

Link-Up (Qld)

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Still Bringing Them Home

CEO - Patricia Thompson



Patricia Thompson

Welcome to the final edition of our magazine for the year. As usual we have had a very busy year and staff are looking forward to a well deserved break over the Christmas/New Year holiday period.

2019 will not slow us down. Link-Up (Qld) will be celebrating 35 years of service to our

Stolen Generations clients and to our communities. Link-Up (Qld) was established in 1984, in response to community concern about the number of people searching for their families. Our people were removed due to past government policies. Policies and laws which saw us forcibly removed from our families, our communities, our country and culture with the aim of assimilating us - causing insurmountable hurt and pain.

Link-Up (Qld) was established prior to the 1987 Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody and the subsequent Bringing Them Home Enquiry and Report in 1997. Our important work continues to enhance the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people by reuniting those who experienced forced separation – known as the Stolen Generations – we support their healing journeys and we are Still Bringing Them Home.

For Jennifer and Steven Hart though, we have not been able to find Sasha Mona Lisa Bond – Jennifer’s only child - born on 6th April 1978 in Melbourne. Their story is one that lingers at Link-Up (Qld) and while we were never able to achieve the outcome we sought and the healing journey they grieve for – it strikes at the heart of what we do and the journey we travel with our clients.



Steven, Jennifer and Patricia at The Healing Our Spirit Worldwide Conference

The Healing Our Spirit Worldwide Conference was held in Sydney in November 2018. Link-Up (Qld) produced a video presentation titled: **Searching for Sasha: Access Denied. The barriers in reunifying individuals and families of the Stolen Generations.** The presentation highlights Jennifer and Steven’s anguish about their lost daughter. It also highlights the barriers Link-Up (Qld) faced in accessing records in our search for Sasha Mona.

I want to acknowledge the tenacity of our Research Manager, Ms Ruth Loli for her dedication and commitment to Jennifer and Steven’s case. Ruth spent 7 years doing intensive research, exhausting all research avenues, reluctantly a decision had to be made to close the case.

Jennifer and Steven’s story is on page 8.

Cheryl Haines and Tarni Williams had the opportunity to attend the HOSW Conference in Sydney thanks to support from the Healing Foundation. This is what they said about being there:

“We both felt excited and apprehensive about the great opportunity to attend. We weren’t sure what to expect. There is a great vibe and aura of love at the gathering. There is also a strong feeling of unity demonstrated through talking to people, listening to stories and sharing experiences. It seems that Indigenous people from around the world are learning to overcome the shameful ignorance and arrogance of our oppressors. It’s emotional being here and we feel personally and culturally strengthened in our own healing journeys. We feel we are a part of a global cultural and healing awakening”.



Tarni Williams and Cheryl Haines at the Conference

Jennifer and Steve Hart - Cherbourg

Searching for Sasha: *Access Denied.*

The barriers in reunifying individuals and families of the Stolen Generations.



In 1978, Jennifer and Steven Hart had a daughter - that daughter, Jennifer's only child was taken away. 32 years later in 2010, Jennifer and Steven approached Link-Up (Qld) on one of our visits to Cherbourg and Jennifer signed up to be a client. Jennifer's request was straight forward; she stated poignantly in her application:

"I was born in Cherbourg. This process is about locating my daughter. She was born 7 April 1978 at Richmond Hospital, Victoria and taken away. I named her Sasha Mona Bond".

Jennifer's case is complex and it is unique. But it holds similarities with many of our clients in that it tells the story of Link-Up's service and the barriers Stolen Generations members face in accessing records to trace their histories and reunite with families - the trauma our clients go through in being separated and the disconnection that persists.

Finding Sasha was never going to be straight forward. Over the course of Jennifer's case, Link-Up (Qld) made extensive searches of many agencies. In total over 80 searches. We also embarked on a media effort in 2014 but this unfortunately did not yield any new leads.

Our Research Manager, Ms Ruth Loli has dedicated 7 years of intensive work on this case, exhausting all research avenues and despite these efforts, we were unable to uncover information about the circumstances of Sasha's separation - *what happened to her? - where did she go?*

Nor could we determine Sasha's current name, her identifying information, her whereabouts...we could locate nothing.

In some agencies, we made multiple searches over various years as we uncovered new leads or were unconvinced that a full and thorough search had been made. In other agencies, the outcome was unsatisfactory to an extent that we escalated the decision to the Freedom of Information Commissioner for review.

The complexity and difficulty in locating records in Jennifer's case falls behind two main barriers:

1. Agencies are fixed in their process and dictate a requirement of concrete details to make name based searches of their database only. However the details of Jennifer's case are hazy and there are a large number of variables in her case due to the exceptional circumstances and trauma surrounding the event. Searches need to be made applying a wide range of criteria but agencies are resistant and often unwilling to make a manual search of the records. The records are not on open access that we can search ourselves; the agencies essentially stand as gatekeepers.
2. Records have been destroyed or records have been withheld. What is demonstrated in this process is that privacy and confidentiality is only one element in determining access. Perhaps there is a layer of apprehension, an unease of what a release of information could lead to: **validation... accountability... compensation...?**

In 2013, we made a Freedom of Information application to Victoria Police seeking access to a 1978 Fitzroy

Police Station Staff List. This was the third FOI application we were to make to Victoria Police since the commencement of Jennifer's case in 2010. We were made aware of the List through liaison with a Sergeant at Fitzroy station who suggested the former officers on the list may have recollection of or be able to provide leads in Jennifer's case.

The official decision handed down by Victoria Police was that the Staff List does not exist. A further FOI application was made, this time with the proof of the list and with the named Sergeant willing to attest to the existence of the list, however, the decision remained the same and access was denied.

We brought the decision to the Office of the Freedom of Information Commissioner for review. Victoria Police made a submission in which it was stated, in part:

"... given the passage of time, and given the sensitive nature of the issues in question should current and former members of Victoria Police face questioning now, by the Applicant, regarding the application of government police in 1978, it is likely they will suffer distress and anxiety."

We were successful in our appeal and granted access to the Staff List in late 2014. It took 18 months to get one record.

A similar scenario played out with St Vincent's Hospital. Two FOI applications were made before escalating the matter to the Freedom of Information Commissioner. The Hospital was unyielding in their response that a patient name and a patient number is a requirement to make a search. A decision was handed down stating a record does not exist. This was based on a lack of time and resources to manually search Hospital archives; **it was stated that such a request would detract from the normal operations of the Hospital.**

This process from the initial FOI application spanned a period of 4 years and even with the involvement of the FOI Commissioner, we were unable to influence an outcome.

It is possible a record for Jennifer still lies there.

Our service at Link-Up (Qld) is guided by the **heart**. We honour our client's stories. We hold empathy for their experience and trauma. We provide services to facilitate healing. But agencies are so often riddled in red tape and there is **no heart** to meet client needs.

But it doesn't just come down to the agencies, it comes down to the individuals who are the agency contact points, the Freedom of Information officers or similar, who choose to block the process, be it through **idleness, racism** or through a **mere lack of initiative**.

They are the gatekeepers.

But just as there are gatekeepers, there are also individuals with heart, such as the Sergeant at Fitzroy station. He continued to assist in Jennifer's case for 5 years, going above and beyond his course of duties, making various enquiries and identifying new leads. At the time of Jennifer's case closure in 2017, he wrote an email, in part he said:

"...can I only suggest that an approach be made..... with your story as it is a compelling one. As I have said to you before, she woke up somewhere this morning! I am sorry that I could not assist further with the matter and sorry about the ongoing sadness of your clients. It is often on my mind."

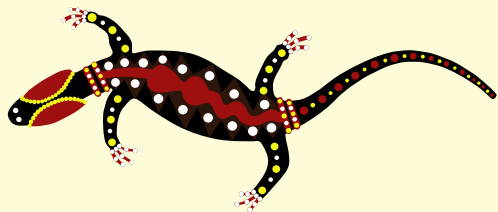
It has been 20 years since the findings of the Bringing them Home Report and access to records is still a broken system for Stolen Generations people. The Australian Government states a commitment to the reunification of families yet problems accessing the records we require persists.

Jennifer and Steven Hart's daughter is still out there somewhere - she will have celebrated her 40th birthday.

We need to open the path that she can find her way home.



Steven and Jennifer's wedding day at Cherbourg.



Link-Up (Qld)

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CERTIFICATION

Link-Up (Qld) Office Closure 20/12/2018 - 02/01/2019

These services are 24 hour helplines should you require counselling or support during the Christmas/New Year period.

- * Lifeline 24 hour Crisis Line 131114
- * Suicide Call-Back 1300 659 467
- * Kids Helpline (under 25 years and under) 1800 55 1800
- * DVConnect Womensline 1800 811 811
- * Mensline Australia 24 hours 1300 789 978
- * Blue Knot Foundation 1300 657 380
- * SANE 1800 187 263

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