

REPORT ON PROCEEDINGS BEFORE

**PORTFOLIO COMMITTEE NO. 1 – PREMIER AND
FINANCE**

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

CORRECTED

At Grafton District Services Club, Grafton, on Wednesday 1 July 2026

The Committee met at 9:30.

PRESENT

The Hon. Jeremy Buckingham (Chair)

The Hon. Robert Borsak (Deputy Chair)

The Hon. Stephen Lawrence

The Hon. Aileen MacDonald

PRESENT VIA VIDEOCONFERENCE

The Hon. Dr Sarah Kaine

The Hon. Rachel Merton

The Hon. Bob Nanva

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The CHAIR: Good morning, everyone. Welcome to the second hearing of the Committee's inquiry into unsolved murders and long-term missing persons cases in New South Wales between 1965 and 2010. I acknowledge the Bundjalung, Gumbainggir and Yaegl nations, the traditional custodians of the lands on which we are meeting today. I pay my respects to Elders past and present, and celebrate the diversity of Aboriginal peoples and their ongoing cultures and connections to the lands and waters of New South Wales. I also acknowledge and pay my respects to any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people joining us today. My name is Jeremy Buckingham, and I am the Chair of this Committee.

I ask everyone in the room to please turn their mobile phones to silent. Parliamentary privilege applies to witnesses in relation to the evidence they give today. However, it does not apply to what witnesses say outside of the hearing. I urge witnesses to be careful about making comments to the media or to others after completing their evidence. In addition, the Legislative Council has adopted rules to provide procedural fairness for inquiry participants. I encourage Committee members and witnesses to be mindful of these procedures.

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Ms KAREN COX, Sister of Narelle Cox, Missing Person, sworn and examined

Ms KATHY COX BROWNING, Sister of Narelle Cox, Missing Person, affirmed and examined

Ms SUE CANTLE, Best Friend of Narelle Cox, Missing Person, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: I thank the witnesses for making the time to give evidence. Would any of you like to make an opening statement before we turn to some questions?

KATHY COX BROWNING: Yes, I would. I'm here today for my sister Narelle Cox. In July 1977, at the age of 21, she became a missing person. That was 49 years ago. I was 15 at the time. Then, as it is now, speaking about this situation was difficult. We were an average working-class family, raised to be honest, caring and respectful. The lack of action and care by the authorities was devastating. I have noticed that this is no longer the case. People are still being reported missing, and action is immediate. But there are still unidentified human remains sitting in a drawer, waiting. Family and friends that know a missing person have a unique mindset. We all suffer from the battle with hope and logic. Hope has lasted for years—decades, even—but the logical brain is always nagging the truth at you. This human trait of hope makes acceptance a lifetime struggle and gives you a knowledge that there may never be closure.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much for taking the time to come along today. In terms of what we know about Narelle, had Narelle lived in Noosa for long, or was she just travelling there to see a friend?

KAREN COX: No, she'd never lived there. She had visited a couple of times and hitchhiked those times as well. But she used to have a big dog with her, except the last time.

The CHAIR: She hitchhiked with a dog?

KAREN COX: Yes.

The CHAIR: She had hitchhiked up over the previous year or two to see friends?

KAREN COX: Yes, I think about three times, but just to visit her friends. She never actually lived there.

The CHAIR: Did she hitchhike to other places? Was it routine for her to hitchhike?

KAREN COX: I don't recall her hitchhiking anywhere else. I don't think there was a necessity for her to go anywhere else.

The CHAIR: She had planned to work in Noosa. Was she moving there long term, or was it just a visit to see a friend to catch up?

KAREN COX: Yes, it was just a visit to catch up while she was actually waiting—she had been in Sydney for a while with our aunty. Then she decided she wanted to go nursing, but she wanted to see a bit of Australia. So she applied to Darwin hospital. She came home and she was waiting for the papers to come from Darwin hospital. She said to our mother, about two days before, "I think I'll go and see Faye," who was a schoolfriend.

The CHAIR: In Noosa.

KAREN COX: Who lived in Noosa now, yes. My mother said, "How will you go?" She said, "I'll hitchhike." Mum said no. Mum had given her \$200 for her twenty-first birthday in March. She said, "You've got the money. Why don't you take the bus?" Nothing more was said until two days later when Mum came home from work and found the note. All she said was, "Gone to Noosa to see Faye. Be back Monday." That was the only connection to Noosa.

The CHAIR: Was that note definitely in Narelle's handwriting? Was it definitely from her?

KAREN COX: Yes. I lived not far from our parents, and my mother came around and asked me, "Narelle has left this note. Did you know anything about it?" I said no, she hadn't said anything to me.

The CHAIR: Was Narelle in any sort of relationship at that time? Did she have a boyfriend or anything like that? Was she single?

KAREN COX: She was single, yes.

The CHAIR: My understanding is that your mum then went down to the post office and sent a telegram—

KAREN COX: Yes.

The CHAIR: —to her friend in Noosa to confirm she'd been there.

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SUE CANTLE: There was a lift organised for her to come up and see me in Armidale at the uni the following week. She wasn't home and she missed the lift.

The CHAIR: It was because she hadn't gone to Noosa and returned in a couple of days that you then realised, when you didn't see her, that something had gone awry.

SUE CANTLE: Yes, I think Narelle's mother realised that she should have been at home.

KAREN COX: Yes. When she didn't arrive home on the Monday—in those days we didn't have a telephone, so she went to the post office and sent a telegram. I think that was on the Tuesday. The telegram came back from Faye, and all it stated was, "Have not seen or heard from Narelle." It was that evening or afternoon that my mother and I went down to the police station and reported her as a missing person.

The CHAIR: What was the attitude of the police?

KAREN COX: "Well, she is 21. She has probably just decided to stay longer or go somewhere else. She is 21. She can do what she likes."

The CHAIR: So they didn't act on it. They didn't send out a search or say they were going to do anything at that time?

KAREN COX: Nothing at that time.

The CHAIR: Did that remain the situation?

KAREN COX: No.

The CHAIR: What about after another week? Did you go back to the police?

KAREN COX: Yes. My mother and I frequently went back.

The CHAIR: When you say "frequently", how often?

KAREN COX: I'd say once a week. I didn't always go, but my mother went at least once a week. It was about six weeks after she left that the police actually put a notification in our local paper, *The Daily Examiner*. A couple of days after that, a fisherman at Lawrence on the Clarence River, while fishing, pulled up his anchor and thought he'd pulled up a body. The police diving team from Sydney was brought up, and they did two days diving—I think it was two days.

The CHAIR: Where is Lawrence from Grafton? How far away is that? Is it on the Clarence River?

KAREN COX: Yes, it is. It's where there's a ferry that goes across to an island.

SUE CANTLE: It's a 20-minute drive.

The CHAIR: So a person thought they had seen a body and they were concerned enough that they went to the police. My understanding is that they thought the deceased person had blonde hair. Did Narelle have blonde hair?

KAREN COX: No, she didn't. She did have a blonde streak. Where he said he was, it's a fishing spot and it's a very deep hole, apparently, in the river. The divers didn't find anything. My mum and my aunty actually went and interviewed the fisherman and he then said to them, "I don't think it was Narelle because the person had blonde hair." That is where that came from. A lot of people said, "He drinks a lot. If he said that, that probably is not true." Equally, a lot of people said, "If he said that, it happened." We don't really know much more.

The CHAIR: Do you know if the police interviewed him or if he gave a statement to the police?

KAREN COX: Yes, I believe so. It was in the paper, pictures of them diving et cetera.

The CHAIR: And the diving didn't bring up any result?

KAREN COX: No.

The CHAIR: There was a report that a truck driver had allegedly picked Narelle up from South Grafton crossroads and given her a lift to Brunswick Heads. Is that true? How was that established?

KAREN COX: We don't know. The police told us that, when we were down there at some stage. My mother asked whether she could speak to this truck driver, but the police refused and said he didn't want to be identified.

The CHAIR: So a truck driver had come forward—

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KAREN COX: So they said.

The CHAIR: That was the police who told you that a truck driver said he had picked Narelle up at South Grafton crossroads.

KAREN COX: Yes.

The CHAIR: And dropped her at Brunswick Heads?

KAREN COX: The fish co-op.

The CHAIR: North of Byron Bay?

KAREN COX: Yes.

The CHAIR: And that was all you were told, with no outcome about whether or not he was interviewed or who he was and all the rest?

KAREN COX: No, that was the only thing that was said—"No, he doesn't want to be identified."

The CHAIR: Did they tell you how they established that he picked her up?

KAREN COX: No. We had a report that a truck driver picked her up at South Grafton and dropped her off at the fish co-op at Brunswick Heads.

The CHAIR: Did they give you dates or times or anything like that?

KAREN COX: No.

The CHAIR: They wouldn't tell you who he was or anything about him or when he dropped her off or all the rest?

KAREN COX: Nothing.

The CHAIR: Was any search for Narelle ever conducted around Brunswick Heads, that you know of?

KAREN COX: No, I don't think so. I can't quite remember times but, at one time, the police did tell us—because we said she was going to Noosa—that they would notify all the police stations from Grafton to Noosa. I can't remember but it was probably a couple of weeks after she left when Mum, me and Kathy went for a drive and stopped off at every little shop along the way showing Narelle's photo to see if anybody recognised her, and there was nothing. When we got to Brisbane, we weren't sure what to do so we went to a police station. I can't remember where it was. We asked them if they knew anything about it. They had never been notified. We have found out since that New South Wales and Queensland and New South Wales and Victoria didn't interact.

The CHAIR: This was just a few weeks after Narelle had disappeared? You took it upon yourself to drive to Queensland to look for her.

KAREN COX: Yes. We didn't go any further because we thought there wasn't much point because they don't know anything about it.

The CHAIR: How long after Narelle's disappearance was the truck driver incident? Was that just weeks after or months after?

KAREN COX: Weeks. It was all within weeks and then it went to nothing. We took a description of what Narelle took with her, including a guitar and X-rays. She'd broken her nose playing hockey. We had X-rays and we took those to the police. In the Coroner's inquiry a few years back, none of that evidence was ever found. Nobody knows what happened to it.

The CHAIR: Tell us about that. Is that where the trail really trailed off?

KAREN COX: Yes.

The CHAIR: What did you then hear from the police over those intervening years? When was the coronial inquest?

KAREN COX: I can't remember dates. I've got a thing in my car.

KATHY COX BROWNING: In the 2000s.

The CHAIR: I think it was 2011. Between 1977 and 2011—33 years—how much contact did you have with the police?

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KAREN COX: About one year later—Mum was still at work but I was at our family home—two young policemen came to the door. They knocked on the door and I answered it. They said, "We've found Narelle." I said, "Oh my God! Have you? Where is she?" They said, "She registered for unemployment in Sydney." I was so excited. Anyway, when Mum came home and I told her, she more or less immediately booked a train and went to Sydney, because she had a sister in Sydney. She and her sister went to the unemployment office that the police had said. Because of the circumstances—they really shouldn't have, but they did—they looked up the file, and it was the year before, when Narelle was living in Sydney.

The CHAIR: So the police had got that wrong?

KAREN COX: They had got that wrong. After that, there was no further contact.

The CHAIR: Where did Narelle live in Sydney?

KAREN COX: With our aunty.

The CHAIR: Whereabouts?

KAREN COX: Epping.

The CHAIR: Was she down there long?

KAREN COX: About six months, I think.

The CHAIR: So apart from the police knocking on your door and giving you some incorrect information about a year later, did you have much contact from the police?

KAREN COX: No.

The CHAIR: Did you have any contact from the police?

KAREN COX: No. There didn't seem to be much point because they just kept saying, "No, there's nothing there."

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: So you've had no contact with the police since then?

KAREN COX: Not until the Coroner.

The CHAIR: So for 34 years.

SUE CANTLE: I have. First of all, it was probably about six weeks later that I was living in Armidale. The head detective from the Armidale police force, who we all had heard of, came to the house. He didn't come in the front fence at all; he just stopped at the fence. I went out to see what he wanted, and he just wanted to reassure me that the police are friendly and, if I heard anything about Narelle, not to hesitate to come into the police and let them know. I never heard anything. Then, again, I think it was in 2004, or maybe a little bit before that, I got a phone call from somebody, a policeman—I don't remember his name—who said they were going back over cold cases. He questioned me about Narelle's case. He said, "I can't find an official record of interview with you." I said, "No, there wasn't one. We just talked over the fence." He asked me other questions and he was horrified, really. He said to me, "It's just terrible that an investigation was never done. It should have been chased up, and now it's a long time later."

The CHAIR: So it was 27 years after she had disappeared that you got a call?

SUE CANTLE: I guess so, yes.

The CHAIR: Did he say how the case was being reinvestigated, or why?

SUE CANTLE: Lots of them were being reinvestigated. Actually, the person I shared my house with had a missing brother and he got a call also.

The CHAIR: At that same time?

SUE CANTLE: Yes, so they were clearly going through old cold cases to revisit them. There was probably a change in attitude from the police.

The CHAIR: And that was just you. Did other family members get contacted as well and told the same thing?

KAREN COX: Yes. Sorry, I had forgotten that but, yes, Detective Burke I think it was, was very good. He came, and the same thing. He also was involved with the Coroner's thing too—the same detective. I remember now that he had come again after and I hadn't seen him for years in between. He came again and said similar things—they were looking into it.

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The CHAIR: Ivan Milat was arrested in 1994. Did you or any family members ever contact the New South Wales police in relation to Ivan Milat and where he may or may not have been at that time? Can you tell us about that?

KAREN COX: Yes. When Ivan Milat was arrested in Task Force Air, I think it was called, I rang the number and I spoke to a detective. I told him Narelle's circumstances, and I was just wondering whether Ivan Milat could have been involved. He said, "I'll just check on that, and I'll get back to you in 10 minutes." I thought, "That's that." But they did ring me back almost to the 10 minutes, and he said, "We've looked up Narelle's date of disappearance and, in correspondence with Ivan Milat's work record, he was supposedly working on the roads in Newcastle at that time." That was all—that was the end of that.

The CHAIR: And so, therefore, he was ruled out?

KAREN COX: Yes, he was ruled out.

The CHAIR: You call them and 10 minutes later they call you up and say, "We've checked his work records. He couldn't have done it."

KAREN COX: Yes.

The CHAIR: And that was in 10 or 15 minutes, to your recollection?

KAREN COX: Yes.

The CHAIR: Were you ever told that Narelle had been on a list of cases that Task Force Air had already reviewed as sharing similarities to the Belanglo murders? Were you ever told that?

KAREN COX: No.

The CHAIR: That information was never passed on to you?

KAREN COX: No.

The CHAIR: And that was the last contact you ever had with Task Force Air?

KAREN COX: Yes.

The CHAIR: There was a coronial inquest in November 2011. How did that come about? Were you told why it was happening, or did you just get an email or a phone call from the Coroner saying that was happening?

KAREN COX: No, Detective Burke came and told me.

The CHAIR: This is the detective who had called you in 2004 or 2005. He said that there was a coronial inquest happening seven or eight years later.

KAREN COX: Yes.

The CHAIR: Can you tell us about that coronial inquest? Was there any new information provided there?

KAREN COX: No. Again, I have the thing in my car with the results of it, but I didn't bring it up.

The CHAIR: Were there any persons of interest mentioned there? Did the police provide any new information?

KAREN COX: No.

The CHAIR: But you have been provided with a copy of the results of that?

KAREN COX: Yes.

The CHAIR: Would you be prepared to share that with the Committee?

KAREN COX: Yes, I can go and get it.

The CHAIR: No, you don't have to do it right now, Mrs Cox. That's fine—just in due course. The secretariat will be in contact with you.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Thank you for coming along today. If you look back since your sister's disappearance, what do you want most for the Committee to understand about that disappearance?

KAREN COX: I think the Committee and probably everybody understands it's not just the person who disappears. It destroyed our mother. She used to come to me sometimes and say, "I've got this terrible feeling in my chest that Narelle's somewhere and needs me." She wasn't a dramatic, emotional sort of person. It was just

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heartbreaking to hear it. She tried everything she could. When I show you my thing—she'd contacted the Salvation Army because they had a missing persons section. They inquired as far as they could and then sent a letter back to say, "We can't do any more." Mum put an ad in *The Courier-Mail* in Brisbane. It was so limited, the things we could do in those days.

KATHY COX BROWNING: And other news departments weren't interested in the story at all.

KAREN COX: She went to *A Current Affair*, but they didn't run it.

KATHY COX BROWNING: We know what it means, but it'd be good that future people get satisfaction through the authorities that they are doing everything they can to find a missing person. It is very important to start straightaway, not weeks or months later.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: That was going to be my next question. Is there anything, for you or for another family, that you believe should never have happened in your case? You're saying that they should act quicker and you mentioned the communications side of things.

KATHY COX BROWNING: And it doesn't matter how old they are. The police thought that at 21 she's an adult—that it doesn't matter—but it does matter, because the people who know her knew she wasn't going to disappear for no reason. There was a reason behind it. Sometimes children disappear. It's terrible, and they get immediate things. But sometimes with older people, they think they've just wandered off or they've just gone off. But it doesn't matter. A missing person needs the same amount of coverage and investigation as anyone else.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: You mentioned in your opening statement, Ms Cox, that you believe it's changed now from what it was.

KATHY COX BROWNING: Yes. I see it now, like on Facebook. I get notifications that someone's missing in the area straightaway. It's good; it's what needs to be done.

The CHAIR: Do you mean via text message or something like that?

KATHY COX BROWNING: Yes, it's some sort of police notification that I get. I don't know why I get them. They just come out and I see them. I think, wow, it's really good nowadays. It's keeping people informed, letting people know that it still is happening. Back when my sister disappeared, there was very little media coverage of it. That's why it was a field day for anyone who wanted to go out and commit crimes. They just weren't followed up. So, yes, it's good that it is followed now and there's more emphasis on trying to locate and find them. Sometimes people never get found, even now. With all the social media and coverage it gets, they still can't find them. So it is sad, and there's another generation of more families that have to go through the not knowing.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: What has been the most difficult part of living with that uncertainty? As you say, it wasn't just Narelle; it's your whole family and your mum.

KATHY COX BROWNING: And friends. Sue's known her through school days. There are still people from Narelle's school days who bring it up and say, "We still miss her."

SUE CANTLE: Yes, very often.

KATHY COX BROWNING: Next year is 50 years. It's a long time.

KAREN COX: Just recently one of Narelle's schoolfriends died. During the funeral, Narelle's name was mentioned because it was one of her memories before she died. That's such a unique sort of thing. One other thing I want to comment on too was, as far as we know, Faye Brown was never interviewed and we never heard any more from Faye Brown.

SUE CANTLE: They didn't do any interviews. I wasn't technically interviewed.

The CHAIR: Remind us who Faye Brown was.

KAREN COX: She was the friend that Narelle was going to visit in Noosa, but because the States didn't pass information between the States—

The CHAIR: So no New South Wales police officer, that you know of, ever went to Queensland to interview them?

KAREN COX: No.

The CHAIR: The coronial inquest—did you attend that?

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KAREN COX: No. It was in Coffs Harbour, and I can't remember why. We were going, but something happened. I can't remember now why.

The CHAIR: Were you ever sent a transcript of it?

KAREN COX: Yes.

The CHAIR: You were sent the whole transcript of it?

KAREN COX: Yes, I have it in the car.

The CHAIR: Did the truck driver issue come up—like, who that truck driver was?

KAREN COX: No.

The CHAIR: Was that information included in the coronial inquest?

KAREN COX: No.

The CHAIR: That part, the person who says that they picked Narelle up and had come forward, or the police had learnt that they'd picked them up—they weren't mentioned at the coronial inquest?

KAREN COX: No.

The CHAIR: Was there any mention of a search of Brunswick Heads or the police conducting inquiries in Brunswick Heads, potentially her last known location? Was that mentioned?

KAREN COX: Look, I'm not—I'd have to go through it again. I just can't remember.

The CHAIR: I understand.

KAREN COX: I'm old!

SUE CANTLE: I had another thing happen. It was just before COVID. We had a celebration of 40 years since Narelle disappeared, so it's nearly 10 years ago. We were interviewed for the local paper. It was a really huge coverage. Just before COVID, a journalist was writing about it and he said, "Google me; I'm legit," and he was. He was getting a podcast together. He picked me out because, he said, "There's not many people with your name, and I knew I'd be able to find you," and he tracked me down. I told him that Kathy and Karen would also be worth talking to.

He was doing a podcast on a particular criminal who was in jail at the time. He said he was coming up to interview me, but we all got locked down and nothing ever happened of it, because we were locked down for a long time. But he said to me, in his opinion, there is another culprit who should be looked into, who was operating in the northern part of the State. I can't remember his details, but he was a likely lad, he said. She might have been in the wrong place at the wrong time. He committed all sorts of assaults, rapes, murders, and finally made a mistake, and they got him for three murders in Sydney and one in Melbourne.

The CHAIR: Was it Ashley Coulston?

SUE CANTLE: That's the guy. I didn't know if I could say his name.

The CHAIR: The balaclava killer.

SUE CANTLE: Yes. He said he wanted to interview me about that. I thought, "Well, he's decked.¹ He could be questioned again, couldn't he, about things." But they don't cough up, I don't think. But that was interesting.

The CHAIR: When you say, "They don't cough up," do you mean that the police never tell you who they're looking at, or what?

SUE CANTLE: No, the criminals don't bother admitting to other things, I don't think. But I have read a bit about him and there was a lull in his criminal activity. They said it was very unlikely he was doing nothing, and Narelle's disappearance fell into that little time.

The CHAIR: He lived at Kyogle, too.

¹ In [correspondence](#) to the committee dated 10 July 2026, Ms Sue Cantle, best friend of Narelle Cox, missing person, clarified their evidence.

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SUE CANTLE: Yes, he did, and apparently he used to go camping on the weekends. They said they just thought there was something suspicious about his camping trips on the weekends, and then things would go wrong. There was a couple found dead on the beach at Kingscliff that they never solved, and other things going on around that area.

The CHAIR: That was the murder of Caroline Dow up at Kingscliff.

SUE CANTLE: I'm not sure of their names.

The CHAIR: That was in 1977 as well, I think.

SUE CANTLE: Yes.

The CHAIR: This was a podcaster?

SUE CANTLE: Yes, it was a journalist who was going to write a podcast, because he suspected this fellow was operating up there and that Narelle might have been one of his victims.

The CHAIR: What's your attitude to the media inquiries? I know it's an incredibly difficult subject, but how have you always felt about media approaching you to talk about it—or, in fact, this inquiry? Is it something you think is helpful? Of course you would prefer not to be doing it.

SUE CANTLE: No, I appreciate doing it. I appreciate the interest. After all these years you don't expect an outcome, but it's good that it gets looked into. I hope that the police these days take things seriously.

The CHAIR: One of the things you said early on was that there are a lot of remains. I think we've been told there are hundreds of remains that are stored in—have you ever been asked for DNA?

KAREN COX: Yes, here a couple of years—

KATHY COX BROWNING: It was before COVID. Both Karen and I went down and supplied DNA to the police.

The CHAIR: What do you mean? Can you describe that?

KATHY COX BROWNING: They invited us down because they were taking DNA for missing people to tidy up the human remains that they have there. This was down in Coffs Harbour we went, and we gave them a sample.

The CHAIR: And who's they? The Coroner?

KATHY COX BROWNING: The police.

The CHAIR: It was the police?

KAREN COX: Yes. Apparently they said there was some money granted to them for this. They did all this DNA and we've never heard another word since.

The CHAIR: That was it?

KAREN COX: That was it.

The CHAIR: You went down, you provided your DNA because they were going to—

KAREN COX: Yes.

The CHAIR: You were told that was to compare against human remains that they had unidentified, but then no result.

KAREN COX: And it was the first time that it was Australia wide. They were going to DNA test any remains from Australia wide. But we've never heard another word since.

The CHAIR: Was that New South Wales police or the Federal Police? Do you recall?

KATHY COX BROWNING: I thought it was New South Wales police.

KAREN COX: Can I just add—I can remember little bits. The day Narelle disappeared, the day she left—I said my mother had given her \$200 for her twenty-first birthday. She went to the Commonwealth Bank and deposited that money before she left. That bank account was never, ever touched. That was another thing that we told the police. I mean, people didn't have access to money except, you know?

The CHAIR: Would she have routinely carried a lot of cash with her?

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KAREN COX: No.

The CHAIR: Just a few dollars.

KAREN COX: Yes.

The CHAIR: I know it's hard for you to remember, but did the Coroner make any findings on—clearly not about the cause of death, but that she is deceased or when she may have become deceased?

KAREN COX: I'd have to look at it again, but I'm sure it said "likely death".

The CHAIR: But no time?

KATHY COX BROWNING: I think it was not long after she disappeared.

KAREN COX: Yes.

KATHY COX BROWNING: It was basically that someone took her and probably—

The CHAIR: And relatively soon—okay. I appreciate that's hard to recall. Colleagues, do you have any other questions?

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: I have a few. Thank you so much for assisting the inquiry and coming along. Are there any other understandings you have of possible shortcomings of the police investigation that you would be able to share with us? You have obviously talked about you, Sue, not being interviewed and the police not acting soon enough, perhaps, and perhaps them assuming that because Narelle was 21 she was just doing her own thing or whatever. Are there any other specific issues or concerns that have come to your attention about things that you feel should have been done that perhaps were not done?

KATHY COX BROWNING: I think mainly the part that States don't talk to each other, or they didn't back then. I'm not sure what the procedure is now. But I think that was the biggest hurdle. It was reported in Grafton Police Station and it didn't go anywhere else until much, much later. By then it was too late. That was the biggest one, I think.

KAREN COX: And I think it was only that my mother kept going to the police station that they eventually put the ad in the local paper. But I don't know that it went to any other papers.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: In terms of ongoing contact with the police over the years, have you felt that you've had someone that you were able to contact in the police? Have you felt that that contact is appropriate and open to you?

KAREN COX: I found that Detective Burke—I'm pretty sure that's his name—was very understanding. I couldn't fault him. He didn't hide anything. He was the one who told us that all the evidence had disappeared and all that sort of thing. I was quite happy with his representation. Apart from that, I've not had anything to do with police.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: In terms of disappearing evidence, was he talking about the evidence that was obtained by the police back in the 1970s?

KAREN COX: That we supplied.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: But that has all disappeared, has it?

KAREN COX: Yes. When I said to him, "We supplied this, the description, what she was wearing, the guitar she had with her and the bag," he couldn't find anything like that.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: That's something that I'm aware of in quite a few criminal trials. Evidence is lost before the trial and then not available for the trial. Did the police give you any more information about whether that had been destroyed as part of standard police procedure or had it simply gone missing? Did you get any insights into that?

KAREN COX: I could only say that he couldn't find anything. I don't know why.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: So he didn't tell you whether that was something that had occurred deliberately or accidentally?

KAREN COX: No, not that I recall.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: In terms of the possible involvement of Ivan Milat, is that something that you've got any more information on that you'd like to share with us in terms of theories that you might've developed or understandings or things that you've been told?

CORRECTED

KAREN COX: The only thing is that Ivan Milat apparently had been in Grafton Gaol and had been released from Grafton Gaol at one stage. These are only things I've been told. I don't have evidence of it.

The CHAIR: It's true. He was.

KAREN COX: At the time that Narelle disappeared, it was our July Racing Carnival here in Grafton, which is a famous racing carnival. He would've probably been aware of that. Also, I have heard since that even though they said he was working on the roads in Newcastle at the time, he often got other people to sign his name in when he wasn't there.

SUE CANTLE: I've heard that's common for people to do that.

KAREN COX: That's the only thing about Ivan Milat.

The CHAIR: From 2004 up to the coronial inquest in 2011, did Detective Burke ever mention people of interest or any discussions about people who they'd ruled in or ruled out, like Ivan Milat or Ashley Coulston or people like this?

SUE CANTLE: Not to me.

The CHAIR: He didn't say, "We're looking at this through a particular lens"?

KAREN COX: No.

SUE CANTLE: With me, he was surprised that there was no interview and not much follow-up at all. He couldn't believe it. He talked to me over a fence and that was the extent of police involvement. She was intending to come up to visit me, so you wonder.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much. That concludes our questions and the time we've allocated for you. Our condolences to you. Our deepest sympathies and condolences. We deeply appreciate you coming along to talk to the inquiry and share your story. It has been enormously informative. The secretariat will be in contact in due course. We'd love to see what the coronial inquest had to say. If there are any questions you've got, please contact the secretariat. The process from here is that we're going to continue our hearings. We'll probably be writing a report. This has been really important to us. We deeply appreciate you coming along and sharing your story today. Thank you very much.

KAREN COX: We appreciate you too. Thank you.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

CORRECTED

Ms SALLY LEYDON, Daughter of Marion Barter, Missing Person, sworn and examined

Ms JONI CONDOS, Individual, affirmed and examined

The CHAIR: Thank you very much for your attendance today. Do you have an opening statement you'd like to make before we go to questions?

SALLY LEYDON: It's a little long, so I'm going to hopefully get—

The CHAIR: You take all the time you need. We've got 45 minutes, and we definitely have some questions.

SALLY LEYDON: Yes, I have taken that into consideration.

The CHAIR: You can both make one if you'd like to.

SALLY LEYDON: Thank you for the opportunity to speak today and for helping bring a voice to those of us living with a missing loved one. My name is Sally Leydon, and I am the daughter of long-term missing person Marion Barter. On 22 June 1997 my mum stepped aboard a bus in Southport on the Gold Coast and travelled to Brisbane international airport for what she described as the trip of a lifetime. My mum has never been seen again since. Her passport re-entered Brisbane international airport on 2 August 1997 under a new name—Florabella Natalia Marion Remakel. That passport expired in 2007 and was never reported as leaving Australia again, marking the start of what has become a living nightmare for the past 29 years. My mum does matter.

For me, today marks the twenty-third anniversary of my grandfather's passing—my mum's dad. He had been diagnosed with bone cancer not long before my mum went overseas and, sadly, he died a few years later, never knowing what happened to his eldest daughter. It was 18 October 1997 when my mum missed calling my brother for his birthday, which was very out of character. Worried, my friend suggested that I call her bank to check if she was using her bank account. At first the teller told me she couldn't tell me anything due to privacy, then asked me, "Did you say your mum is overseas?" "Yes." She alerted me at that point that \$5,000 every day for 3½ weeks was being withdrawn out of my mum's account in Byron Bay and Burleigh Heads on the Gold Coast.

A short time after my partner and I attended Byron Bay Police Station, I received a call from a man whom I believe was the same police officer I had spoken to only days prior, telling me that they had located my mum, and she didn't want anyone to know where she was or what she was doing. There is no record of this call on police files. I told my grandfather. Unsatisfied with the response of New South Wales police, he sought help elsewhere. After hearing a radio segment about missing persons in Queensland, he reached out to the Salvation Army missing persons. The Salvation Army worked in conjunction with the Queensland missing persons unit at this time.

In March 2019, the night before *The Lady Vanishes* podcast launched, I received an email from my cousin which included a scanned copy of a handwritten note and letter from the Salvation Army. He stated that they had found it when cleaning out my grandparents' home. After only nine days investigating, they told him in this letter that "Bank security confirmed it was definitely your daughter Marion who went into the bank, withdrew all her money and spoke of starting a new life" and that "bank security are like the police". They told him that there was nothing further the police could do and suggested he hire a private investigator and "start in Byron Bay". My grandparents both died believing what the Salvation Army had told them in that letter. Seemingly, the Salvation Army believed what the police had told them. Through the inquest, we learnt that this information about my mum starting a new life was told to police by a bank teller who, to this day, remains unidentified as no records of who this bank teller was were ever recorded—what branch they worked at or what date this took place. No physical sighting by police—they never spoke to my mum to confirm that she was, in fact, safe and well. It was all third-hand information they took as fact regarding my missing mother.

Because both the New South Wales and Queensland police believed my mum was missing by choice, the required P79B form was not done for the Coroner until 2019—22 years later—despite notes throughout my mum's file from the Coroner's office requesting this. This form is required to be sent to the Coroner's office 12 months after a person is missing and they have not made contact with their next of kin. An inquest into my mum's disappearance commenced 24 years after I walked into Byron Bay Police Station telling the desk sergeant that something was wrong. Every police officer and Salvation Army personnel who touched my mum's case and was called to give witness testimony was asked had they ever spoken with or sighted my mother, and they all said no. Not one of them could confirm that my mum was safe and well and that it was actually her who had come back to Australia and was withdrawing large sums of money from her bank account daily in Byron Bay and Burleigh Heads when she was supposed to be overseas having the trip of a lifetime.

CORRECTED

Queensland police told my grandfather that my mum had withdrawn all of her funds and closed her account. This was not true. On 31 December 1997 my mum's account was closed, and the balance of \$14,887.70 was moved to unclaimed funds whilst her other bank account attracted monthly account-keeping fees for the next 27 years. Knowing she had sold her home, packed up all her belongings in a shipping container and left her car with me, she had no fixed address of residence, no independent transport and none of her precious belongings. We were left with Queensland police telling my grandfather to get a PI and start in Byron Bay—no action, no care and no responsibility, all due to other work priorities.

In 2002 my only brother took his own life believing what we had been told—that our mum chose to leave us, never wanting to see us ever again. I cannot express clearly enough that your words do matter. I am now 53 years old. I'm a wife and a mother of three. My eldest daughter is now the same age that I was in 1997. It has taken months to dredge myself through 29 years of reliving poor wording, assumptions, accusations, silence and unverified misinformation. My written submission is 43 pages long, and I don't apologise for that. It is difficult to summarise nearly three decades of what has transpired—the loss I have experienced, the inaction and the assumptions. I see this opportunity to speak the truth about what I, as the daughter of a missing person, have endured, with the hope that other people are finally opening up and listening, recognising the failures and helping to bring about the necessary changes required.

This parliamentary hearing was approved to go ahead on 15 October last year. That date now has huge significance for me and my mum's case, being the date that NSW State Coroner Teresa O'Sullivan declared that my mum died in 1997. On that day, \$80,000 was electronically transferred from my mum's bank account to an unknown account. Put simply, police failed to record details about where that money was transferred to and to whom. This information was available when they learnt about the \$80,000 but, instead, they assumed it was transferred overseas to buy a new house with a new partner, as suggested on the police file. If we knew where her money went, I might not be sitting here today talking with you all 29 years later. There has been no digital footprint of my mum ever since. My mum was not placed on the New South Wales missing persons register until 2007, after I contacted the AFP. That's 10 years later. She was never placed on the Australian Missing Persons Register until I went public with a podcast in 2019 and started a petition which raised over 30,000 signatures. Joni Condos, who sits beside me today, found me through *The Lady Vanishes* podcast, now with 25 million listeners.

Joni was one who very early on heard my calls for help, when police continued to tell me their hands were tied and the investigation was as good as it was going to get. They were wrong to make those assumptions. Within six weeks of the podcast launching, drawing on her own lived experience with a missing family member, Joni utilised her skills that she had previously used to find her husband's great-grandmother. In doing so, she found a lonely hearts ad placed by an "F. Remakel", a polyglot, non-smoker, non-drinker, seeking love or marriage, with a PO box in Lennox Head and a phone number. That ad in the *Le Courier Australien* was the catalyst for the new investigation into my mum's disappearance.

In July 2019, when the case was handed over to another detective for "fresh eyes" to run over everything, I was told they wouldn't find anything because the previous officer had "done a really thorough job". Yet within six months, homicide detectives found a driver licence in Queensland, where my mum was residing before she disappeared, belonging to a Fernand Nicolas Marie Remakel, who turned out to be the same man who admitted to writing the lonely hearts ad in the newspaper in 1994—a married man looking for love and potential marriage. It is reported that New South Wales police attempted to try and locate the owner of the phone number in the ad that Joni had found, but claimed Telstra did not hold records after seven years and they were unable to make that connection.

Another listener of *The Lady Vanishes* podcast, who also is here today, heard us discussing this and went to Ballina local library, where he hand-scanned over 6,000 phone records in the 1997 phone books available. From there, he was able to identify the phone number, linking an address and a business name. An ABN search provided him with the information that led us to a local coin dealer and his business, Ballina Coin Invest. Unbeknown to us at this time, police had also identified this man. Known publicly as Ric Blum, it's alleged he has used 53 aliases and has been granted 10 Australian passports in different names. He was a Belgian national living here since the '60s.

In his first interview with New South Wales police, in 2020, they asked him if he knew my mum and he said no. The next day he admitted to not only knowing my mum but in fact having a secret affair with her in the months leading up to her selling her home and going overseas. He was called to give evidence at my mum's inquest, being on the stand for nine days, the Coroner referring to him as a person of significant interest. The police took 13 years to identify that my mum had legally changed her name through the Supreme Court in Brisbane to Florabella Natalia Marion Remakel, one month before she disappeared. It is important to mention that I was not privy to my mum's personal information due to strict privacy laws in Australia, despite my endless attempts to find more information that I believe would have greatly assisted me in my search for my mum.

CORRECTED

It took me going to an inquest and the Coroner declaring my mum deceased, so I could apply for a death certificate, so I could then apply for a grant of probate, to allow me, as my mum's next of kin, to be able to ask these questions about information about my missing mum and to act on her behalf. It has been another 852 days since the Coroner handed down her findings. My push for my mum's reward to be increased to \$1 million was approved earlier this year and a press conference was held at police headquarters on 4 May. There, Detective Superintendent Joe Doueihi was questioned by the media regarding what further action had been taken since the Coroner placed my mum's case back with unsolved homicide for "ongoing investigation". He replied, "No, Ric Blum has exercised his right to silence."

On 11 June this year I watched live the first hearing of this inquiry that was held in Bowral, where Detective Superintendent Joe Doueihi represented the New South Wales police. I was shocked to learn that, of his team of 125 officers working in homicide, only 36 detectives make up the New South Wales unsolved homicide team for the entire State—three inspectors, six sergeants, and the remaining are investigators, responsible for 750 unsolved homicides still sitting on their books, dating all the way back to '70s. He said each case is a "one-man show", a "really slow burn", and that 30 cases are still being worked on, and that since 2008 they have resolved 32 cases, which he said was "significant for us". Alarming as this was, it gave me a lot of perspective of the current day. Houston, we have a problem. To hear my mum likely died three days before my brother's birthday, which she missed calling him for, and five days before I walked into Byron Bay Police Station 27 years ago telling the police officer I was worried that something was wrong was absolutely devastating.

Whilst waiting to enter the Coroners Court for the last time on 29 February 2024, I was told by the unsolved homicide team that my mum's case was open but inactive, and that they have 800 cases that they need to prioritise. I felt it was shelved yet again. After the inquest, we learnt through Google that after an inquest in New South Wales, unsolved homicide are not required to conduct any new investigations for five years unless new information emerges. As they say they are not actively looking for any new information, this largely falls back to the families to keep pushing for anyone who knows anything to come forward through social media, to keep needing to expose ourselves and our families to the world through media, and all the while we are worried about upsetting police by doing our own investigations and contaminating witnesses who reach out to us with new information. I do have a little bit more to say, but I think I'll pause there and I can probably answer some questions.

The CHAIR: That's fine. Ms Condos, do you have an introductory statement?

JONI CONDOS: Yes, I do. I am a registered social worker with more than 20 years experience in crisis intervention and family violence. I speak to you today not only as a professional but as a private citizen and a member of this community who has become personally involved in the search for Marion Barter, a woman who vanished in 1997 and has never been found. In 2019, I heard about Marion's case through a podcast, as Sally said. Sitting at home one evening on the couch unwell, I located a lonely hearts ad in a French-Australian newspaper under the surname "Remakel", the very name Marion had changed her name to just five weeks before she disappeared. I submitted this to Crime Stoppers immediately because I could see the significance of this find. I heard nothing—absolutely nothing. The lead sat untouched for nearly two years.

It should not take a random person such as myself two States away to identify a person of interest in a cold case, but it did. That is the truth of the matter. It tells us something important about how these long-term missing persons cases are being managed that that was the reality of the situation. Marion was treated as an "occurrence only". This is the same category as a stolen letterbox, car or bin. For 10 years, proof-of-life checks were run in the wrong name because they did not realise that her passport was actually in her new name. Her case was closed in 2011 based on assumptions, as Sally said, never on a confirmed sighting. The State Coroner herself later found that this was handled incorrectly.

The man who wrote that lonely hearts ad is known today as Ric Blum. He was born in Belgium in 1939, entered Australia illegally in 1974 using his brother's passport, obtained Australian citizenship fraudulently, and has operated under at least 51 known aliases over five decades here in Australia. Among them are Frederick de Hedervary, Richard Lloyd Westbury, Willy David Coppenolle and Rich Richard. He has an extensive criminal history in Europe, including a four-year prison sentence in France. He admitted at the coronial inquest to having a covert relationship with Marion in the months before she disappeared and to housing her precious belongings in a tea chest in his home. Marion's savings were withdrawn near his property in northern New South Wales.

The State Coroner found that he has further knowledge of Marion's disappearance and is deliberately withholding it. Four other women came forward at the inquest with near-identical accounts of fraud, theft, coercive control and manipulation at his hands spanning 40 years and multiple countries. The sole charge ever brought against him in Australia was for stealing a pair of shoes. That is the full extent of his accountability under Australian law. Marion is still missing, and the Coroner has found that he knows more.

CORRECTED

I want this Committee to understand what it costs a family when the system fails them and the media becomes their only option. Sally Leydon has spent years having to offer journalists something new to keep the story alive. That is a deeply unfair and re-traumatising position to put any person in. Going public has also meant opening up her life to trolls, fantasists and people who feel entitled to know every private detail of her grief. I have personally been stalked and slandered as a result of this case, and my husband has actually had to increase security in our home. Media involvement also put Sally in an impossible position. What actually happened was we got a bit caught between the podcast and the media wanting information but we were also gagged in relation to the brief of evidence, so we were having to sort of play that middle line between two worlds in a way when the coronial inquest was happening.

As you've seen in this case, skilled volunteer researchers can make a real difference in propelling cases forward. As a community member, I'm asking this Committee to consider three things. Firstly, legislate a national register of missing persons and unidentified remains, as is overseas in the UK and the US specifically. We currently have colleagues of mine, Australian volunteer researchers, who actually work overseas on cases because there is not the capability here in Australia to do it. They go overseas and use their skills on non-Australian-related cases.

Secondly, I would like to see an establishment of a formal framework for collaboration between police and skilled researchers. At the moment, we're doing this work with no structure, no guidelines and no feedback. Just looking at this case, for example, the sheer number of hours that have been put in by myself and many other researchers in this space, there is absolutely no way that the police would be able to fund the pure level of travel, research and hours that have gone into getting where we are today with this case.

I would also like to suggest reviewing all unidentified remains buried in unmarked graves across New South Wales. This was something that also came out as part of the research into Marion's case. It's not just the holdings that are within the actual facility themselves, but there are unmarked graves all across New South Wales which do hold people with no DNA, dental or any other kind of record. What is actually happening with that? Marion Barter was a teacher, a mother, a sister and someone's daughter. Her family spent nearly 30 years without answers, often fighting the very system that should have been fighting for her. As a member of the Australian community, I'm asking you to do what the system has not—to take this seriously, act with urgency and to ensure that no other family has to go through what Sally Leydon and her family have endured.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much for your evidence today. That's very compelling and incredibly useful. Thank you very much for your comprehensive submission to the inquiry, both of you, which lays out this egregious case.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: Thanks so much for coming along. It's an extraordinary story, and it is amazing, the work that you have done, both of you. Why is Mr Blum still an Australian citizen given that he had been incarcerated in Belgium, lied on his application to come to Australia, came here on a false passport and has now been living on social security, benefit of the taxpayer, for decades? Are you able to explain why this man's citizenship has not been cancelled?

SALLY LEYDON: Put simply, Joni has sent seven emails, I think, to Home Affairs and immigration with this detailed information. She went into archives in an open-access period and was able to pull the files, so we actually have the handwritten documents from immigration where they've said he should be charged under section 50 of the citizenship Act, but they believed that he was offshore at the time. The file got moved, it got lost and it was forgotten.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: There's no statute of limitations for that offence, and it existed at the time when he did these things?

SALLY LEYDON: There is not, no.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: Would you be calling on the Australian Government and the relevant Minister to seriously consider cancelling his citizenship?

JONI CONDOS: Yes, certainly. We have called on multiple Ministers since 2022. I've got endless correspondence stating that they take it on notice, they understand, they accept and they're looking into it. But the actual citizenship documents, it's all literally there—the account.

The CHAIR: Is he a resident of New South Wales, that you know of?

SALLY LEYDON: Correct

JONI CONDOS: Correct. Yes, he is.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: Yes, at Ballina.

CORRECTED

The CHAIR: As of today, he's a resident of Ballina.

JONI CONDOS: Yes.

SALLY LEYDON: He just recently moved. I won't divulge where that is, but we do know he's moved.

The CHAIR: But he's a resident of New South Wales.

JONI CONDOS: He's in northern New South Wales, yes.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: You say in the submission that he lied at the coronial inquest—I'm not sure if that was found positively by another coroner or not; it may well have been—and he's clearly someone with a history of lying and deceit. You also say that there was some talk of him being charged with perjury arising out of the inquest.

JONI CONDOS: Yes.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: Has that investigation ever led anywhere? Have you been told whether he is to be charged?

SALLY LEYDON: The question was put to Joe Doueihi at the reward press conference by Bryan Seymour, who came. He is one of the journalists who's worked on *The Lady Vanishes* podcast, so he knows my mum's story back-to-front. He asked the question about whether that was going forward, with any charges for perjury. He took that on notice.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: And you've never been told since?

SALLY LEYDON: No.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: How long ago was that?

SALLY LEYDON: That was 4 May.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: This year?

SALLY LEYDON: Yes.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: This Ric Blum obviously seems to be a con man, based on what you've told me of his criminal record. You're sure that he had an association with your mother; is that clear on the evidence?

SALLY LEYDON: He admitted to having an affair with her, yes.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: You don't have to answer this. Is it ultimately your view that she's fallen under the spell of a con man?

SALLY LEYDON: When she left the country, she had sold her house very quickly at a loss. We have spoken to other witnesses who have also had relationships with this same man overseas. They speak of very similar circumstances, where he's encouraged them to sell their house, move overseas and start a new life. My mum changed her name to the same name that he was using, being Remakel—same initials as what he had on the driver licence. He was using that driver licence. This has all been talked about in the inquest. He admitted to using an identity from a man—he had a relationship with a previous woman over in Luxembourg. He'd taken his identity and then managed somehow to get a Queensland driver licence in that name. He actually accused my mum of stealing that driver licence out of his wallet while he was at her house, for the purpose so she could change her name to the same name as him. He left the country five days before my mum did, but he was using a different passport on that occasion of Richard Lloyd Westbury. My mum was using a passport in the name Florabella Remakel.

It's my personal opinion that he probably separated—as a preface, he doesn't say that he travelled overseas, but it's my personal opinion that he would not travel with my mum if he was going under a different passport after she'd just gone through the Supreme Court to change her name legally to his same name. He flew back into the country two days before her; she's flown back in. Then we have all her timestamps here, hence why I'm in Grafton—because she used her Medicare card in Grafton. All her money came out of her bank accounts in Byron Bay. He was living locally to this area. Since the reward has come out, I've had multiple leads come forward. We've just found a timestamp in my mum's handwriting in Yamba. We've also just recently, over the last couple of days, found out about more information that is quite concerning in Ballina as well.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: When is that timestamp from?

SALLY LEYDON: The ninth of August 1997. My mum flew back in on—

CORRECTED

The CHAIR: Sorry, Ms Leydon. I don't want to divert you. In your submission, you say that her passport came back, but you're convinced that she actually came back at that time as well.

SALLY LEYDON: Yes, I believe that.

The CHAIR: That she flew back in at about that time and that she was with that passport coming back in?

SALLY LEYDON: Yes. There's a lot of controversy on that. As you can probably appreciate, that opens up a lot of inquiry to people online. There are a lot of people who believe that she was murdered overseas, never came back and someone else used her passport. I sit here firmly and say we've now had confirmation of her own handwriting in Yamba.

The CHAIR: That indicates that she actually had come back.

SALLY LEYDON: She has come back, but what hasn't been addressed or discussed in any court of law or with the police is any coercive control, gaslighting or manipulation. I personally believe my mum was in a state of that. She was 51 years of age. She was lonely. She liked being in relationships. I think the catalyst for her was "Let's go on a trip overseas. Let's go on the *Orient Express* and start a new life together in Luxembourg."

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: Just to be clear, she came back on what passport? Remakel—

SALLY LEYDON: Yes, correct.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: —or Barter?

SALLY LEYDON: She changed it legally, I might add. She didn't get a fake passport. She actually went into the Supreme Court in Brisbane and changed her name legally. She just didn't tell anybody about it. That was what the police narrative ran with.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: So there's absolutely no doubt in your mind that she came back to Australia?

SALLY LEYDON: She came back here, a hundred per cent.

The CHAIR: You talked about the handwriting. Have you got a copy of that handwriting? Has that been compared to any other handwriting? Is it something—

SALLY LEYDON: No. It's just my mum's handwriting, 10,000 per cent. I saw it. The gentleman who found it sent it to me. He was overseas at the time and he said, "I think I might've found something. I'm travelling. Let me get it for you and I'll send it to you." I was on the phone to a girlfriend. I nearly vomited when I saw it, because it's one hundred per cent her handwriting.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: Did your family have legal representation at the inquest?

SALLY LEYDON: I did, yes.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: Was it put to Mr Blum that he'd been involved in your mother's death?

SALLY LEYDON: Yes. He said, "No."

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: Was that positively put to him—that he had actually murdered her?

SALLY LEYDON: They asked, "Did you murder Marion?" He said, "No."

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: I thought, in your evidence, Ms Condos, he later admitted that he was in a relationship with her.

JONI CONDOS: Yes.

SALLY LEYDON: Sorry, did you ask "murdered", not "in a relationship"?

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: I asked "murdered". I asked if it was put to him at the inquest by the lawyer for the family that he had murdered her, and it was put to him.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: Oh, murdered. Sorry.

The CHAIR: He did deny being in a relationship initially—

SALLY LEYDON: Correct.

JONI CONDOS: Yes.

CORRECTED

The CHAIR: —and then admitted that he had been.

SALLY LEYDON: The next day. He was interviewed by police. They asked him, "Do you know about a missing person, Marion Barter? Are you aware of her?" He said, "No." The next day, he got in contact with the police and he said, "Actually, I do know her and I had an affair with her."

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: Do you have any doubt that he killed her? You don't have to answer that question.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: You can answer it under privilege.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: You can, yes.

SALLY LEYDON: I'll pause on that. I think everyone knows my thoughts on what's happened to my mum without having to say it. It definitely needs further investigation. Part of what I didn't say before, if I can add that in now, is the inquest into my mum's disappearance was categorised into two parts: one, is my mum dead or alive; and, two, did the police act appropriately on her case. They found that she had died and that the police, between 1997 and 2011, did not act appropriately, and the lack of them investigating is the reason why Marion is still missing today. Despite key evidence being uncovered by community members, a full investigation into any alleged connection between Ric Blum and my mum has never been conducted by New South Wales police. I used to get told at the inquest that he's not on trial and that an inquest is not a trial; it's a fact-finding mission to find out what's happened. It's up to the Coroner then to suggest what happens next.

The CHAIR: But the finding was that he was a person of significant interest in this.

SALLY LEYDON: He was on the stand for nine days. I think that's pretty significant in an inquiry.

The CHAIR: Since the inquest, what has the attitude of New South Wales police been? How do you liaise with the New South Wales police? That's the first question—are they proactively coming to you or do you have to pursue them? What is the nature of the interaction and relationship there?

SALLY LEYDON: It's a very tricky position to be in when you have a missing persons case, because we really want the police to work with us and help us. I've always tended to be very positive about what's happening in the now, but obviously there has been a lot of debacle and problems that have arisen. Joni was talking before, actually, about the work that these guys are doing in helping cold cases. The simple fact of the matter is that the officer, when I went into Byron Bay police, went to the effort of finding out that \$80,000 had been transferred out of my mum's bank account. He didn't take the next step to find out to where. Where did the money go? Because if we knew where that money landed, I might not have needed Joni Condos to come in and help me find the information. So there's all of that as well.

The CHAIR: In terms of the coronial inquest, my understanding is that after an inquest, unless new information comes forward, it's put on hiatus, at least for five years. What's your approach to that? Have you provided new information to the police since that inquest?

SALLY LEYDON: Yes. I've written about this here as well, because we actually googled this. We found out about the five years no investigation after an inquest. We didn't know that fact to begin with.

JONI CONDOS: No.

SALLY LEYDON: I did hear in the last inquiry that has now, since, been changed to two years. That's a long time. We're talking about a gentleman who's 87 years of age in three weeks. We don't have another two years. I've been waiting 29 years already.

The CHAIR: The 87 is Mr Blum?

SALLY LEYDON: Correct. When my mum's case has been forgotten about so many times, and it's only my injection that actually brings about—even Joe Doueihi said the reason that the reward is happening is because Sally has pushed for it. To go back to your question before, I have a good relationship with the detectives on the case right now—or detective. But the problem is—and this is what has come about in understanding that they have 36 of them trying to manage 750 cases. It's no wonder that I don't hear from them. When I'm sending them some information, I'm not getting—for me, if I find something that's new, I want to know right away: Are you acting on this? I can wait weeks before I hear anything. Again, it's not their fault. I don't blame them for that. But there's a problem in the system—that they're not getting supported either. That needs to change. We need to have more staff so they can actually help us. I actually believe that they want to solve the case. That's not what they're trying to do. They're not trying to not solve it. But they just have no capacity to do it, and that's a big problem. The Government needs to come in and help support the policing as well. It's such a big mess. It's not just one element that's breaking the system; it's a lot of little things that are breaking the system.

CORRECTED

The CHAIR: You've raised a really interesting point about the role of volunteers and the community. It's always the community or public who provide evidence to the police that solve these cases, if they are to be solved. There's an increasing number of people involved—volunteers. If you look at the case of Lynette Dawson and the role of podcasts in these, it's a similar situation here. Do you think that there's a way that the police can better harness that interest and those efforts of the community in these cases?

JONI CONDOS: I think it certainly needs to be looked at, purely from the point of view of if I think back to when I was doing, as Sally mentioned, my family history stuff, that was in the early 2000s, so we needed to actually trundle down to libraries, archives and things and physically go through. Now we're in an era where there are podcasts, media and so-called armchair detectives or web sleuths. We're basically active 24 hours a day, seven days a week, right across the world. I think that possibly law enforcement hasn't really got their head around the fact that this is actually real—this is happening.

We can, as per Marion's case—and it's not just myself talking as myself; I'm talking for other representatives here who are community researchers as well. We do provide legitimate, genuine information. In this case, you've seen how it has actually borne out to basically push the case along to this stage where he was on the stand for nine days. I think that there really should be some kind of formal or legal working out, because it is a one-way street. The only reason I was able to dedicate seven years to this case, from 2019—and I still continue to work on it today—and almost full-time over COVID, was purely because I had access to the brief of evidence with the coronial inquest. Prior to that I wasn't even able to access that information to be able to further leads—

The CHAIR: And you were provided that via Ms Leydon.

JONI CONDOS: That's correct.

SALLY LEYDON: I requested it.

JONI CONDOS: I was legally provided that document.

The CHAIR: In what capacity?

SALLY LEYDON: All capacity. I actually requested it because what happened was—Joni sort of touched on it before, about the media. I had been very open with the media. I told them everything because no-one was listening to me. That's a very bad trap for us living in the missing space, because you aren't listened to most of your life. My family just want to put their heads in the sand and go, "The police said she wanted to start a new life. We are accepting of that"—and their heads go in the sand. They don't talk about it. I was left as a person who does need to talk about it. Part of my mental health is helping me be able to express and talk about it, so sitting there and having a coffee with someone in the media—you tell them everything, off you go and the rollercoaster starts. I'm very grateful for that, but it can cause problems. It can be a problem when I then get told, "You've signed a document with the Coroners Court. You're not allowed to talk about it."

We found Rick Blum, and I wasn't able to tell the podcasters that I had found him. This caused problems for me because I was then withholding information from them when I had previously been telling them, and they had helped me endlessly to get to that point. Without them, I wouldn't be here. There's the catch 22 for me. It's a really bad situation to be in, and the only other two people who were allowed to see the brief of evidence were my husband and my eldest daughter, who was 21 at the time. I requested and said, "I can't have this discussion with my 21-year-old daughter. This is traumatising for her. It's her grandmother who she has never met, and she is having a massive impact on her life." So I asked if Joni could see. I said, "She's actually the person who is finding the majority of the information anyway that is in the brief of evidence." They granted us that, thankfully, and we both had to sign a document that we weren't allowed to talk to the public anywhere. That also had a harmful effect on the case because I then couldn't talk to the media to tell them what was happening. I literally walked out of the Coroners Court and had the entire universe of media standing in front of me, and I was not allowed to speak to anyone.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: Just on that, there is often a priority to keep the material that investigations produce confidential because the last thing that you want to do, for example, is provide the perpetrator with information. But, with respect to cold cases where lots of things are happening and where matters are actually being solved by public participation, bearing in mind what the founder of modern policing Robert Peel said—"The police are the public and the public are the police"—do you think there might be a case for making public entire briefs of evidence, with suitable redactions, in certain cold cases to allow this community participation to occur better?

JONI CONDOS: Can I just add something there too, before I answer the question?

SALLY LEYDON: I was just about to say the same—I know what you're going to say.

CORRECTED

JONI CONDOS: Mr Rick Blum actually got to see and digest the entire brief of evidence.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: I saw that in the submission, which would tend against the argument that they should be confidential for that reason—

JONI CONDOS: That's right.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: —if one assumes he is the perpetrator.

JONI CONDOS: Yes.

SALLY LEYDON: He was able to read the entire brief of evidence. No other witnesses were, just him. You could tell that he had read it by what he was saying in his testimony.

JONI CONDOS: Because things would change.

SALLY LEYDON: He was looping it through to comments I had made and things like that. I mentioned my mum and a pilot, and then all of a sudden the pilot is coming to his house to pick up the tea chests and put them in the back of the car— tiny little details. I am still bewildered, as is Joni, that he was allowed to see that. I agree that briefs of evidence should be allowed to be seen but probably not until after the inquest. I will say, always—

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: Seen in terms of online publicly, provided to certain people or what?

SALLY LEYDON: Yes. We still can't show you guys. We still can't—

The CHAIR: With the agreement of the family.

SALLY LEYDON: Yes, I guess it has to be, and redactions made where necessary because, obviously, there's a lot of private information in those briefs of evidence as well. There is a lot of stuff in there. We've still got stuff that was redacted by the police that we didn't want to see. There was a whole file in there, and we questioned why the file wasn't put into the brief of evidence by New South Wales police. Then there was a whole big discussion about, "Oh well, we'll let you pick seven of the items." We could see what the items were. We couldn't see what was behind it. Instead of getting the whole brief of evidence—that whole document—we were allowed to pick certain things. So we had to work out what ones did we think were most important to see to help us, because we're just trying to—

JONI CONDOS: Yes, what are the priorities.

The CHAIR: What was the reason given by the police that you weren't allowed to see the entire brief?

SALLY LEYDON: I can't remember.

The CHAIR: You would have much preferred to have been able to see the whole thing.

JONI CONDOS: Yes.

SALLY LEYDON: We were just trying to find my mum. At the end of the day, I'm not trying to—I don't know. I think there's this whirlwind of what we're trying to achieve when we have a missing person. The point blank is my brother died with words that were not true—not truly spoken. My grandparents both died thinking their daughter had gone missing on their own account. None of her family talk to me because they got upset that I did a podcast, because I had to be heard. The podcast really took off because my mum was married to a famous football player, not because she was missing. I had gone to *60 Minutes* four times and said, "Hey, would you please help me tell my story? I have something to tell." No answer, no reply. But as soon as we did a podcast and people started listening, it starts getting momentum.

It shouldn't be like that. Everyone matters. Every single case matters. It's the same with the rewards. I get the million-dollar reward. I have people commenting, going, "Why does your mum deserve the million-dollar reward? What about my brother? He doesn't have a reward." It makes me feel sick to the stomach. Everybody should have a million-dollar reward, because if they solve the case, great, it actually saves them going to an inquest and spending a million dollars on an inquest—for what? Do you know what I mean? I think everybody's equal. Everyone should be treated equal in this, and it's not the case.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: On your brother, you say in your submission:

My brother took his own life at the age of 27 believing the police had spoken to our mum, them telling us she didn't want anyone to know where she is or what she was doing. That "you can tell them to stop looking for me in Byron Bay as I am far, far away".

Is it your understanding that that conversation never occurred and that that was incorrect information?

CORRECTED

SALLY LEYDON: That the police didn't speak to her?

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: Correct.

SALLY LEYDON: There's no record of them on the police file. I got a phone call and they told me, "We have located your mother. She doesn't want anyone to know where she is or what she's doing." I remember it word perfect.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: But there's no evidence of that on the police file?

SALLY LEYDON: No. It was a man who rang me, not a female. My grandfather then took action himself, as I said. He went to the Salvation Army. The Queensland police then told him that they had spoken to her as well, and there was a comment made to me from my family saying that "you can stop looking for me in Byron Bay because I'm far, far away, and you can tell Sally that I'm annoyed with her because she didn't put the money for the car into my account". That's a whole other story. My mum had left her car with me. I was supposed to sell my car, and I was planning to give her the money from my sale of my car into her bank account, hence why I had her bank account and hence why when I rang the bank, I had her account details.

I didn't sell the car until months later, by which point she was then missing, and I said to my grandfather, "What do I do with the money?" He said, "Don't put it in the account. Just keep it and give it to her when she comes home." We didn't know who was accessing her account. We were just being told that money is being drawn out of her account and it withered away to nothing. So it was a very terrible situation to put me in as well. I didn't really want to be in that situation. My car was brand new. I didn't need a car, but I said I would swap out and give her the money for my car. Those comments have sat with the family. I've only heard that third-hand, so I don't tend to put it in any of my evidence because it was only said to me by one of the sisters. There's a lot of that over 29 years.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: Ms Leydon, before we wrap up, you talk in your submission extensively about the Green Seat Project. Do you want to just talk about that for a minute?

SALLY LEYDON: Yes, I'd love that opportunity. When I went through the coronial process—I have put some recommendations in there about death certificates and things like that, specific to missing people, which I really hope you guys really take on board because that's something that really needs attention. I left that process and I felt like I was on an island. I didn't have any help from anybody. *The Lady Vanishes* finished. The police just gave me a hug and said good luck—that kind of vibe. I was just left. It was just that my kids and I were talking. We just had nowhere to go. We have no body. We have no memorial. I actually don't know where my mum went missing from, because she travelled—she's here, she's in Brisbane, I just don't know.

I came up with the idea. My grandparents actually have a seat at Moffat Beach, and they have a plaque on their seat up there where they lived. My middle daughter actually loves going there whenever she's feeling sad and wants to go and remember my grandparents, because she didn't have my mum in her life. I came up with the idea that maybe we should have a green seat where we could put a plaque on there notifying people about missing persons. There's a plaque that says, "The Missing Matter", and we've created a QR code. My husband has actually created a website. We are very gently asking families personally if they would like their missing loved one to be a profile on that website. It's a bit more humanised rather than just the height, weight, hair colour and eye colour of a person.

We've also found in a lot of the work that I'm doing in this space that most of those records are usually incorrect. You would think after 29 years and all of the information that I've gathered—I was sitting in headquarters on 4 May for that \$1 million reward and they had my mum's year of birth incorrect. The last known location was also incorrect. There was no notification that there was a reward at all at that point. So I came up with the concept of doing the Green Seat Project. Because the community behind us is so huge, we already had one placed on The Spit at the Gold Coast. Since then we've now got close to 17 other seats going in.

I came down in March earlier this year with Joanne Greensill, who is talking later. She also has a missing person, and we gave a deputation to council. There was a unanimous vote of yes that they would support us in putting in two green seats. There is one going in here, in Grafton, and one in Yamba shortly, among others around the country. It's a place of hope. It's a beacon, if you like, and a place where you can go to sit to remember that people are missing in our communities. It's a place where people can reflect on their loved one but also bring about learnings and an understanding of the impact that we have, when we have a missing person, on our community.

Every time I do a presentation to Rotary or to councils, I sit there and say to them, "Last year around 52,000 people were reported missing in Australia. They say in the statistics that 12 people are directly affected by having a missing loved one. That's 624,000 Australians impacted by having a missing loved one, last year alone,

CORRECTED

in Australia." I have men coming up to me at the end, saying, "Did you mean to say that number? Or do you mean forever there's been 52,000 people missing?" I said, "No, just last year," and their mouths drop on the ground, because people aren't aware. We get no funding. We get no help in this space. There's no guidebook for us. We're fumbling our way through the best we can.

The Green Seat Project was something that I just feel like could be really taken to the next level, at a national level, so that we can have somewhere to remember these people. We literally have nowhere to go. I went to Brisbane City Council when I first started this. They said, "We've created a memorial for missing people in our cemetery on the north side of Brisbane." I said, "That's quite traumatising for me. I actually don't have a body. I don't want to go to a cemetery. I want to look at a body of water and think about my mum, think about where could she be and remember her. I don't want to sit in a cemetery, and I'm certainly not going there to remember a missing person." So it's about bringing awareness. There's so much red tape and so many hoops you have to jump through. It's a very hard task, but we're working heavily on that at the moment. Thank you for asking about it.

The CHAIR: That's an excellent note to conclude on. Thank you very much for your evidence today. It's enormously helpful. You've made an amazing submission. You've done incredible work pursuing justice for your mother, a member of our community. We deeply appreciate it. We'll certainly be considering your submission. We may well be asking you to come back, because you made such an excellent submission and you've got such an interesting, compelling and informative case. There's a lot of learnings from that. I wish we had more time.

SALLY LEYDON: Sorry. It's very hard to talk about it in 45 minutes, I would suggest.

The CHAIR: We understand that. This is an iterative process. This inquiry may well be going for some time. We deeply appreciate you taking the time to come to Grafton to talk to us today, for making the submission and for the work you've done.

SALLY LEYDON: Thank you for having us too, because this is important. Thank you to Joni and everyone turning up today. It's important for us that we are heard. There's a lot of stuff to talk about that I haven't even touched on today. We are very happy and very open to helping work through this process and making it better for everyone moving forward. I can't change my circumstances; I'm living it. But we certainly can do better for the next person whose family member goes missing in the future.

(The witnesses withdrew.)

(Short adjournment)

CORRECTED

Mr PETER STACE, Father of Lee Ellen Stace, sworn and examined

The CHAIR: Welcome to the inquiry, Mr Stace. I apologise to everyone that we are running a little bit behind time. Do you have an opening statement you would like to make?

PETER STACE: I'd just like to bring a few things up about my daughter's murder. First off, there are details about my daughter's murder that have never been released to the public. The police refused to release the details, but I am going to release them here and hope—because it was a shocking murder. Maybe if these details had been released, people would have put these bastards in earlier on. The day my daughter went missing, she was 16 and she was a virgin. That morning she also started her menstrual period. She had to ask my wife to borrow some tampons, and then she went to work. What happened to that poor young girl is despicable, mate. Maybe the police should have released that. It might have made the public come forward.

But anyway, apart from that, I've got a couple of questions. Why did the police pay money to a drunk in the Maclean Hotel to wear a wire in order to record a so-called confession from another patron? Only trouble was the drunk apparently had a loose tongue and half Maclean knew beforehand what was happening. Talk about comedy cops. Question two: How many lies can a major suspect fabricate before he is charged with hindering a police murder investigation? In one version this suspect had no car, was nowhere near Red Cliff or Lake Arragan. But in the next version, he had his car, was at Lake Arragan and did see a man in a suit with blood on him. Now, what the hell? It was also claimed that this suspect then threatened police with legal action if they did not stop harassing him over my daughter's murder. The suspect then sold up and left Brooms Head, hopefully forever.

Another point: Another prime suspect in my daughter's murder is a criminal convicted and imprisoned for raping and attempting to murder three Yamba schoolgirls. I personally met one of those raped schoolgirls and agreed to take her to visit my daughter's murder and grave sites. As we approached the murder site, she started getting agitated, panicking and freaking out. She said, "This is so much like where that bastard took us. I think I need to leave." We had to leave almost immediately because she became scared. I really felt for that young girl.

On the week of my daughter's murder, this same suspect was supposed to report to a Sydney police station on Monday, Wednesday and Friday as part of his parole conditions. I am led to believe he did not report on Wednesday as required. This gives him five days on the loose to do what he likes—plenty of time to go to the North Coast and return. Also, why did the police show my wife and myself a photo of this criminal suspect and then stipulate, "You did not see this photo from the police"? Well, who did I see it through, if you're not police? Another point—the Coroner's report was 12 years after Lee's murder. The State Coroner at the time, Carl Milanovich, thought the police investigation—he was critical of the investigation. He removed the investigation from the local police and directed the case be given to the cold case homicide squad. The cold case homicide squad have had it for years, but I have not heard from the cold case homicide squad since the last officer in charge of the case went on maternity leave to have a baby. I have heard nothing since. So that's the story. That's where I'm at—I know nothing.

The CHAIR: When was that, Mr Stace? When was the last time you were contacted by them?

PETER STACE: It would've been late last year. The lady detective actually came up and asked if I'd take her up to the murder site, which I did. I left her there, and that's the last I'd heard from her until she rang me some months later and said, "I'm going on maternity leave. There'll be someone else in charge."

The CHAIR: Had you had much contact with her, or is that the first time you'd heard from her? Since your daughter's murder, how many different police have contacted you? Has it been the same one through that period, or has it been a lot of them?

PETER STACE: Mate, there's been dozens—scores. That's what I mean. The case gets passed on from one bloke to another bloke to another bloke. It's as if it's just handed down and no-one gives a stuff.

The CHAIR: Are you told that someone is leaving, or is it just someone else sends you an email or knocks on the door?

PETER STACE: No, you just get told, "I'm in charge of the case now." I know one bloke that was in charge of the case—he got the sack for corruption in that Gary Jubelin case. The way the police have treated my daughter's case—I don't trust the police, mate. I've got no time for them.

The CHAIR: Are you aware of whether the police have ever questioned Anthony Apps about Lee Ellen's abduction or murder?

PETER STACE: Yes, I am.

CORRECTED

The CHAIR: Do you know what the outcome was?

PETER STACE: No.

The CHAIR: How do you find out that they're talking—that there is a particular person of interest? Is it just ad hoc—every now and again you get told, "We're doing this; we're talking to this"? Do you hear through the community?

PETER STACE: Mate, the information from the police is very minimal. As I said, they don't just tell you anything. They don't want you to know stuff. At one stage I requested a meeting with the head officer of the Coffs and Grafton police station. Me and my wife went in there and I spoke to Brian. That was his name. He was the head police officer. He's dead now. I said, "You give me one reason why I shouldn't go and hire a private investigator, mate, because I can't trust you cops." His response was, "Mate, we can't tell you everything. We've got to keep some things." I said, "Mate, you're telling me nothing. I don't trust youse no more—end of story." That detective died not long after that.

The CHAIR: Originally, on the disappearance of Lee, how did the police act? When you told them that she'd disappeared, was a major search conducted straightaway? What was their attitude at the time?

PETER STACE: "Mate, we can't do nothing for 48 hours. She probably just left home."

The CHAIR: That's what they said to you?

PETER STACE: That's what they said.

The CHAIR: How did you feel about that?

PETER STACE: Mate, I knew she hadn't left home because my daughter was scared of the dark. She was a home girl, mate.

The CHAIR: She was holding down a job at the supermarket.

PETER STACE: She'd just started a job, mate. She hitchhiked to work instead of catching the bus to try to save money, which resulted in her getting kidnapped.

The CHAIR: What about after 48 hours? She hasn't turned up a day or two later. You're probably making representations to the police again. What did they say then?

PETER STACE: Mate, very little. They were investigating, but they weren't concerned.

The CHAIR: Of course, in the horrendous circumstances where her body was found, can you tell us what the police then did? How did they tell you and what did they do at that time?

PETER STACE: I'd been out fishing with a couple of mates that day. I got home. I'd only been home 10 minutes. I was still cleaning fish, and I still remember this detective turning up in blue overalls. I said, "There's something wrong here." Anyway, he asked to come inside. We went inside and he told us that remains had been found, and it was suspected to be our daughter. Then me and my wife had to give DNA, because at the time the cops didn't even have DNA testing in Australia. We had to give DNA to be sent to Canada and England to identify the body—not very good.

The CHAIR: Did they tell you what they were going to do to investigate it, or whether they had leads, or if there were people of interest? What were they doing in terms of the investigation?

PETER STACE: The cops told me nothing, virtually. They even took me in and investigated me for murdering my own daughter, mate. I had to sit through that, and some of the things they said to me were horrible. At the end of it, they gave me a CD and they said, "There's your copy of this." I said to the coppers, "Mate, stick it up your arse. I never want to remember this day again. I don't want no copies."

The CHAIR: Then what was the nature of your communication with the police over coming months, as no-one was arrested?

PETER STACE: Mate, I think the cops got sick of me because I was on their back all the time.

The CHAIR: When you say that, what do you mean? Were you going down and visiting them every week?

PETER STACE: I was ringing up, and nothing was going on. In the end, I just gave up.

The CHAIR: What time period are you talking about? Are you talking about a few months?

PETER STACE: Two years.

CORRECTED

The CHAIR: Then did the contact from the police just basically fade away?

PETER STACE: Yes, it did, mate. They've got nothing to tell you, so they don't contact you.

The CHAIR: When was the coronial inquest into Lee's death? I think there have been a couple, haven't there?

PETER STACE: No, there has only been one, and it didn't take place until 12 years after Lee's death. As I said, even the Coroner at the time, Carl Milanovich, criticised the way the case had been handled by the police.

The CHAIR: What did he say?

PETER STACE: He criticised them—the way the case had been handled, and he said, "I'm taking it off the local detectives and handing it to the cold case squad."

The CHAIR: Was there anyone who was named as a person of interest or persons of interest at that inquest?

PETER STACE: Yes, there were several people, and I was one of them. There were people at that inquest that said they spotted me—because at the time I had a white Cortina—picking my daughter up. Now, that was impossible because I was up at Casino working. But there was another gentleman who had a white Cortina similar to mine that lived in Maclean or Harwood or somewhere. To my knowledge, that person was never investigated. Now, I've got all the transcripts, and he was never investigated, yet he owned a white Cortina that I was supposed to pick my daughter up in. So I think the investigation by the police leaves a lot to be desired.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: Thanks so much, Mr Stace, for coming along. In the coronial inquest into your daughter's death, the Coroner heavily criticised the inordinate time it took for police to complete the investigation and actually compile the brief. I understand that he noted that it just shouldn't take 12 years to put a brief together, unless there's clear evidence of an ongoing investigation.

PETER STACE: Yes.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: Are you able to tell us anything more about your understanding of the circumstances around that apparent inordinate delay? Why did it just take so long without much happening?

PETER STACE: You'd have to ask the police that, but when my daughter was murdered, it was four years before I was allowed to bury what remains there were. Four years I had to wait for a burial, mate. Even then it was only a couple of bones. You'd have to ask the police why everything takes so long. They're the ones running the show.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: Did the Coroner make a series of recommendations around specialist resources for investigating homicides and particular attention needed in rural areas? Did you have the opportunity to have legal representation at the inquest?

PETER STACE: Yes, I did. I had the victims of homicide support group—who I can't speak highly enough of. They contacted a barrister in Sydney, and this barrister sent me 10 foolscap folders full of information—witness statements and the whole works. I got copies of the whole lot.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: It says online that police and the Coroner identified three men as persons of interest and prime suspects.

PETER STACE: Yes.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: Apps, O'Leary and Davis—is that your understanding?

PETER STACE: I'm not supposed to say names, but you're correct.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: Is there anything else that you want to tell us that you think would be helpful for us to know, in terms of things that you might know about what has occurred that might be of assistance to the Committee?

PETER STACE: Off the top of my head, I cannot recall anything that I can say that would help.

The CHAIR: At any time, Mr Stace, have the police contacted you after the coronial inquiry was referred to the unsolved homicide unit? Are you contacted by New South Wales police now or since the inquest to tell you whether or not the case is active again, being picked up or anything like that?

PETER STACE: No. This cold case squad—there are so many detectives. Apparently, these detectives are working on 20-odd cases at once. That's 20-odd murder cases for one person. How is that going to solve crime? There's just too much work for one person.

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The CHAIR: In your experience, your evidence here today is that that one person changes every couple of years.

PETER STACE: Yes. Thirty, 40 or 50 detectives have been on my daughter's case. It's just a joke.

The CHAIR: What's your attitude to announcements, because there's been a reward and the coronial inquest suggested increasing the reward? What's your attitude to the rewards and them being set at a certain amount or an announcement that it's been doubled? Does that have much effect?

PETER STACE: No, it doesn't. I remember when the reward first came out, and I think there was a \$50,000 reward for my daughter. This is no disrespect, but there was a young Chinese girl who went missing in Sydney. Within a matter of weeks, Bob Carr—the Premier at the time—put up a \$100,000 reward. I wrote a letter to Mr Carr, and I queried him on why the reward was put up so quick. I said, "Are you trying to buy the votes off the Chinese people, or what?" Anyway, I got a response. The reward for my daughter went to \$1 million a matter of weeks later. But the reward still sits there.

The CHAIR: To no effect. You didn't hear of anything.

PETER STACE: The reward did nothing. There are people who know who murdered my daughter, and they're protecting them. But I know for a fact that, at the coronial inquest, a certain person's mother was there every day, and every night she was ringing her son, who was in jail, and telling him what happened at the inquest. I know that because the police told me that.

The CHAIR: The police told you. Did they do that formally? Did they say that was part of an investigation, or was that just one of the detectives thinks that—

PETER STACE: I was talking to the detective at the time, and it might have been just off the cuff. It mightn't have been official, but he did tell me. The mother had been there every day, ringing her son in jail every fricking day and telling him what happened.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Mr Stace, thank you for coming. What support should families receive while investigations are ongoing, because it doesn't seem like you've had—

PETER STACE: Off who?

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: I'm not sure. If they should have support, where would you like to see the support, or what has helped you most?

PETER STACE: Probably my other daughter and wife. I've got to still be there for them.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: But, other than that, there's been no formal support process via police or—

PETER STACE: Not from the police but from the victims of homicide. They've been wonderful. But the police, no.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: What made the experience that you've gone through harder than it needed to be?

PETER STACE: Probably just the way it's been handled, mate. There's certain suspects, but you're not allowed to say things and you're not allowed to do things. You can't go and ask them questions and that. In my opinion, it's all too much in favour of the criminal.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Did you ever feel like your voice wasn't being heard?

PETER STACE: Yes. I know the police don't like me much because I speak my mind and I abuse them. They don't like hearing the truth sometimes.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: What would you like to see change so that your experience isn't an experience that other people have to go through?

PETER STACE: Even when people are found guilty, they get a slap on the wrist. It doesn't deter people. I know it won't happen, but I'm a firm believer in capital punishment. In the old days they had severe punishments. That'd stop the crime. In these days, we've got easier punishments. How do you expect to stop crime?

The CHAIR: I'm sure there are people in the community who care about Lee's case and your circumstance, and they come forward with information. What's been your experience with providing that to the police? How do you do that, and what is the police's attitude when—

PETER STACE: You mean when people tell me?

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The CHAIR: When people tell you or when they learn things. Do they just call Crime Stoppers? What's that flow of information from the community through to the police?

PETER STACE: I've had it happen. I've had people come and tell me things and I say, "Mate, you should be telling the cops." I say, "If you don't, I'm going to ring them up as soon as you leave, so you'd better go and tell them." That's what I do.

The CHAIR: And if those people do, do they get an outcome? Do they just ring Crime Stoppers? What's the police's attitude to new information coming forward if you call them?

PETER STACE: Their attitude? Mate, new information, nine times out of 10 they just don't want to know about it.

The CHAIR: Do you call them up? Do you get a response if you send them an email or something like that?

PETER STACE: I don't do social media. I don't do emails. I talk in person.

The CHAIR: What would you like to see happen? Are there any changes you would like to see occur in this space?

PETER STACE: Off the top of my head, I can't think of anything that's going to change the system.

The CHAIR: Fair enough, Mr Stace. Colleagues, do you have any more questions?

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: I have none.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: Not from me. Thanks, Mr Stace. We appreciate it.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Stace. I offer our deepest condolences to you and your family for a horrendous circumstance. Our deepest sympathies go to you. It is a terrible burden to have to bear. We deeply appreciate you coming along and putting on the record that information. It greatly helps the inquiry develop its recommendations and, hopefully, make things better going forward. If there are any other questions we have, we will be in contact with you in due course. Thanks again for coming today to give your evidence in very difficult circumstances.

(The witness withdrew.)

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Ms JOANNE GREENSILL, Partner of Andrew Robert Inglis, Missing Person, sworn and examined

The CHAIR: Good morning, Ms Greensill. Thank you very much for your attendance today and your submission. We deeply appreciate it. Is there an opening statement you'd like to make?

JOANNE GREENSILL: Sure. Firstly, thank you to the inquiry for the opportunity to speak today and for me, to some extent, to represent the thousands of people impacted by ambiguous loss, whose missing loved ones do not necessarily have the profile that some of the cases heard to date have had. Also, thanks to the Hon. Jeremy Buckingham for his dogged determination to see this inquiry get up and to those who supported him. To those who consider that this inquiry is a waste of time and resources, I ask you to walk a day in the shoes of anyone who has endured ambiguous loss and perhaps, rather than asking whether this inquiry is a waste of time and resources, ask how did we get here and how do we ensure that this inquiry isn't a waste of time and resources, remembering the well-worn saying that the standards you walk past are the standards you accept.

In the summer of 1985-86, I was 17 years old. I was born and raised here in Grafton, and my family had holidayed in Yamba every Christmas holidays since I was small. I had finished year 12 and made the decision to move to Sydney to pursue my hockey goals, study and, most importantly, be closer to Andrew Inglis, who was my teenage holiday sweetheart—my first love. On the night of Boxing Day 1985, Andrew left the Blue Dolphin Caravan Park in his car, and he has not been seen or heard of since. His car has never been found in 40-plus years. My case is in many ways very different from most that have been before the inquiry to date, in that I don't believe there was any third-party involvement in Andrew's disappearance. However, the trauma of the not knowing is the same.

I acknowledge that, for those families and friends living with unresolved third-party involvement, either known or suspected, that they have the additional grief of knowing that somewhere, someone knows something, and this frustration must be soul destroying. For those of us where that is unlikely, poor early investigation is devastating to the outcome because it is very likely that nowhere does anyone know anything, and the loss of early evidence leaves us with no hope and no answers. Early and open-minded action is vital. I also wish to state that I'm not family and I am an example of how broadly reaching the impacts of these cases are. I have said on many occasions the suggestion that, on average, 12 people are impacted by a missing person is, in my opinion, grossly understated. It seems to me that whatever the scenario, foul play or misadventure, there has been a culture within police to tick the easiest box. Once that happens, that box becomes immobile.

Although not directly covered by this inquiry, I think this extends to what is also now referred to as hidden homicide. I don't know how the Government can address this issue, but resourcing, or a lack thereof, seems to be at the heart of the problem. As an outsider, but as someone who has worked in large institutional environments, it seems that there is a problem with groupthink, a lack of lateral thought and a persistence with following the usual investigative methods, even when this results in no outcome. There are many examples of everyday people who have found themselves sleuthing and discovering vital information. Perhaps the police department could consider that part of their workforce not need be traditional police, but people who have both skill and passion for research and finding answers. I would also suggest that in cases where people and cars disappear simultaneously, particularly in an area like the Northern Rivers, that early inspection of riverbanks and roads adjacent to waterways is vital.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much for your evidence today, and thank you very much for your submission. It's very important to get a broad range of perspectives. In your opinion, how should we better handle missing persons cases? In the context of what happened to Andrew back in 1985, what happened at the time, and what do you think should happen into the future?

JOANNE GREENSILL: I think there was an assumption made by his family and by most of us, probably, that he had made the decision—he didn't live in Yamba; he was there on holidays and he lived in Camden—to simply return home. Again, we're talking about pre-mobile phones, pre-internet—pre-any of those things. About three days after he left, his father went to a phone box, as you did, to ring his mother—they were separated at the time—to check that he'd gotten home in one piece. That was when, of course, we found out that he hadn't arrived back in Camden. I think it was at that point that his father went to the police station. Yamba, in those days, would've been a one-copper town. Given it was Boxing Day, there might've been a couple of other police that'd been sent to the area from probably Grafton, because of the influx of people during the holiday period.

I think that his family lived with continual hope that he had just—he was 18, he'd had a bit of a dummy spit and he just decided to make his own way. I can't tell you how I knew, I just knew the moment I found out he hadn't gone home that we wouldn't see him again. My gut told me that. Because I think his family didn't want to perhaps even contemplate that, I don't think there was a lot of push from them for further investigation. In saying

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that, there was no investigation. I think I was probably the last person to speak to him. I've never been contacted. I don't think any of his mates who were sharing a tent with him were contacted.

There was an assumption made that he had left of his own choice, which he did, but that he continued to stay away of his own choice. I don't think that's the case. I don't think he was suicidal. I think that if he had suicided, his car or something would've been found. His bank accounts had not been touched—all of those things. There's no proof of life. Again, there's been no inquest and, again, that's probably because the family have not pushed for it. As a 17-year-old person who was not family, I had no power nor life experience to know what to do or how to influence the situation.

So what could've been done differently? As I said, I think it was an easy box to tick when the family said, "We think he's just gone off and he'll come home when he's ready." I think at some point someone should've gone, "Well, it's been a while. Do we really think that that's the scenario?" The night he left there was a storm and the roads were wet. He'd been out fishing with his mates in the afternoon. There were a few beers consumed, so he probably had a little bit of alcohol in his system, driving on wet roads in a crappy little Datsun. To quote my brother-in-law, they were "pretty skiddy" cars, and if you drive from Yamba to Grafton, you'll know you spend a lot of time driving along that river.

I don't think that there is a great deal of hope for an outcome for this case, but I speak because I want to see better outcomes for others that are more recent. It's not just the family that are impacted. I often hear about the family—and that's appropriate—but I think everyone needs to understand it's not just about family. Many of his friends—we all spent a great deal of time. I remember one of the guys who lived at Maitland thought he saw his car in the 12 months after he left, and he stopped and did a U-turn on the highway and followed it. They're the sorts of things that we do when we think we see something or someone that looks like it might be the person that we know that has gone missing.

The CHAIR: You were never contacted by the police or made aware that he could become officially a missing person?

JOANNE GREENSILL: No. I was living in Queensland and we used to get *The Courier-Mail* at work, as businesses often did in those days. I was flipping the pages of *The Courier-Mail* in Missing Persons Week. It was probably very early on in Missing Persons Week, so I'm going to say it was about 10 or 11 years after he left—so in the '90s. I turned this page to see the photo that's on the current site just jump off the page at me and I—that visceral reaction a decade later told me that this stuff just bubbles under the surface. You never really get past it, in the true sense.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: Thanks so much for coming along and helping the inquiry. Are you aware whether his disappearance was ever reported formally to the police?

JOANNE GREENSILL: Yes, I believe it was. I believe when his father found out he hadn't arrived home that he went to the police. He has been listed as a missing person on those pages for a long time. My understanding and my memory—and I don't know whether this is fact or fiction; it's just my recollection of what I was told at the time—was that at that time there was some level of classification of missing people and that his family, and his mother in particular, had told police that she did not want media. That was a request that she made. Of course, I don't know the whys and wherefores of that. So there was no media. There was nothing. There were no reports. There was nothing in the paper. Until I saw that missing persons week and a bunch of photos on a page of *The Courier-Mail*—that was the first time that I had ever seen his case mentioned. I think there was a Sydney Morning Herald article that Sally found—because I lived in Sydney—which I wouldn't have seen, because I probably didn't read the Herald at that stage. So there was a little bit, but that probably came around as a result of missing persons week as well.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: Do you know if the police ever conclusively formed a view as to whether he had consciously just left or they formed the view that he was no longer alive? Do you know what view they reached?

JOANNE GREENSILL: No, I don't know because, as I said, I've had no contact with the police. Again, I understand that there were a couple of instances in probably the 12 months after this where his father and his younger brother did have some conversations with police where they perhaps thought they had found something or someone. I've got an inkling of a memory that they went to the Cross at one stage, because apparently that's where everyone goes when they take off. Everyone goes to Kings Cross. That seems to be the narrative at times, particularly for the young. But nothing ever came of that. To the best of my knowledge, the registration on his car was never renewed. The car was never transferred. He didn't touch his bank accounts. Based on what I understand since, I understand that what happened or didn't happen should have triggered a request from the police department for an inquest, but that hasn't happened.

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The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: What do you think happened? I've been to that caravan park and holidayed there as well. It's somewhere you do want to return to every year, as you've said. So what do you think happened?

JOANNE GREENSILL: The first place we should have started—or even now maybe could look—is the Clarence River. There were lots of bends on that road. There are still lots of bends on that road, but obviously it's improved in 40 years. But, as I've said, there were lots of places where if you lost control off a corner, you could end up in the river. I don't know that occurred to me initially, but I can tell you that when I was living in Queensland—I was living on the Sunshine Coast; it was about 11 years since Andrew left—a young girl, about 18 or 19, disappeared from Noosa. She'd last been seen at the Rolling Rock, which was a nightclub in Hastings Street, and she never came home.

Her mother was very different to Andrew's family. She was talking to every news outlet, and she had her daughter's photos on the side of milk cartons—the whole gamut. About three or four years after she disappeared, a man was fishing in the Maroochy river. He got a snag, and that snag was the inside lining of the ceiling of her car. The Maroochy river, for any of you that have been there, is nowhere near as deep as the Clarence. She'd obviously turned down a street and not realised it ran straight into the river, and had literally just driven herself straight into the water and that car would've just sunk in the silt.

One of my older brothers-in-law who grew up in this town will tell you that when he was a teenager, everybody knew whereabouts in this river they could dump a car if they wanted to dump a car. It is a massive river and it is very deep. Even where there's not a lot of depth between the top of the water and where you can put your feet down, it can be very silty. So something like a car would disappear. I don't know that's what has happened, but to me that seems the first thing that we could or should have looked at. Again, the lack of looking in those first few days and weeks particularly—there might have been skid marks on the road somewhere. There might have been a tree that was partially pushed over. There might have been a guidepost that was knocked over. There might have been some evidence that a car had gone into the river in any number of places along that river.

But that sort of evidence is not going to be there for long, particularly in the summer, when we get rain, storms, floods and stuff coming through. The Clarence—for those of you that aren't local, our river floods on a regular basis. For me, that's the logical answer to your question, but I obviously don't know that. It could have happened that you leave Grafton and you go down and a bit further down you get to the other side of Coffs Harbour, and you're driving through Nambucca and Macksville, and there are lots and lots of rivers and lots and lots of roads that run very close to waterways in this part of the world. That accounts for his car missing.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Do you think there were missed opportunities in terms of communications? As you said, you weren't interviewed and neither were any of his friends.

JOANNE GREENSILL: As I said, I get it was Boxing Day, the busiest time of year, in a very small country fishing/surfing village. I imagine it was just because his family thought that he would just come home that—move on. I was probably one of the few that just knew. I just knew in my gut. I can't explain it to you. I don't know where that came from, but anyone that knew me at the time will tell you I said that right from the get-go. Had they talked to me and had I told them that, would that have changed anything? I was 17, so maybe not.

The CHAIR: But you and the family never countenanced suicide?

JOANNE GREENSILL: No, I don't believe that. One, I don't think he was suicidal. But even if that was the case, where's his car? He left in the dark. It wasn't like he had a weapon. It wasn't like he had a shotgun or a revolver under his car. If he made some of the choices that other young people are known to make, like gassing themselves or hanging themselves, you've got to do it somewhere, right? The car would be found. Something would be found. I know that's possible. I'm not saying it's impossible, because of course everything is possible. Everything is possible because we have so little information that absolutely everything is possible.

The CHAIR: We've received some evidence that we might be better served if there was a specialist agency that looks into missing persons or more coordination across existing agencies. Do you have a view on that? Currently, it's principally focused through the New South Wales police.

JOANNE GREENSILL: As I said, and as Joni and Sally have also talked about, there are many people with skill sets that don't involve carrying a revolver and a set of handcuffs that have the ability to give value to this space, whether it's research, whether it's the SES or whether it's the RFS. I know that Councillor Peter Johnstone, who's on the Clarence Valley Council and who's a member of the RFS, put a submission in about some of the tools and stuff that the RFS has that might be able to be used when someone goes missing, as an example. We need to collaborate across agencies and volunteers. I often hear on podcasts about a number of retired police—I think once you're a copper, you're always a copper—who have time, energy and interest. We have to find a way to garner every possible resource and find a way to make that a coordinated, efficient effort that is going to give

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people better outcomes than what we've had in the past. I haven't got the answers, but I do think there is a bit of groupthink and that we don't necessarily think laterally.

It seems to me that there is training that an investigation follows a certain pattern, a certain pathway and a certain process. That's fine, but it won't always provide answers, so we have to be able to think outside the box. That's not just in this area. I often think about someone like Charlie Teo, who's a doctor who says we will never find an answer to brain cancer if we keep doing the same things we've been doing, from a research perspective. We have to think differently and we have to think outside the square, because thinking traditionally has gotten them nowhere in 35 years in an outcome for brain cancer. It's not just in policing. I think lateral thought is important in many places where you're trying to solve a problem.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: Ms Greensill, have you had any involvement at all with his family since then?

JOANNE GREENSILL: Yes, I was very close to his family. I went to his father's second wedding. I went to his stepsister's wedding. I don't see much of the mum because I don't get to Sydney and stuff. His parents are English, and friends of mine have suggested that it was the whole stiff upper lip British thing. They never talked about it—not once. I talked to his brother about it, and his stepsisters, but not once did I ever have a conversation with his parents, even though I continued to be a part of the extended family for quite a long time. They just didn't—

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: They have not expressed wonder?

JOANNE GREENSILL: They never talked about it. They just tucked it away, which made it hard—I suppose harder even—for me because, as I said, I had no influence. I had no power.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: You're not aware of them being contacted by the police?

JOANNE GREENSILL: Obviously, his father went and reported him missing. I do understand there were a couple of contacts early on. As I said, I believe, at one point, they went to the Kings Cross Police Station because they'd been contacted, but that was 39 years ago.

The CHAIR: On that, the family may have gone to the Kings Cross—

JOANNE GREENSILL: Yes, his father and his brother.

The CHAIR: Went to the Kings Cross Police Station.

JOANNE GREENSILL: That's my recollection, but I don't know the detail of that.

The CHAIR: There may be a question from online. Ms Merton? There is something coming in, but she is on mute.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: She asked me if I could ask what your first interaction with the police was? It sounds like you didn't have one.

JOANNE GREENSILL: I'm still waiting. There hasn't been one.

The CHAIR: Ms Greensill, thank you so much for your submission and your testimony today raising Andrew's important story. We appreciate you coming forward. It gives us a lot to consider, and it broadens the scope, importantly, of the types of matters that we can consider and make findings and recommendations on. We deeply appreciate you continuing to keep your good friend's memory alive. If we have any questions, we will be in contact in due course through the secretariat.

(The witness withdrew.)

(Luncheon adjournment)

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Ms KIM MARSHALL, Sister of Bronwyn Winfield, Missing Person, sworn and examined

The CHAIR: Welcome back, everyone. We will recommence the hearings into unsolved murders and long-term missing persons cases. Thank you to our next witness, Ms Kim Marshall. I know Mr D'Arcy is joining you as a support person. He is not giving evidence. Do you have some introductory remarks you'd like to make?

KIM MARSHALL: Yes, I do, thank you. Good afternoon, Chair and Committee members. I am a sister of Bronwyn Winfield, nee Read. Before I deliver my opening statement, I want to acknowledge the attendance of other family members who are present here today. I have consulted the New South Wales homicide unit regarding how to approach my evidence today. I am before you today not just as an individual but as a daughter of Barbara Read. Our mother was forced to live with the loss of her firstborn and pass away without justice being served. I witnessed our mother not be acknowledged, and this has shaped how I, too, have lived my life with the impacts that result from systemic fractures that break the families of the missing.

I am here to speak directly about the profound investigative and institutional failures that have compounded our family's trauma and make recommendations today for system restructure, multi-agency and community collaboration, and funding allocation. For years our family has had to endure the excruciating pain of an unresolved investigation regarding my sister, Bronwyn. But the tragedy didn't stop with her disappearance in 1993. The ripple effect of losing Bronwyn has carried an immeasurable toll. There is a profound, compounding cost of five generations deeply affected by her loss. Instead of receiving compassion and rigorous transparency, our family has been subjected to systemic failures that have left us all isolated, institutional exclusion, character defamation and critical failures of evidence. Our mother passed away without ever seeing justice or closure. She spent the latter half of her life suspended in the agony of the unknown, pushed aside by the very institutions that were supposed to protect her.

I am sure things have modernised to protect the vulnerable, and we must ensure that we safeguard all children and young people up to the age of 25. To do that, this inquiry must urge investigators to go deeper when interviewing families and witnesses. When you have the right to investigate, have considered conversations. Much more detail will come forward. Our family has proven this to where we are today. I, too, now have proven this with the agency I have taken in recent years. Too often, when people are not experienced or well-versed with something unfamiliar to them, critical details slip through the cracks. We must always remember that Bronwyn's case was so much, much more than what numerous NSW Police Force reviews and reinvestigations produced, for the ODPP to continually reject. New South Wales must do better and address this gap in the judicial system. It may not very well be too late for the responsible person to face legal justice. That is okay. To the person that is responsible, just know that I know what only you know. They will either live it or they will deal with it. Enjoy the surf.

My mother cannot speak today, and many families are also not here. But I am here to demand system reform and modernisation, where collaborative frameworks across agencies and community will be the working model to assure accountability, collective investigation and virtue of care. It fosters trust. We need to be able to rely upon it. All family victims, especially young people aged to 25 as a minimum, must have targeted safeguards. All communities deserve to access systems that work. I am asking you to address these gaps and modernise the system that is meant to serve and protect us. The world we live in today is a new era for accessing information. Currently, the homicide unit works beyond capacity. Placing a trapdoor in place to manage the demand causes health impacts that I am sure are tracking towards a chronic health junction, harming our children today and in the future. Thank you for everyone involved who has attended today.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Marshall. We deeply appreciate you coming along to give some evidence in the most difficult circumstances. In your initial contribution—you haven't made a submission—you talked about deep systemic issues with the process. Could you elaborate on that? How do you think the system has failed? How do you think it could be improved?

KIM MARSHALL: The system has failed because when you have people crying out and going along with their own agency to do their own investigations—that just blew me away when I came into the missing persons space. I couldn't believe that everyday people were becoming caretakers of a missing loved one. That does not make sense to me. The system needs change because it's obviously not giving a responsive service. Impacts are unfolding and they're increasing. I have lived such a long time to finally come to understand what happened to me as a co-victim. I now clearly understand what I've lived; I didn't in the past. I had to go and find that out for myself. I just hope and pray that there are not other people who have lived like I've lived, because it has actually impacted my ability to work and function.

The CHAIR: When you talk about being a caretaker, how do you mean? A caretaker of key information, of understandings of what happened and when and why? Could you elaborate on that?

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KIM MARSHALL: I'll say it again: I shouldn't have to turn up to an inquiry for my sister in 2002 to discover crucial information during the inquiry that I had firsthand knowledge of. I had tried to get that information across. No matter how I tried or when I tried, I could not get that evidence submitted. During the inquiry in 2002, I actually got brave enough—heavily pregnant—to actually ask my brother to come with me to speak to the public prosecutor and the detective. I briefly explained, at my brother's introduction, what information I had. The answer was, "Just wait there a minute." They went away. They came back through the doors—"Oh, it's too late now. The evidence brief has already been submitted. We can't change it. We're not going to worry about it."

The CHAIR: Was this a coronial inquiry or was this a police inquiry?

KIM MARSHALL: It was a coronial inquiry. The Deputy State Coroner, to this day, still does not actually know what my evidence was. Plus, I wasn't a witness, and my mother wasn't a witness. We were asked, through channels, not to attend the inquiry. My understanding of what a coronial inquiry is today, and in the past—because family victims services has actually supported me with this research—is that my mother and I should have been witnesses. We were told why we were not to attend. That is absolutely disgraceful, and it has affected my self-worth all my life.

The CHAIR: Could we wind the tape back a bit to the initial disappearance of your sister? What do you know about that and how the police investigation was conducted at that time?

KIM MARSHALL: What I now know as fact is that there was no investigation that took place in 1993. It was only a set of inquiries. That is it. That's all that happened in 1993.

The CHAIR: When you say inquiries, what do you mean?

KIM MARSHALL: Inquiries mean that there were no statements taken.

The CHAIR: So police were made aware that someone was missing?

KIM MARSHALL: Yes.

The CHAIR: And they went and asked a few people what they knew, but no formal statements were made?

KIM MARSHALL: Correct.

The CHAIR: Did your sister go onto a missing persons register? Or you don't know?

KIM MARSHALL: It's not actually clear. I don't think the missing persons register happened for a period of time, but I would have to take that question on notice and give you the answer, which I can. What I do understand is that there was a set of cops' running sheets and there was a final local station or command report done, and that was the end of that.

The CHAIR: What's your knowledge of what that report said?

KIM MARSHALL: It contained things that clearly identified Bronwyn to be her own person of interest. For those who don't understand what that means, it means that she was responsible for her disappearance or her adventure. The next of kin that was appointed—and that is something I will recommend for several cases that I'm aware of. We shouldn't have gatekeepers looking after people's personal effects and people's estates when they don't have a voice themselves. Next of kin should probably be allocated to a person that is transparent and independent, and that may even also exclude my brother. I will add, my mother was also the next of kin officially, confirmed by Victims Services New South Wales. My mother was totally—I don't know—a blip. She actually should've been the next of kin and consulted before she handed the case to anybody else to be caretaken by.

The CHAIR: What's your recollection of the nature of the liaison between the police and the family, in broad terms, in that period before the coronial inquest? Was it ongoing? Was it one police officer? Was it someone from the local area command who was in charge of it? What was the nature of the engagement and how extensive was it?

KIM MARSHALL: The nature of the engagement commenced in 1998 by a family initiating contact. An experienced ex-homicide detective looked at the file and decided to take on the case. From my own experience, I will say that my mother's and my witness testimonies or statements were actually done by the previous constable in the 1993 inquiries. I actually never got to speak to or meet detective Glenn Taylor until two minutes at the inquiry I mentioned before. I now actually speak to him on the phone and have his phone number, and it's 2026.

The CHAIR: Did the coronial inquest make any findings? What were the findings of that coronial inquest?

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KIM MARSHALL: The findings were—and this was actually said—that "a known person within this courtroom is responsible for the death of Bronwyn Winfield at approximately 9.30 p.m. on 16 May 1993, and I refer to the ODPP for prosecution".

The CHAIR: That's a pretty strong recommendation, or a pretty strong finding. What happened?

KIM MARSHALL: From my understanding and research, I am led to believe that the evidence was poor and circumstantially based and that no charge would proceed.

The CHAIR: So the ODPP declined to proceed with the case on the basis of the paucity of evidence?

KIM MARSHALL: Yes. And they referred it back to the unit for further investigation.

The CHAIR: Was there further investigation? When was it, as the police say, picked up again? When were you made aware that they were looking into it again? When was the contact after that?

KIM MARSHALL: Looking at my notes, we would be looking at a 2009 relaunch of Strike Force Chelmsbrook, because the initial investigation was called Operation Lumberton.

The CHAIR: So there was a new strike force seven years after the coronial inquest?

KIM MARSHALL: Yes.

The CHAIR: Was there any outcome in that? Was there any new evidence? Why were you told that there was a new strike force initiated? Were there new learnings that the police had?

KIM MARSHALL: I can't actually really answer that question, because I was never informed, consulted or had any information shared with me.

The CHAIR: Who was that information shared with?

KIM MARSHALL: That would, I suspect, be my brother Andrew Read.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: Thanks so much for coming along. It's really appreciated. From my understanding of this case, your sister's husband, Jon Winfield, misled police about things such as your sister's mental health and that had the effect of, in a sense, derailing the police investigation. I think the Coroner may have criticised the reliance the police placed on things that he said about her mental health. Could you elaborate on that?

KIM MARSHALL: I would probably like to make a correction. I would not want to be known to say that Jonathan Winfield had conducted himself in that manner. But what I can tell you, looking at all the documentation, is that between cups of tea with the detective, they somehow came to the conclusion—and it is recorded—that perhaps Bronwyn Winfield has had a breakdown like her mother, a schizophrenic.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: What do you say about that as a fair representation?

KIM MARSHALL: If I have a look at everything and I take into account my lived experience and my involvement with all the triangulated phone calls that happened between Jonathan Winfield, my mother, me standing with her and my brother Andrew, yes, the incorrect history of my mother was actually explained third-hand to Detective Graeme Diskin. Yes, Jonathan Winfield is known to have continuously repeated that.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: Is it the case that during the reinvestigation of the matter, police basically found no medical evidence to support those claims?

KIM MARSHALL: Correct. Bronwyn had been attending a GP service and she had also been heavily engaged in 1993—which I am so impressed with—with domestic violence support through the community centre.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: It seems like an important point. If someone goes missing and their partner is saying things about their mental health that might tend to support some theory that the partner is putting about voluntary disappearance, police should generally be sceptical about those sorts of assertions, because we know how commonly someone's intimate partner is actually the perpetrator of homicide.

KIM MARSHALL: Yes, research published definitely says that, and I have research continuously going at the moment. I have also engaged the most leading psychology-based crime specialist professor that actually has the ear of the Prime Minister. He is going to be working further with me on Bronwyn's case.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Thank you for your evidence today. What support do you think should be available to families where people have gone missing and the investigation goes for a long time?

KIM MARSHALL: What I've actually learnt speaking with Victim Services—they have explained to me how their non-operational arm is not independently operating to its best practice. They believe they could actually

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make a lot of changes and improvements and provide better services. They have actually told me that they do not have the ear and support of the NSW Police Force.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: If you could change one procedure or police procedure tomorrow, what would it be?

KIM MARSHALL: I definitely have one for you. It would be that frontline police are not in charge of triaging and identifying support allocations because at the moment the current practice, I believe, is that when a traumatic event actually happens, it is up to the detective or officer that's on scene in charge. They don't even have a cheat sheet to follow, and if they get around to it, they get around to it. If they don't—

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: They don't.

KIM MARSHALL: There we go. It's not acceptable. We actually need allied health—obviously with a clearance level—and a specialised officer that actually is that interconnector. I want to see the community framework pillars and practices multi-agency—innovation. Let's make New South Wales lead. Let's call it "New South Wales Search and Care" that actually is a multi-operational arm that supports the NSW Police Force. Let them get on with their real work.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: In your experience, what made it harder for you than it needed to be?

KIM MARSHALL: That's a great question. I only had the communication of my brother and Jonathan, so I had two men that were manipulating and controlling me. I basically booked a plane ticket—and so did Melissa Read. It was the two sisters that were the only relatives that actually went to Lennox Head. I was already going with a preconceived safety plan. I was already going to—what would you say—escort my sister and the girls back to Tasmania at the financial and directions of my grandmother. I did not have anyone to talk to at all. I didn't know who to go to.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: So you would say your voice as a family member wasn't being listened to?

KIM MARSHALL: Continuously. My voice has only been listened to because I, eight years ago, went and got Hedley Thomas, who could give me a voice. I then have been tokenised and probably recognised. Now we've all gone back to normal practice.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: What has helped you through this? You haven't had support from where you think you should be getting it.

KIM MARSHALL: Four years of psychology.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Like research psychology?

KIM MARSHALL: Yes, and going to university and becoming academically informed so that I knew how to make the most informed decisions for my niece Chrystal and for my niece Lauren—I know that she is listening, even though we can't communicate—to make sure that I clearly understood what happened to me, because I grew up always putting myself last. I've even done it today with these reporters that come and talk to you. I don't know how to ask a question that actually comes from me inside. I only know how to fix it.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: But by doing the study, you're learning to know what questions to ask?

KIM MARSHALL: Yes, I've learned how to identify with myself.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: And to advocate on behalf of your sister and her family.

KIM MARSHALL: Yes.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Do you think there were missed opportunities in terms of communication, like who police did speak to and who they didn't speak to, to get the full picture?

KIM MARSHALL: In the 1993 investigation, my opinion is that it was societal pattern behaviours. There was a culture in the Richmond command, so police were allowed to make their own judgements. They weren't aware of unconscious bias, but you would have thought, in 1993, that they would have been. In the 1998-99 Strike Force Chelmsbrook, you still would have actually thought—even though the lovely Detective Taylor is a great person, you would have still thought that he would have actually met or spoken to Bronwyn's mother and Bronwyn's sister. It's not just Barbara and I; it's Melissa Read as well. Then, if you look at the cops' running sheets, you will see repeated same language, patterns, sentences stolen from other people's phone calls and no opportunity

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to answer a question other than a leading question. That applies to the 1993 questionings by Diskin, and it also applies, unfortunately, to the 1998.

In regards to 2009—and you're talking about George Radmore—I never met the man. Megan thinks he's absolutely famous and fabulous. I never met the man. Here we are today, and I have still had to force the police to actually come and address my mental health. It doesn't matter if you do a podcast; you still don't get to do an interview. I was falsely taken to Sydney to do an interview and was then told, "No, you're not doing it. We'll do it another time down the track." Luckily, I understood chain of command, and I have actually managed to get my evidence from being contaminated. I now have more evidence that is actually in my possession that I've had to secure and that has still not been picked up. I actually spoke to Inspector Nigel Warren this morning to let him know that I'm about to talk about that today. "Do you want me to talk about it? Do you not want me to talk about it?" My brother said, "Don't you dare talk about the case, at all costs, while you're at the inquiry." So here I am, and I am holding another piece of information that I reckon would be very helpful.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: What do you hope is the outcome from this inquiry?

KIM MARSHALL: I would actually like to see—if the police and the Coroner believe that Jonathan Winfield is a suspect in the disappearance of my sister, I cannot understand, and I want it explained, why he cannot have an interview or why he can't be given an opportunity to be interviewed. I understand that he might have legal advice but, at the end of the day, that person has been irresponsible from the get-go. I have no belongings of my sister. They have all been destroyed. If someone else has them—and they might have pieces of them—why don't they share them? What's that got to do with a murder conviction? Why do belongings have to be destroyed? Why can they not be shared?

It just doesn't make sense. There is no compassion whatsoever. Police also hold delicate items and evidence, and they will not explain why they will be released when I have, in writing, in 2009, from George Radmore's investigation, that those things will be actually returned to me. I don't understand why, and we just want simple language. We don't want trapdoors. There must be a way, and I know of a way. It's in my submission that you will be getting once I leave the Ballina area. Because of my PTSD, I don't want to publish it until I have left New South Wales.

The CHAIR: In terms of the coronial inquest, were you privy to the brief of evidence? Were you able to see that?

KIM MARSHALL: No, I saw the brief of evidence in, maybe, an email from Andrew in 2020. Then I tried to actually—

The CHAIR: That's nearly 20 years afterwards.

KIM MARSHALL: Yes, and I actually never really got to see it until 2024, to tell you the truth. I'm so glad that I actually never saw my statements because now it helped to not contaminate my evidence. So it's actually worked in my favour, if there was a positive out of all of this.

The CHAIR: Why weren't you able to see it at the coronial inquest?

KIM MARSHALL: It would have to be because I'm not a next of kin, and I would have been identified as a stepsister. I was incorrectly identified with an incorrect surname and an incorrect blood relation—or non-blood related, perhaps, so maybe I had a different mother or something like that. Someone told someone that I was not blood related, I was only related by marriage.

The CHAIR: So therefore you weren't considered a next of kin and therefore able to see.

KIM MARSHALL: Yes. I spent \$10,000 getting to the coronial inquest with my husband and my child and my pregnancy, and then the next of kin decided to have a memorial service in very short time. Travelling from Hobart continuously up here, it was going to cost another \$6,000 in airfares. So my poor mother and myself—my poor mother did not get to go to her daughter's service. That is shameful. I hold two people accountable for that: one, the agency, whatever they're called, or the public prosecutor, or I hold my brother responsible.

The CHAIR: There has been significant public interest in this case for a very long time.

KIM MARSHALL: Yes.

The CHAIR: For 30 years—

KIM MARSHALL: It's 33 now.

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The CHAIR: What's your understanding of how that information makes its way into the police? Are you aware of information that is held by other members of the public who have tried to put things to the police? Does that information exist, is it coming from the public and what has been the police's attitude to that information?

KIM MARSHALL: It doesn't matter whether I submit evidence or information. It doesn't matter whether a public person does. It cannot be guaranteed. There's no logging that any information has been received or acted on. The example is, whether it's actually a manipulation plan, there is a member of the public that actually believes that they sold an additional piece of property to Jonathan Winfield at a very crucial time. They provided a receipt to the police in 1993 about this transaction. Still today we don't know where that receipt is, but we also do not know if they're following up on that lead.

The CHAIR: That's an example that you say of people providing critical evidence to the police that is not properly accounted for, and you have no understanding whether it's been acted—

KIM MARSHALL: Yes, there's no chain of command. There's no logging sheet. At the moment, I've done a new statement. I've got no copy of my statement, and I'm meant to. I also should have been allocated a warrant officer or an evidence officer and also a number. I've done two statements and, to this day, I have no copies of my 1999 statement or my 2025 statement, which went for 13 hours, so we went well into the middle of the night. I've got nothing, and I'm not allowed to have a copy of it.

The CHAIR: My understanding is that information did come to light that may have indicated a potential location for remains.

KIM MARSHALL: Yes.

The CHAIR: How did that happen, and did the police act upon that information?

KIM MARSHALL: I wasn't actually allowed to be aware of that information due to the continued control. I found that information out through the actual search commander later on. He waited a period of time that was ethical before releasing it to me. I am aware that a report has been sent to NSW Police Force. They will not engage in any conversation on that whatsoever—but, just remember, they don't engage on any conversation. We're not allowed to know. All they keep telling me is that I'm in danger. They have expressed concerns to me that I am in danger and that I should not be a Sally Leydon.

The CHAIR: Really? What do you mean?

KIM MARSHALL: I should not be, when I receive information from the public, handling it whatsoever. I should just be passing it on, but when you pass it on you actually don't know if it gets there. At the moment, I am on about day 45, or day 60 maybe, where I'm still waiting to see if an email that I have sent has been received—not actually acted on, but just received. I wanted to let them know that I was attending. That was part of it. I wanted to let them know that I was going to be conducting some activities. I wanted to show cooperation with them, and I just wanted to know, again, when my mother's and my sister's letters were going to be returned.

The CHAIR: And you're getting very little out of that?

KIM MARSHALL: No. I actually rang, and so over a 25-minute phone call to the desk—25 minutes—I still do not know, even verbally, if my email has been received. As a person who works in the Department of Justice in Tasmania, in the Supreme Court, I cannot understand how the homicide unit must be running because they need registry operations asap. You don't need detectives answering the phone to help me work out if my email had been received. Where's the staff?

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: Are there any significant investigatory steps that you or anyone else that you're aware of in your family have asked police to do that have not occurred?

KIM MARSHALL: Could you just reframe that question for me, sorry?

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: Are there any particular things that you or your family have asked the police to do, or that you think the police should do in terms of the investigation, that haven't happened that you want to talk about?

KIM MARSHALL: I actually don't know why my Auntie Jan hasn't been interviewed. She's quite ill. She's had pancreatic cancer operations. She hasn't been interviewed. That's just one example.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: Yes.

KIM MARSHALL: That just doesn't make sense to me whatsoever, but is it because she's female, again? Is it because we're going down another line of inquiry that is not relevant? For all I know, the line of inquiry they are going down is becoming very successful. It's on. It's hot, whatever's happening. But, that doesn't help the

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family victims and the co-victims on the other side. If they were to set up a portal, like we have at the Department of Justice in Tassie, you would be able to track; you would be able to leave your detectives alone; you would be able to see progress; you would have agency. If we have agency, the ambiguous loss can actually just calm down a little bit.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: I saw something online when I was doing some research about the case about a concrete slab at a property.

KIM MARSHALL: Yes.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: It was suggested that that slab should be examined. Do you know if that's occurred?

KIM MARSHALL: No, and there's no way that they would answer me, and my brother won't tell me even though he's the gatekeeper and probably knows what's going on because he's in the boys' club. He actually would know, and I'm sorry to speak with discrimination and gender bias; I apologise. But if I don't stay angry—because I'm not used to being angry—I will not be able to talk to you. I have to stay in this mindset because I'm actually a very soft, gentle, compassionate person.

The CHAIR: All right. Thank you very much for being angry and for coming along and giving your evidence today on behalf of your sister and your family. We deeply appreciate it. You've made some excellent suggestions. We look forward to your submission. Please make sure you do that, with your experience.

KIM MARSHALL: I will.

The CHAIR: Both personally and professionally, I'm sure you're going to make recommendations that will be of enormous assistance to the inquiry. Again, I express our deepest sympathies. We thank you for taking the time and for coming all this way to give evidence. It's been of enormous benefit to the hearing today and to the inquiry. Thank you very much.

KIM MARSHALL: Thank you very much, and can I just say this: Can you please try to stay curious and help us get transparency in some way so that we can get these resources allocated correctly because the detectives do work really hard.

The CHAIR: Thank you.

(The witness withdrew.)

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Mrs KAREN ROBERTSON, Sister of Kylee-Ann Schaffer, Missing Person, before the Committee via videoconference, sworn and examined

The CHAIR: Mrs Robertson, thank you very much for taking the time today to come along and give evidence in regard to the disappearance of your sister, Kylee-Ann Schaffer, and also for your comprehensive submission. We deeply appreciate that. It was very substantial. Do you have an opening statement you'd like to make before we turn to questions?

KAREN ROBERTSON: I do, thank you. Firstly, I would like to thank the Committee for their time and consideration of this inquiry. I'd also like to take the time to acknowledge and thank all of the witnesses that have come forward for their loved ones and have lent a voice to those who cannot speak for themselves. My sister, Kylee-Ann Schaffer, had just gone to a party with her friends. According to the reports, she was emotional and seemingly depressed.

During the course of the investigation, key facts were overlooked. My primary concern is that although there are a multitude of inconsistencies and conflicting statements in my sister's case, these were not addressed. Simple alibis were not verified and various key locations such as even her home weren't searched. My hope is that this inquiry will bring to light the lack of resources available to investigators and that, in turn, there is a dedicated team to ensure that all missing persons cases are able to be investigated efficiently to achieve better outcomes for all involved. My fear is that the inquiry pushes investigators to chalk up cases to a serial killer, creating a scapegoat for cases like my sister's, where we—her family and loved ones—believe that she was murdered and probably by someone that she knew.

I'd like to address one of the biggest issues and inconsistencies that I've noticed in the time that I've been involved with this awful world of missing persons that I've been living in, which is going on 23 years now. That is that there doesn't seem to be a particular formula for any missing person being included in the promotional posters that have been released twice yearly since 2004. There is also a huge inconsistency with the rewards being offered. I know that's only a small part of the picture, but with no framework in place, it means that some families may feel that their missing person isn't of the same stature as another and that other people deserve more help. Whereas all missing persons, I believe, should be investigated equally. I know that is something that needs to be addressed with new protocols and standard operating practices and things like that, and potentially support from other facilities like committees and such that I know previous witnesses have mentioned. We need consistency.

My sister and others have been overlooked time and time again, while some missing persons have been featured three or four times on those posters. I won't get into the statistics today but I've done the research and there have been some people that have been featured four or five times. We have so many people that are missing that it needs to be a little bit more consistent. There's no obvious reason that some cases are more worthy than others. My concern with the rewards is that if it's at the discretion of the investigating officers, then in regional, rural and small communities, it does open up a potential for bias. We don't know who knows who in a small town. Certainly where my sister went missing from, it's a big factor.

If someone doesn't believe that the person deserves a reward or the same exposure as others then they potentially won't get it for a reason that we may not be aware of. The lack of support from investigators often means that we are either left behind or forced to utilise things like media, social media and the like, and then our motives are questioned, quite often by the family and friends of the person that's missing. They think that we are after notoriety or financial compensation, which anybody in our position knows that that's not something that you get. Quite often we're very lucky to even be heard.

As part of my submission, I call for standard operating practices and protocols to be created to help facilitate a more cohesive approach, to ensure more interaction with families and less ambiguity of case status. My father passed away having never found out what happened to Kylee and not really having an idea of the status of the case and how it was progressing. I'd like to put to the Committee that there is potentially room for a group of individuals that have been affected by matters related to this inquiry and similar unsolved missing persons cases to provide feedback on what could be more useful in providing assistance to families. I, for one, would be happy to assist.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, Mrs Robertson. In your submission you say that there is a lacklustre approach to local missing persons.

KAREN ROBERTSON: There was, unfortunately.

The CHAIR: Could you expand on that? What does that mean in your submission and in your sister's case? Could you describe what happened at the time in terms of the reporting, and the attitudes and actions of the police at the time?

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KAREN ROBERTSON: Absolutely. In my sister's case, unfortunately, I was living in a completely different region, so the information that I got was third-hand anyway. There was no urgency to report her missing, initially, by not just the people that were with her but also there was only one police officer in the town, so the resources available were very limited.

The CHAIR: Was the town Willawarrin?

KAREN ROBERTSON: Willawarrin is where she went missing from. The local police officer was in Bellbrook, which is a neighbouring town. My family was located geographically right in the middle of the two. The local police officer was in Bellbrook. But being a weekend and being the sole operator in the town, the resources were limited, so not much happened until the Sunday and then the Monday. She went, I suspect, on the Friday night but was reported on the Saturday, and I don't think the official report happened until the Sunday. So there were delays and issues from the start, let alone once it had all began. I think the lack of resources is a huge problem with it.

It was almost like locals weren't seeking to give information regarding my sister's case. If anyone asked, including asking any police officers, it was more asking, "Did you ever hear anything about that case?" They could've been asking about a missing car. It wasn't really anything that was of interest. There's a lot of unspoken gossip in the area, and that's never followed up on. As for the main town of Kempsey, I spoke to the police officer that was looking after her case in 2019 after reading the Coroner's report. I'd never had access previously. I started chasing up with the AFP and found out who I had to contact. I had contact with that person for a very short amount of time, and the last time I contacted them asking for an update was in 2021. Then six months later I said, "I haven't heard anything for six months. Can I please have an update?" I've had nothing since. There's a complete lack of interest.

The CHAIR: So that was 15 years after your sister disappeared?

KAREN ROBERTSON: Yes. There has been very little contact.

The CHAIR: What about at the time? Your sister disappears on the Friday and there's a police report. At what point did the police take an interest in the matter in terms of it being suspicious that she hadn't turned up and it was either misadventure or something worse?

KAREN ROBERTSON: Never. It was always a case of she ran away. The people that were the witnesses that were interviewed—the people that were at the party with her—all indicated that they thought that she was going to commit suicide. It was almost like everyone was happy with that. Whilst they did do a search—they did, the SES were involved and locals helped look for four days, then the search was abandoned. A pair of shoes was found a couple of weeks later, but they just didn't have the resources. When going through the Coroner's report, there are a few things that I thought were a bit peculiar, such as one officer mentions that there were drag marks on the side of the creek, but they were of little consequence and found to be unimportant. I would have thought they would have deserved a little bit more investigation. Her home—the unit that she was renting and sharing with quite a few individuals that were at the party with her and she had disagreements with—was never searched. That was never searched. They looked for her as a missing person, but there was never any proactive investigation into it being a potential homicide.

The CHAIR: Even after many years, they never thought that there may be cause to interview some people as to the nature of her relationships with them—if she had disagreements with certain people?

KAREN ROBERTSON: It was very basic, initially. They were all teenagers, and they spoke to them regarding what happened at the party, but some people weren't interviewed for two years. Just after it all happened, some of the people that were there at the time moved interstate, and it wasn't questioned. There were a lot of conflicting statements I read where two people talk about "I went to that person's house for coffee", and the person that they had gone to see said that they had come to the other person's place. It's a direct conflict, but that's not investigated. There are so many conflicting statements and inconsistencies right throughout that were seemingly never chased up. However, the officers that were looking after the case—and I can only talk about my sister's case, obviously—kept being changed. As you go through the Coroner's report, it starts off with one person that's in charge. It says at the end, "I was moved on to other work." That happens around half-a-dozen times. How is there meant to be consistency if we can't even keep the same officer involved for any decent length of time? It's just that it wasn't a priority.

The CHAIR: When there finally was a coronial inquest, were there any findings made at that?

KAREN ROBERTSON: Yes.

The CHAIR: Did the Coroner make a finding as to the manner of death, or if he or she believed your sister was deceased?

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KAREN ROBERTSON: The coronial inquest was completed in 2010, and the findings were that one of three options had happened. It was either death by suicide, death by misadventure or death by homicide but, in the Coroner's opinion, all things led to misadventure. There was no evidence to suggest that she had committed suicide or that she had been murdered, and it was most likely just misadventure—something had happened, but they weren't sure what.

The CHAIR: You subsequently were able to get a copy of the brief for that coronial inquest. What was the evidence they were relying on? How comprehensive was that?

KAREN ROBERTSON: It wasn't. All of the statements that were made were of people that had spoken to her in the few days leading up to the event happening, whatever that event might have been. Then, as I mentioned, some people weren't interviewed until quite an extended time after it. The things that were mentioned were mental health issues, disagreement at the party she attended and that she was depressed. They believed that she was having some sort of a breakdown or schizophrenic episode, and a nurse at the local hospital had mentioned that she should come back to be admitted. But other people that I have spoken to that were with her in the days prior said that there was no indicator of any of that, so it's very conflicting.

The CHAIR: In your submission you say that your sister was—I think I've got this right—in the same friend group as Amanda O'Dell.

KAREN ROBERTSON: No, not the same friend group. There were very similar circumstances: a couple of weeks after a birthday, going to a party with friends. They could well have known the same people. There were a couple of years difference in age, but certainly the same area. But there were the same sorts of circumstances. Her friends were the last people to see her and something happened—they disappeared. But there was insufficient evidence to blame any person in particular and—

The CHAIR: But Amanda's remains were found.

KAREN ROBERTSON: They were, yes. Luckily, they were found. Unfortunately but luckily, because at least you have some sort of closure and can grieve properly. But from what I understand, the friends were never investigated. It was always an assumption of someone else being responsible. I just think it's worthwhile talking to everybody involved, not just assuming one.

The CHAIR: And Amanda O'Dell was a homicide. It was determined that that was a homicide.

KAREN ROBERTSON: Apparently, yes.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: Thanks, Mrs Robertson, for your evidence. It is much appreciated, and your submission is really helpful. In the submission, you say, "Significant delays occur when regional and rural police are not trained efficiently and are understaffed when it comes to missing persons cases." We've also been looking at another case where, I note, the Coroner made specific recommendations about the way that homicide investigations are dealt with in regional areas. I wonder if there's anything you'd like to expand upon in terms of your opinion about how well placed police in regional and rural areas are to respond to these incidents?

KAREN ROBERTSON: Absolutely. I actually live in a regional area now and am well aware of surrounding towns not having a police presence at all. I don't think it's reasonable to expect that a single-manned—even if there's only a handful of people policing the area, I don't think it's reasonable to expect them to dedicate all of their time to a missing persons case, because obviously you need to commit time and resources, and then you can't dedicate anything to protecting the local area. It's completely unreasonable to believe they can investigate a missing persons case or a homicide effectively when their attention may be pulled elsewhere, and quite reasonably so.

You can't be everything to everyone if you're a sole person operating in a town of 2,000—you can't—let alone a town of even a hundred, which is what we were talking about at the time with Kylee's case. There's still local business that happens. There's still crime that happens, and even just normal, everyday police business that has to happen. I don't believe it's fair and reasonable to expect one person to be able to do everything. That's where I thought potentially a committee or some sort of team that is solely dedicated to homicide and/or missing persons—I know homicide is its own entity, but missing persons not so much. I don't think it's reasonable to have that expectation on any police officer.

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: In your submission, you talk about how you think there should be a standard criteria for determining when a reward should be offered and how much the reward should be.

KAREN ROBERTSON: Absolutely.

CORRECTED

The Hon. STEPHEN LAWRENCE: That's something that we took some evidence about this morning from a gentleman who, essentially, was suggesting that there was some arbitrary nature to the amount of the reward that is offered in particular cases. I'm wondering if you wanted to expand upon that.

KAREN ROBERTSON: First of all, I think having some cases, like my sister's, that have never had a reward offered and it's never been up for discussion, other cases where substantial rewards are offered, and then some where a paltry sum is offered, in the opinions of most—being so inconsistent, first of all, you lose faith in the system. There is no financial motivation for someone to come forward because, in the case of small towns in particular, if I come forward and I say, "I know that Joe Citizen did X, Y and Z," I then have to leave that area. I have to because I am no longer safe, particularly if it was someone local. I need some sort of financial motivation to be able to relocate and disappear because I can't rely on the police to protect me for doing the right thing. If that person is already deceased, and I know they're deceased, why do I put myself at risk unless I know that I can move and be safe? I think that's basic.

The consistency, though, is an issue because why is one person more important than another? It's ridiculous to think that one person's information is worth \$50,000 and another's is worth \$1 million, half a million dollars or \$100,000. I think it's strange that there is such a gap. It wouldn't matter if all of them were \$50,000 or if all of them were \$1 million, as long as there was some form of consistency and some framework for when it's introduced, such as do you offer it at three months, six months, 12 months, five years or 10 years? When? Certainly, there needs to be some sort of framework in place and consistency.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: Mrs Robertson, you talk in your submission, in section 6, about recommendations and, certainly, listening to your evidence now, part of the problem that you're talking about is the lack of consistency in relation to reporting. For example, you talk about "establish clearer national protocols", "fund specialist family support liaison officers", "improve access to real-time information"—I think that one is a very interesting one—and "develop culturally appropriate missing persons resources". Do you want to expand on especially the last one? What cultural resource expansion are you talking about?

KAREN ROBERTSON: Obviously, being a missing person or someone being murdered or disappearing, there is no bias. It can happen to any one of us at any time regardless of race, beliefs or identity. I think it's really important that, in the case of, for example, Indigenous persons, there is a huge inconsistency with reporting. It's well known that the images and names of people who have gone missing, potentially have been murdered or have passed—it's well known that that is problematic, and it certainly needs to have some more consistency. I know there have been recent cases where that has been a huge issue for the families left behind. But it's not just that. I think the families have to be more involved with it being appropriate in nature. Quite often, there are inconsistencies in the way the case is addressed, the way the case is sent through to media outlets and the way that it's reported on.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: I think it's interesting that you don't actually criticise the police in those recommendations, but what you are talking about is a more open process and a more real-time process.

KAREN ROBERTSON: I know that the police have their media team, and I know they do what they can. But I think that the only thing I would criticise from that perspective is that maybe more caution needs to be used when naming people of different cultural backgrounds when it may be against their culture if the person is deceased.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: What about European culture? I understand the sensitivity in relation to Indigenous cultural mention, but what about our ordinary European cultural approach to things?

KAREN ROBERTSON: I think that there needs to be transparency. I think that we need to make sure that there's no speculation. One of the biggest things that I've noticed with the average case—if we're saying "European" as being Caucasian and the average-looking person, I suppose—then I think one of the big problems that I have noticed is that in the cases that are reported on, if there's some sort of press conference then there seems to be an indicator that family are involved. It doesn't seem to be clear enough to prevent speculation that near family are involved in the disappearance. It happens a lot recently with parents and other relatives of children that go missing being not implied or accused, so to speak, but it not being said that—there's no way of protecting them that I have seen so far. There's always a little bit of ambiguity, saying that there's no-one of interest, but they don't say anything about the parents or grandparents, or whatever, and it leaves them open to attack.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: It's pretty clear from the evidence we've been getting from family members, both today and at our previous hearing, that there seems to be a haphazard approach to that.

KAREN ROBERTSON: A little bit, yes.

The Hon. ROBERT BORSAK: Would you agree with that?

CORRECTED

KAREN ROBERTSON: Yes, I do.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: You mentioned the number of investigating officers as not a good thing. How did that affect your confidence in the investigation?

KAREN ROBERTSON: The issue that I have personally, being involved only remotely, was that I was contacted by an officer early on and then that person disappeared. I wasn't contacted ever again until I reached out to the AFP in 2019 and got a call back. The person that called me was the current officer on the case, to the best of my knowledge, and they didn't know who I was.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: So no handover between—

KAREN ROBERTSON: Nothing. I'm not the first point of contact and I understand that. But if you are investigating a case, I would assume that it is your business to know who the family members are. The words used by the officer were "I don't even know who you are. You're not on my list." It was absurd.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Yes, that is absurd. What information did your family most need but struggle to obtain?

KAREN ROBERTSON: I think the biggest thing that's lost by investigating officers is that no update is an update, even if you are calling to say, "We haven't had anything new pop up. Do you know anything? Have you heard anything?" One of the things that I didn't mention in my submission, because I tried to keep it procedural, is that I provided thousands of pages of inbox messages that I have received since starting a support page for my sister on Facebook in 2008—thousands of messages that I have received saying this is what happened, this is how it happened and this is who was involved. Being the person that I am, I have screenshotted every single solitary message and saved them. I provided that to the police officer at the time and have not even had any feedback at all—nothing. I posted hard copies at her request and have never heard anything ever again. How could I not lose confidence? It's unfortunate, and I'm pretty confident that I wouldn't be the only person experiencing that.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: Is that why you say that there should be a dedicated family officer for these cases?

KAREN ROBERTSON: I think there needs to be a dedicated liaison, absolutely. It would take the pressure off the investigator. They could be free to do their work, then if there was a team of people that were some sort of intermediary, they could say, "Hey, just letting you know for this quarter"—or this year, this period of time; anything would be better than nothing—"this is the current update. Have you got anything for us? Is there anything you'd like to know? No? Yes? Great." Then you could move on. We're all sitting here screaming and trying to get help. Not only are we falling on deaf ears, from a police perspective, but our families question our motives. We can't get the traction that we need, and all we need is an update. We just need to know that our missing person is valid and is still being looked for. It's very difficult.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: If there could be one procedural change that would've made a difference for your sister, Kylee, what would you say that would be—if there is one?

KAREN ROBERTSON: Procedurally, I would think it would be transparency. The biggest problem that I have found throughout this time is there is a tremendous lack of transparency with where the case is at and what is needed. I've had a huge amount of conflicting information from not just the officer at time but also my sister's mum—my stepmother—who would have a conversation with me and tell me, "Oh, I spoke to the officer recently." I was shocked because I haven't heard anything for five years. I thought they dropped off the planet but, no, they're in the community. There's no transparency. There just needs to be some sort of consistent contact, however infrequent. Even if it was a yearly call to touch base to say, "Hey, this is where we're at," it would give us an opportunity to be able to help as well and say, "Well, this is what I've got for you." We can get a lot more through social media than they may have gotten by asking.

The Hon. AILEEN MacDONALD: From this inquiry, what would you like to see as the outcome—from your perspective, anyway?

KAREN ROBERTSON: From my perspective, there are three things. Firstly, transparency across the board with cases. If you are one of the family members that actually wants information—because some elect not to—and you're not a person of interest, obviously, then you can obtain transparency as far as where is the case at, is it currently being investigated or is it dormant. Is it not being investigated, but it's open? Is it closed? Where is it at? Secondly, standard operating procedures for missing persons as far as how it's investigated and the touchpoints. Lastly, consistency around not just media presence, such as Missing Persons Week et cetera, but rewards. I would ask for standard operating practices regarding how missing persons are handled, how the media is handled and rewards and, as I said, transparency.

CORRECTED

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, Mrs Robertson, for your excellent submission. I offer our condolences and our deepest sympathies on the disappearance of your sister, Kylee-Ann, and the situation you and your family are in. I also offer our gratitude to you for taking the time today to give evidence and making a very constructive submission also. It'll be something that we certainly will be considering in detail and, in due course, making findings and recommendations about. If there is any other information you wish to provide in due course, please contact the secretariat. If we have any other questions of you, which we may, we will be in contact.

(The witness withdrew.)

The Committee adjourned at 15:00.