

I would like to make this submission to the Senate Inquiry on Government Compensation Payments.

At 11 years of age I was voluntarily placed in home care by my mother who could no longer care for me, due to health and mental reasons. My extended family and brother paid for my upkeep and care as a boarder. I was placed in the care of the Good Shepherd Sisters in Victoria, St Aidan's Convent and Orphanage, Bendigo. I was released from that care when I turned 16 and at no time during my incarceration was I treated any differently to a state ward. The only family members I saw while incarcerated were my mother and my great uncle once a month, which was the allotted visiting times. Sometimes they were unable to come on Parlour day so I would wait an additional month to see them.

The physical abuse began on my first evening there, when I was hit across the base of the skull with a wooden hand broom by _____, for being a normal child and running around the group room, this was the first of many occasions that _____ would hit me in this fashion. I felt degraded and embarrassed by this being hit like that in front of the other children who I did not yet know. I remember hearing a loud crack and feeling a very sharp pain in my neck, I still have neck pain many years later. During my time in care the abuse did not stop there.

Every day was a standard day; Sunday was for rest and relaxation their way. We awoke at 5.30am weekdays, and showered and dressed in a group environment as there was no privacy. After which we reported to the auxiliaries for inspection by 6.00am. If you were not one of the favourites, derogatory comments were made to you, about your appearance, your smell etc, sometimes you were sent back to redo your personal hygiene which meant that you missed out on breakfast because you didn't get your chores done in time. After this we were released from our dormitory to commence our daily chores.

One of my jobs was to wash a hallway called the "Apium way", on my hands and knees, during this chore the nuns would walk the hallway to go to the church, I would be required to commence again from the start to remove the footsteps. Three days a week, I applied floor polish again by hand on my knees, and then I operated an electric polisher to polish the floor. If I did not do this job, I was allocated to cleaning all of the public toilets in the area, which included scrubbing the interior of the bowl with my hand and a scrubbing brush with no rubber gloves, and washing all the walls and floors on hands and knees. If they were not cleaned well enough, I was given a toothbrush with which to do the job. This is a job which I am still fanatical about today. After chores were complete, we would be required to attend morning service at the church and then go to the dining room to eat. This work was laborious and hard for a young child to do daily. After the job was completed, it was inspected and if found to be not good enough the entire job had to be redone. I can remember on many occasions holding my breath waiting for inspection and nobody came. It was only at morning prayer time when the hallway was used to get to the church that I was able to let them know to get someone so that I could leave the area. We did other work also in our spare moments, normally on a Saturday afternoon, larger jobs like cleaning windows, the yard and grounds etc.

The food at the convent was minimal and there were no second servings of anything. It was a great day when we had sago for dessert. We had a roster for kitchen duty to wash and dry the dishes, clean the kitchen and take all left over scraps to the pigs. If you were not on that roster you reported for morning duty at the laundry. If you were on the kitchen roster you reported afterwards to the laundry. Mornings mainly included sorting through dirty washing that was delivered from hotels, motels and boys homes around the area. The work was arduous and continuous. At 9a.m. we reported to the school room if we had completed our laundry tasks.

Schooling was conducted by correspondence and was limited. We were told that we would never amount to anything so it didn't matter. We had two supervising teachers, who came on alternate days, one was an elderly lady who could hardly see, the other was an elderly gentleman who couldn't hear. We were not encouraged to amount to anything except housewives. At lunchtime it was the same routine, to the laundry or kitchen depending on roster. If there was nothing to do in the laundry which was seldom you were allowed free time for half an hour. It was after school that was the worse.

After school I worked in the mangle room, the ironing area was reserved for those who were more favourites to the auxiliaries and the nuns, or to those who just couldn't fit in the mangle room. Still not a pleasant task, but the mangle room was not for the faint hearted, during summer on 40 Celsius+ days, in a tin roof factory, with no fan or air conditioning, we would stand at a hot mangle. A large round solid steel machine with a woollen cloth covering it, heated to a temperature to dry and press wet sheets and tablecloths. The mangle was approximately 6 foot in diameter and approximately 15 foot long; it continually rolled to keep it at the same temperature. Wet sheets would be fed in by two girls on one side of the mangle and be pulled off by two girls on the other side. I was never considered mature enough to feed sheets, so I always pulled them off the mangle. Steam would surge off the sheets and directly into your face, the tips of your fingers would get blisters and your hands and wrists would become very sore. We would then take the sheets back to the other side to be fed through approximately three more times until they were dry. At which stage we would stop and fold them. If they were not folded properly, corner to exact corner, the punishment was usually a belt to the back of the head with a wooden broom which kept on a piece of rope around her waist, or if the wooden broom was not available, she would use anything she could reach. The sheets would then have to be fed through again and refolded. When and only when the work was completed for the day in the laundry were you allowed to leave the laundry and have a little downtime before dinner. We were never paid for any work performed in the laundry, it was expected. You never complained about doing this work because they would find something far worse for you to do.

If you were not under punishment you would be lucky to have a chair to sit on in the dining room. Everyone knew if you had done something wrong as you would stand to eat at your table for weeks on end. The longest I had my chair removed for was three weeks. I am not sure of the purpose of this type of punishment; however, it made eating very hard, so you tended not to eat as much as you normally would.

Depending on how long dinner took, there was an hour after dinner, where you returned to the group room and said evening prayers and had a half an hour to converse and develop relationships with others as well as complete homework. Even though you lived, slept and worked with these other children there was never much time to form relationships that you could call close. However, having found some of them as an adult, is a comfort, because they understand what you have been through. They were there with you.

Being taken away from your family and living in loveless and lonely conditions only heightens your feelings of low self-worth and sadness. I have suffered with depression since I was a child and still suffer today. Group rooms were supposed to be family rooms, we were to bond as a family, but in a family there are common practices, such as listening to others problems/issues, cuddles and understanding. In our group room there was ridicule, silence and under no circumstances any shows of love, quite the opposite in fact. Depending on the mood of the group nun and auxiliary you could be shunned, which was one of the worse things, you felt so alone you just wanted to die so that you could get away from there. Nobody was allowed to talk to you, it was horrible, I can remember thinking about suicide at that time. I still struggle even today to form loving and strong relationships

with my own family, now that they have moved on from being children, I have no idea of how to cement an adult relationship and have a true mother/child relationship. Having lacked love, understanding and praise myself as a child, I have found it very hard to provide these things to my own children. My daughter recently told me that I show more affection to her cat than to her children, and she is right, I love my grandchildren of course, but I have issues with bonding because I was never taught or shown how to do it.

After your hour in the group room, it was off to the dormitory, where you were monitored while you showered, dressed and washed your underwear, if you were in the shower too long an Auxiliary came in to see what you were up to, or an older girl was sent in to hurry you up. There were only two showers in a dormitory of approximately 50+ girls. There was no talking during this time. You then reported yourself and your underwear to the auxiliaries for inspection. To stand in front of an older woman in line with many others and display the crutch of your underwear is humiliating, especially when you may not have washed them properly with your body soap and you are told how stupid and dirty you are. Often we were told that the mentally disadvantaged girls could do a better job of their underwear than us.

Lights out was normally at 8.00pm and there was no talking for fear of punishment. The Auxiliaries normally slept in a room just off to the side of the dormitory if not in it, so they monitored everything. We slept in small steel beds, head to head in an open dormitory with no dividing walls approximately the size of The House of Representatives. There was row upon row of us and no privacy whatsoever. Beside each bed was a small bedside chest of drawers and a locker. You kept your small stash of personal goods in this area, photos were not allowed to be displayed or carried. The dormitories were very cold in winter and Bendigo often gets down to 4° Celsius in the middle of winter or lower, and the reverse in summer, some nights were unbearable. There was no heating or fans to assist in regulating the temperature of the room. And no additional blankets were provided for winter. I can remember lying in bed very cold on some occasions, my time in bed was a time to reflect why I wasn't loved, why I had been sent away and why I was no good and so bad that they had to put me in a place like that. There were not very many nights that my crying did not mix in with the other girls. We all dreamed of home, no matter how bad home was, it was much better than there.

The personal abuse that I remember apart from the above, were the beltings in the privacy of office. In particular to me, was a systematic abuse, I was raped before being admitted to the convent and had contracted syphilis from the rapist. I was taken to the doctor several years later and had to undergo a three month therapy of injections twice a day. She gave these injections and every time she did, she advised me that I was a sinner, disgusting and not worth anything, she told me that I was a whore and would never be admitted into heaven. She also made the injections as painful as possible, sometimes throwing them like a dart from a distance into the rump of my buttocks. I never received any health or dental checks while admitted to the convent other than this one time, and that was at the request of my mother. As I had never had a medical check in my time at the convent and the disease had been allowed to grow and do damage, I was denied my right of having a natural birth due to damage caused to my uterus, instead I have had to have caesareans each time.

At one particular time, I had a severe earache, I was not taken to a doctor, I was not given anything for pain, I was told to stop complaining and get on with it and I was given cotton wool to put in my ear. I still had to perform all chores and my daily duties in the laundry while sick. I also endured kidney infections as I know them to be now, and a broken left foot that was diagnosed at age 22 and for which I never received any medical treatment for, they told me to stop being a hypochondriac.

Every Friday night we were fed a tablespoon of castor oil. Castor oil, when ingested, triggers cramping in the bowel making it an effective laxative.

There was a mixture of elderly, senile and mentally disadvantaged women at the convent, and there was no division between them and the younger girls. I was chased and kicked by one elderly resident, bitten by another and witness to countless epileptic fits that were never explained properly to us, we were only told that they had the devil in them. A nun that died at the convent had open coffin funeral and we had to do a walk past her coffin to show respect. She was very scary, this was very frightening to a child and we should never have been subjected to it. I had nightmares after that which persisted for several years.

The convent was kept locked down and to go through one door to another required a key and then the door was immediately locked behind you. The gates to the outside world were kept locked and impenetrable. They were approximately 15+ feet high with barbed wire on the top of them. We were told that the doors were locked to protect the good people of Bendigo from the likes of trash like us. There were young children kept on the other side of the convent, orphans, we were always told that they were angels and that if we saw them we were to turn away because we were not worthy enough to look at them. If we did, we were punished.

I attempted to run away from the convent on three different occasions, putting myself at risk by hitchhiking to get away. On each occasion I was returned to the convent by the local police. All I wanted to do was go home, but I didn't know my way there.

There was so much more that happened however, my space here is limited.

Shortly after I left the convent my teeth all had to be removed because they were rotten and falling to bits. This was a very painful and an embarrassing situation for me, I became very ill after their removal due to infection. I've had to wear a top and bottom plate since age 16.

I found out in my twenties that I have a genetic, chronic kidney disorder and that I have had it since birth. I had no care for this disease as a child, and probably suffered with multiple urinary tract infections (UTI's) which are part of this disease. Each UTI if not treated can become a kidney infection and I remember many of them, each kidney infection kills the function of my kidneys just a little more or could send me into renal failure. I am very lucky that did not happen to me as a child in care. My current function is 38%.

Mentally and socially, I became institutionalised in my personality and on my 16th birthday was released from the convent and sent home. I had not been prepared for exiting an institution or given any idea as to how to cope in the real world outside of the convent walls. I wasn't even told that I was going until an hour before I left, when I found my bag packed in the parlour and my Uncle at the door. I had no trade or skills and was not entitled to any assistance to feed, clothe and look after myself. My release was frightening, without my daily routine and the protection of the walls of the convent I felt totally naked, stripped of everything that I knew, scared and emotionally unprepared for the harsh realities of life.

I felt very lost and alone at this time. I had no support system, no friends in the outside world and no parents to support me, the small relationship that I had with my family was removed from me while I was in the convent. I walked the streets for the first few nights before being taken in by a couple who imprisoned me in one of their bedrooms, at first I was appreciative because I had nowhere else to go,

and then it became very scary, I woke one morning to find the bedroom door locked, so I climbed out through a gap in the window and ran.

After I left their house, I fell prey to a very abusive and possessive man and slept in his car on the street for three months, while he slept in his bed at home. As I had not been taught anything about contraception I fell pregnant to him and became his slave and beating post. I was constantly bashed and abused morning and night until all hours. My incarceration into the orphanage made me a perfect target for such a person. I lacked self-esteem and any pride of personal achievement, and as I was used to being constantly put down and abused, the relationship with this man became similar to Stockholm syndrome. He was able to systematically remove me from society and keep me imprisoned in his house while treating me in any way he felt like at the time. All the time I reasoned that his behaviour was because he loved me and wanted to protect me. I hated living like that but I was scared to leave as I knew that I would not be able to cope without him, it was my own personal hell and I believed I deserved it, because I had been told so often that I did.

I attempted suicide three times during this relationship, and then after five years and a lot of begging by my mother who eventually found out about what was happening, I found the courage to run away. I was still very troubled and at times irrational, I put myself into situations that were dangerous, I didn't care what happened to me because I felt worthless. When I walked away I left my two children as well, as there were no support systems in place to assist me to care for them and I had no means or skills to do it on my own. I felt they were far better off without me. I was not in a great mind space but I was very wrong they were not better off without me, life on the street with me would have been better.

I am now 53 years old; and even though I have been able to build a life, I still have a very low self-esteem and see myself as less than others. I suffer from depression and have consistently tried to find out who I really am since leaving the convent, as I left a very different person to the one that entered as an eleven year old. I am a target for bullies and have been bullied in the workplace on more than one occasion. I believe my temperament leaves me wide open for that type of person to target me and abuse my gentle nature. I have trouble forming social relationships with people and panic in some larger social events. I have and do suffer with RSI in my forearms and have also had an operation on my hand, these injuries could have been instigated by my days in the laundry. My knees are also damaged and I have had surgery on my left knee. I have paid a lot of money to psychologists, psychiatrists and other health professionals to assist me to get better. I no longer have the money to do that or I would continue. Now I just depend on the good nature of my husband who is my support and has assisted me to grow and mature.

I have no course of redress for the abuse that I suffered as a child. Only because this abuse took place in Victoria and unlike other states they have no system in place to support the needs of myself or others like me whose lives and futures were systematically destroyed by the system that was supposed to care for us. I do not have the cash required to outlay for legal action but if I did have it, I would certainly attempt that avenue, although I understand that to take this matter to the courts would cost more than I would be awarded if any. We are all Australians and as such, the recognition of compensation should not be limited by state borders. A person who has an injury from work can claim compensation from a common law across each state of Australia, but victims of crime, such as me have no redress whatsoever because each state has a different claim system for children who have been in care. And in no uncertain terms, our care was criminal.

On the day that Mr Kevin Rudd, gave a formal apology to care leavers I stood in my workplace and cried uncontrollably, as embarrassing as this was, it was an instant reaction that I had absolutely no control over. The care givers who abused and belittled us have never attempted to admit their abuse or apologise for their abuse and it is important for us to hear that also. We live in Australia but felt like third world children, unloved and uncared for. Care leavers need to be recognised in a special group. And as such, the abuse, mistreatment, neglect, poor education, lack of health and dental care, the lack of having our emotional needs met and the irreparable psychological damage that was caused to us should be compensated. We also need to be recognised for the fact that we are telling the truth about our pasts and circumstances.