



## NEWS BULLETIN MARCH 2017

**Dear VANISH members, service users and supporters,**

Hello and welcome to our bulletin for March 2017. VANISH sends out bulletins when we have updates to share before the next edition of VOICE is published. This month we have some announcements, a review of the movie LION by Dr Sue Green, and we are sending you a card commemorating the National Apology for Forced Adoptions.

Kind regards, Charlotte Smith, Manager

### **New Search Service for People Affected by Donor Conception**

In December, Minister Jill Hennessy authorised VANISH Inc. as the search agency for the implementation of the Amendment of the ART Act 2016 which came into effect 1 March 2017. VANISH is delighted with this outcome and sees it as a natural extension of our advocacy for the rights and needs of people affected by past donor conception policies and practices. We also view it as an affirmation of the quality services that we have been providing since 1990 when first funded by the then Department of Human Services to provide post-adoption search and support services.

The ART Act 2016 is ground-breaking and we congratulate the individuals who dedicated so much time and energy over the years advocating for the rights of donor conceived persons to know their identity, in particular those who courageously shared their personal stories to promote greater awareness and understanding of the issues. The new Act is known as 'Narelle's Law' named after the late Narelle Grech who spent 15 years searching for her biological father and campaigning for openness and transparency. Sadly Narelle died of a hereditary cancer in March 2013 before this law came into force. Thanks to an intervention by the then Premier Ted Ballieu, Narelle found out the identity of her biological father and met with him a few weeks before she died.

The responsibility for handling applications lies with the Victorian Assisted Reproductive Treatment Authority (VARTA). The Central Register and Voluntary Register will be transferred from the Victorian Registry of Births Deaths & Marriages to VARTA. The team at VARTA will be on hand to provide support and counselling as required. While pioneering, the amendment is complex, it allows for donor conceived people to apply for the identifying information of their donor(s). Once they have applied, there is a four month period in which the donor is to be located, informed of the application, and invited to record his or her preferences regarding contact. If he or she cannot be found within that timeframe or does not respond to the outreach then the identifying information is released to the donor conceived person. If the donor is found and contact is made, he or she then has four months in which to respond. In cases where a donor is not located and a donor conceived person, having received identifying information, is able to locate them, the donor conceived person is required by law to provide the information to VARTA so that an outreach can be made. Under the Act it is an offence for the donor conceived person to make direct contact with their donor without a formal outreach having been made. This provision to safeguard donors is not dissimilar to laws that were implemented in various States' adoption laws, although in most states (but not all) contact statements and vetoes have since been removed.

VANISH will undertake searches requested by VARTA through a Memorandum of Understanding. The search results will be provided to VARTA so that an outreach can be made. VANISH is being funded by the Department of Health and Human Services to provide this service and will report to the Department and VARTA on progress. If you have any questions or would like to discuss this service, please contact the Manager, Charlotte Smith.

## National Apology for Forced Adoptions – Commemorative Postcard

This year VANISH has produced a commemorative postcard for members of the community who wish to be reminded of an important event in our history, when the Prime Minister Hon Julia Gillard stood before a large audience at the Great Hall of the Parliament House and all those watching from satellite locations or from their homes, and offered the National Apology for Forced Adoptions.

We wish to acknowledge that this apology came about due to the tireless efforts of many individuals and organisations across Australia, all of whom deserve recognition. For many the apology brought recognition, relief, understanding and healing. For others it stirred up difficult feelings or raised further questions. The apology was offered to each and every person affected – to be accepted by them or not, according to each persons' choice.

The commemorative postcard depicts an original painting by artist Dominika Darowna of forget-me-nots, which are also the symbol used for the Victorian Parliamentary Apology for Past Adoption Practices. The intention is to convey the feelings many of our service users share when they talk about the family members from whom they were separated – they are remembered, thought of, yearned for, wondered about and definitely not forgotten. We hope you find the postcard a suitable keepsake to remind you of the Apology and all that it means to you.

## Evaluation – VANISH Wants Your Feedback!

As reported in our last issue of VOICE (summer edition), VANISH is undertaking an evaluation of our services. This will involve carrying out surveys with service users, partners and other stakeholders, as well as asking service users to complete a feedback form after they receive a service from VANISH. We would be very grateful if you would participate - we would like to hear from you if you are currently receiving services from VANISH or have received services from VANISH in the past.

All responses will be confidential and securely held. Analysis of collated data will be reported to the VANISH Committee and the DHHS. An overview of findings will be published in future newsletters.

If you would like to complete our survey please follow the link  
<http://www.surveymonkey.com/r/VANISHServiceUserFeedbackSurvey>

### Committee of Management Vacancy

#### TREASURER

**(voluntary role with monthly meetings in Melbourne)**

VANISH is seeking a Treasurer to join the Committee of Management. The Treasurer is responsible for the financial oversight of VANISH operations, including ensuring that financial policies and procedures, budgeting, record-keeping and accounts comply with statutory and funding body requirements. He or she will work with the accountant in preparing the budget and preparing accounts for audit, and will report regularly to the COM and to the AGM. The Treasurer is expected to attend ten Executive meetings (5pm to 6pm) and COM meetings (6pm to 8.30pm) each year on the fourth Wednesday of every month except December and the AGM in September.

VANISH is seeking expressions of interest from individuals who:

- *are qualified and experienced in accounting and/or finance*
- *possess relevant Board/Committee skills and experience*
- *are aligned with VANISH values and policy positions*

It is VANISH policy to undertake a police and referee checks prior to appointing all employees and volunteers.

Please send your expressions of interest to The Chair, Penny Mackieson via [info@vanish.org.au](mailto:info@vanish.org.au). If you wish to discuss this role, please email the above address and a Committee member will be in contact with you.

## New Counselling Service in Warrnambool and Geelong



The experience of family separation and adoption can impact in many ways on the life of an individual and their wider family and social relationships. A sense of grief and loss, challenges to a sense of self, feelings of not quite belonging or feelings of shame and anger, are some of the issues that can be faced from time to time. These feelings can be triggered by life events such as the birth of a child, reunion with a family member, moving house or the loss of a loved one. They may have little to do with the quality of current relationships or past care received as a child. Feelings may be recurrent over time and can be wearing.

Since 2013 VANISH has provided free and confidential counselling services by telephone and face to face at our North Melbourne office. This service is now available in Warrnambool and Geelong, with a highly qualified and skilled counsellor who has many years of experience of supporting individuals affected by family separation and adoption.

*"I had a really good feeling with you (and I don't say that lightly), so I'm very happy and grateful to have found you" (Counselling service user 2016)*

To make an appointment or to discuss any matters related to counselling, please call VANISH on (03) 9328 8611 or 1300 826 474 during business hours and talk to the Counselling Coordinator or one of the Search and Support workers. Alternatively you can email [info@vanish.org.au](mailto:info@vanish.org.au)

### Support Groups – Date Changes for Easter

Next month, some of the regional support groups fall on the Easter weekend so they have been moved to a different date. These are:-

Traralgon Adult Adoptees Person Only Group—please contact VANISH for further information.

Mildura Mixed Group will now be on **Saturday 22nd April** at the Sunraysia Disability Resource Centre, 159 Langtree Avenue, Mildura.

Ballarat Mixed Group will now be on **Saturday 22nd April** at the Eastwood Leisure Complex, 20 Eastwood Street, Ballarat.

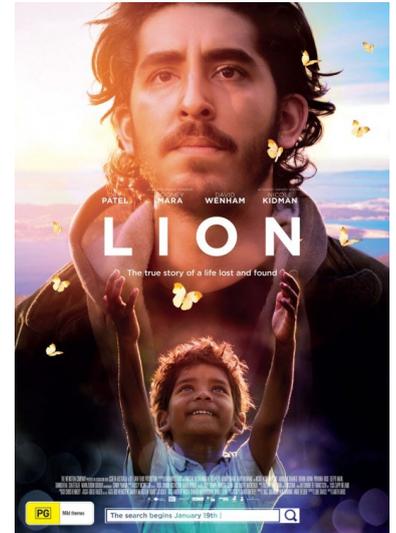
Mixed groups are for Adoptees, Natural Parents, Adoptive Parents and other family members.

## The Movie 'LION' - a Review of Loss to Adoption.

by Sue Green

*Dr Sue Green is a psychologist, mediator and trainer, and an adopted person. During the 1980s, Sue was Convener of the group Origins, Advocacy and Kinship (OAK) and lobbied for the opening of closed adoption records in the Victorian Adoption Act 1984. In 2014 she developed and delivered the VANISH Counsellor Training Program. Sue currently serves on the VANISH Committee of Management.*

LION is based on the memoir 'A Long Way Home' written by Saroo Brierley. Saroo was born Sheru Munshi Khan and lived with his mother and siblings in Ganesh Talai, a district of the city of Khandwa, then adopted from India at five years old and raised in Tasmania. Beautifully acted, shot and written, the film tells the story of how Sheru became lost in a city far away from home and his harrowing time on the streets and in a juvenile detention centre. Deemed to be a 'lost child' he is flown to Australia and introduced to his new adoptive parents, Sue and John Brierley and later is joined by his adoptive brother Mantosh, also from India. In his mid-twenties Saroo has flashbacks of his life with his mother, Kamla and brother and sister and he begins an obsessive search which takes six years to find his lost family and eventually leads to him reuniting with his mother and sister.



LION's film critics and media publicists have depicted Sheru/Saroo's adoption as a double edged sword. Namely, on the one hand the loss of his identity and his longing for re-connection with his family of origin, and on the other hand his adoption being an act of virtue giving him a new life. This leaves viewers to draw their own conclusions. It also raises the question - how well does the film advance the general public's understanding of the complexity, loss, grief and trauma associated with transracial inter-country adoption?

There have already been three excellent reviews of LION which respond to this same question, by Lynelle Long of InterCountry Adoptee Voices<sup>2</sup>, Thomas Graham, Editor of Ipsify (formerly the Australian Journal of Adoption)<sup>3</sup> and Angela Barra, adoptee activist and commentator<sup>4</sup>. All three provide a well-reasoned analysis of the film from both a political and personal perspective and are highly recommended reading. My review draws on their work, the memoir, and also recorded interviews with Saroo, Sue Brierley and Kamla (Fatima) Khan.

### **Part One: Becoming Lost to Adoption.**

The film is powerful in depicting the loving, close relationships that exist in Sheru's family alongside the extreme poverty. His relationship with his older brother Guddu whom he worships, is joyous and fun and his beloved mother Kamla is caring, nurturing and self-sacrificing. Then there are scenes of sheer terror and loneliness experienced by young Sheru when he is accidentally separated from his brother and becomes entrapped on a decommissioned train which travels 1600 kilometres. After some days he arrives in the crowded station of Kolkata where he can't speak Bengali nor communicate his family name or the suburb he comes from. It is here that Sheru, because of his pronunciation, becomes known as Saroo. He is lost and alone and has to fend for himself amidst the dangers of child kidnapping and trafficking before being placed in an overcrowded and abusive detention centre for children. The trauma he experiences is palpable as is his resilience and instinct for survival.

Sheru was 'lost' because poverty meant his deserted mother worked long days carrying rocks for very little income. Her children could not attend school and were unsupervised, and Sheru and his brother needed to scavenge for food to survive. The cruel irony, not shown in the film, is that eventually, after the tragic loss of two of her sons (Guddu is killed on the railway line), Kamla could afford to send Sheru's eldest brother Kallu and youngest sister, Shekila to school and they were able to escape the cycle of poverty for themselves and their families. It can be argued that had basic family income support been available to Kamla, Sheru could have been kept safe. This is one of the many 'what if' questions in Sheru's journey.

Thomas Graham points out that Sheru was deemed lost by the police, he was not an orphan, which is the case for many children in orphanages. Angela Barra notes that Sheru was adopted through a private agency that survived on payments for arranging adoptions and comments *"I couldn't help but wonder what if this was an Australian child that went missing"*, she goes on to quote Patricia Fronck *"Surely you would expect no stone to be left unturned to find your child - even if took six months, a year, or two. But how would you feel if your child was permanently given to someone else before this happened?"*<sup>5</sup> The poignant scene where Sheru asks the social worker at the adoption agency whether she had really looked for his mother reinforces this important question.<sup>6</sup>

In the memoir we find that the adoption of Mantosh, Sheru's adoptive brother, was delayed as checks were undertaken and meanwhile he was sent back to the juvenile centre by the adoption agency where he was abused. Sue Brierley, his adoptive mother, has said that had he been adopted earlier this abuse may have been prevented.<sup>7</sup> This commonly used argument to increase and speed up adoption as the solution to poverty and lack of in-country child protection and welfare systems does not address the need for improvement in the child welfare system in India and sweeps aside the importance of safety checks.

### ***Part Two - The Chosen Child's Divided Sense of Self.***

In the second part of the film, it commences with Saroo deciding to search for his family. Perhaps not to lengthen the film, LION does not depict how he lived with his loss, grief and trauma as a child and adolescent or whether he experienced the taunts and racism in his small white community that so many intercountry adoptees report. It does show the problems his brother Mantosh faces as a child and then how he struggles to achieve a satisfactory adult life. Craig Mathieson (Sydney Morning Herald January 15, 2017)<sup>8</sup> points out that *"One of the picture's problems is the feeling that Saroo is living out a storybook life... Saroo has no issues with his Australian upbringing, and LION is unfortunately too cautious in examining his life... There's too much affirmation."*

Whilst it is true that many adoptees only feel they can search when they move away from home or their adoptive parents are deceased, LION seems to imply that Saroo's feelings of loss, grief and longing only surfaced when he moved to Melbourne to study and met other Indians. The film does convey how Saroo had no real sense of his birthplace, for example his statement *"I am adopted, I am not really Indian"* powerfully communicates the identity confusion many adoptees experience. However, although his ongoing disenfranchised grief is hinted at in a few scenes, there is not enough for non-adopted people to understand how adoptees experience the divided self. That is, the false self that plays the 'as if I belong' game, seen as the 'good adoptee' who is selfless in the desire to please, compliant in meeting expectations and afraid to express or share their feelings of sadness or anger for fear of losing or hurting their adoptive parents. On the other side of the divided self is the forbidden self, who feels empty within and guilt and disloyalty for longing to know their family of origin and culture<sup>9</sup>. In interviews Saroo reported that throughout his childhood he thought of his mother and brother in India every day and experienced flashbacks often triggered unexpectedly by music, smells and sounds<sup>10</sup>, this is not conveyed in the film.

One scene where the battle of the divided self is well demonstrated is at the dinner table when Saroo tries to conceal that he is searching for his adoptive parents and he says to Mantosh *"You are not my real brother."*<sup>11</sup> It is as if the false self and living a lie has become too much for him and the forbidden self breaks out, much to the disapproval of his adoptive mother Sue who quickly shuts down the conversation. The general public, as did his mother Sue Brierley, may think that Sheru/Saroo was just being cruel and rejecting of his adoptive brother rather than understanding the inner rage of living within the artificial self.

On the surface Saroo appears to be being cruel and rejecting of his adoptive brother, however I would suggest a deeper understanding is required of Saroo's inner rage of living within the artificial self, including his inner torment over losing his natural brother Gaddu whom he loved dearly, and the denial of this pre-existing relationship. This split loyalty seems to remain unspoken, disenfranchised and even taboo within his adoptive family.

Lynelle Long discusses the impact of being a 'chosen' and the constant need for adoptees to reassure their adoptive parents of their gratefulness and loyalty<sup>12</sup>. The film depicts this well in one scene where Saroo visits his adoptive mother Sue Brierley who is feeling despondent at Mantosh's ongoing trauma and failure to achieve wellbeing. The implication 'that love is not enough' is superficially contrasted with Saroo's adoption which is portrayed as affirming. Saroo expresses sympathy to her that his parents could not have biological children, to which she responds that they could have but it was their choice to adopt<sup>12</sup>. Saroo is then seen walking to his car and experiencing rage at the irreconcilable predicament he feels. There is the absolute inner need to find his

family, the unfathomable heartache experienced in wanting to reassure them that he is alive and well on the one hand and on the other hand his compulsion to protect his adoptive mother from being hurt by this need. As Saroo says to his girlfriend Lucy who is the only one he can share his torment with *"It would kill her (his adoptive mother) if she knew I was searching"* and then goes on to say *"My real brother and mother spend every day looking for me. It's the pain of them not knowing where I am whilst we swan about in our privileged lives."*<sup>13</sup>

Saroo spent six years searching without telling his parents and attempting to maintain to the outside world that he was okay. The film captures very well how obsessive and overwhelming the search process can be. He retreats from contact with his adoptive family, his relationship and his ongoing career and is consumed by intrusive and distressing memories, flashbacks, hyper-vigilance to triggers, excessive and persistent feelings of guilt, difficulties in experience positive emotions, irritable behavior and angry outbursts, poor concentration and difficulties in sleeping. Despite his methodical searching, he randomly found his village one night when in despair he ended up clicking on the map outside the radius where he had been looking. Saroo says in interviews that if he weren't successful, he would have kept on searching. However, one does wonder how his mental health would have fared over time if he had not been so 'lucky'.

### **Part Three - Another Mother's Loss and Grief.**



The third part of the film depicts Saroo's reunion with his family and village with equal portions of tragedy and joy. Although her relief is palpable, the film does not explore his mother Kamla's life after losing her two sons, her grief is disenfranchised and unacknowledged. We know from his memoir and her reports that, like so many mothers of missing children and adopted children, she suffered daily. In fact she says that she died every day that he was missing<sup>14</sup>. She visited a mosque every week to pray that she would see her son again and at the reunion stated the *"happiness in my heart was as deep as the sea. I experienced heaven on earth when I met him."*<sup>15</sup> This begs the question of whether LION has fully conveyed that the 'gift of a child' to the adoptive parents was a traumatic loss for his Indian mother, continuing for over twenty-five years.

Kamla's other children had offered her better accommodation near them as they moved away from their small village but she had refused to move. As Saroo says in his memoir: *"Just as my search for my mother had in some ways shaped my life, her faith that I was alive shaped hers. She couldn't search, but she did the next best thing: she stayed still. She had wanted to stay near the house she had been living in when I disappeared, so that if I ever returned I would be able to find her"* (p 231)<sup>16</sup>. It is noted that in making the movie the cast of local people cried and clapped when Saroo reunited with his mother illustrating how losing Saroo affected a whole village community<sup>17</sup>.

### **Conclusion – Contradictory messages**

A key message from the film is that the best thing for adoptees and prospective adoptive parents to do is follow their visions and dreams. Saroo's miracle of finding his Indian family in a vast continent of over one billion people can be seen as a simple success story with a happy ending. Saroo has talked about the weight of longing and loss that needed to be lifted from his shoulders. He says the main message of the film is *"... about empowerment and understanding for anyone in my situation. There are other people out there that are in the same situation, not understanding what their thoughts, feelings and their dreams are telling them. You must not suppress or diffuse these but listen to them. Otherwise if you don't, it will stick with you and before you know it you will be too old, so listen to your heart and your dreams"*<sup>18</sup>.

For prospective adoptive parents, in the film, the book and in interviews with Sue Brierley she said she had a vision when she was young of providing a home to a suffering child so that they may have 'a better life'. To quote from the film *"I saw a brown skinned boy and felt him next to me, it was the first time I felt good"*<sup>19</sup>. Sue has talked about the virtue of adopting 'another woman's child' as a humanitarian act, saying that she hopes the film will create a lot more demand for adoption and as there are *"Wonderful families waiting to be created"*<sup>20</sup>.

Many in the adoption community feel strongly that these kinds of messages are inconsistent and harmful. To convey that the loss and grief adoptees feel is solved through reunion understates the impact of separation and places unrealistic expectations on newly forged relationships. To encourage prospective adoptive parents to follow their dreams, sweeps aside the fact that adoption can also mean another mother, child and family suffer lifelong loss, grief and trauma. The film's media publicity and consequent fundraising efforts are similarly confused, calling upon audiences to support the lost children of India to reunite with their families or if this cannot happen to make their adoption easier. More rigorous analysis is long overdue of how all children can be supported to stay in their family, extended family or community and retain their culture, so the weight of pain and loss would not need to be carried by adoptees for their entire lives. As Lynelle Long says, "In contrast to his adoptive mother who uses the film to promote further inter-country adoptions, I hope Saroo will help create a forum in which the world can delve into ethical questions involved in the rights of vulnerable children and their families and a rightful place for intercountry adoption after ALL attempts to reunify the family has occurred."<sup>21</sup>

## References

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3. Lion Cub in Search of his Original Pride, Reflections on Saroo Brierley's Adoption Story by Thomas Graham, Ipsify at <http://www.ipsify.com/lion-cub-in-search-of-his-original-pride/>
4. UNPACKING THE '#LION MOVIE' WITH AN ADOPTEE LENS by Angela Barra for Huffington Post at [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/unpacking-the-film-lion-with-an-adoptees-lens\\_us\\_5897cb57e4b0985224db56f3](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/unpacking-the-film-lion-with-an-adoptees-lens_us_5897cb57e4b0985224db56f3)
5. Your child is missing, Would you want their adoption to be easier? By Patricia Froneck in The Conversation, ABC, 26 May 2015 <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-05-26/fronek-your-child-is-missing.-would-you-want-them-adopted/6497232>
6. Quote taken from the film Lion
7. Brierley, Saroo (2013) *A Long Way Home*. Viking. Melbourne, Australia.
8. Lion review: a compelling re-telling of a remarkable true story by Craig Mathieson, January 17, 2017 at <http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/movies/lion-review-a-compelling-retelling-of-a-remarkable-true-story-20170108-gto0cd.html>
9. Lifton, B. J. (1994). *Journey of the adopted self: A quest for wholeness*. NY: Basic Books
10. A Long Way Home - presented by Saroo Brierley at Real Big Things #3 at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IDNtNhuds1E>
11. Quote taken from the film Lion
12. Lifton, B. J. (2009). *Lost and Found: The adoption experience*. (4th Ed.) MI: University of Michigan Press.
13. Quote taken from the film Lion
14. Interview with Fatima Munshi <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-4151160/Mother-Nicole-Kidman-s-blockbuster-Lion-speaks-out.html>
15. Brierley, Saroo (2013) *A Long Way Home*. Viking. Melbourne, Australia.
16. Ibid
17. Dev Patel, Luke Davies, Saroo Brierley: "Lion" - Talks at Google <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uAdlZ26KHpQ>
18. Ibid
19. Quote taken from the film Lion
20. Saroo And Sue Brierley Discuss The Film, "Lion" at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tvLAWvqbO80>
21. Lynelle Long, op cited

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