

## THE BIG PICTURE EXTRA



'I would just like Australians to know what happened to children in care in that time so that it never happens again.'

Triumph over tragedy ... Sharyn Killens and Lindsay Lewis.

Photo: Jacky Gosselin

# An innocent found guilty for living

Sharyn Killens had a tough start but she fought back – and won, writes **RACHEL BROWNE**.

**S**haryn Killens's family rejected her before she was born. In the prologue of her book *The Inconvenient Child*, she says news of her impending arrival was not greeted with joy. "Abort it. Adopt it. Drown it. Just get rid of it," was her grandmother's advice to her expectant mother, Grace Samuels.

The year was 1948 and Grace had discovered she was pregnant after a brief affair with an African-American merchant marine while he was on shore leave in Sydney.

To be born out of wedlock was one thing in that conservative era but to have mixed-race heritage was quite another. As Killens writes, she was considered "absolutely unadoptable".

What followed were years in brutal institutions, attempting to form a bond with her emotionally distant mother while longing for information about her biological father. On the way there was a stint in the strip clubs of Kings Cross, a dalliance with hard drugs and finally success as a singer, entertaining the crowds on cruise ships around the globe.

Killens's story has all the makings of a triumph-over-tragedy page-turner but it took the encouragement and support of her friend and co-author Lindsay Lewis to get the tale on paper.

Sitting in Lewis's office on Sydney's north shore, Killens is a long way, both physically and emotionally, from her troubled childhood. It is hard to reconcile this immaculately dressed and dignified woman with the horrors recounted in her book.

"But I knew that this is an important story and it has to be told and that I could trust Lindsay 100 per cent. Lindsay extracted things from me that I had never wanted to revisit."

Over two years and many boxes of tissues, Killens told Lewis how she was rescued from neglectful foster carers when she was 19 months old and

placed with family friends at a boarding house on Womerah Avenue, Darlinghurst.

When Killens was five, her mother decided she needed a more stable environment and moved her to Saint Martha's home and orphanage in Leichhardt, her home for the next seven years.

There she developed emuresis, a problem which earned the wrath of a nun who would push her face into her urine-soaked sheets and beat her savagely with a leather strap.

Killens became a chronic runaway, which eventually landed her in Parramatta Girls' Home as a teenager. From there she was sent to the notorious Hay Institution for Girls. There, young girls were subjected to hard labour and psychological torture designed to crush their spirit.

Not surprisingly, she has been watching the progress of various government inquiries into children in institutional care with interest.

The most recent report, *The Lost Innocents and Forgotten Australians Revisited*, has led to a promise from the Federal Government to apologise to those who suffered abuse in institutional care, along the same lines as the apology to the stolen generations.

"I would love to see the people who ran those institutions held accountable for what they did. Sorry would be wonderful for so many people. For me I would just like Australians to know what happened to children in care in that time so that it never happens again."

Killens managed to rebuild her life after leaving Hay, but many did not. "By my 17th birthday I was sitting in a cell singing happy birthday to myself and thinking I was on the verge of a nervous breakdown. I had a prayer with God and I said, 'You have got to get me out of here or I am going to lose my mind'.

"And many girls did. Many girls came out of there and turned into women who suicided, became prostitutes, drug addicts and alcoholics."

Admittedly, it took a few years and brushes with the seamier side of life before Killens got her life back on track. By the mid-1970s, she was the mother of two young sons, Anthony, now 39, and Patrick, now 37, working as an exotic dancer in Kings Cross and dabbling with heroin while harbouring dreams of becoming a professional singer.

"I lost the plot for a while with [her sons] as far as doing drugs, drinking ... One day I looked at them and I thought these children deserve better ... I had to get it together for their sake. I'm very blessed I did because it encouraged me to pursue singing."

In just one year the boys went from being in a house with a mother who was hitting up heroin, to holidaying on a cruise ship where their mother was the headlining act.

She built up her singing career under the name Sharyn Crystal and also reconciled with her mother Grace, who died in 2007.

Grace eventually identified Thaddeus Killens as Killens's father after a Scotch-soaked night in 1989.

It took a few more years and some extraordinary twists of fate before Killens tracked down her father's family in Los Angeles. He had died in 1981 but she met his four children – Debra, Donna, Sandra and Thaddeus jr – in the United States in 1996.

The meeting still brings tears to Killens's eyes. "In that instance my whole life just rushed at me," she says. "I didn't find my father but I got the family and I have got a really great family and they just love me."

*The Inconvenient Child* by Sharyn Killens and Lindsay Lewis is available through Miracle Publishing.