

*BOARDING SCHOOL SURVIVORS – SUPPORT NEWSLETTER*

*June 2021*

Greetings to all and a very warm welcome to old friends and to all the new supporters who have recently joined our mailing list. We have had a considerable increase in letters recently and feel that some of them are due to Covid causing real and added isolation for those who already feel isolated, and those living on their own. While, as former boarders, many have managed lockdown stoically and very well with the learned-resilience from school days, it has also brought back feelings of great sadness and loneliness for others.

Many new people have written to say that they have been pleased to find us because they had no idea a group for former boarders existed, and that they have always felt quite alone with the aftermath of their boarding years. This is a constant, recurring theme and one that, when we read the letters, can take us back... however many times we have visited and processed it... to that isolation of school.

As children we all had to isolate ourselves in order to survive that institutional life away from home, and with those patterns embedded in us in our formative years, we unknowingly take them into adulthood. This can cause both bewilderment and hurt to ourselves and to those near to us. After feeling alone and 'different' for many years, it can be, and is for many, a great relief to find that there are hundreds of others who feel the same as you do. They do not judge you, push you away or bully you, or need explanations about how you feel or react. As a supporter recently and very succinctly said: "They just 'get' where you are at".

We send a lot of information to all new supporters so they also learn for the first time of all the work that has taken place over the years by Nick Duffell, Joy Schaverein, Thurstine Basset and many others, on boarding issues and recovery. We hope you can all feel you are part of this group of people... The Annual Conference is a great place to experience that and meet others and we are waiting to see what Covid does next so we can make plans for that to happen once more. We will look at November, but it seems unlikely: and, if so, we will move to next Spring.

We hope that you are all well and send you our warm good wishes at the start of what we hope will be a really good summer for everyone...

## **HOME NEWS**

### **Greetings to Mike Dickins – a new Director!**

The Directors of BSS Support are very pleased to announce that we have a new Director to join us in our work. Mike was a boarder from the age of 7, leaving school in 1990 after nearly 11 years of boarding. He has been a supporter since attending a meeting in London to discuss Advocacy for former boarders, in 2006. Since then he has always shown great interest and been involved in all we do. He is one of the contributors to our recently published book, *Men's Accounts of Boarding School: Sent Away*. He is strongly opposed to boarding and thinks that boarding school is "a terrible thing to give a child". Mike has a busy life as a full time teacher and has a young family. We are delighted he can join us and bring onboard his positive energy!

### **Book launch**

*Men's Accounts of Boarding School: Sent Away* book launch was held on Wednesday May 12 at 7pm.

The event was held on Zoom and hosted by the OPUS organisation. Olya Khaleelee introduced the OPUS organisation, which promotes the understanding of society. We are hugely grateful for their generosity in sponsoring this launch and allowing us access to their resources and network. The Zoom call was expertly managed by Carlos Remotti-Breton, who co-ordinated all the speakers and the 200 strong audience, including their chats.

The event was chaired by long term supporter, former Director and contributor to the book, Thurstine Bassett. The event went very smoothly with a varied and interesting set of speakers. Many thanks to Thurstine for bringing the evening together.

The editors of the book, Margaret Laughton, Allison Paech-Ujejski and Andrew Patterson told the story of the inception of the book and the stages in its progress to publication.

Nick Duffell made opening remarks by saying: "It is an awful book", meaning that the stories within it of the men who experienced boarding school are difficult to read. Joy Schaverien also spoke, saying the stories in the book are, sadly, all too familiar and that the pain the men experienced was clear to see. Darrel Hunnybell and Marcus Gottlieb also gave us their insights as experienced therapists in the field of BSS and the process of recovery. Contributors Ardhan, Anupam, Khalid

and Gordon and his father Paul all made personal contributions on the evening. All the participants and attendees on the evening helped make the publication of the book an event that will be remembered. Many thanks to all involved.

As we said on that evening, we would like everyone who wants to read the book to have access to it. We have a few complimentary copies, or at much reduced cost, and if you would like one of these please write to:

[margaret.laughton@bss-support.org.uk](mailto:margaret.laughton@bss-support.org.uk).

### **Our website**

We have been working on updating the website to make it more user-friendly and to make the content more easily accessible.

We are creating a new "Services" page with a clear description of what we do; a page of FAQs for quick answers; and proper privacy and cookie policies. There will be a separate "News" section and the large "Resources" section will be re-organised to be more digestible. The "Events" section will be upgraded in a similar fashion.

This isn't a major revamp, but something of a tidy-up since the site was launched two years ago. It will be updated in the coming weeks, so keep an eye out at: <http://bss-support.org.uk>.

All [feedback or comments](#) will be gratefully received – we hope you like it!

### **OVERSEAS CHILDREN SENT TO UK BOARDING SCHOOLS**

We have for the past few years been very, and increasingly, concerned about the number of overseas students who are sent to boarding schools in the UK. This now makes up over 40% of their total numbers, of which 44% come from China and Hong Kong.

We know from a teacher of 'English as a Foreign Language'... in a Public School with a Prep annexe... that she had 150 pupils in her care starting aged 8 whose knowledge of English was inadequate for school purposes. We find this very concerning and feel for those children who not only lose their homes and culture but also their natural means of communication. How can they possibly really explain sadness, loss and homesickness?

We have recently had contact from someone who was sent to England at the age of 11 from the Far East and has kindly written the following article of her experiences:

## School was a very, very long way from home

*I realise now that there are a range of differences and experiences within the boarding world. It saddens me to hear that more children are being sent from overseas, as I thought the number would go down due to the reduction of military postings.*

*My personal view is that we are a sub-group with another additional layer of trauma. This trauma is due to not only being sent away from family, friends, and pets but from all that is familiar in your home country.*

*I have watched many of the boarding videos and don't relate to any of them. I travelled back and forth across the world without parents and arrived at school on my own or with my older sister. No parents visited for Sundays, exeats, speech days, open days, plays, parents' evenings and so on. Home was impossible to get to and so you had to cut yourself off from it entirely, to survive.*

*We all needed to find something familiar at school to help us survive and for us, cliques formed with other overseas boarders. I was with those from other Far East countries and even though none were from my home country we had something in common. There were very few boarders from overseas in my school, so I always felt that extra level of abandonment.*

*On my first night I told the dorm girls where I was from and it was met with total silence. That was heart-breaking as I realised no one would care about my background: I was totally alone in every sense.*

*I arrived aged 11 having never been cold, having no idea what or where anything in England was, with no knowledge of 'Englishness' or of the culture, despite being white and speaking English. England was a totally foreign country and one I didn't feel safe or comfortable in. All calls home were extremely hard due to time-lag, cost and interference; and I was also told not to call as it was too expensive.*

*I had no family in England but my parents had a friend I didn't know but who was expected to be my Guardian and, in desperation, my only place to go to for weekends or Sundays, if I didn't get an invitation from one of the girls. Sport, school subjects, unfamiliar shops, products and food, were all new. There was a total dissection from my home life.*

*In the holidays I had to re-adjust to home which, during the term-times away had become alien... and as no school friends could visit I never felt fully comfortable there again either. As an older teenager I had two completely different groups of friends.*

*I believe that being an overseas boarder also adds an extra layer of 'being lucky' or 'privileged' into the mix which can make it even more confusing. Overseas boarders are often given a lot of freedom and luxury at home, so we constantly moved from one extreme to the other. I think my experience is quite extreme as my parents hardly ever visited – my father once in my entire seven years.*

*I wrote these two poems about my boarding feelings:*

### **To Board**

*Dissected from all that was familiar,  
pain welled up, nothing was similar.  
Standing alone in an ancient hall,  
discarded and left to rise or fall.*

*How 'fortunate' you are in this alien place,  
where all that matters is a brave face.  
Few comforts, no privacy, routine and bells,  
'lucky' to experience a kind of hell.*

*Being alone is never a chosen condition,  
safety nets gone, a cold hostile prison.  
Brave faces on, we are the lucky ones,  
deprived of comfort, no one will come.*

*Survival is key, but paper thin,  
routine keeps us believing we'll win.  
Years have passed, shocked and bruised by that day,  
recalling the simple fact, they walked away.*

### **Separated**

*People won't recognise privileged neglect  
but what do you call no safety net?  
No one to turn to, no interest in you,  
no right to speak out, it's a taboo.*

*Why didn't you realise until too late,  
it wasn't your fault but now you just hate.  
Inconceivable feelings of being alone,  
did you miss out on a wonderful home?*

*Alone again, no one came  
you defended them due to the shame.  
It bites every time being passed around,  
a brave face at events which abound.*

*What was your life like, drudgery free,  
peaceful, so far away from me?  
Don't ask, keep quiet, remember how 'lucky' you are...  
A fading childhood, a tarnished star.*

## **RESEARCH**

With all these thoughts of boarding very much in mind there are now many people undertaking research into the various aspects of the effects of boarding school on the child. *BSS-Support* is keen to support research into these effects and its outcomes so we are delighted that, despite Covid, that we have been approached by three researchers who are looking for participants in their research projects.

### **1. An exploration of the trauma of attending boys boarding school and its impact on adult life** – Dawn Grundy

#### **Call for Participants**

My interest is in determining how all-boys boarding school for those who attended from 8/9–18 years, affects emotions and development in childhood and if this is carried through to later life.

This research is part of an MA in Clinical Counselling that I am undertaking at the University of Chester. This research has been granted ethical approval by The Department of Social and Political Science Ethics Committee at The University of Chester.

If you are interested in taking part, your involvement would be answering semi-structured questions by online Zoom video call for approximately an hour. To take part you must have attended an all-boys British boarding school before 1989, from age 8/9 through to 18 years. To have explored and addressed problems in life that you believe originated from your boarding school experience, leaving you now feeling grounded in the subject. To currently be living in England and Wales, and to be sufficiently fluent in written and spoken English. No relationship with myself either directly or by a third party.

I kindly ask, due to confidentiality, that if this advert is shared via social media, please do not tag or link any potential participants' names to this advert. This advert will expire on 31 July 2021.

Thanking you, Dawn.

For more information please contact me at: [1816751@chester.ac.uk](mailto:1816751@chester.ac.uk)

## **2. LGBTQ+ awareness** – Helena Humphrey

Hello – I hope you are well. I am getting in touch because I am a freelance journalist currently looking into LGBTQ+ awareness at same sex schools, specifically boarding schools. I am hoping to publish this as an article in a national print outlet. I was very much interested to see your work with Boarding School Survivors.

As a bit of background: I attended an all-girls school myself at a time of very little LGBTQ+ awareness. Unfortunately, one of my classmates was suspended for having a very normal teenage romance with another pupil. The bad handling of this left an impact for years after – and of course I am aware of many other instances of bullying, harassment etc. on this issue. I am also very aware that many schools are not adequately training their staff to handle this matter, which is a real concern. There is some momentum towards a sort of MeToo movement when it comes to mistreatment at boarding schools at the moment, and I think this facet really needs to be part of the conversation.

I was wondering if, as part of my research, whether you might know of anyone who could share their experience with me on this issue? Perhaps people who have been bullied for being gay, or struggled with their sexual identity? It would be a sensitively handled conversation but an important one. I would then hope to be able to include your comments in an article.

Many thanks for your consideration, and all the best with your important work.

Helena Humphrey <[helena.journalist@gmail.com](mailto:helena.journalist@gmail.com)>

## **3. Ayahs and Amahs** – Jo Stanley

International researchers are uniting to study ayahs and amahs, who were often the joy of lonely colonial children's lives.

Novelist Michael Ondaatje refers to his ayah as his 'almost mother.' This warm and loving bond was usually severed when the child went off to boarding school ... and

BSS hit. Physical contact with the beloved care-giver could be lost forever. Yet on both sides love often endured. The founding memory of good attachment was a lifebelt for children who became Boarding School Survivors.

My colleagues in this new research group – in the US, UK, Australia and India – would really appreciate hearing from BSS people prepared to be interviewed (probably over Zoom) about their ayahs and amahs. Will you kindly help us?

What's it for? Education and posterity and better understanding and public knowledge about this brown-white intimate domestic relationship. There will be books, articles, theses, and maybe creative products too. A website is being drafted at this very moment called 'Ayahs in Britain'.

You can also see pre-existing initiatives:

- an Instagram group Ayah's Home. It does more than just focusing on the early 20C hostels for ayahs in London but offers updates about ayahs generally. You will enjoy surely the myriad pictures at <https://www.instagram.com/ayahshome/>
- a website about the Antipodean take on ayahs: Ayahs and Amahs: Transcolonial Servants in Australia and Britain 1780-1945: <https://ayahsandamahs.com/>

I myself am specialising in ayahs' voyages but am very interested in the emotional attachment patterns too. Please feel free to use me as the first point of contact if you can help our group explore this lost history of ayahs. Do get in touch even if you can tell us *only* about your parents' or grandparents' ayahs. Thank you.

Jo Stanley <[doctorjostanley@gmail.com](mailto:doctorjostanley@gmail.com)>

## **AT SCHOOL**

The start of it all..

This poem speaks the feelings of generations of children just starting out on the journey of boarding school.

### **After my first therapy session...**

*Memories caught in amber, trapped and raw.  
The car that picked up speed and left. He tried to call it back  
But the turquoise motor crunched the gravel, tore  
Along the lane beside the church, beside the school.  
And he listened to that engine's roar until it too had ended*

*To leave the child, to leave the wound untended.  
For there, Pandora's box was opened, unable to be mended.  
Come back, he said, come back. And mouthed the words  
In silence, but there was no return, no sudden change of heart.  
And so he turned. and faced the fullness of this heavy start.*

*Iain Overton*

### **Letters home**

*Dear S.W.A.L.K.*

*I recently found a lot of my letters that I sent home from boarding school between the ages of 8 to 15 yrs. old. To see my voice develop over this snapshot in time where robust coping mechanisms were built, and my childhood lost so quickly, has been interesting. Do you remember your writing days? Mine apparently were Tuesday and Fridays! I had a lot of funky writing paper at times, Athena cards and lots of stickers like Garfield, Care- Bears and Lemon scratch'n'sniff and they still smell!!!*

*I have two children a boy (10) and a girl (8). Having children has heightened an anxiety and protectiveness that runs deep. My overthinking and searching for answers to a given situation that happened at school or a friendship, is expressed with a flurry on these pages. In one letter I am asking for hairgrips urgently after getting told off – and proudly a week later stating, "I now can do my hair correctly". Another asking to write back quickly on advice about a friendship, with boxes: "yes/no – please tick". Reading this overreaching in trying to connect and needing my parents seems exhausting.*

*My children's racing hormones reminds me what it is like growing up as an 8 and 10 year old and the emotions I had surrounding those pokes. I have a tight panic knot in my stomach at times. Being there supporting their feelings while not taking control is so hard, as all I want to do is get it sorted and make the pain go straight away. I do a stop-and-think and have to remind myself their voice is important and not my 8 or 10-year-old voice.*

*Sometimes I wonder what my parents felt when reading my letters. What were their emotions when they read, "I did not cry last night" or asking about their day's lunch? Only to know that these cannot be answered straight away and by the time they are, I have moved on. In one letter I actually said "How is life now at home without me. I suspect very quiet". I felt quite proud of myself that I was having a dig.*

*I will admit that reading the letters with my children in mind brought me to the question, "Why did you send me away so young?" The emotional ending (in my case half a page) of, "I love you soooooo much, I miss you". Or, "I am trying not to cry and be stronger", gave a picture of a lost and desperate little girl. Sometimes I drew a picture of sad face with tears and a happy face next to it to show I'm fine and telling my parents not to worry. My teddies were mentioned during the first few years. They even expressed how well they were doing and how the matron told them off at night for talking. I do remember once having to strip my bed and make it again for talking and telling off Bugles and Hippo!!! Can you remember your support that kept you safe at night? They bring a smile to my face when I think of them.*

*I used to list everybody (and pets) asking to say "Hi" to them and even writing notes to pass on. "Missing Mrs Butter's Jam Tarts and chocolate cake," which was underlined in over ten of my letters at the beginning, made me smile at the importance of this! That soon became, "Say 'Hi' to everyone, etc." and my connections with family and friends slowly flounder, which is sad. I am still the instigator in outreaching to people and friends, not missing anyone out. There is some truth to the saying 'Out of sight, out of mind' and the feeling 'Will they forget about me' is still the driving force of my outreaching today. Inclusivity is something ingrained in my day-to-day life and further explored when I did my Masters in inclusive education and kept trying to answer 'What is inclusivity?'. The countdown of going home – "4 weeks to go, 8 weeks to go" – was important to state in big bold writing, along with "I don't know what else to say." I still find that I run out of things to say to my parents once I have finished the day-to-day. Personal matters are rarely discussed.*

*My children chat about their day during the car ride home. My first question is, "What was fun today and is there any gossip?". Reading my reviews of my friendships (BF changes/dorms) and schoolwork were funny and my children are the same in reporting facts. Having to ask for everything little was exhausting to read. A plea for stamps (12p and 18p), paper, cards (and special ones for birthdays), address, batteries for the Walkman, posters! I link my overthinking, in this constant bombarding of requests, to now when I think of details before most people do. It would be nice not to be so in my head at times.*

*A plea for chocolate was important and you can't beat a Marathon! Parcels used to be checked and I used to smuggle Mars Bars in my trunk! I still have a very sweet tooth and I will admit I used to put sugar on my bread for an extra crunch! It was liberating when I was older to finally be allowed past the gates down to the town. There was also a tuck shop that opened up.*

*Do you remember the phone cards? There was a buzz when we were allowed to call home and we had 10-minute slots! In one letter I wrote, "I can't call as much,*

*as someone got reported for using the phone out of their time-slot and if anyone gets caught they will be severely punished". Eek! However, not all appreciated my reverse charged calls, as I used to sneak in extra calls... one was £91. I apologised in a letter later that week after saying, "It was lovely hearing your voice on the phone".*

*Over time my voice gets more detached and formal. The more independent I became the harder it was for me to accept my parents' input or praise. It is now met with curt thanks, as in my head I'm thinking, "I will sort this out myself and know my limits to protect myself."*

*It's hard to discuss the true feeling with anyone who has not survived boarding school. Some have referred to Malory Towers saying, "You're so lucky".... I just laugh it off. When I start to explain about being inspected most mornings, being tidy and shoes polished, or laundry issues, or dorm antics, or having to share embarrassing growing-up pains together, it is met with incomprehension. This constant exposure – they can't understand the complexity and rage it stirs at the memory.*

*My children sometimes get a monologue from a question they ask, as I want to cover all areas. The look they give me at times is, "Mum, it's a yes or no answer". Even with the normal banter and parenting I say every night, "I love you unconditionally and will be your support."*

*A joke I sent that I will share...*

*Knock knock  
Who's there?  
One eye  
One eye who?  
You are the one eye care for*

*I will sign off now with .....Please write back soon and if possible send me a food parcel. Only 3 weeks to go can't wait to see you Whippy!*

*Lots of love  
GIGI xxx  
I.T.A.L.Y.  
H.O.L.L.A.N.D.*



By GiGi

POETRY

We have collected many poems from supporters over the years and recently we were sent a very moving collection of poetry called *The Scarred Scarab* written by Nicky Moxey. She wrote to us and said:

*I think of myself as an author, but the only thing I've managed to bring to fruition this year whilst in therapy is this collection of poems on depression and my therapeutic experience.*

She hopes that her poems will be of help to other BSS.

These are two of her poems and, if you want to know, more her website is:

<https://nickymoxey.com/boardingschool> – *boardingschool* is the password.

### **Why write?**

*My intent is not to depress you  
But to offer my experience  
As a window  
So that if you wonder –  
Is there something wrong with me?  
Why do I feel...  
Nothing?  
Skinned raw?  
Nakedly vulnerable?  
Pain loud enough to cut?  
Read on, see what resonates.*

### **Cocoon shields**

*Boarding school. Bullied.  
Each rejection cut,  
And even as I turned away, bled.  
Over time the blood hardened, darkened  
A cocoon, my soul trapped inside.  
Dung beetles were sacred to the Egyptians.  
They are transformation, a new form of being;  
To the light, or to the dark.*

*My cocoon shields.  
Externally, all bright competence  
Shiny tough lacquer, hard as nails.  
Inside, grey marshmallow soup*

*Glints off rough black lining.  
Hurting nothingness.  
Like a dung beetle  
Guarding all my dung against attack.*

*My cocoon shields,  
Deadens. For many years  
I didn't even know I was crying  
Inside my double shell.  
If you scream too loud, it hurts.  
No-one sees, no-one comes, no-one cares.  
Like a dung beetle  
Gathering up my dung, hoarding pain.*

*My cocoon shields  
Me from birds, bees, trees, leaves  
Sunlight on water  
Birds on the air.  
Locked in my cocoon  
I see nothing but my misery  
Like a dung beetle  
Face stuck in my dung, blind and unfeeling.*

*My cocoon shields  
All casual acquaintances  
From seeing me; numb, terrified,  
Achingly alone. And yet somehow capable  
Of chairing a meeting, writing a report  
Smiling as though my world still turned.  
Like a dung beetle  
Pushing my dung uphill.*

*My cocoon shields  
Others from seeing my folly.  
Or perhaps, shields me from their pity  
Overweight, sometimes drunk,  
Shadowed eyes from sleepless nights,  
My heartbeat shaking my whole body.  
Like a dung beetle,  
My shit falling apart.*

*Finally the tears thinned the blood-shell  
The lacquer cracked and protection collapsed*

*Leaving me –  
Numb  
Terrified  
Achingly alone  
Impossibly exposed.*

*Now I could not deny  
The gut-wrenching sorrow of my inner child.  
No matter what pieces I picked up  
My cocoon could not be mended.*

*The poor, scraped-raw thing  
That was the heart of me  
Bombarded  
Bereft of shields  
No means of coping.*

*My inner child lies naked, weeping,  
Curled into a dung-streaked ball.*

*Nicky Moxey*

## **FUTURE EVENTS AND NEWS**

There are two events coming up this month that are listed on the website. They are:

June 21st 2021

*Boarding School Syndrome: Girls and their Bodies* with Prof. Joy Schaverien.  
Hosted by BPA talks on counselling and psychotherapy. Details [here](#).

June 16th 2021

Joy Schaverien will speak to the Wessex Psychotherapy Society at 7.30pm. Details can be found [here](#).

Christine Jack

We have known Christine, who lives in Australia, for many years. When she was seven, she was sent away from home to a Catholic establishment in New South

Wales and says, 'I was a little child and it was a shock to go into a very strict regime'.

She has recently had her book *Recovering Boarding School Trauma Narratives* published by Routledge and it is available on Amazon at £25.35.

Here is a link to a podcast by Piers Cross where he discusses the book with Christine: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=29xLvzA9sE>.

Piers Cross has also interviewed Joy Schaverien and Alex Renton in his podcasts

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This Newsletter brings all good wishes from us all for a good summer.

The directors of *Boarding School Survivors – Support* are:

Allison Ujejski  
Margaret Laughton  
Mike Dickins  
Paul Fray  
Sam Barber

**Our Website is:** [www.bss-support.org.uk](http://www.bss-support.org.uk)

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