

SUBMISSION TO: AUSTRALIAN FEDERAL GOVERNMENT SENATE INQUIRY INTO 'CHILDREN IN INSTITUTIONAL CARE 1920 - 1970'.

25th. MARCH, 2004.

It has only recently come to my attention that this inquiry is being held. I have read through a number of the submissions on your web site & I feel that I must contribute my own recollections of my time at the CENTRAL METHODIST MISSION DALMAR CHILDREN'S HOME at Carlingford NSW (now known as Wesley DALMAR ). I went into care there as a young child aged about 6 years. DALMAR became my home from approximately late 1946 to November, 1955.

Most of the submissions I have read have given a very negative report of care received by children, as well as reports from present 'care' givers & how they endeavour to provide it today. The difference is enormous. So too are the times in which they are set. To conduct an unbiased inquiry into the years from 1920 to 1970 one must also look into society attitudes & the state the world was in then. Again there is an enormous difference to the world of today. Looking at those 50 years will show how rapidly society can change. Many improvements have taken place but new situations have arisen & still we do not seem to be able to 'get it right' when handling matters which ultimately have direct or flow on effects for all people.

The reasons my father felt he had to placed me in DALMAR'S care after my mother's untimely death would certainly have been solved in totally different ways today. For example, my mother died from a heart disease which today can be treated. My father became a single parent, without any help to guide him through his crisis. He believed it was a noble duty to fight for 'king & country' which is why he had enlisted for service in the Aust. Army in WW11, where he had seen atrocities beyond anything I could comprehend. Two of his older brothers had returned from WW 1, suffering very poor health for the rest of their lives. As most returned servicemen did, he needed the companionship & friendship of his 'mates' which doubtless caused him to bury his grief & sorrow in the then accepted way, by taking alcohol, eventually to excess. This too, would now be treated & understood with a totally different attitude. My mother died when I was aged 5 years & 8 months & I needed care that only women were then considered able to give & so, after due consideration my father & I had to live apart. Again, today's attention to this need would be handled quite differently. However we remained very close & his love for his only child did not diminish. He gave no thought to me being adopted. With hindsight now I can see that at that point in his life my father was a broken man but was expected to 'get on with life & make the best of it'. Issues were not discussed or dealt with.

By going to live at DALMAR I was, thankfully, spared seeing my dear father in an intoxicated state & I was cared for in the most appropriate way for those days & by totally dedicated Christian women. Community attitudes then looked on children in institutions as lesser mortals & the stigma we came to feel & understand as we grew older was always there & is still very deeply felt. Even today I am extremely selective as to whom I 'open up' to about my school years. As I write (& rewrite!) these lines I am going through the full spectrum of emotions. I thought that I had truly worked through that part of my life & now able to look back on the whole experience as a growing one, which has contributed to the well adapted person that I consider I am today. However this inquiry seems to have struck a nerve with me which at times can be painful. It was not any easy childhood but I thought I had succeeded in turning it

into a positive, learning experience. Maybe this 'opening up' now will help to put things back into balance. The real issue is not that we were at DALMAR but rather WHY we were there.

Maybe I am seeing it all through 'rosy glasses' as they say most adults do of their childhood. However, I do know that I did not spend nearly 10 years of my life in a terrible place, with abuse or any other terrible things happening to me. I recall many happy times & I still enjoy a close, friendly relationship with my (then) cottage mother. She took care of me for some time when I was a Junior Girl living in the main large imposing building. When I later moved to the girl's Senior Cottage she transferred there, which gave us some continuity of care. I am able to return to DALMAR as it is today & meet many of the children with whom I grew up & who I now consider my life long friends

As children we seldom knew why each one of us was 'in care' & it hardly mattered to us, as we grew up & played & learned & led a busy, useful & healthy life. All of our health needs were met & when, for various health reasons I needed to see an honorary medical specialist at Royal Prince Alfred Hospital, I was taken to the outpatients department by a staff member, sometimes on her day off duty. Our dental care was seen to regularly at the Sydney Dental Hospital. Each Friday, on an excursion fare, a committee lady would take a group of children in by train. When we were older we were able to take the responsibility of ourselves, sometimes taking a smaller child in with us. Personally I did look on those trips as an 'excursion' & something out of the usual routine (though dental appointments today do not hold the same appeal). We had outings but to be allowed to take one's self on public transport was not a frequent happening. We were able to walk nearly every where, including school & church. There are many other activities & responsibilities that I recall in a positive way, which certainly provided me with feelings of self worth.

In my formative years at DALMAR I was taught values which I still apply today & for which I am truly grateful. Our religious instructions were taught every day by Matron Barnett after breakfast & Sisters, as cottage staff were called, in the evenings (each wearing uniforms including caps & veils such as nurses wore back then). We learnt to stand up & thank people on behalf of we girls after parties such as at Christmas time. Church & Sunday School were attended every Sunday, at the Dundas Methodist Church, a short walk out of DALMAR grounds. The choir practice leading up to the annual Sunday School Anniversary had us all singing our hearts out with hymns I shall never forget! For a while after leaving DALMAR I turned away from regular church attendance but find I am now attending again. My sustained faith, learnt then, has helped me through some difficult emotional times since & I have encouraged my children to seek this spirituality in their lives.

Other important social values were taught, such as table manners & when we were able to go away on a holiday & stay with relatives or other families (who offered to take children without a family of their own) we were not totally ignorant in these things. Our speech was corrected, bad language was not tolerated, nor were dishonesty & bad tempers. We were disciplined in the accepted way of those days, denial of our few privileges mostly e.g. film nights. Sometimes the boys were caned (by the Superintendent who was appointed in about 1950, before DALMAR accepted some 12 children from UK after the WW11. I believe this was a condition imposed by the British Government, before children were taken into institutionalised care, that there was a male head.) Though I am not sure of any girls being caned, I was not &

do not recall any brutal treatment or abuse of the girls I grew up with in the juniors & then in our senior girl's cottage. See now Submission No. 203 by Pamela Vernon. Pam & her sister Yvonne were both in our cottage & we virtually grew up together. There were usually 16 senior girls accommodated in 2 dormitories. The abuse Pamela writes of, suffered by her older sister Yvonne, has truly shocked we 'Old Girls' who shared the same cottage & almost every thing with them. We had no idea this abuse was going on & feel sure that neither Matron nor Sister did. This revelation certainly must be dealt with today.

During & after the Depression & WW11 the running of this large & imposing 'campus' (originally 15 hectares & I think later enlarged) it was difficult to attract suitable staff. Of necessity help from the children had to be used. Daily rosters for duties for used for such jobs as cleaning, kitchen duties, gardening, laundering, helping look after the babies. I personally found helping with the babies quite sad as new babies cried a lot & we were not encouraged to pick them up or they might not learn to stop crying & settle down. The babies cottage was later closed by a director in about the 1960's as he felt it was, again of necessity, not a caring enough environment for those so young. I recall the babies were aged from about 1 or 2 years to about 3 ½ to 4. After this age they were moved into either the girls or boys junior sections in the main building when there was a vacant cot for them. For a short while there was a very tiny aboriginal baby there, possibly only a few months old. I thought she was the most beautiful baby I had ever seen. We senior girls would vie for the chance to take her for walks around the grounds in a pram.

One of my closest friends was an aboriginal girl who was only about 2 years my junior. We also grew up together, from my first day to my last day. After I left DALMAR & was working, she & I spent a lovely holiday together at a Guest House at Bundanoon in the NSW Highlands. I recall another young guest there asking me if my friend was an aborigine (which of course was obvious) & I replied that I did not know & why did she ask. Her skin colour meant nothing to me, we were almost 'sisters'. Here again was another stigma, which I understand my friend found unable to cope with later in her adolescence. As she had no family she stayed on at DALMAR after finishing school, attended Technical Collage & became a very proficient dressmaker. My friend was a very pretty & quiet girl. She had such lovely dark softly curled hair & I was very envious of her. Needless to say I had fair, straight hair! I still wonder where she might be today & how life has treated her. At my wedding she & our cottage mother (Sister) kindly offered to arrange the flowers in the church for my wedding. I was so pleased.

The boys took care of the cows & other farm work. There was a full time farm hand employed who worked while the boys were at school. They milked the dairy herd each morning & evening & 2 of them carried the full milk can between them, up to the main building & into the kitchen. The milk was scalded before use & the cream skimmed off. We had cream with almost everything! If there was no butter ready made we used cream, thick & clotted! We girls sometimes made the butter after school. There were lots of milk puddings, & milk was always served at breakfast & tea. That is certainly where our good teeth came from! No doubt this local supply ceased due to health concerns such as TB etc. from un-pasteurised milk. However many families ran a cow then, if they had enough land. DALMAR had acres & acres. I liked walking amongst the cows on my way home from school & calling their pet names. They were just like many small herds I have since come across & contented enough to part with their precious milk for us. Prior to me being there I believe

vegetables were grown on site, with the boys helping. Some later went on to farm work after leaving DALMAR.

See now Submission No. 136. & many of the jobs we did. Many of those listed here were done in a different way to my day, however I do remember using the large industrial electric polisher with some skill & pride. It was much easier than the former method of polishing with a woollen cloth on our hands & knees. This work would often become a game until we got too noisy! All of our duties were expected to be done on time to fit into a strict timetable & to a good standard. Laziness was not tolerated. I do not recall having to do any duties that would not have been expected of children living in a normal home. Perhaps looking after the hot water furnace was a job I did not like nor did I do it well. Many times there was no hot water when I had that duty. Keeping the coke up to it was not easy & I did not understand how to get a good fire going then, though being a Girl Guide taught us many coping skills. Sister helped during the day but it was not a job I cherished. In a private house it would probably have been a chip heater. Of course the jobs themselves were much bigger e.g. to scrub the main dining room floor before school each Friday morning meant that the floor space was divided between 6 children & even then it seemed a big job. I was usually late for school when it was my turn. However I believe I learnt to do many jobs more ably than 'outside kids' who we though must be very spoilt.

We learnt to take a pride in our achievements, (though Matron Barnett said that 'pride was a sin') particularly on DALMAR'S Open Days, when the whole place was on show. I recall those days as quite exciting, with lots of visitors. We were expected to look our best & to be on our best behaviour so that people could see what a fine place DALMAR was. I can see now that in some ways we children may have been patronised. I remember being extremely up set when, on one of those days, in our dormitory, the base of my bed had to be raised onto blocks (as I did for myself each night due to chronic lung disease). I was never fond of being 'on show'. Doubtless this was to demonstrate to visitors that extra care was provided for those who needed it. I guess that any institution that relies heavily on public donations must let people see how the money is spent. I must say that later annual reports of the Methodist Mission showed we had very good teeth, that our diet was good & that we were practicing good dental hygiene. Matron read that to us so that we could feel pleased with ourselves. I'm sure she must have felt some pride too! None of us was obese nor were we under fed. Second helpings at dinner were possible, if you were quick!

It is worth reading the small book written by Don Wright "DALMAR. A CENTURY OF CARING'. Some people feel this is written in a patronising manner, may be, but it records the history of DALMAR & the reasons & problems which were faced in establishing & providing such care, even prior to 1920. Published by Wesley Mission in 1993. I am concerned that the excellent care provided today, still using the name DALMAR, might be compromised by the negative submissions received by this inquiry. This would be a dreadful backward step. It seems we humans still cannot live in societies without stigmas attached to those suffering & 'in care' or other traumatic & tragic situations. Thank goodness racism & bigotry are now 'politically incorrect' but when will the habit die? May I suggest that your Committee talk to Mr. David Hill, former CEO of the ABC & NSW State Rail. He & his brothers were in care at the Fairbridge Farm School outside Molong NSW as boys. I have heard him speak of those years over the radio. There are other such prominent people who received care.

These negative attitudes, along with wars, seem to me to be the cause of many of the terrible problems in the world today. At least we are trying to overcome some of these attitudes but governments & those in authority must find better ways to handle wars & aggression. I pray each day! ALL people are victims of war. My father was the one who needed counselling after medical discharge from the Army in 1943 & in 1945 through his grief, so too might my mother who, for whatever reasons left England after WW1, rather than we institutionalised adult children today (with some exceptions). It seems all too late now. The counselling profession will see even more enormous growth & costs if solutions are not found to these big issues, so that these problems are not repeated again & again. We seem to be going round in circles. It is certainly time to get off the disastrous roundabout. We play in such folly. I remain truly astonished that it took so long for the government to recognise that the Vietnam Veterans needed counselling & their service recognised. A more caring approach to illegal immigrants must be found. At DALMAR we were taught that one bad thing did not deserve another, rather the reverse. Forgive me. Enough of my preaching. If only I could change the world! Perhaps you can help?

Daily routines at DALMAR were, & probably necessarily, operated in a rather regimented way, such as in my junior years lining up to go to the dining room, church, school & nearly every where, even to have a bath! In my senior years we were expected to take care of these things ourselves & to get ourselves to places on time. Any one late needed a very good reason. The big brass bell was rung for meals etc. Rules were rules & not broken without staff permission. If one felt sick one needed to convince one's siblings rather than Matron, as to pretend being sick was not accepted by other children who might have to do extra duties. I think some of my guilt feelings developed then as I often had to stay home from school or go to bed, due to my lung disease. However my girl friends understood this & I certainly made the most of those sick days, reading every thing I could find. We had lots of donated books & the cottage book shelves were quite large & always full. I still have a love of books & Mr. Latham should have no fears there! However newspapers were not allowed until we were in our last year at school. These were censored by having unsavoury items cut out of them! I guess that was to protect us but they would have been about so many of the situations we now see & hear about on TV every day. How well we were protected from the evils of the outside world! After I left DALMAR in 1955 there was a TV installed in the main building & viewing was rostered at suitable times. This of course is when TV was introduced to Aust. in time for the 1956 Olympic Games. A swimming pool was installed in about 1957 & I recall returning for the Official Opening which was done by the Olympic Gold medallist, Lorraine Crappe. A tennis court was put in about 1954. No doubt other such 'luxuries' came in as times & administration changed. I believe other neighbourhood children were envious of the pool going in!

Matron Barnett was in charge when I left & she had been the first 'Sister' who cared for me when I arrived in 1946. She was firm & consistent & at the same time a very kind person. She made an excellent Matron & was liked by both staff & children. I recall that when one of the senior girls aged 9 or 10 years older than me was to be married in Perth, she asked Matron Barnett to give her away at the wedding. Matron travelled all the way to Perth & brought back photos for us to see of the wedding. Again she must have felt proud! The bride had no family & had stayed at DALMAR, helping with the children until she was old enough to take up the nursing profession. I believe a number of the girls became quite brilliant nurses. So too did some of the

boys succeed, 2 as ministers in the Methodist Church. I'm sure there were others that I do not know about. Matron Barnett was particularly 'proud' of them & also those who enlisted during the War. Also, one of 'her boys' had been awarded a Victoria Cross for military service. These staff indeed nurtured us with kindness. Even though there might not have been time for hugs there was time to teach us many values. There were around 96 children there in my time & only about 10 or 12 staff. Matron taught us that our love came from Jesus & that He loved all children & was always there for us when we prayed. Later in my life I found a letter my father had written to me when I was aged 2 years, & which he had asked my mother to put away for me in case he did not return from the war. He asked me to always look to my mother for guidance & to grow up into as fine a woman as she, also to 'fear God'. This I thought must be a mistake as Matron had said that God loved all of us. Maturety has cleared up some things!

There are many happy times that I still enjoy recalling from my time at DALMAR. Christmas time in particular was just magic. Literally tons of gifts were delivered to Matron, unknown to us, & kept locked in the Committee Ladies' Meeting Room in the main building until Christmas night when we older children became Santa's Helpers with Matron, sorting out gifts into various age groups. Then creeping up stairs to the junior dormitories & helping 'Sister' put them into the pillow cases at the end of each child's bed. Then we seniors 'fell' into bed & our cottage 'Sister' did the same for us. She must have been awake all night! In the morning we senior girls were not permitted to open our pillow cases until we had sung carols outside each cottage & woken every one up. On that day, the birthday of Jesus, no work was done except for meals & necessary jobs. We had also, before Christmas, gone shopping for little gifts for each other at Woolworths in Parramatta & which we had secretly wrapped up & hidden away in our lockers. It was a very special time in my life. There would be others but no Christmas since has measured up to those ones!

We did have a little pocket money which Sister kept until we perhaps wanted to give a special friend a birthday gift or needed other personal items. I still have another very guilty feeling about the time that I stole a penny from the Church offering plate. It was discovered by way of the pennies being counted after church & returned to Matron for re-use next week & refunded by one of the church elders each week. I think it was then that the issue of not having pocket money to spend how we wished came to a head. I was seen sucking on a large lolly one day the following week at school, otherwise I would have not been punished so severely. I think I was denied all outings for quite a while. Maybe it was soon after that we were each given a shilling a week, out of which we used 3 pence for offerings at Girl Guides & Christian Endeavour. Then another 3 pence were needed if we wanted to catch the bus to tennis for school sport. The remainder we could spend at the school tuck shop. It was a very different test to manage wages when we left school. I was hopeless. I do recall being in trouble for saving a few pence & phoning my aunt from the shops at Carlingford when doing an errand for one of our teachers. Few people had phones & there was only one at DALMAR in Matron's office which only she used. Another sign of the times.

Regardless of these 'disadvantages' I feel fortunate that I grew up at DALMAR. I knew the love of both of my parents in my very early years & then had the company of so many other 'brothers & sisters' that being an only child would have been denied me. Though I learnt that my dear father had a problem I knew that he was a good man & not a criminal in jail. He & I were as close as we could be considering our

separation & he visited me as often as he could. We wrote many letters to each other during the years he worked on the big Snowy Mountains Hydro Electric Scheme in the early 1950's. We had great plans to live together in Sydney after I had finished school, when I was to attend Secretarial Collage. He, as well as DALMAR, instilled in me how important it was that I gain a good pass in my Intermediate Certificate, which I did. Unfortunately he died suddenly at that very time & my dreams were shattered. Matron & Sister conveyed this awful news to me as kindly as they could. Soon after I went to live with my aunt & uncle who had followed my progress so far.

Although life was now much freer & I became part of a good, kindly family, this became the hardest time in my life. I was suddenly living in an alien world. All the security I had felt at DALMAR was gone. Values were very different in the 'real' world. I now had to find a job, become self sufficient & somehow fit into this unfamiliar world. Nothing was censored any more. I could do almost anything I wanted to but it felt as though my friends from DALMAR & also from Guides & school were on another planet. There was no preparation for this new life & certainly no time for grieving. This was no fault of my aunt & uncle. Some of my friends who had no family stayed on at DALMAR until they were older & felt able to take on another life. They appreciated that & DALMAR is to be commended for their 'after care'. I was fortunate to have relatives who also cared.

This is the time when my grief for my father was so deep that I recall wondering why I did not walk against the point duty policeman's signal to 'stop' at the corner of Pitt St. & Martin Place after leaving the bank head office in which I worked. Why not just keep walking? I do not ever remember feeling that way after my mother's death, probably because I was much younger. These next few years were extremely difficult but I kept it to myself. I now realise that it was a deeply stressful time for me which may, or may not, account for how I have dealt with some of the problems (mostly medical) in my life since. However I have been able to enjoy 42 years married to a good man & I have his love & that of my 2 grown up children & their babies. Health continues to be a problem for me but I seem to be able to get on with life without too many hassles. Presently my Doctor is keeping me on antidepressant medication. The reasons could be for anything from having had breast cancer 13 years ago, taking on too much work, worrying about my kids as they grew up during the 1960's & 1970's when I knew nothing about drugs & the rapidly changing sexual issues, or maybe for allowing myself now to feel very sad for the life that might have been with my loving parents.

I now better understand how difficult those 10 years must have been for my father. He did not learn to cope as I have & the years he still had after his wife's death seem wasted but for the love I knew he had for me. I have truly tried to live up to his wishes as written in his letter of 1942 & I think he would be very pleased & proud, as would Matron & Sister, of his 2 grandchildren & 4 great grand children whom he never knew nor they him. Through researching family history I have made contact with my mother's family in England & they have welcomed me &, in fact, had been trying to find me over the years. All seems well now & I am almost at peace in myself. Thank God!

I hope that you can accept this submission is a positive one. I know your Committee must now look deeply into the negative submissions & the feelings of the authors about the care they received. I know the Vernons & feel very sad about their story.

We were aware that the twins were their siblings, they looked alike. Perhaps their family situation might have been handled in a more kindly way for the benefit of their whole family, though I feel that the Stewart's intentions were good. However I had no idea that the sexual abuse reported by Yvonne was going on. I have spoken with other girls who were at DALMAR with me at the same time & they too are extremely upset about it all. I have also suggested to the present director at DALMAR that perhaps those of us who were there at that time might sit down together with Yvonne, Pamella & Leith & talk about these issues, hoping that this process might prove helpful both to them & to us. I was deeply shocked, thus the variety of emotions I feel as I write this today.

Thank you for reading this far! Your task as a committee is not an easy one & I sincerely wish you every success. Time seems to heal lots of things but a genuine change in community attitudes & understanding in these issues is long over due. But it has to come from within each individual. As you can now see, much help is needed by many past institutionalised care leavers. I am glad that times have changed & care is now given in a different way. I repeat - the real issues are not that we were at DALMAR but WHY we were. THANK GOD DALMAR IS STILL THERE TO GIVE CARE. IT MUST ALWAYS BE THERE FOR THOSE IN NEED. PLEASE HELP THESE AGENCIES WHO ARE TRYING SO HARD.