

To:
The Members of the Committee
Inquiry into past forced adoptive policies and practices
Parliament of Western Australia

Submission by Katrina Farrelly

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this inquiry. I am a 53-year-old adoptee, adopted in the state of Victoria, however, I have been a permanent resident of W.A since 2013. I was unaware of the Victorian or other state parliamentary enquires into past forced adoption practices that have already occurred, only discovering of their existence within the past year via W.A based Jigsaw.

I was born at the Royal Women's Hospital, Carlton in 1970 – my 18-year-old birth mother from country Victoria was referred to the Salvation Army home for unmarried mothers, called The Haven by her grandmother. Up until a few years prior to my birth, the unmarried mothers gave birth at The Haven, but in 1970 the young girls were sent to nearby Royal Women's to have their babies. My mother was admitted to the Haven in January 1970 and discharged two weeks after my birth in March 1970. I do not know how I came into the world, how my birth mother was treated, if she was prepared for my birth, did she see me, was she able to hold or care for me a little in the weeks after my birth; and after she was discharged, who/how I was cared for in the two and a half months until I was passed for adoption. I also don't know if she did sign my adoption papers willingly or was presented with the revoke to adoption order - the dates on my paperwork don't quite add up. After reading other submissions from birth mothers and adoptees who also came from The Haven, I can imagine it was a traumatic and lonely time for her and that her experience was in no way pleasant. My own Haven records I have been provided with have little information apart from basic facts. I am unable to access my hospital birth records without the consent of my birth mother or her next of kin (something I do not currently have and may never have).

My adoptive parents had waited 12 years to have a child and I was the first of 2 children they adopted from The Haven, my brother, 11 months younger than me was adopted a year later in 1971. We were told of our adoption at a very young age, at first in the form of a story book describing how lucky we were to be 'chosen by God' - there was also a personalised bible given to us with an inscription in the front of it, written by the matron from The Haven. At the time of our adoptions, The Haven encouraged adoptive parents to tell children they were adopted as young as possible, so our parents made it into a story. Mine started on the day I left the Haven, it was a 45 minute drive from The Haven to the Dandenong Ranges where we lived and even though my adopted mother held me in her arms on the drive home, I screamed all the way. During that initial transition from The Haven to my new home, I was apparently very unsettled, crying and vomiting my feeds up a lot of the time. My adoptive mother was frantic and thought I may be taken away from her because she wasn't looking after me properly. Things did not get better when my brother came along a year later – he screamed for an hour every day we were put down for our afternoon naps outside in the fresh air in our pram (more advice being followed) – the neighbours could always tell it was 2pm when the crying started!

The advice my adoptive parents were given to be open about our adoption was in complete contrast to what birth mothers were told – they were shamed and berated, told to forget about their 'mistake' and never speak of it again, they were 'damaged goods' and nobody would want to marry them if they knew, along with facing being rejected and unsupported by their own families if they did attempt to keep their baby. Footage I've seen from an ABC TV 1970 Four Corners documentary stated:

‘In 1970, one baby in 12 was born to a single mother. Adoption was seen as a solution’

The documentary then went on to highlight a case of a couple who had been waiting 11 months to adopt a baby boy, footage of them collecting him and taking him home with the nurses waving and smiling them off. They did mention that they would have to wait the fulfilment of the 30 day revocation period that birth mothers had a right to – (which in reality was often not presented to the birth mother) and finished off by saying:

“This little illegitimate bundle will become legitimised. By adoption this child will escape the handicap of its birth, his real mother will certainly never set eyes on him again and with all the love he may expect from his new parents, he will never feel the loss – one woman’s loss could turn out to be someone else’s gain.”

I do understand times were different at the time of my birth, society’s attitudes to sex before marriage and parental responsibility falling primarily onto the mother, but I still find it mind boggling that the best advice was to tell the birth mother to forget all about it, never mention it again and suppress her feelings; to advise the adoptive family to openly tell the child they were adopted and to expect the adoptee to be ‘happy with their lot’ and never to question it! It seems like a recipe for disaster in my opinion.

At the age of 6 my adoptive parents divorced, the divorce was very amicable with the highest regard for our welfare considered before any issues they had. My mother remarried and had two biological children with my stepfather. I always felt loved and wanted by all in my family but as I got older, particularly into the teenage years, I became more and more curious about myself, my origins, who I might look like, did I have any other biological siblings, cousins, uncles, aunts...I would sometimes imagine who I may be related to, of course it would always be someone famous or glamorous... at one point I was convinced I was related to Princess Diana, although I knew it was impossible for her to be my mother, it must be true, we must somehow be related! I also had a strong feeling that I was a twin and that I must have a long lost sister out there somewhere.

No matter how good your adoption is, I believe you do intrinsically feel different, somewhat void inside and self-conscious about being adopted - there have been a few instances in my life highlighting when I have especially felt this way:

- My brother was always in trouble at primary school, complete opposite to goody two shoes me, whenever he was sent to the Principals office for the strap or my parents were called to collect him, I always got the rundown on what happened from his classmates who had formed the opinion that his naughtiness was due to him being adopted....kid logic, if that was the case why wasn’t I the same! I just nodded and didn’t dispute it at the time.
- In high school, arguing with a science teacher about how I could be blood type A and I could still have a mum and dad who were blood type O...its not scientifically possible I was told (I didn’t tell her I was adopted and she sheepishly apologised after speaking to my Dad) – what a stupid assignment!
- Being denied a British Passport even though my Dad was a British born Ex-pat and veteran. After applying at age 27, the British Embassy rang my Dad and asked if I knew I was adopted as adopted children of British men were not entitled to a passport, only biological children. I’d imagine an adopted person who applied before me was rung and told this and probably didn’t know they were adopted, what a way to find out! They graciously said I could have ‘right of abode’ to the UK though!

- A more recent one a few years ago, when working at Perth Airport, a role requirement to hold an Aviation Security Card, which is renewed every 2 years. On the 3rd renewal, my birth certificate, which had been accepted everywhere up until that point, was now no longer acceptable, it couldn't be electronically verified. I had no idea Births, Deaths and Marriages Victoria were replacing adopted peoples birth certificates with electronic type ones and had to apply for my new one, it didn't cost anything but I had to wait awhile. During that time my card expired and I wasn't allowed onto the airport, fortunately there was an offsite job I could do for 6 weeks until it eventually came. When I did finally get to produce my new birth certificate and collect my new security card, I could hear the one of the girls behind the counter whispering, she's the one with the weird birth certificate who must've been adopted!

When I turned 18 (four years after the law changed in Victoria and adopted records were allowed to be accessed) I applied for my original birth certificate. I told my Dad (who my brother and I were living with by then) and he completely understood my desire to know and gave me copies of the records he had, which was just the formal adoption papers when my adoption was granted – containing no clue or identifying information about me before adoption. At that point in my life I wasn't very close to my Mum (just the normal teenage angst at the time), but my Dad relayed all the information on to her. She too said she understood and would do anything to help and eventually, after all the teenage angst had passed, our relationship healed, and we moved on.

After a wait of over a year, in 1989, at the age of 19, I went to a government department in Melbourne for a meeting to be given my birth records file. It was mandatory to have some group counselling, I don't remember much about it now, but I do remember that we had to talk in small groups – in my group I remember a birth mother who had travelled from NSW to try and find the baby she had given away in Victoria. I was in awe of her and her story, she was the first 'birth mother' I had ever knowingly met! The time came after the counselling to be given our files. Mine contained my original birth certificate, court records, some records from The Haven and some forms I could take to a special area of the Victorian Births, Death and Marriages office and obtain my birth mothers birth certificate and possibly a marriage certificate for her, should she have subsequently married in Victoria after my birth. On my original birth certificate it said my name was Kerry Michelle Campbell and it gave my mother's name, her age, where she was from....the section that should have shown the same information about my father was blank and had a line through it.

After that session we were on our own. I went straight away to Birth, Deaths and Marriages and was presented with my mother's birth certificate – turns out she was a twin! She had also married two years after my birth, in the same country town. I now had a starting point and was excited to begin the search, I just wasn't sure how to. Even though I'm sure there were a few agencies around to help with the search and any contact attempts, I was young and I wasn't familiar with how to access them. Naively I thought that would be arranged after the counselling session and receipt of my file. Although my adoptive parents would've been happy to help, there was no way I wanted to discuss it with them at that very early stage. So my best friend's Dad offered to be a mediator. This was pre internet times and he managed to easily locate my birth mother in the country town's White Pages, she was still living in the same country town and still married to the same guy who she'd married when I was two! She confirmed who she was and a meeting was set up for us to meet centrally in Melbourne.

A few days before the meeting was due, she phoned my friend and said she couldn't go through with it, too many people in the family didn't know about me and her husband didn't want her to get

hurt. One of the hardest phone calls I've ever received was when the mediator rang to tell me the meeting was off. Up until that point I had never viewed my birth mother giving me up for adoption as rejection, I had always felt, even from a young age that she didn't have a choice and was doing the only thing she could have done. The feeling of rejection came flooding through me after that call, I wished she had just said no to meeting initially, but I never wished I hadn't attempted to access my records, no matter how painful the outcome was. I'm sure in the counselling session prior to receiving my birth records, we were advised that there may not always be 'happy reunions' and to be prepared for anything, but even though you are made aware, you still think because you are ready and willing that whoever you're looking for is also feeling the same...its easy to ignore the possibility of unwanted contact. Even though I had no choice but to respect my birth mother's decision for no contact, I felt I couldn't shut the door without one more attempt...so I wrote her a letter. I have no idea what I wrote in that letter, I didn't keep a copy but I guess i just wanted her to know a bit about me and I wanted to know a lot about her. I must also have given her a contact number because not long afterwards she rang me and we spoke quite awkwardly for a bit...it was surreal hearing her voice, we discussed the possibility of meeting up in secret but ultimately we knew that was not right for both of us. I learnt a little about her and that she had recently had a baby girl (who was 1) and that I had 2 brothers who were around 4 and 17 years old. She said her eldest son was doing apprenticeship exams and that they would eventually tell him about me – I have recently discovered that he died at age 41, I don't know the circumstances, but there were no public death notices, it shocked and saddened me quite a bit when I found that out.

The best thing that happened to me after that was that I was leaving within a few months to join the airforce...this took me away from Victoria and kept me busy and life went on. I was told by the counsellor at Jigsaw W.A that military service is a common career for adopted children, offering some structure and stability. Since joining the airforce in 1990, I have never returned to Victoria to live permanently and have spent most of my adult life living overseas and in other Australian states, now permanently settled in W.A with my own family. My adopted parents have both since passed away, my Dad 15 years ago and my mum 5 years ago. I still have a stepfather and siblings in Melbourne, but I no longer am in contact with the brother a year younger than me, who was also adopted. He was a troubled kid/teen; even though we had a shared younger life experience, our connection as adults was broken and he has been estranged from the family for 20 plus years. He did meet his birth mother though; my father was contacted by community services when he was 18 as his birth mother was keen to reunite with him. They did have a reunion and my mum and dad met her and some other members of his birth family, they even came to his 21st....which I did not attend, there was no way I felt I could face that after my own experience so I was glad to have an excuse not to go, living in Adelaide at the time!

My second attempt at finding my birth family, 33 years after the first, started by me registering my details on the Jigsaw database and seeking counselling from [REDACTED], the counsellor at Jigsaw W.A. My records had been put away in a drawer years ago and I hadn't shown them to anyone. I have suppressed a lot of the emotion relating to my failed first reunion and whilst a few close family and friends were aware of me being adopted, it wasn't something I was comfortable talking about. This includes talking about it with my husband and 2 children. My children found out I was adopted accidentally when my stepfather told them not long after my mum died 5 years ago (he just assumed they knew) ...I was in the shower at the time and they burst through the door, 'mum we didn't know you were adopted'! When I booked my first counselling session with Jigsaw I couldn't find the words to tell my husband, I had to forward the email trail onto him and told him, 'this is why I'll be late home Thursday'! It's not like I ever deliberately hid the fact I was adopted, I just found it too painful to talk about - I think I must share some of my birth mothers original feelings of shame and secrecy. I

especially find the medical questions awkward and just resort to 'I don't know my family history', thankfully to date, I haven't had any serious medical conditions warranting a need to know more medically.

Tracing relatives is different now to when I first received my birth records - the internet, mobile phones, social media and Ancestry DNA testing all making it possible to find someone. I agreed for Jigsaw to send a registered letter to my birth mother last year (she's still living in the same country town, still married to the same guy) but Australia Post 'lost it'. Then a second letter was sent and I've heard nothing about how that one fared, so I'm no closer to finding out if she wants contact now or not. And the fear of another 'no' stops me from reaching out via social media, although at least there is confirmation if a message has been read or not that way. At present I'm also not game to reach out to her remaining two children, I suspect they don't know about me - they have also lost a brother.

There is increasing popularity with Ancestry DNA and I read a lot of stories of adopted people who've discovered relatives, particularly fathers not named on their birth certificates, this way. I decided to do my own Ancestry DNA test while waiting to see if the Jigsaw registered letters would be acknowledged. I had a date of birth for my biological father and a name written down from the mediator's conversation with my biological mother in 1989, although the surname wasn't correctly written down, it could have been one of two possibilities.

After some detective work, copies of historical ancestor records from BDM Victoria and contact with a second cousin on Ancestry, I was able to trace my biological father and get the names and details of his two children. I messaged my brother and sister and was thrilled to receive a response....they had no idea of my existence! And a bonus, my brother lives in Perth too...our families have met up a few times and we spent last Christmas together, he is the first person I'm biologically related to, other than my two children who I've ever met! My biological father is still alive and active, living over East, my sister lives in the same area! I've spoken to my father a couple of times, exchanged some pictures and stories and it was lovely to receive a call from him on my 53rd birthday. My sister and I have spoken too and message regularly, she is great at filling me in on family members and sharing lots of stories and photos, plus a shared love for music! We are getting to know each other slowly and cautiously - I can't wait to meet them, hopefully later this year!

I am so grateful that my biological father did not deny my existence to his children and that I am now able to have the opportunity to be a part of their lives. It's a complete bonus that he is also interested in me and my family, I didn't ever expect that from a man of his age or era. I don't know yet what went on between him and my mother, but I'm not going to hold him, or my mother to account for stuff they did as kids. I'm more interested in getting to know him, who he is, what makes him tick, what his life has been like. It feels great, finally, to not be a complete secret even if it is just the paternal side of my biological family. I'm under no illusion that my life would have been better if I wasn't adopted - I wouldn't have met the wonderful people I have in my life to date and my siblings may not be who they are - I feel a bit stuck between two worlds, a deep sadness that I've missed so much of their lives and was not able to grow up as their older sister but also excited and grateful that we have a chance to now get to know one another. This time again, I am glad that I did try to make contact, I will always want to know my birth mother and maternal siblings and would be receptive to any contact, but I think I am now done with initiating that contact attempt.

I sincerely hope that this inquiry will recommend the funding for more expert support and counselling services for relinquishing mothers, adoptee's and their extended families to access ...Jigsaw WA has one counsellor who only is available 3 days per week. Jigsaw's reunion service not

only look after W.A but all of Australia. Support offered should also take into consideration peoples use of current technology, letters may have been the way years ago but not used so much today. With the affordability and popularity of Ancestry, people are now doing DNA tests, getting their results back and then getting stuck with the next step.. some social media groups have 'search angels' that assist those not so tech savy with trace and contact. A more integrated support service covering all forms of possible contact should be considered. It's been more than 40 years since the forced adoption era changed to open adoptions. Time is of the essence for some people who shouldn't be waiting years for their birth records or for someone to help them trace their family and assist them with the support they may need during that journey.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak up and share my story.