Cover illustration by Pilgrim International.
All other illustrations are authentic children's contributions.

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Kids Speak Out: What it's like being a State Ward

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Kids Speak Out: What it's like being a State Ward

"No one knows what we are going through. No one knows how we feel living in a home."

The Mission of St. James and St. John administers eleven family group homes within the Melbourne metropolitan area, catering for young people in long-term residential care.

As well, the Mission operates a wide range of other welfare services directed towards the needs of children, adolescents and whole families. In excess of 600 families were helped in the past year through counselling, support services, residential crisis care and fostering programs.

Twenty-six children were interviewed from ten of the eleven family group homes to ascertain their opinions, Sue, a girl who has left the Mission's care, was also interviewed.

With the exception of Sue, the identities of all the young people, as well as those of past and present staff, have been protected by deleting names and identifying situations from the text.

In short, this booklet attempts to illustrate the lives of children in the Mission's care. It is written by well qualified people — the children themselves.

COMING INTO CARE

Young people come into care for many reasons: parental separation; for care and protection; abuse by a parent.

During the interviews, many children talked about why they had come into care and their feelings at the time.

* * *

I think I came here because my mother wasn't able to cope. Having three children was just too many, with all the stresses and not getting a job.

* * *

When I was two my Mum nicked-off: she went away from my Dad. After that my Dad was working all the time, and my brother had to look after me. . . . Like at the time we were getting into trouble and never going to school.

* * *

My Dad used to hit my mother a lot, so Mum ran away and left us. Dad said he couldn't look after us, and so he put us in a home while he was going to work. He said he didn't know what else to do.

* * *

I had family problems with my Mum. She couldn't handle me, so she put me in a home.

* * *

I went to court and then they just made me a ward of the state. I just cracked up. I didn't know what to do: I was only ten.

* * *

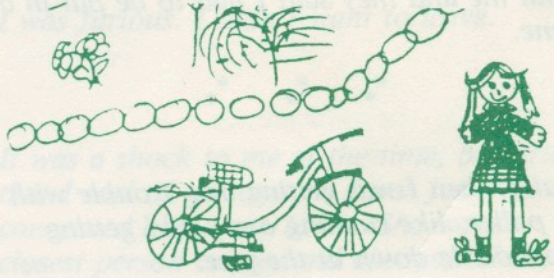
My step-father used to hit me a lot, on the back and that. I had scars, and I was in hospital for three or four months, or six months or something. I wanted to go back to Mum, but he hit me again if I did a little thing wrong.

* * *

We don't know. We have lots of theories. Either Dad was drunk; either Dad did something Mum didn't like, or something like that. So we don't know.

* * *

Dad doesn't even really want to know her now, because he said he really didn't like her walking out and leaving him with us all. He didn't have a clue what to do. Like, I was still only a baby. She knew what to do with me when I would start crying, and all that. He'd get really uptight with us — sick of us.



Me and my bike before school.

My Mum was a drug addict, and I couldn't live with her anymore. She would probably have had a heart attack every ten minutes because I was doing stupid things and she would be worrying too much. Dad didn't care a stuff about me. So they split up, and I've got no home to go back to, really.

* * *

What I was told is that I had family problems and that I couldn't get on with anyone in the family. Every now and then I got on with Dad, and then I got on with Mum. Just at certain times I got on with certain people.

* * *

Mum and Dad weren't looking after us properly. They were giving us food, but not all that much.

* * *

Mum and Dad maybe couldn't control me. I just kept taking off. . . . They just gave up and called the coppers out. The coppers couldn't find me. They went to a meeting about me and they said I had to be put in a home.

* * *

That's when I was getting into trouble with the police, like running away and getting into trouble down at the pier.

* * *

I don't want to talk about my past. I don't really want to. The thing is, I don't really want to remember it. Like, to me it is pretty bad. . . . When I first left home, I didn't want to leave. I was down holding my Mum's bloody leg, and that's the truth. No way I was going to leave. No way in the world.

* * *

Dad just didn't want us.

* * *

I remember when they came back from the meeting and said that I'd have to start packing a few things. I thought, "Oh yeah, great stuff, I'm shifting. See you later Mum and Dad, I've had enough." Went to the home, mate, and had a ball. Better than sitting at home, getting into trouble all the time.

* * *

I just got thrown into the home. I don't know what I did wrong.

* * *

I was furious. I didn't want to leave.

* * *

It was a shock to me at the time, but after that I sort of got over it. I was just concerned about my Mum. She was the closest person to me, and always will be, so it was a shock.

It was all weird, because now when I think back and talk to other people about it, I sometimes cry about it. I can't help it. I don't know why I'm crying, and it is really weird thinking about it and how it happened.

PAST LIFE IN CARE

Many children had lived in reception centres and other family group and children's homes before coming into their present situation. One issue that developed during the discussions was the insecurity experienced by many people who had constantly moved from place to place. Another was the size of the home or reception centre.

* * *

First, we lived at Mum and Dad's, then we lived at — — —. Next, we shifted to — — —, then after that we went to — — —. We stayed there for a little while, then after that we came to this house. After that sometimes, we used to go and visit Mum and Dad.

* * *

I've been at three different places.

* * *

I've been all different places.
How many can you remember?
Six.
In how long a period?
About three years.

* * *

I had to go into a home, and then another one, then another one, then another one.

* * *

I hate it. All the homes I've been in. Had to shift all the time. It gives me the creeps.

* * *

There's four, but I've been in and out of them. This is my fifth place now.

* * *

I didn't like shifting, either. When we shifted away from my parent's place, I wanted to go back. When we were shifted from my Mum's place, first we went to — — —, then went to — — —, then we went back to — — —. We were sort of moved back and forth. I found it really annoying. Why can't we stay in one place, instead of moving?

* * *

Altogether, there were maybe forty or fifty of us in the one house, where we all slept in a dormitory.
All fifty of you slept in the one dormitory?
Oh, maybe not that much, but it was a big dormitory.

* * *

Well, we had girls' and boys' dormitories. In the girls' one there were about fifteen, and the boys': about ten to fifteen.

* * *

Heaps of kids. In the section I was in there were about eight kids.

* * *

Yeah, I was with another group of kids. It was fairly strict because it was mostly kids who were nicking-off. We didn't have much of a group because there were two or three missing every night.

* * *

The staff weren't that good to me, and I never got to see my Mum because she was in Sydney. It was just a dump.

* * *

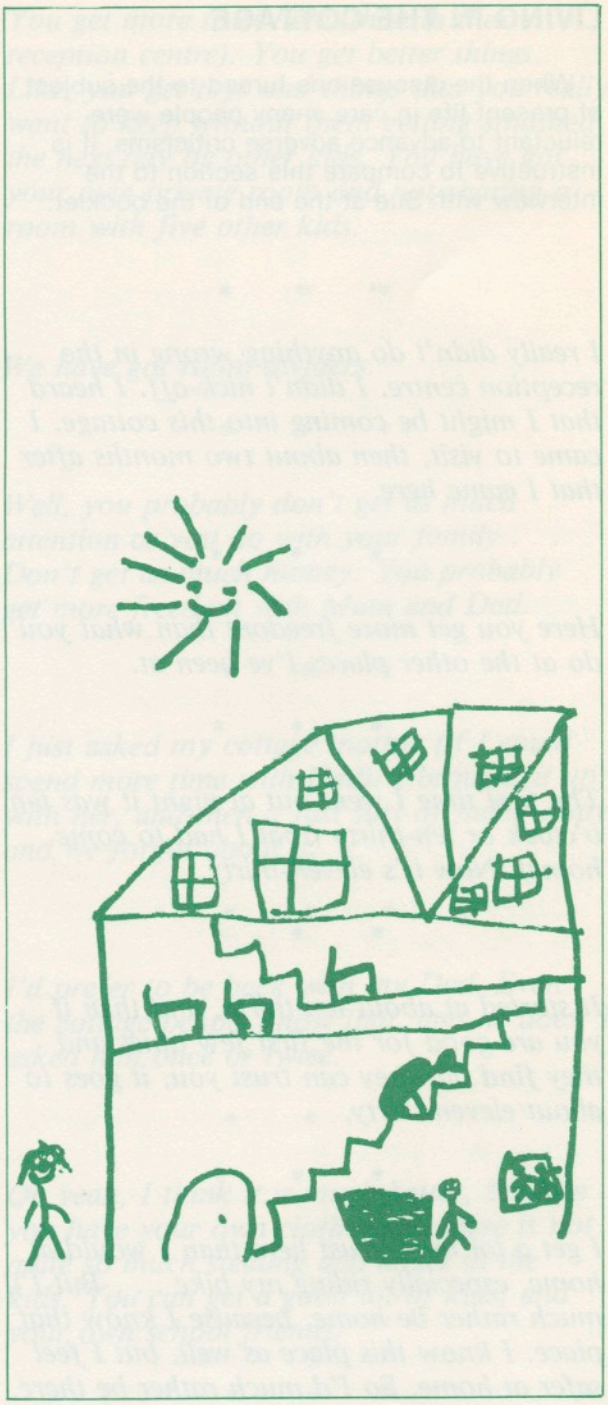
You didn't have a cupboard to yourself. You had two and the person next to you would have two. You wouldn't have your own things. You wouldn't have things like your own tape-recorder, unless you brought it in yourself. You wouldn't want to keep them on you, because they might get stolen or broken.

* * *

The cottage parents I have had before, I don't really think they gave a stuff. Their family came first.

* * *

I didn't like it so I kept nicking-off. I thought it was so strict, because even though I was a teenager, they still treated me as if I was just a little kid.



LIVING IN THE COTTAGE

When the discussions turned to the subject of present life in care, many people were reluctant to advance adverse criticisms. It is instructive to compare this section to the interview with Sue at the end of the booklet.

* * *

I really didn't do anything wrong in the reception centre. I didn't nick-off. I heard that I might be coming into this cottage. I came to visit, then about two months after that I came here.

* * *

Here you get more freedom than what you do at the other places I've been at.

* * *

The first time I went out at night it was ten o'clock or ten-thirty (that I had to come home). Now it's eleven-thirty.

* * *

It started at about ten-thirty, and then if you are good for the first few times and they find out they can trust you, it goes to about eleven-thirty.

* * *

I get a lot more trust here than I would at home, especially riding my bike . . . But I'd much rather be home, because I know that place. I know this place as well, but I feel safer at home. So I'd much rather be there.

You get more trust here (than in the reception centre). You get better things. Like, you get toys and things that you really want to keep without them getting smashed the next day by other kids. You have got your own private room and not sharing a room with five other kids.

* * *

We have got room dividers.

* * *

Well, you probably don't get as much attention as you do with your family . . . Don't get as much money. You probably get more freedom with Mum and Dad.

* * *

I just asked my cottage mother (if I could spend more time with Dad). I brought it up with her, and then it just sort of faded away and we forgot about it.

* * *

I'd prefer to be back with my Dad. Even the cottage people know that, and he does. I asked him once or twice.

* * *

Oh yeah, I think it is much better, because you have your own clothes and there is not quite so much stealing and anger in the kids. You can get a good lot of kids, and your own school friends.

* * *

There's no difference at all. The only difference is that I don't call them Mum, Dad, brother, sister and stuff like that . . . Like we said, we are one family, in the lounge room and that, and we can do whatever we want.

* * *

If you have been in homes for a while, . . . you just treat cottage parents that come and go like your family.

* * *

You treat the cottage parents here as if they were your Mum and Dad.

* * *

I'd prefer to be with Mum than here. I think it's better. I'd do anything to get back to my Mum right now.

* * *

I've been in better places, but it's not bad here, once you get used to it.

* * *

When I first came here I was nervous. I came up the front doorstep. No one home! I got a good welcome.

* * *

Yeah, if we sneak our bikes to school we get sent to bed about seven o'clock. That's the bad thing, and the good thing is me riding my bike.

FAMILIES

The bottom line of care is separation from families. Many children have continuing contact with their parents, in varying degrees, although some had lost contact altogether.

Some people were fiercely loyal to their families — others simply apathetic.

* * *

I see Dad once a month, and I see Mum once a fortnight.

* * *

I'm going down to see Dad after May, or in the May holidays. My two sisters are coming. Mum might be coming. I'm staying down there for two weeks.

* * *

Do you think your Mum is interested in what you do?
I honestly don't know. Sometimes it makes me feel really angry that I don't know her at all, and sometimes I really want to see her.

* * *

I saw Mum last Easter — the first time in ten years. I didn't know what she looked like. Oh, I knew from photos. I saw her for ten minutes. That's all she said could spare. I see my Dad a lot.

* * *

I met her a few months ago. Like, I didn't know where she was, and that.

Yeah, it's really hard (coming back to the cottage after visiting parents). You can't leave; you feel like you can't leave. Every time I go there I just don't want to leave. But I get over it.

* * *

I see my Dad. Oh, I haven't seen him for a while, because I had a fight with him, and then he didn't want me anymore. I haven't seen my Mum since I was three; since I was put in. They were trying to contact her (but they think) that she might have been married and got another name, which is really hard to find where she lives.

* * *

I don't think my sister could take over being a mum. I don't think anyone can.

* * *

Ah, he's my Dad. There's lots of things — like I value my games and my bike. I'd even give that up to go back with him. After a while he didn't ring me up for some reason, and I had to ring him up, and he said he couldn't get in contact with me for some reason. He had my telephone number.

* * *

I get, sort of, sick of his complaints. Like he says, "Why don't you come down here more often?", but I can't be bothered with it. I don't think he really cares about us that much.

* * *

We don't visit at Christmas because Mum left Dad.

* * *

I got a letter from him, and I got earphones and a radio.

* * *

I even got embarrassed calling her Mum, I hadn't seen her for so long. I hadn't seen her for five months — no, nine months. That's when I got shy about calling her Mum.

* * *

Up till two months before Christmas I was seeing her on what was made a weekly basis, but she skipped weeks until — I haven't seen her since Christmas.

* * *

This year we were supposed go to home for the weekend, but since Mum left Dad, we can't go home and stay for the night because he probably wouldn't look after us that well.

* * *

Mum lives down the road. We don't know which number.

* * *

I don't care if I really don't see Mum again, because I don't really know her. I'm not very close to her at all.

SCHOOL

Living in a cottage was often an issue for the children to face at school. Many believed that they were treated differently from other school children, both by teachers and pupils.

* * *

I spoke to my teacher the other day to tell him that I was fostered, and he just said to the whole class that I was fostered. He said, "You don't mind me telling them about this?" and I said, "No, I don't mind." So he told the whole class about me being fostered.

* * *

It is usually like this: if you tell your best friend then he tells his friend, and he tells his friend, and it goes around the school.

* * *

They knew I was fostered. They cared about me, and that. Just the same as everybody else.

* * *

They might have a bit of sympathy, but they don't show it unless it is something personal.

* * *

They tease me, and that. Once, on the second last day of school, they bashed me up.

* * *

They sort of treat you different.

* * *

I was at the same school for five years, so I made quite a lot of friends, and they knew through me telling them. The other kids who I didn't know or have much to do with; they didn't know.

* * *

I prefer the kids not to know, because when they get up against me, they tease me on it.

* * *

It didn't really worry me, because half of them had come from homes anyway. We all had our differences, but we stayed mates.

* * *

I just told a couple of kids and they spread it around the class.

* * *

When they first find out that you are in a home, they want to find out the whole works. "What's it like?" "Why are you in there?" Stuff like that, which is none of their business. If you tell them it is none of their business, you're into a fight . . . When you first come into the school and you meet some friends; as the years go by, or a couple of years, they don't bother asking, because they know you well and they can't really give a stuff. But when you first come in, they want to know the whole works.

If someone flicks a bit of lacquer-band across the room, they get into trouble, but if we do it, they give us one chance and the next time we get into trouble.

* * *

They give us a chance, but with other people they don't.

* * *

Well, I don't go to school. I used to, and then I got kicked out. I didn't get on very well with the teachers there, and that.

* * *

When I first went, the Education Officer went with me.

* * *

My teacher said, "Are you living in the cottage yet?" and I said, "Yes." Then she said, "That's good."

* * *

I want to do my H.S.C., but I'm not saying that I can go that far. I'll just see how far I can go.

* * *

I don't want to leave school before I do my H.S.C., but it is different with others. The cottage parents help me with my work if I'm stuck.

* * *

THE STIGMA OF CARE

A common misconception in society is that children have come into care through some fault of their own and, therefore, must be treated with caution.

It is disturbing that many of the children have accepted this stigma.

* * *

Well, I lost most of my friends when she said that, because they thought, "Oh, she is one of these people that are in a home. You had better watch her. I'm not going to muck around with her anymore." Everything like that.

* * *

They sort of treat you differently.

* * *

The kids down there, they live with their real parents, and that. (Pauses and thinks.) It's hard to explain actually, but I sort of feel left out.

* * *

People all think that, because we live in a home, that we have done something wrong. They don't realise that it's not us that have done it wrong — well, maybe a couple of us have — but it's really because of parents who maybe don't give a stuff.

* * *

A few people felt sorry for me, and that, that I was with someone else and not with Mum and Dad.

Oh no, they find out, but I think they still get the impression that you've got to be in by such-and-such a time, but you soon tell them that it is not run that way. It's run by cottage people that have got their own times and their own schedules.

* * *

I think it is more of a personal thing, and the nasty kids of the school would, you know, like torment. "Oh, you don't live at home." Most people go home and tell their mothers, "This kid, she lives in a cottage," and the mother would think, "She is a crook; she has stolen." The girl said, "What did you take; what did you steal?" I had to bring her over here to meet the cottage mother and the kids before she thought that I had just come here because my mother couldn't afford it, and wasn't able.

* * *

When you live in a home, they think that you have done something wrong.

* * *

At our school there are not many people that come from cottages. They all live in a family. By now they have got used to it and I'm getting most of my friends back again — which is pretty good — and now they just treat me as if I am in a normal family.

* * *

I'm just another person.

* * *

They thought of us as a different lot of bloody people.

* * *

They just treat me like a normal person, not like I've done something wrong, or anything like that. But I've only told a few friends.

* * *

Well, I don't actually say "State Ward". I say "I live in a home." and they go, "Oh."

* * *

One of their main questions is, "What time do you have to get back in?", as if you're locked up, or something. I say to them that you're allowed to go in just like normal people.

* * *

That all depends on the way you have been brought up. Like . . . for instance. Because he has had a bad background, he will always be different to what other children are in a normal family life. But then, if you haven't had such a bad background you aren't always as different as most children. . . . I haven't had a really bad background compared to a lot of kids . . . If you have always been bad when you were young, it's very hard to change your lifestyle . . . I was young enough to be changed. A lot of children that are at the home are different to what normal children are. They have seen more of life than most children have.

* * *

Sometimes I think I'm better off than normal people.

* * *

THE END OF CARE

Having experienced much insecurity, many people were anxious about the future.

* * *

To leave the cottage? The best age, I reckon, is when you feel like leaving; when you want to leave. But you can't leave until you are fifteen, or over, unless you've got parents to take you, or foster parents. You can't just go out on your own.

* * *

Just say I left now, I'd probably miss all these kids here. I would miss them because they are my family. I've had three different families — four including my family; my proper family — but I'd probably miss everyone here.

* * *

I'd probably come back lots of times.

* * *

I think I would like to come back, to see how they were going. Like, some of the younger children, I'd like to see what they are going through and what they think of it.

* * *

The minute (the cottage father) leaves I won't be looking back at this joint.

* * *

Starting again: it would be bloody hard.

* * *

I don't think I want to rely on (the cottage mother) for very long, because she has to lead her own life. It's not very fair to rely on someone the whole time, so I'd like to get a good wage and a job as an apprentice.

* * *

The Mission thinks at eighteen you are old enough to stand on your own two feet, which I think is fair enough.

* * *

Oh yeah, I'll definitely come back, because I've made really good friends with the cottage parents around here, and the ones here I really think a lot of. They have really been good.

* * *

I'd prefer to stay here until at whatever age you have to leave and then go on to my own life instead of going home . . . I'll get my own flat and own job and live my own life instead of going home.

* * *

No, I don't really want to go back home. I'd rather live in a flat . . . I'd go home and visit Mum, but I don't think I could live back there.

"A LOT OF THAT REPEATS ITSELF."

In most of the discussions the final question was: "How would you feel about your own children coming into care?"

* * *

No way!

* * *

Oh, I couldn't handle that, because of what I have been through. I wouldn't let them be state wards.

* * *

I'd just try to keep them out: not become state wards, or anything like that. I wouldn't put them in a home.

* * *

I've had me fair share of really bad cottage parents. My kids might cop that. They might move around all over Melbourne and still cop really bad ones. There's no way I would do it.

* * *

My kids won't go in a home. I've been in a home all my life — since I was three — and I don't reckon that any kid should go through it.

* * *

No use putting them in a home and letting them have a rough time. Keep up the good times!

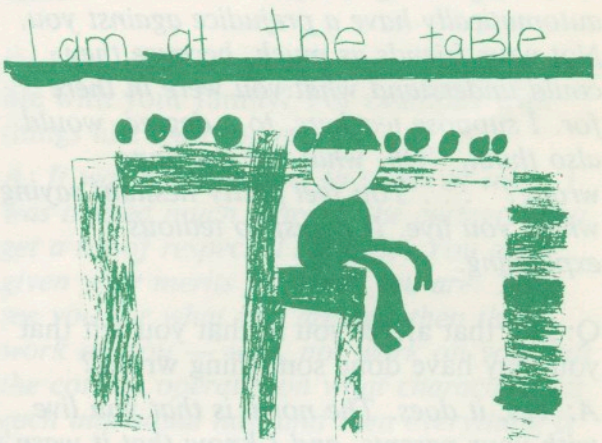
I'd try and keep them no matter what happened. Well, if there was no way out . . . but I wouldn't want to see it happen.

So are you saying that it is not a totally good experience being in a cottage?
Oh no, not a bad experience, but I think that when they come here it is nothing like being in a family. It is important that if you can stay together, then you should. But if it is going to be better for them — leaving home — then I suppose it is better for them to come here.

* * *

If I have got to go to court with my wife to work out who is going to have who — like, I might hate my wife, but I'd probably give up (the kids) to her even though I might love the kids a lot. But they aren't coming in a home. That's out of the question.

* * *



SUE'S STORY

Sue spent three years of her adolescence at a family group home administered by the Mission. She has now left care and is studying at university.

* * *

Q: From the time that you left home, what homes were you in?

A: When I first moved out I was in a temporary — I suppose a church organised thing. It was with a wife and a husband who were taking in kids who just needed temporary foster care. I was there for two months, but they really couldn't have me for too long, so my counsellor found the (Mission) cottage, and I moved straight into there.

Q: At school, did you feel any stigma attached to being a state ward?

A: Actually, I wasn't a state ward. I was a private placement. There was . . . especially your friend's mothers and fathers. They think you are a bad kid, that you have done something wrong. People would automatically have a prejudice against you. Not your friends as much, because they could understand what you were in there for. I suppose teachers, to a degree, would also think, "Oh, what has she done wrong?" . . . You feel pretty hesitant saying where you live. It is just so tedious explaining.

Q: Did that affect you in that you felt that you may have done something wrong?

A: Yes, it does. The norm is that you live with your parents, and I know that it wasn't

my fault. It was a whole family break-down. I knew I had done nothing wrong — I hadn't been involved with the police, or with anything criminal — but, yes, you think, "What have I done wrong?" People look at you in funny ways and you think, "I shouldn't be in this situation." I suppose your ego and the way you look at yourself is brought down.

Q: When children at school first found out that you came from a cottage, what were their reactions? Specifically, what questions did they ask you?

A: I really can't remember. "Do you like it?" "What are the people like?" A lot of them didn't ask questions. They didn't want to know about it. I think a lot of people would have automatically thought, "It must be pretty bad living there. It can't be a nice place. I'm not going to ask her about it." They had already thought that it is an institution, and that's where you live. They automatically think that a lot of rules have been placed upon you. I think that a lot of them just didn't ask questions because of that.

Q: How did life at the cottage compare with life with your family? For example, with things like trust; privacy?

A: It was much better. In terms of trust, I was trusted much more at the cottage. You get a lot of respect, I suppose. You are given your merits for what you are. They see you for what you are and then they work on you — well, not work on you, but the cottage operates on what characteristics each individual has, and then everything is worked around that. There are not rigid

rules. I got much more trust there than at home; much more privacy. That was respected.

Q: Looking back at that time at the cottage, do you think that it was a positive experience?

A: Very much. I learnt a lot about relationships with people, and I gained a lot.

Q: Do you think that for most people it is a positive experience?

A: I don't know about most . . . A lot of kids didn't seem very happy.

Q: Do you know why?

A: I don't know. Everyone in our cottage was very happy, but in the other cottages, probably because of the cottage parents, the kids didn't seem happy. It is, look after them physically, buy them clothes, cook them food and make sure that they are not out too late, rather than the emotional care they need. Even in the way the social workers operate it is very rigid: "I'll see you at one o'clock Thursday, and we will talk about your problems."

Q: Do you think that this is a loss of personality?

A: Yes, because the rules are so rigid that it doesn't matter who you are, they are going to be the same for you as the next person. You are just not recognised for what you are. Your needs are not recognised. I don't think communication can happen under those circumstances; it is just not possible.

Q: If it had been possible for your family to have stayed together, would you have preferred that?

A: No, I wouldn't go back to them.

Q: Do you think that most children would prefer to be with their parents as opposed to being at a cottage?

A: I don't think so, not from what I've seen. It is such a hassle for them to see the parents, and a lot of the time the parents don't want them on a permanent basis, anyhow. I think the parents should completely leave their lives if it is going to be like that. A lot of the kids are put on high hopes of getting back with their families, and then are let down. It is just too traumatic for them.

Q: When you came into care, how did you feel leaving your family?

A: You feel all the loneliness, and you are out on your own — and you don't know where to turn.

The Honourable Pauline Toner, Victorian Minister for Community Welfare Services, said: "Most of the children and young people involved in the Speak Out Project were State wards, and I am very glad that they have had the chance to speak out about their experiences. Nothing can be more important than children having a say about what happens to them when they come into contact with our welfare services. It is my hope that this Report changes the shape of some residential care services to meet the needs so eloquently expressed."

Mission of St. James and St. John,
12 Batman Street,
West Melbourne, 3003