

**Submission
No 30**

**INQUIRY INTO THE FAMILY RESPONSE TO THE
MURDERS IN BOWRAVILLE**

Name: Ms Penny Stadhams

Date received: 15/07/2014

My name is Penny Stadhams. I am the younger sister of Rebecca Stadhams and the Aunt of Evelyn Clarice Greenup. I derive from the Gumbaynggirr Nation and grew up on Bowraville Mission.

I was at TAFE in Macksville and was told later that day when I was in town at Bowraville that Rebecca and Billy were looking for Evelyn. Billy seen me in town and came over and asked me if Evelyn was with me and I told him I was at TAFE all day. I then went to my mother's house up the mission to see what was going on. Everyone was upset and crying they all look concerned as no-one knew where Evelyn was.

I went back to my house in Cohalan Street, Bowraville and got changed then went driving around the town and local rivers looking for Evelyn. We were all getting really worried and desperate as it was getting dark outside and we still couldn't find Evelyn. We went around to all the houses on the mission and everyone was looking for her under their house, around and under things that we thought a little girl might hide or was hurt and not be able to move. We were singing out Evelyn's name to see if she could hear us but we never heard her. We went out to the cemetery and looked all through the grave yard. Everyone pitched in and helped. I went and got Rebecca and Lesley then we all went back home waiting for Lulu (Michelle) to get home from work.

I was angry at the time with both Rebecca and Billy for not knowing where their daughter Evelyn was as they were going through a separation at the time of her disappearance. I can remember when I drove back up the mission to check on mum to see if anyone found Evelyn and Billy was sitting in the gutter screaming Evelyn's name over and over again and just crying deeply he was so very distraught no-one could console him or talk to him. I will never forget how Billy looked that day as you could see the terror, grief and shock on his face and it showed in his body language as well.

Rebecca was not talking much she was in shock and crying with fear that her little daughter might be lost and it was getting dark. Rebecca was fidgeting she couldn't sit still; she was shaking and crying out where could she be. We were asking Rebecca think back to last night and Rebecca said 'the last time I seen her she was in the bed with her brothers Aaron and Aidan in my room at mums, then I went to bed with them'. Rebecca started to scream and cry and we all started crying and we were trying to keep each other calm. Michelle came home and we told her that we couldn't find Evelyn and everyone looked in their houses on the mission and around their houses but couldn't find Evelyn. Michelle and Rebecca went to the Police station to report Evelyn's disappearance because she was only 4 years old and we had severe concerns for her safety, health and wellbeing as she was a small child missing.

The Police didn't seem concerned and Michelle came back and told us how they were treated at the Police station. The Police on shift said he was going home and it was late

so he could not do anything. He did not even take a statement from Rebecca and did not show any compassion towards Rebecca or Michelle. We were all very disappointed and disgusted in the Police. If the child was of European heritage we believe the parents and disappearance of Evelyn would have been a total different response from the Police.

That weekend I was getting my two children baptised at the Bowraville Catholic church and as this was supposed to be a celebration we had only sad thoughts in our heads because of the disappearance of my niece Evelyn. After the baptism we all went back to the mission and everyone came together and we did a massive search ourselves all over the mission, in the paddocks, at the tip, in and around the cemetery again, and everyone was working together to find Evelyn. We then went down to the shops and around the local swimming places.

I remember looking down at my daughter Jasmine who was looking up at me and I started to cry as she is only 1 year younger than Evelyn. I felt deep sorrow for my sister with the loss of her first born child a daughter. Evelyn was a beautiful shy little girl and she had sandy blonde hair with blue hazel eyes. Evelyn was always beside an adult or within the view of adults as she was only used to being around family who she knew and would not go with strangers or would get frightened of people she didn't know was visiting. Evelyn played with her cousins and Aaron was always with her, as brother and sister they had a special bond. Evelyn enjoyed going for walks and her dad (Billy) used to take her all the time. Rebecca used to hide the shoes because if Evelyn seen the shoes we had to take her for a walk.

The family had no support from services during the disappearance of Evelyn and the only thing I do remember are Father Ryan and the church visiting Rebecca and the Catholic Church holding a prayer service at the mission. The family and community were blanketed in deep sorrow, trauma, loss and grief over the disappearance and murder of the three Bowraville children. The families and community was crying out for help from the police but it never came. Everyone started to get angry and we protested against the murders and how the police seemed to be blaming all the Aboriginal parents and community because of their lifestyle. The Police seemed to be covering up for the accused person who was being charged and placed on trial for the murder of Evelyn.

There was tension in the township between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people as the Bowraville Ex-Services Club had a jar with a sign on it asking for donations to assist the accused person who's family was well known and lived in Bowraville. This act pushed people over the edge and the wider community was showing their support of the accused not the victim's families of the three murdered Aboriginal children in Bowraville.

When the police came to start interviewing people and taking statements I remember they were taking statements from people outside of the police station and was joking and laughing about the murders and who the families were. The Police treated all Aboriginal people with no dignity or respect throughout the whole investigations back in the early 90's. The questions that the Police were asking people were irrelevant to the case and seemed very stupid and off track for a murder investigation. To make matters worse the Police in charge of the investigation had no experience or knowledge on how to deal with a homicide case.

Sadly because of the inexperience and lack of knowledge from Police the families of the three murdered children still have no closure. The level of professionalism was extremely poor from the Police at the time of the investigation and the service to the Aboriginal community was basically zero response. Comments from Police were 'It's just another Aboriginal kid gone walkabout' and this comment was also mentioned on the radio, in newspapers and the local news. Rebecca was never informed first of any news or updates on Evelyn's case the Police always informed the media first before the families. We all heard any information on radio, in newspapers and on the local news.

The families were never shown any compassion from the Police and just blame pointed and frowned upon as Aboriginal people. The Police took statements from children who were minors with no parents present and was taking the word of children and people who did not know the children who went missing were making statements. The Police ask our mother if she sold Evelyn as mum got a back payment from the Department of Veterans Affairs for Widows Pension as my Father (Burke Henry Stadhams) fought in the Vietnam War. Our mother was extremely upset that Police would even ask her that.

Our mother blames herself as she heard Evelyn cry in the room but thought Rebecca settled her down and she heard a thud. Then there was no more crying and mum thought Evelyn went back to sleep with Rebecca. Mum tried to open the door and sing out but Rebecca could not hear mum.

I guess we all have some kind of guilt and often if only we did something the day before Evelyn may still be with us. In the days, weeks and months slowly we all watch my sister Rebecca Stadhams deteriorate and the transformation of Rebecca was very heart breaking to see. I remember Rebecca sitting in the corner of my house everyday looking out the widow rocking on the chair just waiting for any word that they found Evelyn. But each day Rebecca slipped further and further away into a dark place. Rebecca stopped eating and talking to us. We all had to take turns at watching over her every day because we thought she would kill herself over the trauma, loss and grief of Evelyn's disappearance.

It was very emotional watching my older sister lose the light from her eyes and because how everyone treated Rebecca she was oppressed. We all tried to keep Rebecca in our conversation daily and we would try and get her to speak or even smile a little. Rebecca had a photo of Evelyn and just rubs the photo touching her face softly and held it close to her heart every day. As Rebecca's sister we stand by her to find justice of the disappearance and murder of her first born child Evelyn Clarice Greenup. Rebecca was ridiculed for years which had deep physiological scaring and we would never let that ever happen to her again. Those events have changed Rebecca and since she came back from that dark place my sisters not the same person as her heart was shattered to pieces.

We stand to protect our sister as I remember she was a very different mother who loved and cared for her three children at the time. Rebecca taught me to be a mum when I had my first born daughter and I respect my sister very much as I was a young mum. Rebecca showed me how to bath, dress, change nappies, feed and care for my daughter. If I didn't have Rebecca I would have not known what to do.

Rebecca has nine children and she will relive this tragic event every day as she has to explain to her children when they are older what happened to their oldest sister Evelyn whose life was taken so very young. Evelyn didn't even get the chance to go to Kindergarten and be a normal little girl laughing and playing with friends at school.

The location where they found Evelyn's remains is also very hard for the family to deal with knowing that her little body was just dumped in the bushes and left like rubbish without a thought. I drove out to Congarinni Road everyday as my closet friend lives out there and what was even more heart breaking was finding out I pasted her body everyday as she was down in the bushes. I felt sick in the stomach and just a terrible sense of grief at the whole situation and was always fearful of my children disappearing as was everyone else at the time. Everyone was worried there was going to be another child taken which put terror into parents especially the Aboriginal parents as the three children murdered were all Aboriginal.

I hope Rebecca can forgive us and I am deeply sorry to my sister for adding any sorrow and extra stress onto her after enduring the family, community and Police pointing the finger at her because she was Evelyn's mother.

We all need to be reminded that Rebecca Stadhams is the biological mother of Evelyn Clarice Greenup who felt her daughter grow, move inside for her womb, gave birth to her and only a mother knows the special bond between their child.

Penny Lee Stadhams

Penny Stadhams – Impact Statement for Parliamentary Inquiry