



George's STORY

George came to Four Flats in 1977, just months after it opened. This is the only voice of a resident we have from that time. In 2007 George returned to say thank you for what had been done for him all those years ago. This is his story.

FIRST-BORN children are often the most adored. But Annie's first baby, George, was born with a turned eye. She was deeply ashamed of him. He remembers her shouting at moments of inexplicable rage "You are a freak!" Perhaps she felt guilt and grief at having produced a less than perfect child. She abused George and his brother, physically and emotionally, and when George was eight years old they were taken into care and placed in a boys home. Annie's daughters remained at home with her. George went to high school near the orphanage and his memories of that time are painful. He was bullied and taunted for his eye condition and because he was "an orphanage boy".

George's parents had separated when he was very young and his father went to work on the Snowy Mountains Hydro-electric Scheme, occasionally returning to the district. One day he bought his eldest son a bicycle. George took the bicycle to school and suddenly everyone wanted to be his friend and ride his new bike. This sudden popularity was a new experience for George. He could not deny anyone a ride on the bike. No matter how roughly they rode it over the bumpy dirt roads on the edge of town, George would give his bike up to anyone who asked. Before long it disintegrated. In his desperation to win back his popularity he stole two bikes. With two, he could ride with a friend.

He was arrested and charged with theft. He was given a three-year sentence, reduced to eighteen months on appeal. He didn't understand why he had been treated so harshly. Country magistrates were well known for handing down harsh sentences in rural towns where a long sentence would get "rid of the problem", at the same time sending a signal to others: don't offend in this community.

George was transferred to Langi Kal Kal and he remained there for the full eighteen months. During this time he had no visitors. His mother did not reply to letters from the administration at Langi Kal Kal, asking if she was prepared to take him back home on release. By this time George's father had returned from New South Wales and was living in Gippsland again. He later told George that he did not visit him because he did not know he was in custody. Because there was nowhere for him to go, George remained in custody for the full term of his sentence. Towards the end of his time, Peter Norden and Alex Firmager visited him at Langi Kal

Kal and invited him to Four Flats for a weekend to see if he would like to come and live there. He vividly remembers the visit.

I had nowhere to go and no one I could turn to outside of the institutionalised system... In other words - no choices!

After a very encouraging three days at Four Flats, meeting the other residents and getting a feel for the place, they offered me the option of staying for up to three months. "Until you can establish some independence," they stressed.

George stayed for four months. During his time there, he went out at night with the other residents and discovered a world he had never known - the city life of pubs, discos and rock concerts. He loved going to hear bands playing and Alex Firmager gave him some guitar lessons, showing him some basic chords.

He left the hostel at the end of October 1977 and drifted for a while. He was sleeping rough and still hanging out with other residents from Four Flats. However he kept in contact with the staff at Four Flats and in

December he visited the hostel and the staff saw he was struggling to get his life together. He decided to leave Melbourne and move to Adelaide where he was offered a job as a lighting assistant in a theatre. He stayed there for some years.

George went on to become a professional musician, releasing a CD which has sold over 70,000 copies. He toured the world promoting his music. He now lives in Melbourne with his partner and has published several books. He is currently writing his autobiography. He talked of his time at Four Flats.

Offering me that "choice" equated to trust in my eyes, which also translates to belief - a belief that I could do something productive, and not be stuck playing the hand life had dealt me to that point.

In being given this choice, I recognised and appreciated that someone believed in me, more than I did in myself at the time.

My stay at Four Flats gave me a vehicle to find my way forward.

George attempted a number of times to reconnect with his mother but she has continued to reject him. He did establish a relationship with his father and he visited him regularly as his health deteriorated. He regularly took him food and helped him with household chores. On one of these visits he told George that he too had been abused as a child. His father suicided at the age of 71. As George sorted through his belongings, he found a letter from Langi Kal Kal written in 1976, asking if he was prepared to offer George a home on his release. His father had never replied to the letter.

George's story is similar to that of many other Four Flats residents in his experience of abuse, neglect and institutional care. His life after leaving Four Flats is not so typical. Many did manage to make lives for themselves which were free from offending, but George's extraordinary success is far from the norm. His perspective on this is surprising. He said, "While I am not a religious person I do believe I have been blessed". His resilience and capacity to be so positive in spite of his experiences are perhaps a clue to why he did manage to make such remarkable changes in his life.

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