

25.7.03

Submission by

Name

Institution

Kincumber Children's Home

Regards.

Mary Brownlee

I will allow this submission to be disclosed to whoever it needs to be disclosed to. I don't need this submission in the long run to be confidential.

Regards

Mary Brownlee

Firstly a little about my family background. We were ten-pound immigrants from Northern Ireland. My Father wanted a better life in Australia. He was enticed by the immigration policy of the day. My Father, Mother, Brother Patrick and myself Mary came to Australia in 1960. Patrick was two years old and I was 9 months and walking well. I was very independent. My Mother and our family were ripped away from our extended family in Ireland by my Father's dreams for a better life and the Australian Government's advertising campaign of a great life in Australia. It was not a better life in Australia. My Mother said the hostel was disgusting; the food was full of weevils. My Mother was so homesick for the support of her family. It was not my Mother's idea to leave her family. My Mother was only 20 years old, a mere child herself who ended up with five children in Australia who went to institutional care. My Mother had no support from anyone. My Father got to stay in our house. No one helped my Mother. I don't blame my parents because my Father had a mental illness, which was made worse no doubt by being away from the extended family in Ireland. In the 1960's I don't think people were very readily diagnosed for a mental illness at least my Father was not. My Mother got custody of the five children but she could not support us, she knew nothing about the welfare system. She had never been away from her family in her life; she had never been more than 10 miles from her home. What a nightmare for my poor Mother. My Mother did not have the knowledge to put a finger on my Father's strange behaviour. In hindsight we can see that he was suffering from a mental illness. My Brother also now suffers from a mental illness, no doubt made so much worse by the institutional care, which he was subjected to. He was the baby and only three years old when taken from our parents. He was sent to school at three years old. How disgusting to expect a three-year-old child to sit in a classroom and be disciplined. My heart weeps for my brother Stephen. His life of mental illness is deplorable where he is subjected to a system that is deplorable.

A big black car pulled up in front of our house in 1966 and took the five of us away. My brother Patrick was eight and became our Father. I was seven and became my brothers Mother. My brother Tony was six, my brother Claude was five and my little brother Stephen was only three. I remember the big black car distinctly. I was afraid. I have never been given an official explanation of why my family were taken away. My Mother has told me her version but that is her reality. I want the official reason. In 1996 I took action to find my records mainly for genealogical reasons. I was told that "I would not like to see what had been written in my records, but don't say that I told you that". I had rung Ingleburn Community Services and this was what I was told. Since this time I have ventured to find my records but to no avail. I was taken for seven bloody years and no one can tell me why. What is going on??? Did I exist??? Actually I was a very conforming child and never got into trouble so this piece of information did not seem at all relevant to me. This person made me feel that I had done something wrong that I should be ashamed of. I have never done anything wrong that I would be ashamed of. I was a very conforming child as all of my brothers were. It angers me so much now and I still have not got any records to this day.

We were put into care for about six weeks with no explanation for what was occurring. My brother Tony and Claude were together somewhere. I was so worried about them; I

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did not know where they were for the first time in my life. My little brother Stephen and myself were in a foster care situation with a number of families. I was seven years old and expected to look after little babies in these foster situations. I remember this and am upset that I was expected to feed, change, and supervise very young children who no doubt were traumatised. I was very stressed and remember getting very angry with these children crying and demanding my attention. I was seven years old. How disgusting to expect a seven years old little girl to have this responsibility. What a disgusting system we were put into. The little children who were very young cried all the time. My brother Patrick went to a home in Glebe. He has since told me of his experiences in this home. Patrick is an intellect as we all are and explained very clearly some terrible stories of abuse that he witnessed there. He saw cut up fruit thrown out to the children like they were animals. Every time I think about what Patrick told me I want to just break down and cry. Dear Lord other stories also, which I am horrified about. I also did not know where my brother Patrick was for the first time in my life. This traumatised my brothers and myself. We have never got over these experiences. So that you understand this, these experiences caused a profound sadness that you never can rid yourself of, because it is triggered constantly by an expanded humanity. These experiences have created great feeling of humanity for others especially children. You can never get away from this. It causes your heart to bleed when you observe the way people treat other people especially children. These experiences have created a deep empathy for others. This brings me to profound sadness at many times in my life. This is hard to live with in these times of such wisdom and knowledge.

After weeks and weeks away from my brothers and my parents I was taken to court where I met my brother Patrick and we were involved in the court activities for a short time. The judge was nice and spoke to us and asked us a few questions. I remember constantly worrying about my other brothers and where they were. I felt bad that they were not with me. When a child has no context for what is going on where do we put this information. It had no meaning to us because we did not understand what was happening. I am saying that I did not understand anything that was happening at the time. I was very confused and scared, as a child would be. In other words the system stunk. One plus was that I got to see my adorable brother Patrick and my much loved parents who had done nothing that I could see that had hurt us. I had more of a context for my real situation than for any other situation I was involved in such as the welfare system of this time. This was much harder to bear than what we were taken away from I can assure you of that. My Father had a mental illness that no one knew about including himself. My poor Father. I love both my parents and so do all my brothers. It was not their fault. I want the records to show this. Do you understand this? I have got no records to dispute but it did happen. Did it happen? Yes it happened and it is recorded somewhere or it should have been kept as very important information about lives taken from us. Families destroyed without any explanation. No one's fault O.K. but it happened. I need to read records to give all of this a context so that I can accept it and finally have some power in a profoundly sad part of my life. I did nothing wrong, my brothers did nothing wrong, my parents did nothing wrong. I want an explanation for why we were taken away. I deserve an explanation because this was my life that was interrupted by the authorities and now as an adult I deserve an explanation. The truth. The welfare policy of the day. Whatever!!!

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There must be court records. They are my records. I want to see my records. I want to know what happened in my life that day that no one to this day has given me a context for and therefore any understandings. This knowledge has abuse value for me because of my humanity. This humanity was created by emotional torture in my formative years. I am a very nice, conforming good parent now so I live with this horror well. I like who I am. Many have not experienced this horror well including my four brothers. In the last few years of research into my brothers and sisters who I grew up with and others that were in institutional care I can clearly see the trauma, profound sadness, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, low self-esteem, addictions, stifled potential, issues that come with the territory of institutional care. It is not a pretty picture. I can see having four brothers how the boys have suffered so deeply. They become men who cannot marry and have children because they are too scared to. Even the ones that do have relationships have many problems with their marriages. A sad, sad deal for these boys that I love not just my four brothers. I grew up with 100 boys at Kincumber. Not many turned out happy and fulfilled I can assure you. I know because I have organized the main reunions for a few years now for Kincumber. I understand these boys. I can be in their shoes to a degree. I lived a life as a girl but the insights from 4 brothers were vivid and abusive. At times my heart bled for my brothers and the other boys in the dormitories. Beltings, emotional abuse, hard-hearted discipline. **No unconditional love.** Just care, practical care. God help us.

Next thing we were given back to our parents who drive us up to Kincumber Boy's Home at Gosford. This drive was late at night and it was bucketing down with rain. We had to go over the mountains to Gosford and I remember my big brother Patrick who was all of 18 months older than me getting under the dashboard to manually make the wipers work. He was such a good conforming boy with great intellect as my other brothers were also. We were all very good children and constantly did what was expected of us with no trouble. We were all smart, intelligent children. We arrived at Kincumber after a horror trip very late at night. We entered the home and our parents were taken away to talk while we waited huddled together in an alcove in the middle of the big buildings in the home grounds. It was at least midnight and our parent never came back to say goodbye. They were told not to come back and say goodbye because it upsets children. Lets face it; it upsets the adults having to observe it. By God we could not even have our feelings. Such abuse. I will never forget how we all cried and held on to each other and said we wanted our Mum and Dad. Such profound feelings of abandonment. Our parents were advised of the way to abandon us by the so-called professionals. Where were the psychologists in all of this? By God there must have been research around into children and their feelings in abandonment issues. Who used it then? Where were the intellectuals in this crisis? Where were the psychologists then I ask????? I will never forgive anyone for what they did to us all. I had to watch my brothers; I had to see this sadness. Can you see this concept? We were definitely not excited, as you would expect children on an adventure to be because this was an adventure into hell. A hell of not being mirrored by anyone who in the least had any relationship with you. No one who truly loved you so you must be no one. **Children in institutional care become no one. We don't belong and we don't feel a part of the community. We were separated from the community. This has great impact for the future health of institutional care children.** Do you understand this concept, to be no one to anyone who is part of you in your environment?

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To be no one in the community only someone who is in a home and you need to feel sorry for. This is how it is for us. We became just someone in need to feed, clothes and discipline. Oh children have to be disciplined. Actually children have to have their feelings and be able to express them openly in a protective environment. This is abusive in itself, just in itself, we were abandoned by our parents with advice from the supposed professionals??? My brothers and I were luckier that most because we had each other, some children were only children. Some Children were separated from their siblings. Dear Lord the stories I have heard, the sadness I have observed. Could you even imagine what that must have done to us. No one could imagine the damage and the heartache we have experienced. I say luckier from a child point of view for our family only because at the time my brothers and myself had each other and loved each other but children especially brothers and sisters should not have the burden of the responsibility of being the main carers which my brother Patrick and myself who were the eldest were forced to take on. We should have been fighting with each other as normal brothers and sisters do. We never fought with each other. We loved each other too much, do you understand this concept. Children should have a relationship with some conflict because this is normal behaviour that drives parent mad but by God it is normal. We then have healthy boundaries. Patrick and I loved each other so much that we never as children had a bad word to say. We developed bonds that were too strong. Our profound sadness as a sister and brothers keeps us apart today. Our childhood was destroyed by too much burden for each other. Can you see this concept? We did not become individual. Even now I cannot go a day without thinking about all my brothers and worrying about their welfare and there is definitely a lot to worry about. My brothers have had terrible adult lives. None of them have married, and out of four that does incur some questioning. We all have problems with worrying about each other because this was our loyalty being ignited in an abusive environment not suited to a normal environment for children. We would have died for each other. We had to love each other too much and there was no place for who we individually were. We became terribly anxious for each other. What a terrible burden. Institutional children become no one. There is no one to mirror with love who they really are. No one to see their intellect but still their hearts grow. We all ended up with great enormous hearts. My intellect now is being skilled and is catching up with my enormous heart and when I finish my education at university in the near future I will be endowed with great skills to understand my place in this world finally. I am 44 years old this year and I am at University. It happened because my brain needed to fulfil the potential God gave me. No one in my childhood saw my potential. No one saw whom I was and that I was very intelligent. No one saw all of my brother's intelligence either. We were wasted people. All children need someone to see who they are and to motivate them to fulfil their potential. I don't care what my situation was; someone should have directed my good intelligent brain to fulfil its potential. I never felt fulfilled. I have no records of school reports. No one ever took an interest in my intelligence until I finally worked out that learning is like food for me. I love to learn and as a young person should have had the opportunity somewhere to be directed into higher education. I did not. Also as a young person out of an institutional environment I was very oppressed. I was very shy and too conforming. Institutional care children learn that you are no one. You don't matter in the scheme of things. You come out with your eyes closed to the big world. How do young people cope in these situations? An intelligent person like me just smiled and conformed

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to whatever people wanted. You see that is what I was taught by the sisters of St Joseph. Just be polite and conforming, Oh and you learn to trust everyone. Trust is your only tool to survive. This got me nowhere. I am 44 years old and at University with no extended family in Australia. I have a great need to have an association with my family in Ireland but the distance and the cost is too great at this time. I am an unemployed university student of 44 years old who need to learn to survive. My learning is more important than my food requirements. I always lost weight when I'm learning. My children have also missed out on extended family in Australia. I am an Australian but I am also very Irish and feel very connected to this part of my being. I believe that this is a strong cultural trait in me. I feel that I have lost a great deal in my life by not being associated as a young person with family members in Ireland. As a child in care and under the protection of the Government or the Church why did no one every think to contact our family in Ireland? If my Mother would have had support we could have been with her. My Mother totally alienated herself from her family because she had lost her children, which was not her fault. In other words she had to alienate herself because of the terrible stigma associated with her children being taken away by the welfare. This stopped my Mother from contacting her family. My Mother did nothing wrong. We being taken by the welfare affected our whole family in both countries. There was stigma associated here that my poor Mother could not deal with. My Mother has never been back to Ireland in 43 years. My poor Mother. It was the stigma involved. You know that welfare stigma, the good parent bit. My Mother and Father loved us all and never ever purposely wanted to hurt us. It was the welfare policy that did so much more damage, lets get that right now. I have connected recently but there is so much catching up to do and it will take time to feel a part of my strong family origins and be considered a part of this family in Ireland. My brothers and myself have lost so much in our lives. Can you see this? Irish people have a strong, overpowering culture.

I was in the home for seven years. My brothers in that time were in the dormitories while the girls were in cottages. There were about 100 boys and between 15 and 20 girls at this time in the home. For the girls as we became close to a cottage Mother as happened to me with a cottage Mother called Nursey we were moved to another cottage. It was looked at as a negative thing to become close to a cottage Mother. I heard the adults talking about this as a child. Dear God this makes me weep. How can children 'love' when they are not allowed to attach themselves to anyone? Meanwhile in the institutional dormitory environment my brothers were treated with heartless, hard discipline and there were many times that boys were belted for not conforming or simply for wetting the bed. I witnessed my little brother of about 4 years old Stephen be abused and shamed and got a belting from a Nun for wetting his bed. He was only 4 years old and by God I hate that Nun. I had four brothers who told me what it was like. As a young girl it would upset me greatly when I walked past the big boys showering/bathing hall and heard the very cross nuns at times belting them. I had four brothers who were in a very heartless environment and I knew this as a seven year old.

When I was 10 years old the cottage Mother who was looking after me Miss Margaret Burke who was about 70 years old at this time started verbally abusing me terribly and then pinned my home made bloomers on my back turned inside out and wrote a note

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saying 'Mary is a dirty girl' and made me attend the afternoon session of school wearing these bloomers and sign. A little bit of poo can be such a daunting thing to an old witch that she had to completely rip away any self-esteem that I may have had. I am still horrified till this day that I was forced to be so degraded by this act. The damage that this would have done to my self-esteem was monumental and the school was made up of a majority of boys. I will never get over the cruelty of that act, it will never go away. Do you know how I must have felt; I was only ten with four brothers in the school. Why did this happen. I was so shamed. Also I was constantly forced at every lunchtime by the witch Miss Margaret Burke to eat everything on my plate. I was a small eater being a small little girl and desert was never an option. One lunch time as usual the girls and myself went to our cottage and as usual I struggled to finish the main course let alone desert. She put me under a carport to finish my desert, which was baked custard. She kept checking on me and forcing me to put baked custard in my mouth while I was visible wrenching. I vomited in my plate and she stood and made me eat every bit of my vomit. Up until about 10 years ago I had told nobody about these things, I kept them to myself like most of us do. We have been shamed badly. I remember when I did tell a good friend at playgroup she was so horrified that she ask me to tell the other ladies. As Mothers they were horrified. This helped me to deal with this abuse a little bit but I find when I do have to tell it again I get very angry and cry. I am crying now. I was a very conforming child who could not eat the baked custard. This was pure abuse. My seven years were a crash course in sociology and I was an excelled student.

At another time at Kincumber a group of girls were playing near the old above ground well one day when a man who helped maintain the grounds came up to us and started talking. We all knew him because he had been at Kincumber for quiet a few weeks or months. I remember he wanted me to go with him because he said he had something to show me. I said no. I didn't want to go. A younger girl Linda who was a girl from a one parent family just outside the gates of the home who's Mother had died or gone away was enticed to go with this man a short time after. We saw her go with him not thinking much of it at the time. A while later she came running up to me crying and completely distraught with her face dirty from tears mixing with dirt. Her clothes were torn and buttons were off. She was a mess. I took her straight to a Sister at the home. It is only in hindsight as an adult that I realize she had been assaulted in some way. I am very distressed to this day about this. I know now that she was a child who had been interfered with and my heart is broken. I am crying again. I also realize that this could have been me or some other of my friends. I now realize that this was such a serious occurrence and I feel so bad for Linda. I feel I need to talk to her. I feel that I was a part of something so wrong. I will always be profoundly affected by the knowledge of such a burden.

Another time at Kincumber I was playing in the playground near the boy's shower room when one of the older Hooky boys came to me and said that a Sister wanted to see me in the chapel. I followed him down the path that lead to the chapel. As I neared the door of the chapel at the end of the winding path I had a strong feeling that something was not right and I stopped. The Hooky boy doubled back and told me again that the Sister was waiting for me inside. I started moving inside the doorway and he then indicated that the Sister was up the stairs above in the choir area. This disturbed me again and I decided to

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run. He grabbed me and shoved me under the stairs and started to grab my blouse and as he did this he pulled many buttons off the blouse. I was screaming and clawing him but he was quiet bigger than me and strong. I did get away and ran crying and afraid to my big brother and I was so happy to see him. I was so afraid. I told him what happened. He took me to a Sister and then I know that he went and bashed up the Hooky boy. I could always rely on my brother Patrick. He looked after me first and then he looked after the Hooky boy. The Sister was very good and ask me lots of questions and I felt that she believed everything I said. I must have looked a sight. All the big boys were sent away after that before they got too much older. This included my big brother. Patrick was sent away earlier because this happened to me. All my brothers were sent away earlier because this happened to me. I was left alone in the home and watched my brothers be taken from me one at a time. They were all sent to Westmead Boys Home. I believe that God looked after me that day. I knew something was not right. I was a very conforming little girl. This was so horrible. Losing my brother was so horrible.

The institutional care was a horrible experience and as a child I had no power in my life and no one that loved me to support me. No eyes with unconditional love to see who I was. No mirror reflecting my unique nature, my individuality. We were just a group of needy children who needed to be fed, clothed and disciplined. We got this aspect of care but no one saw my intellect but my heart just grew bigger and bigger. It is a wonder my heart has not exploded by now. Do you know what it is like to see so many children who have been abandoned over nearly your whole childhood? Your most important formative years. If you don't deal with it and your heart does not grow it would explode. Well my heart has not exploded but it has grown very big. I love children, a very positive thing but profoundly sad at times when I am ever exposed to children who are not being treated with respect and given power in their lives. I find this very positive, the way I am and can and will advocate for children whenever the need arises. I still can see that children have not the rights that I think they should have in this day and age of so much wisdom, and remember I am an expert in this field; my heart has grown so that it did not explode. I sometime realize that a lot of the children who were put in my position could not cope with what they observed. Their hearts just exploded with profound sadness. There are a lot of addictions out there. Many children from institutional care who are heavy drug uses, alcoholics, damaged people emotionally. So much abuse, so much trauma, so much need for humanity here. Sad, sad people who have no extended family. I have dealt a lot with many people from institutional care and I have listened to their amazing stories of strength in the face of great adversity. So many of these people need support and help right now in so many different ways. We are a very unique group with a tremendous amount of humanity.

Thank you for reading my long story, regards

Mary Brownlee

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Mary Brownlee nee Mary Corry
Mother

I declare the contents of
the 7 pages of this letter to be
true & correct to the best of my
knowledge & belief

Witness: *[Signature]*

x Mary Brownlee
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