

# 'I tried to fight once I realised



First visit in a long time ... no fond memories

Photo: Henrik Brattli Vold

**An interview with a former John Oxley Youth Centre inmate raises more questions about what was going on in this youth detention centre and why no one ever has ever been called to account. It is surely time for some real answers. The interview has been edited.**

Henrik Brattli Vold

**Could you walk me through the first week you were there?**

I got transferred from Sir Leslie Wilson to John Oxley. It was dark when I got there, so it was in the evening sometime, they had some concerns about my behaviour with people, so they decided to put me into Blaxland (the name of one of the wings).

**It was a fifty-fifty chance?**

They do assess it on your internal records I guess, in regards to your behaviour and stuff like that, and whether you had any issues with anybody in there.

**Did you feel you belonged in the Blaxland unit?**

I didn't feel I belonged in John Oxley. I remember the days leading up to it, they told me I was being transferred, and I was f...ing terrified, you know, because there were so many bad stories floating around about how hard it was and how horrible.

*... I saw him take enjoyment from it. He smiled and laughed and gave me shit over it, called me a little bitch.*

**Were you scared of the carers or the inmates?**

Both. I was just terrified, it was like the bogeyman stories that I'd

heard all over the country, in my travels up and down Queensland doing drugs and stuff, and the young people I associated with, it was a common story "to stay the f... away from John Oxley". I remember my family came to visit me and I hadn't seen them for a long time, because I had run away from home, and I refused to even talk to them, I just sat there and cried, because I was so terrified of going to John Oxley that I couldn't even converse to my family, the people I love. I regret that, in a big way, that day. I was just petrified.

They had a separated cell which was a, what they called an observation cell, and it had big, clear windows so that the staff could see into it. And they put me in there because they wanted to have a chat with me before they put me in the unit, and he immediately confronted me with stuff that I'd done in the other detention centres, you know.

I attacked another inmate at Sir Leslie Wilson because he was in there for molesting a baby, and I f...ing attacked him you know, and he confronted me with that, and said I had attacked the wrong person, and that I was just a liar and a piece of shit and he just continued to degrade me.

I didn't understand at the time what he was doing, but now I see he was just trying to break me, you know, just letting me know he was the boss. That guy just berated me and he ended up laying me down on the bed and choking me, telling me I was a little piece of shit, and "don't even bother fighting", because I was not going to win.

**You were thirteen years old?**

Yeah. With his knees on my chest, a full-grown man you know ... that's probably the biggest sticking point I have to the whole place, that one particular guy. He f...ing terrified me the whole time I was there because he was so scary and so forceful you know and he'd just whatever he wanted he got, and he allowed so much shit to happen to me as well as doing some stuff to me. I never felt safe, you know, this guy was supposed to be running the show where I had to live with these

people who hated me, who stood over me and stole from me and bashed me. And you know I had to live with the thought that this big scary guy who is supposed that to look after me is allowing it and inducing it to happen. And he took enjoyment from it, I saw him take enjoyment from it. He smiled and laughed and gave me shit over it, called me a little bitch.

**What did he do? He choked you?**

... and then he stopped. I just stopped listening to what he had to say, because I just didn't care. I thought I was dying you know. When I was nearly out of breath he'd stop and start again. I was f...ed. So I don't really recall everything he said, because I stopped listening to what he said. I'd given up you know. I had resigned to the fact that I was f...ed and dominated.

*... he ended up laying me down on the bed and choking me, telling me I was a little piece of shit, and "don't even bother fighting", because I was not going to win*

**You must have realised that what he was doing was illegal?**

Well, yeah. But you know, my perspective was, and it was something I had learnt really early, that I was a criminal and a drug user and a child, and that no matter what I said no one would believe me. And I was at the mercy of these people. In my opinion, these were upstanding people, workers of the government and the law. If they were doing it, there was no point in me arguing, they were the law in my mind you know? I didn't see anything outside of this, I had no genuine concept of the law, not like I have today, so I just assumed that this was the way it was going to be, and that there was no way around that you know. I just had to function within it, as best I could. And I never really adapted you know. They kept changing the rules. It was just a total state of confusion

for me, because I had no way of knowing whether what I was doing was right or wrong. I could do something one day and it would be fine and then the next day I would get f...ing bashed for it. It was just so random, it was just like it was just pure pleasure for them, you know?

**Did anyone you know of ever press charges? Did you ever bring anyone else's attention to this?**

Well, I had heard, and I don't know if there's any foundation or truth to it, but at the point that I had arrived there, there had been five investigations into [carer's name], and five times he was found to be free of any misconduct, and therefore, they were not going to investigate him again. And that's what I was told, but it was only rumor to me, you know. F... this guy is good, and he has also gotten away with it and not get caught. What's a thirteen year old kid going to do?

**That's a lot of information for a thirteen-year-old to process.**

Well, I didn't. I'm still processing it today. To be perfectly honest, I don't really care to process it anymore, I sort of moved on. I have to have an understanding of it, but there's no point in me processing it, because as far as I'm concerned today, it was pointless. There was no rhyme nor reason for it, just someone's illness or insane f...ing pleasure. There is no point me trying to find an answer in that. I'll never get it. I know I face things a bit cynically, but a lifetime of it makes you a bit cynical you know. Doesn't worry me too much.

**So, what was the rest of the week like? This was just the first day?**

This was the first day. "Welcome to John Oxley". I hadn't even met the inmates yet. And I knew where I was going, and I knew I was going into the worst part of it, and I thought, "well, if this is just the beginning, how bad is it going to get?"

**How bad did it get?**

Well, it just got worse. I mean, there were periods there when

things were okay, probably in hindsight because they had to be. But I could never do anything right, that's how I felt. No matter what I did, it was wrong and it got me hurt.

*I was a criminal and a drug user and a child, and that no matter what I said no one would believe me. And I was at the mercy of these people*

**Physically hurt?**

Physically hurt, and if not, there was a massive amount of anticipation and anxiety involved. I remember going to [carer's name] and begging and pleading for him to help me. These kids my age were terrorising me, and he told me he'd sort something out. Within two hours I was having the other kids grabbing me and told me I had been telling on them, and all of a sudden there's no staff around. We were supposed to be supervised in a maximum security detention unit, and all of a sudden there's no staff and I'm being attacked over information I provided a staff member to ensure my security, and it had been betrayed. And I only went to that man out of pure desperation. I didn't want to go to him, because he did the same thing to me, but I had nothing left. He was the man. He was the boss. I thought if I begged enough, maybe he'd help me. I was wrong there too. Then I started self-harming. A lot. And isolating a lot. Refusing to come out of my room, just flatly refusing.

**Because these attacks happened in the common areas?**

Yeah.

**During the day?**

Yeah. During the day, during the evenings, during mealtimes. I'd cop a salt shaker in the forehead, or someone would make me eat salt, or pepper. Continually punch me in the ribs, or whatever, you know. F... with my food, take it. Stick their finger in their ass and then touch my food with it.