

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Responses to Historical Forced Adoptions in Victoria

Melbourne—Monday, 7 December 2020

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 Wilhelmina Marshall, Mother.

The CHAIR: I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we are meeting. I pay my respects to the elders past and present and the Aboriginal elders of any other communities that may be here today.

I declare open the public hearing for the Legal and Social Issues Committee's Inquiry into Responses to Historical Forced Adoptions in Victoria.

At this point all mobile phones should be switched to silent.

To my right is David Southwick, Member for Caulfield; to my left is Michaela Settle, Member for Buninyong; and Heang Tak, MP, Member for Clarinda; and of course to my left is Christine Couzens, MP, Member for Geelong.

All evidence taken by this committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. Therefore you are protected against any action for what you say here today, but if you go outside and repeat the same things, including on social media and other platforms, these comments 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 verified transcripts, PowerPoint presentations or handouts will be placed on the committee's website as soon as possible unless it is noted to be confidential in nature.

Today we have support services available. We have Reiko Hipple, who is here today from Carfi, an external provider of psychological support services. She is available to talk to you at any point of this presentation, whether it is during the hearing or also after. If you would like to take a break, please let us know. Also we are happy to provide any other services at the end of the meeting or another time if you may wish so. The committee is interested in hearing about your experience of forced adoption and in particular the services you have accessed and what outcomes you would like from this inquiry.

I now invite Wilhelmina Marshall to provide a brief statement to the committee, which will then be followed by some questions. Thank you so much for being here today.

Ms MARSHALL: Thank you, honourable members of Parliament. And are there committee guests here too, or this is the committee?

The CHAIR: Just the secretariat staff.

Ms MARSHALL: Thank you for the opportunity to further share my story with you. If you do not mind, is it okay if I sort of read? That is all right?

The CHAIR: Yes. No, go ahead.

Ms MARSHALL: I will try and be as brief as possible. You have all got a copy of my original submission. I just wanted to add some more to that today. There were things that I did not touch on. Earlier this year, with extreme sadness, my dear eldest son, [name withheld], also known by his adopted name, [name withheld], passed on, which you have in your notes. And yes, it is not pleasant for any mother to have to lose her child twice, as we have. There are a few of us that have had to experience this. His passing brought home a lot of memories—mostly sadness and loss but yet laced with some splashes of joy.

In my submission I did not touch on the fact that in the latter part of my pregnancy I stayed at a home for unmarried mothers. Unlike some of the mothers, I did not adopt my child out in Victoria. It actually happened in Queensland, but you have got that in there. I actually stayed at a home for unmarried mothers in Graceville in Brisbane. This home was run by Lifeline and was recommended by someone for me to spend the latter part of my trimester. After arriving there I soon discovered that they were very pro adoption and came down very hard on any of the girls that wanted to keep their babes. Being young, vulnerable, naive—I was an immigrant girl, so I did not have a very good grip of the English language—I did not fully understand the full extent of the terms of the adoption and what it really meant. The legalities were never fully explained to us, and it was as if we did not have any rights or that we had no right to question it. Well, you cannot shut me up now.

The home I stayed at was really quite beautiful. It was this beautiful old Queenslander. It had three levels, and it was located on the Brisbane River. Like so many other mothers, I heard of some terrible stories of what they

went through in their homes for unmarried mothers. We were spoilt. The second floor was completely taken up by two large dormitories, and it housed about 25 girls. The girls' ages ranged from as young as 12 to 28. And, yes, we worked hard, but in general we were well cared for and at times had a lot of fun.

We were actually given free reign during our downtime. We were able to go to the local shops and cinemas. Interestingly, the girls that were there came from all parts of Australia, New Zealand and New Guinea. The sad part of it was that some of the girls there were victims of rape, and in one case, the 12-year-old girl, she was a victim of incest. It was something that all of us girls struggled with deeply. This is one of the reasons, and this is one of the things I do want to point out and stress at this time, why it is so important for adoptees that are searching for their natural parents to please, please, operate through VANISH or use an intermediary, because in some cases there are very delicate issues, and these have to be respected.

The girls were a lovely bunch, always caring for each other as family. One of the girls that was there, her boyfriend was in Vietnam. I am talking the Vietnam War period. Her boyfriend was in Vietnam, and in those days there was no Skype and no mobile phones, right? I can remember every time she would receive a letter from Vietnam we would have a celebration because we would know he was still alive. As well as carrying his baby she had that to deal with, and we were there for one another. It was because we had no-one else, you know, they became our family there. It all seems so surreal now. This all happened over some 50 years ago, yet it all is so vivid in my memory.

As we did not receive appropriate counselling at the time of adoption, it was just shelved in the files somewhere in the archives of my mind. We got on with our lives but the heartache was always there, and many a time buckets of tears flowed, especially when I was alone. The loss is immense and indescribable. The counselling I received back then was to go back into the world: 'Don't ever tell anybody you had a baby, especially not your future husband. Just forget it ever happened'. There was just no room for grieving, and the counsellors back then did a good job of damaging—I am not saying the current counsellors; they are wonderful—our self-esteem, our confidence, our self-worth, devaluing us and condoning lying. They wanted us just to go out there and lie. What they did do was they set us up as future Stockholm syndrome victims. I know quite a few girls, because of their low self-esteem, have got themselves into that Stockholm syndrome, and it is because we did not believe we deserved any better. That is sad. They virtually robbed us of our dignity.

I truly believe that bonding with your child—I am speaking from experience—happens. It happens long before birth, that bub knows mum's voice. Bub knows her laughter, her tears, her crazy singing songs, but most of all, bub knows the comforting strokes that a mother gives baby on her belly, just stroking. Therefore the separation of birth was as much traumatic to the baby, with everlasting, ongoing effects. To deny the mother's early colostrum milk, which is so detrimental for their physical health as well as their mental health, was also criminal. That was done so we could not bond, yet denying the baby his future wellbeing. Am I speaking too fast?

The CHAIR: No, no.

Ms MARSHALL: Okay. There was no follow-up on our babies for us. I can remember ringing the department and then asking if [name withheld] was okay, how was he doing. But we were not allowed to have a smidgen of information, and that was so hard, you know. We just wanted to know they were okay. It was non-identifying, we just wanted to know—but no. That was very, very traumatising and it was cruel. How one human being can inflict such anguish on another human being is just beyond me. They treated us like an incubating machine. I have got no other word for it.

Incidentally, I was never given a copy of the adoption papers, which I signed under extreme duress, nor was I allowed to have anyone there on my behalf. I also found out later that [name withheld] adoptive parents paid the Brisbane hospital \$25 for my son. I know that does not seem much, but at the time that was probably a week's wages, right—which leads me to ask, what other financial transactions took place, and since when did a little human being become a chattel or a commodity without any rights? It is interesting that the Australian laws in regard to child trafficking—which, I am sorry, but to me it is like part of child trafficking—in reference to divisions 270 and 271 penalties actually range from four years imprisonment for debt bondage and 25 years imprisonment for slavery and trafficking in children. On top of everything else we have also become victims of a dreadful crime.

I am going on a lighter note now. Some 15 years ago, when [name withheld] adoptive dad was still alive, [name withheld] took me to meet his adoptive dad, [name withheld]. His adoptive mother was not alive anymore, plus she would have never consented to such a meeting. [Name withheld] was a dear, gentle, kind man in his mid-80s. He was very welcoming, and I warmed to him straightaway. He was a lovely, dear man. He made it a lovely afternoon. At the age of 85 he sat me down and he made this beautiful afternoon tea—scones, you name it—and we made small talk. But it is what he said that really floored me. He turned around and he said, you know, ‘Thank you for giving us the honour of raising your son’. That was amazing. Tears began to well in my eyes, and I looked at my beautiful son. He was in tears too. And in return I also thanked [name withheld], because he was certainly instrumental in [name withheld] becoming that lovely young man, and he deserved that, you know, even with all the sad circumstances. This was a very pivotal moment in my life. It showed equality and mutual respect and acknowledgement, and they are the very first steps to any reconciliation. In that there lies the equity.

Sadly, [name withheld] passed on some 10 years ago. He would have been horrified with [name withheld] funeral earlier this year. Once again it was if I had no rights, no voice, no acknowledgement of his real birth status or birth parents. I was totally dictated to by [name withheld] adoptive sisters to the extent that even my two younger sons, [name withheld] half-brothers, who he had a good relationship with, were not allowed to attend the funeral, nor were any of his birth uncles or aunties nor his cousins. Hence another reason why I decided not to fly up to Queensland for the funeral—I just could not cope with the continual lies. And then the total disrespect for [name withheld] birth family—no mention of us on his grave plaque, still no recognition for us. And, you know, we are the very reason he was there.

This leads me to a very special request—when we are talking about things we want. I believe in Perth—somebody was telling me—that they have set up a garden with plaques.

A member: Yes.

Ms MARSHALL: You know it?

A member: Yes, we know it.

Ms MARSHALL: And I would like something similar done for that here in Melbourne, either in our botanical gardens here in Melbourne or at Cranbourne. So, yes, there is some significance there—and for my extended family too.

You know, I am a Bonegilla kid, okay? When our family immigrated from Holland they shipped us up to Bonegilla, and up there they now have got this beautiful wave with all the plaques of all the families that came across the waters and settled in Australia. It is a real sense of belonging for me. It is a ‘Hey, yeah’. I mean, all my heritage is back there in Holland, ‘Yeah, I can remember hearing the crows for the first time and telling Mum I think there is a baby crying somewhere’.

Last night I actually read Julia Gillard’s beautiful address again, the national apology. And yes, tears flowed last night, both for sadness and joy, because there was finally some acknowledgement of the crimes carried out against us. The speech was warm, heartfelt and all in earnest, and I remember being so thankful for it. It was such a wake-up call to so many. My phone did not stop ringing for days. People were so kind and supportive. Some cried with me, which was really beautiful.

Sadly, it was not followed up by a national inquiry, as was done for the stolen Indigenous generation, and that sort of disappointed me. That is why I admire you so much here today for what is happening. In addition, it would have been a perfect opportunity for the churches, charities, hospitals, medical staff, doctors and bureaucrats—for everyone that was involved with those adoption practices—to come on board and extend their sincere apologies to us and say sorry as well, also offering us assistance wherever possible. The acknowledgement of wrongdoing would have been an integral healing step forward for us. Nothing ever can return our babies to us. That is such injustice, but we need to move forward.

What I am about to say now is slightly irrelevant to this hearing, and I am not trying to convert anybody or push my beliefs, and I respect everybody’s beliefs here, but I just want to clarify something that is so misunderstood and the root of a lot of problems in our society today.

Yes, I am a Christian, and I am very proud of it, because some months ago I actually—I know this is going to sound interesting—experienced a miraculous healing. It came one morning when I was lying there in bed, and I just did not want to live anymore. I lost my son twice. I said, ‘Lord, you’re going have to help me. I can’t do this anymore’. I can remember getting a touch on my cheek, very gently, and next thing this amazing warmth, like an electric, warm river, ran right through my body. And with it, it was like he picked up my heart and put it back together again. It is only because of that that I am here today and able to talk to you. It was such a special moment.

Now I am a follower, I actually study the early Messianic teachings that started at Pentecost, where the gentile Christians and the Messianic Jews started this movement, this beautiful church—the original church, which was not a building; it was a movement—with Jesus as their head. Rome took over Christianity 300 years later and turned it into a religion. Now the very word ‘religion’, broken down to ‘religio’, actually means ‘return to bondage’, so there our freedom was taken away from us. It is quite sad to see what has happened to something that was so beautiful—a message of love, a message of equality which has so been eroded because of the practices of the religions. It is not only us that were damaged; it was right through the community. It is just individuals that have come in that have just corroded something so beautiful.

In closing, I would like to thank you all for listening to my message, and I bid you shalom. Now are you familiar with the word of shalom and what it exactly means—all the good points of shalom? Can I fill you in? Okay. It is a beautiful word, ‘shalom’: one, it means peace; two, it means tranquillity; three, it means safety; four, it means wellbeing; five, it means welfare; six, it means health; seven, it means contentment; eight, success; nine, comfort; 10, integrity and lastly, wholeness. So again, I bid you all shalom—all of you, okay?

The CHAIR: Thank you so much, Wilhelmina. Committee members, any questions?

Ms COUZENS: Thank you, Wilhelmina. We really appreciate you coming along today. We have the written submission, but the additional information you have presented today—it is just fantastic for us to hear that. So thank you so much. I know it can be difficult sharing your experience, but we do really appreciate having that face to face and a really strong understanding of the experiences that you have had. Can you sort of talk a little bit about what support you have had over the years, if any, whether it be from your own instigation or whether there have been organisations involved?

Ms MARSHALL: Yes. Initially it was with ARMS. Many years ago—30—I approached ARMS because I was an absolute mess and lovely people like Marie Meggitt were there. ARMS are very good, and they gave me a lot of support and even the support of other mothers. You know, sharing our experiences was very helpful to me.

Ms COUZENS: Do you still have contact with them now?

Ms MARSHALL: Yes, now and again. I am not a full, active member. Many years ago, yes, I was a very active with them, but not so much now. And I have been away as well, so it makes it difficult.

Ms COUZENS: Okay. And so that is really the only support you have had over the years then, from ARMS?

Ms MARSHALL: Friends. Unfortunately I lost my mum 12 months before I became pregnant, so I did not have mum’s support. I will quickly give you a picture of my family. I am one of 13 children.

Ms COUZENS: Wow.

Ms MARSHALL: There were nine girls, and I am the youngest. I was reared by the three oldest girls virtually. When we emigrated to Australia my eldest sister was already married, and then my second-eldest sister got married very briefly afterwards. And then my third-eldest sister left to go back to Holland; she did not like it here. She was 23 and she could not settle in Australia. She went back to Holland and got married there. So within the space of a couple of years I lost my three mums, you know. So I did not have them to turn to, and unfortunately my second-eldest sister died very young of cancer. So I was really alone. But since all this has happened my eldest sister has emigrated to Australia and she lives here now, and it is like getting to know her again. The last time I saw her, when we emigrated, I was nine years old. And then she comes here 30 years later and is this grown-up woman. Who she really does not know who she is.

When we were both in Holland together—I used to sing with a gospel choir, and we were touring Holland and she was visiting there with her husband and we both stayed at my brother-in-law’s after the tour. She actually sprained her ankle, so I ended up having to look after her and cooking, and we got to know each other. It was like somebody gave me my mum back. She has been so supportive. When my son passed on earlier this year she was there for me. She was just a rock, and through it all she makes me speak in Dutch, you know. So it has been good because she has reignited the love for my original language, and I am amazed at some of the words I know. It is really good. Even when I was in Holland a lot of the family just wanted to me speak Dutch, but it has been very good. But she was such a support to me. I will always be very thankful. At the age of 88, 89, she was marvellous.

Ms COUZENS: And I am so sorry for your loss too. It must be very hard for you, as you say, to have lost your son twice.

Ms MARSHALL: Yes, it is.

Ms COUZENS: Thank you very much.

The CHAIR: Any more questions?

Mr SOUTHWICK: Thanks.

The CHAIR: David.

Mr SOUTHWICK: Wilhelmina, you mentioned the other women that you with during the time. After that did any of them keep in contact?

Ms MARSHALL: Yes, there was one in particular—the girl that had her boyfriend in Vietnam. We were very close and we kept in contact. We still do now and again. We still keep in touch. Yes, he came back from Vietnam alive, thank goodness. But he came home with of course the post trauma, and we all know what reception those poor boys received when they came back from Vietnam. It was just so unfair. Of course she was dealing with the adoption as well as the post drama, and ultimately they ended up in divorce. It was just a double combination. But there are so many cases like that, you know. It is that deep loss I think that stopped us from really experiencing a healthy relationship—the anguish that was there.

Mr SOUTHWICK: At the end of the time—when your son was taken was there any further opportunity for assistance or did they literally just—

Ms MARSHALL: No, they just shoved you out the door, get on your—.

Mr SOUTHWICK: Out the door and on your way.

Ms MARSHALL: Yes, forget about it; forget that you ever had a baby. It was so sad, and I just could not talk to anybody about it for a long, long time. I had virtually had a breakdown when I contacted ARMS because it had all—you know, as it does, it just all bubbles over. You can only keep something suppressed like that for a time, and then eventually it comes out.

Mr SOUTHWICK: With your son you mentioned that you had this relationship on his terms. What do you mean by that?

Ms MARSHALL: Yes, that is an interesting one. On his terms, it was like ‘Okay, we don’t talk about that subject’ or ‘No, I don’t want to talk about the birth parents; these are my real parents now’. I think he was really hurting deep inside, and I know that probably he never forgave me for adopting him out, because he used to say to me, ‘Do you think it was nice to be made to feel like a second-class citizen?’. Even in the church that he attended they would put the adopted kids, because they were classed as—what do they call that name; anyway, it is illegitimate children—to the back of the group.

Ms COUZENS: Oh God, that is outrageous.

Ms MARSHALL: That is what I mean. That is not the message of love, is it, or equality? I was horrified to hear that. It was difficult for him, and it is difficult for the adoptees to understand what happened during that

time. He used to say, 'Why didn't you fight harder for me?'. I said, 'Listen, there wasn't the pension there, and I did try to get you back', which I did. But, yes, it became my fault in a lot of ways. That is what I mean by 'his terms'.

Mr SOUTHWICK: Thank you so much for sharing your story today.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much, Wilhelmina, for presenting here today. Thank you for your valuable contribution in your submission. The Committee appreciates the time and effort that you have taken to prepare your evidence, and we acknowledge that revisiting the past was painful and extremely tough. Please be assured that your evidence will help inform our understanding of the relevant issues to make recommendations, and very strong recommendations, in this report to the Victorian government.

The next steps will be that the Committee will table its report by 1 July 2021, and we will make sure to keep you updated on the progress. Most importantly, if you do want to add or talk to anyone of us, including Yuki—you have got Yuki's details—please reach out. But on behalf of the Committee, thank you so very much for taking the time to be with us here today and submitting your experiences. Thank you. All the very best.

Ms MARSHALL: Thank you.

Witness withdrew.