



## Melissa's story

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Nothing in this story constitutes a finding of fact by the Commission of Inquiry. Instead, these stories have been published to show how people are experiencing the current child safety system in Queensland. Any views expressed are those of the person who shared their experience, not of the Commission of Inquiry.

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Dear Commissioner

I write to you today to provide input into the Commission of Inquiry into the Child Safety System in Qld that is currently being undertaken. As a former ward of the state (Qld), I welcome this decision as well as the opportunity to share my perspective. At this point, I would also like to state that although I recognise that my submission may be read by multiple parties, I am making it on the condition that any points that I raise that may be surfaced publicly, should be de-identified unless my further approval is given.

Perhaps unlike many of the submissions that you will be hearing about, my experience as a ward of the state occurred at an earlier time – my time in out of home care began in [REDACTED], when I was 14 years old. Regardless of the time that has passed, and that at least on paper I may appear to be a success story, the reality is that decisions that were made at an earlier point in my life still impact me today. On balance, I believe that I am amply well positioned to not only share my experiences but also advocate for potential strategies that may affect positive change in the lives of others with similar backgrounds to my own.

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## Background

At the end of [REDACTED] I was removed from the care of my biological parents. Up to that point I had experienced an extremely violent, abusive and neglectful childhood. The last time that I was beat, I was hit so repetitively and with such force (by a blunt instrument), that my skin tore in places. I was covered in bruises (except for my face) that ultimately took 8 weeks to heal. The scabs and their residual marks (from my torn skin) took even longer to disappear. This was not the first time that I was beaten like this – in fact it had been happening for years. On this last time though, the police officer who took my photos commented that my presentation was the worst that she had seen in her career of over 20 years.

It wasn't just physical abuse either. In honesty I cannot tell you the number of times that I had to save my siblings and/or myself from being killed or ran away to save my own life. In so many ways, my parents were not parents in any meaningful sense of the word. Really, I should have been removed from their custody long before I was. I also believe that my siblings should have also been removed. I'm not sure why I was not removed at an earlier point in my life, but can speculate. As my brother often puts it 'times were different back then'. This is true, but given that child protective services did exist, our family should have been on departmental radars. I know that we were certainly on police radars, because the police would attend our house 2 – 3 times per week to face my fathers drunken and rageful outbursts while our mother was out with her religious group.

I suspect that I was left in that house for as long as I was, because of the role that I played in caring for and protecting my younger brothers and sisters. While my mother was physically abusive at times and psychologically abusive often, her biggest transgression was arguably her absence. While she was out, we (children) were left at home with an unpredictable, violent and rageful father. It was easier when he wasn't there, because at least I could keep everyone safe. 'Easy' though is perhaps not a good description, given my role in preparing meals and cleaning up, doing laundry, homework, bathing, brushing teeth and bed routines, all while I was still a child myself. I will probably never know why I was left in that house for as long as I was. Part of me – especially



when I was younger – can or could see some sense in it being for protective purposes. But as I have gotten older, I have come to recognise that this was the first way that the system failed me. I should never have had to endure the things that I did and for as long as I did, before an intervention finally happened.

## **My experience in out of home care**

At the time that I was removed, I was just shy of 15. At the age of 15, I began to receive an allowance from Centrelink and lived independently. This was tough, for a number of reasons. Financially, the stipend really wasn't much to live on, and I secured a part time job to supplement my income. This also wasn't a lot, but it did make a difference. I was determined to finish school, go to university and build a better life for myself. But, going to school was a challenge. Although I could get myself to and from school with public transport, I found it difficult to keep up with all the homework that I had in my academically advanced subjects, whilst also juggling work and caring for myself (cooking, cleaning, appointments etc). In addition, I also found it difficult to be around so many young people with such 'trivial' and 'immature' issues. By this point I had had to step up to be an adult for a number of years, and although in hindsight my peers were probably dealing with some pretty typical stuff for their age, it was completely divorced to the issues that I had been facing.

In addition to the accelerated trajectory into adulthood, the trauma of my childhood and the stress of having to look after myself independently, I also faced another notable problem. Although I was mature beyond my years in some respects, I was also still very much a child in others. Living independently, I was exposed, unprotected and vulnerable. In living independently – ironically for my safety – I was also any easy target, and I was sexually assaulted. The trauma of this also weighed on me and made it difficult to be able to concentrate on and participate in school. Ultimately, I left school, without finishing, and against what I had wanted to do. I know that part of the Royal Commission is centred around investigating the residential care sector, and that this has



come about because of ongoing failings. I do not dispute this to be the case. But I would also like to point out that there is also considerable risk in having young, vulnerable people living independently. Risks might perhaps be less visible, but that does not mean that they are not real. I also understand that several accommodation options are currently being looked at. Irrespective of what is chosen, I implore you to rather than just run with the notion that residential care is bad and should be superseded, to also consider and evaluate what the alternatives might be. And by evaluate, I mean follow up on an ongoing basis, with the view of changing implementation strategies as needs and evidence present.

## **System failure after leaving care**

It can be difficult to really dissect out where one thing ends and another begins, such is the tangle of life. For example, when looking at the residual trauma that I carried for years after leaving care, it is hard to know how much of this came from my experiences as living as a ward of the state, vs being trapped with my parents for the first part of my life. This could be debated indefinitely.

However, I can clearly articulate an example of where I was failed after leaving care, and which still impacts me today. As previously mentioned, my aspiration had always been to go to university. Although I did not finish high school, I did end up obtaining a tertiary preparation qualification, which in turn enabled me to enter tertiary studies. Not only did I attend University, but I performed well academically and went on to obtain a First-Class Honours degree before then completing a PhD. Academically, I was capable. Financially, I struggled, despite also working part time. Part of the (financial) difficulties were also born from the fact that I took in and looked after one of my siblings while she was still at school.

Whilst at University, I was having a conversation with one of my tutors one day about how tough it was to balance working with the amount of study that it takes to get good grades. She suggested that I might think about cutting back on the number of hours that I was working and instead take

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out something called a Student Financial Supplement Support (SFSS) loan. In hindsight, I now recognise that this was a very bad deal and was a mistake. As of today, the \$7 000 loan that I initially took out has ballooned to \$43 000 with indexation, reflecting that balances have only increased with time (as my HECS has been paid down), as well as absences from the workforce with my extended studies, working in contract based positions, and having a small amount of time off to have children.

If I would have known what I knew now, I never would have taken out that loan. Even when the scheme was folded up, the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, Larry Anthony, at the time noted that the scheme was unfair and flawed<sup>1</sup>. Unfortunately, though, I did not have this literacy at the time that I signed up. Since then, I have found out that clause 75 (2) (b) of the Child Protection Act 1999<sup>2</sup> states:

*ensure the help is available to the person for the period starting when the person turns 15 and ending when the person turns 25*

What I take from this, is that at the time when I was entertaining entering an SFSS contract with both Centrelink and the Commonwealth Bank, that I should have been provided with additional financial counselling to help me to understand the implications of what I would be signing up for. I had the academic smarts to be able to succeed at university. I had the grit and determination to survive and look after my siblings. However, I was effectively, largely financially illiterate. Because of this, this debt remains with me today, and is something that could have been avoidable.

Decades later, it feels like a punishment that I am still being given from simply trying to survive, shape my life and look after my siblings all those years ago. Although I ultimately agreed to the contract, I believe that the lack of appropriate support provided to me by a government agency (Centrelink) in explaining what indexation could look like, represents a departure from the terms outlined in the Child Protection Act 1999. Without having suitable financial literacy, and without having a (family) structure in place to provide me with advice, I should have been provided with additional financial counselling.

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## Long term wishes

Compared to many people, I know that I look like a success story, and in many ways I am. But, in other ways, the chains that were around me as a child, have continued to shackle me. I have pointed out the SFSS loan as one example, but there are others. I did not grow up having anyone value or respect me, so did not know how to really do or expect that for myself. This has meant that over the years I have had more than my fair share of being on the bad side of poor interpersonal and power imbalanced relationships. This is despite having the level of education that I have obtained, and the skillset and capabilities that I do. On the one hand this might not make a lot of sense, but on the other it does – it's one thing to know or read or hear about something, but it's quite another to be able to recognise something when it wears its own unique skin.

With these things in mind, I would like to advocate for the establishment of mentoring services where people in/ formerly in care can go and talk about life. Troubleshoot. Seek alternative perspectives. In education both the 'curriculum' and the 'hidden curriculum' are spoken of, the first of which probably needs no introduction. The hidden curriculum though, includes all of those juicy and important skills, learnings, relationships, approaches and strategies that happen when you are moving through the curriculum and ultimately help you to get there and beyond. In many ways I think life can be likened to this. We can have our official goals, plans, aspirations, but *how* do we get there? *What* is the implementation plan? Again, this is another one of those perpetual questions that could be talked about indefinitely. But often, a big piece of the puzzle involves interpersonal relationships. Who is supporting you, and in what way? How do you make sure that you are not only getting information, but also good quality information? Often this comes from family. If people are divorced from this possibility though, then ultimately this is a resource that they may not otherwise be able to access, and they may yet again fall another step behind. I believe that by having a mentor of sorts though, that these inequities may in part be able to be bridged, and I would like to suggest that this is a possibility that is considered.

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Ultimately, in order to really understand what people's needs are, a formal assessment needs to be conducted. A problem here though, is that there is a lack of data when it comes to people who have formerly been in care. Being in care is treated as a transient quality – once somebody turns 18, they no longer fit the brief. Though, from the studies that have been done on small and selective cohorts over the years, it is evident that the outcomes of people who have been in care, are amongst the worst of any population. The ABS (Australian Bureau of Statistics) permit the recording of foster child data in the census, but this is not necessarily approached in a consistent and reliable way by respondents and may or may not happen. Nor does it represent people who were formerly in care or necessarily capture those living in alternative arrangements. More recently, the AIHW (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare) have started to look at data from people who have recently transitioned from out of home care arrangements. Although this is a welcomed step in the right direction, only a limited focus within a narrow scope of time is included, meaning that an incomplete picture is able to be presented.

An estimate calculated on data from the last century suggests that there were approximately 500 000 'forgotten Australians' – people who had been in care at some point in their life<sup>3</sup>. Even within the last decade we know that the number of people who have entered care has jumped staggeringly, which suggests that the estimation is out of date and conservative. Hence, I would like to see a new, current estimate completed which identifies the number of people who currently are in or have ever been in some form of out of home care. I believe that by having this number, weighting would be added to the importance of better understanding and supporting this population.

Leading on from this, I would also like to see ongoing analysis and reporting on this population. One relatively easy way that this could happen, could be through the ABS census. Adding in an extra question(s) that directly capture whether somebody currently or has previously lived in out of home care would then allow trends to be detected in a host of parameters that are already accounted for (e.g., income, occupation, housing status, education). In turn, this would provide a currently

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incomparable level of insight into the population, which would be useful for identifying and developing needs-based programs and initiatives. In doing so, the importance of co-design and delivering tailored, targeted and needs based approaches cannot be under-estimated. To be able to do this though, some base line data is needed.

Currently, I am employed in the ██████████ sector. A central tenant of my field revolves around the need to dismantle inequities, and there certainly is a lot of work to be done when it comes to people who are or were wards of the state. We know that there is a positive correlation between educational attainment and quality of life (in multiple domains). We also understand that educational outcomes in people who have lived in out of home care are much lower than the general population. Exactly how much lower is not entirely known, given that this data is not systematically and consistently collected. In a 2018 study conducted in Western Australia, it was found that only 18% of the cohort completed secondary school, and about 4% completed post-secondary education<sup>4</sup>. Given the ambition outlined by the Australian Universities Accord to have 55% of the population equipped with a tertiary qualification by 2050<sup>5</sup>, there is a long way to go here.

Currently, Universities receive HEPPP (Higher Education Participation and Partnerships Program) funding to support equity building initiatives. This allocation is based upon the number of enrolled students who belong to one of four groups: First Nations, Rural and Remote, Low SES and Disability. Beyond 2026, the model will be changing to something that is needs based, although the particulars here do not seem to have been finalised. With an imminent change to equity funding being on the horizon, it seems like the prime opportunity to advocate for the specific inclusion of people who have formerly been in care, as receiving specific attention. The importance of recognising this cohort as its own equity group in education, is not a novel concept<sup>6</sup>. The specific needs and approaches here would of course need to be fleshed out, but with such low completion rates of secondary school, a pathway program of sorts to enable people who had not completed high school but who wished to attend university, seems like a likely initial candidate.



Thank you once again for undertaking this important piece of work, and also for the opportunity to share my experiences and perspectives.

## Summary of desired outcomes

- More comprehensive investigations / interventions for children at risk of family violence.
- Review of existing government policies and procedures that fall short of delivering requisite services to children and young people who have recently left out of home care. This extends beyond Child Protective Services agencies.
- Advocating for the inclusion of questions within the census that capture whether individuals are or have been wards of the state.
- Committing to ongoing evaluation of emergent evidence and adjustment of practices where required, in regards to decisions that are made for people living in out of care home arrangements.
- Recalculating the number people in Australia who currently or previously have been, wards of the state.
- Establishment of programs that increase educational opportunities for current and former wards of the state.
- Advocating for the establishment of equity-based funding for educational initiatives that support current or former wards of the state.

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