

## **From the Cradle to the Grave: Sister Lindsey and the Blind Babies' Nursery**

**Judy McKinty and Margaret Tomkins**

### **Abstract**

*From the Cradle to the Grave: Sister Lindsey and the Blind Babies' Nursery* is about an oral history project to document a part of the history of the Royal Victorian Institute for the Blind (now Vision Australia) not previously recorded. The project documented the stories of several of the people who, as children, spent the earliest years of their lives in the Blind Babies' Nursery, under the care of Sister Elizabeth Lindsey, the first Matron. The first child admitted to the Nursery was two years old, and others arrived as babies. Under the loving care of Sister Lindsey and her Nurses, the children were given opportunities to learn and grow together, and to take their first steps towards realising their potential as independent adults. Several of the children from this group went on to achieve remarkable success in their chosen fields, and the members of this cohort have remained close friends throughout their lives – truly a 'community of memory'.

### **Background to the project**

The Royal Victorian Institute for the Blind (RVIB) Nursery was established in 1933, during the Great Depression. It was a residential nursery for children from infancy to school age. At that time, the need for funds was particularly pressing, as the RVIB was a charity, relying heavily on the public for financial support. Blind babies were a significant attraction when fundraising, and many professional photographs were taken for this purpose. Back then, the concept of 'from the cradle to the grave' underpinned the thinking when planning services. Consequently, the nursery, school, sheltered workshop, hostels and aged care and nursing homes completed the 'life cycle' range of facilities for the blind.

The Nursery's Charge Nurse was Sister Elizabeth Lindsey, the first Matron at the Nursery, who served from its beginning until 1945. She was a remarkable woman whose innovative and positive approach to the care and education of blind children was to have a lasting effect on the lives of the children in the Nursery during that time. When she died, she left behind two albums of photographs, 145 images, many of which give vivid impressions of life in the RVIB Nursery for Sister Lindsey, her nursing staff and the children in their care. These albums contain the rich source material for the Lindsey Collection.



Sister Lindsey and the first group of Nursery children,  
photo courtesy Lindsey Collection, Vision Australia Archive

The bulk of the images were taken in the period before the Second World War, and show children engaged in play and learning activities using toys and equipment specially made to help them gain confidence and learn to negotiate the world without vision. Music was an important component in the daily routine. At the end of the day in the Nursery, Sister Lindsey, a competent pianist, would gather the children around the piano and teach them songs. At two, three and four years of age, the children were taught to sing in harmony.

During her time at the Nursery, Sister Lindsey became increasingly concerned for the welfare of one of the children, a little boy who was blind and who could not walk unassisted. When it became evident that this child was to be placed in a residential home for people with physical and intellectual disabilities, she resigned from her employment with the RVIB and devoted her life to the care and welfare of this little boy. She went on to legally adopt the child, who became progressively and profoundly disabled, and later made arrangements for his life-long care as an adult.

Nearly eighty years have elapsed since the Nursery was opened. The aim of the project was to record the oral histories of a number of the surviving people featured in the Lindsey Collection. Evidence of the achievements of those who are now deceased were also included to complete the picture.



Sister Lindsey and the little boy she legally adopted, photo courtesy Lindsey Collection, Vision Australia Archive

### **The project**

The idea for an oral history project grew out of the work we were doing on a collection of historical photos of the Blind Babies' Nursery, which stood in the grounds of the former Royal Victorian Institute for the Blind (RVIB) in St. Kilda Road, Melbourne. The photos had belonged to the first Matron of the Nursery, Sister Elizabeth Lindsey, and showed children engaged in various activities in and around the Nursery and at other places during the 1930s and 40s, as well as several images taken later in their lives. The collection was contained in two albums of photos Sister Lindsey left behind when she died. She had given them to a friend – one of the people who had been a child in her care – who was also one of Margaret's dearest friends and who, in turn, entrusted the albums to Margaret before she died.

Rather than lock the albums away for safekeeping, we set to work on digital copies of the photos, enhancing their clarity and visibility for people with low vision (including Margaret). Then we set about putting names to the faces, and the result was a remarkable set of images, which were compiled into a Powerpoint file showing all the information gathered. Copies of the images were made, along with personalised Powerpoint files, and these were sent to the people in the photos and/or their families, most of whom did not know the images existed. The original albums of photos and a copy of the digital files were given to the Vision Australia archive. Throughout this stage of the project, our aim was to put the photos into the hands of the people pictured. Although she was never in the Nursery, Margaret had attended the RVIB School for the Blind with the children in the photos, many of whom had become her lifelong friends. She knew that their time in the Nursery and at the RVIB school had been a critically important part of their early lives.

As we worked on the Lindsey Collection, we discussed each person's story and their remarkable personal achievements as adults – some were pioneers and role models for blind people in the fields of music, education and technology. This led to a joint proposal in May, 2008 to the National Library of Australia to conduct an oral history project and interview some of the people who were children in the photographs, who

had been brought up in the Blind Babies' Nursery by Sister Lindsey and her staff. We wanted to record their stories and any memories of Sister Lindsey, but we also wanted to explore what it meant to them to have grown up in a community of blind or vision-impaired children, with the kind of specialist education and support that no longer exists in Victoria.

At the time we wrote the proposal, Vision Australia was in the process of closing its Burwood Education Centre, the only remaining school for blind students in Victoria, and there was vigorous debate among educators and members of the blind community about the value of specialist education and the additional challenges faced by blind children in 'mainstream' schools. We felt that the views and experiences of people who had been involved in specialist education from their earliest years would be significant contributions to this debate, particularly as the level of educational and personal achievement amongst the group was so remarkable.



Water play with a hose,  
photo courtesy Lindsey Collection, Vision Australia Archive

Our proposal was accepted and, with the support of Vision Australia, we took advantage, rather poignantly, of a farewell gathering at the old RVIB premises at 557 St. Kilda Road, Melbourne, which had been sold earlier that year. The site is listed on the Victorian Heritage Register as being 'historically important for its pioneering role in the welfare of the blind, being the first institution of its type in Australia'.<sup>1</sup> Its sale marked the end of a significant era in the history of the RVIB and in the education and welfare of blind citizens in Victoria.

We decided to use the farewell as an opportunity to record interviews with several of the people who had come from interstate or regional Victoria for the occasion. Some of these interviews were conducted in an inner-city motel where some of the travellers were staying, on the evening of the farewell gathering, before they flew home the next day. We had booked a room for this purpose and we were able to set up the recording equipment in the lounge area and bring people in for each interview. Luck played a part, too, as we were able to interview the former partner of one of the group (now deceased), who happened to be passing through Melbourne the following day on other business. We also travelled to people's homes in Melbourne and regional Victoria during the following weeks to record their stories.

We managed to interview seven people who had been directly involved with the Blind Babies' Nursery or the RVIB School for the Blind, including those who had been children there, a teacher and a nurse who worked with Sister Lindsey. We also interviewed family members who were able to give us their perspectives on the influence of those early years on the lives of the people they knew as adults.

### **Opportunities and issues**

From the outset, we had the advantage of Margaret's close friendship with some of the people we interviewed, and this helped enormously when planning and carrying out the interviews. Apart from making contact with people and gaining their permission for participation she shared common experiences with them, including attending the RVIB School for the Blind and being evacuated to Olinda when the site was taken over by US forces during the Second World War. Her knowledge of people, events and issues in education for the blind community was invaluable and added insight and depth to the project.

We had a laptop computer with images from the Lindsey Collection, and this proved to be an invaluable *aide-memoir* when we were interviewing sighted people who had been associated with the RVIB Nursery, although this made it a longer session as the images were usually shown before the interview commenced, and there was discussion about the photos. Frustratingly, in one case, the person talked quite openly about

Sister Lindsey while looking at the images, but simply gave a knowing look during the interview and refused to say what she had previously told us, even though it was a fairly mild observation. During another interview, the unexpected presence of very close and loving relatives had an effect on what was said. It was this interview that we were hoping would give us a really clear picture of Sister Lindsey and her motivation. While it did, to some extent, there was much left unsaid.

Five of the people we interviewed were blind or vision-impaired, and we were careful to make sure they fully understood the conditions of access and permission forms they were signing. Each section was read out and explained fully before moving on and, at the appropriate places, a record of where the ticks or crosses were placed was made. We recorded the permissions process at the end of each of these interviews, so there would be an aural record of agreement in addition to the usual permission forms.

Although we were lucky to have had a once-only window of opportunity with the farewell gathering, the interviews that evening came at the end of a long and tiring day, and we were all feeling a little flat, given the nature of the proceedings. The interview about the early years went well, but it was so late in the evening that we weren't able to take extra time to fully explore the activities and achievements of the people in their later lives.

The oral historian's curse where really interesting or valuable information comes along after the recorder has been turned off also happened during this project. The first person we interviewed was the first boy to be enrolled in the Nursery, at the age of two. The interview went well – he has a remarkable memory – and we were sitting down having a cup of tea afterwards when he casually told us that he had been called in to re-establish radio contact with Darwin after Cyclone Tracy. The equipment had been carefully packed up and the moment had passed – what a pity!

### **Information and outcomes**

From the outset, we felt that it was important that these stories of achievement by blind people be recorded and preserved, and made available to the wider community. This is the first time this group of people has been interviewed about their early years, and we believe this to be a highly significant project, particularly in the light of changes to the way blind children are educated in Victoria.

In the Nursery and at the RVIB school, the children were given every chance to develop their own skills and abilities, and these early opportunities later led to lifelong interests, academic achievements and successful careers for a significant number of them. For instance, wiring electric lights inside a large dolls' house in the grounds of the RVIB school led to a career in electronics and radio, and an early interest in woodwork led to one totally blind man building his own house and furniture. The blind teachers at the school were inspirational, acting as role models and mentors, and offering encouragement or a push in the right direction when needed.



The children playing in a boat rocker,  
photo courtesy Lindsey Collection, Vision Australia Archive

As adults, almost all of the group gained employment, and several went on to be successful in their chosen fields, which included teaching, music, photography, braille production and radio technology. One person researched and built a very complex and precise musical instrument called a Glass Harmonica, which he played in many public performances in Australia and overseas, and another became a technician for the ABC and helped to establish 3RPH (Radio for the Print Handicapped) and another, who entered the Nursery the year before Sister Lindsey left, now broadcasts a twice-weekly Bluegrass Music show over the internet from his home in regional Victoria.

The people in this group were pioneers in the area of education for the blind, and as they graduated and took their places in the work force they became strong advocates and lobbyists in various areas of society, including the employment of blind teachers by the Victorian Education Department. Three of the children in the group later graduated from the University of Melbourne with a Bachelor of Music. Other tertiary qualifications gained were in the areas of Arts, Law and Social Work.

Most people interviewed were in favour of specialist education, rather than 'mainstreaming', as a choice for blind children. Some gave as their reasons their personal experiences of the social and practical difficulties faced by blind children attending sighted schools; others looked back on what had been achieved through their early years in specialist education within a community of their peers.

Throughout the interviews, there was a common thread relating to the closeness of the bonds that were created between the people in the RVIB Nursery and the friendship network that was subsequently established, much of which still remains today. Easy access to communications technology such as email and Skype has made it possible for them to contact each other quickly and cheaply, despite several people living interstate, and support is as near as the telephone.

The interviews are now in the Oral History Collection of the National Library of Australia, together with a copy of the digital image files. The Lindsey Collection is now housed in Vision Australia's archive.



Having a teddy bears' picnic,  
photo courtesy Lindsey Collection, Vision Australia Archive

## Conclusion

The children who lived in the RVIB Nursery gained a valuable foundation during their formative years in the unique environment Sister Lindsey created for their care and education. Her outstanding contribution is reflected in these people who, as adults, embrace life with confidence and demonstrate the ability of blind citizens to contribute to society.

During the past decade, Blind Citizens Australia has recorded that up to 70% of blind people of working age are unemployed,<sup>2</sup> at a time when the level of education has improved and technology is enabling the blind to carry out tasks that were not possible in the past. The reasons are complex, and it may be helpful to gain some understanding from the experiences of those who have travelled the path.

Educational theory and practice has also changed over the years, and normalisation is now the main concept underpinning education for the disabled. This change has both positive and negative components. Social isolation is very real for blind people trying to communicate in an increasingly visual world. In this context, the experiences of a group of blind people for whom life-long relationships, common memories and a shared history have been a source of inspiration and pride are particularly significant. Above all, it is important to acknowledge the contribution and achievements that are reflected in the lives of the first group of children to attend the RVIB Nursery.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Victorian Heritage Register Online  
Item Category: Education: *Deaf, Dumb & Blind Institute*  
<<http://www.doi.vic.gov.au/doi/hvoir.nsf>> viewed 10 April, 2008

<sup>2</sup> Lynne Davis, 'Editorial', *Blind Citizens News*, February 2000, p.5

## Notes on contributors

**Judy McKinty** is a member of the OHAA (Victorian branch), an independent children's play researcher and cultural heritage interpreter based in Melbourne. She has been involved in several oral history projects for the National Library of Australia, the University of Melbourne and Museum Victoria, including *Childhood, Tradition and Change*, a national survey of children's play (2007-2010) and *Aboriginal Children's Play*, a project recording some of the childhood play experiences of Aboriginal people living in Victoria (1990s and 2007-2008).

**Margaret Tomkins** is a member of Blind Citizens Australia and former student of the RVIB School for the Blind. In 1990 Margaret was awarded a Public Service Medal for her work as a Social Worker in Mental Health, Victorian Department of Health. The establishment of housing, rehabilitation and support for people leaving psychiatric hospitals was a major feature of her work. Since her retirement she has been an advocate for blind and vision-impaired people and was until November 2011 Honorary Treasurer of the Blind Citizens Australia Computer Users Group. In June 2012 she was awarded the Order of Australia medal for service to the community.