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From Victim to Survivor: A five-day journey of healing

I wasn't at all sure I was doing the right thing when I signed up for a five-day healing retreat in August this year. I had spent most of my life trying to forget my childhood, and now I was planning to take part in a program for survivors of child abuse!

However, I knew I had to do *something*, and the Mayumarri retreats (now called 'Heal for Life') came highly recommended. So I battled my nerves and took the plunge.

The retreat was held at a private camp at Harvey, where about ten log cabins and a central meeting place called 'the Barn' are set in natural bushland near the Logue Brook Dam.

There were seven guests including me – three men and five women – plus four carers and one coordinator. I couldn't believe it when I found I was sharing one of the two-bedroom cabins with a guy who had been in the same places as me!

We all met in 'the Barn' for two sessions every day. On the first day I was too nervous to say anything, so I just listened. As the others spoke I realised I had a lot in common with them and started to relax a bit.

On Day Two I shared my feelings with the group. It was pretty heavy. However it was also very healing, and it enabled me move past a place I had been stuck at for years.

On Day Three of the retreat I started calling myself a *survivor*, instead of a victim, and began to see a new strength within myself.

We learnt a lot about the effects of childhood trauma and abuse, and that you have to love yourself to be able to love others. This helped me to turn the tables on my old ways of thinking, and I finally came to fully believe that I was not to blame for what happened to me. I wrote a letter to myself from my father, which was a very powerful experience.

We also had some fun times on the retreat, and there was free time to relax between the morning and afternoon sessions. It was a perfect setting – surrounded by natural bush with kangaroos and native birds. In the evenings we sat around the bonfire, joking, laughing and singing. On the fourth night my cabin-mate Dale read out a poem he had written called "This Group of Strangers".



By Chris Binks

(Dale's poem is printed on page 2).

By the end of the week I felt like I had known my fellow survivors for years. We shared an understanding and formed a special bond that only survivors have.

I'm amazed at how much I've changed since that retreat. I'm much more positive. I used to get offended when people did things that weren't ok. Now I see it as their problem, and I don't

react. I used to always expect bad things to happen, but now I'm looking for the good. And when you look for the good, you generally find it.

I would recommend the healing retreats to anyone who wants to stop being a victim of their past. I found the whole experience to be very respectful - you don't have to talk if you don't want to - and everyone supports one another.

Chris is happy to talk to anyone who is thinking about doing a 'Heal for Life' retreat. Contact Chris via CBERS, or contact Heal for Life directly on 0429-979-074 or email westaustralia@healforlife.com.au



In Australia, one in four girls and one in seven boys are abused before the age of 16. Mayumarri has so far helped over 3,500 men, women and children to heal at their retreats, and has provided advice and support to a further 15,000 people.

The next Healing Retreat in WA is scheduled for 6-11th February 2011.

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This Group of Strangers

A poem by Dale Lynch, written on the last day of a Healing Retreat

Don't bother asking me
How it came to be
That I was on a mountain top
So high I thought that
I could see the sea.

Later on, a few days in
We played like children
Fancy dress and all
We sang around a camp fire
What a joyous day.

Gathered there with strangers
On this scenic site
A site to become sacred
And in our hearts
For evermore.

And after a meal
It just came out
I spewed my horrid past
Of dark and stormy days
I preferred to hide.

We had a common thread
That held us there for a week
You see we were all
Survivors
Of a childhood holocaust.

For once the gasps I heard
Were not the frightened cries
Of someone scared of me
But gasps of love and
Empathy
For the poor boy in me.

Some may say we were self-
indulgent
Others may laugh
It's all codswallop
And just emotional hoo-ha.

No false tears were shed
And I was amazed
At the compassion shown
By this band of strangers
Who carried their hurt along
with me.

One by one we took our turn
To speak forgotten truths
I listened as I waited for my
turn.

So now it's almost over
I feel sad but glad
That I met this band of
strangers
Who like this mountain top
I hold high up in my heart.

A slight acknowledgment of
the facts
Said by one and all
No gory details for us to hear
Just simply said and done.

Dale Lynch
25th August, 2010



Left to right: Genevieve Hewitt, Joanna Penglase, Leonie Sheedy and Senator Andrew Murray, in Sydney in early 2002

First Anniversary of the National Apology to Forgotten Australians



It's been one year since the Prime Minister of Australia formally apologised to 'Forgotten Australians': Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australian-born care leavers, and former child migrants from the UK and Malta.

Events were held in each Australian capital city to mark the anniversary on November 16th. Speaking in Canberra, Minister Jenny Macklin said:

Today we gather to remember and reflect on a significant day in Australia's history.

On this day last year, almost one thousand people from across the country gathered here at Parliament House to witness the official apology to the Forgotten Australians and former child migrants.

Thousands more watched the live broadcast all around Australia.

I was deeply honoured to be a part of that extraordinary day.

A day that finally acknowledged the abuse and neglect that many of you experienced as young children in institutional care and foster homes.

For many of you, childhood was a time of fear and loneliness.

For many of you, there was no love and no kindness in those dark, authoritarian institutions.

Last year the Australian Government said sorry to you on behalf of the nation for all these injustices.

Sorry for the tragedy, the absolute tragedy, of childhoods lost.

You experienced terrible hardships and

abuse, things a child should never know.

And we recognised that you were in no way to blame for what happened.

About 150 people attended the anniversary event in Perth, an afternoon tea at UWA's University Club organised by Megan Johnson of FaHCSIA (the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs).

MC Christabel Chamarette opened the proceedings with a Welcome to Country given by Ingrid Collard, and introduced an address by Richard Aspinall, State Manager of FaHCSIA. Following a screening of Minister Macklin's speech, care leavers Anne Grundy, Bob Hall and Robin Stevens shared their personal

perspectives on the national apology.

Despite the differences in these perspectives, there seemed to be general agreement that the apology had helped raise public awareness about care leaver issues, and that it was a 'good start'.

Commemorative Pins



Care leavers at First Anniversary events around Australia were presented with a wattle pin as a symbolic gesture to commemorate the national apology. Additional pins, provided by FaHCSIA, are available from CBERS in Fremantle.

CLAN Turns 10!

Congratulations to CLAN (Care Leavers Australia Network) on its 10 year anniversary, celebrated at the Bankstown Sports Club in Sydney on 3rd - 4th July this year. CLAN members and

we felt to be unacknowledged, and even invisible. In Australia over recent decades, we have become increasingly aware, as a society, of other groups of people who as



children had experiences which caused them trauma and suffering and which had severely detrimental effects on their life outcomes. Some examples are adoptees, the Aboriginal stolen generations, and the child migrants sent to Australia from Britain particularly in the postwar years".



supporters came from all over Australia to join in the celebrations, which included a series of activities and workshops.

CLAN was founded in July 2000 by two Sydney Care Leavers, Leonie Sheedy and Joanna Penglase. Leonie was a State Ward in Victoria and grew up in a Catholic Home. Joanna grew up in NSW, in a non-government Children's Home licensed by the Child Welfare Department (now DoCS). Leonie and Joanna met when Joanna was researching her PhD thesis, which was based on her own experience and that of 90 other NSW care leavers.

Leonie and Joanna write: "The formation of CLAN was the culmination of a long journey for both of us. For some years, we had both been attempting, though in different ways, to raise awareness of issues about our childhood in 'care' which

CLAN is a national support and advocacy network representing people who were bought up in the 600+ Australian children's homes and orphanages, and those put in foster care. Its prime objective is to raise community awareness of Care Leaver issues, and campaign for government assistance to redress them.

Freecall CLAN on 1800-008-774
or Email support@clan.org.au

Show Your True Colours

Mark Farmer has a vision for the future. He sees a child welfare system in which older care leavers are encouraged to offer support and mentoring to children currently in State care. Children in care will be able to link in with someone who really understands what they're going through, and who can provide a source of support during that all important time of leaving care.

Mark remembers what it was like to travel through the foster care system and he is determined to improve the experience for today's - and tomorrow's - generations of children in out-of-home care.

The *True Colours Mentor Program* is currently in the planning stages and Mark's plan is to provide older care leavers with an opportunity to lend a hand to

younger ones, but also offer them a chance to share the wisdom gained through the experience of growing up in State care. Mark wants to show that we are no longer seen as survivors and that our experience will provide hope of a great future to the children now leaving state care through guidance and friendship.

The task ahead is huge and will need careful planning and training for volunteers. If you are interested in joining a *True Colours* reference group or helping in other ways, please contact Mark Farmer on 0423-767-492, or email micknmark@iinet.net.au



The FACT File with *FACT Chairperson Laurie Humphreys, JP*

It is now 12 months since FACT (Forgotten Australians Coming Together) was incorporated and whilst we lack funding we do not lack a devoted group of committee members.

FACT has written a number of letters to the Minister with numerous questions about Redress, which she has answered, and I believe some of our correspondence has led to improvements in the payment process.

FACT members have also assisted with a number of forums held in Perth this year, on such subjects as Aged

Care, Oral History, and Find and Connect.

Forgotten Australians are defined by AFA (Alliance for Forgotten Australians) as survivors of institutional care and out-of-home care, and includes former child migrants and Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australian-born people. It is estimated that more than 500,000 children experienced out-of-home care in Australia during the last century.

Contact Laurie Humphreys

Ph: (08) 9337-4850

Email: lhu1153@tadaust.org.au

FIND AND CONNECT

The results of a scoping study for the 'Find and Connect Service' have been released. The new service is designed to help care leavers locate personal records and family history files, and to assist with family reunification, where possible.

Key recommendations of the study include the development of a national database identifying the various potential sources of information, as well as explanations about why many records no longer exist.

The study also highlights the importance of enabling reasonable time-frames for the release of information to care leavers applying for personal records.

The full report is available from FaHCSIA (Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs) on their website, at www.fahcsia.gov.au

FACT Inc. is committed to the goal of securing a resource centre for WA care leavers similar to those in Victoria (Open Place), Queensland (Esther Centre) and NSW (ARC). These services were established as a result of the apologies and recommendations of Senate inquiries.

WA also needs to establish a service to meet the needs of people coming out of care or who were in care at any time to get access to information and assistance with services such as housing, aged care and employment. Counselling, aged care and health services are priority needs.

INTERVIEWEES NEEDED

Oral History Project

The National Library is still seeking interviewees for the Forgotten Australians and Former Child Migrants Oral History Project.

If you would like to express interest in being interviewed, contact Joanna Sassoon on 1800-204-290, or email jsassoon@nla.gov.au



STOP PRESS

Forgotten Australians Memorial

This newsletter was published just prior to the 10th December unveiling of a memorial for Forgotten Australians in WA. The memorial celebrates the contribution of all those who experienced some form of out-of-home care as children in this State.

The memorial is located on the grassed area in front of the Jubilee Building of the Western Australian Museum in Northbridge.

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CBERS does not have any influence on Departmental

decisions regarding the level of payments offered to Redress applicants and is not involved in the assessment or processing of applications.

All such enquiries should be directed to the Redress WA Helpline (Freecall 1800 617 233).