

SORRY DAY 2008

Action Resource:

Getting in Touch with Experience

HEARING THE STORIES OF THE STOLEN GENERATIONS

On Sorry Day we remember the stories of the Indigenous children who were forcibly removed from their families. Some members of local Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander communities may be willing to share their stories of being taken away, or of having relatives taken away, but others may find it too difficult to share their story with strangers. These events are both a public shame and a private tragedy.

The Bringing Them Home report on the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal & Torres Strait Island Children from Their Families, and songs by Indigenous artists, can also help us to get in touch with the personal stories of the Stolen Generations.

This action resource sheet provides some stories and a process for reflection.

NANNA NUNGALA FEJO

In making his apology speech, Prime Minister Rudd conveyed something of the story of Nanna Nungala Fejo:

“Nanna Nungala Fejo, as she prefers to be called, was born in the late 1920s. She remembers her earliest childhood days living with her family and her community in a bush camp just outside Tennant Creek. She remembers the love and the warmth and the kinship of those days long ago, including traditional dancing around the camp fire at night. She loved the dancing. She remembers once getting into strife when, as a four-year-old girl, she insisted on dancing with the male tribal elders rather than just sitting and watching the men, as the girls were supposed to do.

But then, sometime around 1932, when she was about four, she remembers the coming of the welfare men. Her family had feared that day and had dug holes in the creek bank where the children could run and hide. What they had not expected was that the white welfare

men did not come alone. They brought a truck, two white men and an Aboriginal stockman on horseback cracking his stockwhip. The kids were found; they ran for their mothers, screaming, but they could not get away. They were herded and piled onto the back of the truck. Tears flowing, her mum tried clinging to the sides of the truck as her children were taken away to the Bungalow in Alice, all in the name of protection.

A few years later, government policy changed. Now the children would be handed over to the missions to be cared for by the churches. But which church would care for them? The kids were simply told to line up in three lines. Nanna Fejo and her sisters stood in the middle line, her older brother and cousin on her left. Those on the left were told that they had become Catholics, those in the middle Methodists and those on the right Church of England. That is how the complex questions of post-reformation theology were resolved in the Australian outback in the 1930s. It was as crude as that. She and her sister were sent to a Methodist mission on Goulburn Island and then Croker Island. Her Catholic brother was sent to work at a cattle station and her cousin to a Catholic mission.

Nanna Fejo’s family had been broken up for a second time. She stayed at the mission until after the war, when she was allowed to leave for a prearranged job as a domestic in Darwin. She was 16. Nanna Fejo never saw her mum again. After she left the mission, her brother let her know that her mum had died years before, a broken woman fretting for the children that had literally been ripped away from her.”

MURRAY

This is an extract from Confidential Submission No 776 to the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal & Torres Strait Island Children from their Families. “I do remember my mother showing up for visits, supervised visits. We used to get excited. I just wanted her to take us away from there. Then the visits suddenly stopped. I’m told the authorities stopped them because she had a destabilising effect on us. That didn’t deter my mother. She used to come to the school ground to visit us over the fence. The authorities found out about those visits. They had to send us to a place where she couldn’t get to us. To send us anywhere on mainland Queensland she would

have just followed - so they sent us to the one place where she can't follow 'Palm Island Aboriginal Settlement'. By our mother visiting us illegally at that school ground she unknowing-wasn't to see my mother again for ten nightmare years.

I remember when I learnt to write letters, I wrote to my mother furiously pleading with her to come and take us off that island. I wrote to her for years, I got no reply then I realised that she was never coming for us. That she didn't want us. That's when I began to hate her. Now I doubt if any of my letters ever got off that island or that any letters she wrote me ever stood a chance of me receiving them."

PENNY

This is an extract from Confidential Submission No 191 to the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal & Torres Strait Island Children from their Families.

"It was as though someone had turned the lights out - a regimented existence replacing our childhood innocence and frolics - the sheer snugness, love, togetherness, safety and comfort of four of us sleeping in one double bed - family! Strange how the bureaucracy adopts the materialistic yardstick when measuring deprivation/poverty/neglect.

[Baby] Olive was taken elsewhere - Mr L (Children's Department official) telling me several days later that she was admitted to the Townsville General Hospital where she had died from meningitis. In 1984, assisted by Link-Up (Qld), my sister Judy discovered that Olive had not died in 1956 but rather had been fostered. Her name was changed. Judy and Trevor were able to have a reunion with Olive in Brisbane during Christmas of 1984. I was reunited with Olive sometime during 1985 and Murray had his first meeting with Olive two months ago."

GREG

This is an extract from Confidential Submission 384 to the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal & Torres Strait Island Children from their Families.

"The circumstances of my being taken, as I recollect, were that I went off to school in the morning and I was sitting in the classroom and there was only one room where all the children were assembled and there was a knock at the door, which the schoolmaster answered. After a conversation he had with somebody at the door, he came to get me. He took me by the hand and took me to the door. I was physically grabbed by a male person at the door, I was taken to a motor bike and held by the officer and driven to the airstrip and flown off the Island. I was taken from Cape Barren in

October 1959 [aged 12]. I had no knowledge [I was going to be taken]. I was not even able to see my grandmother [and I had] just the clothes I had on my back, such as they were. I never saw mum again.

To all intents and purposes, I guess my grandmother was looked upon as my mother in some respects because of my association with her and when I was taken there are actual letters on my file that indicate that she was so affected by the circumstances of my being removed from the Island that she was hospitalised, and was fretting and generally her health went on her. A nursing sister on the Island had my grandmother in hospital and she was in fact writing letters to the Welfare Department to find out, you know, how I was getting on and that sort of thing, and asking if I could go back to the Island for holidays. That was refused. My grandmother was removed from the Island and placed in an aged-care hospital, and I was taken to see her and when I did she had basically lost her mind and she did not know who I was...

There is a consent form on [my] file that mum signed and it did include [my sister and my two brothers] - and their names were crossed out and mine was left. I do not know whether it was because I was at the top or not. I might add that most people that I have spoken to said that mum, whilst she could read her name, could not read or write, and obviously would not have understood the implications of what she was signing. [It] has been witnessed by the schoolmaster."

A PROCESS FOR REFLECTION

- Listen to a song by an Indigenous artist on the experiences of the Stolen Generations.
- Recall when you first became aware of the forcible removal of Indigenous children from their families. How did you find out? What did you think about it? What did you feel?
- When you read the stories on this sheet, what do you feel? What do you think?
- Read one of the stories again, slowly. Place yourself inside the story imagining that you are one of the characters. Perhaps you are the child being taken away, or perhaps the mother or another relative. What do you see? What do you hear? How do you feel?
- What do you think and feel about the separation of Indigenous children from their families today?