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Truth of child sexual abuse rises to surface in film Don't Tell

By **AMANDA GEARING**

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The story of the Queensland girl whose fight for justice sparked a revolution in child protection in Australia — and brought down a governor-general — will be released in cinemas next week.

Don't Tell is based on the book by Stephen Roche, the lawyer who represented Lyndal, a 22-year-old who brought action in 2001 against the Anglican Church over sexual assaults at the prestigious Toowoomba Preparatory School. Lyndal had been a 12-year-old boarder at the time of the abuse in 1990.

It was a landmark case, securing a record \$815,000 in damages and exposing a cover-up by the Anglican Church that was found to have involved the alleged abuse of at least 20 girls by predatory housemaster Kevin Guy. The scandal eventually ensnared the then governor-general, Peter Hollingworth, who had been the Anglican archbishop of Brisbane at the time of the abuse.

It was the Toowoomba case that first prompted calls for a royal commission into child sex abuse in institutions, finally ordered by Julia Gillard as prime minister in 2012.

It has been a long journey for Lyndal from finding the strength to launch action as a 22-year-old to the opening of the film next Thursday. At the time of the action in 2001 she had little hope of securing justice.

She is played in the film by Sara West, whose performance brilliantly conveys the inner turmoil of a young woman who has experienced terrible childhood trauma and whose only hope for recovery from deteriorating psychological health is to seek justice.

For Lyndal, the key to escape from her torment lay in being heard and being believed.

The first complaint about Guy was made to police in November 1990. A student reported being abused by Guy and told detectives she thought another girl, Lyndal, had also been molested by the housemaster.

Police charged Guy with indecent dealing offences and, the following month, charged him with a second set of offences in relation to Lyndal.

Guy offered his resignation but the school council rejected it and placed him on paid leave.

Just before his court appearance on December 18, 1990, Guy drove to an isolated national park and killed himself, closing down the police investigation.

School officials and church leaders at the centre of the scandal denied the abuse for the next 11 years. As viewers of *Don't Tell* will soon see, they capitulated dramatically on the first day of Lyndal's civil trial in 2001 and admitted the abuse took place.

"I knew I was telling the truth and because I was telling the truth I knew it was going to be all right," she told *Inquirer* by email this week. "That gave me the strength to carry on with the case and see it through to the end."

It is believed the admission was a defence tactic to prevent the release of a suicide note written by Guy becoming public. However, the two-page note emerged after the trial, leaked to this reporter. In it, Guy admits he "loved so many girls". He names 19 girls at Toowoomba Preparatory School, including Lyndal. The first girl to report Guy to police is not listed but brings the count to at least 20 children.

Back in 1990, after the complaints and death of Guy, a special meeting of the school council was held at the home of the regional bishop, Adrian Charles.

Minutes of the meeting show that despite police and a doctor backing the claims of the former students, lawyers for the school and Brisbane diocese (in which Toowoomba was located) advised that the headmaster not apologise or provide counselling for fear of admitting guilt and voiding the school's insurance policy.

Hollingworth, the diocese's archbishop at the time, wrote directly to Lyndal's parents and parents of the other children listed on the suicide note, assuring them he was monitoring the matter "in close consultation with the headmaster (Robert Brewster), Dr Coman, the chairman of the school council and the bishop for the western region Bishop Charles".

At the time, the families were told there was no indication their children had been abused.

But the families became irate when the headmaster — in a separate letter to them — referred to Guy's suicide as a "tragic death", adding that the housemaster's "love and great effort for the school will be sadly missed".

The family of the two abused girls sought counselling for their daughters from local psychologist Joy Conolly, who informed the school council in a letter of their responsibility to care for the victims. When help was refused, Conolly phoned Hollingworth directly to say the families and children needed pastoral support.

The 2001 trial, held in Toowoomba Supreme Court, later heard the new governor-general had, as archbishop, rebuffed Conolly's pleas, saying he was "very tired, needed a holiday and there was nothing he could do".

As the trial progressed, coverage of the case was splashed across Australia's media. Lyndal's high-profile win set an important legal precedent that institutions could be held liable for child sexual abuse if the abuse was within the scope of an employee's duties.

The jury awarded damages of \$815,000, consisting of \$415,000 in compensation and another \$400,000 in exemplary damages to punish the diocese for its poor treatment of Lyndal after it knew of the abuse.

Regarding the suicide note, it emerged that police had found the note with Guy's body and had given it to school and church officials, including Hollingworth, in 1990.

After the trial and the flood of disclosures in the media, the newly anointed archbishop of Brisbane, Phillip Aspinall, called his own inquiry in 2002 into the diocese's handling of abuse complaints in 2002.

It fuelled the public scandal, and Hollingworth — by then ensconced in Yarralumla — moved to defend himself on ABC TV's *Australian Story*. But when he blamed a 14-year-old girl in NSW in another case of seducing a priest, he lost public confidence.

The Brisbane inquiry reported in 2003, making the shocking finding that, as archbishop, Hollingworth had allowed priest John Elliot — who admitted in 1993 to abusing multiple children in the mid-1970s — to remain in charge of the Dalby parish in southeast Queensland.

Hollingworth told the Brisbane inquiry he had no reason to believe Elliot's previous reported abuse "was anything other than a single, isolated and distant occurrence", despite having commissioned a psychiatrist's report on the priest that concluded he remained a risk to children.

The inquiry tabled a 1993 letter from Hollingworth to Elliot, after receiving the psychiatrist's report, saying: "The major difficulty is that in not taking disciplinary - action I and the church could subsequently be charged with culpability."

The Brisbane inquiry found his decision "untenable".

Hollingworth resigned as governor-general but claimed his resignation was forced by "misplaced and unwarranted allegations".

A decade later, in the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, some of these cases were eventually explored.

In a report released this year, the royal commission criticised Hollingworth over his handling of complaints of abuse by Elliot and another offender in the diocese during his time as archbishop.

After the 2001 trial, the court suppressed the transcript of Lyndal's case. It would have remained virtually unknown but for another girl who asked for Roche's legal help after being abused by a different offender at the same school.

“The next ‘Lyndal’ came into my office 10 years later and I thought, ‘My god, nothing’s changed. What can I do?’” Roche said this week.

That case later settled out of court, but it was enough to prompt Roche to quit his law firm in 2012 and make a movie about Lyndal’s case, based on his book *Don’t Tell*, which he had published about Lyndal’s experience.

“I’ve always had a love of movies and I thought, ‘How hard can it be to make a movie?’ ” he said.

Roche soon found out. Screen-funding bodies refused finance for a movie about child sexual abuse. Undaunted, Roche found a producer for the compelling courtroom drama and largely funded the production himself.

A-list actors including Rachel Griffith and Jack Thompson were signed up along with Jacqueline McKenzie, Gyton Grantley, Susie Porter and Martin Sacks.

“They all met Lyndal on the set early on in the production. They found her incredibly inspiring and have produced an amazing Australia feature film,” producer Scott Corfield said.

Now in her late 30s, Lyndal has appeared in public at premieres of the movie in Australia and the US and is gaining strength from the audience feedback she is receiving.

Her courage in making herself visible has been honoured by audiences at the Gold Coast late last year and at Newport Beach Film Festival in the US last month. Both audiences gave her standing ovations. At Newport the movie won the audience award for best film.

Lyndal believes the film will give other survivors courage and hope. “This is the right time for me to step out from the shadows and to encourage other survivors to come forward and seek justice,” she told Inquirer this week.

“It’s an important step in their path toward healing, so if I can show someone else that it is possible to move forward, that’s a good thing.”

Don’t Tell opens across Australia next Thursday.

[David Stratton reviews the film today in Review.](#)

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