

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Responses to Historical Forced Adoptions in Victoria

Wodonga—Tuesday, 18 May 2021

MEMBERS

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Mr James Newbury—Deputy Chair

Ms Christine Couzens

Ms Emma Kealy

Ms Michaela Settle

Mr David Southwick

Mr Meng Heang Tak

WITNESS

Name Withheld 3.

WITNESS

Name withheld 3.

The CHAIR: I will just read out the official proceedings. I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we are meeting. I pay my respects to their elders, past and present, and any Aboriginal elders that are here today.

I declare open the public hearings for the Legal and Social Issues Committee's Inquiry into Responses to Historical Forced Adoptions in Victoria. I do welcome [name withheld], who is here today. All evidence taken by this committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. That means, [name withheld], you have the green light to say anything you would like here and basically you will be protected by this privilege. s

All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard, and you will receive a proof version of that transcript for you to check when it is available. Any transcripts, PowerPoint presentations or handouts will be placed on the committee's website unless confidentiality is requested.

We also have Debbie here with us today. Debbie is a counsellor and she is available to talk to you during your evidence and also after this hearing.

As you probably know, we are very keen, and we are towards the end of our inquiry. We have, I believe, one more sitting to go and then we will deliberate. The committee will deliberate on all the evidence and submissions and we will prepare a very strong report back to Parliament. We are hoping to table the report on our findings in August. Today is a real opportunity for us to listen to your evidence of your experiences, but most importantly what you would like to see as an outcome from our inquiry. Thank you so much for being here. I now invite you to make a brief statement.

NAME WITHHELD: Okay. I will just read you my story. I was the founder of Jigsaw up here four years ago to change the legislation at that time, so I dealt with my issues and did my search 40 years ago. I will just let you know that, so I am quite comfortable with where I am. I am quite fortunate to be in that position I think. This is just my experience. You can see it was typed out for Jigsaw in that sort of type, which was pretty old four years ago.

My experience—at last I had my fears confirmed. I was five months pregnant, unmarried and only a few weeks until my 18th birthday. Why me? And to be caught after my first experience. I will tell you that I actually was raped, and I never told anyone. I never told my parents; I never told anybody because I grew up in a small town of 1200 people. Had I said anything about that, I would still be known to this day as '[name withheld]so-and-so, who got raped'. So I never told anyone.

The doctor in the next town was very kind, giving me free medical and even offering to travel the 20 miles to inform my parents of my condition. Telling my mother was the hardest thing I have ever done, but after the initial shock she stood by me throughout everything. It was decided that the best thing I could do was to go to Melbourne, away from small-town gossip, and to get into an agency in North Fitzroy. Marriage was out of the question and abortion was not mentioned as I had left it too late. I often wondered if I would have aborted had I had the chance, but I think not, even after all the heartache.

The agency took only 16 girls at the time, so we had to stay at the Travellers Inn in King Street. When mum left me in a small room among strangers in a strange city I was terrified and absolutely lost. After a couple of weeks of just wandering around the city I applied for part-time work, as my condition was not so obvious, and worked for three weeks at a real estate firm. The sister in charge of the agency rang to say that they could take me. In my first interview with the sister I was asked many personal questions, including my intimate indulgences—how I wish I had had some strength at the time to stand up to that one. Over the three months that I was there there were many talks with the sister, who always made me feel ashamed and a disgrace to society. We were all made to feel that we were lucky to have a place such as the agency to live and to never, never think of keeping our babies. There were all the usual reasons for what is best for a baby and what we could not provide. What was best for us was not to be considered, as after all we had made the terrible mistake of getting pregnant.

All the girls at the agency were given another name to use, and we were forbidden to use our own name at any time. The sister explained this was necessary as a few years before another girl had threatened to tell the parents of another in exchange for money. This only added to my general lost feelings. We all became so cautious as to not drop the slightest hint of information as to who we were and where we came from.

All the girls and two sisters slept upstairs, four to a room. At 6.30 we were called to rise immediately, fold our sheets and blankets and go downstairs. All clothes and belongings were kept in a locker room downstairs, where we showered and changed. At 7 o'clock you started your job, such as dusting, vacuuming et cetera that was rostered week about. After breakfast at 8 o'clock was morning Bible readings and hymns, then upstairs to make your bed. After that you continued your jobs until 11 o'clock, when it was free time.

The agency had its own small two-bed hospital, and some girls had their babies there, depending on the availability of the doctor. As I was rostered on the laundry I also had to wash all the delivery linen. All the bed linen et cetera used by the girls was washed by machine, but the girls had to handwash their things. After 12 o'clock lunch there was a forced rest period until 3 o'clock in the lounge. No knitting, talking or anything else was allowed during this time, and if you went to sleep, you did so sitting up, as upstairs bedrooms were out of bounds at all times. You had to obtain permission for visitors, and only from 2 to 4 o'clock were they allowed and only on certain days. All mail was to be put on the sister's desk, which she read and then posted. All incoming mail was addressed to the sister's sister in Caulfield as the agency address was so telling to anyone who did not know. This was also read before you got it.

You were allowed one visit out per week for approximately one hour to the shops and only if you could give a valid reason for wanting to go. Apart from this no-one was allowed at any time to go out of the agency's boundary. We were not to buy any sweets, cigarettes or anything else that was not necessary according to the sister. We were not allowed to listen to any sport on the radio or TV, as this caused fights according to the sister. At 5 o'clock tea we had one hour of prenatal exercises. Then we could watch TV on a rostered program basis until bedtime at 9 o'clock. No-one was allowed to bed before 9 o'clock except in extreme cases of tiredness. All girls had to say goodnight to the sister before retiring.

Once a week all floors upstairs and the kitchen were scrubbed and polished on hands and knees. On Sundays there was church in the morning and we would fall asleep upstairs for the afternoon. No television was allowed on that night. Instead all the girls must sing hymns in the sister's sitting room.

When I went into labour I was taken to the Royal Women's Hospital and left to the sister in charge there. During a very difficult delivery, mainly because I was so frightened, there were very few kind faces. I remember being in the stirrups and facing the doorway, completely naked from the waist down, and one nurse came in and said, 'Oh my God, what a sight'.

As I was wheeled from the delivery room, one sister said, 'See you again next year' and laughed. When I first looked at my tiny 6-pound baby daughter I marvelled at how perfect she was, but I also realised for the first time—and I do not usually get emotional—that she was mine, and although my family and everyone else was against it, I wanted to keep her.

I was allowed no other contact with my daughter during the next two days, until the ambulance ride back to the agency when I actually held her in my arms and cried all the way, knowing that I had not a hope in the world of keeping her. I went into the agency's hospital with my daughter in the nursery. I was permitted once to see her bathe and otherwise was forbidden to hold or touch her. I was also in trouble with the sister for writing to my mother while at the Royal Women's Hospital because she liked to be the one to give the birth news to the family. On the sixth day after my daughter was born her adoptive parents came to get her, and I have never felt such despair as I did that day, bearing in mind that I had 30 days to change my mind. I was forbidden to get out of bed in case I should see the adoptive parents arriving or leaving. Two weeks later I was allowed to leave and return home, and, according to the sister, 'You will soon forget all about this'. That is my story. Any questions?

The CHAIR: Thank you so much. Thank you, [name withheld], for sharing your experiences with us. We truly appreciate it. I know it has been challenging and difficult for you to revisit some of it.

NAME WITHHELD: No, it is fine now. I normally do not get emotional about that, and in saying that too, I found my daughter when she was 12. I had a little bit of information, so I went to the rolls and to birth notices and found it within an hour. I made contact when she was 12 with the adoptive parents—lovely, lovely people.

I always wanted to know: had I made the right decision? Was she okay? Because when we were involved in Jigsaw there were lots of stories about children—some children who had been sent to orphanages that did not fit their adoptive parents, and a lot of other stories. So I wanted to find out. She had lovely parents. I have contact with her parents and I have had contact with her since she was 12, and her parents are absolutely lovely. So it was the right decision for her at the time with what came later.

The CHAIR: If I can ask a question: do you believe that there is enough public awareness of what happened to in particular mothers and people affected by forced adoption, and also would greater awareness make it easier for mothers to come forward and tell their stories and receive support, in your view?

NAME WITHHELD: Of course, because no-one received any support. I have been in contact with the sexual assault unit here about what I would do about her father. That was a long time ago—what would happen, what if I did this, and all the rest of it—and I have decided not to do anything. So there are issues. I would have liked to have had some support back then, but you were not given any and there was not any counselling. You were just made to feel ashamed. There was no way you were going to keep your baby, and besides, there was not any pension. That was not long after the war finished, for example. We were pretty poor—my family was. There was not any option.

The CHAIR: What are your thoughts about a redress scheme for people that have been affected by forced adoption, as in compensation, as in providing financial support for counselling? What would you like to see in a redress scheme?

NAME WITHHELD: The people that I have been in contact with, there are some people who I think would benefit from counselling. I do not know their financial positions—whether they would benefit from that—or their children that they gave up. I do not know. I have heard some really, really sad stories. I mean, I am very lucky I think that I have had my daughter in my life, and I have a good relationship with her adoptive parents. But I think you could travel through that time with better support had there been something. Because it is different now. I mean, single mothers, they can choose to have children. There is no shame. But the shame stays with you. So, yes, I think if there could be counselling and more awareness of that for those people who are still hurting now, the mothers and the adoptive children, to address that shame—not to feel ashamed of what happened.

The CHAIR: Excellent. Did you want to go?

Mr TAK: Yes. Thank you, Chair. Thank you, [name withheld]. I heard part of your answer. We have heard from some different submitters that experiences could be different, and no amount of redress would compensate for the loss of the relationship between parents and children. But what would you like to see from this committee in terms of recommendations to the government, apart from what you have already said?

NAME WITHHELD: I do not know really. You know, I would like to see an outline of what is proposed and then to think about that, rather than me saying, ‘Well, I can’t come up with anything at the moment other than what I have just said’. I would like to look and see what you come up with and then to think about whether I agree with that or I do not.

The CHAIR: Like, for instance, today we heard about the importance of acknowledging the hurt that occurred with forced adoptions for mothers and for adoptees. We heard that it is really important to tell the truth of what occurred.

NAME WITHHELD: Yes, of course.

The CHAIR: So that was really important. Also, a lot of mothers or the adoptees have found it very difficult to access their records, so it is really important to address that. The birth certificate issue as well has been raised. But predominantly we have heard that counselling support services that can actually provide help to people that have been affected should be available. I suppose from what we have heard today they are some of the issues that have been raised. I mean, you have been, with your experiences, a bit more unique because you found your daughter quite early on and it took you an hour, whereas we have heard from others that it has been years and years and they have been blocked and it has been extremely difficult.

NAME WITHHELD: I have done three searches for other people. I am a private investigator; that is my job. It took me three years to find one lady from Tasmania. By coincidence I have just been there. Everyone leaves a paper trail, but then not everyone has access to that. But I agree with you totally, that all of those things that you just said are relevant and about the acknowledgement and the shame. Absolutely, acknowledging that shame, how you felt and what you thought you were forced to do, and that was being forced to give your child away. While I have had a good experience with finding my daughter at 12, there were those 12 years. That is many years for other mothers, but that was 12 years that I wondered every day, 'Have I done the right thing? Where is my child? Did I do the right thing? What if that was not the right decision? What if I could have that child back now that I am married and have other children?'. Those were always the burning questions for me. 'If she is in the wrong position, I could get her back maybe', that is what I thought.

The CHAIR: And just on a final question, how did you go when you were accessing your own records? Was it challenging? Was it an easy process? Did you get all of your information?

NAME WITHHELD: It was an easy process for me. From a couple of things that this sister, this torturous person—I call her Hitler. That was traumatic that home, absolutely traumatic. And the fact that my daughter was taken after six days and I had 30 days to change my mind. What if I had changed my mind? They had already taken her. How would that have been for her? Now, I knew that they were teachers and I knew that there were two other adoptive sons. So I just looked in the *Sun* paper for birth notices, found one, looked up their names and bingo I had got it in an hour. But in these other searches that I have done it has not been as easy as mine. As I say, everyone leaves a trail. But that is just because that is what I do; that is my profession.

The CHAIR: And that includes your medical records as well—you were able to access those?

NAME WITHHELD: I have not accessed. I did write to the Presbyterian Sisterhood and was told that—I got the hospital records of what happened, but apart from anything else, no, no records.

The CHAIR: Right.

NAME WITHHELD: But that did not bother me because I have got my daughter, so really I kind of surpassed that. But I understand from other people I have talked to how hard it is for some people to do that. I am involved in a search for a young man now. He is 48, and I have spoken to his grandmother and she actually dropped the information about where his mother is. But his mother—because I said I was a private investigator to the grandmother—she has freaked out and gone back to the adoptive agency and told him she wants nothing to do with him. Okay, that is her right. I personally believe—and I do not care who does not agree with me—that he has a right to know who his parents are. He wants to find his father; she has that information. All he wanted to do was meet her and find out who he is and what his medical records are, and I personally believe—and I do not care what anyone else thinks—that he has a right to that. So that is an issue, you know, privacy for her. She is married to a doctor, does not want him—family do not know. But he has got siblings. That is an issue. What do you do in that circumstance?

The CHAIR: Any further questions?

Mr TAK: No further questions, Chair. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much. This has been really informative for us. Thank you for taking the time and making the effort after your trip from Tasmania. We really appreciate it. As I said, now our next steps will be to deliberate all the evidence and present a very strong report to Parliament in August, and your submission and your evidence today will be part of our deliberations. But again, thank you so much, and we wish you all the very best. I do want to note that it is really important, because today we have had some pretty strong emotional evidence, and I am happy—and I think I speak on behalf of my members—that we have been able to conclude on a little bit of a happier note with you, so we wish you all the best.

NAME WITHHELD: Yes. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you.

Witness withdrew.