

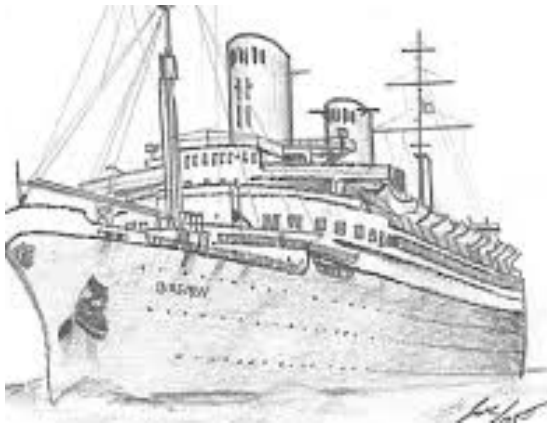
Colin Hiscoe's Life Story

Colin Hiscoe and David Henderson

ENQUIRIES

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Colin Hiscoe's Story



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Foreword

This book is one in a series of five life stories of members of Reinforce, the oldest self advocacy group in Victoria. It represents one of the outcomes of a collaborative research project between the Living with Disability Research Centre (Latrobe University) and the Reinforce History Group, which was a collaborative group formed to work on the ARC Linkage project 'Self Advocacy and Inclusion: What can be learned from speaking up over the years'. The group consisted of Amanda Hiscoe, Janice Slattery, Norrie Blythman, Jane Rosengrave (Hauser) and the late David Banfield from Reinforce and Professor Christine Bigby, Dr Patsie Frawley (La Trobe University) and Dr Paul Ramcharan (RMIT). These life stories were produced over two years of collaboration with members of the history group and the historian Dr David Henderson (La Trobe University).

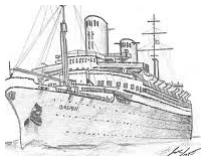


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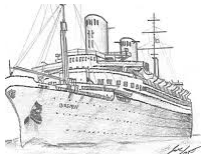


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Reinforce and Self Advocacy

I first saw Colin Hiscoe speak publicly on a warm and unusually humid day at the beginning of April in 2010. We, about thirty or forty people in all, had squeezed into one of the Reinforce meeting rooms in order to honour the memory of Doug Pentland who had died a year earlier. Reinforce had organized the memorial day and Colin Hiscoe, who was the President of Reinforce at the time and who had occupied this position for almost four years, was going to open proceedings. The room was only half full when I arrived but over the next few minutes it filled up quickly and by the time that Colin walked in to get things going the room was full. Colin is a short, heavy-set man with white hair and large glasses that accentuate his friendly eyes. Although he has lived in Australia for most of his life, he has retained his English accent. He has a high voice that seems out of keeping with his sturdy frame. He welcomed us all and spoke briefly about the history of Reinforce. Next, he introduced Christine Asquini from the Department of Human Services and in a low, even voice Asquini spoke about importance of Self Advocacy in Australia and the role that Reinforce had played in the movement over the years.

I can no longer remember much of what Asquini said that day, though I do remember that she stumbled, twice, over the words

self-advocacy. It seemed somehow pertinent at the time, because it was a problem I shared. Indeed, for a while, when this project was still new to me, it seemed as if every time I tried to say self-advocacy a different combination of sounds came out of my mouth. But pronunciation was only part my problem. I was also struggling with definitions and meanings, because explaining what self-advocacy actually is, or means, is not a simple task. Over the years, a number of studies have attempted to pin down the fundamental components of self-advocacy and it has been defined variously as a civil rights movement, a goal for education, a component of self-determination and even as a way of life. In one of the first attempts at defining self-advocacy, Williams and Schoultz argued that self-advocacy could best be understood as people with disabilities 'pursuing their own interests, being aware of their rights and taking responsibility for tackling infringements of those rights'. Thus Williams and Schoultz effectively tied self-advocacy to the civil rights movement, defining it primarily as a movement for social change. Since then however, subsequent definitions have sought to re-conceptualize self-advocacy as a skill or an ability. In 1991 for example, Balcazar, Fawcett and Seekins defined self-advocacy as 'the ability to communicate with others to acquire information and recruit help in meeting personal needs and goals. Today, most current definitions seem intent on defining self-advocacy as both skill and social movement.

Evidently, self-advocacy is particularly resistant to simple and concise definition. It means different things to different people and I

had made a habit of asking each interviewee what self-advocacy meant to them. I remember when I asked Colin Hiscoe he was quiet for a moment before replying. 'Probably, being able to stand up for myself', he said, 'and learning, learning how to do that, and learning what my rights are within society, and probably putting them into place, and then to train other people, around what I've been taught'. He paused and I remember resisting the urge to fill the silence. 'So it's passing on the skills that I've been taught', said Colin, 'to other people with disabilities'. But that day at the Doug Pentland Memorial, Colin was not talking about self-advocacy. He was more intent on remembering a man who is central to the story of Reinforce. Colin is a good public speaker and he did not rush his words. He spoke eloquently about his friend and colleague. It was a measured, moving speech and it was only towards the end that Colin's voice broke. Then briefly, almost silently, he began to cry. I can remember thinking that he would not be able to finish. The room was silent and beside me David Banfield was capturing the whole thing on his handheld video recorder. He was breathing loudly through his nose and for what seemed like one minute or more it was the only sound I could hear. Finally, in a thin voice, Colin resumed his speech and somehow managed to pull himself to the end.

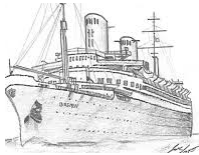


When I finally met Colin Hiscoe a few weeks later I remember telling him that I had been impressed and moved by his speech. 'Thank you. Thank you. That was one of the hardest speeches I've ever had to do', Colin replied. He took a deep breath. 'Doug's been a really great inspiration to me, and we've had a lot of fun together and a lot of good times together, and he told me how to do public speaking, because I went out with him one day. I said "can I come up with you and learn how to do it?" and he said "yes sure". And then the next time we went out he did it a little bit and he said "oh, I've had, I've said enough, I want Colin to do it". Right, so I had a go. And we talked about how that went and, yes, he's given me a lot of confidence and a lot of self-belief'.



I said something inane, about how Doug Pentland must have been an amazing man. I was distracted because I remember thinking to myself that the interview was going well. I kept looking over at my computer, making sure that everything was being recorded. If Colin found my fidgeting distracting, he didn't show it. He was speaking freely and on the transcript it shows: large chunks of his own words with very little prompting. It was not something I was used to – if anything, the opposite was true – yet he did not take on a tone as if speaking for the record. I have noticed how some people talk differently, with more gravitas perhaps, when they know the tape recorder is running. But Colin seemed relatively unaffected by the constraints that recording can have on a conversation. He spoke freely and, for the most part, fluently. 'He was one of the best', Colin said, talking about Doug Pentland. 'One of the funny things I remember about Doug', said Colin. 'You know when I was talking before about this office, and raving about how

good it was, and it was, it was wonderfully large. Anyway, at the other side, at the back, you know in the other room near the kitchen, we went out there one day, we were all having, we were having dinner, and we had a couch and I was laid out on the couch having a bit of a rest. Anyway Doug came in and wanted to join us. And there were no seats left, so he found this box, you know, like a cardboard box. He plonked it down and went to sit on it. And just as he sat down he passed wind and the box broke. And the box fell through and we were all laughing and killing ourselves, just peeing ourselves with laughter. We said oh gee Doug, your farts must be really strong the blow the bloody box up'. Colin Laughed out loud though I could see that there were also tears in his eyes. 'It was gorgeous', he said. He breathed out slowly and it sounded like a sigh. 'I'm glad I got to see him before he, you know'. Colin stopped himself from saying the word died, as if he still couldn't quite believe that his friend was dead. 'He left at midnight that night. On the Sunday, Monday morning. His carer, Gloria, rang that morning, around about eight, or seven, eight, telling me that he's gone. So yes, I was glad I suppose, that I got to see him on the Sunday to say goodbye'.



Childhood

Colin told me all of this the second time we met to talk. The first time I interviewed him we spoke about his life. He had started off by suggesting that I ask questions and had promised to answer them as well as he could. Within a few minutes however he had launched into a practiced version of his past and my questions, when I asked them, were more or less ignored. I let him speak, waiting for breaks that never seemed to come. I can remember that there were one or two interruptions during this first interview, but it hardly stopped the flow of Colin's story.

We started with dates. Dates and chronologies often help give some shape or sense to a life. At the very least, they offer a way into a story and for Colin Hiscoe it was no different. 'I was born in Leeds Infirmary, in England', said Colin, 'and my house was number 92, Cardinal Crescent, Dewsbury Road, Yorkshire Leeds, eleven. I left England on 12 July 1962, and I arrived in Australia, roughly 16 August 1962. So I was 12 when I left. I came across with me mum. I haven't got a dad. He died before I was born. Yes, and me grandma and me grandad died, and my aunty over here wrote to me mum, saying "oh, nothing much worth keeping us there, come to Australia, better life, better opportunity, better life for me". And then Mum said, "yes, okay, we'll come". I didn't want to go', Colin said, 'I was happy back there. I've never been able to settle here'.

'I've got to go back', he said after a short pause, 'I've just got to go back'. Colin told me how he had written submissions for funding in the hope of making a trip back home, but they had never met with any success. He seemed forlorn just thinking about England and to change the subject I asked him where he lived when he arrived in Australia. 'We lived about three to five miles outside of Wangaratta, a place called Oxley Flats. I lived with me aunty and me uncle and me cousin. I went to Oxley Flats primary school. It wasn't bad, I liked it, yes. Only thing I didn't like about it was that one day I decided to play up and for punishment I got put down in the bubs' grade, in first grade. I had to do their work, and then for homework I had to do my own work. Then I had to do my homework that everybody had got given, you know, for that day, then I had to do the bubs' homework as well'. But on the whole, Colin said, school had been ok. It was living with his mother's extended family that was the problem. 'I hated living with me aunty and uncle', he said, 'absolutely hated that'.



Colin and his mother, Leeds Colin's Mother at home. Leeds.

When an opportunity arrived for Colin to get away from Oxley Flats, he took it. 'I don't know why or how but I was going down to Melbourne to go and see, oh I don't know what you call them, I think you call them a psychologist or something. So we caught a train in Wangaratta, came down, and he was having a talk to me and having a talk to me mother. He talked to mum and got me to put these things in a box in different holes. And he got me looking at all these inkblots and telling him what I thought they were'. Colin stopped for a moment. He looked down at his hands, which were resting in his lap. 'It was weird' he said quietly. He stretched the word right out making it sound as if it had two syllables rather than one. 'Anyway he said he wanted to see me some more, and to save me coming down all the way from Wangaratta and costing a fair bit of money, how would I like to move into a boys' home? So I jumped at the opportunity, just to get away from me uncle. So I moved into a boys' home in 1962'.



Colin Hiscoe as a young boy.

That was in Canterbury. The St John's Boys Home in Balwyn Road, 'Absolutely loved it there', said Colin. 'Yes absolutely loved it, I went to Balwyn State School, absolutely loved that. I got stayed down a year, because when I went there I went into the sixth grade but when I went there it was near the end of the year. And I was struggling with some of the work there. Compared to back home, it was totally different. So they kept me down a year. The following year, I went to Blackburn Tech, absolutely hated that, absolutely, particularly one subject that was solid geometry. The teacher we all had was an absolute pig', said Colin. 'Oh! I hated him, and he hated me. Half past one every Friday there used to be a knock on the headmaster's door and he'd say "yes come in Hiscoe, what's wrong with you this time?" Yes and he got used to it. Half past one every Friday I'd be knocking on his doors, telling him I was sick. Just so I could stay out of that class'.

I laughed out loud and tried to remember if I had ever gone to such extremes to miss a class. But Colin was speaking again and from the tone of his voice I already knew that we were into a different, more serious part of his story. 'Anyway this particular day I got sent back to class', said Colin, 'and I was sick. I really was sick. Anyway, I had pains in me stomach and couldn't concentrate and the pains were getting worse and I just laid with me head on the desk, and you know, just holding me stomach. And the teacher called out me name and as I looked up he threw the blackboard duster at me. He got me right here', Colin said, and pointed at his forehead. 'And he asked me what was wrong with me and I told him

and he said, "oh, you'd better go see the headmaster then". I said "well can I ask somebody to help me get there because I don't think I can walk there". He said "no, you've got to get there under your own steam". So I started walking and I collapsed. He told me to get up, so what happened, I collapsed again'. Colin looked up at me then, as if to make sure that I was following his story. 'So I was just crawling on me hands and knees and as I went past him he I kicked me up the you know where. Anyway, when I got to the headmaster's office he took one look at me and called my cottage parents. Mr. and Mrs Robertson they were, absolutely wonderful people, and they took me to the doctor's. He came out, took one look at me and said "nah get him to hospital" and I was operated on that day. Appendicitis', Colin explained, 'it was just about to burst'.

Colin, who had been speaking rapidly, went silent for a moment, as if to let everything sink in. I could tell that we were almost at the end of this particular story and I waited for Colin to continue. 'A week later I had me tonsils out', said Colin, 'and then about a month later I got expelled, which suited me fine'.

By now Colin was seventeen years old. He was finished with school and getting too old for the St. John Boys Home in Balwyn. 'I tried a few jobs', Colin said, 'and then I started to get a bit old for the cottage, because you can only stay there until about 17. They put me upstairs in a special part. Then they put me in a hostel. And then I got transferred to this training farm in Tatura. I didn't want to go', he said, 'no way. I didn't want to go'. Colin told me how as soon as he met the owner of this training farm he knew that things would

not work out. 'As soon as I set eyes on him, I didn't like him. I've got this thing', Colin explained, 'I don't know what it is, but in the first instance, before someone has said a thing, I know whether I'm going to like them. And I knew I hated him and it turned out, I turned out to be right. I turned out to be right', Colin said again. 'He was a real arsehole'.



Park Side School.

Suddenly Colin was in the middle of another story of abuse, though he spoke in such an even tone I wondered how often he had told this story before. 'One day I were just mowing the lawn', said Colin, 'and I stopped to get a brick out of the way and I cut the end of me finger, the end of me finger was just hanging. So I went to get a Band-Aid and get it cleaned up a bit, and I was showing the boss of the place and he wanted to cut the end of me finger off with a razorblade. And because I wouldn't let him he hit me with a chair leg, from the top of my neck right down to the back of my legs, I was black and blue all over'. Colin stopped, but only to take a breath. 'I rang the minister of the boys' home where I was staying',

he said, 'and I rang the social worker. I rang me mother, and I even rang me aunt. Nobody'd believe me. I said, "well come out and have a look at the bruises all over me then if you don't believe me? Oh, I haven't got time". Anyway I tried running away, which I did, I ran away a couple of times. And he threatened me with a ball and chain, so I ran away again, so he tied with a ball and chain. And eventually he took me back to the boys' home for me own safety because a few of the boys was having a bit of me. I was shoved head-first down a hole and me legs spread and he just grabbed really hard in between my legs, I complained about this so they told me not to be such a sook.'

I was shocked by Colin's story, even though I had read it before, for this was not the first time that Colin had told his life story as history. And the fact is, the story he told me that day is quite similar to the story he had told another researcher, Kelley Johnson, five years earlier. My first impulse, on hearing Colin tell these familiar stories, was to get behind this official story and explore the layers of his remembering for this is something we do as historians. With personal stories however, especially life stories, the parameters are slightly different. We need to make sure that we are acting on behalf of our informants. And we need to present our informants in the way that they wish to be presented. Even so, it is important to realize that shaping a narrative from a group of disparate memories is an artificial exercise that effects remembering in a peculiar way and I wonder if through talking about his life in the first interview (as well as on other occasions) Colin had fixed certain

stories or themes in his memory. I wonder if all those tapes and the transcripts had become what the historian, Alastair Thomson, would call 'an active constituent of individual and collective remembering', elevating and prioritising certain memories and versions of the past at the expense of others.

Thomson has written that 'our identities shape remembering; who we think we are now and what we want to become affects what we think we have been'. Memories, he suggests, are "'significant pasts'" that we compose to make a more comfortable sense of our life over time'. Perhaps these stories that Colin tells of his difficult childhood offer a suitable counterpoint to what he has become: a successful self-advocate, a good husband, the president of Reinforce.



The Rex Cinemas Beeston, Leeds.

On the other hand, these stories of victimhood might simply offer a counterpoint to the mostly positive stories that Colin tells of his childhood in England, or home as he still likes to refer to the country of his birth. Later in the interview Colin became quite animated as he explored his memories of his childhood in Leeds. 'I loved it back at home', Colin said, 'I really did, but I don't have a lot

of memories of there. I was hardly ever home', he recalled. 'You know, I'd come home, do me homework and then I was gone. And on the weekend I was up about seven or eight o'clock, have breakfast, "I'm going, bye, see you at tea time." Never come home for lunch'. Colin was speaking excitedly. He skipped from one memory to another, barely pausing to take a breath. There was nothing rehearsed or polished about these stories and it occurred to me that as we talked, we were, in some way, getting underneath the official story. 'We'd go out and we'd play,' said Colin. 'Sometimes we used to run to this vacant paddock, particularly if it had been cut, you know the grass has just been cut. And we'd get rakes and rake it, and get a pile of grass. It was great, and playing cowboys and Indians and you'd get shot just before you get to the stack of grass and you'd die and you'd dive into the grass. Oh it was great', Colin said, and he let out a big sigh. 'Come home with all these grass seeds in you. And we used to sit on the bridge, watching all the trains go past, and this particular day, a couple of times we got a bit more daring and we climbed over the fence and down the embankment and standing against the walls of the tunnel as the trains were going past. That was great. Great fun'. He skipped to another memory. 'Go over the bridge and there was an orchard. And we always used to climb up the tree and pinch all the apples. It was great fun' Colin said again. He took another quick breath before continuing. 'Going to the Rex Picture Theatre', he said without further elaboration, 'going to the Beeston Picture Theatre'. I had the

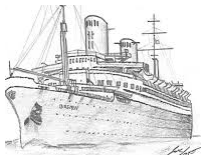
impression that it was all he could do to simply sketch the briefest detail of each memory that was now flashing across his mind.



The SS Orion. The ship that brought Colin and his mother to Australia.

Soon however, following a brief interruption, we were back in more familiar territory, that is to say, a more rehearsed version of the past as Colin told me about his trip out to Australia at the age twelve. 'We came out on a ship. Its name was the SS Orion. O. R. I. O. N.' said Colin, spelling it out for me. 'It used to be a ship in the War and it was its last major voyage and then it was going to get scrapped. And I was coming out after having a meal this particular day, with Mum and a few other people and I heard my name called so I turned round. I couldn't see anybody that I recognised and started walking again, heard my name again so I turned around again and this little girl was sitting on the seat. I said, "are you calling me?" She said "yes", I said "well, I'll be back in a few minutes, I've just got to go somewhere". So I went and came back. Her name was Sheila Lavette', said Colin. 'She was 12, no 13. I was 12. She was French and wanted to know if I'd escort her to the pictures and being a gentleman I said 'yes, I'd like to do that". I said "I'll have to ask me mum when she comes out from having her

meal". So I asked her and she said 'what time will you be back?' We worked out the picture finished about 11.30, and by the time I had walked her back to the cabin it'd be about, I don't know, about quarter to 12. Anyway, we went out, never seen any of the picture, or very little of it', Colin said. He smiled and I refrained from asking what they had done to pass the time. 'We went for a walk after the picture had finished, ended up on a deck that we shouldn't have been on, which was A Deck, getting really cold and really tired by this time, so we get in the lifeboats and cover ourselves up with the tarpaulin that was over there. Had half the bloody ship out looking for us and everybody's thinking that we'd fallen overboard. Anyway, eight o'clock in the morning I decided to turn up home, back in the cabin, and so, oh boy'. He paused for a moment. I had the impression that he was telling a joke. I waited for the punch line and prepared myself to laugh. 'The funny thing about it was I asked Mum the next day could I go out again'. This time, unsurprisingly, Colin's Mum had said no.



Telling Your Story

I remember that I once asked Colin Hiscoe what he thought about this project and about the collection of life stories that we were slowly putting together. In many ways, the impetus for this project had come from him as he had often written to organisations seeking funding for just such a project. 'Oh, I think it's really important that you tell your story', he said, 'so that any other new people that are coming on board will know the history of how we started. They'll know what it is that we're trying to do and why it is that we're trying to do it. I believe that's really important that you do that so that all the history that is in people's heads is not lost'. I was silent and after a while Colin continued. 'You know we were fortunate enough that Doug Pentland, he has all this stuff in his head, and we were fortunate enough to interview him and get his story. So he hasn't gone to his grave with all that knowledge in his head, you know. I think that's what it's all about, that's what we're trying to do. We are getting old', Colin said, 'we want to retire, we want to do this, that and the other. Reinforce might just die and dissolve and another advocacy group might come in and look, and here's all the stuff about what's already been done, what's already been achieved. You know the hassles, the problems, the fights, the struggles, everything, it's all there all documented'. He gave it a bit more thought. 'Anybody should be allowed to tell their story', he said,

'anyone should be able to say that's what it was like, and we need to be able to give the person an opportunity to do that'.

But what is my role in this endeavour? One of the key issues here is, of course, vulnerability. An informant places their story in your trust. They do that because they need to do it and I am aware that in my own customary way, I am making something other of Colin's story than the story he knows. I don't know how not to do this. I don't think it is possible not to do this. Even so, I am convinced that he recognizes something himself in this story, because it is his story too. After all, the memories and the stories have all come from him.

What is clear is that this sort of collaboration requires a lot of time and fortunately, our fortnightly history group meetings gave everyone time to get used to me and to get used to the idea of me prying into their lives. With Colin Hiscoe, who was not a member of our history group, and who, as president of Reinforce, seemed somehow less accessible, it was different. I remember at one stage I was dropping into his office once or twice a week, introducing myself and simply chatting about mundane things like the week ahead or the weather. And although there was no good reason for it, I remember that I had been quite nervous about asking him for an interview.

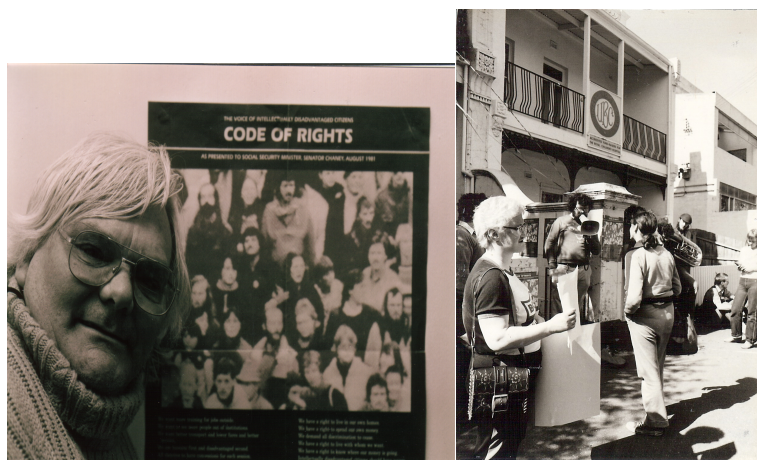
The next time I saw Colin Hiscoe however, my nerves had disappeared and we talked, for more than an hour, about self-advocacy and Reinforce. I remember asking how Colin had become involved in self-advocacy in the first place. Again, he did not have a

problem with dates. 'Well it was in 1982', said Colin. 'Yes the girl I was going with, Julie, Julie Cooper, oh, her support worker, from Middle Park, and she was also a support worker here. Viv Top came and talked to her, about some stuff about a conference that was coming up and would we like to go? She talked to us about it. It sounded really interesting, and that was the one that Summers in 1982. So I decided that I'd like to go along, and Julie thought she'd like to go along too. I think we both became members at the same time.' The way Colin tells it, the conference was something of a revelation. 'I just liked what I was hearing', Colin said, 'and what people were trying to do and because I'd been in an institution, and because I'd been in the sheltered workshop I knew, I knew all the problems that they were talking about. I knew what existed. I could relate to what they were trying to do so I thought, wow, you know? Instead of trying to fight the system by myself, I'll join this group and see, you know, see how far we can get.'



Reinforce. Colin, Amanda, David, Doug and Luke outside their current offices. Melbourne.

Colin went on to tell me about Reinforce in the early days and his memories are of movement from one office to the next. First Reinforce had offices in Brunswick. 'We were in Brunswick at the old DRC office. I think it was 126 or 128 Sydney Road. It's now a hairdresser, it used to be the People First Resource Unit as well, where I did some work. We were at the back of the office, back of the shop, and then we moved from there to a support worker's house, because we had to leave'. Soon Reinforce was on the move again. 'I think we went from there to VCOSS', Colin continued, 'and from VCOSS, I think we went to High Street, in Northcote and from there we went to St. Nicholas Arcade'. Colin paused and looked up at the ceiling as if that would help him remember his early involvement with Reinforce. 'Or it might have been St. Nicholas Arcade and then Northcote', he said, 'I can't remember. On the fifth floor we were, it was a fantastic office. I wish we all could have still been there but the rent was just sky-high, and every 12 months it went up, and up, and up, and up, you know'.



Colin has fond memories of those days in Northcote. 'It was just, it was just ridiculous' he said, and by ridiculous he meant great. 'It was twice as big as this office. This office and that office, this office, that one, and the one where we're in now, it'd be bigger than that. It's like you walk in the, you walked through the doors, and you're standing at the door, of the office, so you open the door, and then all of this, is just office space'. He was talking with his hands, waving them about to convey a sense of the space of those offices in Northcote. I looked around the room we were sitting in now and wondered at how much things had changed. Our room felt claustrophobic. A broken desk was sitting in one corner and a battered old white board was leaning up against another wall. 'There was desks all over the place', said Colin, and 'you could look out of the window, you couldn't see much, but you looked out the window, and then you walked down the big passageway and there was another big room, another big room, about the size of this and off of it was a kitchen'. It sounded pretty good and I said as much. Colin agreed. 'It was huge', he said, 'absolutely huge'.

'But I was a bit scared of saying who I was and what I was, so I used me cousin's name. Whenever I wrote a letter I signed me cousin's name, which is illegal I suppose'. Colin chuckled. 'Oi! You didn't hear that from me', he said, and he laughed again. I was confused and wondered why he would not use his own name. 'Well we were causing problems, we were, we were stirring up trouble. We were doing some stuff at that time with HEF, HEF number two

branch, the union the nurses in the hospital employees federation union. I remember one demonstration I went to at Dallas Brook's Hall, East Melbourne, on the Victoria Promenade. We were going to a meeting then because the HEF had gone out on the sly, and some of our members had gone in and working in Sunbury and what not, and it came time for questioning, you know they were talking about what was happening and what negotiations had been done and had they been stalled and what not. Anyway it came time for questions so this bloke put up his hand, they said: "Yes, you've got a question?" he says: "Yes" he says: "While this strike is still on, and while we're still out on strike, is there any money we can be paid for 'em anyway, because I've got to pay a bill!". Colin laughed out loud, and when he did speak again, he was a little out of breath. 'We snuck into that meeting, we weren't supposed to be there but we snuck in'.

'We were causing a lot of trouble in those days', Colin said and he sounded nostalgic, as if he were talking about the good old days. 'We had a drama group, we had a media group that, you know, we were writing media releases and I remember one of the other things that we did, I'm skipping all over the place, but one of the things that they were doing was they did this petition around the Disability Act. I was working there at that time, because I helped put the bloody things together. Anyway it was on the back page, so you just rip it off and send it back, and I think there must have been about, oh I don't know, 20 or 30 odd sacks, full of mail, and we marched up to Parliament House, went in, and Matthews, I think his name

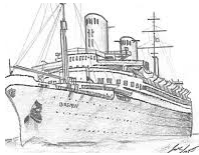
was Matthews, it might not have been, but I think at the time Labor was in. Anyway, we just emptied them all onto his desk, bloody petitions everywhere, went everywhere. It was great fun. Great fun.

When I asked Colin if he thought that Reinforce was more political back then, he was quick to reply. 'We were out there. We were in people's faces. We didn't care whose toes we stood on, you know. If there was a problem, bang, we were out there. One of the things was that we had a sit-in at Tom Roper's office when he was the Minister, and the *Herald Sun* came and took a picture of one of our members in Tom Roper's office there with his feet up on the desk, reading the newspaper'. He laughed out loud before continuing. 'Next day the front page was this bloke who was a Reinforce member, sitting at Tom Roper's desk. We got a phone call from his offsider that works with him saying, hey, you know that's not allowed'. And how do you think Reinforce is different now, from those days I asked. 'When I first joined we had support workers there. Everything was generated, seemed to be generated with the support workers, you know what I mean. You used to have a support worker paid'. Colin reeled off a list of names of some of the people who had worked with Reinforce over the years. Frank de Veer, Lesley Hall, Jacqui Burden, Anne Fisher, Liz McKenzie, Peter Atrill. But over the years, these support workers had moved on to other jobs and, as Colin tells it, Reinforce began to falter. 'Eventually', Colin said, 'all the support workers are gone, and here's Reinforce in the 1990s and 2000s, no support, or very little support'. He stopped speaking and looked away from me for a moment.

'We've had support here and there, but not as much as it was down in the 1980s'.



According to Colin however, it is not just a matter of support that has contributed to the changes at Reinforce. 'We're not as radical as we were', he said. 'You know, we're getting a bit older, we're getting a bit wiser, oh maybe that was the way at that time. Where we did go and step on people's toes, we didn't care whose toes we stood on, you know for example if there was an issue up at Beechworth, we didn't go up to the minister. We didn't go to the supervisor of that hospital, or the nurses, or whatever, or HEF. We went bang straight to oh Errol Cox or whoever it was in charge at that time. We used to sit there and squat in his office until he came back, you know. Once he came back', said Colin, 'and he has seen us and took off again. He didn't bother coming back'.



Conclusion

I did not get the chance to finish Colin's story the way I would have liked. The last time I caught up with him, I read him what I had written of his life up to that point, and when I listen to that recording now, I am convinced that he enjoyed having his memories read back to him. He laughed a lot at what I had written of his life and when I finished there were tears in his eyes. As I read some his story back to him, it had reminded him of things that he had left out and other things that he still wished to say. He wanted to talk more about his mother, his great-Grandfather and his cousins. He hoped to print of a map of the streets of Leeds that he had wandered as young boy. He wanted to talk more about his life in England and we had planned more interviews to focus on these other aspects of his life. However, his poor health combined with my own time constraints on this project meant that the story has remained as it is.

Writing a life story of another person is an unusual exercise. It is no easy thing to take someone's words and shape them into a narrative such that the subject might recognise him or herself on the page. Over the course of this project I have spent more time with other people on their life stories that I have with Colin, and I cannot say that I am completely sure that I have done Colin's story the justice it deserves. That is not to say that the project was not

worthwhile. The last words that Colin said to me, just before I turned off the tape recorder on 1 July 2011 was 'it sounds good, I like. I really do like it'.