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## Tony Deren's nightmare: 'There goes Mr Bubbles' Mr Bubbles. How false accusations of child sex abuse destroyed the lives of an innocent couple

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**I** *t happened again the other day. As Tony Deren is striding to work through the concourse of Wynyard station he notices two men in business suits staring at him and talking to each other. He goes up to them and launches into the little speech he uses on these occasions.*

"I'm not guilty, you know," he pleads, looking into their eyes, trying to convince them. "We were set up. One of these days there will be an inquiry and the truth will come out."

The men look embarrassed and turn away. Tony Deren knows nothing he says will convince them, but he still had to try. He walks on towards his office. It is the start of another bad day.

It is four years ago next month since a posse of police burst into the Derens' home at six o'clock on a Sunday morning, ransacked their possessions, and dragged them off to the local police station to be charged with the vilest crime in the book – sexual abuse of children.

It was to become the most notorious pedophilia "trial" in Australian criminal history, the so-called Mr Bubbles case – eventually Tony Deren, his wife, Dawn, and two teachers at the Seabeach kindergarten at Mona Vale which she owned, were charged on 49 counts involving 17 boys and girls aged between three and six.

The build-up to the hearing was (claimed the Derens' counsel, Mr John Gordon) like the burning of witches at the stake – "Persecution, not prosecution". He said the claims had been made by "hysterical" parents, ready to believe any proposition "no matter how absurd".

Police leaked the (false) information to the tabloids that pornographic videos and books about Satanic rites had been seized during the raid; the prosecution claimed (but produced no evidence) that they had "dressed in white robes and certain occult things happened"; and a rent-a-crowd of women unconnected with the case mobbed the Derens outside the court, screaming "dirty, disgusting scum".

In spite of this, after a six-week committal hearing at the City Court in Glebe, the magistrate, Mr David Hyde, threw out all the charges in August 1988.

The police had failed to produce a shred of convincing evidence, apart from the children's lurid and contradictory statements, and these had been "contaminated" by their interviewers, said the magistrate.

The NSW Director of Public Prosecutions, Mr Reg Blanch, QC, conceded later: "There was simply no case from the beginning."

"I suppose we were naive," says Tony Deren. "We really believed that when the charges were dropped people would realise that we were innocent. But they just refuse to accept the court's decision – they say we really did it, and got off on some legal technicality. It's just been one nightmare after another. When is it going to end?"

The victims have had their say – the parents of the children involved. The politicians have had a field-day calling for inquiries and changes in the law- in an extraordinary outburst, the former Minister for Community Services, Ms Deirdre Grusovin, said of the Derens' discharge: "No-one in

this country, apart from pedophiles, who must be rejoicing, can feel happy about this case.

But this was the first time that the Derens have had a chance to publicly put their side of this extraordinary story – the emotional and financial devastation that the false accusation of child abuse wrought on the previously uneventful lives of two ordinary middle-class, middle-aged people.

They were talking in their small rented flat in a leafy street at Dee Why -all they now have left. Their two children have left home, the assets accumulated during a lifetime of hard work – particularly the beautiful house overlooking the Narrabeen Lakes which they had built and moved into just months before the raid – are gone.

Tony Deren is now 51, a stocky, barrel-chested man with a distinctive rectangular face and dark hair brushed forward Napoleon-style; Dawn is two years younger, matronly, the organiser and the family spokesman.

They have been together for nearly 30 years now – they met at a dance at the Palais in Geelong, where Tony's parents had settled after emigrating from the ruins of post-war Europe.

He is, above all, a survivor. His family fled Ukraine during the war (his original language was Russian, his name Anatoly Derendajev) and one of his earliest memories is of watching a horse-drawn cart laden with refugees crashing through the icy surface of a frozen lake and disappearing.

With one notable exception, the Derens had led a life of suburban respectability until that November morning four years ago.

Tony had worked most of his adult life as a technician with Telecom; Dawn had, for eight years, been running what the Department of Family and Community Services (FACS) inspectors described just months before the raid as a well-run kindergarten ... the best (according to Dawn) on the northern beaches peninsula, with 120 children attending regularly, and a two-year waiting list.

The exception was, Tony believes, the reason why people are reluctant to accept that he is not Mr Bubbles, the figure dressed as a clown who is supposed to have enticed 17 of those children into sexual antics in a bubble-bath.

It happened 20 years ago when the Derens were living in Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea, where he was working as a Telecom technician, and she ran another kindergarten.

Tony Deren says he was overcome with an urge to touch-up young girls -half-a-dozen times in the space of 18 months he indecently groped girls in the Boroko swimming pool, and in August 1972 he was caught.

He was charged with the aggravated assault of two girls, and after a magistrate's court hearing, was ordered to undergo psychiatric treatment. No conviction was recorded.

"I still don't fully understand it," says Tony Deren, "I went to see the psychiatrist six or eight times, but eventually he said there was no point in further treatment, it was something I would have to learn to control. I haven't had those feelings since, and even if I did I wouldn't do anything. It gave me such a shock."

Whatever the truth – the court records have now been lost, the psychiatrist cannot remember treating Tony Deren – it was that mark on his record, his first and last appearance in any court on any charge, that led to what his counsel described as the persecution of Tony Deren.

The police, investigating a complaint by parents of a child at the Seabeach kindergarten, contacted Interpol and discovered the two charges in his PNG record sheet.

"That was one of the first things they asked me (the morning of the raid)," says Tony Deren. "They didn't have any details – just two charges of aggravated assault.

"They asked me what it was about, and I told them. From that moment on, the police decided I was Mr Bubbles, and they were going to put me in jail."

It also, when his confession was aired in a pre-taped interview on the Hinch show the night the charges were dismissed, convinced many viewers that (in the words of one lawyer) he was "a repeat sex offender who should have his balls cut off".

There are, in Tony Deren's view, overtones of other gross miscarriages of justice such as the Harry Blackburn affair in the way he was treated. "The whole thing was a masquerade," he says.

Certainly, in the Derens' opinion, there was gross unprofessionalism in the way the "evidence" was put together, which will be canvassed in defamation actions they have taken against the police and a number of media outlets.

The “Satanic” literature seized from the house was, in fact, a selection of books from the Hallelujah bookshop in Manly – the Derens, though not churchgoers, are interested in evangelical Christianity.

His “identification” at a line-up at the police station was the result of one child smiling and waving at him. There were no pornographic videotapes – the Derens didn’t even possess a video-player. The medical evidence was suspect.

But to establish all this, to prove their innocence, cost money – money the Derens did not have.

When Tony Deren reported for work the day after he was charged – still in a state of shock and asking for a week’s sick leave to sort things out – his boss at Telecom suspended him indefinitely, without pay.

“That still hurts me – the attitude of the people at work,” he says. “Without waiting to see what the court would say they just made up their minds that I was guilty.”

The kindergarten had to be closed a day later, after Alan Jones invited a caller to name Seabeach on his radio talkback show. The result was instant hysteria. “The place became a media circus ... there were quite a lot of parents who just didn’t believe it, but FACS sent social workers to the kindergarten and they told the parents their children were being abused,” says Dawn Deren.

With both of them now out of work – and Dawn Deren nursing a shoulder broken in a fall – the Derens’ only other asset, their dream house at Wheeler Heights which they had occupied for less than six months, had to be sold. The kindergarten was reopened the following year under the management of a friend, Vicki Scott – but she, too, claims she was harassed by FACS officers and eventually Seabeach had to be closed for good.

An investment which Dawn Deren spent eight years building up, and which she valued at \$120,000, simply disappeared. The only work she can get now is cleaning people’s houses.

“Legal expenses just ate everything up,” she says. “We got so low at one point that we sold the second television; we were selling books just to get money to eat.” She never once doubted her husband, and always believed they would be acquitted – but she did not realise at what cost.

By the time investigators had been hired, experts brought from around Australia and overseas, and lawyers’ fees paid, their freedom had cost them \$285,000. True, the court later awarded them costs, noting the “peril, ignominy and public vilification” they had suffered – but that was only \$227,000, and the Derens had to pay the difference.

The Derens were struck by the irony of the recent awards of compensation totalling more than \$500,000 by the Victims of Crime Compensation Tribunal to the parents of about 10 of the children allegedly abused.

“I’m glad they got the money,” says Dawn Deren. “They have been through hell over this – the police told them, FACS told them, everyone told them their children had been abused and now some of them believe it. But what about us – haven’t we been through hell too?”

And something else on which they agree with the parents – the Derens say that a Royal Commission should be held, and they are appalled at the Government’s refusal to hold one. They believe such an inquiry is the only way the mystery of what really happened at Seabeach will be solved.

Tony Deren has his own suspicions about this. He believes there really was a ring of pedophiles operating on the peninsula and that at least two of the children attending Seabeach had in fact been involved in pornographic video-making.

“That is the tragedy of the whole thing. There really is a Mr Bubbles – I know who he is,” says Tony Deren, naming the parent of a child at the kindergarten, whom he says came along to gloat when the Derens were in court. “While they have been trying to frame us for this, the real criminals are laughing.”

One of the few people who have stuck by the Derens through their four years of fear and pain is Ms Beth Brosgarth, a psychologist with experience in counselling child abuse, and the parent of a child who was at Seabeach. Ms Brosgarth was president of the Seabeach parents’ and friends’ association, and fought to keep the kindergarten open.

She is convinced the allegations of abuse were unsubstantiated, and says that she is supported in this by an investigation by the-then Internal Police Security Unit, which followed a complaint she made about the conduct of the case. Ms Brosgarth says she was visited by two investigators around May 1990.

“They told me it was their job to make sure this case did not blow up in (former Police Commissioner) Avery’s face like the Blackburn or the Gundy affairs,” she says.

The police spent several months reinvestigating the case, and then told her “the charges would never have been laid if this had happened in any other part of Sydney ... quite clearly, none of the people charged could have done what they were charged with”.

Ms Brosgarth believes the medical “evidence” that some of the children had been sexually abused was unprofessional – it did not follow the so-called “McCann indicators” which are the internationally-accepted protocols for determining abuse – and she says a panel of overseas experts should be asked to re-examine the cases.

But, as far as the Derens are concerned, Ms Brosgarth is the exception. Most of Sydney “will not be convinced we are innocent until they catch the real Mr Bubbles ... we need someone like Columbo on the case”, says Tony Deren, referring to one of his favourite TV sleuths.

Until that happens, he will have to suffer the stares and whispers.

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