

To start I would like to thank the Committee for the inquiry into past forced adoption practices and policies.

I am a mother who was coerced into giving up my son for adoption in 1981. My son was born in September 1981 at King Edward Memorial Hospital (KEMH). I was 15 years old at the time.

I had just found out I was 14 weeks pregnant, and I was not sure what to do. My parents wanted me to keep the baby. My boyfriend's parents banned me from their house as they didn't want anyone to know. My boyfriend's parents suggested adoption and my boyfriend agreed with this. My parents were against this however, the decision was left up to me.

My boyfriend and I went into the Department known then as Community Welfare in West Perth to find out about the process of adoption. I saw two social workers that day, [REDACTED] When I was there, the social workers decided to interview me for the start of the adoption process. I had only gone there to find out about adoption I was not totally committed. As the interview progressed, I was told that I was too young to care for a baby, unmarried and did not have a job so how would I support the child financially. I was also told that to keep the baby would ruin many lives including my child's.

Not once during this interview was I informed of other options only adoption was best. I did not know at the time there was a single parent pension available. I was told I would have to leave school get a job that I was placing a lot of pressure on my boyfriend by keeping the baby. If I asked my parents to help this was selfish of me as they had already raised their children. How due to my age could I possibly raise a child, care, love and support the baby. The Department never offered any other support from other agencies or counselling so I could make an informed decision. Adoption was strongly enforced and was the only option offered to me to consider.

I was told by one of the social workers over and over again that if I kept my baby I would ruin my life, the baby's life, and my boyfriend's life. It was then reinforced with "if I loved my baby", I would place them up for adoption. It was also reinforced that a married couple were in a better position to care and financially raise my child where as I as a single parent was not. The whole process made me feel ashamed, judged, and worthless. All I could think of is if I kept my baby, I did not love them, and I would ruin many lives. This was a lot of pressure placed onto a 15-year-old. I came away from the Department that day having signed papers to begin the adoption process. Not once during this time did anyone ask where my parents were, I was 15 years old and had no legal guardian with me. My boyfriend was 18 years old at the time but not my legal guardian.

I informed my parents that I would be placing the baby up for adoption. They were not happy and were upset with my decision. They could not understand how I could do this as I was underage. I told them that the social workers told me that as I was the baby's mother, I had the final decision.

One of the social workers [REDACTED] from the Department called to set up another interview with myself and my parents. [REDACTED] came out to the house to inform my parents that I had started the adoption process. My parents were asking her how as I was underage and that they wanted me to keep the baby. [REDACTED] told my parents that as I was the mother, I could do this. [REDACTED] told my parents that it was selfish of them to make me keep the baby due to my age. My mother said then that she would care and look after the baby until I was able to do so. [REDACTED] told them that if they did this, they would ruin my life and the baby's. I was then asked what I wanted. I said I was not sure. I was told once again by [REDACTED] that "if I loved my baby", I would place them up for adoption.

Once again, those words, love my baby, ruining lives if I keep the baby. I was under so much pressure that I finally could not take it anymore and decided on adoption just to make everyone go away and leave me alone.

During this whole time no one ever said that “if you loved your baby”, you would keep them. I was made to feel so worthless as a mother and the prospective adoption parents were everything I was not.

I had what is called a concealed pregnancy. I had to go to KEMH for antenatal check-ups. Another humiliating experience for me. 15 years old alone with a male doctor who treated me appalling. I remember trying to get out of my appointments and not go. The hospital would call to see why I did not come. I was then told I was irresponsible and needed to attend my next appointment. I never said anything to my parents as I thought they were ashamed of me regarding the pregnancy and for placing my baby up for adoption. So, a lot of silence between us all. My boyfriend was working away at the time and would call putting pressure on me about adoption. I was 15 years old feeling overwhelmed, feeling alone and not understanding why I had to make this decision. If I kept my baby, then I would ruin everyone’s life. If I loved my baby, I would give them up. So, if I kept my baby, I did not love them. This was said to me over and over again by social workers at the Department and the hospital. I was told if I had my parents raise the baby, I was selfish and not being fair to them.

When I went into labour on 3 September 1981. I was in a room with my boyfriend and my mum was there. I was given an epidural and my feet put in stirrups. During this time, a doctor came in with several students and proceeded to tell them my age and that I was placing my baby up for adoption and proceeded to let the students lift the sheet to look and feel at how far dilated my cervix was. I was mortified, humiliated, and so upset. My mother said something and was told this was a teaching hospital. No asking for permission. I just retreated into myself and would not say a word. When it came to deliver my baby, I would not push I refused they had to use forceps. When the baby was born the nurse said I had a baby boy and went to give him to me. The doctor intervened and said no the baby was up for adoption and to take my son away. I did not get to see or hold my son.

I was put up on the maternity ward with other mothers. I could hear and see the other babies. I went down to the nursery to see my son but was sent back to my room. When I became upset about this, I was given medication to knock me out. I tried a few times and each time I was brought back to my room and given medication. Unbeknown to me my parents had come up to the hospital and had gone to the nursery to bring my son to me. They were stopped by nursing staff, escorted out of the hospital by security and told if they came back, they would have them arrested for trespassing. I only found this out about 15 years ago during a counselling session with my parents. All these years I thought my parents were upset and ashamed of me and that is why they did not come to the hospital.

I changed my mind about adoption quite a few times while in hospital and informed the nurses of this. When said this the hospital would ring the social worker who would come and see me do the big spiel and would talk me out of keeping my son. I was given registration papers the next day after my son was born to register his birth. The nursing staff had filled them out and named my baby. I asked who [redacted] was and they told me this was the name they had given him after the doctor at KEMH. I was upset about this and wanted to name him myself but was ignored and made to sign the papers. I have the papers today which are filled out in another person’s handwriting then my 15-year-old signature. Throughout this whole process I was coerced, lied to, and shamed. I was denied from seeing, naming, or holding my son. I truly believed this was part of the adoption process. I did

not realise during this time I had every right to see my son, and this was taken from me. The Department and KEMH used my parents working class background, them having very little knowledge of the legal system and not to challenge authority. They kept my parents and I separated when interviewing and told both of us if the baby was kept how many lives would be ruined. All these years I thought the reason why my parents and I did not speak was because they were ashamed of me for getting pregnant and then placing my son up for about adoption. The reality was they did not want to upset me and had felt that they had let me down.

I left the hospital 3 days after my son's birth. Before I left, I asked where my son was and was led to believe that he was with his adoptive parents. I was told by staff to go home and get on with my life. I was young could have more children later on and my son would be well cared for.

6 days after having my son an appointment was set up for me to come up to the Department in West Perth to officially sign the adoption papers. I went with my boyfriend once again without a legal guardian. No one in that office asked where my legal guardian was. I was given papers to read and told to sign them. I was having second thoughts again and voiced this to those in the room. Once again, I was coerced and given the full speech ending with "if you love your son" you will give him up for adoption. I relented and signed the papers. So did the baby's father. I left the building quite upset with adoption papers. I was not told I had 30 days where I could revoke the adoption if I changed my mind. I believed that from the day of signing that my son was now adopted and there was nothing I could do now but get on with my life, and to forget this ever happened.

So, I did try to get on with my life and push any thoughts of my son out of mind but failed miserably. I constantly thought of him but never said anything to anyone or my boyfriend. If I did try to speak about him my boyfriend I would shut me down. I learnt to never speak about him and walked around pretending everything was okay. I was two different people to those around me I had a mask. The mask I wore pretending to the world I was fine, happy, and getting on with my life. It was only when I was by myself did I let the mask slip but then would quickly put it back up again. Eventually the mask of me pretending that I was fine and happy became my normal.

Over the years I would see children around his age and wonder if it was him. Thoughts of is he alive, does he think of me or even know of me. Every year on his birthday I would get a little cupcake and I would place a candle on it for him. I did this privately as I didn't want anyone to know why I was doing this. I went through life with this big secret that no one could find out about. Fear of being judged, scared of people's reactions and just ashamed. My son's birthday was such a sad day for me, but no one would know this as I went around with my mask on not showing anyone my true feelings.

My son's adoption and the way I was treated changed me as a person in so many ways. My relationships were never the same and I was never the same. My parents and I did not speak. They had lost their daughter and grandson. After a few years, my boyfriend and I went our separate ways. Years later I married and went on to have two more children, my first at 29 years of age. I say my first as I did not want anyone to know I had a child before and it was in a way my first time as I was denied being a mother in 1981. I became very overprotective of them. I thought this was normal, but I was on another different level of overprotection. I did not trust anyone and never left them with anyone to babysit them, not even their father or grandparents. I did not realise that this was because I had learnt at a very young age about loss. When raising my sons, I made sure I was perfect at everything to the point of exhaustion and post-natal depression. I had this voice in the back of mind that if I were not a good mother then the Department could take my children away. I never felt safe or had that feeling I could trust people. I was hypervigilant and if anything came up regarding

my children, I would become very aggressive and over the top with my protection of them. Once again, I thought this was normal behaviour. At the same time, I always thought I was a bad person because a good person would not give up their baby. I thought if anything bad happened to me it was because I deserved it.

In 2007 my son contacted me through the Department of Community Development Post Adoptions Service. He was 25 years old and lived in the UK. I found out that he moved to the UK by himself when he was 20 years old. Before this he was growing up 40 minutes away from me. When he contacted me, it was one of joy but also of fear. What did he want? Did he want to get back at me? Did he hate me? So many questions, thoughts, and feelings. I had a really hard time emotionally as I had this secret and was afraid everyone would find out what I had done and would hate and judge me. My ex-husband knew about my son, but my two other children did not.

I became very depressed during this time, and my friend became concerned and made me go to my doctor. I just blurted out everything to my doctor. He was so understanding and kind to me which confused me. He proceeded to tell me that I needed counselling and I said no as I had had counselling in the past. I informed him of what had been said to me over the years - I had been told that it was my fault, I could not move forward I needed to get over my past. Staying in the past was not helpful for me until I did this, I would not get any better. These so-called professionals had no idea of what I was going through. While in my doctor's office he looked up adoption counselling and came across "Adoption Research and Counselling Service (*arcs*)". A specialist counselling service on adoption. He called on my behalf and was able to speak with a counsellor about me. I was given an appointment for the next day. I told him I was not going; this would be like all the times before. He called *arcs* back and I spoke to the counsellor I was going to see and after my conversation I decided to go to the appointment.

During my session with the counsellor for the first time in my life, I actually felt listened to and understood. I had all these emotions and feelings during my sessions. I went on a weekly basis and during my sessions I was able to speak about how angry I was at the Department, KEMH, my boyfriend's parents, my boyfriend, and my parents. I was angry at my parents for not protecting me. I was angry at my then boyfriends' parents for making me feel ashamed in being pregnant while he walked around freely. I was 15 years old and was made to make a big decision that I should never had made.

I found out during my sessions that what I am experiencing is very normal for those affected by adoption. I had a hard time trying to come to terms with the feelings of a 15-year-old girl but was now an adult of 41 years of age. 25 years of keeping this secret, feeling ashamed and judged. Not talking to anyone about it. My heart having feelings for this 15-year-old girl and my brain as a 41-year-old trying to stop these feelings. It was a very confusing time for me. I told my counsellor about how I was feeling and what was happening to me. My counsellor informed me that this was the trauma and grief coming up from when I was 15, and my brain as the 41-year-old was protecting her by shutting down these feeling to protect her. Slowly things were starting to make sense for me, I didn't feel like I was going crazy. The one thing that resonated with me throughout all of this was I was not alone; my story was very similar to others. I read books and listened to other sharing similar experiences or almost identical experiences such as mine. I had a very difficult time trying to understand why some people got to hold, see, and name their child and I was denied this. No one can tell me why some did, and some were denied everything. I still struggle with this from time to time.

With counselling I was finally ready to tell my two young children about their brother with the help of my doctor. I asked him to tell them as I did not think I could do it by myself. They were very confused at first and my youngest who was 6 at the time wanted to know where he was looking around. My 10-year-old said I knew I was not the oldest. The birthday cakes every year in September but no one's birthday did not make sense to him. It was such a relief they did not hate me. It was one of the most difficult things I had ever done other than giving their brother up 25 years ago. I thought everything was fine until about 2 months later my youngest son's behaviour changed, he became very clingy, would not leave me, and could not tell me what was wrong. I spoke to my counsellor about it and was asked to bring my son in for counselling. I found out through his sessions he was afraid that people would come and take him like his brother. My other son was having a few moments himself during this. This was quite distressing for me to hear and see how this was affecting both my younger children. Myself and my two sons were all in counselling from the repercussions of a decision made 25 years ago.

6 months later after my son who was adopted contacted me, I went to the UK to see him. I needed counselling before I could go over. I wanted nothing more than to get on a plane straight away when he first contacted me in March 2007, but I did not want to be an emotional basket case while so far away from home. I wanted to enjoy my time with my son. I saw my son for the first time on 1 September 2007 at the airport in the UK. I went for his 26 birthday but my first with him. The meeting was very emotional, wonderful, and sad. Sadness from what we had both lost. I spent 3 weeks getting to know him and him getting to know me. Photos of him as a baby and growing up. I felt an immense sadness and loss from this. There was so much joy around the visit but also sadness. When it came time to leave, it was very hard. I had to get back to his younger brothers, but I also did not want to leave him again. It was very hard for him as well.

I had been back at home for a few days when I found myself feeling quite depressed and the grief coming back up again. I went back to my counsellor at arcs confused by my feelings. I should be over the moon I have met my son, but I was not feeling this. This was just the beginning of my journey. I thought finding him and meeting him was hard. That was the easiest part. He is my son, but he is also a stranger. Wondering where I fit into his life and him into mine. His relationship with his brothers who he did not grow up with. They met a year later, and it did not go very well. So much loss for all of us. Distance plays a big part in getting to know him as its expensive to fly to the UK. I have telephone calls and emails with him, but it is not the same as seeing him in person when trying to build a relationship. My son is married, and I have 3 grandsons now. I am always watching what I say and do as my thought process is one of not wanting to say or do the wrong thing in case, I lose him again. He has never said or voiced this to me. These are my thoughts and feelings that don't go away and is what I live with. No matter how much I'm told everything will be okay it won't happen. I can only best describe these feelings as being on a rollercoaster with the highs and the low except this ride never ends.

The impact of adoption is lifelong and is something I will never get over. I have had to learn how to live with this. I have had specialist counselling since 2007 and learnt how to live with adoption and have strategies in place to help me cope with what happened to me. I have learnt what triggers me and how to respond to these triggers. Sometimes I understand my feelings there and then other times it takes me a while. I also learnt to be kinder to the younger me who blamed herself all these years for what happened to her. For my younger self to know that I should never have been put in the position I was put in regarding the adoption of my son with the Department, KEMH and the adults at that time. So much pain, and loss for the 15-year-old but also the adult here and now.

Those four words that were told to me over and over again “if you love him” you will give him up. Not one person ever said “if you love him” you will keep him.

I have over the years tried to obtain my records from KEMH but not had any success. My doctor contacted KEMH in July 2008 by telephone and email asking for my records. We were informed by [REDACTED] the Information Officer Mediation and Legal Support Service person that the original file was destroyed but there was a microfilm believed to hold my information and that they would send it to me once it had gone to the legal department to be checked. My doctor did a follow up and we were told that the microfilm had been misplaced is now missing and they were trying to find it. I didn't hear from them at all or receive my information or my sons.

A year later I reached out to Dr Kim Hames MLA – Minister for Health to see if he could help me find my missing records. On the 7 September 2009 along with my counsellor I attended an appointment to speak with him about what had happened to me all those years ago and he assured me he would look into finding out about my records. He also spoke about a State Inquiry into Past Adoption Practices and Policies. I received a letter from him a few months later informing me that they had found my child's information. I was sent the wrong child's information on a [REDACTED]. My son was [REDACTED]. Wrong file and information. I called and spoke to KEMH about this but did not get anywhere and no further help was given to me. As you can appreciate this is just not good enough. I feel brushed off and all those feelings from when I was 15 began to resurface. How can those that are not adopted, or part of the adoption process can have their information from years back, but I can't get mine. There are so many questions around this and no one to answer them or at least give a good explanation as to why.

Over the years I have contributed to a few inquiries and studies into Past Adoption Practices. Listed below.

I attended and spoke at the State inquiry into forced adoption practices on 28 October 2010. Sadly, nothing else eventuated from this in WA.

Attended and spoke at the Senate Committee. My contributions are in the Senate Committee Report – Former Forced Adoption Policies and Practices in February 2012 at the Community Affairs Reference Committee.

Attended appointments and spoke with Senator Rachel Siewert about how hard it has been to obtain my records and information and that this is not just me this is happening to.

I also participated in the National Research Study on the Service Response to Past Adoption Practices August 2012– interviewed by Darryl Higgins.

Attended as a VIP guest to the National Apology for Forced Adoptions on 21 March 2013. A pity the funding that came out of this never went to those that needed it for counselling.

Have always been a strong advocate on Adoption Policies and Practices over the years. I attended as a VIP guest to the 10th Anniversary for the National Apology for Forced Adoptions on 21 March 2023.

I would like this inquiry to look into why we are unable to obtain our records and documents. Records not being redacted all information should be provided to those affected by adoption especially children as they did not have a say.

No fees for those applying for birth certificates and death certificate when trying to find their biological parents, child, or siblings etc.

Most importantly specialist counselling offered to those considering placing their baby up for adoption so they can make an informed decision about this.

Free specialist counselling to those affected by adoption practices. I have spent thousands over the years I have had counselling. This is lifelong. Does not have an end date. Different stages of life bring up issues and emotions.

Increase of funding to specialist counselling services such as *arcs* who have been around for over 30 years.

I would also like the chance to be invited to speak to this committee as I believe I can offer valuable insight into how adoption practices have affected those impacted by adoption.

Your sincerely

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