

newsletters and getting literature about forthcoming events. But it isn't really enough.

Max: So that getting financial support from interested people and organizations is one of your biggest needs?

Gail: Is one of our biggest needs to spread the word, yes.

Max: Are there other self-help groups for child abusers in other States?

Gail: There is a group in Sydney, it's run by professionals. It was run along our lines because a social worker who was helping us went to Sydney, told them about our group and they started this group, it's called Prevention. But as regards to any other Parents Anonymous groups, no there are not any other Parents Anonymous groups, and if there were they would come under us because we have permission from America to start the groups in Australia.

Max: And there's a very active Parents Anonymous group operating in America?

Gail: A very active group, yes.

Max: What is your relationship with the American P.A.?

Gail: They have given permission for groups to be started in Australia along the same lines. They give us supportive information. They send regular leaflets and newsletters re what they do and what they are striving for, and we try to adapt them to the Australian way of life.

Max: What about other States of Australia, have you heard about other States having similar organizations?

Gail: No, only the Prevention in Sydney.

Max: So that then there's a very big need for more self-help activity in this area?

Gail: Yes, oh yes.

Max: If people in other States were

interested in starting up branches of P.A. could you help them?

Gail: Yes, we are available for consultation. The way we would start would be for a social worker in a children's hospital or welfare organization to contact us. We would send literature about how we operate. If finances permitted, we would like to have training courses.

Gail can be contacted for further information as follows:

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Parents Anonymous,
P.O. Box 12, Chelsea,
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The following Victorian members are also readily available by telephone:

Betty: (03) 544 6950
Diane: (03) 56 7704
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A Success Story — Carla

The story

Carla has not had an easy life. One of seven children, her main memories of her early years were of her parents fighting — about literally everything. Her father worked hard and her mother drank what he earned as soon as he earned it. He couldn't put up with things so he drank too! Carla's mother used to rip the clothes off her sons' backs and thrash them. When the situation got really bad, Carla would lock her sister and brothers in a bedroom, slip out a window and ring the police. At 13, Carla made the first of seven suicide attempts. The psychiatrist she saw told her parents not to fight in front of her, but they took no notice.

At 17, Carla began going with an older man, was engaged, and became pregnant. Her fiance then revealed that he was married and returned to his wife. The child, a boy, was born with a deformity of both arms and required special

medical attention. In spite of a Court order, the father paid no maintenance. Upset and feeling the stigma of unmarried motherhood, Carla went to work to try to support herself while her mother looked after the baby. Her mother, who had attempted suicide shortly before the child's birth, suddenly decided she could cope no longer and called the police. The child, who is now 11, was taken into care and made a Ward of State. He was subsequently returned to Carla when she married three years later.

Carla felt little communication in her marriage, and with fear, pregnancy after pregnancy, and sick children, her tension and frustration mounted. Three years ago, pregnant again, she began to physically maltreat her second youngest son (then aged three). Chronically ill, he added to her irritation with his constant crying and the constant complaints this brought from the Housing Commission management and other tenants in the high rise

where she lived. Psychiatric treatment did not help — she was told that there was no serious problem, since her son hadn't been killed, and to take a pill when things got too bad.

Things came to a head in the latter part of last year when Carla met another man, and although knowing him only three weeks, contemplated leaving her husband. The latter, desperate, made her leave the house then shot himself.

Carla describes this as a turning point. She and her husband suddenly realized how much they meant to each other. Although trust is slow in developing, they are beginning to talk out their problems. Carla has joined a group which has helped her with her weight problem. She has joined Parents Anonymous and gained help and confidence from that organization.

She has recently been appointed as an Honorary Probation Officer, and is thinking about a career in welfare work.

In the following excerpts from an interview with Max Liddell, Carla talks about her problems and about Parents Anonymous:

Carla: I joined P.A. to help myself. I was picking on one particular child, he was a sickly child. I had worries at home. I was constantly pregnant. It used to get me that way I used to punch him and throw him. How I never broke a bone I'll never know. I'd throw him across the room. It didn't start till I was on the verge of a nervous breakdown. He's now got an emotional problem caused by me because of what I've done to him . . . I'd get him by the throat until I nearly strangled him and he convulsed and collapsed . . . I went to a psychiatrist and told him this. Five minutes I was with him. He said "Well, you haven't killed anybody, you're only doing it for attention. You don't have to come back anymore".

Max: You've had a lot of problems throughout your life. How has that affected you?

Carla: It's affected me mentally. One time there, before I got involved with P.A., I felt I was going round the bend and that I was going to shoot everyone and myself. I just couldn't stand it. When I talked to someone at the Melville (psychiatric) clinic, I was going backwards and forwards from my past to the present and I was confused. My head starts pounding and I shake, and I'm going to collapse, and this keeps up and everything seems to fade into the background and I seem to have a little voice saying "There's nothing there. You might as well end it all". I feel as if I'm in a trance, as if I'm hypnotized, really. I'm just sitting round and for no reason I'll start to giggle. I lost interest in the housework, I didn't care about the kids . . . They say if you want to end it all you'll really do it. Maybe I'm a coward. I never took an overdose of valium or anything. I've read of people taking overdoses, sometimes they come out of it

alright, sometimes there has been brain damage done. So I never took them just in case they didn't work, I took sleeping pills. Maybe I didn't want to kill myself, maybe I just wanted some peace, and somebody to realize that I was a person and not just a thing. I'm a person, I have my rights and I also believe children have rights. I was brought up to believe children don't have rights, but kids do have rights. They're entitled to their rights. You can't go and punch them up just because you're crook on the world. My son says, even after I've done all this, "I love you, Mummy", and I feel like I could crawl into a crack. I feel so rotten . . .

Max: With all those difficulties, you talk like a person who has found herself and who realizes that there is a lot she can do that is good. How did you get to that point?

Carla: By going to Parents Anonymous meetings, talking my problems out with others, and finding out that I wasn't the only person who had problems. We worked out solutions and I tried them. I also had a weight problem, and I lost a lot of weight. Now I'm not as irritable. Once I was 21½ stone, that must affect your marriage somewhere along the line. Now I'm down to 16 stone and I feel more confident . . . You've got to do it yourself. No use going to doctors or psychiatrists, they just give you pills . . .

Max: Did they do any things that helped you?

Carla: No, no, all they did was say "If you feel upset give us a ring" and they take the kids away for a couple of days or make an appointment to see the psychiatrist. I told the psychiatrist at the Royal Melbourne how I felt and he made arrangements to put my son in hospital for a couple of days and I was thankful for that. But it wasn't solving anything, Peter and I getting

"Pills"

separated for a couple of days. I saw the psychiatrist and he said "Here you are, here's some pills". It's just the cat chasing its tail round and round in circles. I think group discussions, you need them.

Max: What was the problem you had that they weren't solving?

Carla: The problem I had was that I couldn't keep my hands off my kids. I was frustrated and I wanted help. I was telling them what I was doing and they were just giving me a larger dose of pills to calm me down. That aggravated me . . . It's all very well for them to say "Come back in a month, we'll see how you are". In the meantime I could have killed all my kids. They just don't seem to care.

Max: What was it that P.A. did?

Carla: We'd all talk together. I'd find that one of the other girls had a problem like I had and she overcame it by coming off the drugs. I tried that and it helped. I felt a bit irritable at first, but I felt good. Then I found I could speak to them about how I felt about Peter, the other kids and my marriage. We'd talk about different solutions; and they'd say "Try this", and I'd try it, and if it didn't work I'd try something else. I found that it worked. They'd ask me about a problem that I'd overcome before, and I'd tell them what I tried. I think that's what it is, we help each other. We understand each other. We've gone through it, we know how the other person feels. You go to a social worker — I'm not knocking social workers — but we've got the practice, they've got the theory. You say to them "Would you help me?" They say "Do this or do that", but they haven't been through it. They'll tell

"Felt understood"

you yourselves "We haven't got kids, so don't know what it's like, all we can do is give you this suggestion". If I'd known about Parents Anonymous a few years ago, I wouldn't have had all the problems I did have.

Max: You've mentioned a number of things that P.A. did that made a difference. One was that you felt understood.

Carla: Yes.

Max: Are you saying that you did not feel understood when you went . . .

Carla: Yes, they didn't understand me, they didn't understand how I felt, and I felt that I couldn't talk too freely with them.

Max: Why's that?

Carla: Because they wrote everything down and I was always frightened I might say something and lose my kids. I reckon you should be able to go somewhere without having to have the fear that someone will report you. You've got to be able to trust them.

Max: You also said that P.A. members made suggestions of things that you could try. You also said that some of the professionals had done that. What was the difference?

Carla: Well, they'd make suggestions like going away for a holiday, or taking the kids away for about three months or "You come in and see us twice a week". It wasn't good enough, they only spend about 15 minutes with you, and they're talking on the phone, and you think "What's the bloody use?" I was just a case to them . . . They didn't seem to care . . . Maybe they did but it didn't come across. Other members of P.A. feel that way when they talk to professionals. They're a bit frightened.

Max: You feel that other P.A. members do care?

Carla: Yes. They wouldn't look down on you. I can tell them my inner feelings. I couldn't do that with a social worker, and I've had some very good ones, but I just couldn't do it. If I had a problem I rang up and they'd say: "She won't be in till tomorrow". Well that wasn't good enough for me, I needed someone I could ring up and say "Look, I'm

going to go out of my mind, will you come around and talk to me or something?"

Max: When you're upset you feel that you need help immediately?"

Carla: Yes. I often ring Diana. I'm howling on the phone, and she says "Well, come around" and I'll go around and have a cry and everything's alright, we work something out.

Max: You said too that Parents Anonymous gave you the opportunity to help other people?

Carla: Yes. With them helping me I've learned how to understand myself. I feel that I should put that knowledge to help others. By going to different groups and talking about Parents Anonymous and what it's done and what it can do . . . that's what we want to get across. If we could get that across there wouldn't be so many problems.

Max: You said that your life experiences had made you feel guilty and made you feel bad about yourself.

Carla: Yes.

Max: Are you also saying that being in P.A. had given you some reasons for feeling good about yourself?

"Not just housewife"

Carla: Yes, I feel as if I'm worth something. Not just as if I'm a housewife, I'm a person. Other

professional bodies say "If you keep it up you'll lose the kids". That didn't stop me from hitting them. I was frightened after I'd done it, I'd say "Don't you say anything". I used to bribe them, which was wrong.

Max: So being told what the result could be didn't make any difference?

Carla: No, I think I was too far gone. Max, I was getting to the point of no return. I honestly feel that if I hadn't got any help I'd be in jail today.

Max: Even though you were getting to the point of no return, P.A. had something to offer, even at that time?

Carla: Yes, I haven't gone back to see a psychiatrist, I don't need them. Everybody, even my mother, says I've got more gumption, I stand up for myself. I won't let people walk over me. If someone said something to upset me I used to howl, at my age. I would, I'd cry, and I'd get very frustrated. I think I lacked a lot of confidence, too, I couldn't talk to people . . . I gave talks for P.A., they'd ask me to tell them more and I'd tell them more. Suddenly I realized I could stand up for myself. I got more confidence and I didn't have to let people walk all over me any more.

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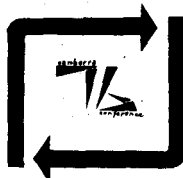
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