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Case File Number…………..?????

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Introduction

When you enter the out of home care system,your whole world is turned upside down. You are separated from your family and placed with either relatives, in foster homes with people you do not know or, supposedly as a last resort, in residential facilities. Known in Australia by the young people that experience it as 'resi care', these are group homes, run by placement agencies, where young people are cared for by a rotating shift of community support workers.

My first care was when I was three months old. From there I would enter care, exit care, enter, exit and then finally at the age of sixteen was placed on an order which kept me in the out-of-home care system until my 18th birthday. My experience is common to many. Moved around a string of placements, with new schools, areas, agencies, workers, etc. to get to know, and for them to get to know me. In a particularly chaotic time, I had eight placements in a space of eighteen months, including a psychiatric facility as no other housing was available for me. As I was not there for mental health treatment, but because I had nowhere to live, I was put in isolation away from the facility's patients until a suitable placement became available a week later. It was a pretty scary and confronting situation for a young person experiencing a housing crisis to be in.

When you enter the care system you also lose your identity. You become a case file, a statistic, someone's job and means of income. You are now a number on top of a file placed on a stack of other files. You are remembered, not by the name on your birth certificate, but by the

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number on top of your file and are known by what is contained in those files.

The first time I found out about my records—and realised that they actually kept records about young people in care—was when my carer had left me alone in the house for a few hours and for some unknown reason—let's call it teenagers curiosity—I decided to enter my carer's room and look around. In a trunk at the end of her bed, I found a pile of notes and paperwork.

All of these documents had one thing in common…me.

Every document was about me and my day-to-day activities—what I was wearing, what I did during the day and even, but not limited to, what time I showered, ate and went to bed.

I scattered all the papers around the living room, lit a cigarette (I was too angry to care at this point that I was smoking inside because I felt like my privacy had been invaded) and waited for my carer to come home. When she did, I confronted her and demanded to know what all of this meant and why she was keeping these notes about me. It seems silly now looking back that I wasn't aware at the time that they kept these kinds of records but no one had ever informed me of this fact.

This incident opened my eyes to a whole new part of the care system and I asked myself the first important question I would have about the care system—'Why hasn't anyone told me about this.' Later on this question would expand to 'what do they say about me in these records', 'where is my input into my records' and 'what are my rights to these records'.

These questions would keep growing and expanding as I got older, my curiosity grew as my knowledge of the care system expanded.

Care experience advocacy

At the age of seventeen, I participated in a workshop about young people in care and their legal rights. This was the first time I found out that we could have a voice, and we could make changes happen. From there I trained to become a young consultant with the CREATE Foundation—the peak body advocating for kids in care (ages zero to twenty-six) here in Australia.

As a CREATE young consultant, I started assisting in training new child protection and social workers. I talked with them about what it was like to be a young person in care and discussed what they could do to help improve care experiences—particularly the little things and acts of kindness that can make such a difference. I gave educational presentations to students still in universities who were considering a social work or other career connected to the care system.

I was also involved with speaking to the media—newspapers, radio 'stations and TV. I told them my story while also discussing with them the current statistics about care experiences and outcomes. My hope was to highlight the problems with the out-of-home care system, and in particular to fight the stigma attached to those with care experiences either still in the system or after they have exited or 'aged out'. I also held meetings, attended round tables and gave presentations to politicians and policy-makers (both at a state and federal level) about my journey and the need for systems change going forward. I advocated for the rights of those who have left care, are still in care and those yet to enter the system. I was determined to be a voice for those who were unable to use theirs and to show others that they too could find their own voice and speak up.

I became aware through this advocacy work that the problems with the care system were similar to those that previous generations of care-experienced advocates had highlighted. Also, like them, I was advocating for change so that no one entering care would have to deal with the same problems that we had experienced.

A few years after leaving the care system I made the decision to access my child protection records. I assumed at first that this would be an easy task, after all these were the records of my life but easy would be the opposite of my experience.

I faced my first obstacle straight away, HOW? How do I access my records and where do I look? Eventually, I discovered that I needed to lodge a freedom of information (FOI) request with the responsible government department, then the Department of Human Services but now the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing.

Once the 'where' was answered I then had to find out the 'HOW' part. Now you would think once I had the answers to both of these the rest would be easier…WRONG! It only got harder and more confusing. I filled in the application form as best as I could with the little information I had. I'll summarise the exchange

> FOI: "Please state which records you wish to apply for"
> Me: "My child protection records"
> FOI: "More information needed"
> Me: "Rhiannon Cole born **/**/****, child protection records from ****-****'"
> FOI: "Be more specific"

In the end after going back and forth for months and after much research on my part I realised that I needed to learn and use the system jargon to specify the particular types of documents that might be included in my records.

> Me: "I, Rhiannon Cole, born **/**/**** would like to access any CRISS note, court reports, incident reports, care team meeting notes, educational plans, records of visits (ect.…) from ****-****'"

Finally, I got somewhere, I was sent SOME of my records, much of it blacked out. There were pages and pages of nothing but tiny numbers on the corner which were supposed to tell me why this information was being denied to me. It was just a shame I had no clue as to what they represented.

I've since applied for my records on multiple occasions, seeking not just my child protection records held by the department, but also my placement records from the two agencies that I knew about. As these are community service organisations, which don't come under government FOI legislation, I applied to them directly—with very different outcomes. One of them was very helpful and supportive all the way through the process providing my records with minimal redactions. The other just gave me the run around.

Each time I have applied for my records I have gained extra pieces of information previously denied to me. Here is where through my advocacy work, my knowledge of the recordkeeping in the care system was growing so I learnt what to ask for. The last time I applied for my records I tried to access the ones from when I was under five. I was asked to detail what agencies I was under and provide details regarding my placements. These are questions I could not answer and were some of the answers I was trying to seek which is why I was applying for my file in the first place.

But, despite what I have managed to receive, I am still missing so many parts leaving many unanswered questions. To this day, I still do not know anything about my time in care from my younger years.

It raised a question for me on how someone who wasn't as lucky as me to have access to the knowledge I've gained in my advocacy work would go about accessing their records as they wouldn't know what to ask for. We are asked to be 'more specific' and give detailed information on records we have never seen and have no real knowledge of what they contain.

Then there are those who were in care when they were very young. How can they provide 'specific' information regarding their time in care when they may not have been old enough to even form those memories?

Recordkeeping research

With my interest in care records, as I came to the end of my time at CREATE I was introduced to recordkeeping researchers at Monash University. They were planning for the Setting the Record Straight for the Rights of the Child Summit in May 2017, to bring together the transdisciplinary community keen to address the systemic and enduring problems with records and recordkeeping that decades of major inquiries had highlighted, and also about to embark on the Australian Research

Council Funded Rights in Records by Design project (Evans, 2017; Rolan et al., 2018).

Fellow advocate, Isla Swanton and I, initially worked with Nina Lewis on the Imagined Archive components of the Summit (Lewis, 2017). As well as helping Nina to develop artworks reflecting on identity, evidence and memory issues for the pop-up exhibition at the event, we also designed and presented the pivotal 'Missing Pieces' session on day one. For this, we developed an interactive exercise for participants to emphasise connections between records and identity, with the aim of getting them to think about care files not just as 'their records' but as part of our lives (More details about the Summit and outcomes are available at https://rights-records.it.monash.edu/summit/).

I then started to work with Joanne Evans and Greg Rolan on the Rights in Records by Design Project. Their aim was to work with care experienced advocates to co-design a prototype of the lifelong living archives component of the National Framework for Recordkeeping for Childhood Out-of-Home Care that had come out of the Summit. My role as a (paid) research assistant was to help design a series of co-design workshops in which we could explore and unpack key recordkeeping concerns and then develop some kind of digital solution.

As the Summit had again highlighted, out-of-home care records, what is contained in them, and access to them has continued to be a consistent issue no matter the era spent in the care system. Case notes, incident reports, court reports, case plans, birth certificates, school records, family letters, photographs, etc. are so important to anyone who has resided in the out-of-home care system. They document (often not very well) what happened in our childhood, and we need access to them to make sense of who we are when we need to. The goal was to create a better system for people in care and care leavers to have more and easier access to their records.

Using my CREATE experience, I helped Joanne and Greg understand how they could create a welcoming and safe environment for those with care experiences interested in participating in the workshops. I helped them to make the research ethics explanatory statement and consent forms more 'care experienced person friendly' and got them to think about how they might tone down their use of academic jargon. I also helped to lay the foundation for what became known as our Trajectory document, which captured the events and transitions which a child or young person in care might experience and the kinds of records associated with them. This became the backbone for our workshop discussions.

We were able to bring together a small co-design/co-research team that ended up working together over two years to develop MySSy—a research prototype of a personal recordkeeping system for a care experienced child, young person or adult to have access and control over their distributed care records network. We began in the initial workshops discussing our records experiences—how we sometimes saw them being created, how we at times felt their impact on our care experience, how we had found it very difficult to find out how to access them, and then if we made it through all the processes we then had to deal with unexplained and unnecessary redactions. We then discussed how an online system could make finding out what records existed about your time in care and where they were held easier, and then the ways in which we would like to control and manage them within our own system. There was lots of learning and laughing along the way, as we deep dived together into care experiences, care records, digital systems infrastructures and digital design considerations (Rolan et al., 2019; Rolan *et al.*, 2020).

There is not the space in this short reflection to go into details about all of MySSy's functionality (see https://rirservermonash.gitlab.io/landing/) and other outcomes from the co-design workshops, so what I want to reflect on here are the features we developed for accessing records. We have modelled how rights to the proactive disclosure of records discussed at the Summit might be realised in a digital system. The idea is that when a Care experienced person activates MySSy, they can immediately see which organisations hold records about their time in Care.

We discussed in our co-design workshops how finding out about, and then accessing records, can be an emotional and triggering experience and canvassed a range of different approaches and preferences—how some might want to have a complete list of their records from the start, while others might want to have controls over which sites and records they are shown. So we developed interfaces and functionality that would enable a Care experienced person to have control—for example allowing for sites holding records to be 'hidden' that may have unpleasant and distressing associations and memories. These can then be reactivated when/if/as needed. The system then has functionality for registering these records into MySSy—a play on My Space—where your own notes and corrections can be added.

Joanne and Greg discussed with us the back-end implications of such a system and how it points to the need for the Care sector to develop and invest in the integration mechanisms—technical interoperability standards and APIs—along with the co-production and sharing practices and cultures that would be needed for implementation. As this is research, we could imagine what might be possible so that it can be used as a design provocation for further R&D and implementation to make rights-based participatory recordkeeping systems a reality.

Conclusion

The creation of MySSy also led me into assisting in writing my first research paper (Rolan, et al., 2019), which was awarded an Australian

Society of Archivist's Mander Jones award in 2019. This was a great achievement for me because as a young person in care who wasn't given the chance to finish any form of formal education I never thought it would be possible to achieve something like this in my life.

Through everything I've done, and will continue to do, my aim has been about educating workers, challenging stigma, giving those with a care experience a voice, changing policy and making sure that people who are or have been in care are seen as more than just a case file number to be filed away and forgotten about.

With my advocacy work I have reclaimed my life, my story and my identity.

No longer am I just a case file number among many…. I am Rhiannon Abeling.

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Biography

Rhiannon Abeling is an autistic thirty-two year old female from Melbourne Australia. She has battled a series of mental and physical disabilities since her mid-teens. She is now a mother to seven amazing children.

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