



# Fighting for truth, justice

Joe is haunted by his years at Neerkol

Shelley Strachan

JOE Kiernan is a 54-year-old man but he has the demeanour, shy smile and body language of a little boy.

The footy fan and Mary Valley Rattler volunteer has never married, lives alone and his closest relative is an uncle on Bribie Island.

His single mother was forced to give him up at birth in 1960, and he spent the first 13 years of his life at the St Joseph's Catholic Church-run Orphanage at Neerkol, near Rockhampton, where he suffered ongoing, sometimes brutal, sexual and physical abuse.

Neerkol is one of the many Australian institutions now the subject of the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to

Child Sexual Abuse, established in 2012 by former Prime Minister Julie Gillard and hearing the stories of at least 5000 Australians who were once defenceless children.

Mr Kiernan is one of those, and his vulnerability is still palpable.

He cannot read or write. He has tried to commit suicide three times, watched a girl succeed in killing herself when he was just 11, can not sleep without sleeping tablets, wears a hearing aid, has survived heart surgery, and suffers irritable bowel syndrome and post traumatic stress disorder.

After Neerkol, Mr Kiernan was put into foster care. His life took a turn for the better when he was able to find his mother, and moved to Gympie in 1983.

She passed away in Winston House in 1990, but Mr Kiernan is

happy here. He has a part-time job, follows the Rabbitohs and enjoys his work with the Rattler.

Mr Kiernan, and others, believe they were also used as unknowing "human guinea pigs" at Neerkol for unproven vaccines for diseases like smallpox and polio, which is why they have so many health problems today.

He gave written evidence to the Forde Commission of Inquiry into Abuse of Children in Queensland Institutions and received some compensation from that.

In May of this year, he gave phone evidence to the Royal Commission about Neerkol, and expects to give more evidence at a public hearing as the Royal Commission continues.

He is not seeking more compensation; just help to pay his medical expenses – or a Federal Gold Card.

**VULNERABLE:** Gympie man Joe Kiernan suffered years of abuse as a resident of Rockhampton's Neerkol orphanage in the 1960s and 1970s.

PHOTO: PATRICK WOODS

REDACTED