Transcript
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Mental health comes out of the closet

MAXINE McKEW: Given one in five Australians will suffer from a mental health problem at some time in their life, a surprising stigma is attached to the mentally ill.

In a bid to tackle this, National Mental Health Week is highlighting options for treatment and is part of a broader campaign aimed at improving services.

The campaign strikes a special chord with a courageous Tasmanian woman named Carla Paul.

After spending half her life in institutions, she's now written about her traumatic experiences.

It's an even more remarkable story given that Carla Paul didn't learn to read, write or add up until she was in her late teens.

Judy Tierney reports.

CARLA PAUL: I remember the sound of the keys as they opened the door to let me into the day room.

It was so scary.

There was people screaming in chairs, in armchairs and rocking backwards and forwards and they were tied to column heaters.

JUDY TIERNEY: Deep inside Carla Paul's mind, this image remains vivid and painful.

Each step she takes here today is a haunting reminder of what she describes as her former life.

For today, this homely, warm and confident woman doesn't show a hint of the tormented years she spent in this isolated institution for the mentally ill.

CARLA PAUL: Took rat poison, sliced my hands to pieces, my arms there, my throat -- cut my throat.

I hung myself -- tried many things.

JUDY TIERNEY: It was 34 years ago when, as a troubled teenager still dressed in her school uniform, Carla was sent to Tasmania's Royal Derwent Hospital -- home for the insane.

CARLA PAUL: I just wanted to die -- I didn't want to be there.

I'd be better off dead.

JUDY TIERNEY: Carla Paul was extremely violent.

She'd attack anyone for simply looking at her.

CARLA PAUL: Whatever I could to hurt them, because I was hurting.

The thought that no-one will ever want me and I'm gonna get people back for what they've done to me.

JUDY TIERNEY: Carla Paul's misery began the day she was born.

Sent to an orphanage by parents who didn't want her, it was her first, but certainly not the last, rejection.

She was adopted by a couple who had lost their daughter in a car accident, but Carla didn't live up to expectations.

She felt the couple's natural children received more attention.

She began, as she puts it, "playing up".

CARLA PAUL: (Reads) "So they placed me in a children's home which was run by Catholic nuns."

JUDY TIERNEY: Carla's story, told in her book titled 'From Darkness to Light', tells it was simply a lack of belonging which led to her years of violence and incarceration.

When she arrived at the home, the nuns told her her adoptive parents had gone on a holiday and they'd be back.

CARLA PAUL: I did believe they were coming back and I sat there Sunday after Sunday, and when they didn't turn up, I was angry, upset.

Now I know the feeling of rejection.

I didn't know what that meant before, but unwanted, unloved.

JUDY TIERNEY: Here for seven years, Carla Paul hated everyone around her and her violence increased.

CARLA PAUL: "The nuns appointed a doctor from the Royal to come and see what could be done with their problem child.

He had me placed in the Royal Derwent Hospital."

JUDY TIERNEY: It was a descent into hell.

Carla became part of a system in a hospital which showed little mercy for violent, uncooperative individuals.

CARLA PAUL: The first time I had the shock treatment, they was all lined up in this big corridor in the ward, and you saw the one before you get it.

And there was no drugs -- you just had this thing put between your teeth and they come along and put the things on your head and you're zapped.

Because even them days, if you swore at the psychiatrist, you was given a week's shock treatment -- that was your punishment.

JUDY TIERNEY: Her vulnerability made her a target.

Carla was sexually abused and often treated cruelly.

But one nurse, even though she'd been attacked by Carla, was perceptive enough to understand the young woman's torment.

Her name was Jean Whiteway.

CARLA PAUL: And we formed the greatest bond you could ever have.

It was like a mother-daughter bond.

She taught me Scrabble and I learnt how to spell, learnt how to write, by card games I learnt numbers, add up, and now I can do it as good as anyone else, and I thank her for all that.

JUDY TIERNEY: Sadly, Jean Whiteway died last year.

But there was another guardian angel in Carla's life.

Attitudes to locking up the mentally ill changed in the '70s and as a young social worker, Marian Klitzke was given the task of rehabilitating Carla back into an alien society.

MARIAN KLITZKE: You had one very scary sort of file there, young lady.

I don't know whether you realise that.

CARLA PAUL: I realise that, yes.

MARIAN KLITZKE: I hadn't laid eyes on her.

I just read this massive file which talked about this very psychologically damaged child who had suffered massive rejections and then became incredibly violent and was one of the most violent patients in the hospital, and had a formidable reputation.

So I wasn't quite sure what to expect, to be honest.

JUDY TIERNEY: And Carla didn't know what to expect outside in a strange and hostile environment.

Her first day was terrifying.

CARLA PAUL: Everyone knows what to do to cross a traffic light, don't they?

Well, I didn't.

I got halfway across the road and it said "Don't walk", so I done what I was told for once in my life and didn't walk, and all the cars were beeping and yelling and I'm pointing to the lights, telling, "Well, it says don't walk."

MARIAN KLITZKE: I really think the day I met you on that ward was one of the best days of my life.

CARLA PAUL: It was mine too.

Carla would keep in touch with Marian Klitzke and join her later at Australian Red

Cross to assist others with a mental illness.

And now there's children and grandchildren and a faith in God.

But all of that is another story.

CARLA PAUL: Now, I'm a person that's as good as you, as good as anyone, that can cope in this world with anything and not have to go back to hospital again.

Hallelujah! (Laughs)