

**INQUIRY INTO UNSOLVED MURDERS AND LONG-TERM
MISSING PERSONS CASES IN NEW SOUTH WALES
BETWEEN 1965 AND 2010**

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Submission for the inquiry into unsolved murders and long-term missing persons cases in New South Wales between 1965 and 2010

To the committee members,

My name is _____, I'm the youngest sister of Elaine Johnson. I was only 12 when my sister went missing. When I was old enough to drive, I started to search for Elaine where all else failed with the help of my sister Wendy.

Elaine was born in the UK and immigrated to Australia in 1969 with our family when she was five as part of the Ten Pound Pom immigration scheme. Elaine was the eldest of five children Elaine, Alan, Wendy, Helen and Stewart (deceased).

Elaine disappeared in February 1980 from the Cronulla area of the Sutherland Shire in Southern Sydney when she was 16.

Despite our father, Clifford, reporting Elaine missing to Cronulla Police State in 1980, she was treated as a runaway and has no official police report, even though my father stated the officer did write down the details.

In 2020 my father passed away, never getting any answers to what happened to his first born daughter and my mother, June, is now in a nursing home with Alzheimer's, so also will never get to know .

For more than 40 years, we have battled against the red tape of the NSW police system for any answers to why Elaine has no file and why officers failed to act.

During that time, we have also taken on the work we believe should have been done by police to mark out a timeline of Elaine's possible leads - in Cronulla, Kings Cross, Wyong, Newcastle and Southern NSW.

When Elaine went missing, her friend, Kerry Anne Joel was known to be with her.

Kerry has a police file. Yet, despite also being reported missing in February 1980, Kerry's file states her disappearance as February 1981.

Incredibly, it would take NSW police until 2004 - more than 20 years after the girls were reported missing - to realise that two girls were missing, not just one. Despite multiple media articles stating otherwise. So we are confused how police can suggest otherwise

As far as we know, before then, police hadn't noticed that Elaine and Kerry's disappearances were likely connected.

Elaine was reported missing to Cronulla Police Station while Kerry was reported missing to Miranda Police Station, one suburb over.

In 2004, the NSW Police Missing Persons Unit handed information about Kerry's disappearance to senior officers based in The Sutherland Shire..

Checks for the girls were made on the police missing persons databases across Australia, electoral roles, Centrelink, Births, Deaths and Marriages, major Australian banks and Interpol. Medicare and the Australian Tax Office were also checked.

There were no records of the girls from after they went missing.

We believe there might be a good reason for that. Official documents show police checks - made between 2004 and 2006 - included searches under the wrong name.

Checks were made for Elaine Johnson as well as Elaine Rockdale - we don't know why.

As well as the wrong name, checks were made with Elaine's wrong date of birth. Again, we don't know why.

Official documents also show there were budget restraints on at least one search. We don't know if this means not all searches for Elaine were completed.

In June 2005, Wendy and myself were contacted by police and asked to come in and give statements about the searches we had done for Elaine.

We were told the statements would be used for a coronial inquest into the girls' disappearance and suspected deaths.

That inquest happened in 2007. While our statements were taken, no friends of Elaine or Kerry were interviewed. We don't know why.

We also don't know why our parents, Clifford and June, were never contacted to be shown the findings from the 2007 inquest and why our father Clifford was never asked to give a statement like everyone else or DNA. No counselling had been ever offered as per normal coronial procedures

The only documentation we have been given from the inquest included a single A5 sheet of paper with handwritten notes on it.

Some of the notes had been crossed out - we don't know why.

In 2010, I visited the NSW Coroner's court in Glebe to seek more information.

I was told to obtain a death certificate for Elaine based on the coroner's single page report which claimed Elaine died in December, 1979.

I declined as it made no sense to her - Elaine didn't disappear until the beginning of 1980 and there was no other supplied evidence - such as police statements from family or friends - to back up the single page report.

In 2015, police contacted me and said they would be getting statements from family and friends of Elaine and Kerry.

We know this police action only came about after I spoke to a NSW police detective at one of my missing persons displays in Cronulla Mall a year earlier in 2014.

I have regularly held displays in the mall over the decades. Over the years, many people have come forward to share information about the girls' disappearances.

In each case when any information was shared by the public, this was also reported to the police.

The detective told me he would help with Elaine's case. I was cautiously optimistic about the offer of assistance. Though, was somewhat alarmed when the senior detective stated he hadn't heard of the girls case.

Just as in 2004, checks for the girls were made on the police missing person databases across Australia, electoral roles, Centrelink, Births, Deaths and Marriages, the major Australian banks and Interpol. Medicare and the Australian Tax Office were also checked.

Again, there were no records of the girls from after they went missing and we have never been made aware of any formal investigations.

From what we understand - unlike in 1980, or 2004 - in 2015 police started to take statements from Elaine and Kerry's friends.

This is 35 years after Elaine and Kerry went missing. We still don't know why no statements were ever taken back in 1980. As there is evidence in the 2016 coroners report that police were actually aware many years prior that Elaine was missing.

It was the first time any of them had spoken to police about the girls.

On 9 August 2016, more than a year after police took statements from family and friends into Elaine and Kerry's disappearance, a second inquest was held.

We found it strange that further checks were made on the police database before the 2016 inquest, given they claimed Elaine had never had an official police file when she was first reported missing and police didn't connect that both Elaine and Kerry were missing.

We were told the 2016 inquest would last for a number of days. It took less than an hour.

Wendy and myself were sitting in court when police admitted Elaine still had no file - when the detective was asked by the NSW Deputy Coroner where the file was, whether it was on microfiche. They were told no, "it is missing".

We are grateful to the two detectives that contacted them after the chance meeting in 2014 that day in Cronulla mall. To a point.

I had to call one of the detectives to find out what had happened after the second inquest. It was only then that I learned police had been inundated with information about the girls' case.

But nothing came of it. I was told despite the officers being "swamped" with information, they said none of the information was relevant.

I was also told by one of the detectives that I was obsessed, this made me feel very uncomfortable and the detective unapproachable. I thought that I would wait for a phone call instead, but this never happened.

After the coronial inquest in 2016 all forms of contact stopped unless I made contact myself, which was uncomfortable as it made me feel like a burden.

We were previously led to believe that once the case went to Unsolved Homicides we would have support and leads would be followed.

Due to the police not looking into the case for 35 years, we believe it would be beneficial to have access to this information to determine its relevance.

A review was said to have been carried out in 2022, though we have never been informed of the review and any outcome.

We now have little faith in the police system as a whole even though we understand the restraints.

I have also made multiple applications to the NSW Coroner's office for the official transcripts from both inquests.

The first request was the 2nd of February 2018. Also made another request on 20 January 2025. Then followed up my 2025 request on 28 August this year and was told "these things take time". It's been five and a half years since my first request. I'm still waiting for a response to my request.

We also have little faith in the authorities because of the lack of help we've been given over a financial reward in Elaine and Kerry's case.

As mentioned, I have held regular missing persons displays in Cronulla Mall over the years. Important information has been shared during the displays.

We believe Elaine and Kerry's case would benefit from a financial reward.

We have made multiple requests to NSW police about such a reward. We have been told it is not possible due to lack of evidence and limited information known about the girls whereabouts prior to their disappearance.

When we did finally hear from authorities, we were sent a confusing letter.

The letter read in-part: "While I appreciate Mr Cooper's distress, I am advised that the offer of a reward via a campaign is not a viable option at this time due to the limited information known about Ms Johnson and Ms Joel's movements prior to their disappearance."

I would like an explanation as to why the letter addresses Mr Cooper's distress when I'm Elaine's sister?

Also, isn't the purpose of the reward to obtain information from the public about their movements?

If the police acted back in 1980 maybe more would be known?

Rewards have been offered for cases with less information.

We do not understand this, particularly given we have new evidence about the case.

In July 2024 we passed this new evidence onto the police during a meeting with Unsolved homicides detectives at Maitland Police station, though no official statements were completed, only jotted down information into a notepad.

We thought we would have statements taken and given a copy, but don't know why this did not happen?

We truly believe a financial reward would dramatically move this investigation along and should be sufficient incentive for those with information to come forward.

We believe there are members of the public with information, just waiting for a reward to come forward.

We cannot understand why the authorities don't want to pursue this avenue.

Scott Cook, the Commander of the Homicide Squad once said: "We can't value a human life. This is about how we get people to talk."

Though after 45 years waiting, it's evident we require an incentive for people to "talk" If not now? When?

Something else the inquiry needs to consider - as Kerry was believed to be pregnant at the time she and Elaine went missing, it is three unaccounted people, not just two.

How long does a family have to wait: lost files, no statements for 35 years and then no reward. My sister Elaine and her friend Kerry deserved better. We deserve better. If police searched when the girls were first reported missing our family may not have gone through all this anguish.

I can only hope Jeremy Buckingham, the chair of this inquiry, keeps his promise he made to me in October 2024 outside NSW Parliament to include Elaine and Kerry in the inquiry. For us, time is of the essence.

(Contact names not for publication)

Kind Regards