

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Responses to Historical Forced Adoptions in Victoria

Kangaroo Flat—Tuesday, 30 March 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

Ms SallyRose Carbines.

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Ms SallyRose Carbines.

The CHAIR: Good afternoon. My name is Natalie Suleyman. I am the Member for St Albans. To my left are Meng Heang Tak, MP, the Member for Clarinda; Christine Couzens, MP, the Member for Geelong; and Michaela Settle, MP, the Member for Buninyong. I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we are meeting here today. I pay my respects to their elders both past and present and any other Aboriginal elders of other communities who may be 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 welcome SallyRose Carbines. All evidence taken by this Committee is protected by parliamentary privilege, so for anything you say here today you are protected by this privilege, but if you say these things potentially outside, including on social media or other platforms, you may not be protected by this privilege.

All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript for you to check as soon as it is available. Any transcripts, PowerPoint presentations or handouts will be placed on the Committee's website unless confidentiality has been requested.

Also here today is Holly, and Holly is from Carfi, an external provider of psychological support services. She is available to talk to if you need during the hearing, but also we are able to put you in touch with Carfi after the hearing as well, should you need this. The Committee is very much interested in hearing about your experiences in relation to forced adoption and most importantly what outcomes you would like from this inquiry. I now invite you to proceed with a brief statement, which will be followed by questions from Committee members. Thank you, SallyRose.

Ms CARBINES: Thank you, and thank you for giving me the opportunity to share with you today. I would also like to acknowledge the Dja Dja Wurrung people, whose land we are on today, and I especially would like to acknowledge the stolen generations, because I think their story is different but the same, and there are lots of learnings, and I am so proud of their voice. Recently the Castlemaine festival heard Archie Roach speak as I was preparing for this, so I think his knowledge of sharing the stories is so important. So I am very grateful for that. I am nervous.

The CHAIR: That is fine.

Ms CARBINES: Prepared but nervous. I hope by sharing my story today that it will make a difference for perhaps practices in the future and for those of us who have come before. I speak today as a voice for those that may find themselves adopted or placed in permanent care or kinship care through no fault of their own. As children we did not have a voice. As babies we did not have a voice. It is also really important for you to understand that this is my unique journey and story. With the years involved in the adoption community I have learned no two stories are the same, even though there are many common threads. I just want to start by setting the scene. I am nearly 70, so 10 minutes is brief. So I have just tried to pick out some highlights and probably some of those themes.

Mother lives in a small Gippsland town. She becomes pregnant at 17. The family send her to Hurstbridge, many miles away on the outskirts of Melbourne, for her confinement. Shame and isolation surround her. Mother sees a local doctor, who starts the adoption discussion with a family who already had an adopted two-year-old son. A private adoption is under discussion. A baby girl is born in September 1951 at the Greensborough hospital. The mother does not see the baby. The baby is alone—no touch, no smell, no connection—I still wonder for how many days or weeks because the records at the now Diamond Valley hospital have been destroyed.

So new beginnings for mother and baby. The mother: the social worker has told her to forget it and move on—'This is the best thing for the baby'—and that is what she did. The baby: a cute sister for Andrew, the little sister, the youngest of two; their family is now complete. Life begins for Sally, a curious soul always asking questions, wanting answers that no-one could or would give her.

I knew from an early age I was adopted. One day I was jumping on a neighbour's trampoline with two girls younger than me. Their voices softened and they whispered, 'Do you know, someone on this street is adopted. They were given away by their family, and do you know who they are?'. I froze, shook my head and ran home in tears, hurt, ashamed, feeling unwanted and not good enough. And it is this story that has shaped my life—not very empowering, is it.

Life went on. I lived comfortably and was given many opportunities: school, horseriding, holidays away et cetera, and I believed I was loved. In 1968, aged 17 myself, life took another traumatic turn when my big brother was killed in a car accident. He too was adopted, and his story is untold and a mystery—someone's son. His identity is locked away in a file. I have sent photos and update my changes of address in the hope one day his story can be revealed. I understood we were a family: he was my brother. I knew he was adopted, but it really hurt when I was told I could not access his file because we were not blood related. More unanswered questions for this curious soul: was he my brother or was it all pretend? Who are my parents? This is a difference of a natural family and a constructed legal family. And now at 17 I am an only child, wondering who I am and where do I fit in. Will I be given away? I see my parents' pain and am driven to be the perfect daughter, a big ask for someone who believes they are unwanted and not good enough. I carry this burden everywhere I go.

Life becomes busy: study, work, love and the beginning of my own family. I have no time to dwell and wallow in my sadness. To the outside world I am confident, capable, reliable and fun to be around. And then 1977: being pregnant and having my first baby was very exciting, but at the same time I was constantly reminded I was adopted by the never-ending questions by the medical profession about my mother's pregnancy and family and medical records et cetera. To these I had no answers, and my curiosity and desire to find my roots were heightened. I also realised that carrying a baby for nine months was so special and not easy to forget. As my mother—my adoptive mother, that is—and I as a daughter were unable to share or support one another, I felt guilty in being pregnant and unable to talk with my mother, as she had never dealt with her own issues of not being able to have her own children. Pregnancy is certainly a big trigger, and I can only imagine how hard it must have been for my birth mother.

1984: discussion, debates, change of legislation—at last I could register for my pre-adoption records. I registered as soon as I could and waited five long years to receive my records. My life imploded as I read through the file to discover I had been named Mary. I immediately wanted to know why and who named me that. Both my mothers' names were the same, quite unusual names, and 18 years apart. There were 18 years between me and my mother and then 18 years between me and my adoptive mother, so three lots of 18. So an unusual name—that was really eerie, and she was so young. The journey to find out who I really was was so close but so far away—so many questions, some questions answered, but some never, such as why and who named me Mary. My mother says she did not call me Mary.

Also, the date I was born, was it the third or was it the fourth? My adoptive mother always told me that the doctor rang on the 3rd to say I was born and a girl, asking if they were still interested, as I had all my fingers and toes. It was only on my 18th birthday when I fronted up to the police station to go for my drivers licence with my birth certificate in hand that I noticed it said the fourth. Imagine my shock and confusion. On my pre-adoption birth certificate it said the fourth, and then since meeting my mother, she remembers it was early September but does not remember the date. So I celebrated the fourth. That is my legal date.

I did the search myself and did meet my mother to discover she had five children. We had a different father. All of a sudden I was the oldest of six. It has not all been easy, especially when she said she would not tell me who my father was, as he was not named in the papers. For curiosity, but why? Was she protecting him, herself or me? I wondered. Eventually she did tell me and I did find him, but his shame, his feeling of letting people down, his regret, his silence meant he kept me a secret for another 15 years before he could tell his three children, when I became the eldest of nine. It is 27 years since I met my mother. I am nearly 70 and she is 87, and we have developed a good relationship. But my heart keeps asking why, and my head tries so hard to understand—some days better than others.

My personal journey has had its struggles, and building meaningful relationships with family members has taken time and work. I must stress that meeting family has certainly helped answer some of the questions, and I would do it all again. I have been fortunate and privileged to work with and support many on their own unique journeys, searching, supporting one on one and facilitating groups, and I still facilitate a group in Ballarat. So

that is really what I have written for my story, trying to map out some of the themes. I have a page of recommendations, so I am happy to go into those straightaway unless you want to ask questions first.

The CHAIR: Perhaps we will go into questions at this point in time. I will begin with Christine.

Ms COUZENS: Thank you, SallyRose, very much for sharing your experience with us. It is really valuable, and we know how challenging it is for you. So thank you so much for that, and I am really interested to hear your recommendations. I suppose, while we are not going to the recommendations yet, what has been your experience in accessing the records to find out about your adoption?

Ms CARBINES: My records, because I registered as soon as I could, and I think there was a flood—I had never talked about adoption. I thought I would be okay today. I will never forget going into that room, but it actually took five years from the time of recommendation to getting the records.

Ms COUZENS: So why did it take five years?

Ms CARBINES: I think because they were just inundated with inquiries.

Ms COUZENS: Right.

Ms CARBINES: Mothers could register—that were not able to get records, so if mothers and children then inquired, they obviously joined those two dots together first, and then it was done on age. So anybody over a certain age was obviously given priority. I understood that, but still it took a long time. And then I was called in to a meeting. I will never forget sitting in a room and then at the back was the table with all of these envelopes. I had never been in a room with other adoptees, but there were mothers speaking there, there were adoptive parents there and adoptees, so it was a very overwhelming experience. We were supported. I think my life did implode, and I just cried. I had never heard those stories. I think it was like a valve opening, the dyke breaking, of being able to say there are other people like me and starting to hear those stories. So in terms of getting the records, that was—and then on that same day I did ask about my brother's records and was told that he could not but my adoptive mother could. But she did not really approve of me searching, and she did not want to go ahead with that.

Ms COUZENS: And were you satisfied with the information that you did get? Was it complete?

Ms CARBINES: Yes, mine was pretty complete. There was not a lot in mine in that I was a private adoption. So I did get my original birth certificate and just the court records really. I did not get any history of the hospital or anything. Seeing all my parents, the three parties signing, and seeing signatures, when I actually saw that signature it was a very profound moment to see that this woman in those stories—I mean, I was probably in my 30s—was actually real. She became real that day when I got those papers. And to be named—because a lot of people, even in the room, were able to share that they were unnamed, so to have a name was something. Having been a search worker and helped a lot of people, the records vary so much.

Ms COUZENS: Yes, I have heard that.

Ms CARBINES: Yes. And someone would be sharing their story, and it would be like, 'Oh, I was this big' or 'My father had brown hair'. I was like, 'Oh, I didn't get any of that', because I did not go to St Joseph's or anywhere. I did try and get my records from, as I said, the Diamond Valley hospital, just to find out that—I had a mystery. I had no idea how long I was in that hospital. I would imagine they would not have sent a brand new baby home, so there must have been a few weeks, I would imagine. I would have liked that history, but I was told that had been destroyed. I had to go through freedom of information to try and get that, but that had been destroyed—the information. I mean, from having nothing to having something, yes, I was satisfied.

Ms COUZENS: In terms of the outcomes for this report, or this inquiry, are there specific areas of recommendation you think are really important?

Ms CARBINES: Yes, I do, and I am happy to leave the written examples here. I really do think that there need to be more resources given for ongoing support. Obviously groups are fantastic—VANISH or ARMS groups—but I think things are changing in that we are all getting a lot older, certainly for mothers, and children are now looking on behalf of the adopted person, so they need to have some support. There is lots of stuff here about supporting groups.

I just do want to say that I do get quite alarmed with the number of shows and things that are on now about all the reunions. It is like you meet and that is it, end of story. For me, that is another beginning of the story, that transition into building relationships. I am really lucky. I have got good relationships with both sides of my family, but it has taken a lot of work from me—and from them. But I suppose I have been the driver of that. I am curious; I ask lots of questions. I do have the ability to read people. With my father, he wanted a DNA—he said he did not think he was the father; was there someone else? I had to go back to my mother. I know more about my conception than most people in this room would know, and I do not really need to know all of that. But I was sensitive enough to give my father time, and that is why eventually he came forward—because of that. So I do have those skills; not everyone does. People want to do it for whatever reason. So I really think there should be more support for that ongoing post reunion, because then you have got children. Children did not know, husbands did not know, wives did not know, mothers did not know, grandmothers—you know. It does open another whole can of worms.

I wrote it more succinctly here, but these television shows I think do a disservice to the people involved. It is a bit like, ‘Oh, isn’t that lovely’. Then I think for partners and friends—and I had lots of friends that would say, ‘Why aren’t you searching? Why don’t you go?’, because I did hold onto my mother’s information for a long time to get her marriage certificate. But I had four children, young children. I had a husband that did not really understand. My adoptive mother was still alive. She did not really want me to search, though. People would say, ‘Why don’t you just go? Go knock on the door. Do this’. And it is like, ‘Yes, I could. But this is my life’. This is our life. This is not a television production. This is not a movie. These are people’s lives, and I think we really need to protect and support them. It is not easy to start sharing your story.

My mother was just 17 when I was born. I think on the birth certificate it says 18, but I think she was actually 17. She had been married for over 40 years. She had never told her husband. So for someone to come knocking on her door and for me to tell her husband that she had carried that secret—one of the things that she found really hard, because she was from a small country town and so was my father—they were both sent away. Their naivety thinks nobody knew, but she has since got connections to the town and gone back and is very proud to say she has met me. The thing that hurt her was everybody knew. She held that secret for 40 years and did not ever tell anybody. So that is what you are dealing with. So once reunion happens you have got all of that. So that is, I think, really important.

I also think for partners—we get asked. My marriage broke down, and I am sure it was to do with my own insecurity. I look back now and think I would not let him get very close. But even my partner now does not really understand, and he sometimes says, ‘Oh, it’d be good if I could go and talk to other people and learn about it from other people as well’. So I think for extended family, for families and some of my eight siblings—some of them would have perhaps liked to go: how do they support their mother; how did they support one another? So I think there is room for more support post reunion.

I know that VANISH does a great job, but I think they are very under-resourced in running the groups. It started as a very self-help model, and of course professionally and with privacy and things it is quite different now. They have developed some really good training for counsellors, which I think has opened up those myths and stories. I think perhaps we need some more money for some development of training—not just support groups but actual training that we could do for building meaningful and transparent long-term relationships from reunion and then training for family members as well and that being delivered by trainers and facilitators using personal story but not necessarily just that support grassroots model.

Ms COUZENS: Great. Thank you.

The CHAIR: We will move on to Michaela.

Ms SETTLE: I was interested in your views on integrated birth certificates. Obviously you are someone who has supported people to search. Do you have a position on—

Ms CARBINES: Look, I have a personal position. Since I have met my father, he has died. He was not on my birth certificate. I think if he was alive, I would probably go to have an integrated birth certificate with both my mother and father on it, but he is not. At my age I feel I probably would not pursue that. But I think it varies. It is very individual, but I think as an adopted person and perhaps getting those records, knowing the truth a lot earlier would have helped. What people do with that knowledge I suppose is—you do not know what people are going to do. But I think it is really important that people do know who they are. I spent years just

looking at everybody's face. If you had said to me, 'Oh, you look like so and so', that would carry weight for me for ever and ever, and if I had known a name or whatever. I think it is really important and I think it does respect our beginnings, our roots. As much as people tried to bury it, it is just too hard. The curiosity in us, the human desire for us to know where we belong, where we fit in, is so strong that I think it is really important.

Ms SETTLE: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much—seeing as there are no further questions—for taking the time to present to us. I know it was a bit difficult and challenging sharing your experiences, but we on behalf of the Committee thank you for being here. The next steps will be that the Committee have got a number of other public hearings to go, and then we will deliberate on the evidence and submissions. We will be tabling a very strong report with recommendations no later than 1 July. What we will do is keep in touch with you during that process and advise you as we come closer to 1 July and the tabling of the report. Again I take this opportunity to thank you and wish you all the very best. Hopefully you will be pleased with our report at the end, for what it is worth. So thank you very much.

Ms CARBINES: Yes. I did not cover all of this. I am happy to leave this, but I really think there needs to be, I suppose, a smorgasbord of options, because groups are not for everybody. A one on one is often important. And then some people prefer a more, you know, perhaps arts therapy and more holistic approach. So I think it needs to be a smorgasbord of opportunities for people. But, yes, I am happy to leave this.

The CHAIR: Please do. Thank you so much.

Ms CARBINES: Thank you.

Witness withdrew.