

14th May 2015

Dear Sir/Madam,

I feel that my family's story and reflections may provide some useful insights. I hope that these reflections can support the work of The Royal Commission into Family Violence.

Some Basic Details About My Family's Experience.

- ❖ I was born in [REDACTED] in [REDACTED]
- ❖ I am the eldest of [REDACTED] children. I have a sister who was born in [REDACTED], a brother born in [REDACTED], another brother born in [REDACTED] and a younger sister born in [REDACTED].
- ❖ Our parents married in [REDACTED] after a [REDACTED] year problematic courtship.
- ❖ At the time of their marriage my parents were age [REDACTED] years (Dad) and [REDACTED] years (Mum).
- ❖ Both of our parents were from a [REDACTED] background. Predominantly ethnically [REDACTED].
- ❖ My father completed only very limited primary schooling at his local small rural state school.
- ❖ My father was functionally illiterate.
- ❖ My mother completed early secondary school education in the [REDACTED] school system.
- ❖ Both of our parents grew up on [REDACTED]
- ❖ Dad's parents had a problematic relationship in which a lack of mutual respect and abusive behaviour often impacted upon their lives.
- ❖ Dad had [REDACTED].
- ❖ Mum had [REDACTED].
- ❖ Mum's father, despite having a serious chronic health condition, died unexpectedly when Mum was aged [REDACTED] years. Her youngest sister was aged [REDACTED] years at the time.
- ❖ Dad's mother was more than [REDACTED] years his father's senior.
- ❖ Dad's mother had basic reading and writing skills despite very limited educational opportunities. Dad's father had no functional reading and writing skills.
- ❖ Mum's parents enjoyed a happy relationship free from abusive behaviour.
- ❖ Mum's family were characteristically more socially progressive and ready to consider new ideas.
- ❖ Dad's parents were fearful of outside ideas and values.
- ❖ My three [REDACTED] siblings live with [REDACTED] disabilities, primarily due to [REDACTED]

- ❖ My other sister is the mother of [REDACTED] aged [REDACTED] years. These [REDACTED] live with and are solely cared for by my sister's ex husband who is their father. The sole carer role has fallen to the [REDACTED] father due to my sister's significant [REDACTED]
- ❖ Despite the end of the marital relationship also continues to provide care and support for the mother of his [REDACTED] (my sister).
- ❖ My [REDACTED] sister doesn't usually communicate directly with other family members except her ex husband and her [REDACTED]
- ❖ My [REDACTED] sister has behaved both physically and verbally abusively towards her ex husband (including in the presence of their [REDACTED]) on multiple occasions.
- ❖ My [REDACTED] sister has also attempted to defraud family members.
- ❖ My [REDACTED] sister has not usually behaved violently towards her children, however on occasion she blackened the eye of her youngest [REDACTED] then aged [REDACTED] years.
- ❖ Until [REDACTED] my parents and siblings lived in rented [REDACTED] (very run down, not always with drinkable running water or conventional sanitation).
- ❖ In [REDACTED] my parents moved to their own [REDACTED] with a very small two bedroom house outside of [REDACTED]
- ❖ I lived with Dad's parents for [REDACTED] years (the first [REDACTED] years of my primary schooling). During this time I had extremely limited access to my mother or my siblings.
- ❖ Dad's relationship with his in-laws was always problematic.
- ❖ We attended a series of small rural schools in the district. These were often single teacher schools.
- ❖ In [REDACTED] the school which we were attending was largely burnt down in the [REDACTED] fires of that year. The fires also burnt the [REDACTED]
- ❖ Our parents and youngest brother were missing at one stage on the day of the fire. Myself and my other two siblings were told by my teacher that our three missing family members were dead. This fortunately was incorrect.
- ❖ In [REDACTED] Mum (with her five children) left Dad. My youngest sister was recovering from surgery.
- ❖ We stayed with Mum's mother, and her youngest daughter also still lived with her, for a few weeks.
- ❖ Mum rented a private rental home in [REDACTED] later that year.
- ❖ Our parents divorced in [REDACTED]
- ❖ Later in [REDACTED] my mother bought a small house in [REDACTED]
- ❖ My mother is still the carer for my three youngest siblings. She also lives with a physical disability acquired in [REDACTED]. Their household is primarily dependant on Centrelink benefits.
- ❖ My mum receives only very limited social/family support.
- ❖ My father died in [REDACTED]. He was estranged from all primary relatives.

- ❖ Dad's primary employment was as an assistant [REDACTED]. He supplemented this by [REDACTED].
- ❖ Prior to their separation Mum's employment had been limited to [REDACTED].
- ❖ From [REDACTED] onwards Mum's activities were limited to [REDACTED] and homemaking duties including caring for her growing family.
- ❖ Dad saw himself as the boss/owner. Dad believed, and acted as though, all family members were under his authority/control/ownership.
- ❖ Dad slept with three loaded guns under his bed. This bed he shared with Mum. The guns were always kept loaded.
- ❖ Life was characterised by constant threats. Sometimes these threats were thinly veiled or implied, but always close to the surface.
- ❖ When I was [REDACTED] years old on several occasions Dad threatened to burn the house. He said he planned to do so as we all slept.
- ❖ Dad threatened Mum and other family members with guns.
- ❖ Dad controlled all the family's money including child related social security payments. Dad did all the family's shopping.
- ❖ We never felt safe when Dad was at home. We used to dread his return from work or elsewhere.
- ❖ We never had a telephone in the house and mail was not delivered to the house. All phone messages and mail was delivered or not delivered by Dad.
- ❖ Dad collected the mail and any messages (usually very limited) from his parent's home several times a week.
- ❖ We lived a minimum of [REDACTED] minutes walk to our nearest neighbours.
- ❖ Access to day to day supplies varied hugely. This was more inconsistent as the years went on.
- ❖ Dad controlled all access to health care, including disability related intervention services.
- ❖ Dad was consistently physically and verbally abusive towards Mum and us children.
- ❖ Outbursts of abuse were often triggered by very remotely related triggers.
- ❖ Dad attempted to control what media contact we were able to access. For example if Mum was caught listening to AFL football broadcasts on the radio she would be physically assaulted.
- ❖ Dad sexually assaulted family members and I have been told other people as well.
- ❖ Dad sexually abused my eldest sister. She became pregnant as result of this abuse. A local General Practitioner, trusted by Dad, terminated this pregnancy (possibly quite late into the pregnancy). My sister's consent was not sought or considered by Dad.
- ❖ Dad often particularly targeted Mum whilst she was pregnant.
- ❖ Family planning was forbidden by Dad on religious grounds. Despite this Mum's pregnancies triggered expressions of anger and anxiety from Dad.

- ❖ Dad would often cite Church teaching to justify mistreatment of family members or other people. These views were often not conventional [REDACTED] teachings or had added aspects to conventional church teaching.
- ❖ Dad generally praised himself and continually put everyone else down.
- ❖ Dad and his parents had no meaningful understanding of disability. Issues related to disability, illness or injury would often trigger physical abuse and always triggered verbal abuse.
- ❖ We lived with a sense that we were closely watched.
- ❖ People known to Dad would report to him what he and they claimed to have observed.
- ❖ Dad would often return home from work and say something like, "Why was the washing not on the line before 10am".
- ❖ Some people supported Dad's observation as they passed [REDACTED], out of fear of him or to support their perceptions of the church's control or just simple to cause trouble.
- ❖ Dad's Aunt, who lived nearby often made up observations to trigger Dad to abuse Mum or other family members including his own Mother (her sister in law).
- ❖ Dad always owned multiple poorly maintained cars. Mum was always restricted to only doing the school run. Mum had to take a specific route (not always the most direct route). Mum was never allowed to park the car where other parents parked.
- ❖ Dad's close observations of the car and the presence of people keen and willing to report Mum's movements limited her driving to Dad's set limited.
- ❖ Dad measured all fuel which went into the car Mum was allowed to drive.
- ❖ Dad always drank alcohol heavily. For example he often drank four litres of wine in a sitting.
- ❖ Dad often drove extremely unsafely under the influence of his drinking, putting himself, family members and the community at risk.
- ❖ Dad always spoke of the alcohol not affecting him. Dad was extremely judgemental about other people being drunk.
- ❖ Dad's drinking would often trigger especially intense abusive behaviour.
- ❖ Dad would put down his family in the presence of others including at the few social occasions we attended. For example: "My wife is useless in bed." "They are all useless, stupid, worthless and a burden". "I would be better off raising cats".
- ❖ Dad enjoyed damaging household items. This would be a "justification" to abuse a family member.
- ❖ Dad came, with guns and made threats, to my grandmother's house and in turn both the houses in [REDACTED] to which we had moved after my mother left him.
- ❖ Dad also came to our school armed and made threats towards staff.
- ❖ We also received threatening and abusive phone calls even after Mum obtained a series of silent numbers.
- ❖ Dad frequently expressed his desire to control his wife and children's lives.

- ❖ Dad wanted to significantly limit his children's educational and employment opportunities.
- ❖ Dad also often said he expected to have sexual access to his son's future partners. "I will father my own grandchildren."
- ❖ We also experienced Dad's joy and pleasure in harming animals. This involved general cruelty, performing terminations on pregnant cows and bestiality

Things which Helped Our Family to Leave/Escape and to Get on with Rebuilding Our Lives

- ❖ Access to payphone in a nearby [REDACTED] There was nevertheless very high risk in accessing this means of communication.
- ❖ Somewhere to run to (in our case my maternal grandmother's house).
- ❖ Some reasonably limited support from St Vincent de Paul Society. For example, we received bond money for rental accommodation, some school uniform items to start at a new school.
- ❖ The occasional little bit of understanding and slack at school.
- ❖ My youngest brother being accepted at the local [REDACTED] Primary School. This was after the local State School in [REDACTED] had refused to enrol him due to his level of disability.
- ❖ The kindness of strangers. (The local [REDACTED] Church minister and some church members were very supportive and affirming.)
- ❖ Extended family support (sometimes problematic).
- ❖ Mum's faith in own capacity (this took some time to recover).
- ❖ Access to quality State education.
- ❖ Social security payments and related advice.
- ❖ Social Worker support mostly from the local centre against sexual assault.
- ❖ The passing of time.
- ❖ Relatively reasonably affordable housing.
- ❖ Mum's familiarity with the area.
- ❖ Access to disability services (sometimes problematic).
- ❖ New friends who helped us to move to the house which Mum bought in [REDACTED]

Barriers

- ❖ Our family's religious beliefs. Mum was the first person in her family to leave her husband and to get divorced.
- ❖ Some family members and one very loud [REDACTED] were extremely judgemental.
- ❖ Mum's family had no real understanding of the concept of trauma, risk or that others life experience may be significantly from their own.

- ❖ Some of Mum's family didn't identify any risk to themselves or their children even when Dad was pointing a gun at them and making threats.
- ❖ Negative reactions or reactions which lacked insight from family members and the staff at school when prompted about immediate risks to their safety. For example: "Don't tell me not to go into an office (where Dad was armed and making threats). You're just a student here and I'm a senior teacher."
- ❖ Limited material emergency assistance. More bedding would have been very helpful for example.
- ❖ Inappropriate material assistance. Food which was unfit to be eaten and items which were broken or badly worn out for example.
- ❖ The local [REDACTED] parish was not very supportive in the early years. We heard for example remarks such as: "You're not part of the parish". and "You don't go to the Regional [REDACTED] College".
- ❖ Not really being able to afford the fees for my younger brother at the [REDACTED] primary school.
- ❖ Living in the same immediate area meant that Dad still had ready access to the family up until his death. Dad's last interaction with a family member was when he verbally abused one of my brothers in [REDACTED] because he (my brother) was wearing [REDACTED] Dad claimed he objected to [REDACTED] on religious grounds.
- ❖ Pressure to keep Dad in our lives. Dad spoke of having been diagnosed with antisocial personality disorder. He claimed that he had never ever done anything wrong in his whole life. Dad was always very keen to list the failings of others.

Things Which Would Potentially Have Been Helpful.

- ✚ Police being consistent in seeing the role as being to protect the people being threatened and or harmed. It certainly is not their role to vocalise their personal views about the role of women.
- ✚ Education for extended family. Traumatized people should not have to be responsible to educate others.
- ✚ More responsive disability services. Access to a wheelchair would have been helpful at one stage. Mum was told for example, "She's your child. You're a big woman you can carry her".
- ✚ The local [REDACTED] primary school to waive fees for a term or two.
- ✚ Access to meaningful family therapy to help unlearn some of the now unhelpful behaviours which we once needed to survive.
- ✚ More age appropriate responsive mental health services.
- ✚ More advocacy on behalf of survivors of domestic violence and sexual abuse.
- ✚ More material help. (We left with a car boot load of belongings for six people including three people living with disability.)

- ✚ Access to a car and items from our previous home. Dad via his lawyers blocked this.
- ✚ Access to rural space. We were [REDACTED].
- ✚ Structural support relating to rebuilding our lives including career guidance, advocacy to access resources, driving lessons.
- ✚ Free access to a silent number.
- ✚ More confidentiality. On occasions some service providers were also Dads drinking buddies.
- ✚ Greater awareness and compassion relating to domestic violence in the local [REDACTED] community.
- ✚ Support to maintain relationships with other family members such as Dad's older sister and her children.
- ✚ Awareness amongst service providers that the impact of domestic violence is something you live with all your life.
- ✚ Better and more accessible legal support and advice. The system is very biased against the victim.
- ✚ Court ordered child support payments to be collected fairly and at a fair level.
- ✚ Child support payments should be extended so that children can finish their education and or so that disability support needs can be met.
- ✚ Fairer financial settlements in the divorce courts. Make it harder to hid assets and money.
- ✚ Restriction on Wills to ensure that abusive parents must make provisions for their children with disability or significant mental health concerns.

In Summary.

As a family we have survived, but at some personal costs. It is hard to make your way forward. We found many barriers to building a life where we felt safe and could take advantage of some of life's opportunities.

Attitudes towards domestic violence need to change across society. Bias against victims needs to be consistently addressed and must stop.

Yours Sincerely

[REDACTED]