

MY STORY

I was born in 1951, and my natural mother suffered from the mental condition, bipolar which was previously known as manic depression. This was before lithium and the contraceptive pill were available.

Gwen my birth mother, would spend time before my conception with men she was not married to. Before I was born, there were two other children. She did not marry John's father, but married Elizabeth's father, who she spent five years with. Gwen's mother looked after those previous two children, but she drew the line at her daughter's third child. I have been able to locate my birth family since having moved to Darwin.

In the last week of July 1951, my natural mother Gwen and I were wandering in Kings Cross. At that time, police stopped my mother and me. I was just a few weeks old. I wore only a cloth nappy. It was winter. I was clearly at risk. As a result, I became a State Ward.

I was moved as a young baby into a foster home. I lived there for 16 years. My first foster mother died before I was 4 years old, but the three of us were allowed to stay. A new grandmother looked after us, until my foster father re-married.

All of us children were poorly treated. We were all abused. My older sister and I were sexually abused by my foster father (it was my older sister's natural father). Life in that household was extremely dysfunctional, like living on egg-shells. When Hazel married David, our life changed, but it certainly did not improve. I have always had a sense that Hazel knew. The longer bathtimes alone for the girls, were a certain, sure indicator.

I have discovered recently that my foster mother was raised in a family with an alcoholic father and brother. Hazel's mother died in a fire when my foster mother was only 13 years old, so her elder sister looked after the two younger sisters as best she could.

When I was 16 years old, my foster family decided that it was too difficult to look after me. I was returned to the Department of Child Welfare like an unwanted Christmas present. The institution was Bidura in Glebe, and later I was moved to Corelli House. I also spent some time at Molesworthy House in Five Dock. For some time the welfare sent me to Callan Park. The doctors wanted to understand why I was lighting fires, and generally behaving badly. So I had spinal taps which were horrific, as well as group work, which for a girl of 16 were frightening.

No wonder I was behaving badly. I was only 16 years old, which is bad enough. I more than likely had an identity crises, and felt abandoned.

I was forced to leave a foster home where I had always been "Debra Ruth Elliott" and was expected to know that I was now "Kathleen Imogene Pike Watkins". I refused to answer the morning roll. Unfortunately I was unable to abscond overnight like the other older girls. I had a physical disability, and I couldn't get over the fence. I was so homesick, and couldn't sleep at night. I believe I suffered a nervous breakdown at that time.

I worked out I could see the lights at the Burwood Road and Hume Highway intersection at Enfield. This was so close to my home, and all I wanted to do was to

get back there. My foster home was much better than the institution, where there was little personal attention, and certainly no love.

My foster family refused to allow me home. Hazel would visit, but only for a short time. Years later, my future husband and I visited from Perth. You had to wipe out the shower recess, after a shower. Life with my foster mother had not changed much.

My elder foster sister also left the household when she turned 16. She married a man, who became a violent alcoholic and four children were born into that family. They each endured a horrific life.

Both my foster brothers were allowed to stay in that house for some time. They weren't the risk to Hazel that my sister and I were as 16 year old girls.

In 1973, I was married. My children were born in 1979 and 1980. I became divorced in 1985, because my husband wanted a mother, and I was not prepared to mother him as well as our children.

I enrolled at Curtin University in 1983, and completed a Bachelor of Arts in (Primary) Education as well as a Postgraduate in Health Promotion by 1995. I had to take study leave because of my ill health for a number of years.

Now those female children are 24 and 25. The younger one is about to go to Duntroon. The older girl has several units to complete, and in the meantime is working in Juvenile Justice as a social worker. As a separated mother, I worked hard to bring them up and loved them unconditionally. I knew I did not have a good example of parenthood, so worked really hard to bring them up in the most appropriate way I could manage.

The worst thing I ever did was marry a violent alcoholic in 1989. The best thing I did was take the three of us out of that relationship within two years. My two girls don't tell me that, however I feel extremely guilty.

I recognise that my early years were extremely difficult. The Welfare would visit, and I am angry that they allowed such appalling treatment for so long. As well as enduring life in a foster family and in an institution, I always suffered from a physical disability, which as I have gotten older has become more difficult, because I acquired rheumatoid arthritis when I was only 23. This condition was not originally a positive factor, although it did later on become that. I have concerns that this condition was caused by my early years in the foster home and the Welfare institutions.

I have never been able to earn much income. As a person on a Disability Support Pension, my mature years will be financially limited. However I believe that I have achieved much in my personal circumstances.

C: /My documents/forgottenAustralians

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