

# THE SISTER KATE'S HOME KIDS HEALING CENTRE: EARLY BEGINNINGS

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## I Introduction

The Sister Kate's Home Kids was established in 2004 by a small group of women, including myself, who were institutionalised as children at Sister Kate's Children's Home in Queens Park, Perth.<sup>1</sup> The Sister Kate's Home Kids was formed because we wanted the truth of the history of child abuse associated with the Home to be properly acknowledged, and we felt that the children who were abused at the Home should receive a just response from the Uniting Church and the Western Australian Government. We also believed that the Home children had a legitimate interest in the future of the land.

As a result of the history of the Stolen Generations and the trauma of child abuse, the Sister Kate's Home Kids sees the need for Aboriginal healing today as paramount. We knew from the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families ('*Bringing Them Home* Inquiry') and its report<sup>2</sup> that the history of the Stolen Generations has severely impacted upon the physical, emotional and mental health and wellbeing of individuals and families. The impact of the trauma commonly experienced by members of the Stolen Generations has been described as 'multiple, continuing and profoundly disabling'.<sup>3</sup> The effects of this trauma include detriment to the self-esteem and mental wellbeing of Stolen Generations members, the impairment of Stolen Generations members' relationships and parenting capacity, an increased risk for children of Stolen Generations parents to be removed, and detriment to the vitality and morale of many Indigenous communities.<sup>4</sup> These findings in the *Bringing Them Home* Report have now been confirmed by the Western Australian Telethon Institute for Child Health Research whose research has established the intergenerational effects of Aboriginal child removal policies.<sup>5</sup> According to this research, the

children of Aboriginal people who were removed from their families are 2.3 times more likely to be at high risk of clinically significant emotional and behavioural difficulties, and also have double the proportion of alcohol and drug use than other Aboriginal children.<sup>6</sup>

## II Abuse at the Sister Kate's Home

The experience of child abuse and trauma at the Home was documented in the *Bringing Them Home* Report. The Report was conducted under the leadership of former High Court judge Sir Ronald Wilson, who had also been the moderator of the Uniting Church who oversaw the Home and its operations. Many people throughout Australia gave evidence to the *Bringing Them Home* Inquiry including Millicent, who told of being taken to Sister Kate's in 1949 at four years of age even though she had a loving and happy family environment.<sup>7</sup> In Millicent's own words:

The Protector of Aborigines and the Child Welfare Department in their 'Almighty Wisdom' said we would have a better life and future brought up as whitefellas away from our parents in a good religious environment. All they contributed to our upbringing and future was an unrepairable scar of loneliness, mistrust, hatred and bitterness.<sup>8</sup>

At the Home, Millicent and her brother were separated. They were told Sunday was visiting day but were unaware that their family was not allowed to visit. The staff at the Home told Millicent that her family didn't care for her and that she had to forget them. The Home taught that it was very degrading to belong to an Aboriginal family and that she should be ashamed of herself because she was inferior to white people.<sup>9</sup> The Christian environment was entwined with corporal punishment that included whippings, physical

abuse and public humiliation. As Millicent recalled, '[h]urt and humiliation was a part of our every day life and we had to learn to live with it.'<sup>10</sup> The Home kids worked hard, caring for the little children in the nursery, chopping wood and doing other household chores.

In her first year of high school, Millicent was sent out by the Home to work on a farm as a domestic. She was raped at the farm by the man of the house. The Sister Kate's Matron, upon hearing from Millicent what had happened, did not seek any help for her but instead washed her mouth with soap, beat her and warned her not to tell the other children. She was sent out again to that same family where she was repeatedly raped and violated by several perpetrators.<sup>11</sup> The Home did nothing to protect her; instead, they facilitated the abuse and blamed her for it. Millicent stated, '[t]hey constantly told me that I was bad and a disgrace and if anyone knew it would bring shame to Sister Kate's Home.'<sup>12</sup> The rapes led to a suicide attempt, pregnancy and adoption against her wishes.<sup>13</sup>

The Sister Kate's Home Kids acknowledges that many Aboriginal children at the Home experienced severe acts of physical, emotional, sexual, psychological and spiritual abuse. This abuse is considered to have mainly occurred after the passing of Sister Kate in 1946, when the Presbyterian Church took over the running of the Home and implemented the cottage parent system, which allowed greater male presence at the Home. In addition to the abuse at Sister Kate's being identified to the *Bringing Them Home* Inquiry, research undertaken by the National Library has also confirmed the commonplace nature of abuse at the Home. In *Many Voices: Reflections on Experiences of Indigenous Child Separation*, the publication resulting from the National Library's *Bringing Them Home* Oral History Project, Christine Choo states that '[t]he overwhelming memory of children who lived at Sister Kate's Home during this period is of deprivation, drudgery, hard work, cruelty and psychological, physical and sexual abuse'.<sup>14</sup>

### III Negotiations Between the Sister Kate's Home Kids and the Uniting Church

Since the formation of the Sister Kate's Home Kids, we have engaged the Uniting Church in discussion about the pressing need for a response to the issue of abuse perpetrated at the Home under the Church's watch. We asked the Church to consider the 2002 report of the Law Commission of Canada entitled *Restoring Dignity: Responding to Child Abuse in*

*Canadian Institutions*.<sup>15</sup> This report called upon Canadians to recognise the deep and long-lasting impact of institutional childhood abuse, to adopt programs to educate the public about the tragedy of institutional child abuse, to affirm the importance of both individual and societal commitment to preventing the recurrence of such abuse, and to take steps to honour the memory of all abused children, those who survived and those who did not.<sup>16</sup> We were very interested in exploring Canadian 'redress programs' – agreements between responsible churches and governments and the former institutionalised children which are designed to provide redress to survivors of institutional child abuse through financial compensation and non-monetary restitution. Redress programs are designed with input from the group they are intended to benefit, and offer a wider range of benefits than those available through the courts. As the Law Commission of Canada noted, they primarily seek to promote healing and reconciliation and therefore can be 'as expansive and innovative as the imagination and resources of their creators allow'.<sup>17</sup>

The Uniting Church has not yet explored further with us the development of a redress program, which in the Canadian context have typically been formed in the 'shadow of the law' and as an official response to the threat of civil liability. The Church instead has proposed to us the initiation of a further inquiry by the Western Australian Office of the Commissioner for Children and Young People, which was recently established under the *Commissioner for Children and Young People Act 2006* (WA).<sup>18</sup> The Sister Kate's Home Kids was, however, fully aware that former Sister Kate's Home children had already given their testimony in the 1990s to the Western Australian Aboriginal Legal Service and the subsequent *Bringing Them Home* Inquiry, neither of which resulted in any personal measures of redress for them. We remain concerned that many former Home children have now passed away, including younger people in very tragic circumstances. We believe that a negotiated redress program is consistent with the Uniting Church's position as noted by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner in 1998 in support of reparations for the Stolen Generations.<sup>19</sup>

During our talks with the Uniting Church we became aware that settlements were being reached in relation to non-Indigenous children who were abused in institutional care, including a settlement finalised by the Salvation Army in Perth (who presumably agreed on ethical principle not to

raise the statute of limitations).<sup>20</sup> The settlement was made with people who were victimised by, as one newspaper report put it, the 'notorious paedophile and then Salvation Army Captain Charles Alan Smith'.<sup>21</sup> This is the same individual whom members of the Sister Kate's Home Kids knew as a former Superintendent at the Sister Kate's Home. We understand that another significant settlement process has also been negotiated with respect to serious abuse perpetrated by the St John of God Brothers in Australia upon the vulnerable boys once in their care.<sup>22</sup> As yet, we are not aware of any settlements in relation to the abuse of Aboriginal institutionalised children.

Another important aspect of the Sister Kate's Home Kids' negotiations with the Uniting Church is in relation to the land on which the Home area stands. In the late 1980s the management of the Home had been vested with an Aboriginal agency (who renamed it Manguri); however, this agency did not seek to represent the interests of the former Home children. Subsequently the Uniting Church's Aboriginal Congress became the Home's new managers (and 'beneficial owners' of the land), but they did not seek to establish any relationship with the past Home children.<sup>23</sup> During our talks the Church initially conveyed their view that we had no interest in the land. This was in contrast to the recommendation in the *Bringing Them Home* Report in which churches were urged to

review their land holdings to identify land acquired or granted for the purpose of accommodating Indigenous children forcibly removed from their families, and in consultation with Indigenous people and their land councils, return that land.<sup>24</sup>

When we queried the Uniting Church about their support for the *Bringing Them Home* Report they reaffirmed to us that they still supported the Report's recommendations and the work of Sir Ronald Wilson (who, as has already been mentioned, was a former Uniting Church moderator). However, during the early part of our negotiations with the Uniting Church it appeared that they had forgotten the commitments they had once made to the members of the Stolen Generations and the former Sister Kate's Home children. After attending meetings with the Church I heard some of our members say, 'It's as if they just want to turn the page on us'. We reminded the Church of the formal commitment they had made in 1997 to enter into discussions with the associations of people from Sister Kate's who had 'passed through' the Home, to listen to

the stories of what happened at the Home, to negotiate the ways in which the Church may help to repair the damage that occurred and its continuing consequences for individuals and families, and to assist in the process of healing in the community.<sup>25</sup>

Notwithstanding our efforts, around 2006 it was apparent that the negotiations with the Church had stalled. The Sister Kate's Home Kids then met with the Sister Kate's Children 1934–1953 Aboriginal Corporation who formally represent the older members of the Home (they had been under the care of Sister Kate, whom they remember as a loving and protective 'Gran'). They told us that their attempts to negotiate a lease at the Home for an aged care facility had encountered substantial difficulties with the law firm engaged by the Church to settle the term of the lease. Soon after this meeting a proposal was made by Dr Sue Gordon of the Sister Kate's Children 1934–1953 Aboriginal Corporation to approach the Indigenous Land Corporation to discuss whether we could apply to purchase some of the lands from the Church for the purposes of an aged care facility and healing centre.

Although the *Bringing Them Home* Report recommended that churches return land, the Uniting Church's attitude to their proprietary interest was obvious to us and so we decided that the purchase of the land by the Indigenous Land Council was the most appropriate course of action to pursue. Our decision could not have come at a better time as the Church later revealed to us that they had begun the process of selling a large block of Home land known as the 'bush block', which holds significant memories for former Home children. The Indigenous Land Council has supported both the Sister Kate's Home Kids and the Sister Kate's Children 1934–1953 Aboriginal Corporation throughout the land acquisition process, and we were given formal advice in September 2007 of the Indigenous Land Council Board's approval of the acquisition of approximately 10 acres of the former Home site to build a healing centre and aged care facility. As part of the settlement process, we successfully negotiated (with the support of the Indigenous Land Council) with the Church that half of the purchase price of the sale is to be held in trust for the operational costs associated with a healing centre – the Sister Kate's Home Kids Healing Centre – and an aged care facility – the Sister Kate's Aboriginal Corporation Aged Care Facility – on the site.

Our work towards the development of the Sister Kate's Home Kids Healing Centre is made all the more urgent in

light of the fact that 10 years after the *Bringing Them Home* Report there still is no meaningful recognition by churches or governments of their role in the abuse of Aboriginal children which occurred as a part of the practice of Aboriginal child removal. Although Aboriginal children were frequently abused in the homes and missions, Australian churches and governments have not adopted redress processes with Aboriginal survivors. In Western Australia, the official apologies by the Government and churches have not yet led to any settlements or redress process that allows for the truth of that history of child abuse to be heard and addressed.<sup>26</sup> Those public apologies and motions are hollow gestures if not followed through with a committed process of redress and healing.

#### IV Contemporary Legacies of Abuse of Indigenous Children

As the various reports have confirmed, the unresolved trauma of the past continues to impact today, and this is very relevant in relation to the crisis of Aboriginal child sexual assault. From our own experiences and inquiries, the Sister Kate's Home Kids understands that the sexual abuse of children was widespread, and perpetrators included cottage fathers (and in some instances cottage mothers) and other employees and associates of the Home. They also included members of the public (such as single males) who ostensibly were providing 'family-like' experiences for the children. Others were given the benefit of Aboriginal children's unpaid labour. These abusers and paedophiles gained their access to children via the direct facilitation of the Home Superintendent, who had the support of the Church and the state. Aboriginal children were thoroughly silenced by churches and perpetrators who degraded the children's sense of identity, self-pride and spirituality. Aboriginal children were taught that abuse was 'normal' and to be accepted, that it was not a matter that they could complain about, that they had to endure it and they had to remain silent about it. There was no help or respite.

Over the last decade various inquiries throughout Australia into the issue of Aboriginal child abuse have all confirmed that family violence and child sexual assault is an endemic problem across Australia that should be treated with the utmost concern and as a matter of real urgency.<sup>27</sup> Judy Atkinson's work has shown the widespread abuse of Aboriginal children to be a reflection of intergenerational trauma flowing from original historic traumas of

colonisation.<sup>28</sup> Aboriginal communities today face unhealed layers of trauma, vividly articulated in the high rates of homicide, suicide, mental and physical illness, child abuse (including child sexual assault), rape and domestic violence, and alcohol and drug misuse.<sup>29</sup> The ongoing effects of colonisation and the history of the Stolen Generations have also been recognised by the National Crime Prevention Programme in its report entitled *Violence in Indigenous Communities*. The report acknowledged:

The impact of personal, family and community disintegration in many Aboriginal societies, enacted by missions, statutes and regulations, and State and Commonwealth policies, is still being realised today and should not be underestimated if genuine and workable solutions to prevent violence in Indigenous communities are to be developed. What is required is treatment and 'healing' on a massive scale...<sup>30</sup>

From our experience, however, the Australian churches and governments have yet to address their own role in the systemic abuse of Stolen Generations children and their ongoing responsibility today to those victimised while under institutional 'care'.

The recent 'emergency response' to the '*Little Children Are Sacred*' Report<sup>31</sup> and the issue of child sexual abuse in the Northern Territory has been criticised by many Indigenous commentators, including Pat Dodson who has argued:

A cultural genocide agenda has been foisted on the Australian public in the context of extensive media coverage about the social collapse of Indigenous communities, centred on sexual abuse of children and rampant violence fuelled by alcohol and drugs.<sup>32</sup>

Although the '*Little Children Are Sacred*' Report identified non-Aboriginal men as perpetrators, extensive media coverage has promoted the myth that only Aboriginal men abuse children. Such a myth was rejected by the Report as dangerous and unfairly stigmatising Aboriginal people and communities.<sup>33</sup> Yet the myth is nevertheless routinely deployed in the media, rendering invisible the past and present abuse of Aboriginal children by non-Indigenous people and, by implication, excusing non-Indigenous Australia from taking any responsibility for the abuse of children that comprises the history of the Stolen Generations. In other words, whitewashing!

Pat Dodson's claim that a cultural genocide agenda is being foisted on the Australian public is supported by the way in which we are increasingly hearing from non-Indigenous commentators (including academics, judges and politicians) that Aboriginal child sexual abuse is somehow inherent to Aboriginal culture. While there is absolutely no evidence to support this claim, there is significant evidence to suggest that the widespread sexual abuse of Aboriginal children is a part of the history of cultural genocide, especially the history of the Stolen Generations. That such abuse is now endemic within our communities raises the question of whether Aboriginal child sexual assault today is a continuation of the cultural genocide in which many Indigenous people have also become perpetrators or are otherwise complicit with. This question emphasises to me the importance of decolonisation and healing based on an honest understanding and acknowledgement (and not minimisation of) the severity of child sexual assault, which is abhorrent to Indigenous culture and continues to threaten our future wellbeing.

## V Conclusion

The Australian governments, churches and Aboriginal communities all have a mutual responsibility to work towards the greater protection of Aboriginal children today. This should include recognition of the human rights violations experienced by members of the Stolen Generations, many of whom suffered abuse and trauma as children, and who are entitled to reparations, redress and healing in recognition of those violations. The Sister Kate's Home Kids has started its own journey of working towards healing for the children institutionalised at the Sister Kate's Children's Home, other members of the Stolen Generations and also Indigenous families and communities who are living with the impacts of intergenerational trauma today. The Healing Centre will work towards raising greater awareness and understanding of the harm created by the Aboriginal child removal policies, pursuing a just and healing response on behalf of the former Sister Kate's children to the issue of abuse associated with the Sister Kate's Home. The Sister Kate's Healing Centre will also seek to develop healing programs aimed at addressing intergenerational trauma and the strengthening of individuals, families and communities today.

These are our early beginnings. Thank you for listening.

## Endnotes

- \* Hannah McGlade is a founder of the Sister Kate's Home Kids, and works as a human rights lawyer and researcher.
- 1 The Sister Kate's Home Kids was launched on the steps of Western Australia's Parliament House on Sorry Day, 2004.
- 2 *Bringing Them Home Inquiry, Bringing Them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families*, Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (1997) ('*Bringing Them Home Report*').
- 3 Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, *Bringing Them Home: A Guide to the Findings and Recommendations of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families* (1997) 18.
- 4 *Ibid* 18–21.
- 5 Telethon Institute for Child Health Research, 'Pain of Forced Separation Affecting a New Generation' (Press Release, 13 April 2005).
- 6 *Ibid*.
- 7 *Bringing Them Home Inquiry*, above n 2, 115–18.
- 8 *Ibid* 115.
- 9 *Ibid* 115–16.
- 10 *Ibid* 116.
- 11 *Ibid* 116–17.
- 12 *Ibid* 117.
- 13 *Ibid* 118. According to the *Bringing Them Home Report*, Millicent and her daughter were eventually reunited: at 118.
- 14 Christine Choo, 'Sister Kate's Home for 'Nearly White' Children' in Doreen Mellow and Anna Haebich (eds), *Many Voices: Reflections on Experiences of Indigenous Child Separation* (2002) 193.
- 15 Law Commission of Canada, *Restoring Dignity: Responding to Child Abuse in Canadian Institutions* (2000).
- 16 For a summary of the Report's recommendations see Law Commission of Canada, *Restoring Dignity: Responding to Child Abuse in Canadian Institutions: Executive Summary* (2000) 12–34.
- 17 Law Commission of Canada, above n 15, 304.
- 18 Under pt 5 of the Act, the Commissioner is empowered to initiate a special inquiry into any matter affecting the wellbeing of children and young people. However, it is not clear that the issue of past abuse of children dating back several decades would fall within the ambit of pt 5.
- 19 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Report 1998*, Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (1999) 52.
- 20 Dawn Gibson, 'Salvos Settle Abuse Claims at Child Homes', *The West Australian* (Perth), 8 August 2006, 17.

- 21 Ibid.
- 22 ABC Radio National, 'Whistleblower Accuses St John of God Brothers; Canadian Anglicans and Same-sex Unions', *The Religion Report*, 27 June 2007, <<http://www.abc.net.au/rn/religionreport/stories/2007/1963032.htm>> at 20 March 2008.
- 23 The issues of inclusiveness and accountability to the actual members of the Stolen Generations are part of a broader theme later recognised by a 2000 Senate Legal and Constitutional References Committee Inquiry into the implementation of the *Bringing Them Home* Report: Senate Legal and Constitutional References Committee, Parliament of Australia, *Healing: A Legacy of Generations: Report of the Inquiry into the Federal Government's Implementation of Recommendations Made by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission in Bringing Them Home* (2000). This Inquiry reported that many programs had been put into place without the proper involvement of the members of the Stolen Generations themselves. It appeared that governments simply assumed that Aboriginal organisations represented the members of the Stolen Generations. Stolen Generations organisations told the Senate Inquiry that they had only had limited involvement in planning, discussion, access to funding and management of services: at 40–42, 52, 56, 65, 66, 68, 76. The Senate Inquiry agreed with these concerns that the actual needs of the members of the Stolen Generations were not being adequately met, that 'the funding allocated for purposes related to separated people [had] been misdirected', and recommended that an independent audit was required: at 74. It seems that a non-consultative attitude was also adopted by the Church, Aboriginal bodies and individuals in their discussions concerning Sister Kate's, for the discussions often did not represent, and in some instances excluded, the former children of the Home.
- 24 *Bringing Them Home* Inquiry, above n 2, 659.
- 25 Gregor Henderson, Assembly General Secretary, Uniting Church in Australia, 'Extract of Unconfirmed Minutes of the Eighth Assembly', 28 July 1997, <<http://nat.uca.org.au/assembly97/minutes3.htm>> at 20 March 2008, [97.22.07].
- 26 Since this speech was made, the Western Australian Government has established Redress WA, a scheme directed at providing financial and non-monetary redress to people (including members of the Stolen Generations) who were abused while in State care. See Redress WA, <<http://www.redress.wa.gov.au/>>. This scheme stands in contrast to the Canadian redress programs, which are premised upon consultation, negotiation and agreements between governments, churches and the victim-survivors of institutional child abuse.
- 27 See Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women's Taskforce on Violence, *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women's Taskforce on Violence Report* (1999); Inquiry into Response by Government Agencies to Complaints of Family Violence and Child Abuse in Aboriginal Communities, *Putting the Picture Together: Report of the Inquiry into Response by Government Agencies to Complaints of Family Violence and Child Abuse in Aboriginal Communities* (2002); Aboriginal Child Sexual Assault Taskforce, *Breaking the Silence: Creating the Future: Addressing Child Sexual Assault in Aboriginal Communities in NSW* (2006); Northern Territory Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse, *Ampe Akelyernemane Meke Mekarle: 'Little Children are Sacred': Report of the Northern Territory Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse* (2007).
- 28 Judy Atkinson, *Trauma Trails, Recreating Song Lines: The Transgenerational Effects of Trauma in Indigenous Australia* (2002).
- 29 Ibid 82.
- 30 Commonwealth Attorney-General's Department, *Violence in Indigenous Communities: Report to Crime Prevention Branch of the Attorney-General's Department*, National Crime Prevention Programme (2001) 17.
- 31 Northern Territory Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse, above n 27.
- 32 Pat Dodson, 'Whatever Happened to Reconciliation?' (extract from John Altman and Melinda Hinkson (eds), *Coercive Reconciliation: Stabilise, Normalise, Exit Aboriginal Australia* (2007)), *Crikey*, 13 September 2007, <<http://www.crikey.com.au/Politics/20070913-Pat-Dodson-whatever-happened-to-reconciliation.html>> at 20 March 2008.
- 33 Northern Territory Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse, above n 27, 57.