

# Neerkol family cannot forget

Report by LINDA BRADY

IT WAS just like any other family reunion.

Chatter was punctuated with raucous laughter; there was story swapping and tales of childhood exploits, and squeals of delight as old friends spotted each other.

But former residents of St Joseph's Orphanage at Neerkol, near Rockhampton, are not like any other family.

Their reunion was tinged with a real sense of defiance and strength . . . and the tears came easily.

More than 60 former residents of St Joseph's gathered near the entrance to the notorious institution yesterday to officially open a memorial in remembrance of the more than 4000 children who passed through its gates.

For many the service brought back memories of the sexual, physical and emotional abuse they suffered at the home — some of those stories were told in the 1999 Forde Inquiry into the Abuse of Children in Queensland Institutions.

"This is very important," former resident Bill Shute said.

"It's very important they aren't forgotten and it doesn't happen again. I'm thankful they taught me right from wrong . . . but there are a lot of unhappy memories in there."

The memorial, made with bricks salvaged from the gates, was officially opened by Abuse Inquiry commissioner Leneen Forde and federal Multicultural Affairs Minister Gary Hardgrave, who both lashed out at the failure still of many authorities to effectively protect children from abuse.



□ Former Neerkol resident Diane Carpenter: "I try to put on a facade here today but every time I hug someone I just cry." Picture by MARK STRAKER ms5/803/5

## Tears as memorial unveiled

AS Diane Carpenter laid flowers on the ledge of the new Neerkol orphanage memorial yesterday, not even her sunglasses could hide the tears.

"I just can't stop crying," she confesses. This is so bloody emotional."

Sent to Neerkol as a little girl after her mother was diagnosed with a mental illness, Diane spent nine years at the home and — despite being abused and, traumatised — remembers the old wooden halls with a certain fondness.

"It was home," she said.

"We are all family — those of us who grew up there. There are memories of friends and times

that I'd hate to lose."

Today Diane and other former Neerkol kids will take a tour of the old home for one last look before it is demolished.

"I'm nearly having a panic attack already," she said.

"The hardest part will be remembering the kids who didn't make it out. I remember one girl hanged herself under the old school building."

Diane's connection with Neerkol is stronger than just her own childhood. The flowers she laid on the bricks earlier in the day were in memory of her grandmother Rosemary.

"She was of Aboriginal descent and was taken away from

her parents at an early age and ended up here. Decades later I followed," she said.

"I was a ward of the state until 18. They sent me off to work on properties when I was about 14 but eventually I left, got into uni, put myself through studies and then got into nursing."

Diane says she has spent most of her life trying to heal the hurts of Neerkol, but said it was a long and difficult process. "I thought I'd be okay coming here now but when I saw the wonderful memorial that Hannelore (Worrall, co-ordinator) had managed to create for us I just hugged her and bawled my eyes out."

This Memorial was opened by  
**Mrs Leneen Forde AC**  
 on  
 5th August 2003,  
 and is dedicated to the Children of  
**Neerkol - St Joseph's Orphanage - Home**



Over 4000 children passed through these gates between 11 April 1885 when the first 11 children arrived, to its closure on 5 March 1978.  
 It is our wish that in creating this Neerkol Memorial not one baby, little child, young adult or Neerkol worker will ever be forgotten.

*"In our souls today this is a new beginning"*

□ One of two plaques on the St Joseph's Orphanage memorial — urging people not to forget those who passed through its gates. ms5/803/7

Dedicated to the English boys and girls, who left the security of their Birmingham and Middlesex Orphanages in 1951 to a brave and unknown future at Neerkol - St Joseph's Orphanage.

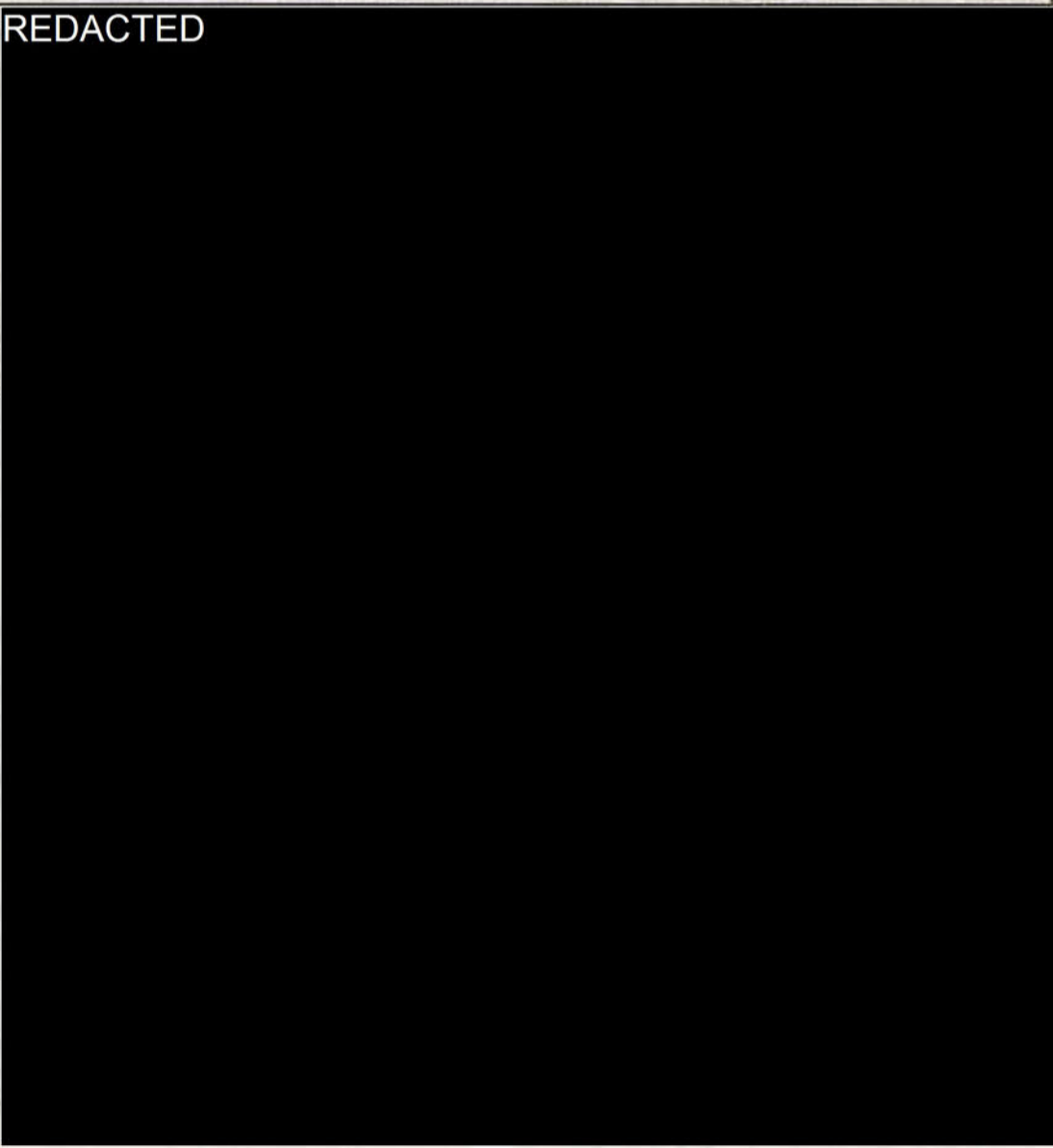
They endured many hardships but derived some benefits from their new life, so far removed from that previously experienced.

These children moved on to make their contributions to Australian society in diverse ways as parents, workers and citizens.

This memorial is jointly funded by the Commonwealth Government and the community of Rockhampton

*"Our Nation is Better for Their Coming"*

□ The second plaque in remembrance of the migrant children who came to Neerkol. Many arrived after the war from Britain and Malta. ms5/803/6



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