



So you are accessing your file? You are not alone

*Leonie Sheedy, Vlad Selakovic and Frank Golding,
in conversation with David Denborough*

Leonie Sheedy, Vlad Selacovic and Frank Golding were all wards of the State of Victoria and are now executive members of CLAN (Care Leavers Australasia Network) a peak advocacy and support agency for people who grew up in orphanages, children's Homes, foster care and other institutions.

Leonie co-founded CLAN in 2000 and is now its Chief Executive. Vlad is President of CLAN's Committee of Management and Frank is Vice-President.

David Denborough works as community worker, writer and songwriter at Dulwich Centre.

Contacts:

Leonie Sheedy: ceo@clan.org.au

Vlad Selacovic: vlasovic16@gmail.com

Frank Golding: fgolding@bigpond.net.au

David Denborough: daviddenborough@dulwichcentre.com.au

Abstract

Three experienced advocates, Leonie Sheedy, Vlad Selacovic and Frank Golding, join in conversation with David Denborough to share their experiences in gaining access to childhood records for those who grew up in Australia's orphanages, children's Homes and foster care. The journey of discovery is often painful, even re-traumatising. Some Care Leavers find the official narrative does not match their version of their childhood. There are surprising omissions and inaccuracies and infuriating censorship that privileges other people's privacy over the right to the truth. The conversation shifts to strategies for dealing with these problems, but more importantly to the value of Care Leavers creating their own accounts of childhood and a more honest history.

Key words: *state wards, Care Leavers, children's institutions, childhood records, rights, counter-narrative*

David: *When Care Leavers decide they want to gain access to the records that were made about them when they were children, what would you like to say to offer company along their journey?*

Leonie: Sometimes, accessing your file and reading it can be really hard. That's why we want to help other people realise the difficulty, the hurt and the shame that's attached to getting your file.

Frank: We want to share some of the things we found in our files and that you might find in yours. Most of what you will find in this conversation was spoken or written at the time we were searching for our personal stories – or soon after we gained access to our files.

We want to honour your search

David: *If someone is accessing their files, it probably means they have been on a long search. We want to honour your investigation skills! We know how significant it can be to search for and finally get your hands on your file. It can be a big step on the journey.*

Leonie: Many of us have had to investigate and search to find out our histories. We have had to seek out our family. I was three when I went into the home so I needed to find my older siblings to find out information. This is true for many of us. Many of us have become dedicated investigators. For some of us this has long histories. When I was a kid I used to always go to the telephone books and look up the 'Sheedys'. It was like a mantra, searching for family.

Vlad: The file is not just a piece of me, but a piece of history.

Our experiences of receiving our files

David: *So what's been your experience? What did it mean for you when you first received your files?*

Vlad: At first, the disappointment I experienced with obtaining this was just horrendous. Then the hurt ... It hurt so much. It reminded me of all the loneliness, of all the horror and shame that I carried through my life. It's continuous. Page after page after page.

It's staggering to find out that the welfare department, in that day and age and era, was allowed to get away with certain things the way they did. It has conjured up and has brought back things that I have not remembered for thirty odd years. You'll pick up a page and, it just hits you. And you could be lost for hours. I truly mean that this one page could take you away to another world, for hours.

Frank: It helped me to remember it wasn't my fault I was put into a Home. I was just a child. I had nothing to be ashamed of because there was nothing I could have done at the time to make things better.

Vlad: You might find that the file is not your story. It doesn't tell about me. It just tells you about the person, who was a number, and one of many, in a group. It wasn't my story. It was someone else's version of what I was doing.

Frank: Welfare workers could record any opinion that reflected their own prejudices in preference to the relevant facts. And no-one called them to account. Clearly, these files were never meant to be read by us, or our parents.

Vlad: We are survivors. But you may find that the file doesn't honour survival skills. I'd come through a system that was really bad, and I learned how to use that system to my advantage. Even as a small child. It was one of the things we all did – to survive, it was just that survival mode. What did I steal? Food. That amazed me alright ... I was always stealing food ... I must have been hungry!

Frank: No-one is good for nothing – despite what we were told as children. Everyone is good at something. Some of us are good at lots of things.

Leonie: What workers said was bad behaviour could have been survival skills.

What you might find

Frank: You are seeking the truth, but you might find untruths. We have a very different view of our childhood reality from the one that is our records. My official record declares that my father's visits upset me; but I have always known the opposite was the case.

On the other hand, you might find things you don't remember, that our story did not begin the way we thought it did. A whole phase of our early years might have slipped through the mind trap. I had no memory of one of the Homes I was in nor of two of the foster 'mothers' who had us for a while. But the records check out.

Leonie: You don't always find what you are looking for. You might be surprised not to find basic documents like a birth certificate, the names and last-known address of members of your family, an explanation of the reasons for your placement. Sometimes, your 'carers' didn't 'care' to include things that were critically important to you.

Frank: We all remember events that loom large in our memory that were never recorded, or have been glossed over. And sometimes large parts of the file are censored – blacked out or whited out – depending on which authority controls your records. Don't give up when you get a knockback. You have a right to appeal any decision that seems unfair or unreasonable.

Leonie: We were the children of the poor and in some ways the state colluded with parents in abandoning their children. There was no supporting parents' benefit. There was no encouragement for parents to continue to take responsibility for their kids. While the rich paid for nannies or sent their kids to boarding schools, we were the children of the poor and we ended up in Homes.

Frank: The records explain very little about the social conditions in which our parents made heart-breaking decisions to put their children in the 'care' of the welfare people. We find nothing in the archives that explains the story behind the story – the misery of grinding poverty that dogged the lives of working-class parents who, with little schooling, found themselves trapped in long-term unemployment and unstable accommodation, or enmeshed in military service or domestic violence or chronic illness. Many in the Australian welfare system believed that family crisis resulted from individuals' personality defects. Poverty was their own fault, they claimed. Chronic poverty is not about a lack of moral character. It's about not having money, resources and support in your time of greatest need.

Vlad: You might find that the file uses negative words about you. 'Cunning, conniving, spirited.' There are comments in those pages that are derogatory to a

little boy, you're talking about a boy who was 10 years old, 12 years old, and they're literally saying that this boy was no good. Would always grow up to be no good. Well, I'm sorry, that was part of a system that let me down.

Leonie: Some of us who are perfectly intelligent have found in our records that we were described as 'slow-witted', even 'low-grade mental defective'. Almost all of us were expected to leave school as soon as the law allowed – to go into menial jobs for the rest of our lives.

Frank: You want to find positive remarks, but you might find slander. In some cases what was recorded is painful to read not only because of what was written as fact when it was inaccurate, but also for the disparaging slander about parents that freely littered the files.

Things we can do while reading our files

David: *It can be overwhelming. Are there things you have learnt to do while you read your files?*

Vlad: Decide which parts of the file to reject. I think I'd better get rid of that page. Remember this is not the truth. It's not my story. It's someone else's interpretation of where I was, and what was going on. Not mine. There's not much truth in this, believe me. There really isn't much truth in this at all.

Leonie: Create new language. We've needed to develop ways of describing our lives when ordinary language doesn't work for us. We've also found new, more appropriate names for some of the organisations we spent our childhoods with: The 'Christian Buggers', 'the Starvation Army', 'The Sisters of No Mercy'!

Vlad: Turn the file into a discovery manual. This is not just some pages, and words, and paper. This is a discovery, of a journey that I have gone along. Because I have discovered things about myself ... It is not my file. This is my discovery manual.

Leonie: Remember your skills of defiance. We were told not to get on the back four rows of the bus because the locals were concerned that we were waving at the boys. Now whenever I get on a bus I head straight to the back!

Vlad: Share it with others. I flashed it round to my family. Put the file on the table and said, righto. Three sisters and an older brother ...

Leonie: Cherish what is precious. We have found ways to hold onto small things that are precious to us. I still have my old brown suitcase from when I was in the home. I still have a dressing gown, an apron, some old name tags, and a jumper my sister knitted for me. Keep hold of the good memories. It has been important to me to acknowledge the good stories from my past and the good people who did care for us.

I have a lot of fond memories. They are not all negative. There were some good people working in the homes. There were some decent Australians who did their best and they made a real difference to our lives. It has been really important to me to meet up with them again and to thank them for the good memories. I do not forget their contributions to my life. My daughter is named after one of the nuns who was different, who smiled at children, who wanted us children to have good memories of her, who wanted to be able to come to reunions.

It is important to hold onto precious memories of adults who did care for us, who trusted us and gave us responsibilities. We have held onto those memories of good times, of playful moments, times such as jumping into the river with all our clothes on. I have tried to meet up with those adults and say: 'I've come to say thank you. I've got really good memories of you.'

Frank: A compromise might be to agree to a staged release where the Care Leaver asks for specific information they know they want as a priority e.g. any medical notes, names of parents, etc. and then a follow-up stage where the whole record is handed over. Maybe we could indicate in the documents the sorts of information that might be asked for as a minimum.

Vlad: I'd want my birth certificate, a family tree showing all my important relatives, names and last known addresses of all my family, all medical and school reports, and the names of anyone who visited me while I was in 'care'. That would be a good start.

Leonie: Yes, at least all the things that Vlad has mentioned, plus a list of all the people who had us for holiday stays. And for all those who were moved from one place to another, a list of all the places we lived in and the reasons why we were moved from one place to another.

David: *I can imagine that if I was to access a file about me I would desperately want the information but I wouldn't want the slander. And maybe I would ask for only some information as a starting point before I accessed the staff interpretations of my life and family.*

Frank: Fair comment, but it should be Care Leavers' informed choice. On the other hand, slander is also information! It tells us a lot about the writer and the system we were in.

Our choice about what information to access

David: *One other thing that emerged from the Routes to the Past workshop that I was really interested in was that some people only choose to access certain parts of their file – certain pieces of information – and not to get the whole thing. I hadn't realised this. And it sounds like at least some places will respond to such requests carefully and only send what is asked for. What do you think about this?*

Leonie: This is a two-edged sword. It's common practice in WA but the suspicion is that the record-holders who say this expedite the processing are trying to save work for themselves. But how do you know what to ask for unless and until you know what's there?

Now it's our turn to tell our side of the story

David: *I understand that hundreds of Care Leavers have now written or told their own versions of their stories.*

Leonie: That's true, and CLAN has a great collection of these in our Library. The CLAN Newsletter has also published hundreds of these over the years. The National Library has list of published memories and life stories.

Vlad: If you hear of any Care Leaver publishing their story, let us know – but also tell your local library and ask them to order a copy to add to their collection.

Frank: Under FOI laws in each state and territory (e.g. s39-49 of the Victorian Act) there is usually a right for Care Leavers to challenge questionable information and to ask for our own version of incidents to be placed in the files. We should be queuing up to tell our side of the story. You could do this in stages:

An easy way in: insist that the obvious mistakes in names and dates be corrected.

Then add in facts that are missing from the records e.g. going to school (or not), jobs you had to do in the orphanage, being sent to another Home.

Then challenge the 'official' interpretation of critical incidents that are reported – or were never reported.

Leonie: Make a donation of memorabilia to CLAN's Australian Orphanage Museum. During your search you may come across photographs, badges, books, telegrams, and other information that could be valuable for this museum about the history of orphanages and children's Homes.

Vlad: Tell your story to your local Members of Parliament and ask them to pass on a message to their Leaders.

Frank: Contact your old Home and ask for a plaque or some form of memorial to be erected on the site in honour of all the children who once lived there. In many cases, the Home has changed hands, but CLAN can help you find out who to approach with your idea.

Creating a more honest history

David: *What can Care Leavers do to contribute to a more honest history?*

Leonie: When you are ready, why not put your own story in writing (or on tape) for your own children – or to share with the world! CLAN (and others) can help. Write a short piece for the CLAN Newsletter, or ask to be interviewed for the column 'Meet a Clannie'.

Vlad: Join CLAN members in silent protests about the way you were treated and the need for redress. The placard you hold may be read by hundreds of people who have no idea that Australian children were treated so badly.

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