

## **RICHARD HILLMAN FOUNDATION INC. LAUNCH,**

By Matilda Bawden,

Welcome distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

I am delighted to be here today to talk about issues for which I have advocated over 10 years.

I grew up knowing who my father is. I grew up with a complete and unedited memory of who he is - the texture of skin, the warmth of his smile, the shame of disappointing him, the look of joy (and perhaps relief) on his face when I graduated, his tears when he gave me away at our wedding and his pride when he became a grandfather.

I grew up knowing of his love for me and having had the benefit of learning under his protection and guidance. I am proud to say my dad is here with us today.

Unfortunately, tens of thousands of children in Australia every year will never know what it is like to hug or kiss their father. They will never know what his family origins were or even what his profession or trade was. They will never know what it feels like to kick a ball with him or go to a theatre or concert with him.

**My main message here today is: To strengthen child protection, we must challenge the mythologies about males.**

For those who don't know, I am a Social Worker. My first experience in dealing with so-called "men's issues", happened when (as a new graduate) I was approached for an independent opinion by a father who maintained that he had been falsely accused of seven rape and incest charges against his then 5 year old daughter by the then Department of Community Welfare (now Family and Youth Services or FAYS).

Like most Social Workers, I too believed that if he was accused, he must surely be guilty, after all - first and foremost - he was a man. Besides, how could a team of social workers, police, doctors, Crown lawyers and psychologists get it so wrong???

Well, if not for his desperate pleadings, persistent phone calls and his insistence that he was innocent of the charges over some two weeks, I would probably have read his file once or twice and concurred with the opinion of all the other professionals.

So what changed my mind? Each time I read the file, I read it from the presumption of his absolute and irrefutable guilt. Then I tried a different approach - I began to ask myself, "Could he possibly be innocent?", "Could there have been a mistake by the prosecution's team?", "If so, could a guilty man walk because of sloppy investigative work by the government's team?" and "Was the so-called evidence of the man's guilt as contained in his file *the fruit off a poisonous tree?*".

When I read his file from the position of his possible innocence, the holes in the prosecution's case became so massive, one could drive a fleet of buses and several jumbo jets through it! So much so, it would be another 5 years later before the father would be exonerated by a front-page Sunday mail story.

This was the first of many cases for me in which the father would face false allegations of abuse and then been subjected to endless and relentless persecution by Crown lawyers. Often the Crown's case would be buoyed by stories fabricated by departmental Social Workers themselves and I can say this as I am a witness to some of those occasions when the false allegations would later emerge.

Identical practices have been exposed in many cities overseas around the mid-1980's, including England and Miami, Florida. We know from the practices we have observed that the verballing and interrogation of children under the age of five by our authorities, is common-place. Your 3 year old could be brought in for questioning on something entirely unrelated, but two or three hours later make disclosures you could never have imagined possible, much less plausible.

So my next burning question became, "What ideological, procedural, legislative or organisational culture could lead an entire team of professionals to behave like a *lynch-mob*?"

To answer the question, I had to start with myself, as I too would have succumbed to the same mentality.

Retrospectively, as I stand here today, I can attribute a range of factors and causes for why we have, as a community accepted a very indifferent and casual attitude to the separation of children from their families.

Firstly, as a community we accept the gender-feminist mantra - that all males are abusers; three in five women have been sexually abused some time in their life, and some 97% of domestic violence offences are perpetrated by men. With over 90% of Social Work students being female, it is hardly surprising that many are prepared to absorb such doctrines like a sponge; as if preaching to the converted.

With no "counter-feminist" perspective to balance this equation, new Social Workers are ill-placed for de-programming themselves. This is particularly so in a public sector culture where professional de-skilling is the order of the day and independent thought is rendered impossible if one is not to be the subject of professional suicide or reprisal for challenging the elite.

Another crowning achievement of the feminist movement has been the growth industry in women's services – generating hundreds of extra professional jobs (often for women) to deal with the apparent increase in reports of domestic violence and child abuse notifications. In these roles, the community has accepted them as champions not of oppressed, disadvantaged and down-trodden women, but almost always of all children!

Just ask those battered, oppressed and down-trodden women how much their lives have been changed for the better because of the feminist movement, when to this day they cannot access income support, housing, health care, respite, police protection, legal representation and other goods and services after they are forced to flee the family home.

The promise of feminism was:

- equality and equity,
- the elimination of discrimination, persecution and oppression,

but what we actually got was a direct transfer of the inequality from one gender to another.

Again, if you are a woman who finds herself needing such services – good luck!!!

For example, you will no doubt observe a pattern of stories regarding child protection, abuse or neglect to always lead the usually female journalist to advocate additional staff and resources to combat the ever increasing notifications of child abuse and neglect.

Just recently, *The Weekend Australian* in the *Weekend Inquirer* of June 8-9, 2002, at page 19, published an article titled “The Children We Write Off”. Several interesting things can be observed from this story.

Firstly, the article quotes a Social Worker asserting “These children are all abused – you pray none of them will die”. The story, as reported, would suggest s/he has not come across false allegations or malicious reporting of abuse.

Secondly, the article highlights the massive increase in notifications right across the country. For South Australia, in 3 years, this jump went from 10,000 in 1998 to 16,300 in 2001.

Curiously, however, the article also reports “Notifications are up in every state. Substantiations are down.” This being the case, we should all be asking the question, “Why, when notifications are so significantly higher than ever before, are substantiations on the decline?”. One could reasonably speculate that false or malicious reporting has also significantly increased.

This brings me to the third interesting observation about the position adopted by this article. It reports that in 1993, Western Australia held an inquiry into Child Protection. The major finding of this inquiry was the criticism of “staff shortages and high case loads”.

In 1999, a similar inquiry in Queensland also resulted in a finding of “cruelty and deprivation in Queensland’s under-resourced and isolated child institutions”. By 2002, the Queensland Ombudsman also found that there was “inadequate resourcing of child protection”.

This year South Australia is due to conduct a Child Protection Review, headed by Robyn Layton QC.

What concerns the Richard Hillman Foundation today is:

- That the TOR are seriously inadequate and fail to properly address the protection of our families and additionally suggest that the department is seeking to form a framework by which it can conduct social engineering.
- That submissions will only be read by four persons; 3 of whom are FAYS representatives, and

- With barely 4 weeks consultation, the limited time in which members of the public have to send in their submissions.

Like in Queensland and Western Australia, it would not be a huge stretch to pre-empt that (with input from government spin-doctors), the finding of South Australia's Review will also result in findings identical to those in the other states - largely arguing a case for more resourcing of the very Department which had in the case of Richard Hillman argued it owed no Duty of Care to parents **or the child**.

Late last year the former Attorney-General, Trevor Griffin, launched the "Inner Southern Collaborative Approach for the Prevention of Domestic Violence" project, with much fan fare. The sheer volume of documentation in the carefully prepared information kits handed out at the launch reinforced the "**women are victims**" premise. Yet this project upholds the ideal outcome of any DV interventions as that which ensures that the mother and children leave the family home, the father remains a dead-beat-dad, incapable of spiritual and personal growth and the children end up traumatized and dysfunctional. I, however, would suggest that the mother having to leave the family home and relationship should be regarded as the least desirable outcome of any tax-payer funded interventions. Shouldn't we, as a community, point to such low expectations of state interventions as an indicator of their ultimate failure and financial waste!

Instead, I would like to see some tangible responses for dealing with Domestic Violence, such as:

- The allocation of Housing Trust stock specifically for documented DV cases.
- Greater powers to Police for enforcing restraining orders in well documented cases of DV.
- Ready access to Centrelink benefits during the transition of family members from one living arrangement to another.
- Easy access to children's counselling services (especially within schools).
- Responsive mental health services which do not prematurely discharge patients without proper community supports.
- A recognition, in practice and official publications, that men can be "victims" of domestic violence and that women can be "perpetrators" of abuse, with equal access to appropriate "rehabilitation"/ counselling/ support services.

In conclusion, I was interested to find out that in a significant number of DV cases children were abandoning their mothers as they grew up - often either blaming them, re-establishing or strengthening their contact with their fathers and/ or severing contact with their mothers. What would we all learn if we could hear the voice and stories of those same children?