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Use of pseudonyms: Please note that names and other identifying information including certain dates have been changed to protect the confidentiality of the people involved, including Hannah. It is important to Hannah that she is not 'defined' solely by what happened to her, as she has worked very hard to build a new life for herself.

FOREWORD

By Professor Leah Bromfield

"I don't know, I really don't know what to do. If I go to the police, it means that I'm very brave. But I don't know if I can do it without resisting the urge to kill myself."

A teenager's diaries reveal the depths of despair and horror she faced while being abused by a trusted family member – her own father. This is Hannah's story, but sadly, the trauma and devastation she describes is all too common. An estimated 1 in 4 Australian children will experience abuse or neglect during their childhood.¹ It is one of the most hidden, but significant challenges facing contemporary Australia.

The public conversation in recent years has seen increased acknowledgment of the significant amount of abuse which has occurred in Australian institutions. Also uncovered has been the often poor responses by professionals to abuse suspicions or disclosures, including counsellors, Police, child protection, teachers, judges, doctors and nurses. Monumental failures that have perpetuated rather than stopped harm and added to the trauma experienced by victims. We saw this play out in Hannah's story, when, due to inadequate support following her initial disclosure and a lacklustre response from child protection authorities, she recanted her initial disclosure and refused to cooperate with authorities for several years. It is a tragic but unfortunately very common trajectory in such cases.

Sadly, while we focused our efforts on exposing the abuse and cover-ups within institutions, child protection agencies around the country have continued to be inundated with cases of children being neglected and abused where they should feel safest – in their own homes. Analysis of contemporary Police data show less than 5% of alleged incidents of child sexual abuse were in an institutional location.² For the majority of children abused and neglected, the place they are least safe is in their homes. And for those children who experience abuse or neglect at home, their torment is endless. There is no break, and often for these kids, no sense of hope.

As we have learned through the many public testimonies of abuse survivors over recent years,³ the impacts of abuse and neglect are frequently profound and pervasive affecting survivors' health, happiness, relationships and opportunities. Impacts that for many last a lifetime. As one abuse survivor

shared with the Royal Commission: *“As a victim, I can tell you the memories, sense of guilt, shame and anger live with you every day. It destroys your faith in people, your will to achieve, to love, and one’s ability to cope with normal everyday living. It has [been] and is an enormous struggle to stay on top of life.”*⁴

Children who are abused in their family are particularly at risk of experiencing chronic abuse, where the experience of abuse and the fear for when will be the next time are an enduring feature of their childhood. We see in Hannah’s story - due to the perpetrator’s ongoing and unquestioned access to the victim - the abuse went on for years. Research tells us that the longer abuse goes on, the greater the accumulation of adverse impacts and the harder it becomes for survivors to beat the odds, to recover and to lead happy and fulfilling lives.

Survivors also tell us that compounding the hurt from the abuse and neglect is the harm caused when other adults around them turn their backs, close their eyes, or deny the abuse occurred. Reading Hannah’s experiences of attempted disclosures, and the sense of crushing worthlessness she felt when the people around her ‘failed’ to recognise her calls for help, is eye opening and something we can all learn from. It is vital that as a community we do better to prevent children from being abused, and to intervene as early as possible to protect those we suspect are being harmed.

The disclosure of abuse or neglect is an incredibly difficult journey for a child. Often, it takes some time for the child to realise that the abuse is not normal.⁵ This is particularly the case when the abuser is a parent – the very people who teach children right from wrong and have unquestioned authority over all aspects of children’s lives. For a child to disclose, they have to find the words to describe something they may barely comprehend, something that they’ve been taught to be ashamed of and to hide at all costs – the barriers are immense.⁶ To speak up against a parent is an even more impossible task. Many abuse victims will never find the words during their childhood. Researchers report disclosures occurring 20-years after the period of abuse.⁷

The moment in which a child finds the words and the courage to tell their story and to ask for help is bittersweet. On the one hand, the courage of survivors who tell their story must be recognised for the achievement it is. In Hannah’s story, I recall vividly the hope I felt when she makes a trustworthy connection at Kids Helpline. On the other hand was the disappointment that, despite how far we’ve come in raising awareness of abuse and neglect, it was - again - a child victim and not one of the many adults within her life who ultimately took that life changing action.

We must continue to do better at recognising and responding to child victims. I am in awe of every survivor who comes forward be they 9 or 90, particularly in light of the vilification and scapegoating so many survivors experience following disclosure. In particular, for people disclosing abuse which has occurred within their own family, the effect can be like a bomb detonating. Families are often torn apart, special occasions and memories forever tarnished, sides taken, hearts shattered. It is not hard to understand why many abuse victims do not ever feel safe enough to disclose.

For this reason, it's crucial when we suspect abuse or neglect that we don't wait for children to find the right words. While children often struggle to say what is happening to them, they tell us in a multitude of other ways that they need help – through their behaviour, their physical presentation, their unexplained absences, injuries and infections.⁸ Despite their fears, children are inwardly screaming out for a caring adult to pick up on these signs. In her diaries, Hannah writes of her disappointment in a trusted teacher who fails to take action despite being aware of obvious signs of the abuse. When action is finally taken, Hannah's relief is clear, as she writes: *"Even though having it reported is so scary and I have no idea what's going to happen, at least I know that Mrs Stanley does care about me."*

As a community we are failing when we leave the protection of children to children. The responsibility belongs with adults to really see children and to be willing to ask them, are they okay? To be the ones to find the words, to let children know what we've noticed. We need to give children the message that we want to hear and stand by them, no matter what. As one young person who had been removed from their family due to abuse and neglect told researchers, *"I think that even though adults are scared to talk about this stuff [with children] because it is uncomfortable, it has to be done if things are going to change."*⁹ Disappointingly, when over 1000 Australian children in schools, sports and recreation clubs around Australia were asked about their safety most children did not believe that adults knew them well enough to identify when things weren't OK.¹⁰ Of children assessing their schools for child safety characteristics, only 43% identified they had at least one adult in their school who they trusted some or all of the time. Many said they would be more likely to turn to a friend rather than an adult if they felt unsafe.

I thank Hannah for the courage, determination and generosity she has shown in sharing her story in order to help others. I hope reading this book challenges you to do more. Her childhood diaries offer a rare point of view of a child experiencing abuse and how she perceived the action - and inaction - of the adults around her. It is gut wrenching at times but this story needs to be told.

because there are countless other Hannahs out there who desperately need help. We must face this problem together. As you read this book, ask yourself, “Am I doing everything I can to be someone who sees, hears and stands for children?”

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¹ Octoman, O., Arney, F. (2018). Identifying factors associated with families with repeat involvement with child protection; Lynch, J. BetterStart Child Health and Development Research Group, University of Adelaide.

² Bromfield, L., Hirte, C., Octoman, O., Katz, I. (2017). Child Sexual Abuse in Australian Institutional Contexts: Findings from Administrative data. Sydney: Royal Commission into Institutional Response to Child Sexual Abuse.

³ Royal Commission into Institutional responses to Child Sexual Abuse. (2017). *Final Report*. Sydney.

⁴ Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. (2017, p 23). *Final Report Volume 3: Impacts*. Sydney.

⁵ Allnock, D., & Miller, P. (2013). No one noticed, no one heard: A study of disclosures of childhood abuse. London: National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children.

⁶ Esposito, C. (2015). *Child sexual abuse and disclosure: What does the research tell us?* Sydney: NSW Government Department of Family and Community Services.

⁷ Esposito, C. (2015). *Child sexual abuse and disclosure: What does the research tell us?* Sydney: NSW Government Department of Family and Community Services.; Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. (2017). *Final Report Volume 3: Impacts*. Sydney.

⁸ Allnock, D., & Miller, P. (2013). No one noticed, no one heard: A study of disclosures of childhood abuse. London: National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children.

⁹ Moore, T., McArthur, M., Roche, S., Death, J., & Tilbury, C. (2016). *Safe and sound: Exploring the safety of young people in residential care*. Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, Sydney.

¹⁰ Moore, T., McArthur, M., Heerde, J., Roche, S., & O’Leary, P. (2016). *Our safety counts: Children and young people’s perceptions of safety and institutional responses to their safety concerns*, Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, Sydney.

INTRODUCTION

In this book, I have shared my personal story, starting with my teenage diaries, to give you rare insights into the experience of child abuse and its devastating impacts.

The abuse I endured only stopped when I moved out of home in 2006, the year I turned 18. Up to this point I had been let down by several adults in my life. I received inadequate education about sexual abuse at school so was unable to find the words to tell anyone about it until I was in my mid-teens. By this time, my faith in adults had been all but shattered. The particular teacher who I tried to confide in about the abuse took years to report it, and by the time she did, I was 16 years of age and had decided that the only person I could trust was myself. I slipped through the cracks of the child protection system, who closed my file with the words “no further action” without even meeting me. The child protection report was written with such little care for detail that at one point the case worker had even gotten my name wrong and called me ‘Natalie’. I cried when I read it a few years later and wondered why nobody had even pretended to care about me.

Thankfully, I did not give up. It was through developing an anonymous relationship with a **Kids Helpline** counsellor that I started to build up the confidence to keep trying to get help. I started telling adults little bits of information to test the waters, gradually telling them a bit more, until I knew if they were ‘safe’ or not. With these adults, I yo-yo’d back and forth with my trust for them, and sometimes denied that the things I had told them were true. Eventually when I was 17, I found a sexual assault counsellor who listened to me and helped me to move out of home. If it hadn’t been for this counsellor and Kids Helpline, it is hard to say whether I would have been able to keep going.

At the age of 18, a few months after leaving home, I built up the courage to go to the police, so that my father could never hurt me again. In reading this book, you will see just how tough the legal system is for victims of crime, particularly when you have already been so badly violated as a child. Sadly, there are no real winners in this system. At an age where I should have been out having fun and enjoying new freedom, I spent six years navigating through court appearances, a trial, several appeals, and then parole hearings. Getting ‘justice’ in the legal system was of very cold comfort for me. There were many conflicting feelings of grief, denial, loss and guilt that came with the prospect of my dad being sent to jail. When the guilty verdict came through, I wasn’t celebrating. I was bawling my eyes out.

At the time of publishing this book, I am 26 years old and in the “rebuilding” phase of my life. I still have many issues that make it difficult for me to be the

person I want to be. Some of these issues can be disabling at times, despite not being obvious to people who don't know me well. I go through patches of dissociating and having flashbacks, have ongoing sleep difficulties that only respond to medication, and also experience suicidal periods. I am scared of not having the future I dream of – which has always been to have kids and a family of my own. The enormous trust issues I have developed sometimes make me feel terrified that I have no future to look forward to.

I'm going to be honest with you in saying that I wish I did not feel compelled to write this book. I firstly wish that I had never been abused. Sadly, I was. Secondly, I wish that the service response in my situation had been effective, respectful and comprehensive. Sadly, it wasn't. And more than anything, I wish that the abuse had not impacted on my life in such a soul-destroying way. Unfortunately, I cannot change what happened to me, but it is of some small consolation that I can help people to understand the difficult situation that I and countless other Australian children have faced.

I hope my book will make you aware of the importance of educating kids about abuse so that they have the words to tell an adult what is happening to them. I hope I will make you aware of the importance of listening to and helping children, instead of assuming that they are 'coping well despite what is happening at home' and can be left in an abusive situation. Please do not underestimate how heartbreaking it is to read a callously written child protection report about yourself, and to know that nobody at school or the child protection department bothered to intervene. You might not realise how crucial a role you play in helping a young person in a bad situation and in giving them hope for the future. When no one listens, many of these kids will consider killing themselves, because they already feel so worthless anyway. When you do listen, you teach them that it is possible to have a different life.

Since first publishing my story as an e-book in May 2014, I have been amazed by the response from around Australia and beyond. It has been downloaded thousands of times. Government agencies and support organisations around the country have been extremely interested in what I have to say. My story was even featured in a well respected newspaper, The Weekend Australian.

On one level, it has been hugely satisfying to see that my story has sparked so much interest. On another level, all I can see is irony. Now that I am an adult and have the skills to speak up, suddenly I have the attention I needed as a child. Suddenly, my words and actions are seen as 'powerful' and 'inspiring'. The painting I did at age nine screaming out for help, which received no attention when I needed it to, has now been featured in a national newspaper.

Even though I have a lot of attention now, I have not forgotten that less than 10 years ago, some services and government departments couldn't close my file fast enough. I think I was much more powerful and inspiring when I was turning up at school day after day, doing my best to be a nice person despite the endless abuse I was enduring. Doing my best to protect everybody but myself.

Too often in the public sphere, discussions are held and decisions made about the protection of children without truly hearing the voice of kids and young people themselves. I believe my story shows that on many levels, as a society, we are still getting it wrong so often here in Australia. There is huge potential for improvement, and I truly hope that readers of this book will feel passionate enough to push for change. I know you might find my story blunt and confronting, but the reality is that there are so many more stories that are similar to mine that you will never hear. Kids who have been abused are an extremely vulnerable population, and I daresay that most young people who have endured it, and the often damaging system responses, simply do not have the energy or skills to go and give feedback about what changes are needed. More to the point, they probably don't expect anyone to care about what they have to say.

This book is dedicated to every child who has endured awful abuse by people they thought they could trust. To every child whose child protection file has been closed with "no further action" without any investigation. To every young person who has turned to suicide out of despair at the damaging abuse they have endured. To every child who was not listened to by an adult they needed to help them. To every child who has felt completely alone, worthless and like there is not a single person they could turn to. To every child who has been tossed around in the 'support systems' following a disclosure of abuse. To any child or young person who has endured the humiliating criminal justice system.

This book is dedicated to every child and young person who deserved so much better.

Please note: If you are supporting a young person who would benefit from a shorter, more child/teen friendly version of this book, please visit www.hannahbakerbooks.com for more details about:

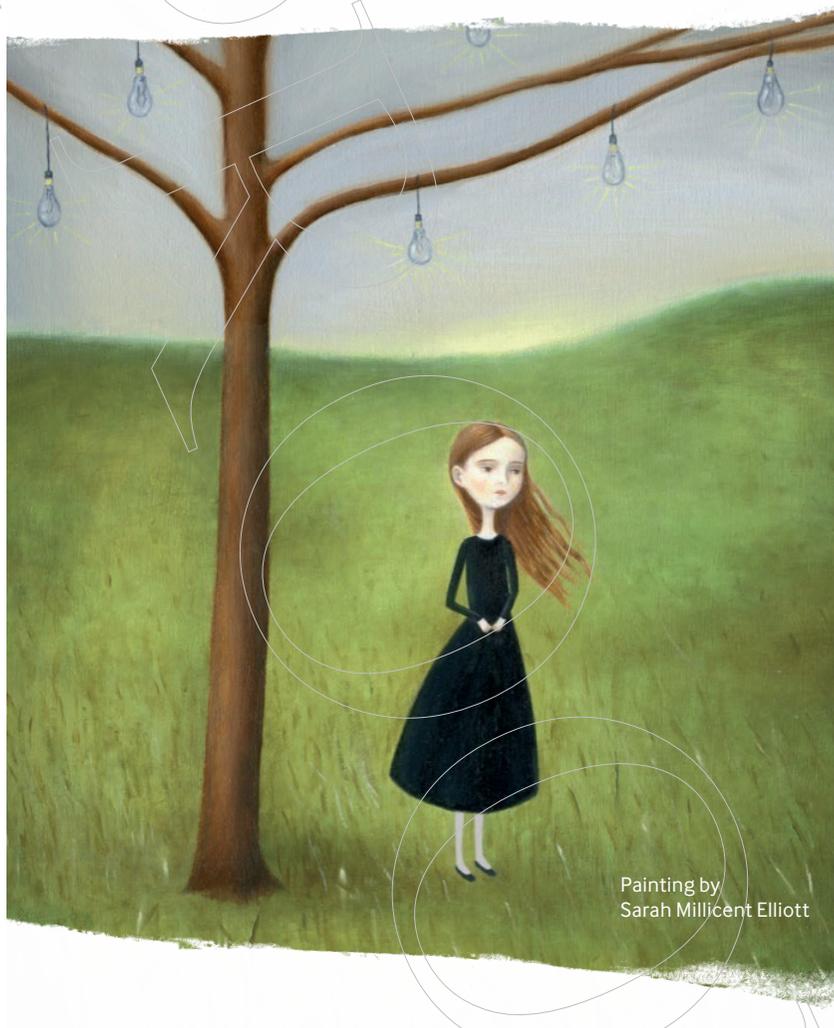
Hannah's Diaries: Surviving abuse which is suitable for teenagers and young people who are strong readers, or

Hannah's Hope: How I dealt with abuse which is suitable for kids age 10+ or teens who prefer a shorter book.

REPORT

PART ONE:

MY DIARIES (2002–2007)



Painting by
Sarah Millicent Elliott

All alone!

Whether you like it or not

Alone will be something

You'll be quite a lot

(Dr Seuss, in *Oh the Places You'll Go*)

INTRODUCTION

The picture on the front cover was painted by me in school art class when I was in Grade 4. By this time, I had been abused at home for several years. I knew that I badly wanted someone to help me, but was so ashamed that I kept it to myself.

At the age of 13, I started writing the diaries that you will see on the following pages. Writing was the only time I could be honest, and my diaries were kept very private. Nobody even knew of their existence until I was 18, when I let my Aunty Susie look at them. I truly believe that my diaries helped stop me from killing myself. I was so terrified that if I died, someone would find the diaries and think I was crazy and disgusting. More importantly though, writing gradually helped me to make sense of the situation I was in, urge myself to keep going, and build up the confidence to seek help.

You might notice in my diaries that I took a while to really 'take in' the abuse and its realities. When I was living at home I was so disconnected and numb, just coping and getting through the day. It was only when I moved out that I could really start to understand what had happened, and could see that it was going to keep impacting on me for many years to come. I started to realise that moving out and escaping the abuse was only the beginning of my recovery, not the end of it. That is when the crippling depression set in.