

## **Suffer the little children: the story of St Aidan's Orphanage and what came after.**

*"The current Child Abuse Royal Commission is aware of St Aidan's Orphanage and the allegations of abuse that occurred there from the 1950s to the 1970s." February 2014*

Spokesperson, Child Abuse Royal Commission

St Aidan's Orphanage has been seen historically as a benign, holy and bountiful presence on Bendigo's skyline.

However, its magnificent gates and imposing architecture hide a story of sexual and emotional abuse, suicide, beatings and solitary confinement.

DIANNE DEMPSEY spent three months talking to and researching the stories of nine "fallen girls" who found themselves in the care of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd

Kathleen Coughlin, a distant cousin of mine, spent her childhood and early adulthood in Bendigo's St Aidan's orphanage. As a young girl I remember her as a tiny, white haired creature who lived in her sister's house "somewhere out the back". When she heard the sound of children's voices she would painfully make her way to the dark kitchen where the only light came from the glowing wood stove. She would come in laughing and hopping on her crutches, and then gratefully lower herself onto her chair. Even as a little girl, I thought her story was beyond belief.

Cousin Kathleen and her sister Nora were first put into the orphanage when their parents were unable to care for them. That was the way of it back in the early 1920s. There was no social welfare net and the church responded to the call of the government by providing for the welfare of children who had lost a mother or a father or more rarely, both parents; economic hardship was also a frequent reason for children being put into orphanages. Often family members would step in when there was a family crisis, but when they couldn't, the good sisters of the church provided. One day in the orphanage young Kathleen became ill. Diagnosed with tuberculosis, which was a rampant at the time, she was put to bed. And there she stayed for 13 years - 13 years. Her bed was on the third floor of the orphanage, on a cold and drafty veranda. Nobody apparently thought to give her regular checkups and as the years past, she became a fixture, like a picture on a wall, a cripple confined to bed.

A doctor happened to pass her by and out of sheer curiosity he asked what was wrong with Kathleen. The Sisters of the Good Shepherd, who ran the orphanage told him she was a cripple. When the doctor examined cousin Kathleen he found nothing wrong with her; but she had been kept in the bed for so long that her legs had atrophied. She was in her late 20s and by the time she came home, on crutches.

St Aidan's is today preserved by the National Trust. Although no longer used as an orphanage it still stands on a hill imposing and majestic. Everyone in our city is aware of its architectural imprint; that alongside the Sacred Heart Cathedral, St Aidan's is one the two, medieval inspired, buildings constructed by the Catholic church. The money for both buildings came from the shrewd investments of the Rev Henry Backhaus. A pioneer priest of the goldfields, Backhaus had a knack of buying and selling - well.

At the request of Bishop Stephen Reville the Good Shepherd Sisters came to Bendigo in 1904 to set up the orphanage and care for Bendigo's needy children. It was also the first orphanage of its kind to accommodate young boys.

The sisters modeled St Aidan's on their Abbotsford convent. They set up the orphanage, a farm and orchard and more critically an industrial laundry to sustain the operation.

Also part of their charter was to protect women and girls at risk, commonly referred to as penitents. Maryfields was specifically built in 1930 to accommodate girls and women from the age of 16 upwards. These girls and women were referred to as penitents; however according to several women interviewed for this article, girls as young as 11 and 12 were also housed there.

Historically St Aidan's has been seen as a benign, holy and bountiful presence in Bendigo. It is a view confirmed by Martha (who wishes to remain anonymous). Now in her 80s, Martha told me that the sisters were good and kind women who cared for the children as best they could. When her mother had died and her father couldn't look after his children by himself, the local priest told him he had to be realistic and place the children in the orphanage.

Martha didn't know anything about the girls on "the other side" who worked in the laundry. "I think they were court girls, they had got into trouble."

She remembers the annual fete, a major fund raiser when the children were dressed up and visitors poured into the grounds. When I told Martha about my cousin Kathleen, Martha told me she remembered her. "It was one of our jobs to change her bed everyday, she was always out there on the balcony."

When the convent closed in the early 1980s the Bendigo Advertiser published an obituary of sorts for the institution saying that, "St Aidan's will long be remembered for the devoted work done there over the past 75 years."

But I could never forget Kathleen's story. Whenever I drove past the imposing building I always thought of my cousin trapped in her bed and my curiosity peaked. What else happened inside that building behind the Gothic arches?

Some of the stories I discovered sound Dickensian in nature. I interviewed several women who were sent there in the 1950s, 60s and 70s. And also refer to two published written accounts. The women say

that cruel beatings, solitary confinement, sexual abuse and emotional abuse were not unusual. Common themes emerge: sadistic nuns, long hours of domestic drudgery, scrubbing floors, a scant education and laundry work. It is a Gothic horror story, appropriate enough for the building which housed it. It is the story of an institution, which was for many years deemed beyond reproach. And it is the story of an order of nuns who turned in on themselves and for a time, lost their way.

Beverley Foster, 57, was placed in St Aidans on the 27<sup>th</sup> September 1969 and she left it on the 18<sup>th</sup> December 1972. She has written a self-published memoir, *Broken*, under the name of Sandi Gamble which is available through Amazon.com.

Now living in Queensland, Beverley has been organizing a reunion for the past three years of other women who attended the convent, many of whom also worked in the laundry.

Beverley personally told me her story when she came to Bendigo last March for their third St Aidan's reunion.

Neglected by her alcoholic mother and sexually abused by family "friends", it wasn't surprising that Beverley was naughty at school. "I had been expelled for truancy. My mother couldn't cope with me anymore so she decided to send me to St Aidan's as a boarder. I was 12 years old and I was picked up in Melbourne by Mother Rita and taken to the orphanage. I can remember the sound of her keys and doors constantly being unlocked and then locked behind me.

"Mother Rita said to me the doors were always locked to protect the good people of Bendigo from people like me.

"Even though I was a boarder, my mother paid for me, I was put in the laundry – on the other side, the bad girls' side. I slept in the Maryfields section of the convent which was supposed to be for girls 16 years and older. We were referred to as penitents, fallen girls. And we were with other older women who were mentally and physically disabled in the same dormitory. Some of these women had been in the convent for so long that they were institutionalised. They had nowhere to go, so they simply stayed. We were always frightened that we would end up like them, that we would never get out. At night time there was always crying and whimpering."

Beverley worked in the laundry before school, at lunchtime and after school, she scrubbed and polished floors on her hands and knees – for four years. She says she now suffers from problems with her knees and other women have also sustained arthritic problems because of doing such hard physical work at such a young age. It was, she said, slave labour, and far worse than that which was experienced by the girls in the notorious Irish Magdalene laundries as their Irish counterparts were generally much older.

The first day Beverley worked in the laundry she had to stand on a wooden crate and pull steaming sheets through a huge industrial steam mangle. She constantly burnt her hands but she was cheered up by another girl who told her that calluses would soon form and protect her from further pain. When she made a mistake one day Mother Rita came

up behind her and whacked her on the head with her weapon of choice, a hand broom which she kept in the folds of her habit.

"The smell of the laundry was sickening. Laundry came from hotels, hospitals, and boarding schools from across the state. We found all sorts of disgusting things amongst the linen and were expected to sort it out. As well the heat in the tin building was often over 40 degrees in summer."

Some of the girls had sisters in the orphanage section but they weren't allowed to see them.

"They didn't want us to infect the orphans or the 'Holy Angels' as they called them," Beverley said. I used to keep watch out of the laundry door and if someone's sister went by, I would stamp my foot on the floor so they could see them."

"We did our learning by correspondence. Mrs Raeburn was a baby sister rather than a teacher. We filled in these books which were sent off to some mysterious place and then returned back to us with writing on them, which we rarely understood.

"We were constantly told to repent for our sins, to cleanse ourselves. We were told we were bad and that society didn't need or want us.

When Beverley had enough of the emotional and physical abuse she ran away but terrified and alone she handed herself in – to Mother Rita. "The next morning I was told to stay in my nighty and stay by my bed. She came into the dormitory and told me to scrub the showers with my toothbrush. I did what I was told, I spent hours doing it. Then Rita came with a lackey, usually an older woman who had been in the orphanage for years. These older women just did what they were told.

"Mother Rita pointed out a little spot on a tile that couldn't be removed.

'You are 12 years old and hopeless,' she said to me. She beat me on my head and neck and back with her hand broom until I was blue with bruises. Then she turned on the cold water of the shower and left it running while I lay there crying. Finally she turned the shower off and left me there. I huddled there for hours in my wet nighty in the shower, too scared to move, freezing. She was a cruel woman," Beverley said in what can only be a masterpiece of understatement.

Not long after Beverley was in the orphanage she became ill. "I was sexually abused before I came to St Aidans," Beverley said. Mother Rita took me to the Bendigo Hospital. Mother Rita placed a chair at the end of the bed and watched while they gave me an internal examination. This was on the pretext that I needed a chaperone. But she had a good view. It turned out that I had gonorrhoea.

"When I got back to the orphanage, I was dragged along by my pony tail and she cut it off. One of the many jobs Beverley had to do was get down on her hands and knees and scrub and polish the Appian Way. Named after the legendary Roman road, the Appian Way was a cloister that connected the main buildings. "I hated that bloody Appian Way," Beverley said.

"I wasn't a ward of the state. The convent got money from the laundry, they had money from the government and money from my mother who paid for my board. But finally in the early 1970s Mother Rita was replaced by a reformist nun, Mother Katherine. She unlocked the gates and unlocked the doors. "Mother Katherine saved us," Beverley said.

"I don't know how Mother Rita could be so cruel. I heard that she was cruel to other nuns as well, and she was finally sent away in disgrace to work in a kitchen. I hope the story is true."

Mother Rita is mentioned more than once in dispatches. In an interview Maureen Cuskelly gave to the Goodweekend (December 2013) she says she was in St Aidan's in 1964 when she 12 years old and stayed there until she was 17. During Mother Rita's reign solitary confinement was common. "It was in a toilet locked from the outside. Girls came out broken-spirited. One girl wrote 'I love Elvis Presley' on her arm and went in for three days. When the girls came out they were gone."

"No one cared," Bendigo resident Michelle O'Donohue said. You cried at night, you missed your mother, but nobody cared, you were not loved." Michelle and I had arranged to meet for coffee to talk about her experience of being an "orphan" when she was sent to the Abbotsford convent as an infant and then to St Aidan's in 1972.

"My impressions of being at the Abbotsford convent are those of feeling totally overwhelmed. I was three years old and completely lost. We were all mixed up in a dormitory together. The eldest girls were 18. There were 20 children to a room and one toilet. The younger ones used to tear their sheets up in the morning if they wet the bed, they obviously didn't want to get caught.

"In the mornings there would be a fight over socks which were all kept in the one basket. I was the youngest. I could never find the elastic to hold up my socks. The little ones were lost. We were treated like sheep. No one showed us how to dress, how to eat."

Michelle looks up from her coffee. "You don't know how to do these things unless you are taught. Breakfast was a bowl of stale bread, in milk and sugar. I wouldn't eat, I'd just sit there."

"At St Aidan's I remember walking up stairs and endless corridors, the cold white marble of statues. You had to share everything. You had no private time. We were educated, fed and clothed but that was it, we were not loved.

"We were slaves. We came home from school to endless chores. Slippers were put right under our bed, so we would have to get on our knees and remember to prayer.

"I remember Sir Joan cut off a girl's hair because she couldn't find her hair tie, I can still hear the sound of the hacking.

"We were allotted to holiday hosts. I used to stay with a couple from Benalla. I remember waiting, they were late. I must have been agitated. I annoyed Sir Joan so much she slammed a glass on a bench and smashed it to pieces. I thought, 'gee I've done it now.' I always got extra chores, I was the black sheep.

"The son of the holiday host used to abuse me. You couldn't speak up in the orphanage, nobody would believe you. You always got the blank stares. They implied we know who you are, where you came from, the finger pointed at you.

"My mum ran off when I was little. She was only 18, had three children within three years and wore a calliper on her leg because she suffered from polio. Her name was Patricia Florence Evans. Dad couldn't cope. I don't think the nuns had any respect or time for families."

In her memoir, *Sins of the Mothers*, written with Amy Willesee (Pan Macmillan 2006) Donna Davis writes about her time at St Aidan's in the 1950s. There was a kind nun there, Mother Carmela, who was gentle and affectionate but Donna's bete noir was Mother Therese and one of her special torments was a cruel game of chasey in the dark.

Mother Therese waited until late at night and called for the bed wetters or other girls who had misbehaved. She would sit on a chair in the courtyard and tell them they must walk right around the entire orchard in the dark. Donna would run and stop, sweat and cry and wet her pants, again. Bed wetting was not approved of in orphanages. Donna had to stand in the courtyard in the morning with the wet sheet over her head. Donna smelled so much because of the bedwetting she had to sleep on the veranda where the wind came in through the louver windows. The same veranda cousin Kathleen slept in.

One night Donna wanted to go to the toilet but was stopped by an older girl who was in charge of the bedwetters. Before Donna could go past her she had to masturbate her.

The years pass, Donna is pubescent and gets her first period. It is an experience right up there with *Carrie*.

"One morning I wake up to find that my cold wet sheets are stained with red. There is blood and pee everywhere. I go beserk, crying and yelling, I'm dying! I'm dying!"

Mother Therese rushes up to the distressed girl and gives her a whack with her stick. She tells Donna that the bleeding is supposed to be a secret and "just the filth of the body working".

Michelle is phlegmatic about the nuns. She shrugs her shoulders. "Some were nasty, some were nice. I remember Sister Rose, she was lovely, some really did try. But I don't think any of them were very happy. Nobody was happy."

The years passed by and the outside world started to catch up with the sisters. Reforms were gradually put in place. The large children's dormitories were divided into units in an attempt to simulate smaller family environments. Reforms in child welfare continued and then the orphanage model was abandoned altogether.

Michelle said the change from the smaller dormitories to residential care was better, but not much better.

"St Luke's integrated us into families who lived in a cream brick building on the grounds. We were looked after by couples. I remember one

particular family very well. They had a son and a daughter. As well as their own income they were paid by St Luke's. They were well off.

"He was the manager of the Bendigo Pottery at the time. The two children were privileged. The girl went to Girton and the boy went to the Marist Brothers.

"I had to do breakfast, lunches and then prepare dinner when I got home. I was the cleaner as well. The mother would start bossing me around as soon as I got home from school. I used to buy her fags for her. When I got caught by her for smoking she went off.

"She said, 'You're here because nobody wants you or loves you. She reinforced my inferiority. I was in my first year at St Marys and she was nasty and cruel. I was with my two siblings and she discriminated between us, the orphans, and her own children. It was a terrible time. Her children wanted for nothing but we couldn't get a pair of new shoes.

"It was like a slap in the face every day. She made my position very clear. She was in her 30s, she verbalised my position very clearly.

Francine Callanan who went through a similar experience to Michelle says she can still remember her ward of the state number, 11467. Francine talked to me at Lake Weeroona on a fine Bendigo Autumn day. With her red hair she's as Irish as they come, and gutsy too.

Francine said that when she was first sent to Saint Aidan's in 1972, she found it so grand and imposing that she told the children at the local Catholic primary school, St Therese's, that she "lived in a castle on the hill". It was her older sister who later that day disabused her of the illusion. "We live in an orphanage, stupid, we're orphans," she said.

As Francine's grand illusion crumbled, so too did her defence against the prejudices of the children at St Therese's and of most people she met.

They despised her for her orphan status.

At St Aidan's Francine used to get hit by Sister Peter. "She was a big Amazon of a woman who walked around with a ruler all day to whack us with.

"I think back now and why would you expect these frustrated, childless women to have maternal instincts. They gave up everything in life and for a lot of them, I think we were the scapegoats for the disappointed of that sacrifice."

Like Michelle, Francine was eventually sent to a St Luke's residential house although it wasn't on the grounds of the orphanage but in Kangaroo Flat. "We went through three sets of parents. There were two sinks in the bathroom, one for us and one for the children of the parents. It was them and us. You knew your inferior status, you just sucked it up.

"The cottage system was better than St Aidan's but I was abused by one of the foster fathers," Francine said. I would listen for him every night. You were taught from a young age not to question anything. That was the way of it. That started when I was in year 7. I told my sister about it years later and she laughed. Her response was, 'Did you think you were special? He did it to all of us.' We were always vulnerable, if anyone showed us any affection, we responded to them."

A couple of days after talking to Francine I arranged to visit the convent myself. While the facade and other aspects of the convent are under National Trust protection, the convent is currently being turned into a series of privately owned, luxury units.

While the renovations are underway you can still see the interface between the old convent and the new building works. Although the convent ceilings are high, the building still seems oppressive. I found Beverley's Appian Way and imagined her on her hands and knees all those years ago.

In 2006 the separate laundry behind the convent where the penitents worked was burning. All of Bendigo was lit up that night as 45 fire fighters in seven trucks rushed to save the buildings. Cars choked St Aidan's Road as onlookers rushed to see the flames. While the laundry was burnt to the ground, the rest of the orphanage was saved.

Finally as I walked through the orphanage I found what I was looking for - the long veranda where cousin Kathleen lay in her bed for all those years. I turned away from the building and looked outwards to see the shimmering blue of the distant hills. At least she had a good view from up there.

Sadly St Aidan's appears to be no different to the other orphanages of the past century. Blinded by their faith in the church, ignorant of the harsh regimes and cruel punishments, the people of Bendigo let the children suffer.

### **What came next**

When Kathleen first came home, struggling to walk, the first thing she wanted to do was go to Melbourne on the train and visit her special friend from the orphanage. Her family thought the trip would kill her but in this matter she was determined. She went to Melbourne and had the trip of her life.

Francine said that she dropped out of school and hung out at the Mall. She was homeless for a while and slept at friends' houses. For many years she struggled with depression and worked in dead-end jobs. She eventually trained to be a teacher's aide at Bendigo Tafe. She lives with her partner in Bendigo and says of her two children, "I got my childhood back through them. Making playdough, reading and drawing together, cuddling them, giving them kisses, that's what made me happy, made me whole."

Michelle was sent out into the world to fend for herself when she was 15. "It was see you later, you're on your own now." A social worker placed her in a home in the Melbourne suburb of Jacana with a woman who Michelle greatly liked and admired.

"One day she came home and I was playing records too loud with my friends. I was playing Alice Cooper. She kicked me out. She wouldn't let me stay, although I begged and begged her. I cried so much I looked like the photo of Alice Cooper on the record cover with long black streaks of running down my face.

Michelle lived a peripatetic life working in a variety of jobs for many years. "I always knew when to leave an abusive relationship," she tells

me proudly." Settled back in Bendigo, she says she is happy and loves her life – her friends and family. Michelle currently works in retail and is doing a computer course. She has a partner and three children who she loves. In regard to her children she says, "I always do the opposite to how I was treated. I am a triumph over how I was brought up.

Beverley and her friends who came to the St Aidan's reunion earlier this year, were not so lucky. "Most of us have had problems building relationships with our own children," Beverley said. "We were never cuddled, we had no affection. We didn't know how to be good parents ourselves."

Beverley had a child when she was 16, not long after she left the orphanage. Her boyfriend kept her a prisoner in her own home, When she was in hospital with her new baby he came to the hospital and beat her up there. "The hospital staff had to keep him away," she said.

"And we were told never to speak about what happened, this stopped a lot of us from complaining about our past. I think they knew, the nuns, they knew what happened to us was wrong."

Dot Foster-Hyndeman, 57, said, "We had to find out for ourselves how to love. My sister who was in the other part of the convent committed suicide. We know quite a few girls who committed suicide. It was a loss of love. We just had to feel our way through life. We had no life skills. We had no idea of how to get on a bus or apply for a job.

"Most of us still suffer from clinical depression. Our childhood still upsets all of us.

Cheryl, 56, who wishes to remain anonymous, said that when the orphanage was shut the girls tried to keep in touch with each other. "We had no other family. But we have each other today."

That is their consolation, that they have each other, their unique allegiance - their sisterhood of pain.

## The Women of Maryfields

*When St Aidan's finally shut its doors in 1984 there 25 women left in the Maryfields centre. They were in their 40's to 60's and had been at St Aidan's since they were infants or young children.*

Nine of the Maryfields women were considered to be able to live independently. Sixteen others were recognised as needing some intensive support and supervision. The Sisters of Good Shepherd provided support to enable the women to adapt to their new lifestyle in a secure way. They gave this new activity the name of the Maryfields Centre, according to

Paul Fogarty, the Director of CentaCare 1999–2013 and Chair of Maryfields – 1999-2006.

CentaCare took over the work of Maryfields in 1988 and became responsible through a committee of management for the supportive welfare and care of sixteen women who were previously cared for by the Sisters of the Good Shepherd in Group Homes in Bendigo. At this time funding was also secured from the Department of Human services to employ a support worker to co-ordinate the care needed for the ladies.

Prior to this time, the women had few decisions to make in St Aidan's. The sisters had ensured they received a basic schooling, but after this, many had jobs in the laundry and in the kitchen. A few were given jobs outside St Aidan's. All had been institutionalized to the detriment of their relationships with the broader community and their own independent capacities. Seldom were there discussions held by them later in life about their experiences within institutional living.

According to Monsignor Frank Marriot several of the women were extremely holy, having modelled their life on that of the sisters.

The Maryfields Ladies were accommodated in homes or units within the Catholic Parish boundaries of Kennington. Some members of St Therese's Catholic Parish Kennington became the ongoing members of the Maryfields board of management and each had a personal interest in the ladies and a deep sense of ministry for the wellbeing of the ladies.

Mr Fogarty said that the lives of the women touched many who knew them." All they wanted was to be accepted individually as themselves. Without awareness they taught other people about compassion, patience and generosity," he said.

The last of the Maryfields women died in 2013.

(The full copy of Mr Fogarty's report can be found in our online edition.

## **Breakout**

In all there were eight Magdalene laundries in Australia, all run by the Sisters of the Good Shepherd. The 2004 Senate report, *Forgotten Australians*, described the laundries as prisons for girls forced into labour with poor living conditions and scant education.

The report states that exploitation of children as 'slave labour' a term used in many submissions, often at a very young age, was a common means to gain income for the institution. This included working in commercial laundries, on farm plots or in other ventures that would create income for the institution.

In 2009 the report led to a national apology from the prime minister Kevin Rudd and opposition leader Malcolm Turnbull.

The report said that abuse and assault was widespread across institutions, across states and across the government, religious and other care providers.

But the overwhelming response as to treatment in care, even among those that made positive comments was the lack of love, affection and nurturing that was never provided to young children at critical times during their emotional development.

The report goes on to say that it is even more distressing that the Committee and other contemporary inquiries have received many reports that abuse is still occurring among Australia's out-of-home care children. As such, a need exists for a national approach to further raise community awareness of child abuse and garner support for an effective campaign against child abuse, irrespective of when or where it has occurred

### **So what's changed?**

*"As a community, we still cannot say that we're taking proper care of children in out of home care."*

*Gregory Nicolau*

*CEO/Consultant psychologist for the Australian Childhood Trauma Group*

A counsellor and a former resident of Allambi's Children's Home in the 1970s, Evelyn Chittleborough said that in another 20 years she didn't want to see another Royal Commission and another apology made to the victims of government policy. "There still isn't an answer to how we care for children in out of home care," she said.

For years the government passed this responsibility onto the religious orders and then they failed to audit those organizations to see how the children were being cared for."

This view is in part supported by one of Australia's leading experts in childhood trauma, Gregory Nicolau who says we have not made a lot of progress since the Forgotten Australians senate report of 2004. He added that recommendations from inquiries are often not followed through. But he says it's too easy to blame governments.

"Certainly Royal Commissions put the issue of abuse in out of home care on the front pages but you don't see a lot of community concern for what happens to children. I'm hoping the current government and the community as well will stand up and say we have to get it right this time. "It is true that there are simply not enough resources to go around but if society continues to buy the line that we should individually pay less taxes, then those children who are vulnerable through no fault of their own will continue to suffer.

"It is still not uncommon to see run down residential units across Australia," Mr Nicolau said. "Things are broken, nobody cares. The residential carer may take the view that if the children have broken furniture they just have to live with it. These photos of residences reflect depressing and unsafe environments. As well some children are in foster homes where the care is not optimum.

"Having said that there are some heroic people working in group homes, residential units and as foster parents."

Nicolau says the essence to understanding how to best care for children lies in understanding the impact of childhood trauma and attachment disruptions.

"At times I feel desperate that the community does not understand the impact of separation trauma on children," Mr Nicolau says. There is plenty of research out here that tells us that children suffer psychological, physiological, emotional and spiritual damage when they experience separation from their parents, even as babies. This trauma is compounded when they then witness family disruptions such as domestic violence.

"The brain itself suffers physiological and neurological damage. A baby relies on own actions to get attention, to be fed and held, it cries. In older children and adults if that stress is not resolved, it becomes toxic. The brain goes into survival mode. The imperative for a young person is safety and if they don't feel safe, they will act out or become disruptive. Children show their wounds through emotional behavior. They are saying I'm scared.

"Carers need to respond by regulating the child's emotional state and strengthen connections. When kids become disruptive they need to put water on the fire rather than fuel the fire

Mr Nicolau says that he has worked with out of home care agencies for over 20 years and time and time again he sees staff given blunt tools to do microsurgery.

"These traumatized children need people who are highly qualified experts. This means that a lot of money has to be spent, and if that's the case then so be it. I often use the analogy that you wouldn't put a nurse with a Cert IV qualification into an ICU unit. And if I were to continue the analogy of nursing with the development of out of home care, then the starting date would be about 1910. We are still in the dark ages as far treating traumatised children is concerned.

"The children's wounds may be internal but they are still there."

"Sometimes I lose hope. But I keep going," Mr Nicolau says. And he urges people who come across traumatized children to listen to them.

"You might be the one who makes the change," he says.

## **Out of home care for young people in Bendigo today**

The Department of Human Services, for the most part, gives St Luke's Anglicare the responsibility of providing supported residential care for young people.

St Luke's offers six residential units for young people between 12 and 17 years of age. Each unit has a team leader and rostered staff who provide 24-hour care. The units support up to 14 young people at any one time. This effectively means that each house will support two to three children.

One of these units is a therapeutic residential care unit which includes education programs and the capacity for additional, high level case management

However the following observations were made by a St Luke's worker who wishes to remain anonymous.

"The ideal situation in a house is considered to be two children but we constantly have four young people to a house.

"While there is a 24 hour roster, carers sleep overnight. This is the time when children are most vulnerable. They will display trauma systems, eg bed wetting and nightmares and they will be at the mercy of other dominant children who may physically or sexually abuse them.

"Food is generally kept locked in cupboards."

"Residential units in Bendigo are currently underfunded and understaffed by under-qualified people.

"There is a lot of bullying, harassment and sexual abuse of children by children.

"Residences are often damaged by the children."

"Workers usually have minimum qualifications and some of them are lazy.

"Staff are trained to work in a crisis, for example they call the police if the children are violent, but they are not trained to work with traumatised children in a therapeutic manner. Nor do they have the resources to work in a therapeutic manner.

"Children who refuse to go to school simply stay home.

"There are some workers, who despite the odds, are doing their best for the children."

Get a response from St Lukes?)

### Referrals

Women who have attended the Good Shepherd convents and wish to reach out to other women in the same situation can contact Beverley Foster:

[sandi.gamble@bigpond.com](mailto:sandi.gamble@bigpond.com)

Other contacts

Connect

CLAN

Link Up Australia

Open Place

~~For people who wish to make submissions or who are seeking further resources there is also a variety of links available on the Royal Commission website  
childabuseroyalcommission.gov.au~~