

Call for probe into

Justice is too late for family

By Matt Doran

At 7am on an ordinary morning in the early 1990s, police rapped on the door of a house in Mt Martha, waiting to tell a mother and a father their two toddlers were believed to have been victims of pedophilia.

They did it subtly, of course, by asking the parents to see if their children had ever heard of "red Kenny" or "Daddy Kenny".

A number of children from a Mornington childcare centre had earlier told the police these were nicknames used by men who had sexually abused them.

"I will never forget the look on my daughter's face when she heard those names. She immediately ran behind her mother saying 'save me mummy, save me'," said John (not his real name).

John was later told by his eldest daughter that the same men had held her underwater and bent her little finger backwards if she didn't do as she was told.

John knew in his heart then that the bruises on his youngest daughters' cheek had not been caused by a "playground accident".

His children, "two little heroes", were among at least 16 others abused at the Mornington Child Care Centre and Nursery School in the 1990s.

Children told police and their parents they were taken from the centre in a van to a house in Mornington where they were sexually and physically abused by a group of adults.

Some described being abused by



Victoria Police Chief Commissioner Christine Nixon.

Picture: KRIS REICHL N49H0311

adults wearing "funny clothes" including police uniforms, clown suits and "black capes with tails".

The centre was deregistered after a Department of Human Services inquiry found that the centre's owners, Norman and Alison Shulver, had "permitted the abuse to occur or were involved in that abuse".

No police charges were laid, but in 1994 the Crimes Compensation Tribunal awarded damages of up to \$20,000 to more than 30 applicants affected by the alleged abuse.

Now a decade later, Victoria's Ombudsman is due to release a report on the way police handled their investigation.

But that does not comfort John or his eldest daughter, now 16, who are still traumatised.

"My eldest daughter still needs counselling and is afraid to sleep by herself. She is on anti-depressants and . . . has no friends," John said.

"She believes she was the victim of organised pedophilia and she still fears for her life.

"It is too late for justice for my family. Justice can not repair my marriage or make up for the trauma my daughter has suffered. But there needs to be justice for the community, so that people's faith in the system can be restored."

Psychologist Dr Reina Michaelson, who is representing survivors of abuse throughout Victoria, helped instigate the Ombudsman's investigation in 2002.

She first raised concerns with Chief Commissioner Christine Nixon in 2001, about the way the original police investigation was conducted after a "well-hidden" file containing allegations linking police to child sex offences was stolen from her home.

But now Dr Michaelson has lost faith in the Ombudsman's internal investigation.

Documents obtained by the *Leader* show that in April last year an Ethical Standards Department officer was removed from the investigation for "incompetence" after he failed to pass on vital information from two witnesses.

One witness claimed that a house used by pedophiles in Mornington belonged to a policeman.

The other witness gave information about the existence of a video tape that showed a number of men dressed in police uniforms abusing children.

The investigator said he could not recall talking about a video with the witness, but a check of telephone records showed he did have such a conversation.

"These children were the victims of a highly organised and protected pedophile group that continues to operate throughout Victoria," Dr Michaelson said.

"While this type of corruption

continues, these children don't have a hope of getting justice.

"They desperately want to present their testimonies and evidence, but they need to be given a forum where they can do this in safety and where the investigative process is truly independent. We urgently need a Royal Commission."

Hetty Johnston, founder of Queensland child abuse prevention charity Bravehearts, came to Victoria last month to meet five children who claim to be victims of organised pedophile networks.

She backed the call for a Royal Commission.

"There is a whole line-up of credible individuals saying the same things about the same people," she said.

"Children's lives are at risk and we cannot afford to keep burying the truth."

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