

Saturday 30/07/2011

SUBMISSION TO SENATE ENQUIRY INTO FORCED ADOPTIONS

My name is Jane Snelson, I was born June 1976. I live in Victoria but I was born and bred in Newcastle NSW. I had a wonderful Newcastle childhood full of choice and opportunity, this is something that was not offered to my Mother, Uncles and Aunt, nor was it offered to the sister I have never met, even though my sister would be five years older than myself the circumstances surrounding our births could not be any different. It is as though our Mothers were two different people in two different countries.

My mother found herself pregnant at the age of 17 after suffering a lost childhood to abuse and neglect. My mother was shipped off to Villa Maria in Singleton under the 'care' of the Sister's of Mercy for the term of her 'confinement' She was never allowed to touch, see or feel her baby once she had given birth, she was not allowed to be called by her name, she was not allowed to enjoy the experience of being pregnant or giving birth. She was not afforded the luxury of a recovery period, nor was she afforded the right to keep and raise her child. She was not informed of her rights or eligibility for assistance. She was threatened with poverty and homelessness if she did not abide by those in positions of power to sign the paperwork and relinquish her child. Although other women in the Mater Hospital were able to give birth in relative comfort without being tied to a bed and abandoned my mother was not to be afforded the same treatment. She was given medication to dry up her breast milk, medication to 'keep her calm' and bullied in the worst possible way by the Sisters of Mercy nuns, the child welfare officials and worst of all by the pedophile foster father who just happened to have been the baby's biological father.

I was told of my sister when I was around the age of 20 and pregnant with my first child. My Mother told me only the bones of what had happened, that she had a child before me and that it had been placed for adoption as she had no other choice, at the time my mother told me I believe she was searching for her child and for her records and files held by NSW Births Deaths and Marriages, DOCS NSW and perhaps the Singleton Sisters of Mercy. I do not believe that my Mother was successful in obtaining any assistance or help at that point in time.

Some years later I found myself studying Community Services in the NSW Blue Mountains and a discussion came up surrounding Freedom of Information and client Files. I had a discussion at that point with my mother about the files held by DOCS regarding her childhood and with the help of a teacher at the TAFE who put me in touch with another Forgotten Australian and through the FOI dept at DOCS I was able to make contact with a person there who helped me obtain the files for my mother and my Aunt who had died in foster care when my mother was 17.

In the DOCS files there was a very small reference made to my mother being placed in Villa Maria with a story about how she came to become pregnant, this story revolved around a family friend being named as the child's father, not the foster father being named as the father, there was also no reference made in regards to my mother's pleas for assistance regarding the abuse she was suffering at the hands of her foster father.

Shortly after receiving the files from DOCS and after numerous attempts by my mother to locate her files from both Villa Maria and the Mater hospital in Newcastle (Waratah) I gained my mother's permission to apply on her behalf for access to the files held by the Sisters of Mercy, now known as Centacare. I contacted Centacare with my request and the person I spoke to had no idea of Villa Maria's existence. I then asked to speak to someone else. The person I spoke to informed me that all records were held in archives with the Mater Hospital. I then contacted the Mater hospital who told me that all records surrounding the adoption and my mother's time in Villa Maria were held by Centacare as the Mater hospital was no longer owned by the 'Sisters of Mercy' or Centacare.

I once again contacted Centacare. At this point each Tuesday at 10am I would call Centacare, I would ask where the records are and how we could apply to see them. After 3 months of contacting Centacare I called one Tuesday and told the person I was speaking to that I was not getting off the phone until I received an answer as to where the files were and that if the call was disconnected I would be calling back. I informed the person on the phone that I had all day and the patience of a saint and would simply not stop calling and talking until I received an answer. Finally on this occasion I was given a phone number for the Bursar in Archives in Cooks Hill Newcastle. I contacted the phone number I was given and I was told that the person who is in charge of the records was on holidays, at this point I told the person I had contacted that it was not a good enough answer and I was not hanging up until I received an answer as to the location and availability of the files in question. I provided my phone number and name to the person answering the phone in case the 'Bursar' would like to contact me when they returned from holidays, however I wanted information instantly on the location of the files. It was then that I was informed that there are indeed files in the archives that are maintained by the Bursar and that they have to be looked at by the Bursar and the nuns who house the files before they can be released.

I was told that the files are rarely looked at and that the nuns who are there find it 'too distressing' to read the files. The nun's are now old and some are 'infirm' and they simply do not have the mental ability to be able to cope with reading the files and it was too traumatic and unreasonable for me to expect them to do so. At this point I could not believe what I was hearing, these people are the perpetrators of the acts committed, they were in a position of power and also a position of privilege. They were openly demanding the removal of babies

from relinquishing mothers who have lived a life time of pain and regret and yet the people who **caused** the pain are the ones who cannot face reading about what they have done.

After receiving no assistance from the Bursar I focused my attention to obtaining my mother's medical records from the Mater Hospital, however this was yet another road block, to obtain them you have to apparently apply through the social work department and yet on enquiry no one in the social work dept either answers the phone or knows where to begin to look for the records apart from perhaps contacting Centacare.

Medical records are important, every citizen knows the importance of their medical history, it is a question that is asked when you are admitted to hospital, given new medication or even visit your local GP. However my mother has no idea what her medical history is or what drugs she was administered, how her labour progressed, if her child was healthy, if there were any post natal notes or even notes regarding prenatal care. In her submission to the senate enquiry she has mentioned that they were taken for prenatal appointments and she was admitted as a patient to the Mater Hospital, therefore there should be a record of her care, perhaps not under the name of [redacted] but there should be a record somewhere, although how you find your records when you have alternative names I have no idea, but it seems that no one knows much about files and records when it comes the Catholic Church and their 'care' of young vulnerable girls.

My sister should be able to know where she came from, who she came from and that she was not willingly given up for adoption.

I am lucky, I know my childhood, I know I was loved and wanted, I know my medical history, I know that my mother, uncles and Aunt did not have a childhood that was acceptable by any standard in any point in time.

I know that there is a family history of cancer, high blood pressure, heart disease and Alzheimer's. I know that my brown hair and height come from my mother, I know when I look in the mirror that my features are a blend of my parents and that I belong. I don't know my sister. I don't know how her life has been, if she has children, if she had what she was 'promised' a 'good childhood with good god loving parents'. There is someone out there who has the same blood in their veins as me, she may have the same eyes, the same hair and perhaps the same predisposition to a family medical history that we share. I could walk past her in the street and would never know we are related. I could have spoken to her and never known who she was. Has she been told she was adopted? Does she know she was wanted and loved? Does she know that she has nephews?

The above is only what I know, and what I know isn't even the tip of the iceberg. What I know is what I have been told, what I have heard and in a small way what I have seen in files held by

DOCS. What I know is what I have seen in meetings with Forgotten Australians and what I have read in the senate report for Forgotten Australians. I have not experienced the loss of a child. I have two children. I have given birth to two babies where there was no question as to my right to raise my children. I have not experienced the pain and devastating loss of having to give up my child at birth with no choice and no say in the matter.

I have however grown up an only child, I have no sister or brother in law, and there are no nieces or nephews or cousins for my children.

This is not history, this is now, the children of the 'relinquishing' mothers are still here and they have a right to know what happened, how it happened and why. They have a right to know they have not been abandoned by reckless, careless and thoughtless immoral young girls.

There will be no great happy Hollywood ending for relinquishing mothers and the lost and stolen children, the damage is done and cannot be undone. You cannot go back and change what has happened, you can repair some of the damage and heal some scars but there will always be a hole that cannot be filled, a space where a childhood full of memories good and bad should fit, a hole where missed moments, the first step, first word, first tooth and first achievements are missing, where the only firsts relinquishing mothers have is the first love and first loss.