

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Responses to Historical Forced Adoptions in Victoria

Wodonga—Tuesday, 18 May 2021

MEMBERS

Ms Natalie Suleyman—Chair

Mr James Newbury—Deputy Chair

Ms Christine Couzens

Ms Emma Kealy

Ms Michaela Settle

Mr David Southwick

Mr Meng Heang Tak

WITNESS

Name Withheld.

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Name withheld.

NAME WITHHELD: I am here on a couple of different fronts, I guess you could call it. I am an adoptee, but I also was pressured to relinquish my child, my first child, which I thankfully resisted. But there are the two aspects.

I was born in 1969 in Albury Base Hospital and in later years found out that my birth mother was forced to relinquish me. But basically, the story, is since I was four years old I repeatedly asked my parents if I was adopted. I just inherently knew I was. There was no specific reason; I just felt I was. And that was denied my entire life. When I was about to turn 40, after my parents had passed on—I had lost Mum and Dad for many years at that point—it was confirmed that I was indeed adopted, and I immediately knew that I would search for my birth family, because I had felt like a fish out of water my whole life. When I say that, I mean the interests of my adoptive family were very different from what I had, and they were very opposed to some of the things that I felt were natural to me.

It took me quite a deal of money and six months to find my birth family. I had been raised in a home where my father was Aboriginal. I had believed that I was Indigenous as well. I still feel I am; and that is just who I am, but upon finding my birth family, I am not. So, 12 years on, after finding my birth family, I am psychologically a stateless person. I have no idea what I should answer when forms come up and it says, 'Do you identify as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander?'. Sometimes I sit there looking at it for 10 minutes. I have no idea whether I should say 'yes' or 'no' because deep in myself, I feel I am and I feel like I am denying the heritage I grew up with if I say no. But biologically I am not.

Because I was 40 when I found out that I was adopted, I had raised my three daughters to believe they were Indigenous as well, and to this day I do not know where I stand. I have never met anyone in that circumstance. It feels a physical pain to me when I have to answer those questions, because I honestly do not know what I should be putting? That I am?

Upon finding my birth mother I suffered secondary rejection from not only her but also my half-siblings, because she stated on a number of occasions, 'that I was the worst thing that ever happened in her life'—as in her trauma—and she wants nothing to do with me or my three children. Because it causes their mother pain, my half-siblings do not want me in their lives either, and also the decision to look for my birth family has cost me many of my adopted family, because they felt that I was betraying Mum and Dad by making the decision to look for my birth family.

Finding out that I was adopted was liberating, as in I could finally understand why I was so different from everyone in my family and I was allowed to have different interests and so forth, but it also cost me who I am as a person—and everyone around me. So there is that aspect.

Sorry, I am jumping all over the place. I wrote all this out.

The other part to it all, was that in the spring of 1985 I fell pregnant to my future husband. I was 16 at the time, and because both my adoptive mother—who I thought was my birth mother at that point; she was my adoptive mother—and my future mother-in-law wanted me to adopt the baby out, I had to undergo a series of psychological assessments to be allowed to keep the baby and I was forced to leave school despite the fact that I was a very good student; because I was insisting on keeping the baby.

The prenatal visits were nothing short of heinous. I was denied information about the baby's progress or my own health. The medical staff refused to answer questions and would barely speak to me at the visits. I was given no access to any other peers. I was not allowed to talk to any other mothers—teen mothers, anyone like that—and I was given no counselling services.

On my 17th birthday I went into labour. I spent two days in labour, and when it finally came to the point when the baby was due to be born I was taken to the delivery suite and I was strapped to the bed and put into forceps without being given any pain medication. That was not discussed with me at all. Once the baby was born, she was handed directly to my mother. I was then sent off to a ward on my own.

After I was sent to the ward, the baby was taken to the nursery and I was only called up to the nursery anytime the baby needed to be fed. I was given no guidance and shown no mothercare skills, as opposed to all the other women in the hospital. I was kept separate from the other women in the hospital, and then after the seven days of this treatment and being constantly told by the nurses and the doctors and then being asked if I would consider giving up the baby, I was finally sent home with her. Then I had two more visits at home, and I can only assume they were hospital counsellors or some sort of related staff. They came to visit me, and both times it was to ask me if I really wanted to keep the baby, because it was stressed that my life would go back to normal if I gave her up for adoption. It remained an argument with both my mother-in-law and my mother for years. They wanted me to give up the baby afterwards. I was not allowed back to school, and I had to go out and get a job and move out of home and support the baby alone.

So, in short, I am really glad that I kept her, but that was only 35 years ago. We are not talking all that long ago, really. This practice has gone on for far longer than most people think it has. Most people think of the 50s and 60s. They do not think of it being mid-80s.

I would like to see that I can access the records, because my birth mother did not agree to any of the paternal information that was on my paperwork, and at the time I was told that I could not access that without her permission. I believe I now can, but I have to pay for it all and go through the process again. I would like to see that you do not have to pay for it, for starters. No adoptee asked to be adopted out. Why are we having to pay to find out who we are and then pay again when the laws change?

Often the conversation stops with the relinquishing mother. Yes, I understand the pain of a relinquishing mother, but every adoptee out there has been told that they should be grateful. I am sorry, what are we grateful for? That we do not know who we are? That for the rest of your life you have this turmoil and you second-guess every day in life whether you should have searched?

I do not know if I have done more damage to myself and my family by searching. Yes, we need to know the truth, but society does not allow for you to have any sort of ground point in where you need to go from there. I stumbled across VANISH nine years after I found out I was adopted. There was nothing that was said to me about a counselling services.

I still do not know where I stand about my heritage, what I should be, what I should not be. I do feel that the heritage thing is a huge thing for me. I feel I am Indigenous, but then I am not, you know what I mean? Biologically I am not, but mentally I am. There are just so many factors. There is still no assistance for me to find my paternal side. I am unable to access any of the medical records that pertain to myself via my genetic history and consequently, my children as well. We live by going to see a doctor and announcing every time we see a doctor of any sort, 'I'm adopted', or my children say, 'My mother's adopted. We don't know anything about our medical history'. It is just insane. When I found out that I was adopted and found my birth mother—I have had cancer twice in my life, and the cancer that I had runs all through her family. It is a biological thing. This is almost a basic human right—to find out these sorts of details. So, yes, I would like to see that adoptees can access at least their—and their descendants'—medical histories.

The other facet is I grew up with a father who had had a son who was taken at birth because he was Indigenous, so he is part of the stolen generations. I would like to find him. I would like for him to know what a good man his biological father was. And I have been told that because I am not biologically related to him, I am not able to access or even begin the search. So that is pretty much it, I think, yes.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much, [name withheld]. I wish you all the best. Thank you.

Just to conclude, everybody today who has presented will receive a transcript to go through and just check that through. If you have got any questions, reach out to Yuki or any one of us. As I said, the next steps will be that we are just at the finishing line in the sense that we will be deliberating on all the evidence and putting forward a really strong report, and hopefully we can have you all there when we are tabling the report in August to Parliament. Thank you so much for taking the time. I know it has been challenging, and we all appreciate you taking the time to be here with us today. I wish you all the very best in your endeavours. Thank you.

Committee adjourned.