

Royal Commission into Family Violence

To the members of the Royal Commission into Family Violence,

Thank you for allowing us to present a submission to this Royal Commission. We believe that a Royal Commission into this area is both imperative and long overdue and we thank you for seeking the views of the community on an issue that is having a horrible impact on the lives of so many Australians and Victorians.

This Royal Commission was brought to our attention by the Honourable Fiona Richardson MP, Minister for Women and Minister for the Prevention into Family Violence.

We are two down to earth, honest, hard - working Australians who we believe have the expertise to offer strong recommendations into the reform, strategies, policies and programs that need to be instituted if we are to reduce the rates of Family Violence in Victoria.

Family Violence is destroying the very fabric of our society. The Victorian motto that guides our principles is 'peace and prosperity' and while the alarming rates of family violence continue to plague our state then we certainly are not adhering to these principles. Family Violence and a lack of freedom is something that we have long associated with other countries and other cultures. It is an issue that has been swept under the rug for many years. A problem that we have ignored but it is real, very real and it is happening every day, every hour in our very own state. We need to act and we need to act now before this crippling life destroying, problem becomes unstoppable.

Our names are Sean and Vanessa Simpson and we are the Founders of Phoenix Foundation. We created Phoenix Foundation to raise awareness, funds and provide education programs with the over – riding goal of reducing the rates of domestic violence. We believe we have the expertise to put forward a solution from a number of different angles. Firstly and most importantly Vanessa is a survivor of the most severe domestic violence. She understands family violence from a perspective that many of us cannot. Her experiences with domestic and family violence lasted many years and included extreme physical beatings till she was put in hospital, severe emotional bullying, social

exclusion, stalking, and many other forms of family violence. She understands family violence. She has lived it. She has survived it.

Sean is a teacher and as held many senior position including Acting Principal, Deputy Principal, Director of Learning and Teaching and is currently Head of MacKillop House at Loyola College. He has worked for many years at both Primary and Secondary level.

Sean has a strong understanding of policy development and the strategies it will take to reduce domestic violence in our state. He also has an extensive knowledge of both primary and secondary school students and this is crucial if we are to change the attitudes towards family violence of the young men and women of Victoria.

Both of us have read extensively about Family Violence and have an understanding of all aspects related to it. Through our Foundation we have heard the stories of many victims and survivors and we also have a knowledge of the issues that many cultures face with Family Violence. We work closely with our great friend the respected Indigenous elder Miriam Rose- Baumann and the Nauiyu Community and are aware of the appalling rates of domestic violence that are taking place in these communities. We are taking action to support these communities.

The other important aspect of our Foundation is that we have inspired a generation of younger people through our education talks about Family Violence. Many of these Year 12 students were so inspired that they are now the Young Ambassadors for Phoenix Foundation and are supporting us to spread the word about Family Violence.

We believe we can offer incredible insight into this Royal Commission as we come from the perspective of the following:

- A victim
- A survivor
- Those currently experiencing Domestic Violence
- Education
- Indigenous Community
- Cultural Perspective's
- Younger Generation

We would love the opportunity to discuss our submission in person with the Commission and hope that our insights, recommendations and suggestions can offer valuable input so that Family Violence can be reduced and eliminated in our society.

Vanessa and Sean Simpson

Question One

Are there other goals the Royal Commission should consider?

We believe the Royal Commission has set both achievable and relevant goals that if achieved will help eradicate the horrors of family violence in our society. We believe that there should be a goal about incorporating a program into secondary schools that will empower women not to accept domestic violence and empower men not to act in a violent way. We have had such success with our own program that we believe this is imperative.

Question Two

The Royal Commission wants to hear about the extent to which recent reforms and developments have improved responses to family violence, and where they need to be expanded or altered.

To be brutally honest recent reforms have changed absolutely nothing. Family Violence statistics have not decreased. As many women, men and children are being bashed, emotionally tortured, financially controlled, physically beaten, stalked and more women than ever are being killed. At the moment there seems to be lots of talk but the action is not working. Yes there is far greater awareness, yes the media is talking about it a lot, yes there is more exposure, yes more people are reporting but no the violence is not stopping. There are so many groups out there doing good things but the response is not coordinated. Ask the families of those murdered as a result of Family Violence in 2015 if they think the response is working. It is not. Our society is becoming more violent and attitudes to women are not changing. The victim is still seen in many cases as being at fault. We need to target the younger generation. We need to change the attitudes of men and this can only happen with a targeted approach to education. We need to target schools. We need to target sports clubs, football teams, pubs, clubs, golf clubs etc. We need to target 14-18 year old males. We need to make example of the good role models. We need to not accept this behaviour any more. We need to stop making excuses. We need to stop using drugs, alcohol and mental illness as an excuse. We need to stop blaming victims. We need to start again.

Question Three

Which of the reforms to the family violence system introduced in the last ten years do you consider most effective? Why? How could they be improved?

The recent increase in media exposure and awareness is making the public more aware but unfortunately awareness is not transferring in to a change of perceptions or attitudes. We realise this takes time but nothing is working. Our country needs to work as one to approach this evil. There needs to be a coordinated approach. Nothing has worked yet. Let's be honest, women are dying every day. It is not working. There needs to be a complete overhaul. We need to cut our losses and start a completely new strategic campaign.

Question Four

If you or your organisation have been involved in programs, campaigns or initiatives about family violence for the general community, tell us what these involved and how they have been evaluated.

Two aspects of our Foundation are beginning to show success. The first being our education programs which while only in the early stages have had incredible success. The students in Year 11 and 12 have been so inspired that many of them who have now moved beyond Year 12 have taken up the fight with us. They are our young ambassadors. We commence our program with a powerful power - point, look at the issues of domestic violence, statistics, causes, problems. Vanessa who is the most inspiring and courageous woman I have ever met allows her story to be shared, we look at the early signs in teen dating and issues associated with relationships, we look at positive relationships, we look at support networks and model what makes a relationship work. The feedback has been outstanding. The students are both engaged and captivated and are motivated to take immediate action. It is incredible one year on that so many of them are actively involved off their own backs. They themselves are inspiring the next generation. Feedback includes

'This was the most inspiring lesson I have had in 13 years of schooling. I have never been so moved or inspired to take action like this. I walked out wanting to inspire others, wanting to improve my own relationship, knowing what I had to do. Every day people are everyday heroes. You don't need to be famous, Vanessa and Sean touched my heart. I will never ever accept violence and I will always spread the message. These two people have changed the lives of our generation'

18 Year Old Female- Now a Phoenix Foundation Young Ambassador

'I know now I was making mistakes. Not treating my girl right. I wasn't physically violent but I excluded her friends, held her phone and didn't let her out without me. This is where it begins. Vanessa and Sean showed me what a positive relationship is, how I should respect my girlfriend. Violence of any sort is not to be tolerated. I have never worked away feeling so empowered.

18 Year Old Male

These programs need to be developed, extended, put into curriculum. They are working. We have another 400 feedback sheets that offer the same powerful insights. The other aspect of our Foundation that is working is the relationships we are developing with our Indigenous. Rates as high as 90 percent. We are failing badly here and would love the chance to discuss our plan for Indigenous Australians further.

Question Nine

Does insufficient integration and co-ordination between the various bodies who come into contact with people affected by family violence hinder the assessment of risk, or the effectiveness of (early intervention, crisis and ongoing) support provided, to people affected by family violence? If so, please provide examples.

Question Ten

What practical changes might improve integration and co-ordination? What barriers to integration and co-ordination exist?

Again we will be very frank here. There is no coordination, there is no sharing. Too many groups are in it for themselves. For their own glory. Even awareness groups don't support each other. We need to coordinate a world domestic violence day and week. So many groups have their own day, their own month. We have coordinated a successful world day for another cause where each year the world comes together as one. This has had enormous success. The world uniting as one. Not 50 different groups having their own day for their own self – gratification. Some of the bigger groups should be ashamed of what they are doing and why they are doing it. Some groups and bodies are amazing.

We have only answered questions relevant to us so as to not waste your time but we would love the chance to discuss the following further

- *Education Programs*
- *Indigenous Approach*
- *A united Australian and world approach to awareness. It can be done.*
- *The formation of a world alliance to approach awareness. We have done this with another cause with great success. The united approach and the ideas shared were amazing. It led to global reports through the World Health Organisation and had impact on the reduction of statistics. The world alliance of key groups and countries will work and we have the proven capacity to set it up.*

We may just be two humble Australians but we are making a difference and can make a bigger difference. There is so much we want to discuss with the Royal Commission and we believe their so much we can add to your recommendations. So much we want to show you. Domestic Violence does not discriminate. It is unfortunately embedded in all parts of our society. It's time to work together to change this and we know the programs we are developing are working. Give two Australians who give their life to reducing Family Violence a chance to show you our plans and ideas in detail.

We thank you so much for your time and appreciate all you are doing. This Commission can improve the quality of living for millions of Victorians.

Vanessa and Sean Simpson

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