

Witness Name: GRO-A Mr EX

Statement No.: WITN1099

Dated: 20.05.2022

## ROYAL COMMISSION OF INQUIRY INTO ABUSE IN CARE

WITNESS STATEMENT OF GRO-A Mr EX

I, GRO-A Mr EX, will say as follows:

### 1. Introduction

- 1.1. My full name is GRO-A Mr EX. I was born on GRO-C 1960 and currently reside in Auckland.
- 1.2. I am Māori. My iwi is GRO-A.
- 1.3. I am Deaf, though I grew up in a Hearing family. My wife is Deaf, and we have GRO-B daughter who is Hearing.

### Early life

- 1.4. I was born in GRO-A, New Zealand. I have four siblings. I am the only person in my immediate family who is Deaf. I have a few uncles and cousins who are also Deaf, and I communicated with them through sign language.
- 1.5. My parents were both native speakers in te reo. My parents did not know how to sign and so I communicated with them orally by turning my voice on. My two sisters knew some signs.
- 1.6. I would attend the marae with my mother and father for important tangis or hui but there were no interpreters.
- 1.7. At age five, on a doctor's recommendation, my parents decided to send me to Kelston Deaf Boarding School (**Kelston**). My siblings were not sent to boarding school.

- 1.8. Kelston told my parents only to speak to me in English, so unfortunately te reo was never passed on to me.
- 1.9. My mother is still alive, but my father passed away five years ago.

## 2. Abuse

### **Kelston Deaf Boarding School (1966 to 1973)**

- 2.1. I first went to Kelston in 1966 when I was five years old. I stayed there until I was 13, after which I went back to GRO-A and went to GRO-A Boys High School.
- 2.2. For most of the time that I was at Kelston, I went to Waterview Primary School (**Waterview**) during the day. At first, I was going to school during the day at Kelston, then from 1967 to 1971 I went to Waterview. In 1973, I went back home to GRO-A and went to GRO-A Boys High School.

### **Arrival at Kelston**

- 2.3. I will never forget going to Kelston. Mum and dad put me on a plane by myself, from GRO-A, when I was merely five years old.
- 2.4. I did not know what was happening. There was no explanation from them. I screamed on the plane. The air host could not control me because I was crying so much, and I had to get off the plane. I was really out of sorts. Mum and dad were not sure what to do and ultimately dad drove me to Kelston instead.
- 2.5. I experienced a real culture shock when I got there, because mum and dad were not with me. I was so upset, I just cried and cried when I went to bed. I was heartbroken. The older I got, the more resilient I became. At the time I was so young and I wouldn't have understood. Now I understand that they were told it was the best option for me. I know that it wasn't their fault. My mum wanted to keep me close, and this caused arguments but ultimately, they made the decision to let me go.
- 2.6. My time at Kelston was good and bad. Bad because it was a really difficult time. I still feel the trauma. Good because I gained Deaf friends who became my second whānau.

### **Day-to-day life at Kelston**

- 2.7. When I first arrived, Kelston felt like another world. It was a different place, a different way of being. I had to learn to adjust. It took a long time for me to feel like I was fitting into this new family. I did make a lot of friends there though. Some students and I had a lot in common. We shared a story of how we got there and how we missed our parents. There was that commonality there – we could support each other because we were all in the same boat.
- 2.8. I saw my parents three or four times a year, during public holidays and Christmas. I would count down the days until I was catching my flight home. It was like marking down the

days to being released from prison. The other students were counting down as well. It was kind of like a motivator.

- 2.9. Our bedroom was a big room with dividers, all up about 12. You could look over and see your mates. After school, they would give us fruit and then we would go off to different activities. We would come home around 5pm and have dinner to 5:30pm then have free time. We might do homework and watch TV and relax. On the weekends I played rugby and hockey. For summer sports there would be different activities. We went sailing and there was gymnastics – we did learn a variety of things. If we were sick it was not bad – they had a sick bay and there would have been three or four beds in there.

### ***Deaf silencing***

- 2.10. The staff communicated with me and the other kids using the oral method only. The staff made it clear that it was not okay to sign. When they saw us signing they would hit us on the hands, and we were told to turn our voice on and talk. I would never turn my voice on for a Deaf person but for staff I had to turn my voice on and speak – this was drilled into us every time we were caught signing. Back then the staff were told to punish the Deaf kids if they saw them signing, so every time the staff weren't watching we would switch to sign. I guess they were just following orders from higher up.
- 2.11. Their reasoning for that was that if you want to get on in a Hearing world, you need to learn how to speak, not use gestures and signs. We followed what they said so we would not get smacked or strapped, but if they were not around, we would sign.
- 2.12. Among the students, we did not use the formal sign language we use now. It was more gestures and lip reading of each other. We would make up our own signs, which would then be disseminated and thrown into our language pool. When I moved back to GRO-A for high school, I went to a Hearing school and wasn't connected to the Deaf community. When I moved back to Auckland and started going to Deaf club at 18, I started learning proper grammar.
- 2.13. I think what they did to us at Kelston was wrong. Not being able to sign was upsetting. We were all upset. It was like being in a concentration camp.

### ***Cultural neglect***

- 2.14. Kelston was very Pākehā. The majority of the staff were Pākehā. There were only two or three Māori staff members. I felt it was easier to connect with the Māori staff. If the Pākehā staff cared for me the same way the Māori staff did, then I would have been happy.
- 2.15. As I mentioned earlier, the school told my parents not to speak te reo to me. My culture was pushed aside. To this day, I am only able to speak little bits of te reo; I'm still learning. I just know the basics. At Kelston, there was no te reo, only English. I was only exposed to te reo at tangis or at the marae in GRO-A. I feel there is a disconnect to my culture. A part of me is missing.

2.16. It is not my parents' fault, as they simply followed the school's directions, but I am disappointed that I was not immersed into my culture. My parents were worried that if they spoke te reo to me about what would happen if I then spoke te reo at Kelston. They were scared that they would then be reported, because back then you couldn't speak te reo. I couldn't speak te reo and I couldn't use sign language. I think my parents felt anger and frustration. There was a lot of oppression from the government and the school system. I guess now I look back and think, I am starting to learn now and that's good. I can pick sign language up a lot faster than te reo.

### ***Physical abuse***

- 2.17. Between 1967 and 1970, I suffered physical punishment from male staff for signing or for being naughty. They would strap me with the belt or smack me with their hand. They would take our pants down when they whacked us.
- 2.18. I recall an incident one Saturday morning. We had free time and were all being boisterous and screaming, as boys do. The staff member recognised my voice and called me over and asked why I was screaming. They told me that I was not allowed to scream and that I needed to be punished. I got strapped on my hands, and my backside with a belt that he had been wearing. They pulled down my pants and slapped me multiple times. It was really hard.
- 2.19. I burst out in tears, and he told me never to do it again. I had seen other students being belted in the past.
- 2.20. I did not tell my parents I had been belted. I do not know why I did not tell them. I know now that I should have told my mum, but at the time, I did not want to upset her. I could tell her, but it might be traumatic for her. I don't want to upset her. And if she gets upset, maybe she'll blame herself for sending me there and how it turned to custard. It's not the doctor's fault either.

### ***Sexual abuse***

- 2.21. Around 1968 to 1970, when I was eight to ten years old, I was sexually abused by a male staff member during shower times.
- 2.22. Usually, I had privacy when showering at Kelston. The boys' bathrooms had separate cubicles although there were no shower curtains so staff could see in. Staff would be around at shower time. Back then, I didn't know what perving was. But now I look back and think – they were perving at us.
- 2.23. Mr [GRO-B] was a supervisor at the village. He was Pākehā and Hearing.
- 2.24. One time, about 7pm at night before bed, he started washing my back and said, "don't worry I'm just going to help you clean your bum so that it's 100 per cent clean". He then started washing my bum. I was frozen. I thought it was going to be brief, but it wasn't brief – it took a while. He said my bum and anus looked dirty and that he needed to clean it. It

was a good excuse. He inserted his finger in my anus and would poke and rub it a number of times.

- 2.25. I did not understand whether what he was doing was right or wrong because I was so young. I think it went on for about two to three minutes. It felt like a long time.
- 2.26. After that, it happened again and again. I do not know how many times he did it in total. I felt very uncomfortable.
- 2.27. I now know he did it to other students as well. But at the time, I thought it was just me.
- 2.28. I found out he did it to other kids only seven or eight years ago when I reunited with an old friend from Kelston. We realised we had been abused by the same staff member. This was the first time we had shared our stories. I have heard there were other victims also, but I am not sure who they are. I believe there will be others who this happened to.
- 2.29. Many years later, I met a staff member who worked at Kelston for 51 years. It was a Māori woman and she used to look after me. We spoke about the staff member who had sexually assaulted me (although I did not tell her what he had done to me). She said she remembers him and recalled that after he would finish his shift, he would sneak in to the boarding house late at night. The students would be sleeping, and he would try to play with them, and kiss them.
- 2.30. The Māori staff member heard noises one night and opened the door. The male staff member had managed to hide under a student's bed and was not detected. The student was too scared to say anything at the time. However, the Māori staff member later saw the male staff member take off. When I spoke to her years later, we put two and two together that this was the same male staff member. I asked her if she reported it to anyone and she said no, she had let it go. I didn't want to blame her, but that was her choice.
- 2.31. This male staff member no longer works at Kelston. Last I heard, he was working in one of the male prisons.
- 2.32. In 1969 to 1970, an older Pākehā Deaf student taught me how to masturbate.
- 2.33. I was seven or eight years old and he was 14 or 15. I told him that I did not feel comfortable, but he said: "this is normal, it is good for you to learn." I had no experience with this and I felt he was forcing me to play with myself. It happened a few times. I was so young - I hadn't been through puberty. There was no sexual arousal and it wasn't something I wanted to do. I just had no idea or concept of what it was.
- 2.34. This would happen in the toilets, in a cubicle. I can't remember if the door was closed.
- 2.35. No staff member ever spoke to me or educated me on sex or sexual abuse. I never told anyone about what the older boy was doing. I was frightened. I had no concept of what this was. I didn't know what it meant but he would encourage me and tell me I would enjoy it. I didn't know any sign for sex, or sexual abuse. There was no sign at that time for sexual abuse. We had no knowledge of words related to sex.

### ***Psychological abuse***

- 2.36. I have experienced a level of psychological abuse personally and have also witnessed staff psychologically abusing other students.
- 2.37. Most of the staff were okay but there were a few bad apples.
- 2.38. A favourite phrase used by staff to describe Deaf students was “Deaf and dumb.” For example, they would say: “no wonder you are here, you are Deaf and dumb.” I have tried to forgive them and forget about it, but it is not easy.
- 2.39. I am also upset by what I witnessed. It made me feel sorry for other students. For example, one time a female Pākehā staff member was yelling at a Māori student. As a punishment she made the student brush her teeth with soap.
- 2.40. Two years ago, I spoke to another student who had been at Kelston who told me that a female Pākehā staff member had hit her when she didn’t understand things and she ended up collapsing. We realised that this was the same staff member who had made students brush their teeth with soap.
- 2.41. That was the first time I had seen this happen, but I heard from other students that this particular staff member would do this often. If students were slow to do things, they would be sent straight away to brush their teeth with soap.

### ***Time in hospital***

- 2.42. In 1970, when I was nine years old, my legs started giving out. I ended up in hospital for about three months.
- 2.43. When it first happened, I was screaming because I could not walk. A Māori staff member who was working the night shift lifted me back to bed and said she would report it to the nurse as she was quite concerned.
- 2.44. I saw the nurse and the doctor. The next morning, I went Greenlane Hospital and after two nights I was sent to Middlemore. I was at Middlemore for two and a half months and they found that I had a dry hip. Both my legs had to be elevated and were pulled out of the socket joints, so more fluid could come into the socket.
- 2.45. After this I had to learn how to walk again as my legs felt like jelly. Once I had improved I went to Auckland Hospital for two weeks. I was really scared during those three months that I would end up in a wheelchair or paralysed. I just wasn’t sure if I would walk again.
- 2.46. There were no interpreters present to explain to me what was happening. Even though they knew I was Deaf, they would speak to me. Because I was Deaf when they spoke they just gave me brief explanations – maybe they were dumbing things down.
- 2.47. They would give reports to staff from school, but not to me. Maybe they thought I couldn’t read English or wouldn’t understand. Maybe they thought it wasn’t important to give me

the report. I had some understanding of what a hospital was, but I did not understand the process or what was happening to me.

- 2.48. One time I got angry with a male nurse, after breakfast. I pressed the buzzer to go to the toilet. They said there were no urine bottles to hand out, so I had to wait in the queue. I pushed the buzzer a few times because I could not hold my urine. The staff member became angry with me. I was angry with them too for making me hold my urine, so I grabbed my orange and chucked it at him. It was an unpeeled orange. I was really aiming for his head, but I think I missed.
- 2.49. During my time in hospital, I was still in Kelston's care. Some of my friends came to visit me and a lady from Kelston dropped off some books for me to read. Other than the books provided, Kelston did not continue with my education during this time.

### **Waterview Primary School (1967 to 1971)**

- 2.50. While I was boarding at Kelston, a small group of us went to mainstream school at Waterview during the day. I went to Waterview from 1967 to 1971.
- 2.51. I had a variety of classes. Some were in a Deaf class - these were my core classes like English and Maths. Sports and art were in a mixed class, with both Deaf and Hearing students.
- 2.52. There were around six or seven Deaf students in Deaf class.
- 2.53. My education was quite hard because there was no sign language and we had to rely solely on oral methods. I would get frustrated because sometimes I missed things or could not understand.
- 2.54. If I were in a hearing class, I would always ask my friends to read their notes. Sometimes, teachers gave me extra time to talk with them after school.

### ***Cultural disconnect***

- 2.55. There was no access to te reo or tikanga. I was never encouraged to connect with my Māori side. It was predominantly a Pākehā system.
- 2.56. There were not many Māori students at Waterview. I recall there being one Deaf Māori girl. About a quarter of students at Waterview were Māori. We were in the minority. If there were more Māori students, I would have found it easier to make connections.

### ***Physical abuse***

- 2.57. When I was eight years old, we were learning about old fashioned telephones in class at Waterview. We were learning how to use the wiring in the circuitry. Six to seven students were all holding hands. One person was holding the grinder and the person on the other end would hold something else. The teacher was grinding it so that we could lightly feel the electric current pass through us.

- 2.58. During this class, one of the students got upset with me. He told the teacher GRO-B, I was picking on him. I think the teacher was aged around 30 to 40 years old. After all the students had left and the door was shut, the teacher told me to come to him. He asked me questions as to why I was teasing this boy. I said it was just for a laugh. He said the punishment for that was the phone circuitry machine. Because it was just me, the current would hit a lot stronger and quicker, as it was not going through several people.
- 2.59. When it hit me, I felt the electric shock go through my brain. It was quite extreme. It went on for about one to two minutes. I was shaking and trembling. I was shocked. It felt like my body was frying. To this day, it has traumatised me. I have never forgotten it.
- 2.60. I never told anyone about this incident. Only a few of my Deaf friends knew at the time but no teacher figure or my parents knew.
- 2.61. I had no ability to contact my parents. I also did not know how to communicate a lot of the things that were happening to me. Now I can communicate with them, but back then, I was still a young boy and did not know how to come to grips with it.
- 2.62. Up until that point, I always thought he was a good teacher. After the incident, I wondered whether he would treat his own son like that as well.

### ***Psychological abuse***

- 2.63. I started wearing a hearing aid when I was three or four years old. It was quite old fashioned and included a pack I had to carry. It had shoulder straps and the transistor would sit on the front of my chest.
- 2.64. The kids at school would joke that I was a robot or that I was wearing a bra. They would ask if I was a girl or a boy. Instead of talking to me directly they would talk to me through the hearing aid sitting on my chest. It made me feel humiliated and embarrassed.
- 2.65. The teachers would always tell us to turn the hearing aids on. But when I was with other Deaf students, I would take them off and I felt free.
- 2.66. During speech therapy we learned how to lip read with hearing aids on. We would have big headphones on. Sometimes, if I could not understand what the teacher was saying she would ask me to turn my hearing aid up. I would tell her that it hurt to turn it up louder and that I could not hear. The teachers never believed me. There were times where she forced us to have the high volume. There were times when I could hear her, but it didn't mean I understood her.
- 2.67. I do not think the teacher had any idea what she was doing or knew what was uncomfortable for us. There were no Deaf teachers, that is just the way it was.

### **3. Impact**

- 3.1. I wish I could have talked to someone at the time.



- 3.2. You pretend like nothing happened, but it is hard to forget. You try to maintain positive and lead a normal life. You try to deflect by being active, but it is in the quiet times where it seeps in.
- 3.3. I have anger issues because of suffering sexual, physical, and verbal abuse. I had counselling for anger management from 1998 to 2000. This helped a bit but not 100 per cent.
- 3.4. I attempted suicide in Australia in 1997 and in Spain in 2018. At the moment I am good, but I am not the same. I am surviving though, by using different coping mechanisms and just hanging in there.
- 3.5. I cope with the stress, trauma, and anger by engaging in lots of activities. For example, I walk a lot, swim, travel, and go on fun outings like the movies. I believe the best medicine in recovering from everything that happened is through a massage.
- 3.6. It helps me relax and gets all the negative feelings out. It helps me switch off and let it be. One day I would like to buy a massage chair to fit at my home, so I can use it every day.
- 3.7. In 2016 I injured my back and I could not walk properly – I used a walking stick for three and a half months and was very frustrated. I went to a chiropractor every week to lessen the pain. Then my dad passed away in 2017. His loss, in combination with all the abuse I have suffered, made me very depressed. I turned to alcohol for two to two and a half years. I returned to church in 2020 as I wanted to be better. I have not drunk alcohol since then.
- 3.8. I find a lot of comfort in my faith. I go to the Church GRO-A every Sunday. It helps me clean my spirit.
- 3.9. This repeated trauma, is not something you can just push away and move on from. You learn to live with it, but it's hard. Church has helped to lift that burden and to live more positively. If you remain quiet with your life, it does nothing to the trauma, it does not move it, it does not shift it. So, I made a conscious decision to speak up.

### **Arrest**

- 3.10. In 1976, when I was 15 or 16 years old, I was living with my family in GRO-A and attended GRO-A Boys High School.
- 3.11. One night I went out with a few Hearing Māori friends to a party. Around 3am I got a ride home with three of my friends.
- 3.12. I was sitting in the back of the car and fell asleep. The car ran out of petrol. The driver and his friend tried to cipher petrol from a car at a nearby house. I was not a part of this and waited.

- 3.13. The owner of the car woke up and rang the police. He himself was an off-duty police officer. By the time the police arrived, my two friends had run away. My friend and I were still waiting in the car and were arrested.
- 3.14. During the arrest, my hearing aids fell out and I could not hear what the Pākehā policeman was saying. I was asked questions, but I could not hear anything. Eventually, he handcuffed me. I asked the policeman to grab my hearing aid from the ground, so I could communicate and explain what happened. The policeman got really angry and punched my stomach multiple times instead for no reason. It was very unfair that this off-duty Pākehā police officer punched my stomach while I was handcuffed – I couldn't defend or protect myself.
- 3.15. They thought I was playing dumb. It was so painful. The detective arrived and we were taken to the station. I was questioned, this time with my hearing aids back in my ears. I explained the incident had nothing to do with us. He insisted we tell the names of the guys who took off. We did, it was an impossible situation. The detective said that if I didn't reveal my two Hearing friends' names and/ or where they lived, they would lock me up until I did. It wasn't fair. I thought it was best to reveal their names so that they would take me home, rather than embarrassing my parents. I went home at 5:30am in the morning.
- 3.16. The officer who punched me was Pākehā. I felt he targeted me because I was Māori. I do not know his name, but I remember his face.
- 3.17. I was so shocked that police could hurt me like that. It never occurred to me that I could make a complaint and take it further. I just didn't have that knowledge or know the process.
- 3.18. There was no interpreter present during the interaction with police. I am not sure if they realised at all that I was Deaf. However, I think they may have picked it up from seeing my hearing aids.

#### **4. Redress**

- 4.1. I have never made a claim about the abuse I suffered at Kelston. I learned only via the Royal Commission last year that this was an option.
- 4.2. I hope me going through this process with the Royal Commission sparks other Deaf people with similar experiences to seek justice also. I am doing it for our future generations.
- 4.3. I am not sure if it is worth going to police about sexual abuse because it was so long ago. Back then, I had no knowledge, sense, or idea that I should report the abuse to police. I was very young – eight to ten years old – and I didn't understand.

## 5. Looking forward

- 5.1. If educational staff do not follow the basic ethics, there should be consequences for their actions. Kelston should have been aware of what was happening. Staff training should have been better to keep people in line.
- 5.2. Certainly, the world we live in now with access to interpreters is not what we had back then. We do not want to be at a lower functioning level in terms of education, we want to have the ability to succeed as well.
- 5.3. The first time I had access to an interpreter was when I went to University in GRO-A to study building management. I was there for four years and I also had a notetaker. It was a huge help to my studies.
- 5.4. Learning te reo in English is hard. It would be good if a program was implemented that allowed Deaf people to learn te reo through sign language.
- 5.5. As I have described, Kelston was Pākehā centric – there were only two Māori staff. It was easier for me to connect with them, and I would have been happy if the Pākehā staff had cared for me in the same way that the Māori staff did.
- 5.6. I would like to see an increase in Māori staff at Deaf schools. When I was at Kelston, my culture was pushed aside, and a part of me is missing. Back then, it was like Māori students were second class citizens. I then experienced racism after Kelston. I experienced an incident around the year 2000 to 2002 when I was working in a mail centre. There was a Pākehā guy who said to me “Hey you black bastard!” I heard him with my hearing aid, and I could also read his lips very clearly. I asked him “Why did you call me a black bastard? Because of my colour?” He said it was just a joke. I told him not to call me a “black bastard” ever again, or else. I told him it was not on and it was not a joke. I was hurt and humiliated – no Pākehā had ever called me that in my entire life. I also used to work with five Pākehā men who would mock sign language when I would communicate with another Deaf man who was my friend at work. They thought it was a joke. I told them that it was not on, and it wasn’t a joke. This is my Deaf language and culture. I asked them how they would feel if they had a Deaf child, and their Deaf child was mocked. They regretted what they had done and had never thought about that. I was hurt and humiliated.
- 5.7. There are still so few Māori staff at Kelston. Kelston is trying to bridge the gap but it is not a welcoming environment for more Māori staff to join. Money needs to be invested in supporting Kaupapa Māori. Māori success would improve if there was someone to push Māori initiatives.
- 5.8. My transition to school would have been better if there was more whānau support. Sending me to a Deaf school did not work. A part of me is missing.

**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:

20.05.2022/

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