

## EDITORIAL

### Archives, identity and survivors of out-of-home care

My childhood in care was one of constant physical neglect and abuse, psychological terror, and hard labor. It was one that can best be described as similar to prison life with a loss of family, identity, and dignity. That was my experience as a ward of the state in New South Wales where I belonged to no-one and where as a child I was denied basic human rights ...

Years later, at the age of 48, I received a package of files I had requested 12 months earlier from the Department of Family and Community Services in New South Wales. I was very sad to see the many letters from my father, my mother and my grandmother begging to be allowed to see me, begging for reports as to my wellbeing. The lack of compassion in the system was abundantly clear when my grandmother's heartfelt request for even a photo was denied. I knew that they would have felt extremely disappointed seeing replies from the authorities that simply said 'Linda is well'. They were told things like it would be disruptive for me to have any contact with them. Nothing could have been further from the truth and if only they had realised I was being told that I had been left 'to rot' because my parents could not take care of me. They were labelled as 'irresponsible' and 'no good' and comments from authorities about my mother saddened me very much as they described her as a troublesome nuisance. [extract from Submission 470 to the Senate Inquiry into Children in Institutional Care (Forgotten Australians), 2004]<sup>1</sup>

This special issue of *Archives and Manuscripts* turns its attention to the issue of access to materials of any type, and held in any form of archive, that relate to individuals and their quest for information about their lives. The specific focus of the articles is on those people who, for whatever reason, ended up in the care of an organisation rather than under the care of their family. The articles stem from work undertaken by archivists, historians and social workers, both locally in Australia and internationally, to help those individuals understand why so many of them had difficulty in getting access to records and, when they did get access, why they were so difficult to interpret. The International Council on Archives' (ICA) 2010 'Universal Declaration on Archives' pointed to 'the vital necessity of archives for supporting business efficiency, accountability and transparency, for protecting citizens' rights, for establishing individual and collective memory, for understanding the past, and for documenting the present to guide future actions';<sup>2</sup> yet for these purposes to be achieved, archives have to be accessible to those who need to use them.

There are two elements to access. The first is the process of discovery and comprehension, understood conventionally in terms of the development of finding aids and other archival guides. The article by McCarthy and Evans explores the development of a public domain web resource, 'Pathways', designed to help care-leavers in the state of Victoria to access information about their pasts, and articulates the principles on which it was based.<sup>3</sup>

This collection also provides an introduction to the second element of access: the legal authority to consult archives, a core issue for care-leavers, not only in Australia but in the many other jurisdictions where inquiries have been undertaken into past experiences of out-of-home care. The issue of legal authority is fraught. Principle 6 of the ICA Code of Ethics sets out the responsibility of archivists to ‘promote the widest possible access to archival material and provide an impartial service to all users’, yet in practice their ability to do this is tempered by Principle 7, the obligation to ‘respect both access and privacy, and act within the boundaries of relevant legislation’.<sup>4</sup> As the paper by O’Neill, Selakovic and Tropea makes clear, care-leavers have too often found that the existing legislation serves to limit rather than promote access and comprehensibility.

Most of the articles in this issue have their origins in ‘Who Am I?: The archive as central to quality practice for current and past care leavers (Forgotten Australians)’, a Linkage Project funded by the Australian Research Council, and a consortium of care-leaver organisations, government and community service agencies with responsibility for the records of adults who spent part of their childhoods in institutions or foster care. The Pathways web resource for care-leavers in the state of Victoria was a key output from the project. The ‘Who Am I?’ project explored the utilisation of the pluralised or fourth dimension of the records continuum as a means for establishing community coherence and knowledge sharing. Pathways was a direct public knowledge intervention as part of an action-research project and its establishment created an archival commons<sup>5</sup> that ultimately changed the way this particular community functioned. The learnings from this activity were distilled down to a set of ten principles for the creation of archival information services in the public domain.

The ‘Who Am I?’ project sought to identify the barriers care-leavers encountered when they decided to access their records and to make recommendations as to how this access might be improved. It drew on the knowledge of records creators, records holders and care-leavers to establish what people needed to know in order to make sense of their records and how current recordkeeping practices needed to change to support people who will seek to access their files in the future. As Swain and Musgrove explain, records play a central part in identity formation for people who grew up apart from the traditional memory-keeping structures of the family. Yet both the inadequacy of the original recordkeeping, and the barriers erected by interpretations of existing privacy legislation, mean that the search frustrates as often as it satisfies. One of the goals of the ‘Who Am I?’ project was to bring about change in the ways in which both records were shared and legislation interpreted, in order to maximise the information that could be made available.

The concept of the records continuum proved invaluable in the formulation of the project. Although the ‘Who Am I?’ project’s focus lay primarily on the fourth or outer dimension, the other dimensions were ever-present. Kertesz, Humphreys and Carnovale explore the ways in which the project was also able to focus attention on the first dimension, the creation of the records, working with social workers to understand how to create records today which will meet the needs of their clients throughout their lives. The project worked with the intermediate dimensions of the continuum as well, consulting with archivists and less formally trained records keepers to locate, document and safely store the records which care-leavers are seeking to access.

The ‘Who Am I?’ project was developed in response to the findings of the Forgotten Australians Inquiry, the third of what has now become a quartet of inquiries into past welfare practices in Australia. The first, *Bringing them Home*, investigated

Indigenous child removal, and the second, Lost Innocents, the British and Maltese children brought to Australia as child migrants. Forgotten Australians dealt with the experiences of local children in care, and the most recent is a Senate investigation into former forced adoption practices, whereby mothers and their now adult adopted children were separated as a matter of social policy, primarily between 1940 and 1975. The recommendations in each case focus on the importance of records, addressing issues around both safe-keeping and access. In the wake of the apologies offered to Forgotten Australians and former child migrants, the Commonwealth Government contracted the ‘Who Am I?’ team to produce the national Find & Connect web resource on the Pathways model. The recent adoption inquiry recommends that Find & Connect be extended to provide records access information for mothers and adopted persons as well.

Australia is not alone in undertaking such inquiries. The article by Sköld, Foberg and Hedström brings an international perspective to this collection, demonstrating the ways in which the Swedish Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse and Neglect in Institutions and Foster Homes used both archival and oral sources, arguing for their complementarity in the effort to complete the care-leaver’s story. In this post-apology era, archivists, in their roles at all point of the records continuum, will encounter people for whom records are vital to their reconstruction of an identity shattered by past wrongs. This special issue of *Archives and Manuscripts* presents, to an international audience, the findings of an innovative interdisciplinary Australian project, which has already been successful in bringing about substantial change.

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### Endnotes

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1. Submission 470, 30 October 2004, Senate Standing Committee on Community Affairs, ‘Inquiry into Children in Institutional Care’, available at <[http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary\\_Business/Committees/Senate/Committees?url=clac\\_ctte/completed\\_inquiries/2004-07/inst\\_care/submissions/sublist.htm](http://www.aph.gov.au/Parliamentary_Business/Committees/Senate/Committees?url=clac_ctte/completed_inquiries/2004-07/inst_care/submissions/sublist.htm)>, accessed 21 March 2012.
2. International Council on Archives, ‘Universal Declaration on Archives’, 2010, available at <<http://www.ica.org/6573/reference-documents/universal-declaration-on-archives.html>>, accessed 21 March 2012.
3. In November 2011, the Pathways website was relaunched as ‘Find & Connect Victoria’, available at <<http://www.findandconnect.gov.au/vic/>>.
4. International Council on Archives, ‘Code of Ethics’, 1996, available at <<http://www.ica.org/6573/reference-documents/universal-declaration-on-archives.html>>, accessed 21 March 2012.
5. See Scott R Anderson and Robert B Allen, ‘Envisioning the Archival Commons’, *American Archivist*, vol. 72, Fall/Winter 2009, pp. 383–400.