

Proof of evidence
Veronica Joan Johns

My full name is Veronica Joan Johns and I was born on the [REDACTED] 1958. I was previously known as Veronica Joan Stagg. I went to live at the Retta Dixon Home in Darwin when I was three and left there when I was 15. I lived there with my younger brothers Kenneth Stagg and Kevin Stagg and my older sister. My older sister left when she was quite young. I was told she was sick.

We lived in cottages. There were about 13 children per cottage. I was in number 3, Ashmore cottage. Kevin and Kenny also lived in the cottage with me. The kids that shared cottages could be aged from new born to 17, and both boys and girls. We had many different cottage parents.

Retta Dixon was, I would say, just a place where I existed. I lived in fear. I was always scared of the older boys that lived with us at Retta Dixon. When I was about age 7 I went to play with a girl in another cottage. That was [REDACTED]. She was in number 5 cottage. A boy came out and he said I couldn't play with the girl and had to go with him to the laundry. He had a feather duster and said I had to go with him or he'd belt me. I went in the laundry and I had to make sure all the louvres and doors were locked. He sexually penetrated me. There was lots of blood. His name was [AJV]. I can't remember getting back to my cottage or what happened next. I didn't tell anyone. I went to play with the same girl at the same cottage another time and the same thing happened. I never went to play with her again.

I kept this a secret till I was 25.

Although this stopped with this boy it didn't go away. It entered inside me bringing with it pain, terror, disgust and horror and making me ever alert and wary.

Once a month we had a film night in the home. After the film we went to our cottages and the adults stayed in the film area. There was an older girl in my cottage and three to five boys would come in and have sex with her. Her name was [AJQ]. [REDACTED] I'd hide under the sheet. This happened regularly and for months. The boys didn't leave until their cottage parents called out for them. I was terrified that they would force themselves upon me. Once when I was sharing a bedroom with my brothers I told them they had to save me if these older boys came to get me.

When I shared a cottage with my brothers Kenny and Kevin they looked after me. I now realise my brothers Kevin and Kenny were also being abused. I found out that the first time they were sexually abused was by [AJQ].

In about 1983 when I was five I saw this older boy [REDACTED] have sex with my friend [AJA]. He was an older boy in my cottage. [AJA] was about 7 at the time. It was the year the Queen came to Darwin.

Once I was working at a wedding reception at the home. Another girl asked me to get drinks. I went through some doors and 4 boys were inside there - 2 of the

REDACTED boys and some others. They were sexually threatening me and wouldn't let me out. I pleaded with one of the boys to let me out and he did. They were looking at me and smiling. The girl was laughing. I said "REDACTED tell them to let me out". One boy was in a different spot at opposite side of the room. I know him – REDACTED I said "don't let them get me". I said "REDACTED let me out". He said "I can't". I was pleading and he finally let me out. I could tell by the way they were behaving and saying "come on you have to give it to us" that I was in terrible trouble. The boys were about 17 and I was about 12.

Another older boy used to always make sexual gestures to me all the time with his fingers and tongue and I was frightened about what he was going to do to me.

Sexual assaults happened all the time. You had to be constantly aware of this thing.

An older boy AJR used to go under my bed at night. He shared the cottage with us. He would put my hand on his penis. I'd call out to the cottage parents. They would respond but by the time they came AJR would have ran back to his bed. I would go to Superintendent Pattemore the following day with my cottage parents and report it. Nothing ever changed. AJR was about 9 to 17 and I was about 5 to about 13 when we shared a cottage. I told Mr Pattemore and he would just say "how did you know it was him" and do nothing. AJR kept doing it. One time I woke up and AJR's hand was on my upper thigh. I screamed out. He got out straight away and he ran back to his bed. I think I told Mr Pattemore the next day, as usual, as did my cottage parents. AJR continued to live in our cottage and had free access to my room and to me.

I saw AJR threatening other girls with a feather duster. He would stare at us and scare us, and take some girls into the toilets.

We did not have curtains on our bedroom windows. AJR would regularly look at me through the windows often when I was changing or showering.

My Siblings

My older sister left Retta Dixon early. I felt it was my job to look after the boys.

My brother Kevin would bang his head on the bars of his bed at night and rock himself violently. He was distressed. He did this for most of the time in the home. There were two bars on the bed. He'd lie on his belly and bash his head on the bars. I'd get up to try to stop him. I was worried. He was rocking so hard. I would try to settle him and get him to relax. I now realise that this was probably related to the sexual abuse he was enduring.

Don Henderson, a parent in cottage 2, was sexually abusing the kids, including my brother Kevin. Kevin told me about it much later on. When another of the Retta Dixon boys died he stood up on the table at the wake and said "me and him were fucked up the arse by Don Henderson". I'd heard this from Kevin before.

I often saw Henderson on the tractor taking boys to the chook yard. We all talked about it. We called him Jumbal. I never saw any sexual abuse by Henderson but we all knew and talked about it.

I once saw Don Henderson sitting on a girl punching her repeatedly. He was a psycho. She told me that the police saw her bruises and she said to the police they were from him but nothing happened.

After Retta Dixon

Apart from my attempts to tell my cottage parents and Superintendent Pattemore about these things I didn't tell anyone until I was 25. At that time I told my husband.

I met my husband when I was 15. He thought I was a virgin. He was a drinker. When I told him what happened he went off his head. He blamed me for it like I was a bad person and drove off in the car, drunk. I was upset as he was driving drunk. I went to see my brother. I told him about it too. It was a relief to get that off my shoulders. It took ages for me to say that fella's name. AJV is the person. I think he was a young teenager.

I have one word that I have lived with through the years – "bad". Because of what happened to me at Retta Dixon I feel bad. I have tried so hard to be good. I was worried that I would burn in hell, because that is what they taught me at Retta Dixon.

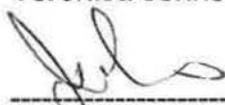
I didn't realise at the time but I now realise that my little brothers were also being sexually abused. I feel really guilty and sad in my heart that I wasn't there looking after them, that I wasn't able to keep them safe.

Us children were all alone at Retta Dixon coping and dealing with sexual, physical and emotional abuse. We did not have a trusting relationship with our cottage parents or with the superintendent. No one ever enquired about our welfare. There was no one we could talk to and be confident that they would make the bad things stop happening.

I am a warrior woman. I must step up, be strong, and share myself with you.



Veronica Johns



Witness signature

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