

They are the forgotten ones ... the little Australians of the '50s and '60s who were put into children's homes by their parents. Starved of affection, sometimes harshly treated, abandoned even by Santa Claus, they are only now starting to tell their stories. **Nikki Barrowclough** reports.

# Orphans of the living

**P**ROBABLY NO-ONE EVER NOTICED the figure of the little boy standing at the gate of the institution every afternoon. He was just another child with his big eyes glued to the passing traffic. How old had he been then, anyway? Five? Six? The age when children still believe in magic. He had one piece of vital information about his father – he was a truck driver. One day, his dad would be driving one of the trucks that came lumbering down the road...

His father never did come back for him. So many parents didn't. And even a child has only so much hope to hold onto. One day, the little boy by the gate wasn't there any more.

That child was one of tens of thousands of children who were left in children's homes across the country in the three decades following World War II. They weren't orphans: usually they had been left there by their parents. Some children went into homes only briefly, before their parents reclaimed them. Others never saw their parents again, and remained in the home until they were old enough to leave. Some were State wards, children who had been taken into care by the then Department of Child Welfare after their parents had been charged with "neglect".

Poor record-keeping means no-one knows precisely how many children ended up in these places, although in 1956 there were 296 licensed homes in NSW alone – homes with children

under the age of seven had to have a licence – and some of them took up to 200 children at a time. The figures were equally extraordinary in Victoria. By 1962, for instance, there were 63 government-approved homes run by voluntary organisations – 12 for babies, 17 for boys, 10 for girls and 24 accommodating both boys and girls.

"The scale on which children were isolated from the community in the world of institutions has only begun to emerge in recent years," says Melbourne academic Dorothy Scott, author of the forthcoming book, *Confronting Cruelty: Historical Perspectives on Child Protection*, co-written with Shurlee Swain. "But there were an awful lot of children in an awful lot of homes."

Many, though not all, were the offspring of the poor and the uneducated. Others came from fragmented families. Some simply had been left with relatives by parents who then vanished – the relatives had subsequently deposited the children in the closest institution.

But whatever the reason, they were all gradually lost to view from the wider community.

"In many ways, we were hidden as children, and we have remained hidden for most of our lives," says Graham Cadd, 48, who lived in a Church of England home in Victoria from age 11 to 15.

"We were not treated like children, we were not given any love or affection, we had no dignity, no privacy, no rights," says David Forbes, 54, who spent eight years in various homes in Sydney and



near Mittagong in the NSW Southern Highlands. "We were threatened and belittled. There were no bedtime stories, no birthdays, no special occasions. Even Santa Claus abandoned us."

"We were the forgotten children," sums up Leonie Sheedy, 46, who spent 13 years in a Catholic home in Victoria.

And for years they remained so – disappearing into cities and towns after they were old enough to leave the institution. Somehow, they remade their lives, got married and had their own children, while often keeping quiet about their past. When asked, they said they went "to boarding school". Or that their parents had died. For some, the memories were so awful they simply couldn't speak about them.





David Forbes didn't tell his wife for years that he had been raped by a male staff member at the age of eight, or that other sexual assaults took place at three of the homes he was in. Foster, who only recently learned how to read and write, received \$40,000 in compensation from the NSW Victims Compensation Tribunal earlier this year.

It seems that, increasingly, as they reach middle age, the "forgotten children" are speaking up about what happened to them all those years ago.

Last year in Victoria, Vivian Waller, an associate of Melbourne law firm Maurice Blackburn Cashman, issued two test cases on behalf of more than 100 former wards of the State, alleging systematic sexual, psychological and physical abuse.

Cited as defendants were the State of Victoria and a former Victorian orphanage. The allegations from the wider group include subjecting children to floggings, severe sexual abuse and virtual slave labour. A statement of claim was filed with the court in June 1999. Both the State of Victoria and the former orphanage are defending the claim. A date for trial has yet to be fixed.

As well, in 1998 a commission of inquiry was held into the abuse of children in 150 Queensland institutions and detention centres. The inquiry, headed by a former Queensland governor, Leneen Forde, covered the period from 1911 to the present. It found evidence of widespread cruelty, including sexual molestation, physical assault,

solitary confinement and beating with whips.

Perhaps we should be inured, after the revelations of the Aboriginal "stolen children" and the British child migrants, to the idea that a country more known for its images of sun-bronzed little figures playing by the sea seems to be capable of producing so many Dickensian institutions.

But the grief of children has a special desolation. And in the case of the home children, it was a desolation made infinitely worse by the fact that, in general, it was their parents who had abandoned them to their fate – and they knew it.

"The thing all home children had in common – and which is why, perhaps, none of us has spoken up before now – is the feeling that we weren't

**Together but alone:**  
while some enjoyed  
decent lives in  
children's homes,  
others remember  
mainly heartache  
and anguish.



wanted, even if that was not factually true," says sociologist Joanna Penglase, who was a baby when she and her sister were left in a home north of Sydney, where she remained until early adulthood.

"A lot of parents suffered terrible heartache at having to put their children in a home," she says, "but the child still felt, 'I am not wanted.' And in the totalitarian atmosphere that existed in many homes, where children had no adults they could be close to, how could they construct any feelings of identity? You felt worthless, and the way many of the homes were run reinforced this."

Penglase, a gentle, dark-haired woman of 55, ended up doing her PhD on children's homes. She called her thesis, which she wrote last year, *Orphans of the Living*.

As part of her research, Penglase placed advertisements in country newspapers across NSW and Victoria, eventually interviewing more than

was like revisiting her own childhood. She and her sister were left in the home by their mother after she was deserted by her husband. Penglase was eight months old, her sister almost two.

The home was run as a business by two women, one in her fifties, the other in her late twenties. The younger woman, who had a violent temper, subjected Penglase's sister to savage beatings almost daily. Penglase was so traumatised by this that she turned herself into a robot, never putting a foot wrong.

"I didn't allow myself to feel anything," she says. "That's how I survived. I became an automaton. I didn't think or feel." She was told her sister was "a naughty girl", but even to this day, cannot fathom what it was her sister did that so annoyed her "carer".

Their mother, a happy-go-lucky woman, visited as often as she could, promising that once she was

**They spoke of their terror when they were beaten or handled roughly, and of secretly weeping after being told, "You're here because your parents don't want you."**

90 men and women about their experiences. One of them was the man who, as a child, had waited by the gate every afternoon for his truck-driver father.

Almost without exception, these men and women had not recovered from their time spent in institutions. Some had terrible tales about the physical and sexual abuse they suffered, but what caused them the greatest anguish was the lack of any personal attention or affection. In that era, of course, children weren't viewed as individuals the way they are today. They were "seen but not heard". And in many cases, homes discouraged parents from visiting, or from picking up and cuddling their children when they did come.

Leonie Sheedy, who was one of Penglase's interviewees, told her of how she lived for hair-washing nights, when she was briefly able to snuggle into the warmth of the woman vigorously drying her hair with a towel. "Sometimes our heads would rest on their chests," she says.

A man who had lived in Salvation Army homes from 1959 to 1965 kept sobbing to Penglase as he described the impersonal living environment. "I don't know why I cry," he said at one point. "We weren't ill-treated - I can't condemn them."

An 84-year-old woman wept almost non-stop as she talked about her childhood in a Church of England home in Glebe. "She still remembered, as clearly as if it had happened yesterday, the utter misery and loneliness," says Penglase.

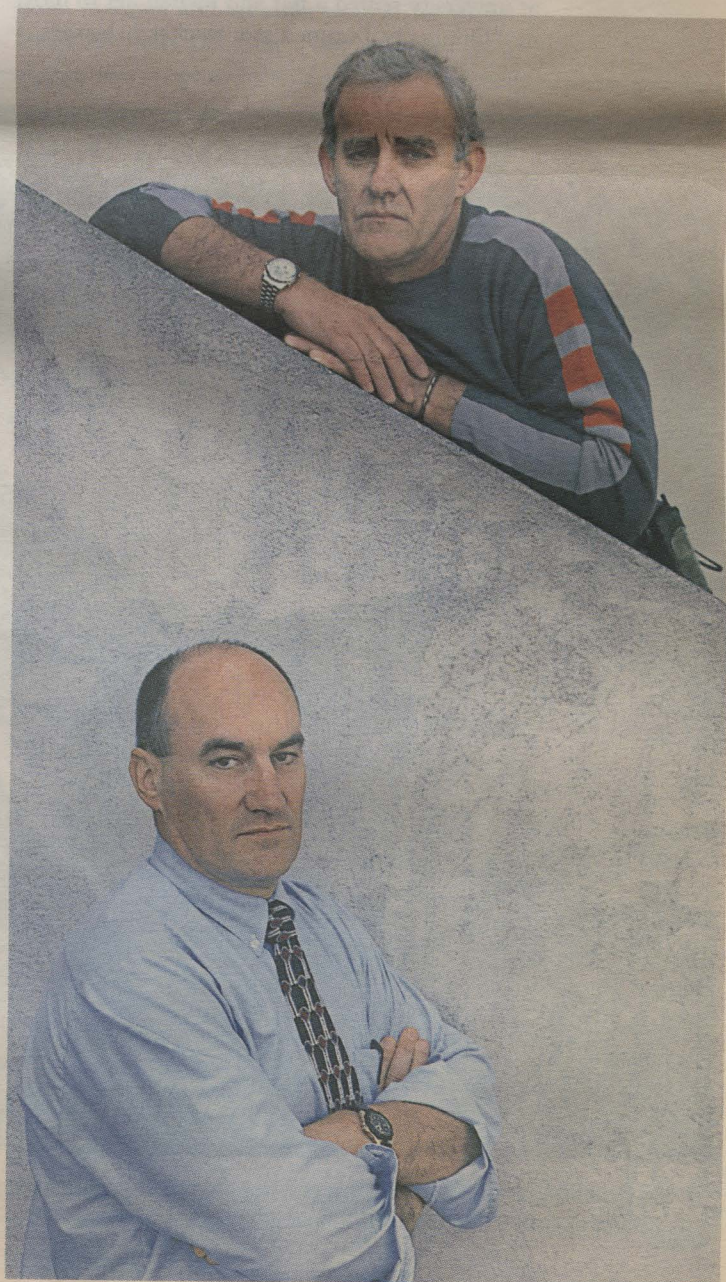
Others spoke of their bewilderment at finding themselves suddenly in environments that were totally alien, of their terror when they were beaten or handled roughly by adults who were strangers, and of secretly weeping after being told by those strangers, "You're here because your parents don't want you."

And they talked of the memories they'd kept repressed for so long, the ones that wouldn't go away: "Small children shaken like rag dolls, dangling from the ankle before being thrown into a cot..."

For Penglase, listening to their stories



"You felt worthless, and the way many of the homes were run reinforced this," Joanna Penglase, who was placed in a home when she was eight months old; (below and below left) Rick Cadd, top, and his brother, Graham, were dumped in a home by their violent, alcoholic father; Leonie Sheedy tells how she lived for hair-washing nights, when she was able to snuggle into the woman drying her hair.





back on her feet financially, she would come and take them back. She never did. Penglase cannot remember if her sister ever told their mother how much she was suffering – although she does recall her sister pinning all her hopes on their absent father. “One day, my daddy will come and get me,” she often said.

Penglase, who now has a daughter of her own, says that she got to know her mother after she left the home and insists, “I loved her dearly.” But she

“But I was so socially crippled, I never taught a single class.”

There was never any official acknowledgment that home children – who had never seen their parents write a cheque, pay a bill or shop for food – might be ill-equipped to join society, and no formal measures were ever put in place to help them. They were left to survive on their own – which remains the situation today. Government support services are now available for State wards

**“You know the greatest loss I feel? I’ll never know what I would have been like as a child if I hadn’t been in a home. And I’ll never know what I would have been like as a child in a family.”**

was also aware that her mother kept her third child, a son, with her – working at two jobs in order to give him a private school education. Talking about this, tears brim in her eyes.

“You know the greatest loss I feel?” she asks. “I’ll never know what I would have been like as a child if I hadn’t been in a home. And I’ll never know what I would have been like as a child in a family.” She adds that she found her father’s surviving brother only recently: “There was this whole other family I never knew about. I was quite upset to hear that my paternal grandmother had been alive until I was 17.”

JOANNA PENGLASE DIDN’T LEAVE THE HOME until she was 21. She was too terrified to try to manage on her own. She left only after a friend at university rented a flat and invited her to move in. “Originally, I trained as a teacher,” she says.

aged 25 and under, but otherwise there is no provision for home children or older wards.

With this in mind, Penglase recently helped form a new organisation, Care Leavers of Australia Network (CLAN), with Leonie Sheedy. The Reverend Bill Crews, who heads the Exodus Foundation in Sydney, is also involved.

Sheedy, a sweet-faced, occasionally highly emotional woman, regards the setting up of CLAN as a way of raising the profile of former home children. It infuriates her that so much pain and grief has been swept under the carpet for so long. Her own childhood is a case in point. Sheedy, her four sisters and two brothers were all placed in homes at various times by their parents. A lack of money, plus their father’s being diagnosed with TB, had put the marriage under strain. Their mother eventually deserted the family altogether – taking her eldest daughter with her.

“I lived with my parents until I was three,” says Sheedy, who eventually became a State ward. “I met Mr Sheedy for the first time after that when I was 15. I last saw Mrs Sheedy when I was 11. I think titles like ‘Mum’ and ‘Dad’ have to be earned,” she adds, a hard edge in her voice. “I can’t really say how many times my mother visited. She used to bring me Jersey caramel toffees.”

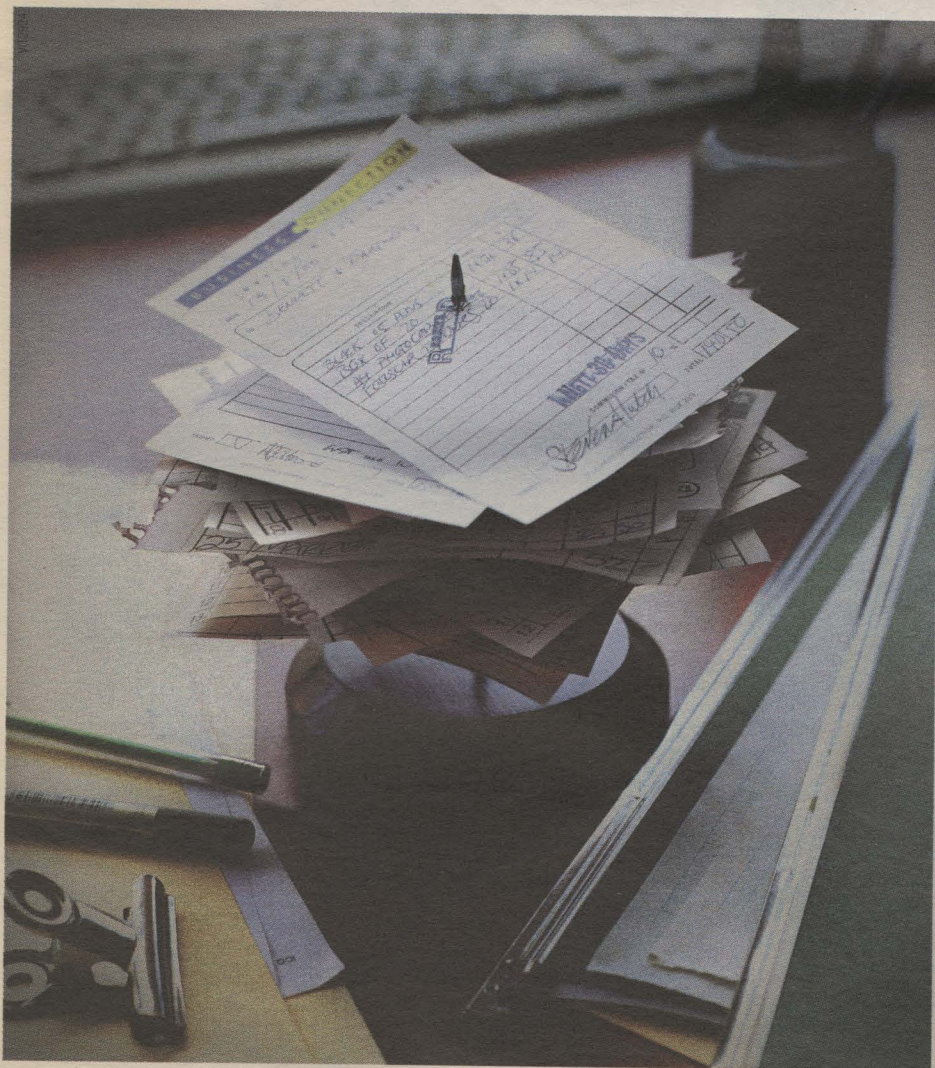
Her tone softens. “I’ve looked for those toffees ever since.”

She still remembers sobbing inconsolably the day one of her older sisters, who was in the same home, along with a third sister, turned 14 and left. “She was like a mother to me. She took care of us whenever she could, which was mostly in the playground at school, as we were separated into different dormitories at night.”

Sheedy, who now lives in Sydney with her husband and children, didn’t see this sister again until five years ago, after attending a reunion for former residents of the home. The two women greeted each other formally, until the others encouraged them to hug, which they did. They have since kept in touch.

She’s been less lucky with her older brother, who she hasn’t seen since 1962, when he visited her in the home. He’d be 59 now. She has no idea where he is. She found her youngest brother in 1995, after having no contact with him for 21 years – he lives in Queensland – and tracked down her two eldest sisters in January this year (she found one of them in the phone book), but neither wanted to meet her. The eldest sister remarked that she had “forgotten all about that other family”.

“I found it an isolating experience, searching for my family, especially since there are no official



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networks to help in any way," says Sheedy, who adds that no-one who has been a home child can possibly just "put it all behind them", as people so often advise those with unhappy histories. "I don't say to people who had a happy childhood, 'Forget about your childhood,'" she goes on, her voice becoming shaky. "Your childhood stays with you always, regardless of whether it's good or bad. I want people to know that if you're going to remove a child from a family, you'd better be well aware of the emotional and psychological damage that lasts for the rest of their lives."

Her voice breaks completely and she weeps.

**C**HILDREN NO LONGER DISAPPEAR INTO HUGE, red-brick institutions. These days, there is a whole range of child and family services, plus refuges and smaller "group homes" run by churches or welfare agencies in liaison with the Department of Family and Community Services.

But the home children came from a completely different era. The supporting parent's benefit as we know it did not exist. Nor did organised child care. Only the rich could hire someone to help out in emergencies. If you had no money and no extended family willing to lend a hand, and your husband – or your wife – deserted you or died, or you fell ill, lost your job, divorced or got evicted, you packed your children off to a home.

Penglase's mother, like most parents, was expected to contribute to her daughters' upkeep in the home, where Penglase, her sister and two other little girls were the only long-term "inmates". The women who ran the home made the rest of their money from the children who were left with them while their parents went on holiday, or when their mothers went into



hospital for operations (both common reasons at the time for leaving children in institutions). This didn't prevent the younger woman from ill-treating her temporary charges, although never with the same degree of violence dealt out to Penglase's sister.

Penglase often overheard the two women discussing how they would explain bruises to the Child Welfare Department, which inspected

homes caring for children under the age of seven every three months. Apparently their explanations were accepted without question, since Penglase's sister was never rescued.

Inspections aside, the government had very little to do with the homes, which were run by charity organisations, by the church or, like the home Penglase and her sister were in, as private business enterprises. Only a few of the children

**Spoon fed:** children who had never seen their parents write a cheque, pay a bill, shop for food, were ill-prepared for life outside the home.

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in NSW homes were State wards. Generally, wards were fostered, after first spending time in government-run "depots" – unlike Victoria, where State wards joined other children in government-approved institutions run by voluntary organisations.

And not all the homes were hellholes. Some were run by kind and decent people who undoubtedly gave the children in their care a far more stable existence than they might otherwise have known. Leonie Sheedy pays tribute to one of the nuns at the home she was in, Sister Genevieve, who treated her with a kindness that left a lasting impression. She named her own daughter after the nun, and the two women kept in touch.

But in general, life inside the homes was austere and insular. There were usually no hobbies or outside activities, apart from going to school and Sunday school.

"At school, I hung around on the edges of groups, fearing that I'd be noticed, but also desperately wanting to join in," remembers Penglase. She was invited, occasionally, to the parties of her classmates, but was so terrified of doing or saying the wrong thing that she hardly spoke at all. And, of course, she couldn't invite her classmates back to her place.

Home children lived entirely by rules. "At mine, there was a strict rule that you washed your face before you cleaned your teeth," she says. "Living was a purely functional exercise. I learned never, ever to show any spontaneity. You never did anything without checking first. You wouldn't even go to the toilet. If you started to go out the door, it was, 'Where are you going?' If you came into a room, it was, 'Where have you been?'"

**Once, one of Cadd's children asked, "Did you lie in bed with your dad reading bedtime stories?" ... "I realised I didn't have a single memory of being picked up by an adult and cuddled."**

Her interviewees similarly told her of repressive, regimented routines, which involved getting into lines from the moment they got out of bed. Lining up with their toothbrushes for the bathroom; lining up, naked, for a bath; lining up for breakfast; lining up to be given the strap. One man, who lived in rural Anglican homes from 1942 to 1954, recalled how everyone was lined up every morning for punishment, regardless of

what they had done. "They always found something wrong with everybody," he says.

This man's twin brothers, who were in the same home, had been born prematurely and had weak bladders. Consequently, they always wet their beds. "Every morning they had to take their pants down and were strapped in front of all the boys," their brother recalls. Many of the children who had arrived at the

homes from broken or violent families were already emotionally disturbed.

Graham Cadd, 48, who made the remark about home children remaining "hidden" for most of their lives, said it for a reason. He has a brother, Rick, who's 49. Both boys were removed as babies from their teenage mother by their violent, alcoholic father, who paid a succession of people in the remote Victorian countryside to care for them. For years, the children lived in a shed without electricity, running water or a toilet. Their father visited at weekends. His visits were nightmares. He would thrash the boys – as well as the woman who was looking after them – until they were black and blue.

When they were aged nine and 10, he dumped them in a Church of England home in Victoria. Battered and bewildered, the boys were separated soon after they arrived. Put into different "cottages", they slept in dormitories with boys in their late teens. Both brothers were repeatedly raped. None of the staff at the home seemed aware of what was going on. Nor did they protect them from their father, who took them out at weekends. The boys returned with bruises on Sunday night; no-one said anything. Nor could the boys comfort each other – back they went to their respective cottages.

Cadd finally escaped by joining the merchant navy when he was 15. Afterwards, he studied nursing, specialising as a nurse working with acute psychiatric patients. He now runs a private psychiatric hospital in Melbourne, and is married with two children.

Once, one of his children asked him, "Did you lie in bed with your dad like this, reading bedtime stories?" The question rocked Cadd, who says, "I realised I didn't have a single memory of ever being picked up by an adult and cuddled."

His brother, Rick, remained in the home until he was 19, and is obviously still profoundly affected by his past. He has had two failed marriages and numerous relationships, and constantly checks with people that his work as a fitter and turner is adequate. "The fear that it's not, equals the old feelings that went with being bashed," he says now.

The saddest thing of all is that the relationship between the Cadd brothers remains distant. They see each other occasionally – like the afternoon the three of us met to talk – but otherwise they lead totally separate lives.

"Who are you close to?" Graham suddenly asks Rick, who replies, after staring downwards, "No-one, really." A few minutes later, he insists, "It doesn't worry me. Sometimes I prefer to be left alone."

"And yet," Graham muses afterwards, "before we went into the home, we were very much together." When we part, they bid each other farewell with the remoteness of strangers.

*The Care Leavers of Australia Network will hold its first public meeting at the Exodus Foundation, 180 Liverpool Road, Ashfield, Sydney, next Saturday from 9.30 am to 12.30 pm. Anyone who has been a State ward or who grew up in a home is invited to attend. Otherwise, write to CLAN, PO Box 164, Georges Hall, NSW.*



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