



**ARMS (Vic)**

**Association Representing Mothers Separated  
by adoption**



**SUMMER NEWSLETTER**

**January 2023**

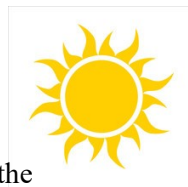
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# W elcome to our newsletter for Summer 2023.

Welcome to the New Year. If you are lucky enough you may be able to enjoy some of the Lunar New Year celebrations going on around Melbourne at the moment. It's always good fun. We are saying goodbye to the year of the Tiger and welcoming the year of the Rabbit. The weather has been quite summery this year. I live near the beach so have been able to really enjoy my sea visits along with the many holiday makers in my area.

In December 2022 we held our Annual General Meeting on Zoom once again, due to not being able to find a suitable venue within our price range! While this was very disappointing for mothers who were looking forward to being together, the bright side is those who cannot normally attend in person were able to join us online. This included interstate and overseas attendees. The meeting went very well, with a very interesting talk by our guest speaker Ange Karavidas, and we were pleased to welcome Jude Hudson to the Committee. Welcome, Jude.

2022 was a big year for ARMS (Vic), being the 40th Anniversary of the founding of ARMS. It's difficult to believe that 40 years ago some brave women were able to get together and discuss things that had only been talked about in secret before, if at all. They also very bravely took to the streets for our voices to be heard. During the 40 years the attitudes of our organisation along with those of each individual have grown and changed and developed. As time goes by they will continue to change. We hope that many members will be able to help us celebrate this milestone in a few months.

Please keep in mind the Forced Adoption Exceptional Circumstances scheme as mentioned in our Spring newsletter. We are fortunate to have a member who has experience in these kinds of applications who has volunteered to help any members who wish to apply for this funding. Please contact us if you would like her help. VANISH and RAV are also offering assistance if needed. We urge the Victorian Government to implement the redress scheme in a timely manner.

We have some articles in this newsletter written by adoptees. Adoptees are increasingly speaking out and letting the world know how adoption has affected them and how the search for and finding original family is for them. The tenth anniversary of the National Apology is coming up in March. We will keep you informed about how we will acknowledge it.

Grants continue to be on our agenda. We have acquitted the Banner Project and the first part of the Digitisation of ARMS' Records Project. We would like to thank RAV for giving us the past Grants with the funding made available from the outcome of the Recommendations made to the Federal Government.

Please remember to contribute to our newsletter. Dorothy does a wonderful job of sourcing material for our information and our healing. However we would love more contributions from mothers. If you have thought it and felt it, then chances are others will find comfort in knowing they are not alone in their similar experience. So take some time to think about this - you do not need to be a writer.

Thank you for reading my report.

*Faye Burnham, Convenor*



**DISCLAIMER:**

All contributions are presented with the aim of sharing ideas. Views expressed by contributors are not necessarily endorsed by ARMS

***Continuing the beautiful candle lighting tradition which Joy began many years ago, Marie lit the candles at our 2022 AGM:***

“You may have heard of the triple goddess – maiden, mother, crone. I have lit one candle to represent the maiden we were when we had a child taken. This candle ceremony is one way to acknowledge our motherhood – a ritual to help us fill a void and before I finish speaking I will light the other two. When I end, I will leave some time for us to reflect and then will extinguish the candles.

Today, as Christmas comes towards us - that ultimate expression of an unmarried family, I want to acknowledge the mothers of those children of ours who have died. When we carve out time to reflect on this grief, the focus is usually the initial loss and grief of having our child taken, because that trauma runs so deep and affects so much of our lives.

The loss in death has an additional quality to that of the baby taken. Taken, but alive and in someone else’s care, we can hope for the possibility of that child being found and connected with. In death, there is no longer hope. Now there are different items on the table of loss. There is no future possibility of repair or opportunity to build a relationship. There is no longer that voice to be heard or the moments that might arise to acknowledge *their* grief or the chance for us to demonstrate our love for them.

My child too, is dead and it is often said that time heals all wounds. I don’t believe that. I think we need to give this wound, like that first trauma, the respect of time, by which I mean to sit with the grief and explore its changing faces. It is not that the facts change - it is that as we move through the stages of womanhood, maiden, mother, crone we understand and experience those facts differently. This is not the same as expecting that time will heal. It was to us as the maiden that the crime of being robbed of our child happened. Our innocence was taken and we were betrayed by those we had most reason to trust. And, as if to mess with our heads even further, we continued to be treated as maiden when in fact we were mother. For too many of us,

this would be our only experience of motherhood.

How do we even begin to make sense of that tangled mess of emotions? The answer lies in how we give these losses the respect of time. One thing that compounded our grief and loss was the denial of it. Our family and friends didn’t gather around to acknowledge, there was no ritual, no outward symbol of all that had occurred to us. There was no baby shower, baptism, exchanges of birth stories. These things were missing and I believe it is only through community and conversation and ritual that we can understand the size and nature and impact of that loss.

I will light this second candle. It represents the mother and it also acknowledges the daughters and sons of our children who went before us. Untimely deaths. It is a symbol of their light in our lives and the many ways in which their birth changed us. It reflects our love for them, now unable to be expressed.



My son has been a beacon in my life and often unconsciously, my experience of him has directed so many of my decisions. He provided me with a moral compass and shaped my life in ways both known and unknown to me. I believe this is so for many of us. His death leaves me bereft and at the same time stokes the fire of my outrage that this damage has been done to both him and me and so many of us.

Time will not heal that and so I light a candle to my time as crone. Now I take time to remember, to regret lost opportunities, to acknowledge him, to understand myself differently and with more insight. I am grateful for the time I have left to act in his interest, in ARMS and for his child. I find I grieve differently for him now. The longing is not gone but it has changed.

I encourage all of us to create a ritual, perhaps as simple as lighting a candle on their birthday. This is for you, for your child. It confirms that it did happen just as we recall it, that we are deserving of this acknowledgement, that we have done as best we can with the cards we have been dealt and that we are entitled to grieve and have that grief acknowledged.”

## **2022 ARMS AGM – notes from guest speaker ANGE KARAVIDAS**

As has been mentioned, our AGM was held on Zoom again in December due to the fact that we were unable to find a suitable venue that was within our price range. This was very disappointing, as we thought the days of not being able to meet together were gone! However, there is always a silver lining – we were very pleased to have participants from interstate, regional Victoria, New Zealand and Scotland as well as Melbournians. And welcome to our new committee member – Jude Hudson.

Ange Karavidas, Manager of Adoption Information Services and acting Deputy Director of Operations, Adoption Services spoke about why AIS exists and what they have been doing recently.

Adoption Services operates under numerous pieces of legislation, the main one being the Adoption Act 1984. The Victorian Law Reform Commission tabled in Parliament a report on the Adoption Act on 7 June 2017 recommending a new Act. In December this year the *Adoption (Intercountry Fees) Regulations 2012* are due to sunset.

- ◆ We are working with funded services (agencies) following the implementation of new service agreements (2019-20)
- ◆ Continued improvements to targeted intake in the context of new service agreements
- ◆ We are working at better integration across the business records and services to people affected by past adoptions.
- ◆ Allow for better intersection management of the intersections between record and services to people affected by past adoption and the work arising out of the parliamentary inquiry.

On 1 October 2021 Victoria ceased approving adoption agencies and as a result the Secretary became owner of all “adoption related” records held by those organisations. Currently we do not know how many such records exist or in which state they are held. Since October 2022 Adoption Services has been able to share information. This addresses the fact that previously the Act did not allow for information sharing even where this would support the best interests of children, safety, or better service provision. This includes the development of sharing arrangements with entities including Aboriginal controlled bodies, child protection, hospitals, VANISH, VicPol, redress schemes and researchers. People access Adoption Services through the website, BDM call centre and through funded agencies. Each of these requires a review.

The Forced Adoption Exceptional Circumstances Fund is one of many steps the Victorian Government is taking to heal the harm caused by past practices. The fund will provide one-off discretionary payments of up to \$10,000 to mothers affected by forced adoption policies and practices in Victoria prior to 1985 who are experiencing terminal illness or other exceptional circumstances. To be eligible for this fund, you must be both:

- ◆ a mother impacted by forced adoption practices that occurred in Victoria before 1985, and
- ◆ experiencing exceptional circumstances.

You cannot apply for this funding on behalf of someone who has already passed. If you are critically ill, your application will be prioritised. It is difficult to provide a precise list of factors or scenarios that constitute ‘exceptional circumstances’. There is usually not one factor which makes a situation exceptional, but a combination of factors applying to everyone. Exceptional circumstances may include a terminal or critical illness, or other circumstances that are having, or will have, a significant and detrimental impact on your life, health or wellbeing over the next 12 months. It is important to remember that this fund is intended for those in immediate need. It does not have an impact on or replace any future redress scheme. If you are terminally or critically ill, your application will be prioritised. The Victorian Government is currently designing Australia’s first redress scheme for people affected by forced adoption. The Forced Adoption Exceptional Circumstances Fund is designed for people with exceptional circumstances before the redress scheme is established. It will not replace or affect future applications to the redress scheme.



Ange gave statistics on local and intercountry adoptions, followed by many questions and comments, one of which was being able to include a father's name on an original birth certificate. She also talked about mothers being encouraged to write letters and accounts of their experiences to be added to the records. It was heartening to receive an email from Jeannot in Scotland following the AGM, who said:

“Thank you for inviting me to your AGM. It was so interesting and helpful to hear how the records access is managed in Victoria. I will be mentioning that feature of adding our own accounts of our histories to records, during my next conversation with our Scottish government officials.”

*A most informative talk from Ange, for which we are very grateful. Jo Fraser*



As well as the ARMS telephone number **0400 701 621** the following committee members are happy to be contacted (between 9am and 9pm) on their personal phone numbers:

|                  |              |              |
|------------------|--------------|--------------|
| Faye Burnham     | 0411 865 836 |              |
| Jo Fraser        | 0409 442 701 |              |
| Dorothy Kowalski | 0411 098 773 | 03 9889 3583 |

*J M McRae has given ARMS permission to reprint part of her article about the reaction of adoptees to the book 'Lioness' by Sue Brierley.*

## **Adopters don't get to tell the stories of adopted people.**

**The dominant Australian adopter voice of  
'Lioness'; Sue Brierley.**

**The Australian adoptee community feels that Sue Brierley's loud adopter voice is wrongfully promoting the benefits of adoption.**

For decades, adoptees have endured an almost constant diatribe from entitled and often famous white women telling them adoption is so very 'win-win'. After decades of being gaslit by these 'experts' society and their adoptive families, adopted adults are pushing back against the fairy-tale telling of *their* lived experience.

Adoptees are adamant - "Adoptive parents do not get to tell our stories, they are merely bystanders to our lived experience. Their view of our world often comes from virtuous standpoints as the white saviour who rescued an 'unwanted' baby."

For many adoptees, Brierley is the frightening public persona that represents their own adoptive mother.

The biological stranger who held the steering wheel to one's understanding of themselves as an adoptee and of their adoption. The woman who did not want to know of the disquiet that was felt, the confusing sorrow at birthdays and the unspoken longing for their missing mother to come find them. Brierley is the face of the powerful adoptive parent narrative, that is the succubus of all Australian adoptee truth telling. Few have pushed back against Brierley's narrative, for fear of a spiteful backlash from Australia's powerful pro-adoptive community and those who are blindly trapped inside the fog that *adoption is beautiful*.

Historically, Australian adoptive parents have been entitled with a strength of voice that has controlled the adoptive narrative, and this has constantly undermined the human rights of biological mother-newborn relationships. It was on the insistence of adoptive parents, to successive governments during the interwar years, that *they* be given access to the newborns of the nation's unmarried teens and young women. What began as a money saving welfare policy to home orphans and changelings, quickly escalated into a steaming hot

market in babies. A wretched history followed. The secret mass incarceration of unwed mothers inside institutional homes, government hospitals and religious facilities. Tricked, bullied, groomed, medically violated and pharmaceutically coerced to accept the permanent severance from their newborn son or daughter. Known as adoptees, the newborn babies languished in Perspex tubs, for months, alongside dozens of other crib mates, failing to meet vital newborn attachment milestones, desperately waiting for their mother to return. Those who benefitted from this wholesale misery, were strangers, the adopters; married, white and economically 'stable', infertile couples or those who sought to finish off their family with a male or female book end baby. The wants and the storytelling of adoptive parents took precedence over the voices of young Australian mothers and their much-wanted offspring.

This power, to own others' children, emboldened adopters, who fought alongside others for the legislation of privacy vetos in the 1990s so they could prevent their adopted child from reuniting with their biological families. Many of these lifelong 'restraining orders' remain today, a cruelty which is difficult to understand.



**Adoption Memorial, Sale**

Adoptees are very much the quiet Australians, operating on the far-flung fringes of society, rarely revealing the true extent of their personal suffering, preferring to support each other within the safety of closed Facebook groups. These private online spaces swirl with stifling grief, multilevel mistrust, justifiable anger and posts often require content warnings to ensure the psychological safety of adoptee participants. Society rarely gives space to hear from these once voiceless miniature humans, especially when they contest the

malignant myth that 'adoption is a win-win'.

In the months after the release of *Lion*, Brierley's pro-adoptive point of view increasingly dominated the promotional interviews. Saroo's superhero determination to find his mother in India is increasingly sidelined to Brierley's grandstanding. The opportunity for society to understand Saroo's disquieted experience of transracial adoption is lost to the altruism of Brierley, who is convinced that Saroo's search quest holds equal importance against her lofty status as his adoptive mother. The media are entirely to blame, so is *Lion's* pro-adoption plot line, which holds a candle to Brierley as the long suffering and virtuous adoptive mother.

In 2020, with her fame fading Brierley published her memoir, *'Lioness'*. The title unashamedly, positions Brierley as THE mother of Saroo, and what a clever marketing ploy by Penguin/Viking to hook the book onto *Lion's* success. This calculated manoeuvre is also a thinly veiled attempt to decommission the parentage of Saroo's mother, Fatima who is his original and only Lioness.

Memoir is a powerful form of writing with which to reshape society's understanding of adoption, yet Brierley's book reinforces the dominant narrative that favours adoptive parents. The malignant myths that propped up Australia's decades long forced adoption era are used extensively by Brierley; adoption is a valid way to form a family, biological and adoptive kinship is equivalent, the difficulty of adoption in Australia and Brierley's 'natural' right to a 'begotten' family. The author even belligerently claims adoption is the cure all for overpopulation, environmental degradation, poverty, child neglect and abuse. These issues are inherently complex, adoption is simply not the solution.

Brierley's conviction that she is a rightful mother, entirely deserving to take the children of strangers as her own, is typical of adopters. In a 2020 interview with the *Guardian*, Brierley claims she is working against the 'mother myth', which is failing society and prospective parents, claiming that "We have got an obsession about birth mothers being the only true mothers" - an unsettling sentence and deeply disrespectful to all those mothers who have lost their son or daughter, no matter the circumstances. In this revealing comment Brierley fails to consider the importance of family preservation to the psychological wellbeing of the child.

International research informs us that a family formed via adoption is far more at risk of dysfunction; adoptees

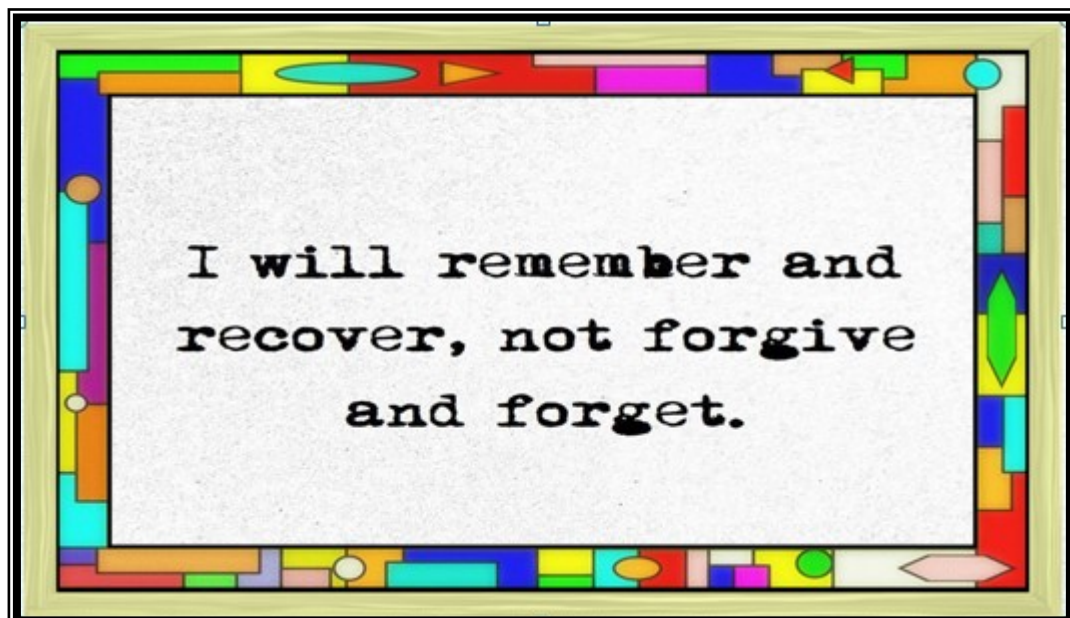
are exposed to a myriad of complexities which are not evident in biological kinships. We must start listening to researchers in the field but more importantly, to those who have lived experience as adoptees. Their testimonies of abandonment, pre-verbal trauma from mother loss, identity erasure and biological estrangement must be heard and not continually pushed aside as *a few angry adopted people*.

For survivors of Australia's past child trafficking practices, adoption is regarded as a very dangerous idea. Adoptees and their mothers are four times at risk of suicide and the full suite of mental health diagnosis associated with disenfranchised loss, grief and trauma. Adoption must cease and family preservation must be held as the highest pinnacle. The business of removing humans from their kin is as toxic to humanity as tobacco smoking, exposure to asbestos fibres and radium. For a healthy society we must preserve families before all other government budget requirements.

It's time for adoptees, domestic, and international to speak their truth and share their lived experiences so society has a better understanding of the harmful lifelong consequences that come from being removed from family. Let's put some long overdue balance back into the pendulum of adoptive truth telling. Brierley has had her say, now it is ours.

*The author is a former clinical community registered nurse, now adoptee activist from Western Australia who writes of her lived experience as a displaced person.*

*Editor's note: **Lion** is the 2016 Australian biographical film based on the 2013 non-fiction book *A Long Way Home* by Saroo Brierley. Sue Brierley was played by Nicole Kidman.*



## ARMS (VIC) CALENDAR 2023



### SUPPORT GROUP MEETINGS

*Shame dies when stories are told in safe places*

Ann Voskamp



### 1<sup>st</sup> Saturday of every month (except January)

|                              |  |           |
|------------------------------|--|-----------|
| January 2023                 | NO SUPPORT GROUP MEETINGS  |           |
| 4 <sup>th</sup> February     | St Augustine's Church  | 2pm – 4pm |
| 4 <sup>th</sup> March        | St Augustine's Church  | 2pm – 4pm |
| <b>21<sup>st</sup> March</b> | <b><i>10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of National Apology #</i></b><br><b># Details for this important anniversary will be advised #</b> |           |
| 1 <sup>st</sup> April        | St Augustine's Church  | 2pm – 4pm |
| <b>6th May</b>               | <b>Special Mothers Day venue to be advised</b>   |           |
| 3 <sup>rd</sup> June         | St Augustine's Church  | 2pm – 4pm |

### St Augustine's Church 631 Bourke St Melbourne

Bourke Street is in the free tram zone

**Trams 86 and 96 both stop at Stop 1 (Southern Cross Station).**

St Augustine's is a two or three minute walk from the Southern Cross Station.

There will be a yellow ARMS notice on the front gate at St Augustine's with Jo's and Dorothy's mobile numbers.

**All mothers are welcome to attend Melbourne support groups. If you can't be there in person, ask Jo Fraser 0409 442 701 for a Zoom invitation.**