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(nee Munro)

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To the Senate Community Affairs References Committee

This is my public submission to the above Committee for the Children in Institutional Care Inquiry.

I was born on 5 December 1947 to an alcoholic mother and father who already had one daughter. Some of the memories I have is of my father coming home drunk and Mum locking him out. He use to go around banging on the windows, it was frightening. Another incident I remember is when he came home drunk after we had just sat down for dinner and he upended the table – we all had to go to bed without dinner that night.

In 1950 I was first put into care at Scarba with my 4 year old sister, probably when Mum had my younger sister. I also believe that my mother had tried to commit suicide.

Mum and Dad had another three girls but Dad finally left Mum, I believe because he wanted a son. It wasn't long before Mum took up with another bloke who moved in – he was a real mongrel. She had two girls to him.

Mum took us back for a while but in 1956, she gave us up to welfare. We were so broke and there was no-one to help. There were six of us to one bed and I remember we used to walk the streets looking for cigarette butts for Mum. I'll never forget the day we went to court and became state wards. Mum said "I'll come for yous one day", but that was the last we saw of her for many years. By this time she had had one of my step-sisters and was heavily pregnant with the second. Six of us became state wards on this day and when my second step-sister was born, she was adopted out at birth. My eldest sister was not put in care though. She went to live with my Aunty (Mum's sister) and Uncle and stayed for quite a while before going to live with some other people by the name of Mallard. She got educated and later learnt a trade while working in the shoe industry.

I have always wondered why my grandparents or aunties or uncles didn't look after us. Don't really know the circumstances, no-one ever talks about. I suppose my aunties and uncles had enough kids of their own. Also, around about the same time my Mother's brother's kids, of which there were 13, also became state wards.

After becoming legal wards, we went to Bidura in Glebe, the holding pen for all the little animals. From there we were fostered out in pairs. I went with my sister Doreen, Pat went with Sue and Maureen with Karen. I was about 9 then. I don't remember this foster family as I wasn't there for long. They kept Doreen but sent me back. I think they only wanted one in the first place so we must have been there on trial.

I went back to Bidura and was fostered out again as a playmate for this family's daughter. However, it didn't last and I can't remember a lot. I'm missing so many years of my life. I am applying to get my records so hopefully I can fill in these gaps.

Anyway, back to Bidura yet again and then fostered to another family where I stayed for about two years. I do remember these people – the Fentons – they were nice and actually came to my wedding. I just couldn't understand why they sent me back. I had just started high school and went off to school this day when Mr Fenton turned up at about ten in the morning and took me home to pack my bags. Mrs Fenton took my watch off me but let me keep my bride doll (which I still have today). This was devastating, it broke my heart.

My next stay in care was at Lynwood Hall. Mr and Mrs Fenton said they would come and visit me but they never did. I took a while to settle in and had been there for about two years when my mother turned up. I remember being in sewing class and being told that I had a visitor. I was so surprised because I never had visitors. I hadn't seen my mother or other sisters for seven years. I asked who it was and was told it was my mother to which I replied "which one". When they said your real one, I said it can't be she's dead.

On seeing her, my first words were what are you doing here? She said she lived a few stations away and I asked her why hadn't she come before and why don't you take me out of here. She said welfare said she could when she could provide a roof over her head. She was with another man by this time and he later told me that he had dragged her out of the gutter. She later came back for another visit with my grandfather and sister Marilyn, who was in a place called Brush Farm.

At Lynwood I was in the bottom dormitory for the first six months. I made a few friends. I was then moved to another dorm after fighting with a girl who broke her arm in the process. Although it was an accident, I had to spend time in the 'clink' which was a small room with a mattress on the floor and a potty. Being locked in there was terrible and I now have a fear of dark closed in spaces.

We had to do our own washing, darn our own clothes and used to make our own bombay-bloomers. The worst time was when you had your monthly's as we only had bits of towel to use. Trying to scrub them clean used to take the skin off your knuckles. I had two pairs of shoes, one for inside and one for out.

Overall, if you abided by the strict rules at Lynwood you were OK, but if you did one thing out of the ordinary you were picked-on. I remember once coming back from a visit with my Mother who had decided to cut my hair into a fringe and she also permed it. I begged her not to do it because we had to always have our hair pulled back off our faces. Well, when I got back I really copped it and from that day the principal, Miss Davies, had me marked for a while for having a fringe.

The food was very basic and there were no snacks in between meals. My Doctor tells me that the reason I am now riddled with arthritis is because of the lack of calcium in my diet when I was young.

I also have hearing loss from being hit over the head a lot, but this was mostly from my Mum. I used to always cop it from her, don't know why.

I was only educated up until grade six. I never went outside Lynwood to school, just spent all my time doing chores. The only time I went outside was when we went to Church every Sunday and on a few visits with Mum.

All the time I was at Lynwood I didn't suffer any real physical or any sexual abuse, but certainly suffered emotionally. I felt a huge sense of abandonment and always wondered why no-one wanted me. I felt like a reject.

Mum finally took me out when I was 15 and old enough to work. She had a job ready for me at Ingams Chicken Farm. My pay packed always had to be given unopened to Mum and Don, the man she was living with then. When I got out, I didn't know how to do my hair, put make-up on, how to dance and in the 60s this was so important. My mother used to say to me: "for god's sake do something with yourself, you look so plain".

By the time I was 18 I was married to Harry, who at first was my pen-friend when he was a soldier in New Guinea. We have been together now for 38 years and we certainly have had our ups and downs. He was a dominating man. Having served time in New Guinea, Borneo and Vietnam he suffers from post traumatic stress disorder. I have been absolutely determined to make my marriage work as I wasn't going to let my kids have a childhood like I had. Believe me, it hasn't been easy to be a wife or a parent with no role models or experience to go by. We had three girls and I now have six grandchildren.

One of my sisters had a child out of wedlock and was going to have him adopted but my Mum said: "No grandchild of mine is going into care"!!! He ended up living with her and Don until he left home as an adult.

Another one of my sisters (Marilyn) ended up killing a man and was sentenced to seven years, but only served about five. This happened after she went back to Mum from Brush Farm and started prostituting herself for lollies and ice-cream. Mum had to go to court to get permission to have her sterilised. She killed this man because she didn't want to go with him and he kept pestering her. She's now living somewhere in Sydney and has a carer who checks on her every now and then – they tried to put her in a hostel, but she's the type of person who can't have restrictions put on her. She had and still does lots of mental health problems.

I now have contact with my sisters but only if I'm in Sydney which is not often. I do speak with Pat on the phone quite often though. It has been really hard to be deprived of growing up together as a family. I missed having birthdays and Xmas's together. Now we're sort of like strangers.

My mother died in 1988 and I was devastated as I looked after her for three months before she died of cancer. One of my sisters was hoping for an apology from her before she dies, but she never got one. She would have said that she did the best she could.

My father died in 1981 but I didn't really feel anything. In 1979-80 I felt like finding him to let him know that I'd survived and that he had grandchildren, but I never did.

Trying to find out family info is difficult – without it there is no real anchor to life that you really need for closure. My husband is doing a family tree which is incomplete because of a lack of information. We did go to England seven years ago and met my father's family. We got on really well with them – they are Geordies – they were wonderful but didn't give us much info about the family. They did though tell me that if we had been born in England none of us would have been given away.

When I do ask questions or make some comments about our childhood etc, I often hear from my sisters, step father or aunties "if only you knew" – it really angers me, I hate secrets.

I hope this inquiry offers help to those people who suffer from having such terrible childhoods without any love or nurturing. I also hope that it does something for those poor kids today who are given up to welfare, heaven help them.