

Witness Name: Jonathan Mosen

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Exhibits: N/A

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ROYAL COMMISSION OF INQUIRY INTO ABUSE IN CARE

WITNESS STATEMENT OF JONATHAN MOSEN

I, Jonathan Mosen, will say as follows:

1. Introduction

- 1.1. My name is Jonathan Mosen, I was born in 1969. I grew up in Auckland and now live in Wellington with my wife Bonnie. We have four children, two boys and two girls. All of whom are grown.
- 1.2. I identify as Pākehā. I was born Blind and for me Blindness is very much my culture. I am also hearing impaired although I wasn't as a child.
- 1.3. For many years I have worked advocating for disabled people. I have had many roles and in 2019 I was appointed as the CEO of Workbridge. Workbridge is the largest employment agency for disabled people in New Zealand.
- 1.4. I want to share evidence with the inquiry about going to Homai College, the school for the Blind, my experiences at a mainstream intermediate and high school, and discuss my time as the Chair on the Board for the Blind Foundation.

2. Early life

- 2.1. I was a pretty gregarious child. I am the youngest of five siblings. My oldest brother, who is 15 years older than me is also Blind.
- 2.2. My parents are country people. They had very little formal education. The last thing they expected was a Blind child. I think they would concede that when my brother was born they were probably very over protective. He was their first born.

- 2.3. By the time number five comes along, and I know this as a father of four, you are a little bit more relaxed. You do not pick them up every time there is a bump and a scrape. I think they had also realised now that they had another Blind child that they just needed to let me be a child more. I was the kind of kid that had a lot of fun, got into a lot of scrapes.
- 2.4. As a child I would ride a scooter and I had this routine going that I could ride my scooter around my house and turn the corner at just the right place. If you overshoot you would end up in the rose bushes and if you turned the corner too early you whacked into the side of the house. So there was an artform to it.
- 2.5. The reason I was able to do it was that I used a technique that Blind people call echolocation. Echolocation is like the technique that bats use. You can click or even just by speaking you can sense when there is a door or when you are coming up to a wall. It is amazing how you can detect objects this way. I am hearing impaired now, but I was not hearing impaired then and I had really good echolocation skills. I still use echolocation now to some degree.

3. Abuse

Homai College for the Blind

Events leading up to admission in care

- 3.1. I was very fortunate in that my parents bought a house next door to the school for the Blind so I could walk to school in the morning and come home at night to be with my four siblings. It was an incredible sacrifice to make and not one that all families are able to make.
- 3.2. Having to send kids to board at a school for the Blind at that age is a hard decision. It often comes with family separation and I think a lot of people had quite dysfunctional relationships with their family as a result.
- 3.3. Most blind kids are mainstreamed these days unless they have multiple disabilities. However, since the 1980s it is too often the case that Blind kids are put with teachers that are not literate in Blindness terms, meaning they do not know Braille. What happens then is you get rationing because the specialised teachers who do know Braille have to travel from school to school and only have so much time to do so.
- 3.4. Rationing means only the most intelligent or most blind are given access to Braille. Even though you might have a kid who has a prognosis that their vision is going to deteriorate over time, they should know Braille for when that happens, but they're not taught it. The education of Blind kids is historically under resourced.

Arrival in institution

- 3.5. I started at Homai College in 1974. Homai College was a school for the Blind located in Manurewa, South Auckland. My understanding is that Homai was State funded at that stage, but it was operated by the Foundation for the Blind. It was a hybrid system.

- 3.6. The State, and probably donors as well, were very generous to Blind kids. I had a very good education, particularly to begin with. I loved it overall.
- 3.7. You would have around six to eight children in each class. Mechanical Braille machines are really noisy, so when you had all the kids brailleing at once it was a very noisy classroom.
- 3.8. The first point that I would like to make is that five-year-old kids belong with their parents. I would often see five-year-old kids crying for parents and not getting a lot of sympathy from the staff. It was a really difficult environment.

Day-to-day life at Homai

- 3.9. Many kids boarded at Homai and their families would send them letters. We would have these sessions in the classroom where teachers would read letters aloud to the entire class. For me as a kid it was kind of like going to school and waiting for the next installment of a soap opera because you would get to know the names of all your classmates' brothers and sisters, what they were doing and whether grandad was sick.
- 3.10. Looking back, it is extraordinary that their privacy was so violated by having their personal letters read aloud to the rest of the class. I presume that children were not asked to consent - consent was not really the done thing then. A lot of them were so homesick that they were just happy to get a letter from home. I am not aware of any consideration being given to reading a letter privately to a child.

Deaths at Homai

- 3.11. We also had kids at Homai with a range of impairments. There is a condition called Retinol Blastoma, which is a form of cancer. It means that Blind people can die at a very early age or sometimes in mid-life, it can happen any time. There are other conditions as well.
- 3.12. My first best friend at school died, I believe from retinol blastoma. One day he was there, we were great mates getting into all sorts of mischief. The next thing I knew he was sick and then he just died. We had several kids I can think of by name who just stopped turning up to school because they had passed away.
- 3.13. I think this is perhaps a reflection of the different era we were in, but I do not recall any memorial for them, let alone anyone at Homai asking if we were grieving for them. This was my first best friend and suddenly he was just not there. There was no consideration given to how that makes a young child feel. When you are five or six or seven you do not really understand death.
- 3.14. He lived in Rotorua and boarded at one of the hostels. It is possible they had some sort of remembrance at the hostel, but there was not any recognition of his death with all the people who were close to him at the school.

Cultural Neglect – Attitude Towards Echolocation

- 3.15. I was really surprised when I arrived at Homai to be constantly chastised by teachers for using echolocation. I could walk really fast and wander around the playground without any aid because I could use echolocation. However, I was repeatedly told off for using it.
- 3.16. After being told off I learned to only do it in secret. I did it on the quiet and tried not to get caught doing it. That really interfered with my cultural identity. I think the teachers thought it was some sort of weird blindism that should not be used. Some things that congenitally blind people do are nicknamed blindisms. For example, rocking, eye poking, and spinning. I think people do these things because it's a form of stimulation that your eyesight is not giving you.
- 3.17. I think the teachers just misunderstood. All our teachers knew about Blind kids was what they had observed and read in books, so I think they just concluded the clicking was a blindism that should be stopped. One of the problems we have in disability services in general is that a lot of times services are given by people that do not share our impairment and so do not really understand our experiences of the world.
- 3.18. The rationale for discouraging use of echolocation was that sighted people would think we were weird. Actually, nobody really cares – I still do it. I do understand that thinking for some of the other behaviours. If you are in a boardroom and you are rocking it might look a bit odd. However, I think where they made the mistake was associating legitimate echolocation, which gives you information you could not otherwise obtain, with those other blindisms.
- 3.19. We didn't have access to many Blind adult role models as kids. What surprised me was a couple of years later, the Chairman of the Board for the Foundation of the Blind come to our school and he was Blind and he was doing it. So, we were actually deprived of this technique by sighted educators that adult successful Blind people were using. I found that upsetting.
- 3.20. Since then, there is a guy who has made a career out of teaching echolocation. He rides bikes all over the place with only his echolocation. It is a very effective tool. I think other kids would do too – as we would often walk around in pairs. I think more than one of us would have been told at a time not to use echolocation.

Mrs Buist - Physical abuse

- 3.21. I had a teacher from 1977 whose name was Mary Buist. Perhaps typical of the time to some degree, you got a lot of smacks on the hand with a ruler if you misspelled a word or did something she considered unacceptable.
- 3.22. She would walk around the classroom, she would check the spelling and if she found a word spelled incorrectly she would yell at the top of her voice "no, no, no!" On every no she would slap your hand. It did not take much to trigger it, but it is the spelling tests I remember most vividly. It certainly made you fearful of taking spelling tests.
- 3.23. There was nothing particularly unusual about that at the time. What was unusual was an incident that happened at swimming. We had this incredible indoor swimming facility. For whatever reason I had developed a nervousness about putting my head under water. I

have often wondered why, and now I think it was because I was particularly susceptible to water getting stuck in my ears.

- 3.24. We would normally have a swimming teacher in the pool with us and the classroom teacher would sit on the side observing. I was expressing reticence to put my head under, I was happy to fossick around in the pool and even do backstroke and things. However, I was really scared about getting my head fully immersed. The teachers tolerated me being scared for a while.
- 3.25. However, one day I turned up to swimming in the middle of 1977 and discovered that Mrs Buist had brought her swimming costume with her and she was going to come into the pool to give me particular attention. Because she was so aggressive I was pretty fearful of the fact she was even doing this. It was unusual for Mrs Buist to come into the pool. It is possible that she was with other individual Blind children at other times and I was not aware of it, but I was really surprised that she was coming into the pool.
- 3.26. At first, she tried to coax me to put my head under the water. I was reacting badly to this and getting more and more upset by the idea. Finally, she said if you are not going to put your head under "I'll throw you in". I thought that was a strange expression because I was already in the water. I still could not do it and that just made me feel even more petrified.
- 3.27. At that point, she grabbed my head in both of her hands and repeatedly ducked it fully under the water. I can still hear the sound that it made. It felt like my head was under for quite a number of seconds each time. Then she would let it go to allow me to catch my breath. She kept saying she would stop when I told her I would try to do it myself.
- 3.28. This repetition occurred over maybe half a dozen times until I finally managed to splutter out that I would try. Then she finally left me alone. I do not know if the swimming teacher was aware of this happening, I think she was tending to the other kids at the time. I believe that happened on a Friday, because we used to have swimming on a Monday and Friday.
- 3.29. The next Monday, when I knew I had swimming I had what I now know was an anxiety attack. I woke up and I could barely speak. I told my mother I did not want to go to school. She could see I was in considerable distress and she asked why. I explained what had happened and she marched along with me to the office to speak to the deputy principal.
- 3.30. My mother explained what I had told her to the deputy principal, who said I did not have to go swimming while they looked into it. I do not know how the investigation was conducted. I believe the principal might have spoken to Mrs Buist and she simply said it did not happen. I do not think there was any sort of external investigation and there were no consequences for Mrs Buist that I am aware of. It did not happen again. However, someone did tell me once that she did a similar thing to them. I cannot remember who it was.
- 3.31. I've often wondered whether the regular swimming teacher was preoccupied and didn't see what was going on or if it was a case of teachers sticking together. I got the sense that teachers were protecting their own.

- 3.32. I think some of this would have happened in any context, but some of it was particular to Blind kids. If you've got a bunch of Blind kids in a swimming pool and this happens to one person, the other kids are not going to see it taking place. In that sense there are not witnesses. It would be hard in a swimming pool of sighted kids to get away with it and say it did not happen because the sighted kids could see what was going on.
- 3.33. In that sense it is Blindness specific but also I think you have authority figures engaged in patch protection and that happens all over the place even now. So it feels more like exploiting the situation because you know you can get away with it.
- 3.34. Once Mrs Buist had adamantly denied the incident, the school said there was no reason why I could not go swimming. Worse than the actual physical abuse was the way I would feel on a Sunday night knowing swimming was coming up and waking up on Monday in an awful state of anxiety. My biggest memory of this is the terror of what was coming up.
- 3.35. We used to have stories before swimming. As the story was coming to the end I would go into an anxiety attack. I would blurt out that I was scared of drowning. Finally, my mother went back into the school and said, "we just cannot go on like this, we'll have to exempt him from swimming. Whether you say it happened or not, he's clearly terrified and it's affecting everything".
- 3.36. The school agreed to exempt me from swimming for the foreseeable future, but they said since I was making up stories I had to go and see a child psychologist. They sent me to a child psychologist. I do not remember a lot about it. My mum filled in the gaps when I was an adult and told me the child psychologist said there was nothing particularly unusual about me and would not take it any further.
- 3.37. At the time this did not feel like an injustice because I did not know what was going on. I remember being asked all sorts of questions that at the time seemed odd. I think one of them was, "how tall do you think the average person is?" At the time I did not know why I was having a chat to this guy. I only learned later when I was an adult talking to my mum that she explained to me that I had been sent off to this child psychologist.

Mrs Buist - Psychological Abuse

- 3.38. Once the school agreed to exempt me from swimming, Mrs Buist employed an extraordinary amount of peer pressure on me. When the story period came to an end and it was time to go swimming she said, "it's time for swimming. Jonathan doesn't have to go but wouldn't it be so much better if Jonathan was with us?" The other children all said that yes, that would be nice. Then Mrs Buist said, "why don't we try to persuade Jonathan to come with us". The other children used babying pleading voices to ask me to come.
- 3.39. I had a full-blown panic attack and felt so humiliated in front of my peers. In the end I made some sort of squeak of distress. She asked if that was a yes and I just sobbed. I was teased mercilessly for not going to swimming. People thought I was a wimp. I don't recall when I finally agreed to go swimming again, but it was a very difficult environment.
- 3.40. There was no care for my feelings about this. It might have been a slightly different discussion if she had admitted that she had pushed my head under water. If she had said

those were her methods and she stood by them. I think part of it was the feeling of injustice that the school was calling me a liar.

- 3.41. I do not recall when I agreed to go swimming again. It was a really difficult period. I loved swimming before this as long as I did not have to put my head under the water. This did affect me for a while but I am pretty resilient and eventually I just sort of got on with my life.
- 3.42. One thing that really helped me was writing a letter to my younger self as an adult. Now I look at it more as I would look at something that had happened to my own child. I feel sympathy for the person that it happened to but it feels a bit more removed.
- 3.43. Looking back, I think Mrs Buist picked on me because she had come to the conclusion that I was a problem child or a bit of an attention seeker. I have had public facing prominent roles throughout my life. Even as a child I was on the radio a lot. I think some of my teachers resented that and thought if they could get enough of my peers to gang up on me that might be enough to tip the scale.
- 3.44. Mrs Buist inflicted horrible abuse on a range of Blind kids. We had a boy in our class who had multiple medical conditions, one of which caused his Blindness. He also had bowel movement issues. He had been cast on a TV advertisement for Braille week. In the advertisement he was on a skateboard and at the end of the advertisement the catch line he said was, "I did it grandad". For some reason the fact that he was in a TV advertisement and had that publicity really seemed to push Mrs Buist's buttons.
- 3.45. One day he lost control of his bowls and had an accident. Mrs Buist yelled at him and humiliated him in front of the class. I remember her saying in a sneering tone, "I did it grandad, I messed my pants". The whole class laughed at him.

Making a Complaint to Mrs Buist

- 3.46. For whatever reason, I have always been a bit of an advocate. I have always been of the view that rationality and reason can win the day. We had all had enough, so I said to some of the other kids why don't we write Mrs Buist a letter. We wrote her a letter in Braille about our concerns, it was respectful but expressed why most of us were unhappy. I was about 10 years old. I do not remember how many kids signed the letter.
- 3.47. We gave this letter to her in class. It was in Braille, which she could read but it was quite lengthy. She said I could read it out to her. I read the letter to her and her response was to tear it up in front of the class and make no further comment. I have a vague recollection of making a comment that we had the right to say what we think, she retorted saying, "you have no rights whatsoever". We were despondent, but we had realised it was a bit of a risk.
- 3.48. For a group of 8, 9, and 10-year-olds I think we were remarkably respectful and constructive. We talked about how we were worried about her 'blowing up' when we got spelling words wrong and that we would like it if that did not happen. When I look back on it, it was quite a mature thing for a group of kids to try and do but it had no effect at all.

- 3.49. I did not feel like there was anyone else we could give that message to. I had lost trust in all authority figures at the school after what had happened in the pool. I did not think there was anyone who was going to help us.
- 3.50. We gave her the letter in 1979, by this stage she had taught me for three years. Three years is a long time for a child, especially to be subjected to this sort of behaviour apparently without sanction from the principal or anyone who should have been taking care of us.

Moving Classes

- 3.51. In the end my mother went to the principal and said if you do not assign him another teacher I am going to go to the department of education and get this stopped. In the end I was assigned a different teacher and really thrived in a different environment.
- 3.52. My next teacher's name was Steve Bellamy. He was such a good teacher. He was around 30 at the time. He would take us camping and to do all kinds of really great things. He really built up my confidence. He has just retired, he taught blind children at Homai for the rest of his career, and I am sure many Blind kids benefited greatly.
- 3.53. I'm occasionally still in touch with him but I do not know how much he was aware of what went on or not. I have often wondered how much was out there, how much other staff members knew about Mrs Buist's behaviour. There may be one or two teachers who are still alive who were there at the time. Mrs Buist died in the 1980s.
- 3.54. My parents were very supportive. I do not know what would have become of me if my parents had not believed me. If they had decided I was making it up, I think the whole trajectory of my life would have changed.

Educational Neglect

- 3.55. In the context of education there are those who are adamantly of the view that every disabled child has the right to go to their local school. I warm to that view, I am very sympathetic. The trouble is that making that a reality so there is not any neglect is very complex.
- 3.56. If I'm in a wheelchair and I want to go to my local school that is a case of making everything accessible, so there are ramps and toilets that are accessible. All those built environment things. That is capital expenditure. Once it has been done then the kid is set up.
- 3.57. Blind children work in an alternative form of literacy. In my view if you look at the 1980s and 1990s as more mainstreaming became more widespread you will find a lot of Blind kids who were neglected because they were not given sufficient access to true literacy. That has lifelong impacts on outcomes such as how employable you are, but also more personal things, like whether you can read a bed time story to your child or not.
- 3.58. During the period that the Commission is considering there have been different schools of thought about what you do with low vision kids. I am totally Blind and I am incredibly grateful for that, because there is no doubt that I'm as Blind as a bat. So my requirements

are very clear. What happens when you have got low vision kids is that there have been changing schools of thought over time.

- 3.59. There was a concept for a while called 'Sight Savers'. The idea with that was if you did not use the sight that you had, you would somehow lose it. They thought of sight like a muscle. If you used your sight muscle enough you would hopefully preserve the vision you have. Everyone knows that having vision is preferable to not having vision.
- 3.60. What that meant was kids who clearly had a prognosis of being most likely to lose their sight as adults were not taught Braille. Because there was a bias that reading in the "normal" way was superior to reading in Braille. Children would be given large prints, magnification over time and would suffer significant eye strain that would give them head pain, just so that they could read print the normal way. When their vision deteriorates as adults, they have suddenly lost their functional literacy. The lost opportunity for those low vision kids whose prognosis, or whose effort to be able to read easily, were not considered is incalculable.
- 3.61. We also had a lot of great opportunities at Homai because class sizes were small. I developed a love of music. We were read to. I would not want to paint a picture that said it was hell. It certainly had a lot of hellish moments, but from my perspective as a totally Blind person I look back on that time and some of the people I interacted with, with a lot of fondness and gratitude. We did get a lot out of it. I think it is important to make the point that it was not completely bad.

Sexual Abuse – Homai Hostels

- 3.62. A number of girls I knew experienced sexual abuse at the school for the Blind. Sometimes in the hostels they were living in. I heard about girls abusing girls, and also boys who abused girls. When students complained about this happening there was not any intervention.
- 3.63. The hostel staff are really supposed to be there in lieu of your parents. Some hostel staff were really great. Some of them were younger and were trying to modernise the environment that these kids were living in. Some hostel staff were a lot older, they did not have family of their own, and they did not relate to young people at all well. They were called matrons at the time and they very much were matronly. They were not people you would warm to and turn to about something as personal as this.
- 3.64. It is not my story to tell, but I do know there was a child at Homai who came from a very difficult family environment. He was violent. He was the only kid that I knew who was actually expelled from Homai. That is quite an achievement because there were not a lot of other places for Blind kids to go at that stage. He was extremely troubled.
- 3.65. I have a friend who was raped by him. She sought support for that at the time and was fobbed off. I think she would have talked to hostel staff, but I am not certain about that. She was told to tell him to go away, not to put herself harm's way.
- 3.66. When the lights go out at any boarding school in the world, anything can happen. There was one girl I am aware of who was particularly manipulative, it started off with

psychological abuse and moved on to sexual abuse. I am aware of two girls who were sexually abused by this girl at night.

Manurewa Intermediate School

Educational Neglect

- 3.67. I was mainstreamed at intermediate, I really enjoyed it for the most part, but it was an interesting learning experience about what constitutes an accommodation for a Blind child. My classmates were asked if there was anyone who would volunteer to essentially read to me. This was a pretty common thing back then.
- 3.68. I had a kid who would sit next to me and he would read anything that was on the blackboard and any parts of text if I did not have a textbook in Braille. It was a voluntary thing and we got some pretty good friendships out of it.
- 3.69. One day the teacher was annoyed with the class for some reason. We were lining up outside and she said we had to go into the classroom without talking. I went in without talking, I sat at the desk and I found a piece of print on it. I thought it was perfectly reasonable, since we were all inside and sitting, to ask the kid next to me to tell me what the piece of paper was. I had different folders to file various things and I did not know if it was a piece of work that had been marked. It was his job after all to read to me. It was not idle chit chat, it was what I would call an accommodation type question.
- 3.70. However, because I had talked I was sent to the principal's office for a strapping. I tried to make the point that I was just getting him to read me something and I did not realise that was not allowed. They backed down from the strapping but I was told off for talking, even though I was asking an accommodation question.
- 3.71. If they had just told me from now if you come in if I have told you not to talk that includes having a reader tell you what has been written down that would have been different. I really was not trying to be disobedient. To me it's legitimate, if I could see then I would be able to read that piece of paper and file it accordingly. Because I cannot see, he was essentially just being my eyes. I did not think that it was in any way being disobedient.
- 3.72. The trouble is, at 11 you cannot articulate that. I think the comment I made when I left the classroom to go to the principal's office was that it was only my education that she was preventing.
- 3.73. I feel I was being discriminated against because of my Blindness. I was trying to use what we would now call an accommodation to get access to information that anyone else would have without talking. The only way I could get the information was to ask what is this piece of paper.
- 3.74. There are no other examples of this that I can recall at intermediate. By and large it was a really happy time and a good environment. The principal was a very nice man. He had a wig and if you could get your white cane in just the right place you could knock it off.

Manurewa High School

3.75. At Manurewa High School there were two teachers who were employed by Homai in a resource room. They provided support to Blind students who were in mainstream classes. Resource teachers were considered the authority, so when your regular high school teacher has an enquiry about teaching Blind kids they would go to the resource teachers for advice.

Sexual Abuse

- 3.76. One of the things I experienced at high school, which was really distressing, was a bunch of kids who decided that it would be a fun game to come up to the Blind kid, touch their genitals and run away. Of course, when you are Blind you have no idea who it was.
- 3.77. There was a sense that you do not nark on these people. If you were sighted and saw this happen, you definitely did not say who it was. Again, if you tried to raise this with an authority figure that someone was touching you inappropriately you were told: "don't pay them any attention and they'll go away". There was never any attempt to investigate it or call people out.
- 3.78. The sad thing about that situation was knowing that other kids were so scared to nark on people doing it. It felt at the time everyone was conspiring against me. It was hard not to get paranoid.
- 3.79. The way I stopped that may not be the most constructive. After trying usual channels like asking them to stop and complaining to a teacher, when it started to happen in the future I would lash out with my white cane. I have quite quick reflexes. The person would normally not be able to get out of the way quickly enough. After doing that a couple of times it did stop. I guess you can call that a case of blind justice or something.

Accommodation Issues

- 3.80. One of the most extraordinary accommodation situations that I experienced was when I had a maths teacher in fourth form who was notorious for going all over the maths book in random order. So, she might start at chapter 1 but then she would decide to go to chapter 10. The reason this is important to a Blind kid is that hardcopy braille is huge. Even the Pocket Oxford Dictionary is about 36 bulky braille volumes.
- 3.81. The maths book is many volumes. I would go to the resource room where all the braille books were stored before class to get the right volume. One day we had finished a chapter and I thought the most reasonable thing I can do is take the next volume of the book. I did not have any advance notice of what chapter we were doing next.
- 3.82. It turned out we were not doing the sequential chapter. I mentioned to the teacher that I had to go to the resource room to pick up the correct volume. She gave me 100 lines saying, "I must remember to bring the right textbook". This was fundamentally unfair. I thought I could sort it out, so I went to the resource room teachers, who were employed by the Foundation for the Blind. I told them what had happened, but they declined to intervene.

3.83. I think after the other experiences I had, this was just another example that showed me teachers stick together and there is not any justice when you have been on the side of injustice.

Music Exam

- 3.84. The other example I can think of is when a teacher came back to Manurewa High School resource room after a break from raising children. I was a music student. They had this oral exam where a teacher would play something on the piano and you would have to write it down.
- 3.85. Typically, Blind kids would take the oral exam separately because mechanical braille machines are so noisy. The class sizes at high school were 20 – 30 kids who would be doing an exam in one room. Apart from anything else the noise of the braille machine was really distracting for sighted kids. If you are sighted and you are trying to listen and write down something complex and this Blind kid is in the same room making this horrible noise that is disadvantaging the sighted kids having the Blind kid in the class. That understandably generates a bit of resentment.
- 3.86. This teacher who had been away for a while insisted that I had to be in the class with my peers. The teachers at this time were all about mixing with peers, and so wanted me to be in the class at the same time. Understandably I was really unpopular for disrupting their work.
- 3.87. I must have been about 15 or 16 years old at the time. I said to her, “things have changed since your day and we don’t do this anymore”. She did not believe me. On that occasion I challenged her and said why don’t we talk to the music teacher at Homai and whatever she decides we will abide by.
- 3.88. Luckily for me, this was the first time in life that an authority figure in education had jumped in and said I was right. The music teacher from Homai said there was no way they could expect me to braille this in the class with everyone else. She said we’ve always taken these tests separately and should continue to do so.
- 3.89. If I did not have advocacy skills and tenacity, then this issue would not have been resolved. I do not think it should be incumbent on kids to have to go into bat for a basic thing like that.

Othring: The ‘Homai Pupils’

3.90. Whenever the Blind kids were referenced at Manurewa High, we were always referred to as ‘the Homai Pupils’. It was strange because on the one hand we had the resource teachers saying mix with your sighted friends, and on the other the teachers and principal referred to us as the Homai pupils like we did not really belong. The only time we were not Homai pupils was when we excelled at something. For example, when I topped the country in History and got in the newspaper, suddenly I was a Manurewa High School pupil then.

3.91. I think the significance for young teenagers, especially disabled teenagers (or for that matter maybe any minority) is that it is confusing and it is othering. What you have questions about growing up is where do you belong, where do you fit? If on the one hand you are being told not to hang out with your tribe, because somehow, it's an admission of defeat to hang out with your tribe. However, on the other hand the school is not acknowledging you and is calling you 'Homai pupils'. It is a very confusing message.

Coaching

3.92. We weren't really allowed to be kids in the evening the way that other kids were. What I mean is we didn't really get to just "veg out" and watch television or hang out with our friends. Because once we got to fifth form we were pretty much required to do coaching in every subject. Theoretically it was optional but there was just so much pressure.

3.93. It was a blanket thing rather than looking at a student's academic skills in a particular subject. The sessions would take place at Homai, which meant that the children who were boarding at Homai could go to the tutorials in the evenings. They were in the classrooms that were used during the day for primary school students. Some sessions went as late as 8pm. They were paid for and quite often the teachers that were doing the coaching would be your classroom teachers.

3.94. I was a reasonably bright child and I really resented the fact that my own time was being interfered with. In sixth form I took six subjects, so I had six hours of tuition outside of the classroom each week plus six subjects worth of homework to get done. It was a huge workload. I am the only Blind kid of my era that I know that also had a paying job. I got a job as a DJ at a skating rink. I just wanted the chance to do the things that kids did in the evenings. I feel like I was not allowed to enjoy some time as a regular teenager.

3.95. They were insistent that because you were Blind you were at a disadvantage. To some degree I understand that. I certainly know that in the job market you have got to have all the advantages you can get. I think they thought it was a gift, they were giving us all this extra tuition. It really was not terribly optional, I do not know anyone who opted out.

Neglect

Cultural Neglect

3.96. Because I had attended the school for the Blind, when I got to Manurewa High School I knew a lot of the other Blind kids, we had grown up together, they were my peers. Because I believe that Blindness is a culture, I believe we have a lot in common. Because we had grown up together, we all liked to hang out at interval and lunch time. The things that we had in common were often not things that a lot of sighted kids had in common. For example, a love of the radio and Blindness technology.

3.97. The Blind Foundation based teachers at the high school went through this period where they tried to split everyone up. The signal was strongly sent to us that hanging out with Blind kids was inferior, that Blind kids were inferior. You were publicly praised by teachers if you had sighted friends. They would say things like "look it's so-and-so, he's got sighted friends, why haven't you got sighted friends?" As if having sight was this badge of honour

and you should hang out with the sighted kids. Maybe they thought sight would rub off on me.

- 3.98. By this stage I was really willing to speak up and push back. I said I am entitled to have whatever friends I would like. They really tried to split up the Blind kids, which was an upsetting thing and I think it sends a strong signal about what they think of Blind people and what our place is.
- 3.99. As a teenager, that was really significant. As teenagers, kids are starting to date and starting to drive. For Blind children when you see your friends jumping in a car and going places you realise possibly for the first time what a big impairment you have. For them to reinforce those signals by trying to split the Blind kids up is in my view outrageous.

4. **Impact**

Mental / physical impacts

- 4.1. The experiences of abuse I have described have in a way turned me into the effective advocate that I have become. I would not recommend that avenue for anyone, but I count myself incredibly lucky in so many ways.
- 4.2. I am lucky my parents, who were not wealthy people, made this enormous sacrifice to be by the school for the Blind so I could go home in the evenings. That was an incredible act of love. I am lucky that through nature I was born pretty tenacious and resilient. I am also lucky that as I got a little bit older, I got to meet some adult Blind role models who had an incredibly positive impact on my life. They taught me that I had a lot to give back to the Blind community. That has driven me ever since. I like to ask myself what difference have I made today?
- 4.3. I will always speak up for people who may find it more difficult to speak for themselves, those who do not bounce back in quite the same way that I do and who are more traumatised by events. In that sense I choose to see it all as a gift. I am kind of at peace and to be honest I have found just going through this process to be very cleansing. It feels like this Royal Commission has authority and finally someone is actually listening. I really appreciate that.

5. **Redress**

Seeking an apology as Chair of the Blind Foundation

- 5.1. In 2002, I became the Chair of the Board of the Blind Foundation. One of my aspirations in that role was to have the organisation come to terms with a past that has been very empowering for a lot of Blind kids but also has serious dark sides. I felt that it was appropriate and necessary for closure that the Foundation acknowledged the abuse that kids like me had suffered and formally apologise for that abuse.
- 5.2. I had some quite robust discussions, because it was my hope that I could offer that apology at the 2003 AGM. I think it was inspired by some of the apologising that Helen

Clark and her government were doing at the time and I wanted to say we truly are sorry. However, I had people on the Board that said you cannot impose today's values on what happened then. That times were different, and we would not do it the same way, but people thought differently then.

- 5.3. I do not care what people say, physically abusing children to that degree, not taking decisive action on sexual abuse is not okay and it never was. I think I need to apologise because I could not get it done and that is the one thing I am most ashamed of in my entire professional life. I could not get that apology and I am so sorry.
- 5.4. I get the argument that current members of the Foundation for the Blind didn't actually do this, so are not personally responsible. However, in the end we are all here for a short amount of time and if we are in a position of power, like being on a board, then we are custodians of the legacy of that organisation. If a part of that legacy is tarnished, then as custodians of that legacy you have the opportunity, and in my view the obligation, to fix that. The fact that I could not do that, I cannot tell you how deeply I regret that. I wish I could go back and try it a different way.
- 5.5. The other Board members were worried about the risk of financial liability, but for my part I think if someone has been abused then just pay them. The Blind Foundation is a very wealthy organisation – it is one of the biggest property owners on some of the most valuable real estate in Auckland. Operationally they are cash poor, but they are asset rich.
- 5.6. A number of those Board members were Blind and had been through the previous iteration of the school for the Blind in Parnell. That was probably even worse, so they basically thought what are we gaining by bringing this up? It was the logic of 'I was strapped as a child and it never did me any harm'. The idea that we've all moved on with our lives and learned how to live with this. I think their reluctance was based on all of those things.
- 5.7. What we finally settled on was some mealy-mouthed statement I was able to give at the AGM that past practices and attitudes would be frowned upon today. It was really just an obfuscation. When I stood up to give the speech, this little voice inside me said now that I'm up here who is going to stop me. In the end I did not have the courage.
- 5.8. I don't think we ever got to the point of seeking legal advice about this. The Board kiboshed the idea before we could even get to that point. I do understand from a friend of mine, I do not have any personal knowledge of this, but one of the women I mentioned who was sexually abused by other girls at the senior girls' hostel did eventually go to the Board and seek an apology and compensation. I think this was relatively recent, as in within the last decade or so, but after my time on the Board. I think there was a settlement reached in her individual case.
- 5.9. What made it even more upsetting for me was that I got a new job and had to resign the chairmanship about a year and a half in. Not long after that, I read a story in the newspaper about more recent abuse that had happened to a Blind child and that's when I wrote a blogpost that got picked up by the Herald and they ran a story about what happened to me in the swimming pool.

6. Looking forward

Apology

- 6.1. I would like the Blind Foundation to publicly apologise for abuse. I do not want any financial compensation, but I really want their apology. I felt that I had failed people who have a right to expect better than what they got. I became a part of the establishment. I almost felt like a sellout. Suddenly, I am the authority figure and I am the person who is not able to own up. It felt like I was the personification of what I was a victim of all those years ago. Suddenly I felt like the problem. I could not do the right thing for all my friends who I know have suffered similarly, it was really hard.

Funding

- 6.2. In terms of education for disabled people you have to resource it properly.
- 6.3. These days, particularly for blind people, technology has the potential to mitigate a lot of issues. If I think about what it was like for me 30 years ago; I could not read a newspaper independently, most offices were full of papers and big filing cabinets. These days if I have a subscription I can read newspapers from all around the world and most offices are storing information in the cloud. It is really exciting.
- 6.4. A form of neglect that is often overlooked – is that when you add Blindness into the mix when it comes to technology you add complexity. Blind people have to use alternative hardware and software. You just cannot go down to your local computer club or polytech and take a class on how to use these technologies. They do not know how a Blind person interacts with this technology. A sighted person with a computer will typically use a mouse, a Blind person does not. They have a whole set of new keys relating to what is spoken, that kind of information.
- 6.5. You couple this with the fact that the vast majority of Blind people in Western countries are unemployed. The unemployment rate among disabled people is around 48%. Among the Blind community it is estimated by some at 60-70%. It is very high. The neglect thing traps people into a cycle of unemployment and poverty because there is no government funding really available at the moment to give a Blind person a fully-fledged computer so that they can train themselves and become job ready.
- 6.6. Once you have got the job there is a fund, which my organisation administers on behalf of the Ministry for Social Development, and you can apply for that once you have got your job. The issue is, how are you going to get that job if you do not have the experience in the first place? There is an incredible amount of digital poverty in the Blind community and it's only going to be addressed when there are affirmative programmes that realise that because of the high unemployment rates of Blind people in the community, that every Blind person who wants one should have a very capable digital device. Particularly when they have a vocational aspiration so that they can learn what is involved in getting job ready. Right now, we are trapping people.

Statement of Truth

This statement is true to the best of my knowledge and belief and was made by me knowing that it may be used as evidence by the Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in Care.

Signed _____

GRO-C

Dated: 19 November 2021