In 1975, when I was a pregnant 17-year-old, my parents placed me in Ngala, Kensington. This was a place where one face was shown to the public and government bodies through and another face was a silent and secretive reality behind closed doors. An article by Deb Rosser about Ngala in Trove says in 1975, all expectant mothers at Ngala were schoolgirls – "except one". That "one" was me. I had left school to go to work as my parents decided board money was more important than education (this issue becomes of importance later), but at 17, I was of an age where I should have still been at school.

Conditions there were awful. There was little difference between Ngala and a prison for us and, indeed, we were viewed and treated as delinquents. My Sickness Benefit was paid to Ngala, but I still had to 'earn my keep'. Most girls worked in the laundry an industrial-type laundry, hot work/heavy lifting, laundering the bed linen, towels, etc., for the facility. I worked in the kitchen and staff dining room. One of my duties was to serve meals for the mothercraft nurses in training and deliver meals personally to the matron's table. Somewhat cruelly, given our situation, other girls were assigned to work caring and feeding the toddlers who were wards there. The nurses were generally dismissive or outright rude to us. When they were rostered to do the bed-time check (patrolling the corridor of our locked ward and shining a torch into our rooms to make sure we were in our beds), they called it "slut duty". The house mistress in charge of the girls and the woman in charge of our kitchen and meals were in a relationship (I was told lived together) and the weekly menu they posted on our dining room notice board and submitted to for approval was not the food we received. It was generally believed amongst the girls, and I think it was true though have no proof, that these two women were either taking home the best food for themselves or skimming the saved money from the budget and pocketing it. I was actually seen by the visiting doctor at one point because I was having episodes of near-fainting. He was shocked to learn I was living on mostly Weet-Bix (which I ate as I couldn't face the food served) and was actually losing weight even though in late pregnancy. He told me to try and get my hands on more protein, and I found that by putting too much meat on the plates of take the leftovers and eat what was meant for the bin. I felt generally unsafe in what was, in essence, a prison environment (we not allowed metal cutlery in case we selfharmed or harmed others), we had no shower curtains in the ablutions area and halfdoors on most of the toilets - and we were observed showering by the on the premise that we "might start a fight" with each other. We were not allowed visitors except those approved by this isolated from all outside contact except my parents. We rarely went outside and had to stay away from the fence in case the fathers of our babies tried to talk to us.

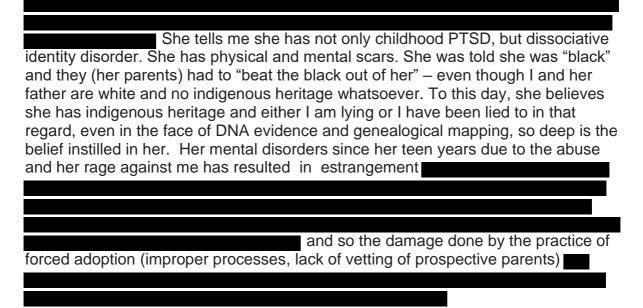
After much tearful begging, my parents allowed me to spend my final weeks of confinement at home, and I was taken to King Edward Memorial Hospital when I went into labour. My father dropped me off at reception with my bag, and I was alone and terrified. The nurses were brusque and I was shown little care. When I asked for pain relief, they say "it's too late now – you should have thought of that before". I was in labour for 12 hours. Finally, I made so much noise, they gave me pethidine to quiet me and stop me "upsetting the mothers"... the implication being I was not really a "mother" myself? I was tended to by a trainee male midwife under

supervision - the episiotomy he gave me nearly reached my rectum and I had to have many stitches, inside and out. I was taken to Theatre also for a retained placenta [I believe this and the long labour was due to the condition called "white womb" from my fear as this can occur when the mother feels under threat and the natural instinct is that the body tries to "hold on" to the baby until danger passes]. My baby was taken to Intensive Care with a low Apgar score (I found out later) which meant she had been in distress and either had breathing difficulties or poor colour or similar, perhaps due to the pethidine but I am not sure. When I woke from my general anaesthetic and with my many stitches, I was on a general ward (I think) and the nursing Sister told me to collect my things and she made me walk, carrying my bag and personal items, to the annexe where they kept the single mums away from the ward with mums who had babies. Again I was told I was being moved to "not upset the mothers" because I was crying, as if I was not a mother. I was groggy and in pain from my episiotomy and asked if she would help me and she scoffed and said no, I could carry my own things. I was never offered a wheelchair, which I think should have been the protocol for someone still unsteady on their feet. I was then treated for an infection in my hand and up my arm because the doctor (maybe another trainee) did not use proper sterile precautions when putting in my IV. I also had my chest bound and was given medication when my milk came in. I was left with the feeling that I was used for training purposes and not given proper care as I didn't matter as much as the married mothers.

I was shown my baby in the delivery room but then she was taken away and I they would not tell me where. I overheard some nurses talking about the "Special Nursery" and I thought that might be where she was, so I followed them. I entered the nursery and asked to see my baby. I was told I should not be in there and the nurses seemed startled and nervous that I was, but I said I hadn't signed any papers as yet and so she was still my child and I wanted to see her. I identified my own baby immediately and saw that her name tag said I asked why they had named her as she was my baby and I had named her . They said it was her new name, leading me to believe the new parents had already picked her name. (Not so.) I asked to hold her and they did let me hold her for a few minutes but then said I had to go or they would be "in trouble" for letting me in. The next day, I went again and asked to hold her and they said "no" - again, because it would cause "trouble".. so that time, I just stood by her crib for a while and she held my finger in her tiny fist. I asked them to remove the name and put young nurses seemed very nervous about and unsure what to do as they had to follow "the rules", but I had just stated what I wanted as I believed I still had a right. But - the next day I went again and she was gone. They told me she had gone to her new home and said how they new parents had been waiting so long for this child, I mustn't upset them by now trying to take her away and I should not be selfish but think of the wonderful life they could give her which I couldn't. Again – I was seen as the troublemaker and upsetting the applecart for everyone else by not being quiet and wanting to have some rights over my own baby. It was also made clear all along the way that I was seen as being incapable of being a good mother. Luckily, unlike others, I was not physically or chemically restrained, to my knowledge, but I do believe I could possibly have been sedated after that. I was unwell and "foggy" but it was put down to a rubella vaccination and my infected arm. At that stage, I had still been not wanting to sign the papers but then they said she had already gone so I felt it was like a fait accompli. I felt helpless and hopeless. In later years, I learnt it was a **<u>lie</u>** and my baby had not even left the hospital – and when she did, she was taken to

Ngala and was there for some weeks before being placed with adoptive parents (this information I got from my daughter who accessed her own records). I was never actually given an option to keep her – no advice was ever given regarding social security support or any kind of support actually. So I was 17, unemployed, and living with parents who did not want to even acknowledge I had a child. I could never speak of it from that time forward.

Even when still in Ngala, I was interviewed by women who came to the home, who I was told were social workers. They also never mentioned what help, if any, I could receive to enable me to keep my child. The discussion was only to find out a bit about me and the birth father so they could "match" the baby to the prospective parents. I asked if I had any say in what type of parents she would go to and I was told yes, I could. I believe this was to mollify me at the time and so let me believe I was doing the best thing, considering my request was totally ignored. I said I had done very well at school and I believed my child would also be intelligent and do well in the right environment, so I wanted her specifically to go to a family who valued a good education and could provide the child with this, a chance I hadn't received myself. The assured me that they would. As it turned out, she went to a couple where the mother was a stay-at-home housewife and the father was a truck driver, living in a low socio-economic area. In later years, I met my daughter - she had registered with Jigsaw and so had I. It was not a happy reunion. I learned that they mocked my daughter for being "weird" because she - like me - liked art, poetry, and creative writing and was a sensitive child.



As a footnote to all this and a recommendation to this inquiry: I did go on to educate myself. At age 29, and a housebound mother of two young children, I attended a course called "New Opportunities for Women" where we were encouraged to try a range of new skills and to enable us to find a path towards re-skilling ourselves and also for personal development. This was a turning point in my life - I decided to do what I thought I could do...not what others tried to tell me I couldn't. I went back to school, I did my TEE and had the top score at my college, I gained entry to university as a mature age student - and a single mum - and had the top scores for my unit. When lack of money prevented me from completing my degree, I found a course to gain a new qualification and I have worked in that field for 35 years - with no break in

employment, all while raising my sons on my own. They will be in their 40's this year. Both of my boys did well - they are not drug addicts or criminals and were at no time "wards of the state" - things we were told our babies could be if we attempted to raise them.

If only - like the "New Opportunities for Women" course, for example - someone had lifted me up instead of putting me down - had said "you are worth something, you can do it and this is the way how", giving confidence, information and guidance, instead of punishment and degradation ... simply for not being married.

If only proper procedures were followed in vetting prospective parents instead of what, I believe, amounted to baby farming and, I am told but have no proof, money under the table.

If only checks were in place to prevent possibly illegal and corrupt practices at institutions like Ngala and power not given to people such as who have been lauded for their work but whose private face was so different to the public one.

If only. My life, my daughter's life, and her children's lives could have all been very different.

Moving forward: May solace now come to those who so desperately need it through this inquiry and beyond and may those who were responsible for these practices finally be exposed.

Thank you for your consideration.