

***Submission responding to:
Inquiry into the past adoptive policies and practices of the 20th century, notably
years between 1939 and 1980.***

15 June 2023

Dear Ministers

My name is Gaye McPhie
Adopted as Wendy Gay McPhie
Born Sue Ellen Rowe

And separated from my birthmother on 2nd April 1967 through Australia's Forced Adoption Practices.

My birthmother was 17 when she was placed into Hillcrest Maternity Home several months before my birth. She was shamed and shunned by her family for becoming pregnant, was unsupported by my birthfather (who ran away when she became pregnant), and told that she was to relinquish me to be adopted by people who "could look after me correctly."

I have been in reunion with her for nearly 30 years and she told me that there were no doctors in attendance, only a few young nurses and she endured a long, difficult, unassisted birth; was not allowed to see me afterwards and was taken to the court to sign papers to agree to the adoption after my birth. She did not receive counselling or support services before, during or after the birth. She told me she was lactating heavily when she was sent home and was told to forget about her baby and the whole experience. She said it was a shameful, confusing, and distressing time for her.

I was adopted by an infertile couple (mother late 30's and father 40 years of age.) My father had recently experienced a nervous breakdown, and neither parent received any counselling or support to deal with adopting a child. In addition, they were not thoroughly psychologically assessed beforehand. My mother was mentally unstable and grieving her inability to have her own biological child. She had experienced a troubled upbringing and was a severely traumatized woman. She was often cruel and emotionally abusive. My adoptive father was emotionally absent throughout my life and was not available to support me in any way. Needless to say, I experienced a difficult childhood with little or no healthy attachment, and my fear of being abandoned and rejected again was terrifying. I felt troubled and confused by my adoption (particularly the secrecy

surrounding it) and this was exacerbated by the emotional insecurity of my family life. I lived in a constant state of anxiety and hypervigilance, and found it disorientating not to have any frame of reference for how I looked, my preferences/behaviours, or sense of belonging, family history/lineage.

As issues of identity arose during my teenage years, I was plagued with obsessing about not knowing where I came from. My distress became heightened. I started acting out, self-harming, drinking, binge eating and smoking, and found it difficult to concentrate on my studies at school. As I became more body aware, the poor health I had always struggled with during childhood, was more worrying for me and the lack of medical history, troubling.

I was placed on anti-depressants at 21 years of age for panic disorder and depression and was under psychiatric care at the Mounts Bay Clinic. I have a diagnosed history of PTSD, depression, anxiety, panic attacks, and low self-esteem. I have deep insecurity and trust issues, and ongoing difficulty with rejection, attachment, and intimate relationship.

I entered therapy as a serious undertaking in my mid-twenties as my mental state was deteriorating (due to drug use, alcoholism, living in a domestic violence situation, and the ongoing traumatic relationship with my adoptive mother.) My therapist recommended that I cease contact with my adoptive mother for my mental health. I was suicidal at the time, as too was my adoptive mother, as she had been for most of my teenage years. I received and paid for this support by working part-time and due to my own sheer will and determination, was able to enter university as a mature aged student. I held down good employment after graduating which paid for my ongoing therapy to deal with continuing issues related to adoption, particularly around healthy relationship attachment and trust, and support with reunion which was a difficult experience. I have been in several dysfunctional, harmful relationships over many years and find it difficult to sustain regular normal friendships. I am often in a perpetual state of flight, fright, freeze and my chronic PTSD has affected my health. I have never been able to sleep soundly, have ongoing irritable bowel problems and low immunity, asthma and allergies. I have literally spent thousands of dollars on every conceivable form of therapy available from CBT, EMDR, SE (Somatic Experiencing) psychotherapy, psychodrama, hypnosis, neurofeedback. Some of these therapies, namely CBT and SE have been helpful in grounding me, providing a framework for learning more functional behavioural skills. I have yet to find a therapy that can really deal with preverbal trauma; that is, being separated from the woman who birthed me and left in a hospital for approximately 4 weeks awaiting adoption to strangers. There is research now that indicates that infant separation impacts babies developing brains in many ways. The brain adapts to this constant fear and focuses strictly on survival.

Subsequently, the brain overly develops the systems and pathways that anticipate and respond to that specific threat and creates an extremely adverse template that affects all future development. This has been my experience.

I was not able to search for my birthmother whilst my adoptive mother was alive. I lived a life of guilt and feeling torn between wanting to know where I came from and loyalty to my adoptive parents for providing a home for me. When my adoptive mother died in 1997, I contacted Jigsaw WA to put my name down on the register in the hope of a reunion. I found reunion to be incredibly overwhelming and was not equipped to deal with the complexity of feeling that ensued. There was no follow up counselling service afterwards for any member of the reunion matrix. Specialized counselling assistance should have been mandatory. The psychologists I sought of my own volition were not trained in this area and did not understand the depth of psychological trauma caused by closed adoptions.

I realise it is not possible to change the past, and given the context (cultural, psychological and societal norms of the day) within which closed adoptions occurred, it is apparent that governments, institutions, and families thought this was a viable solution to a social problem (unwed pregnant women and infertile couples.) However, we know better now, and moving forward, I believe there should be greater awareness of the impacts of adoption in the community and institutionally. An understanding of adoption trauma should be included in the tertiary level curriculum for psychology degrees, and training made available in mainstream psychological/social work services. Of the many psychologists I have seen for some 30 years, many have not understood the impact of the early and ongoing stress adoption has had on me, focusing primarily on the dysfunction of my adoptive family, which of course played a major role in my distress, however the first separation from my birthmother and the subsequent lack of information, has caused a deep neurobiological vulnerability which I have taken into adulthood and have been trying to heal ever since. Adoption for me has meant psychological torment, and *there by the grace of God go I* that I have survived to write this document today. We cannot expect babies that have been separated from their mothers under these conditions to be wired like other people. It is highly traumatizing for any baby, and is counter to any biological process seen in the natural world. It is incredible that we think, as a civilized society, that this does not warrant honorable consideration.

To be denied access to my original birth certificate, not have my birthfather's name included on the birth certificate; not knowing family medical history, and heritage information has been distressing and should never have been withheld from me. I should not have had to forfeit all rights to my identity to gain a home, nor live in secrecy and denial. In 1991-1994 my adoptive mother was heavily

involved in rallying with others to have vetoes introduced into legislation. It is important to me to have this changed as it is a living torment for people not to have access to information; to live with lies and secrecy. This does not make for a psychologically stable society. The ramifications of this type of practice is dysfunctional for all of us.

The following is a further list of changes that I believe would be beneficial for adoptees in our community:

- Focus groups with professionals. Overwhelmingly there is a need for social workers and others to listen constructively to the needs and wishes of people separated by adoption.
- For those who wish to revoke an adoption order and go back to their original name, this process should be neither difficult nor complicated. Adopted people did not consent to be adopted.
- Have vetoes/restraining orders quashed. About 800 in WA remain. This is a stain on our society. That anyone should be forbidden by law to discover the whereabouts of a lost family member is a leftover from the days when adoption practice was supported by secrecy and lies, and it needs to be abolished.
- Inform all adoptive people that weren't informed about their adoptions. Again, this should be the responsibility of government. Adopters were told at the time they obtained a baby that they should inform that child as they grew up.
- Access to free healthcare and psychological services. Adoptees should not have to finance their own somatic and psychological repair.
- Access to integrated birth certificates. Adoptees should be recognised legally as the sons and daughters of both sets of parents.

Yours faithfully

Gaye McPhie

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