

Home with friends

Children taken away from their abusive families are reclaiming their childhood at a reunion next week. WILLIAM VERITY discovers the truth - both painful and inspiring - about Renwick State Ward Home.

AT FIRST GLANCE, IT MIGHT SEEM LIKE a time and place that most people would rather forget.

No-one who ended up at Renwick, or the Mittagong Farm Home for Boys as it was previously known, ended up there by choice.

Before 1976, the 500-acre property and its 16 cottages had catered for physically disabled children, later for boys who were in trouble with the law, and finally for state wards.

Leeallison Downie arrived at Renwick in 1978, at the age of seven, after her mother bashed her so badly she was in a coma for nine months.

When she woke up, she was a ward of the state.

"When I came out of the coma at the age of six, it was like being a new-born baby," Downie relates.

"I had to relearn how to talk, how to walk - you name it."

She has no memories of her life before her bashing - she only knows she grew up half Aboriginal at the back of Bourke, because government documents tell her so.

Yet this is the woman who, along with another former student, is organising a reunion for former state wards and hopes to attract more than 300 people.

To say they were tough times for Downie, and others like her, would be an understatement.

Some of the least disturbed of the children would go to the local schools -

Mittagong Public and Bowral High - but the others were taught at Toombong, the specialist school on site.

The reason most of the children ended up at Renwick was because they were classed as "uncontrollable", so classes at Toombong were never dull.

Downie was nicknamed "the two-day chuck" because every second day she would throw a tantrum.

"I would pick up desks and throw them across the room," she says.

"I didn't know why I didn't have a family like everyone else. I was angry."

She remembers how it took seven teachers to hold her down and drag her to the padded room, where she would stay until she exhausted herself with all the kicking and screaming.

"I spent the majority of my childhood in that padded room," Downie says.

One of those teachers may have been Peter Malone, who first arrived at Toombong in 1973 as a relief teacher, left, and then returned in 1978, staying 13 years.

He served seven years as principal, until the school closed down and the children moved to foster homes in 1994.

Of the 11 students in his year 10 class from 1978, at least seven are now dead from a combination of car and motorbike accidents, drug overdoses and - a major hazard for students - suicide.

"It was tough at the time, because no-one had any answers and we were left on our own to run what we could," Malone says.

"It is very hard to comprehend the difficulties faced. You could write books and books on all the incidents, all the problems and some of the good things too."

One time he was threatened with a knife; another time a student walked along with a brick and smashed 20 windows before he could be physically restrained; another time Malone opened the top drawer of his desk to find a couple of copperhead snakes inside.

He urges us to refrain from judging earlier eras by the standards of today, believing Renwick to be full of good, passionate,



Reunion organiser Leeallison Downie with an early photo from the Mittagong Farm Home for Boys. "That is my home and the only place I will ever feel whole." Picture: KEN ROBERTSON



It's more about what the kids gave me than what I gave the kids

motivated people dealing with situations that were often as impossible as they were distressing.

Indicative of this view is George Tustin, a carpenter who arrived at Renwick as a maintenance man.

Soon enough, he was maintaining teenagers more than doors and fences, and gaining more satisfaction from the human element.

He arrived in 1973, three years before the property stopped being essentially a short-term jail for delinquent boys in khakis and hobnailed boots and converted to a place of refuge for state wards.

Tustin ended up feeling a strong attachment to the students and coached them in soccer, cricket, table tennis and, through sport, how to cope with a difficult life.

Even after all these years, Tustin's voice is warm with emotion when he relates how his Renwick cricket team all walked on to the field and shook the hands of the Moss Vale team that had just inflicted a humiliating defeat.

"Why did you do that?" Tustin asked them, amazed at their sportsmanship.

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