

"If it's the last thing I ever do"

My name is Alan Vincent Sheridan I was born 6/5/46 at Wallsend in Newcastle . There was Dad, Mum, Leslie, Kevin, Josephine, Alan, Gregory and William

We all lived at home in Cardiff, Newcastle happily until I was nine and my mother suddenly died. On 11th August 1955 She died from a heart attack at 42 years old. My brother Kevin, asked Josephine and myself to run to the neighbors house that night to get help, it was a considerable distance and it was dark and late at night and a bush setting. It was very frightening, I was too scared at 9 years of age, so Kevin went to ring from the neighbors phone.. It was too late and Kevin held our mother while she died. The younger children were sheltered from the events and I never saw my mother again. None of the children went to our mother's funeral. I never saw her body and it was a total disbelief to me that she had died.

She left 6 children, ranging from 21 to 5 years of age.

Her death was a tragedy, I think she was the nucleus of the family and with her death the family disintegrated.. My father couldn't cope and turned to alcohol and he was overwhelmed by his loss and he wasn't emotionally equipped to handle the situation.

Within weeks of my mother's death I found myself at Murray Dwyer Orphanage in Mayfield .My Dad took us there and I remember the big steel gates clanging shut. I was frightened, I just wanted my Father, and I cried and cried.

I vividly remember asking the nuns to phone my father up to come and get me.

I was confused, bewildered and had no concept of death or the permanency of death.

My first memories of that day are other boys smelling me, touching me laughing at me, checking me out, seeing what I was all about. This was a huge culture shock for me.

I quickly had to learn all about the rules of the orphanage, quite different from my family life that I had experienced for the first 9 years of my life.

I had to learn rules, lining up for food, toilet , class, what a whistle and a bell meant

I also learnt to remember my new name. It was **Number 64**, I was no longer, Alan.

I lost my identity..

Not only did I lose my identity, but I lost my Mother, my Father, Brothers and a sister, my family home, my bedroom, my toys ,my family photo's, my school friends at St Kevin's at Cardiff,, Aunties, Uncles ,my hometown friends and connections .I feel I lost also my education.

They were all blown away like points off the stock market, just as though it never existed.

The nuns attitude was that boys don't cry and they would say things like "if your Mother could see you now she would be ashamed of you" It had a devastating effect on me and

crushed my self esteem., nearly all of my lifetime. On the contrary she would have been proud of me that I could grieve for the loss of such a lovely and loving mother.

You very quickly had to adopt a stoic attitude, but I couldn't.

I was so grieve stricken , I was inconsolable. I learnt to keep my grief to myself,, until I got to my bed at night , where I could retreat . And pull the blankets over my head, where it was my only refuge and I could allow myself to cry. It was my safe haven.. It was our only escape from the jungle, and hostile environment.

There was a lot of boys distressed by the same thing

.Listening to them crying was very upsetting, distressing and I only imagined they felt the same way and I had empathy with them.

The nun's attitude was if you don't stop crying, I'll give you something to cry about. Sister Margaret and Sister Louise were two women who were not compassionate women and I was quite terrified of them but especially Sr Margaret. Both of them, I was so terrified of them, I would shake, it would only take the sound of their footsteps or their voices to make me feel imitated by them

On two occasions, I hid in the cupboards, when I heard their footsteps and I knew I would pass them in the corridor, so I hid out of sight to avoid them.

The other time I was given overripe or rotten rock melon. It made me sick. Sister Margaret was on duty, I was so imitated by her that rather than tell her I was sick and had a mouthful of vomit, I swallowed the vomit..

I was so terrified of her. She was powerful and I was powerless. There were many times I was terrified of her, she was a most cruel, callous and stern woman. It was a totally contrast to the women who had been in my life before going to the orphanage.

My clothes locker was **No 64** and that was also my new identity. I had to learn quickly to respond to that number anytime it was called. They had sports whistles and bells each one meant something. I had to learn very quickly what the significance of that was!. There were rules, routines, to be learnt, observed and adhered to and a new alien slang and lingo to learn and comprehend. I could not adjust or adapt to the regimented way of life there. It was very demanding and frightening. I became withdrawn, I was very vague and often daydreamed, sitting on the swing staring at the main gate hoping my father or some relative would come in to take my brother and myself home. I missed my sister, I didn't know where she had gone, but just gone. I was not to find out till much later and see her in Monte Pio Girls Orphanage at Maitland. We were taken to visit by my father on an outing. I couldn't keep up with the procedure. I was always getting behind and getting into trouble

One day I got behind and wandered into church late and sat in the wrong spot. Sister Margaret pulled me by the shirt collar and flung me over the other side of the church seats. I was so terrified by her I lost control of my bowels.

Both her and Sister Louise were very strict and stern and were quite intolerant and we were quite often caned around the legs or had a whistle dug into our backs for some breach of their expectations.

We had to line up to go to the toilets; no privacy was afforded, as there were no doors. On the cubicles and queues of other boys were waiting. Some toilets were sometimes blocked or out of order and sometimes in a messy state.

We only wore shoes in winter and no shoes in summer, they were taken away. We often got stone bruises from pebbles, cut feet from fragments of glass and walked on bindies. We played on swings for a while then we were herded into a play yard. The boys set up a rebellious chant "All in the Desert", which expressed our resentment; the desert consisted of an asphalt-surfaced yard, which shimmered in the scorching sun.

A long bench seat ran around the yard attached to the building sometimes you could get a seat, other times you had to trade something, a comic a cowboy gun, marbles or bottle tops, a form of "currency".

A water bubbler in the corner only delivered a trickle of stale tasting water warmed by the sun. We made makeshift toys. How we entertained or amused ourselves was left to our own devices. I was of rather placid quiet and reserved nature, sometimes the target of school bullies, who roamed the yard.

I thank my brother Greg of opposite nature, who came to my rescue and could often ward them off two at a time.

Some meals were wholesome, others were not. We ate dripping bread (bread soaked in dripping) Salty porridge sometimes had weevils in it and sago, we called frogs eyes. Sunday nights meal was a bun and a glass of milk. At sometime or other most of us ate over ripe bananas, overripe oranges including orange peel or apples that had grubs. Some kids would vie for your spent apple core. One kid ate paper; his kick name was "The Dustbin".

At mealtimes you had to be quick and alert, otherwise you could miss out. The food was of poor nutrition and there were outbreaks of boils. It was not unusual to have three or four at a time. No first aid was given out through the day only at night after showers. If a boil came to a head or broke through the day, the contents could ooze down your leg attracting flies. There were no rags, tissues or hankies. We just had to put up with it.

We often flicked the contents onto the ground I still have many scars. We had to soldier on.

Some boys were incontinent, this was unacceptable, we had to line up every night before showers and have the inside of our underpants inspected by Sister Margaret. If they were not spotlessly clean, we had to wear them inside out, on our heads and parade around the room in disgrace for punishment, quite a humiliating experience.

They raped my soul. I lost my dignity.

We were then ready for showers, four boys under a shower in the presence of nuns, was in stark contrast to the code of modesty that my mother had taught me and if you didn't hurry up Sister Margaret would come along and kick you in the buttocks with her boots or throw cakes of soap at you. Then we lined up for dressings on sores or boils. The tops of boils were snipped off with scissors and the core squeezed out, then gauze put on. I'm sure that practice caused cross infection.

We were ready for bed. We slept in dormitories. We had to make our own beds to a standard otherwise it would be stripped and we had to make it again.

Some boys were bed wetters, they had to wash their own sheets and were ridiculed.

We had chores in the kitchen hall and dormitories. I worked in the dormitory. I broke something there one day and it was an accident, despite my protests I had my piggy bank

confiscated, it was left to me when my cousin Marie came to visit. It had 2s 6 d two shillings and sixpence=25 cents in it..

Every Saturday afternoon, we lined up to get our "PAY" for working , it was delivered in a large tin. A piece of bread and margarine or treacle or old bananas or oranges. Also tea we called "swig"

We had what we called "scrambles" donated lollies or biscuits, were thrown in the air and it was a contest" every boy for himself" some boys got three, others got none. Something like feeding chooks with a bowl of wheat.

Punishment for stepping out of line was quite excessive. I was caned and had my arm-twisted behind my back for something relatively trivial. My brother came to me crying one day saying he was held down on a bed and belted.

I was shocked to see him in that state, he was stronger than me and I felt so helpless.

Another boy who lost his temper was locked in a broom closet, until he calmed down.

I continued to withdraw into myself. I couldn't keep up with schoolwork. My education fell behind and I repeated at least one class.

An old man named Cyril herded cows along the riverbank and he was quite simple. He always made obscene gestures and threatened to chase us, we were quite frightened and felt unprotected.

We collected cow manure in the paddocks in bags and sold it to local residents in a wheelbarrow. We bought broken biscuits with the proceeds and gave the remainder of the money to the nuns, who scrutinized our takings. Other boys were sent to the wharves and factories to rattle a poor box and we called it cadging.

Christmas lost it's meaning for me way back in 1955. I have a lot of difficulty still today relating to it.

It was the first Christmas after my mother died. I was still coming to terms with the magnitude of the enormous loss I had suffered in the previous four months.

When Sister Margaret told me I was too old to believe in Santa Claus and he wasn't true. It was disbelief, it seemed like the only childhood fantasy I had left to believe in had gone out the window and was destroyed. I felt another loss and another hit with a hammer.

I wanted to run away, I had a naïve belief I could dig a tunnel to my Aunt's place through the soft ash in the grounds.

She lived in the same suburb. But some boys who had runaway before were bought back

.All the other boys had to line up, file past and hit them in the stomach. So the thought of that deterred me

I was fond of a couple of nuns, but soon found they could betray that trust in some form or another, when they were with their own kind.

I reported two instances of two pubescent boys attempting to fondle me, one in a bath and one in a toilet, but was told they wouldn't have meant anything by it and I was imagining things.

One day I was told to go into a room and help a nun. On arrival I had to undress young boys and expose them. I now realize it was a survey to see if the boys had the circumcision operation perform on them. She was writing down yes or no. I was quite alarmed and bewildered by this event and feel I was a sucker exploited to perform an unpleasant task that they didn't want to perform themselves. I was about 10 years old.

When I was 12, the nuns commissioned a catholic priest to give us a cursory sex-education lesson or instruction. From his crude terminology of anatomy I doubt whether he was qualified or appropriate person for the task. But if it was like a lot of other things and suppose it was par for the course and without sensitivity.

Sister Margaret composed her own song about the orphanage and it started off
“Standing close to the Hunter and upon a green hill stands a red brick building that to many brings a thrill”

I would like to substitute the word thrill for chill. A chill I still feel 49 years later. Some memories are quite vivid and indelible.

After Christmas in 1958, I was informed I was going to Westmead Boys Home in Sydney with my brother and a batch of other boys, so we arrived there in 1959 driven by volunteers.

A huge place, a whole lot of new rules and regulations, do's and don'ts, different culture, different regime, same frightening, lost feelings, very scared and insecure.

It was run by men, Marist Brothers, some huge in stature and with deep commanding voices.

I found most of them to be quite intimidating, intolerant and surly. They had earned themselves reputations and nicknames; one was Bulldog, another Snakey, somewhat of a perfectionist.

I fell further behind. It was more advanced schoolwork and more difficult. I am unable to confirm I ever officially completed primary school.

In secondary school I had a blackboard duster thrown at me and got the cane from Snakey for not being able to comprehend maths, geometry, algebra and science. I did not complete 2 years of high school and got very poor marks.

They were fanatical about religion and we were brainwashed and indoctrinated. We could get the cane for missing VOLUNTARY mass or being skeptical about Catholicism

We could get the cane for missing football training or for losing games or even for not winning by a bigger margin. Some teams won at all costs and some went through the season undefeated.

Punishments for other matters were dealt with in the refectory at the evening meal and administered by “Shorty” .Brother Nestor, a notorious disciplinarian who relished in a “public stoning” Six cuts of the cane was usual. Boys had to be stoic and “Take their punishment like a man”

Some of the brothers were quite brutal, sadistic, aggressive and controlling, some (2) were rumored to be perverted and were avoided.

Shorty made us sell raffle tickets on weekends or else. I could not do that, as I had no confidence , it was destroyed.

I took up cigarette smoking in my final months there, it was a crutch.

I would not hesitate to say atrocities “extremely horrible wickedness out of spite or ill will” were inflicted upon us in two orphanages by Nuns and Brothers who otherwise professed to be servants of God. We were small, young, defenseless, powerless

children in the formative years of our lives. As if the tragedies bereavements and circumstances that put us there in the beginning was not enough to endure!

I left the Home at the end of 1961, when I was 15. I temporarily stayed with some people on the North Shore, who took me for holidays.

I was quite institutionalised only used to activities in groups, classes or teams and had poor individual and coping skills. I was not very literate. Scraggy, lacked confidence, quite withdrawn and introverted, rather timid and callow, shy of people and untrusting.

The people got me a live in job with a horse trainer at Randwick as a strapper. I was very unhappy there and wanted to leave but I had to get my father to tell them. I thought they would bash me up.

As that was my perception of what people did if I did not do as they wishes and wanted to leave.

After that I had many jobs got the sack from some because I had poor aptitude. I could not support myself a lot of the time. Quite often I was destitute, both emotionally and materially. I had no where to live, sometimes I ate from garbage tins, some times in soup kitchens, some time no food for days at a time.

I lived at a boarding house with my father and depended on him. When he lost his job and had no money for rent he left and I didn't know where he had gone, he was missing for weeks, then I received a letter saying he was in the Salvation Army Men's Home. I didn't have any job or money, so I left there with a razor in a cigarette packet and hitchhiked without really knowing where I was going.

I went to my Aunt's place; she said I couldn't stay there so I kept going somewhere. I had holes in my shoes and cardboard inside. I was picked up by a Salvo who took me to a family in Taree. They got me a job on a farm. I only stayed a while and came back to Sydney.

I slept in an old railway carriage, then many cold lonely boarding houses. My father found me in one once by sheer coincidence. I hadn't eaten for three days, he took me to a café, but I was so weak I could hardly walk. I was broke. I don't know what would have happened only for him that time that was a close call. Another time I slept in a culvert in a paddock in winter and caught severe flu. I was sick for weeks. I didn't get any medical attention.

In fact, I never saw a doctor or dentist from 1960 to 1966

.Other times I roamed the city like a vagabond and a frightened little dormouse. I had to be on my guard there were "Baddies" in there lurking in the shadows. Sometimes they approached me I didn't think I was capable of getting angry, but I did. I surprised myself.

In 1965, I slept in a school for shelter and I got caught by the police and was put on a good behavior bond.

I wandered into the city and came across a Salvo's clinic for alcoholics. I heard people telling their life stories. They sounded like me without the alcohol and I identified with their lives. So I agreed to go with them to the Psychiatric Centre, where I talked to a doctor there. He asked me to tell him something about myself and I said, "there was nothing to tell". I now realize what I was telling him NOTHING, was what I thought of myself.

ABSOLUTELY NOTHING.

So after the interview with the Doctor and giving my consent I was admitted there as a voluntary patient, but I soon found it was just another institution and I wasn't very happy there but was prevented from leaving.

There were a lot of very angry, disturbed people there who could only express their anger by smashing windows or shouting obscene words.

The treatment was supposed to be group therapy, where we all talked together about our problems.

I could not express myself very well and had no insight I felt my pain was just too much to share with another human being and certainly not with hostile people, so I didn't get any help.

In fact my condition became a lot worse and I thought the world was so black I didn't want to live in it.

With that belief I took some sleeping tablets and didn't want to live. What a crazy world!

A relative came to see me, but didn't want anybody to know we were relatives.

How supportive!

When I was prepared to lend them money, we were relatives. When I was in a psychiatric Clinic we weren't.

A girl there liked me and serenaded me I didn't know what she saw in me at that time as I had very poor self worth. We had a brief relationship. The staff didn't think that was therapeutic and they said if I didn't want to receive any "therapy" and only wanted to be involved with the girl, I should leave so they gave me "notice".

My God where do you go when a hospital rejects you?

Rejected from the hospital and my close brother in the Air Force had been transferred to Darwin. I was feeling totally alone and abandoned.

Some staff at the hospital were not so "virtuous" themselves with inappropriate relationships.

I walked to another hospital at Gladesville, where I was better treated and got more help.

At that time if my life I was liable to be a conscript soldier with national Service. I had no idea where Vietnam was geographically or the politics of it. I self educated myself about it, all some 25 years later at the State Library.

My life started to improve when I left the hospital at Gladesville, where I spent my 21st Birthday. A kind nurse made me a 21st Birthday key out of cardboard and silver paper. I got a job when I left and stayed there a year. I boarded with my elder brother, learn to drive and got some other skills.

One day I plucked up the courage to phone a dating agency in the city. Where I met my wife, Marie. We went out on a Saturday night to the cinema. I found her to be a friendly, warm, caring, polite, pretty, respectable and compassionate and her mother was the same. I felt like I had a family again.

We went out the very next day and I asked her to marry me. Knowing her less than 24 hours. She accepted and we got married 8 months later. Her won childhood was not without some tragedies and her father dying a month before we were married.

Our marriage had a good effect on me and gradually introduced a lot of stability into my life. We made some friends, bought a new car and a house.

Four years later we had a beautiful daughter Brenda. I named her after a kind nurse. Brenda who gave me some understanding, kindness and inspiration all those years ago, back when I was in the depths of despair and my life at its lowest ebb.

My life continued to improve, staying at one job for 8 years, learnt golf and snooker, excelled at both, winning trophies, also ten pin bowling.

Being a husband and father was good.

I gave and received love. I think that's of paramount importance.

We were married for 30 years, honouring all our marriage vows until death us did part in 2000. When Marie was diagnosed with cancer and she died in December 2000.

During her illness, she cried once. I discovered she was crying for me because I was going to be left behind on my own after she had gone, because she knew my background.

I was overwhelmed by her unselfishness and her concern for me, as she was the one going to lose her life.

I took her by the hand and thanked her for being such a lovely person, a beautiful wife, devoted mother and doting grandmother and I'd still like to thank her posthumously.

She was unique and I often wonder what path my life would have taken had I not rang the dating agency that day and not met her; my life changed forever and was enriched from meeting her.

I still have my daughter and two grandsons now that have our genes, so I'm not alone and I have more coping skills to survive.

I have resided at the same place for 35 years, a long way from the old days of sometimes 35 hours.

Most of my life I have suffered from poor self esteem and self worth, originating in those orphanages and the way we were treated there, sometimes it's been very costly.

One time at work I injured myself seriously,, but I understated the injuries and kept on working as soldering on was the only thing I knew.

Once I swam across a river and back getting into difficulty, I didn't want to "bother" anyone by asking for help. I tried to soldier on and it was nearly too late.

I have attended life enrichment classes and a decade of counselling to improve my life. I made some interesting discoveries about myself and became more assertive so I would thoroughly recommend that to anyone.

I took up family history, it helped put a jigsaw puzzle back together and I regained my identity lost for all those years. I became reunited with some lost relatives.

In recent years, I was introduced to CLAN and Leonie, a tireless worker for our cause with the association.

I don't feel so alone. There are thousands of us out there with similar stories that should be told and intently listened to by the entire society and written into the annals of Australian Sociology and recognized that these events took place.

So thank to Leonie and CLAN, without their help and encouragement I may not have told my story.

Prior to their existence there was nobody to tell and I'd have to take all of that stuff to my grave.

Well, that's my story and I wanted to tell it

“If it’s the last thing I ever do”

Thank you from a survivor,
Alan Sheridan. April 2004

P.S .In addition to my story I would also like to say I feel that because of my lack of social skills and confidence I missed out on so much social life and fun in a withdrawn state that almost the entire era of the fabulous 60’s passed me by. Rock and Roll, classic movies and fun had all but gone with the wind.

I lost my youth, a fact that I am left to reminisce and grieve for today.

I have no objection to me story being published on the internet as it’s real life and that’s what happened in my life. However, please do not publish my address .