

David Robert Smith

My Submission for the Inquiry into children in institutional care.

Burnside Presbyterian homes for children

Pennant hills Road

North Parramatta, Sydney

LINCLUDEN (1976) & WAR MEMORIAL (1976-77)

In 1976 I was placed into the care of Burnside. I was 7 years of age. My first memory of this place was one of why am I being punished? To me this place looked like a prison as it was made out of stone and was quite imposing. My sister and I were placed in Lincluden while our older brother was placed in War Memorial. I hated being separated from my brother as I loved him quite dearly. He was my role model and someone I knew I could depend upon to protect me as I was born with a disability, Strabismus (lazy eye muscle) and Ptosis (lazy eyelid). Because of this disability, I was the source of constant ridicule and name calling from other children.

After a period of settling in to Lincluden, I was then transferred to War Memorial and my sister was sent to Ivanhoe. This caused my relationship with my sister to be limited to school time and that was limited to play times. Now that I was at War home I was with my brother who could only protect me to a degree as he had to protect himself from the older boys. There was definitely a 'top dog' scenario in that particular home that I had not encountered before in my young life. I was introduced to the routine of the 'home life' which was about discipline and this discipline was military in its structure. At 6am a bell was rung and this indicated to us boys that we had to get out of bed, make our bed, get dressed and if the bed wasn't made properly when the house parents came to inspect it then it was pulled apart and stripped and I was made to make it again. Quite a shock for a seven year old. You had an hour in the morning to do your chores from 6 to 7am and then breakfast was at 7am. We had to stand behind our chairs and wait until every child was present, and then say prayers, and then we were allowed to sit and eat. Breakfast went from 7am to 730am then back to finish your chores till 8am when we would get dressed for school. Our chores consisted of scullery duties washing the bathrooms and toilets, cut and polishing wooden floors with a polishing machine, sweeping the floors, polishing silverware and brass ware etc. general housekeeping. If these chores weren't finished before school then you continued them straight after school. I also was prone to chronic Enuresis (bedwetting) which restricted my time in the mornings. I was made to have cold showers I wasn't allowed hot water, then I had to strip my bed and remake it. Then down to the laundry I would take my soiled linen and bedclothes and would have to wash them and wring them out by hand in the foot baths, hang them on the line while being ridiculed by the other boys. This always before doing my chores or having breakfast. The homes tried to cure my Enuresis by medicating me with anti anxiety drugs (this medication should be documented on my medical file) and by

placing an alarm on the mattress which would give me a electric shock or an alarm would go off. Neither of these worked of course as I was in a constant state of anxiety due to the institutionalisation of my life.

MONTROSE (1977)

IS THIS HELL?

I was now 8 and my understanding at the time was that the homes thought it would be beneficial to keep siblings together even though I believe I was settled at War home and finding my way. So they transferred me, Peter and my sister Jody to Montrose a family group home at Epping. My first impression was that the house looked like any other in suburbia and felt like a family's home. This was soon to prove to not be the case. The house parents, Maria and Norman Day, and their two children, Barbra and Stephen, seemed quite nice and friendly. My first lesson of this not being so was when I dropped my fork at the dinner table. Not only was I chastised but I was made to write 25 lines 'I must not drop my fork at the dinner table.' This was the beginning of what I classify as psychological and emotional abuse and torture. From that moment on things went from bad to worse. Very slowly but insidiously. It seemed I was forever doing lines or some form of punishment so much so that to go out to play was scary as I might do something else that would result in further punishment. I was constantly walking on eggshells while I lived in that house. The constant put downs that Maria Day would say as she punished me further impacted onto me emotionally. I assume the breaking of my spirit was her intent. I remember Peter and I being thrashed with the dog leash because we had cut the rope while we were playing. Such was the extent of the thrashing that we had severe bruising on our upper thighs and buttocks. When we went home to our mothers for the weekend we showed her the bruising and explained why and what had occurred she then rang the homes to complain. Ms Corduroy a social worker then visited us at Montrose to investigate the situation. I told her what had been happening re abuse and punishment and nothing further was done about it. I was made aware who had the power and control of me right there and then. I felt disempowered, betrayed, terrorised and at the mercy of Maria and Norman Day. I can recall the smirk on their faces when nothing was done about it and that said it all to me. From that day forward I knew where I stood. I have not gone into detail of how many times I was punished but it was often and my foster parents, the Simcoes were aware of how unhappy I was while I lived there but still we were made to stay there by Mrs Smith our social worker at the time.

This time spent at Montrose -all of six months- has psychologically scarred me for life as it has done to my siblings. Considering I was in the care of Burnside for eight years this six month stint at Montrose is where most of the abuse for me occurred. When I think of the abuse and injustices that occurred while in the care of these 'professional caring persons' I truly know what the word disempowered means and what life must be like living under a dictatorship regime. Not once did these people, the Days or the social workers for that matter, show compassion or belief in what me or my siblings were saying. We complained regularly about how unhappy we were but without success. In the end we resorted to very bad behaviour by stealing the petty cash money regularly. This was our payback. When we were together we were strong so they separated us and finally they realised that our behaviour was going to get worse if we stayed there. They sent me and Peter to War and Jody back to Ivan hoe. In our files several of our previous house parents were asked by the social workers to give a written report of our behaviour. **ALL REPORTS WERE IN OUR FAVOUR AS**

BEING WELL BEHAVED CHILDREN. MOST OF THE REPORTS THAT FOLLOWED OUR STAY AT MONTROSE ARE ABOUT OUR SEEMINGLY DIFFICULT BEHAVIOUR. Following my stay at Montrose I went into a special needs class back at Burnside School when I returned to War home. My teachers name was Mr Pearson. I was assessed as being normal and sent to 3rd class.

WAR MEMORIAL (1978-)

When Peter and I returned to War home Colin and Marie Hadgett were the same houseparents before we went to Montrose. It was great comfort to see familiar faces and loving ones at that. Shortly after they moved to Blackwood and were replaced by Carol and George Pittis. Basically he dominated the house by fear and the threat of violence. One incident I recall he picked me up by my throat without my feet touching the ground and I told him he couldn't do this and wanted to see the superintendent, Mr Henning. He took me over to see Mr Henning and I explained what had occurred. Mr Henning basically seemed to think George was justified in what he had done. So this again lead me to know that there were no rights for the child and no protection afforded to me. I learned to shut up and put up. For if you made waves you were brutalised. I looked forward to escaping out of the homes via sleep over at friends and sporting events.

Before I was 'discharged' from Burnside in 1982, I was given the options of staying in the homes, going to live with my foster parents, the Simcoes or living with my mother and family. Considering that to have original or individual thoughts and voicing them or wants was beaten out of you, physically or verbally, this was quite a paradox. I found it difficult to make the decision but decided to live with my mother in the end. I am glad I made that decision as my mother passed away four years later and I would not have had time with her if I had decided otherwise.

DENTAL AND MEDICAL EXPERIENCES

During my time in Burnside I was a patient at the hospital that was located on the premises next to Ross home. When I was placed in traction for muscular spasms, having to use the bedpans was a humiliating and degrading event which was reinforced by Sister Anna, the nurse. Two sheets of toilet paper were allocated for bowel movements. No privacy. No curtains/partitions. I was still wetting the bed which seemed to infuriate Sister Anna who would chastise me about it. When I had to have fillings in my teeth I remember no pain killers!!!! I remember screaming in the chair and praying this would stop. If you complained to the dentist he would tell you to toughen up and stop being a sook. I very rarely visit dentists now and I know my sister Jody hasn't been since she was fourteen. I decided to become a nurse in an attempt to rectify the lack of caring and humanity that was directed to me as a child.

FOSTER CARE

Pam and Ron Simcoe were my foster parents for approximately five years while I was in Burnside. This was a relationship in which I was constantly reminded in a subliminal way that I was underprivileged and should be thankful that they had taken a liking to me. I was treated like a son but not a son by these people. On one hand I loved them as they were the one constant in my life for several years but on the other hand there was emotional and psychological blackmail for example I remember being

told that if I played my cards right and worked hard on the farm then I would inherit the farm and anything else they owned and then I would be told that I wasn't family so their nephew was actually the one who would inherit if they died. Pam didn't like me playing league and would not drive me to games on the weekends that were vital to future games. She would say my eyesight wasn't good enough for league further increasing my belief that I was inferior. I was told that I was street wise and when we would visit their friends I would be ostracised by the people we were visiting as I was labelled 'streetwise'. They would constantly undermine my relationships with my siblings and my mother by putting them down. This alienated me from my family because I would listen to what the Simcoes were saying and as I wanted their approval and wanted them to love me I would agree.

While in their care on a trip to Dubbo I broke my wrist by being bucked by a horse. I was taken to the hospital. In order for the doctors to fix my wrist they needed to realign it. I was meant to be under general anaesthetic but as Pam didn't want to stay in Dubbo overnight, I was given a local anaesthetic which had little effect. I screamed the hospital down as the pain was excruciating as they twisted my wrist back into place. Pam also didn't believe in pain relief so I wasn't administered any during or after.

In saying this about these people, in particular Pam, they did do a very wonderful thing for me. I was medicated (two forms of tablets which should be on my medical records in my file at Burnside) for the bedwetting as I said earlier and they had a friend who was a pharmacist. Pam asked about the medication and the pharmacist informed them that it was a drug that made me docile in behaviour and could have serious negative side effects. Pam and Ron then contacted the homes and voiced their concerns about my medication. After this I was no longer medicated when I visited the Simcoes. I was still on medication back at the homes until the Hadgetts, (next set of house parents) got me off them.

IMPACT ON MY FAMILY LIFE AND RELATIONSHIPS WITH MY CHILDREN NOW

I have been married for seven years and we have two children a boy and a girl. I am unable to have a normal father/child relationship with them and I don't know what it like to play with other children my age. This in turn is impacting onto my family life now. My wife, Gillian, god bless her, has had to endure constant emotional distance from me especially when our children were born. She has also endured living with me, an emotionally dysfunctional man taught never to show tears as to show emotion was a sign of weakness and as a child I would be hit and chided for crying. She has trouble understanding why I am the way I am and why I am the way I am most days but she is coming to understand and accept me. She constantly refers to me as 'Hitler' for when I am interacting with our children it is always in the role of disciplinarian. Learned behaviour. I am also the President of Southland District Rugby League, a sport I excelled in when I was a young boy. It was through this sport that I endeavoured to counteract the constant put downs of being labelled 'underprivileged, physically disabled, abandoned by bad parents homes kid'. I was an equal and felt empowered by my natural athletic abilities. There was no place on the field for inequality. I am studying the Bachelor of Nursing Degree and am currently in my third year. Through this study I have come to a better understanding of myself and why I have behaved the way I do now and in the past. I also have an awareness of the social structures that were in place back in the 1970's/80's and am now a strong

advocate for human rights especially the rights of the child. Due to my education, I now know my rights and am not afraid to speak out whenever they are threatened.

I am aware that what I have written is quite negative but there really wasn't much space for laughter. I got through most of the bad times by listening to the radio and I know that that is how Peter and Jody survived as well. I am awaiting my files from Burnside and I know that many more memories that are buried will resurface as I read them. Some will be good but most unfortunately will not.

Thank you for hearing me,

David Smith

