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Good morning. My name is Vladimir Selakovic, I am ward of the state 89758 and I am fifty years of age ... It's impressive isn't it?

We're here to talk about what it's like to look, how you feel, your feelings applying for your file, receiving your life ... Well I've got to be honest with you, it never really dawned on me, throughout the term of my life – meeting different people, different friends and, occasionally, people from Homes, different wards of State - that we would eventually discuss the topic of getting your file. It never interested me one bit. I never had the slightest interest in getting that file. It just never meant anything to me.

I always believed that it was my life and I knew what I'd done, and that was as far as I wanted to go with it. It wasn't until I'd fortunately come across people, such as Frank Golding, Leonie Sheedy from CLAN [Care Leavers of Australia Network], that they helped me realize that it was an important issue. It was important because, not only amongst those pages was someone else's story, but it was a representation of *my* story. Which it wasn't. It wasn't my story. It was someone else's version of what I was doing.

As I said, I'd *lived* that life, I was there, I knew what took place, so I didn't have to read someone else's version of what transpired in my life. That was my theory at the time. Until unfortunately I started to realize that, maybe, there is just something out there that I don't quite realize is the truth. And the truth was, that I had been living a lie for many many years. I didn't fully understand what life was about, I had no inclination about what was about to happen to me, I had no idea about life at all. I was just going through, day by day.

So, fortunately for me, I said I'd come across CLAN, who helped me, and made me realize that my story was important not just to me, but important to other people and it was there to help others as well, not just myself, but to help other people realize the difficulty, the hurt and the shame that's attached to getting your file.

And it is. It really is truly a momentous event. I honestly had no thoughts, no feelings. When Leonie said to me, 'I'll help you get it', I said, 'yeah, okay, you can get it, I'll let you do all the hard work, I really don't care about it'. She filled out all the paperwork, I gave permission for all these things, and she literally went ahead and got my file for me.

When my file arrived at her doorstep, she rang me and said 'I've got your file, I've got your file!' She was excited. I wasn't, I was so blasé – thinking, 'eh, bits of paper, who cares? You know, who really cares?' Then it started. Then it started to happen. I started to realize that, guess what, there'd be something

that was out there that was, not just a piece of me, but a piece of history. Something that I was involved with, and I started getting these demons coming up going, well, when I open this, what's it going to be? What do I expect? What's going to happen to me when I open that file up?

It's not very inviting is it? Your life, put in a post bag ... they could have got, direct mail or *something* ... 'there's your childhood, wrapped up in a little envelope'! So what do you do? You go to open it and then you think, 'no I can't. I can't. I just do not want to know'. There are certain things that could be contained in there, that could actually tell me the truth about myself, and what actually happened.

And I thought that I already knew. Because this is my story, as I said. And I'd lived it – I was there. I didn't want anyone else telling me what was going on.

... so all of a sudden I was confronted with not just demons, but a past that I had buried so deep, that I'd hidden from for such a long, long time, and ran away from for such a long, long time.

I didn't want to know about myself, about my past. Didn't want to know *anything* about it.

Yet in here is, not just a childhood, memories, stories ... but a time and a place that existed, and that I was a part of.

It still scares me right now, ok. It still scares me right now. Because in these pages, it's not just a *story*, there's so much involved in this. There's so much in here - my childhood, the beginning of my *life*, is all wrapped up in a few words in some pages here. A few pages. This is my childhood. There are things in here that have been written about me that are just not right, are all wrong. And there's not too much good written about me, I wasn't a good person, let's put it that way. I'd come through a system that was really bad, and I learned how to use that system to my advantage. Even as a small child. It was one of the things we all did – to survive, it was just that survival mode.

And unfortunately I started to look at this thing and pick it up, and go through it, page and page. At first, the disappointment I experienced with obtaining this was just horrendous. I mean, I was really really disappointed. Because as far as I'm concerned, you could have put it on a coffee table [slams file down] and let anyone read it. It was worthless, useless. There was *nothing* in those pages that contained, that actually told me what I really wanted to know.

I needed to ask questions about myself. I needed answers! I needed answers like, who am I? what am I? Where am I going in life? What is happening to me? Why am I in the situation in life, right now, that I am? Those pages didn't contain those things. All they did was tell me: where I was, what had happened to me in certain periods of time, what I'd done ... And remember, I've got people telling me, what I'd done. And, it's staggering to find out that the welfare department, in that day and age and era, was allowed to get away with certain things the way they did. There are comments in that pages that are derogatory to a little boy, you're talking about a boy who was 10 years old, 12 years old, and they're

literally saying that this boy was no good. Would always grow up to be no good ... well, I'm sorry, that was part of a system that let *me* down.

The file? Look, it just doesn't ... it's helped me in a way, now. It's hard to explain. It hurt so much to realize what I'd done as a child, where I'd been. And it showed me certain truths. I was not a very nice person as a young boy. I had a chip on my shoulder, I was angry ... irregardless of what it was, I was not a very nice person. There were certain parts and aspects of my life, which I did not handle very well – the file, the demon, there [gestures] ... is just that. It is a demon. Because it has conjured up so much, of my past. It has conjured up and has brought back things that I have *not* remembered for thirty odd years.

And I'd sit there and go page by page through certain things, and all of a sudden, you'll pick up a page and, it just hits you. And you could be lost for hours. I truly mean that this one page could take you away to another world, for *hours*. And all of a sudden you'll come to, and you'll go, 'Well, I think I'd better get rid of that page', and then you go on to the next one. And the next one's – nothing, because it might be, 30% blanked out, 90% of it's blanked out, so ... all there is is a couple of sentences, something like, where you were, what you had for dinner. So you think, 'what a relief. I didn't misbehave, I didn't choke on my food, I didn't do anything wrong ...'

But it's continuous. Page after page after page, it's there to *remind* you of who you are, where you were. That there [gestures] reminded me that I was once upon a time society's reject. That's exactly what it does. And it reminded me of all the loneliness, of all the horror and shame that I carried through *all my life*. Because I was a ward of the state.

My crime was very simple. I was placed in institutions for 'care and protection', because my mother died when I was eight years old. Family of five, I was the youngest – father flipped out, so the two of us were placed in institutional care. My crime was 'care and protection'. *That* [gestures] was what I had for my crime as a child. 118 pages of absolute ... and, let me state right now, that's not the only one. I started off in children's homes, I went to youth training centres, I went to prison farms, and I graduated to Pentridge. So I had to go and get all the rest of the files to attach to the back, cos that's not the only one. That's just *one* small part of the big puzzle.

But it *has* helped me. It has helped me in such a way that ... well, this is not just some pages, and words, and paper. This is discovery. This has taught me, there are things about myself that were *there*, when I was 8 years old, 10 years old. This is a discovery, of a journey that I have gone along. Because I have discovered things about myself, I have learned things about myself that today, if it hadn't have been for certain things like this [gestures], I wouldn't have been aware of, I would never ever been aware of certain things. This is my discovery manual. It is *not* my file. This is my discovery manual. It has given me a new lease on life. I hated it, I despise it, I loathe it – and I *still* want *nothing* to do with it. And I mean I want nothing to do with it, because it's *not my story*. It's someone else's interpretation of: where I was, and what was going on. Not mine. There's not much truth in this, believe me. There really isn't much truth in this at all.

And honestly, if you were to look at it - somebody put this together, and said, 'uh, look, hang on, that's right, this bloke ordered his file'. I think it was 45 days, a period of 45 days, and once I'd applied for the file, I had to have it within 45 or 60 days. Well, after two months, and it didn't turn up, I thought, you know, it didn't worry me. Into that next week, I thought, 'it might turn up today, it might not'. The anticipation, the anxiety that I went through, knowing it was due to be there at that particular time ... The next week, when it hadn't turned up, I'd completely forgotten about it, just pushed it aside and, like, knowing that I was never going to get it. I didn't want it.

Then Leonie rang up and said, 'I've got your file'. *That* created certain issues in my life that I wasn't quite sure of, I was so indecisive and ... *scared*. And I mean scared. Because, there it is, there's my childhood. In pages. You know what it's like to read a book, your favourite book and you're so engrossed in this book that you can't put it down? This is the complete opposite. It was so shocking and so demoralizing and so dehumanizing to me and to each and every one of us that must go through this. And it really was dehumanizing. Because it's just nothing. It doesn't tell about *me*. It just tells you about the person, who was a number, and one of many, in a group. And they don't individualise you at all ... there are certain things in there, saying, about myself, how I'm hungry, or you know, cunning, conniving, spirited, all these sorts of things - I'm an 8 year old, 10 year old boy. I mean, someone please tell me how I got to that point? I don't know. Well, I do - we had to survive.

The worst part about all of that is, is the *not knowing*. When I was about to receive that, Leonie gave it to me, I was at a rally, there were a lot of people around me, I had support of people around me. Each and every one of those people put their arm around me, and said, 'look I heard you've got your file - be careful. It's a very daunting task, if you need someone to be there with you, if you want someone to talk to, give me a call.'

I was still blasé. 'No, I don't need anything, I'll be right, I'm tough. I can handle it.' Well, I wasn't tough. And I didn't handle it. And it wasn't just the first time, it wasn't the second time - I've had this for over twelve months.

And six months ago, I flashed it round to my family. Put it on the table and said, righto. Three sisters and an older brother. My sisters sat there and went through it, cos each and every one of them were wards of the state and went through homes as well. I'm the youngest of five. So when this all happened, they knew a bit more about my family's situation than I did. When they read through some of the pages in there, they were just horrified, they couldn't *believe* some of the things that were written in there, about myself, and our family.

And, you've got to understand, I had to believe *them*. They were there. They were my older sisters, there was no way known that they were going to lie to me about my mother and things that happened. They knew.

So unfortunately ... it was just one of those situations where I didn't adjust to things particularly well ...

This is a file, one of many which I'm about to get. I don't believe there is anything derogatory or anything good or bad in this about me. Yeah, look, it tells you about me stealing things, and when you look at the bulk of it, I was a thief. What did I steal? Food. That amazed me all right, I never, ever remembered stealing food – I just couldn't comprehend that, as a child, when we were sitting down to work and things – there were a number of things I was getting charged with and it was always stealing food. I just don't understand that - I must have been hungry!

Just to wrap this up, the ten minutes are just about up. To wrap this up: emotionally – it's devastating. It really really is devastating. Because the emotions that I had which were suppressed through my years of living in institutions and in institutional life, were suppressed. And I lived my life, many many years - not just a decade, I lived three and a half decades suppressing my emotional feelings, having none.

I was the original heart of stone. The rolling stone that gathers no moss, well I was the rolling stone that was a heart of stone – 'you will never break this heart of stone', that's exactly how I was throughout my life.

And within those pages, it tells me, that's exactly what I was, who I was. As a child, I wasn't a very pleasant person. I had a lot of anger, I had a lot of issues. I didn't think I had. In all honesty, I didn't think I had - I thought I was a very nice person, I thought I was well adapted in life. Unfortunately, the truth, which lies within these pages there, tells a different story.

Thank you very much, folks. You've been wonderful. I'll leave it at that. It's there [the file] for people to have a look at – if you're game enough, please have a look! Thank you.