

The lost children of Sydney



Wayne, four, and Natalie, two, are lucky. They live in better conditions than most other Aboriginal children living in inner-Sydney. However, they will have to face many of the same problems as they grow up. Pictures: Ern McQuillan

Katie arrived with a small carry-all. It didn't hold much. It didn't have to. Just a skirt, a cardigan, a few underclothes and a treasured chipped bottle of nail polish. She had run away from the children's home where she had been placed as a State ward. She was 12 years old but looked younger.

Tiny, lost, alone. She didn't smile. She didn't speak. Withdrawn, unhappy and trusting no one she had come to a rundown house in Sydney's Regent Street, Redfern. Maybe they would help.

The house, sandwiched between two empty buildings, is the Aboriginal Children's Service. Founded in 1976, to help Aboriginal children, it is run by Aborigines for Aborigines.

It has a staff of three, Vilma Ryan, a

Many of the Aboriginal children living in a city's inner suburbs have never known the comfort of a secure family life. They live in poverty and ill-health. Many turn to crime and alcohol. JENNY IRVINE reports on their plight

jolly motherly woman, is administrator. The field officer is Isabel Coe, young, active, energetic, quick to smile and laugh. Isabel is sister of Paul Coe, founder of the Aboriginal Legal Service. The third member of the team is Sylvia Scott, a tall, elegant, warmly compassionate woman.

Funding is minimal. The task enormous. The day Katie arrived the Federal grant had run out. The next grant was not due for two more months. "We'll make it," said Vilma. "We'll beg, borrow, cadge. We're not giving up."

There will be no salaries for the three women until the grant arrives. Any donations, any money raised from raffles, will go to the children. Salaries

are not considered priorities. Children are.

Vilma welcomed the child. "Hello, Katie. You sit down there. Want a coffee? Some milk? Something to eat? Now don't you worry. You're coming home with me tonight. We'll fix you up." Katie just sat there.

Vilma continued the one-sided conversation, ignoring Katie's immobile face and haunted look. Gradually the child relaxed. Then Vilma, judging the right moment, suddenly said: "Why did you run away?"

Katie spoke for the first time. She mumbled, barely audible, "I want to find my mum."

From the age of five Katie has been in and out of foster homes and institutions. A younger brother died of malnutrition. In harsh terms, starvation, Katie has had countless hospital admissions and surgery. She knows one of her brothers is in a boys' home at Melrose. She hasn't seen him for six years. She has other brothers. But she doesn't know where they are. There were only the repeated words: "I want my Mum."

There are some 20,000 Aborigines living in Sydney. Six or seven thousand are under 15. A large percentage of these children are living as State wards, fostered, adopted or in institutions.

"They hightail it to Redfern," says Isabel. "They know Aborigines live here. They hope through them they can trace a sister, a mother, a cousin, an auntie. Someone. Someone to love and love them."

The Aboriginal Children's Service came into being two and a half years ago. It was set up to help children cope with the agonies of living in an urban environment. It helps them on all levels—tracing families, caring for their health, giving them a pride in their heritage, a positive self-image and confidence as well as education and welfare. It also helps protect them from neglect, poverty, malnutrition and legal problems.

"We banded together to start our own welfare work for our own children," says Vilma. "We work closely with State Government departments, welfare organizations and related groups, but there is a very real need for Aborigines to look after their own. After all, we

understand the problems best. We've been through them too."

Father Ted Kennedy, a priest who has worked for many years in Redfern, pulls no punches about the plight of the Aboriginal child in inner Sydney.

"You can project his history. If he is in foster care or in an institution at five or

six, he'll emerge from the homes at 17, illiterate. He will most likely acquire a prison record. He will be an alcoholic by his mid-20s. At 38 or earlier, he will be dead."

The files of the Aboriginal Legal Service bear out Father Kennedy's grim statement.

"Most of the children going through the courts and in trouble with the law have a history of fostering, institutions or adoption in white homes," says Vilma.

For the child adopted or fostered by Europeans, there are unique, complicated and little understood problems.

"The child with the most difficulties is the child brought up as white, with no reference to his mixed blood or Aboriginal heritage," says Marianne Hoyd, a Canadian who works with the Department of Youth and Community Services as Allotment Officer.

"At one year he is a cuddly brown baby. At two he is aware. He hears neighbours saying to his adoptive parents: 'Isn't he lucky to have been taken by you.'"

"Even at his tender age, the child quickly understands that he is lucky, not that his parents are lucky to have him."

"He becomes terrified of doing something wrong, of not pleasing his new family, of being sent away," says Marianne.

At school he may be taunted, called "monkey", "nigger" or asked why he isn't eating witchetty grubs. But the child will keep this to himself. He doesn't confide. At home he is good, quiet, anxious to please. Too anxious.

When he reaches his teens a crisis occurs. A crisis for which he has had no preparation. The white playmates he has had for years suddenly disappear.

It is one thing to let your daughter or son play with a coloured child at five, six or 10," says Marianne, "but most parents are not happy to have their teenager dating a black girl or boy." Once accepted by his family's friends, suddenly he is an outcast.

The rejection for the teenager is bitter and bewildering. The situation is too much for him. He either withdraws into himself, becoming anti-social, distrustful and mentally disturbed, or he slowly but inexorably turns into a delinquent. Often he will go to Redfern. His white friends rejected him. The Aborigines mightn't.

"White parents cannot understand why their child suddenly disappears," says Vilma, "but the signs have been there for years, they just haven't seen them." Vilma can quote many cases of Aboriginal children arriving at the service with their skin cut by razor blades. "They try to cut off their black skin so they can be more like their parents or their white sister or friends.

They think it will make them acceptable. It makes you want to cry."

"There is no shortage of applications for the babies," says Marianne Hoyd. "But there is a shortage of the right sort of parents."

She is horrified by couples who apply for an Aboriginal baby and specify a shade. "Pale brown or light coffee," they say.

Sylvia Scott snorts: "You'd think they were buying a dress, not wanting a child."

The difficulties facing Aboriginal children are compounded by poverty and poor health.

Sickness begins early. The average white baby has no hospital admissions in its first year. By the time it is one, the average Aboriginal baby in Sydney has been admitted to hospital at least once. Twenty percent have four or more admissions, an average of 88 days in hospital, before their first birthdays.

In one survey carried out by the medical service, 25 percent of Aboriginal children under five suffered from mild to severe malnutrition. Seventy-five percent were below average weight and growth was retarded. There were high rates of deafness, ear disease, worms, mild to severe anaemia and intolerance to milk.

The children's service is battling on

all fronts to ease the plight of Aboriginal children in Sydney.

The day Katie arrived Isabel had just returned from court. A nine-month-old girl was about to be made a State ward. Her mother, only 17, crippled by poverty, overcrowding, unhappiness and finally despair, had disappeared. Isabel had found a couple — one white, one black — who wanted to adopt the baby.

She fought to have the case adjourned so the couple could be studied. She won. The baby will grow up in a happy, loving home. There is no danger of institutions or endless family-to-family fostering.

One major concern is the number of

children taken away from their families and made State wards.

"In some cases there is no doubt that the family is not in a position to look after a child," Dr Archie Kalokerinos, a member of the Aboriginal Medical Service and expert on mothers and babies, says.

"But too often authorities don't understand that most infants would be better off with their mother and families, although on the surface conditions may seem adverse." Some children are made wards of State when their parents or mother can no longer cope.

When faced with exorbitant rents (often \$30 or more for one room with no facilities in Redfern), no job and appalling living conditions, the family breaks down. Tragically many Aborigines have no idea of Commonwealth or State benefits such as Family Allowance or Unmarried or Sole Parent pensions. They are often ignorant of services like Baby Health Clinics and other welfare facilities.

In other instances the child becomes a State ward because the mother disappears. A young girl becomes pregnant. She has never known love. She looks to the baby for the love and security she never had. But a baby doesn't give security. It is dependent and needs security and love even more than its teenage mother. The girl, distraught, unhappy and in despair, runs away, leaving her baby behind. Sometimes the mother is just too young.

"One little girl we had was just 11 years old," says Sylvia. "She looked 11. She didn't look older. And she didn't even know she was pregnant. She sat in hospital nine months pregnant drawing lambs and bunny rabbits. If I could find the man who did this to her, I'd kill him."

A social worker believes that stereotyped prejudiced images of Aborigines play a large part in this type of tragedy.

"City Aborigines are so often dismissed," she says. "The man is labelled a drunk, a no-good. The girl is fair game and an easy lay." She pauses. "It is just not true. But young girls find themselves having sex. They don't understand what is happening. Probably in many cases they are raped. In other cases they want approval, love, affection. They are trying to please. They are just children. Not amoral fair game. But they are treated as fair game. It is a frightening, vicious circle."

Author Thomas Keneally tells the story of nine-year-old Andy Doyle. It is typical of many State ward cases.

Andy, adventurous and curious like other small boys, wanted to find out what smoking a cigarette was like. He scrambled into an empty building, pulled out a cigarette stub and lit it. There was a lot of builders' rubbish about. No one knows how the fire started but when police investigated someone remembered seeing Andy there. The police tracked Andy down and questioned him. Yes he had been there. Yes there had been a fire. He had been frightened. He had run away.

The police then asked the nine-year-old if he wanted a solicitor. He shook his head. He didn't even know what a solicitor was.

Three hours later Andy's grandmother arrived at the police station looking for him. She thought he had been at the Police Boys' Club as he usually was on Tuesday nights. She began to worry at 9 pm. By then the child had already been charged with being neglected.

In court the charge was dropped. Andy was obviously loved, well looked after and happy. The charge became truancy. A field officer for welfare found Andy had missed a lot of school and when she asked him if he had played truant, he nodded.

His grandmother didn't understand

what truancy was. Long after Andy was made a State ward and removed from home it turned out that he had been absent from school, not because he was playing truant but because he had been in hospital. Like many other Aboriginal children Andy suffered from mucous membrane infections and was often ill.

Andy is now in the high-walled, grilled and barred boys' institution at Ashfield. The legal process, the police and even welfare officers didn't understand the real problem of a small boy who simply wanted to have a cigarette.

"Once we were resigned to these sorts of cases," says Vilma. "Grimly, bitterly resigned. They happened. We couldn't understand it, but it was the way. But not any more. We're all fighting against this sort of thing. Maybe one day it won't happen."

Self-determination for Aborigines is the political catch-cry of the moment. It has become political jargon. But while it is still discussed in Government circles, the Aborigines in Sydney have been quietly, but determinedly, taking charge and taking positive steps to protect and look after their own.

The Aboriginal Medical Service battles with the severe health problems of Aboriginal babies, nursing mothers and pregnant women. The Aboriginal Legal Service works long hours,

counselling, giving advice, appearing in court and fighting for children and families in trouble.

The Aboriginal Education Council works closely with the Department of Education, setting up Aboriginal Teacher Aide schemes, encouraging Aborigines to become teachers, providing scholarships and involving families in education. It also fights for changes in the school curriculum and the inclusion of Australian native history and culture.

In Shepherd Street, Chippendale, one of the most successful of the Aboriginal-initiated schemes is underway. It is Murrawina, meaning "black women" in one of the many tribal languages. It is a pre-school for 40 children between two and five years old. Set up in 1972, it is a pre-school like no other. A bus collects the children from all over Sydney — as far away as Dulwich

Hill. By 9.30 am they are in classes. They are taught to read and write. They learn about Dream Time and Aboriginal history and legends. At noon they are given a hot meal. At 1 pm it is play time. The playground is a footpath. Funds only cover the rent of a house.

"It is our pride and joy," says Sylvia Scott.

"It attacks the problem of children in the city at base. Murrawina children grow up proud of their heritage, healthy and happy.

"The children's service on the other hand is a patch-up system for those who have been hurt and need help desper-

ately." The service hopes to open and run its own children's hostel.

"Not like an institution," stresses Vilma. "We want to have a place so we can give the runaways, State wards and lost children of Sydney a real home. One full of love, caring and warmth. A home with their own people, people like us who understand what they've gone through."

At this stage the hostel is still a dream. There is no money.

It is interesting to note that when an eight-hour telethon was held for abandoned cats and dogs in Sydney \$140,000 was raised. Sydney people gave generously. But donations to abandoned children with the children's service are less generous. Last year only \$2,000 was donated.

Dr Lewis Rassaby, who has worked with children and families in India and Israel, is the nutrition expert with the Aboriginal Medical Service. He is horrified by the general apathy about the terrifying problems facing Aboriginal children in Sydney in 1978.

The plight of the children, he says bluntly, is rooted in poverty, health, racism and apathy.

"I would be reluctant to make a comparison judgment between a starving child in Sydney and a starving child in India.

"Both are in dire need. But there is an appalling lack of regard by Australians to poverty on their own doorstep," he says. □