

The secret  
everyone should  
know about

*"We hope this booklet will help us share the collective secrets we hold, and will generate more understanding, more discussion, and highlight the positive difference other people can easily make to our lives."*

Jan and Ray

For further information,  
please visit our website at:

**wattleplace.org.au**

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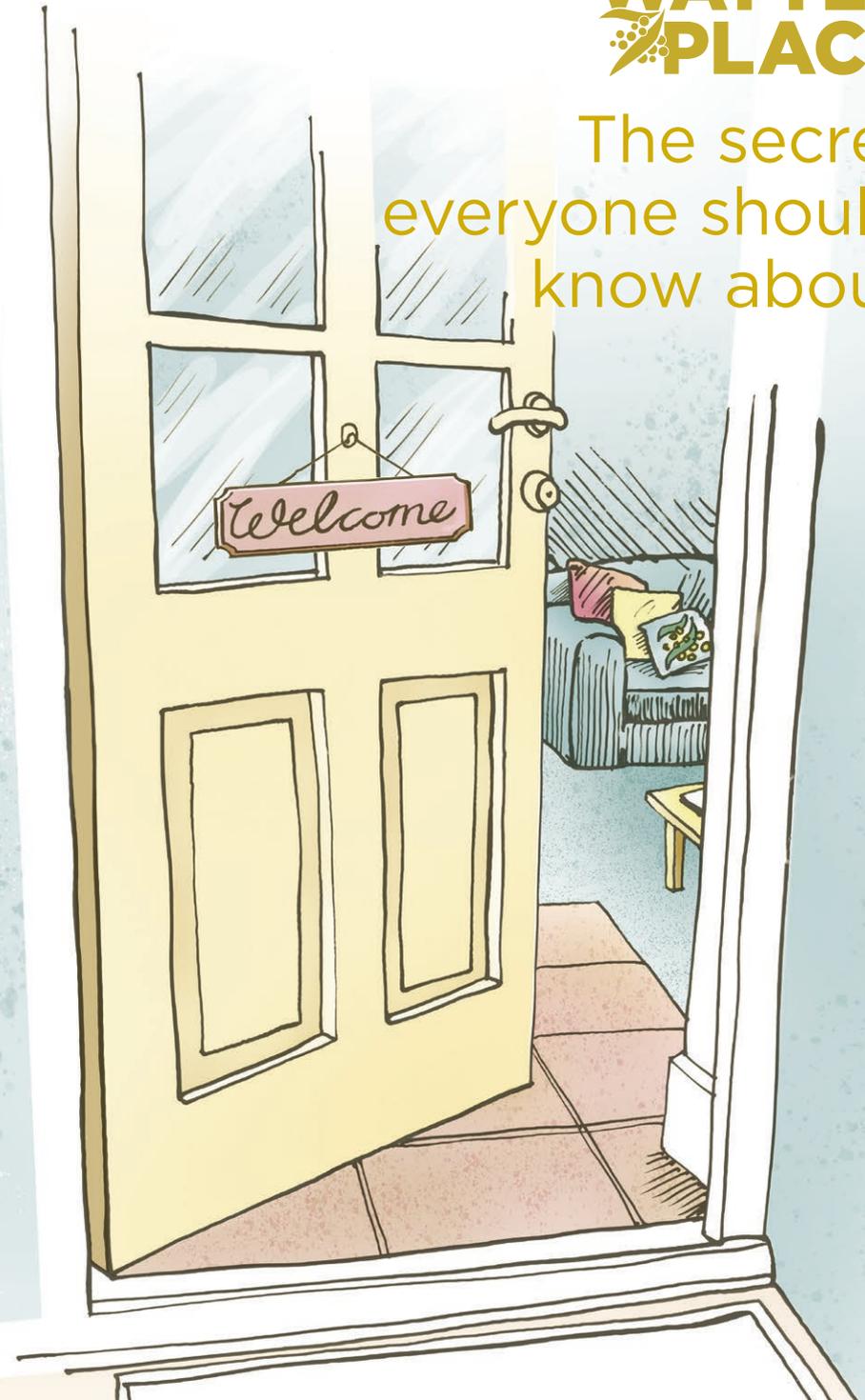
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*Relationships Australia*  
NEW SOUTH WALES

This booklet does not express the views of all Forgotten Australians associated with Wattle Place or those outside of the Wattle Place community.

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# Contents



A special thank you to Jan and Ray, members of the Wattle Place Consultative Forum. This booklet would not exist if it weren't for them.

## History of Wattle Place

Wattle Place was established following the Apology to Forgotten Australians and Former Child Migrants, by then Prime Minister, the Hon Kevin Rudd MP, on 16 November 2009. A transcript of that Apology is included on pages 10 and 11 of this booklet.

Linda Burney MP, the former New South Wales Minister for Community Services, opened Wattle Place in March 2011. She acknowledged the suffering experienced by the Forgotten Australians and the role Wattle Place could play in the process of healing by sensitively considering their fears, needs and concerns.

Wattle Place, Relationships Australia NSW, acknowledges the traditional custodians of the land and waters on which we live and work, and pays our respects to Elders past, present and future.

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# Sharing our Secret



We are Forgotten Australians and we'd like to tell you about Wattle Place.

“Forgotten Australians” is the official term given to those who, as children, were separated from their parents and placed in foster homes, orphanages, children’s homes and other institutions, before 1990. Some of us prefer other terms including “care leavers” or “former state wards”. The term each of us use and identify with is a personal choice, and none of these will be suitable for everyone.

Some members of the Stolen Generations and Former Child Migrants were also placed in institutions or foster homes, and therefore share similar childhood experiences, and similar impacts in adulthood, to Forgotten Australians.

## **Sharing Wattle Place with other Forgotten Australians**

Wattle Place is a safe haven for us, but there are many Forgotten Australians who don’t know about it. We want to get the word out about Wattle Place, so that more Forgotten Australians can benefit from it. Wattle Place provides a community of people who share the experience of being placed in institutions or foster homes as children. We know how isolating and challenging life can be when you feel like no one understands what you’ve been through, or what you’re going through now. Wattle Place staff do understand, they listen and they know how to help.

## **Why everyone needs to know about Wattle Place**

We also want the wider community to know about Wattle Place. Many of us hold the stories of our own past as secrets. We find our individual stories very difficult to discuss, but Wattle Place can safely share what we, as a group, experienced.

When people know about Wattle Place and the work they do, they

will learn about a part of Australia’s history that has been largely kept a secret. We want everyone to know that history, because ending the secrecy ends the shame.

As the name suggests, “Forgotten Australians” have felt forgotten throughout our lives. We were hidden away and forgotten when we were children, our experiences were ignored and forgotten once we left the institutions or foster homes, and we were expected to just forget our experiences and get on with our lives afterwards. Even now, after inquiries and apologies, that part of Australia’s history, along with our experiences, seem to have been largely forgotten by the wider community. Unfortunately, we can never forget our experiences because receiving that kind of treatment as a child leaves physical and psychological scars that continue to impact us every day.

We want the wider community to know and understand what happened to us because we don’t want to be “Forgotten” anymore.

## **Our hopes for this booklet**

We have three goals in making this booklet. First of all, to inform

- healthcare staff
- aged care staff
- service providers
- workers in government departments
- the general community

about what we experienced during our time in institutions and foster homes and how that negatively impacts our interactions with you now.

Secondly, to help share the collective secrets we hold, and generate more understanding, more discussion, and highlight the positive difference other people can easily make to our lives.

Thirdly, to invite Forgotten Australians who don’t know about Wattle Place, to get in touch and see if Wattle Place can assist you.

# So, let's tell you about Wattle Place!

## Wattle Place is part of Relationships Australia NSW and provides services specifically to support:

- Forgotten Australians – that is, people who experienced institutional or foster care as children, before 1990
- Members of the Stolen Generations and Former Child Migrants who were also placed in institutions or foster homes
- Anyone 26 years or older who was placed in out-of-home care in NSW after 1990

## Wattle Place provides the following services:

- Face to face and telephone counselling
- Assistance with information and referrals to other services
- Access to Institutional and personal records
- Family tracing
- Therapeutic Casework
- Social activities and commemorative events
- The Drop-in centre
- Group workshops
- A quarterly newsletter

Those of us who were in NSW institutions and foster homes are also eligible for a contribution towards the costs of some services that support our wellbeing, such as medical, dental, optical, etc.

In addition, Wattle Place provides separate support services for people considering applying for Redress under the National Redress Scheme, and people who were impacted by past forced adoptions.

All these services are **free** and do not require a referral.

## Support specific to our needs

Wattle Place has around 20 staff who specialise in supporting people with childhood experiences of institutional and foster care. They understand the ongoing impacts that those experiences can continue to have throughout life, and provide non-judgmental, compassionate and empathetic support. The staff are strong advocates for us and are here to help us navigate life.

Wattle Place provides a warm, friendly and relaxed environment to get together with others who understand what we've experienced, participate in enriching activities, or just hang out and chat with our "pet" cat, Wattle.

They offer culturally sensitive support and the opportunity to speak with Aboriginal counsellors, if you'd prefer. Wattle Place also offers a number of the services over the phone, online and through coordination with other services.

You may have never identified as a Forgotten Australian, or known of the existence of the term, but if you were placed in institutions or foster homes when you were a child, you are eligible for support from Wattle Place.

If you feel that you need some support, we encourage you to contact Wattle Place to see if it is the right service for you.



# What makes Wattle Place special?



## **A place to belong**

The sense of belonging that Wattle Place creates is invaluable to us, but Wattle Place does so much more. Wattle Place provides social connections and the opportunity to be a part of a community where we feel we are among friends and we belong. Knowing that we have somewhere to go for support when we need it, provides a sense of security and increased confidence in facing some of our challenges.

## **We are believed**

The staff at Wattle Place are aware of the history and continuing impacts on Forgotten Australians. It is liberating to be able to confide in someone (if we choose to) and to be believed.

Wattle Place provides an opportunity to be around others who have a shared experience.

## **We have choices**

We are given choice over our involvement at Wattle Place. This is important to us, as the powerlessness we felt in our childhood was very traumatic.

## **We are respected**

Wattle Place staff understand what we struggle with and show us respect and kindness. This is not always the case out in the wider community

## **They know the importance of trust**

Wattle Place staff are dedicated to helping us and work to earn our trust slowly through compassion, honesty and reliability.

## **They support our search for answers**

Finding records of our identity, our family or our time in out-of-home care can be incredibly significant for us, but can have both positive and negative effects. Wattle Place not only help us find our records, but also provide support, when we need it, to deal with what we find.

## **We have fun and form friendships**

The group work and the social activities offered by Wattle Place provide fun and varied ways to explore our creativity,

gain new skills, experience new things and develop connections and friendships.

## **They recognise our strengths**

Although we share a common bond, each of our experiences were different, and each of our responses and coping mechanisms are different. Despite what we went through in our childhood, many of us have survived. Even though, for many of us, that survival has its challenges, we continue to battle through. Wattle Place staff recognise and acknowledge that.

# Motion of apology to the Forgotten Australians and Former Child Migrants

We come together today to deal with an ugly chapter in our nation's history. And we come together today to offer our nation's apology. To say to you, the Forgotten Australians, and those who were sent to our shores as children without your consent, that we are **sorry**.

**Sorry** - that as children you were taken from your families and placed in institutions where so often you were abused.

**Sorry** - for the physical suffering, the emotional starvation and the cold absence of love, of tenderness, of care.

**Sorry** - for the tragedy, the absolute tragedy, of childhoods lost, - childhoods spent instead in austere and authoritarian places, where names were replaced by numbers, spontaneous play by regimented routine, the joy of learning by the repetitive drudgery of menial work.

**Sorry** - for all these injustices to you, as children, who were placed in our care.

As a nation, we must now reflect on those who did not receive proper care. We look back with shame that so many of you were left cold, hungry and alone, and with nobody, absolutely nobody, to whom you could turn. We look back with shame

that many of these little ones who were entrusted to institutions and foster homes instead, were abused physically, humiliated cruelly, violated sexually. And we look back with shame at how those with power were allowed to abuse those who had none. And how then, as if this was not injury enough, you were left ill-prepared for life outside - left to fend for yourselves; often unable to read or write; to struggle alone with no friends and no family.

For these failures to offer proper care to the powerless, the voiceless and the most vulnerable, we say **sorry**.

We reflect too today on the families who were ripped apart simply because they had fallen on hard times. Hard times brought about by illness, by death and by poverty. Some simply left destitute when fathers damaged by war could no longer cope. Again, we say **sorry** for the extended families you never knew.

We acknowledge the particular pain of children shipped to Australia

as child migrants - robbed of your families, robbed of your homeland, regarded not as innocent children but regarded instead as a source of child labour. To those of you who were told you were orphans, brought here without your parents' knowledge or consent, we acknowledge the lies you were told, the lies told to your mothers and fathers, and the pain these lies have caused for a lifetime. To those of you separated on the dockside from your brothers and sisters; taken alone and unprotected to the most remote parts of a foreign land - we acknowledge today that the laws of our nation failed you.

And for this we are deeply **sorry**.

We think also today of all the families of these Forgotten Australians and former child migrants who are still grieving, families who were never reunited, families who were never reconciled, families who were lost to one another forever. We reflect too on the burden that is still carried by our own children, your own children, your grandchildren, your husbands, your wives, your partners and your friends - and we thank them for the faith, the love and the depth of commitment that has helped see you through the valley of tears that was not of your own making.

And we reflect with you as well, in sad remembrance, on those who simply could not cope and who took their own lives in absolute despair. We recognise the pain you have suffered. Pain is so very, very personal. Pain is so profoundly disabling. So, let us together, as a nation, allow this apology to begin to heal this pain.

Healing the pain felt by so many of the half a million of our fellow Australians who were children in care - children in our care. And let us also resolve this day that this national apology becomes a turning point in our nation's story. A turning point for shattered lives. A turning point for governments at all levels and of every political hue and colour to do all in our power to never let this happen again. For the protection of children is the sacred duty of us all.

This is the motion that later this day this Government will commend to the Parliament of Australia.

**The Hon Kevin Rudd MP  
Prime Minister**

*16 November 2009*

# Why do many Forgotten Australians need a service like Wattle Place?



Wattle Place was established by the NSW Government in acknowledgment of the ongoing impacts from the mistreatment Forgotten Australians received as children while in institutions and foster homes.

## Our reality

While not all institutional or out-of-home care experiences were negative, sadly a large proportion of them were incredibly traumatic. Many of us, as children, experienced things we never should have. We suffered horrific brutality, sexual assault, cruelty, humiliation, neglect, exploitation, poor or non-existent

health and dental care, poor or non-existent education, separation from family, abandonment and a loss of identity while placed in these institutions or foster homes.

Unfortunately for us, the majority of Australians didn't know it was happening at the time, still aren't aware that it happened and aren't aware of the trauma we have carried with us our whole lives from those experiences.

*(Further reading about what we've been through: Please see the links on page 19 of this booklet)*

## The trauma stays with us

For many of us, our childhood experiences have left us in circumstances where, in adulthood, we have regular interactions with the social security, health and justice systems. These can be stressful environments for anyone, but are even more difficult for us, given our fear and mistrust of Government authority.

Every day, the interactions we have, in all kinds of situations, will potentially trigger distressing memories or flashbacks to traumatic experiences in our childhood. In those moments, it is as though we are back in those terrifying situations, and therefore

reliving the trauma. We therefore respond, neurologically, as the child experiencing the trauma. In these situations, we may become angry, abusive, panicked or non-compliant.

It may seem to you that we are being unreasonable or irrational, that we are just being stubborn. But that is not the case. The trauma we experienced as children typically develops into complex trauma, that is, trauma which structurally and chemically altered our developing brains. Our responses, therefore, are instinctual and involuntary.

*(Further reading about complex trauma: Please see the Blueknot Foundation link on page 19 of this booklet)*

# What are some challenges we face day to day?

Any situation where we feel we don't have control, or feel threatened physically or emotionally, is likely to trigger negative reactions in us.

## Fear of being triggered

It can be something as small as a smell, a sound, an item or a name, that reminds us of the institution itself, or something that happened to us in the institution or foster home.

Physical touch, and intrusion on our personal space or privacy, can trigger flashbacks to sexual assault or other feelings of intimidation, humiliation and powerlessness.

This makes medical examinations particularly difficult and will often prevent us seeking treatment early, sometimes avoiding appointments, at the expense of our health.

Being in a hospital ward can remind us of being in the dormitory of an institution.

We can be sensitive about our privacy and belongings, things that were often denied to us as children.

Filling in forms or using a computer can be stressful, even humiliating. We were often denied a good, or any, education and are therefore not always good at reading or writing. The shame we feel makes it difficult to tell people, so we may respond by getting agitated.

Having to tell our own personal stories is particularly distressing, so having to repeat it each time we see a new medical practitioner or service provider is extremely difficult. We often just don't tell people, even though it would be easier for us if they knew.

Our experiences of being talked down to by government staff and those in authority, when dealing with departments such as Centrelink, Housing and Health, makes us feel belittled, intimidated and reminds us of the contempt with which we were treated by authority figures in the institutions and foster homes.

Apart from specific "triggers", we often also suffer ongoing mental health issues such as depression, anxiety and sometimes personality disorders.<sup>1</sup> The trauma that we

endured sometimes prevented us from developing the emotional building blocks required to form a healthy and positive sense of self and belonging.

## Struggles with our Identity

Our identity can be another difficult subject for us. We lost our sense of self as individuals, our sense of connection and belonging and our sense of place and worth. Sometimes our names were changed and some of us were only identified by numbers. Record keeping about us was often poor or non-existent, so we often don't even know standard things about our identity or family history.

## Difficulty connecting with others

Connection to our family was often completely severed. We were commonly lied to and told that our parents had died or abandoned us. This and the treatment we endured quite often negatively impacted our ability to form and maintain positive and loving relationships, often affecting our marriages and parenting. We were commonly deprived of love and positive attention. We suffered a profound sense of separation and abandonment. "The loss of family, usually including separation from siblings, caused grief, feelings of isolation, guilt, self-blame and confusion about their identity."<sup>2</sup>

## Difficulty trusting others

Trusting in people is very difficult for us. Too often we had no one to place our trust in, and if we did, our trust was often betrayed or exploited. We particularly mistrust Government departments and authority figures, given their past responsibility and role in our traumatic childhoods.

## Fear of an unknown future

One of the greatest concerns among many of us is that we will end up having to go into nursing homes as we age. Facing re-institutionalisation and vulnerability is a terrifying prospect, one that many of us simply cannot face.



1 & 2 Alliance for Forgotten Australians, 2014, Forgotten Australians: Supporting survivors of childhood institutional care in Australia

# How can the wider community help Forgotten Australians?

Reading this booklet is the first step! Understand what we went through and how the physical, mental and emotional burden of those experiences continues to impact our lives. The good news is, there are things you can do to help us get through these difficulties in life. For instance:

## Ask the question

If you notice behaviours like those described in this booklet, it would help to ask, “have you ever spent time in a foster home or institution as a child?” This prevents us having to explain ourselves or tell you details about our past, which can be very distressing.

*If we answer “yes”, it is really important that you:*

## Believe us

Being believed is very important for us. We often guard this secret closely, so if we reveal this secret to you, we need it to be validated. “I believe you” is not a phrase we are used to hearing.

## Ask “what do you need from me?”

We may not always know the answer, but asking us shows us that you understand and respect us. That, in itself, may help us to feel

more at ease and have confidence in you. It may be that we then have a conversation about options which will enable us to proceed.

## Understand our perspective

We realise some of our reactions, responses and behaviours can be difficult for you, but the reality is they can cause great distress in our lives. We wish we didn't experience them, and we work on minimising and managing them for our own wellbeing, with the help of services such as Wattle Place. However, that is incredibly difficult and takes a great deal of mental and emotional strength, which we don't always have.

## Avoid assumptions and biases

Communicate clearly with kindness, empathy and sensitivity, with a view to understanding how to minimise our distress.

## Learn more about complex trauma

Being more aware of complex trauma, and useful ways to manage the reactions, responses and behaviours stemming from it, will improve your ability to respond effectively in situations that would otherwise be very challenging.

## Refer people to Wattle Place

If you recognise similar past experiences, or similar reactions, responses or behaviours in a loved one, friend, neighbour, customer or client of yours, ask them if they know about Wattle Place. If they don't, please let them know about it.

## Contact Wattle Place

If you need advice or assistance about how to support a Forgotten Australian, or someone you think may be a Forgotten Australian, please contact Wattle Place.

## Please remember...

### Your response matters

We need you to help us manage in these situations. We need you to take this information on board and use your increased understanding to guide how you work with us. Small changes you make can make a big difference in our lives.

*Our aim is that everyone will understand what being a Forgotten Australian means and how that might be impacting us. All we really ask is to be treated with respect and understanding, so that we can have peace of mind and hope, that our future can be free of the fear we endured in our past.*



# Support for Forgotten Australians

Services for Forgotten Australians are also available in other states and territories.

For further information, please contact us at Wattle Place:

**Freecall: 1800 663 844  
(02) 8837 7000  
wattleplace@ransw.org.au  
wattleplace.org.au**

Additional information and support is available at:

## **Find and Connect**

[www.findandconnect.gov.au](http://www.findandconnect.gov.au)

## **Alliance for Forgotten Australians (AFA)**

[forgottenaustralians.org.au](http://forgottenaustralians.org.au)

## **Care Leavers Australasia Network (CLAN)**

[www.clan.org.au/support@clan.org.au](http://www.clan.org.au/support@clan.org.au)

## **Link-up NSW Aboriginal Corporation**

[www.linkupnsw.org.au](http://www.linkupnsw.org.au)

**If you feel distressed by anything in this booklet, please contact Wattle Place, or one of the services below:**

## **NSW Rape Crisis Centre**

24/7 phone and online counselling  
1800 424 017  
[www.nswrapecrisis.com.au](http://www.nswrapecrisis.com.au)

## **Samsn (Survivors and Mates Support Network)**

Mon to Fri 9am—5pm  
1800 472 676  
[www.samsn.org.au](http://www.samsn.org.au)

## **Suicide Call Back Service**

24/7 phone and online counselling  
1300 659 467  
[www.suicidecallbackservice.org.au](http://www.suicidecallbackservice.org.au)

## **Blueknot Helpline**

Mon to Fri 9am—5pm  
1300 657 380  
[www.blueknot.org.au/Helpline](http://www.blueknot.org.au/Helpline)

## **Lifeline Australia**

24/7 Crisis Support and Suicide Prevention  
13 11 14  
[www.lifeline.org.au](http://www.lifeline.org.au)

# Further Reading



## **Commonwealth of Australia, Department of Health (2016)**

Caring for Forgotten Australians, Former Child Migrants and Stolen Generations

<https://agedcare.health.gov.au/support-services/people-from-diverse-backgrounds/caring-for-forgotten-australians-former-child-migrants-and-stolen-generations-booklet>

## **Elizabeth Fernandez, et.al. 2015**

No child should grow up like this: Identifying long term outcomes of Forgotten Australians, Child Migrants and the Stolen Generations School of Social Sciences, University of New South Wales

[www.forgottenaustralians.unsw.edu.au](http://www.forgottenaustralians.unsw.edu.au)

## **Blueknot Foundation**

<https://www.blueknot.org.au/Resources/Information/Understanding-abuse-and-trauma/What-is-childhood-trauma/Childhood-trauma-and-the-brain>

## **National Museum of Australia**

Inside: Life in Children's Homes and Institutions – Exhibition website

<https://forgottenaustralianshistory.gov.au/exhibition.html>