

## FINANCIAL REVIEW

### Making sure kids don't forget themselves

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**Julie McCrossin** on efforts to help foster children piece together their own history

When times are tough and the pressure is on, I draw on what I know of my family history. Looking back from the serene vantage point of middle age, the family stories about Dad's job as a Pathfinder pilot during the war help me feel that I can handle the relatively trivial pressures of a professional life in the media. Dad had to fly out ahead of the pack in Bomber Command and drop flares above German targets so that the Lancaster bombers coming behind could try to unload their deadly cargo with accuracy. With blood like that in my veins, I should be able to handle almost anything.

If I'm asked to do a job that makes me anxious about whether I've got what it takes, I remember that my English grandmother drove an ambulance during the London blitz. And my Mum not only completed war service herself, but she survived a life-threatening illness and then brought up five kids with hardly any help because Dad was engaged in an endless marathon of work. Stories of their courage stir my imagination and make me see my own potential in a positive light. I guess it boils down to a sense of identity.

But what if you knew hardly anything at all about who you were or where you came from? What if you were a "modern displaced person", as psychotherapist Juliet Harper from Macquarie University puts it, because you grew up in foster care and no-one had made the effort to preserve your life story?

This is the predicament faced by many children who are taken from their families by state government welfare departments because they are not safe at home, or because their parents have become ill or because there is no-one at home able to care for them.

In NSW alone, there are more than 7,500 of these children in care on any night of the week. Slightly more than 2,500 of them are in foster care and about 3,000 are in the care of a relative where there is payment or some kind of professional intervention involved. The rest are receiving other types of tax-funded support, such as a place in a church-run residential service.

A report issued earlier this year in NSW has revealed that many of these children develop big gaps in their knowledge about their history before coming into care. These gaps get bigger for the kids who go in and out of care, over and over again, often with different carers each time. More than 60 per cent of care episodes last six weeks or less.

The report, *Voices of Children and Young People in Foster Care*, was published by an ombudsman-style organisation, the Community Services Commission in NSW. It interviewed 66 children and the results offer a rare insight into what is happening to these children and how they feel about it. I say "rare" because the voices of these children are hardly ever heard. Substitute care is largely carried out in private homes. These children spend the greatest proportion of their lives without any external monitoring or supervision. The lack of systems to check up on them has been one of the most serious criticisms of a much-criticised sector.

The commission's report highlighted the lack of "life story work" being done for these kids. This involves gathering information about the people and events that have played a part in a child's life and putting it together to create some kind of coherent picture. Commonly it takes

the form of a book a bit like the kind of book many of us put together to remember an overseas trip. Or the scrapbooks that actors keep, full of their reviews and programs and snapshots, so that they can recall their career long after the footlights have gone out.

The commission reported that 75 per cent of the foster children said they knew "nothing" or "a bit" about their own history or birth family. Nearly 60 per cent had "no life story book or only one photo".

This research reveals a picture of children deprived of their personal history. More than 30 per cent don't keep in touch with their mother. More than 60 per cent are not seeing their father. More than 30 per cent have lost contact with one or more sibling. How can you develop an identity in adolescence, and come to terms with trauma, if you have only fragments of the facts?