

The Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse continued its public hearing into Case Study 35 today. Testimony was heard from survivor witness Julie Stewart, former Holy Family School, Doveton principal Graeme Sleeman and former Holy Family School, Doveton teacher Carmel Rafferty.

Testimony of Julie Stewart

Ms Stewart told the Commission that she had been abused by a family member for three years from when she was 5 years old, and that when she disclosed the abuse to her father, he told her that she should have known better.

She was at Holy Family School, Doveton when Father Searson became Parish Priest in 1984.

She spoke of reconciliation practice, and then fortnightly confession, where Searson would make her sit on his knee, stroke her hair, ask her to kiss him on the lips and say that she loved him. He would fondle her outside her underwear, an action which she knew was sexual and wrong. On one occasion, Searson sat her on his lap so that she could feel his erection. She pushed herself off him and ran out, crying.

Ms Stewart disclosed the abuse to a school principal at her next school, St Mary's at Dandenong. She said it was possible she told other people but could not remember. Ms Stewart was interviewed by Victoria Police in 1990, but said that she shut down because she felt the Detective blamed her when he said: "What were you doing, wearing a neon sign saying come and get me?"

Ms Stewart testified that after the Melbourne Response was established, she was interviewed by Peter O'Callaghan. She said that she went through a Melbourne Response hearing, but found it retraumatizing. She received a \$25,000 payment and a letter of apology from then- Archbishop Pell, which she told the Commission she did not ask for.

Ms Stewart concluded her testimony by reading a poem she had written entitled, "Pain."

Testimony of Graeme Sleeman

Graeme Sleeman was the principal at Holy Family School, Doveton, at the time when Victor Rubeo and Peter Searson were parish priests. He told the Commission that he had heard innuendo about Searson's misbehaviour with children, as well as large discrepancies with school finances.

He told the Commission about Searson pulling a gun on students who were cleaning the bathrooms at the school, a complaint from a parent that Searson would tape record confessions, other complaints that he would make the children kneel between his knees during confession and a complaint by a parent that Searson had made a sexual advance to their child during confession.

Sleeman told the Commission that he reported these incidents regularly to representatives from the Catholic Education Office, but that no action was taken because the complaints could not be substantiated. He also sought a meeting with Archbishop Little about Searson, but this did not occur.

Mr Searson told the Commission that because he could not get anywhere with the Archdiocese or the Catholic Education Office, he decided to resign, hoping that his resignation would draw attention

to the situation. He also told the Commission that he has not been able to obtain a job in Catholic Education again, and believes he has been blacklisted, and provided a list of examples of roles he was refused.

Sleeman was asked whether he had any dealings with Cardinal Pell before he resigned, and he confirmed that he had not. The only time he had spoken to Cardinal Pell, Sleeman said, was when Cardinal Pell phoned him after receiving numerous letters asking for assistance. Sleeman asked Cardinal Pell to go on national television and say that the stance Sleeman took in Doveton was morally correct and the only one he could take. Cardinal Pell declined to do that.

Testimony of Carmel Rafferty

Carmel Rafferty began at Holy Family School, Doveton as a special resource person but became a Grade 5/6 teacher in 1992. She spoke of an air of hypervigilance and paranoia at the school.

She noted that the boys had concerns about Searson, particularly about serving with him on the altar. When asking the boys to write down their reasons for avoiding serving at Mass, they wrote about Searson's advances. Rafferty testified that she had been told that a high school student was receiving counselling after being abused by Searson.

Following this, Rafferty refused to take her class to the scheduled school Mass and was reprimanded by the principal. Despite being told that the situation would be dealt with, Rafferty noted that nothing had been done in six weeks, so she resigned. She told the Commission that she has been unable to obtain a permanent job in Catholic education because she received a bad reference from the principal.

The Commission will resume at 10am with the testimony of Catholic Education Office officials Allan Dooley and Father Thomas Doyle and, if time permits, the testimony of Bishop Emeritus Peter Connors.