Here’s where the story ends: My transition from curator to activist

What was I supposed to do when exhibiting the story wasn’t enough?

When is the work of telling the story supposed to end?

My final day working as a curator at the National Museum of Australia coincided with the opening of an exhibition that I curated *Inside: Life in Children’s Homes and Institutions.*

The exhibition was based on personal narratives of those who experienced life when they were
children in an orphanage, residential Home or an institution.

On 16 November 2011 to celebrate the exhibition’s opening, I had organised a live concert in the Museum’s entrance hall.

Survivors of institutionalised child abuse were dancing at this concert - celebrating that their personal histories had finally been believed and acknowledged through this exhibition. But there were no signs of revelry from two women adult survivors who were there. They sat at a table on the edge of the Museum’s entrance hall.
They were really angry.

I asked them if I could get them anything. Was there anything that they would like? I’m thinking that I could go to the staff kitchen to make them a cup of tea. But with scowling faces, they demanded, “WE WANT JUSTICE!” And I thought, “Gee, I don’t know in which particular kitchen cupboard I will find that.”

One of the women and the sister of the other woman had both been sent, separately, in different years, to an adult psychiatric facility, when they were children.
They did not have a mental illness.

But it was the one of the many policies that has resulted in the punishment of vulnerable children in Australia.

Various state laws from the 19\textsuperscript{th} century have resulted in children being punished for non-criminal conduct under status or welfare offences, such as being ‘uncontrollable’ or ‘exposed to moral danger’ as the laws described the circumstances.

There was a particular policy in the state of Queensland in Australia that saw a medical response to so-called 'juvenile delinquents'- mainly
children living in poverty – children who had not committed crimes but who had run away – usually running away from abusive orphanages.

There were two psychiatric facilities for children in Brisbane.

From there, some children were transferred to Wolston Park Hospital.

Children were placed there until the 1980s.

In addition to no formal education and a lack of a nurturing social environment, former child inmates of Wolston Park were:

• locked up in wards with criminally-insane adults
• sent to solitary confinement

• forced to take anti-psychotic medication

• given shock treatment

• raped and tortured by male warders.

Now as adults, these survivors live with complex post-traumatic stress disorder and other health problems from injuries that were inflicted on them when they were children.

As adults they have survived periods of homelessness and substance abuse.

In 1997, a group of these survivors sought legal support and one test case was put forward in the
Supreme Court of Brisbane but the judge threw the case out of court.

Then, in 1998, there was the Commission of Inquiry into the Abuse of Children in Queensland Institutions – known as the Forde Inquiry.

But these women weren’t included in the Forde Inquiry because Wolston Park was an institution for adults and the Inquiry only focussed on institutions for children.

So, the women were denied access to the redress scheme that followed the Forde inquiry.

The Queensland Government did, however, make a formal apology in 2010 but the Government did
not, as promised, proceed with reconciliation talks with these survivors.

So these women, at the time of the exhibition opening, were still seeking justice. They complained to me, “Are we supposed to just go home now? Now that the Museum has finished with us?”

And then came the big question, “Are you going to help us get justice?”

My last day on the job.

How to respond?

How would you have responded if you had been in my situation?
Well, I looked her in the eye, clasped her hand, and said, “I promise that I will do what I can.”

The women returned to Queensland. I remained in Canberra well over 1,000 kilometres away.

I went back to the day job I had before my contract at the museum.

But I was now committed to help these women.

But how?

Where would I start?

I decided that the first priority was to get public attention on this issue to call on the Queensland Government to begin a reparation process – financial payments at the very least.
But who would take notice of me on my own?

I needed an organisation behind me.

So I applied and became an honorary fellow at a university.

It wasn’t a paid job and there was no funding but it meant that I could use the name of the university and its ethics review process to professionally support my advocacy.

Then, in consultation with the women in Brisbane via email and telephone I wrote a media release. My media release was picked up by a journalist who interviewed the women and she wrote three related articles, which were published nationally.
It was a huge response.

And then - nothing happened.

What was I thinking?

How naïve of me to assume that national media coverage alone would mobilise a government to respond.

OK - back to the drawing board, I went.

I took annual leave from my day job and travelled to Brisbane to meet with more former child inmates.

As a result, I came to know nine former survivors – both Aboriginal and non-Indigenous women. One of the women and I were interviewed on radio. I returned to Canberra and in my spare time, I undertook further research – because knowledge is the non-violent activist’s best weapon.

Then, in 2013, the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse was established. Most hearings were conducted in private.
But the women wanted their personal history to be selected as one of Royal Commission’s public case studies.

I was formally called to a private hearing of the Royal Commission where I spoke to this very important issue.

Months went by.

No sign that the Royal Commission would publicly hear the case of child abuse at Wolston Park Hospital.

The women were furious.

Back in Canberra and in collaboration with the women via email and telephone I wrote an opinion
piece about how the Royal Commission had failed these women.

And then came the turning point.

I received an email from the Queensland Mental Health Commissioner.

She had read my opinion piece.

The Commissioner invited me to a meeting – just her and I.

The outcome of that meeting saw senior government representatives meeting with the women.

This was a critical development.

But the women were worried that this would be another talkfest resulting in nothing.

It was time for another crack at the media.
We badgered Australian award-winning novelist and investigative journalist, Matthew Condon, imploring him to pick up the story.

And there it was – a cover story from the newspaper weekend lift out. He had interviewed me, cited my research and also interviewed three of the women.

Then, on Thursday 16 March, 2017, five days after that article was published, the Queensland Health Minister made a public announcement - a reparation process for former child inmates of Queensland adult mental health facilities.
And the Health Minister also stressed that financial payments were definitely on the table.

That announcement came exactly five years and four months since my being asked at the National Museum of Australia if I was going to help the women ‘get justice’.

It had been five years and four months of camaraderie and campaigning across state borders. Five years and four months of rage, tears and raucous laughter from the irreverent humour that we shared amongst ourselves.

Five years and four months.

And. We. Won.
So does this mean for museums?

Here are some of the lessons that I learned.

Do any of these lessons resonate with you?

• I learned that when survivors of human rights violations donate their personal narratives – by telling their stories to museum curators - that they usually retraumatise themselves in the process.

But they do so knowingly in the hope that their stories will result in change – social, political and personal change.
• I was reminded of the most fundamental principle of university human research ethics - to be really honest and clear about who benefits from that research.

• And I concluded that that principle should apply to my work at the museum

• And I decided that some of the many benefits of the *Inside* exhibition should flow to those who so courageously trusted me with their personal history.

This is a photo of Sandra taken before she spent the rest of her childhood in a string of institutions.
And a photo taken years before she broke out of Wolston Park Hospital at the age of 16.

Leaving her to live her life in disguise, homeless, on the run from police.

Not that she had committed a crime.

Not that she had a mental illness.

But there it was.

When I met Sandra she had been fighting for justice for 18 years, only to be ignored by all those with the power to make amends.

But, in 2016, as a result of our campaigning together, Sandra was able to secure a face-to-face meeting with the Queensland community services minister.
And in preparation for that meeting Sandra some wrote some words to read aloud to the Minister - words that would give voice to all that had been burning in her heart for all those years.

The final words of Sandra’s private speech speak to the challenges of story telling.

Because here’s where the story ends – not with the opening of an exhibition that I worked on.

The story ends with justice.

Sandra’s closing remarks to the minister were:
“You have inherited righting the wrongs of the past - that both sides of Government knew about and were complicit in.

“It is cruel what happened to us but it is also cruel what is being done to us now by making us fight for so long.

It is time to finish it.”