

A LOST SON

As a single mother of an only child, Harrison, I was planning to be the perfect parent. I was a professional and in my son's early years was self employed at home. I had read widely on parenting and the early years were idyllic. Harrison was very special to me. However, he experienced bullying for much of his time at primary school and I played an active role in the school, fighting many causes. As Harrison was considered to be a gifted child, he was selected to attend regular gifted programmes. The programme coordinator suggested that I have my son assessed by an Educational Psychologist, who during testing, asked whether he had experienced bullying at school. He explained that it is quite common for a gifted child to be bullied; as his classmates detect that there is something 'different' about such a child. As a result of this information, in an effort to give Harrison more confidence, I ensured that he was exposed to a bigger world and sought to find interests which he could enjoy. We had regular holidays such as a trip to Disneyland. I encouraged him to try football, soccer, tennis, judo, scouting and more.

He enjoyed music (taking exams in piano and sax) and he also learned the guitar, as well as swimming, sailing and skiing. I raised him in a democratic way, through discussion and seeking his opinions and input, and, at the same time, encouraging independence and responsibility. There were boundaries. Often the television set would be wheeled out to the shed when he failed to co-operate or his attitude was unacceptable. I was always available and was the 'taxi' parent, transporting not only Harrison but countless other children to and from activities.

It all began to change when my son turned 13. First, he became verbally abusive towards me, which then escalated to threats and emotional and physical abuse. Late one night I received a telephone call from the parents of a school friend, advising me that he was at their home (he had gone to his room at the usual time and must have left the house after I had gone to bed), a 3 km walk in the dark. At other times, when he had disappeared, I asked friends and neighbours to help me with driving around the streets at night, searching for him. One evening, while I was watching television, I looked up to find Harrison standing beside the couch, holding a pair of scissors over my head. On another occasion I was preparing our evening meal and looked up to see him aiming a double pointed compass directly at me; he threw pieces of firewood through a window, while I was in the room folding the washing; he threw cricket balls and rocks at me; he was totally unpredictable. These were all unprovoked attacks. When I tried speaking with him, his eyes appeared to glaze over and I realised that he was in a different space. I installed a chain to my bedroom door, as I feared for my safety. I tried desperately to find help for him and eventually found a Youth Worker. Harrison's main complaint was that he was allegedly being bullied by his schoolmates and also by his teachers; he often refused to go to school. I discussed the matter with the School Authorities and we had several meetings, but to no avail.

One day, after 8 months of living this horrendous nightmare, there were several Police Officers at my front door. It was claimed that there had been a complaint that I had been abusing my son. I explained that there must be a mistake, because it was the complete reverse. The Police claimed that Harrison was covered in bruises. I explained that he often climbed onto our roof and sat there (he knew it terrified me and I actively discouraged it). He would then lift the roof tiles and access the house through the manhole. He also climbed trees and fences on our 10 acre property. The Police asked me to accompany them to our local Police Station and advised that I would be charged with a number of offences. I was put into the back of a Police Van and endured a most uncomfortable journey to the Police Station. At the Police Station the situation went from bad to worse. I was interrogated, but on legal advice from my Solicitor prior to leaving my home, I answered only the basic questions. At some point, I was advised that Harrison would be removed from my care and placed into Foster Care. I could not believe what was happening. I was asked for my house keys, so that he could be taken to our home to collect his clothes and personal possessions. I was absolutely dumbstruck and in shock. I was driven back to my empty home after being detained for approximately 5 hours.

My nightmare continued. Several days later I was interviewed by an Officer from Child Protection and I invited the Youth Worker my son had been seeing to attend this meeting at my home. During the Officer's cigarette break, the Youth Worker said to me that, in his view, the meeting was progressing very well and that the matter should be easily resolved. He also said that the Child Protection Officer had mentioned to him that the bruising on my son was the most minor that she had ever encountered. But the nightmare was far from over. I attended Court Hearings on 12 occasions in 18 months.

Following Harrison's removal from my care, I was instructed by Child Protection to see a Family Counsellor, who unstintingly supported and encouraged me throughout the entire horrific process and was able to preserve my sanity. In the privacy of my home, I still weep and grieve the loss of my much loved son. I feel that I have filled the earth's oceans with my tears. My friends, the very few whom I trusted with this heartbreaking nightmare, have kept me going, by checking on me and offering distractions of one sort or another. I have continued to remain in contact with the Family Counsellor and she most generously (and unpaid) continues to counsel me from time to time. Relentlessly, I continued to fight for the return of my son through daily telephone calls to Harrison's Youth Worker at Child Protection, numerous letters to State and Federal Members of Parliament and letters to the Press. I pursued this campaign for over four very long years until, at 18, Harrison was released from the System. At my final meeting with Child Protection, I was told that 'the child is always right'. My question to them is 'regardless of the truth?'

Later, I learned that my son had commenced studies at University and I understand that he recently graduated with Commerce Qualifications. I have seen Harrison on only 6 occasions, including at my Mother's funeral. Initially, he behaves as though nothing is wrong between us, delightful and happy, but then his attitude changes completely, to vitriolic abuse.

It is now 8 years since I lost my son to the System. To this day I do not understand, and can only speculate, as to what happened to my beautiful child. My emotions continue to bubble under the surface and I still weep at my heartbreaking loss, as I await his return.

Peggy

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