

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Responses to Historical Forced Adoptions in Victoria

Wodonga—Tuesday, 18 May 2021

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WITNESS

Ms Margie Broughton.

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The CHAIR: Hello. Thank you for being here.

Ms BROUGHTON: Thank you. I am Margie. Thank you for this inquiry into forced adoption practices.

The CHAIR: That is fine. Take your time and relax. Have some water as well.

Ms BROUGHTON: I was not going to be like this. I have read this over a thousand times in the last couple of days.

The CHAIR: You are good; that is fine.

Ms BROUGHTON: I read this to Merle yesterday, and I was okay.

My story was in New South Wales in 1967 as a 16-year-old, after a very short, irresponsible moment in time resulted in my pregnancy. Still at school, I confided in one true friend at the time, who kept my pregnancy a secret and for decades afterwards. In complete denial of my situation, I continued at school, but within two months of accepting my responsibility for my growing child inside me I found out what needed to be done. With the help of my friend I found out what to do and where I needed to go to have my baby. Both my friend and I were very naive, frightened girls, with no adults consulted prior to telling my parents. I did not tell my parents until 7½ months into my pregnancy as I was terrified that I would be sent to the bad girls home in Parramatta. This was common knowledge then for treatment of bad girls. Learning that most hospitals would not allow unwed mothers to see their babies horrified me more than childbirth itself. I knew and accepted that my child would be adopted by a loving family and that I was doing ‘the right thing’ for the baby, as I was told by my friend and the doctor that I consulted in August two months prior to the birth.

The Salvation Army maternity hospital in Marrickville, Sydney, was the place that would allow me to see and hold my baby. This was told to me after my initial interview at head office for the Salvation Army. I felt that, from what I had been told, there were no options, due to six important factors, for me. I came from a very small rural community of about 80 homes in 1967 on the outskirts of Sydney where everyone knew everyone. There was the shame for my younger siblings, plus my parents were very strict Catholics. I had not finished school, so I had no income. The father of my child was not around, mainly because I had not told him. The stigma for my child, if I kept him, as he grew up would have been very cruel. A single mother’s job opportunities were limited, which is inconceivable today.

Telling my parents, who I loved very much, in September was the most difficult decision of my life. Arriving at Bethesda Maternity Hospital, I was shown to the unmarried mothers quarters. I had my own room in a small, four-room dormitory along with other small dormitories. Our daily work: after cleaning and clearing up after breakfast we worked all morning in the laundry, which was hot, noisy work—standing, folding sheets off hot drying rollers after they had been washed in huge washing machines. We were allowed to talk, and morning tea was provided. And if a toilet break was required, we were treated with respect. There was a 2-hour break after lunch when we were allowed to go and rest or we had a choice to walk around outside in the park for exercise. I helped in the kitchen in the evening, mainly for patients that were not unwed mothers.

I had been there for one month when my son was born. I had a very easy seven-hour labour in a room with no-one present prior to the actual birth. The nursing staff were coming in every 2 hours. Being left alone, isolated, was very traumatic. After my son was born the nursing staff placed him in a crib and left him next to me for about half an hour. Then I was taken to the recovery ward. Naturally I was very sad, and I cried silently.

I was not given any drugs at any time, as I had no pain. The only pain was my breaking heart, as my baby was no longer inside me. For the next two weeks I stayed in the four-bed recovery ward for unwed mothers. The married mothers and babies were segregated from us in the upper level of the hospital. At the time the staff were very kind to us girls. This was my experience. We were not treated cruelly in any way.

Day 10 after my son was born the social worker arrived, and I was taken to a private room and answered all her questions about my family’s medical history, including mine and my son’s father. The social worker was very

kind and explained everything to me. I did see and hold my son twice in the two weeks after his birth. I was allowed to name him, which I did. Not at any time was counselling mentioned or the options to keep my baby or the help that was available at the time but never mentioned.

I was still in denial for the entire nine months. That is how I coped, as at school I played basketball, rode my bike on weekends and even rode a skateboard, trying to be a kid and pretending my situation was not happening. It was traumatic for me for the entire nine months, alone with the shame and guilt, and walking out of the hospital alone, without my son, after being told, 'Go away and forget this ever happened to you' and 'We don't want to see you back here again'. These words have echoed through five decades. Leaving my son, although seeing him, was the hardest thing I have ever done. My loving parents allowed me to go home, but the silence was deafening. Some of the other girls were told that their parents said, 'You can never go home'. At least I was able to go home. The thought of being homeless terrified me into silence.

Fast-forward 23 years to 1990. My son found me, and by the grace of God we continue to build a step-by-step relationship. The trauma had an impact on my physical health—digestive issues and anxiety—which still plagues me today. Lack of trust in personal relationships was a constant over the decades, the grief after trauma and pain subsides—but it never really leaves completely. Naturally there is more to my story over 54 years, but I hope my testimony will be of help to document this very important inquiry into the historical facts—for many who suffered much more greatly than me. This is the first time I have actually written of my experience of forced adoptions. Thank you for the opportunity to share my story.

The CHAIR: Thank you so much. Thank you very much for your strength and courage today.

Witness withdrew.