

Witness Name: GRO-A Ms AE

Statement No: WITN0527001

Dated: 11/12/2021

## ROYAL COMMISSION OF INQUIRY INTO ABUSE IN CARE

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### WITNESS STATEMENT OF GRO-A Ms AE

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I, GRO-A Ms AE say as follows –

#### Introduction

1. My full name is GRO-A Ms AE I was born on GRO-B 1961 in Grey Lynn, Auckland. I am of Māori and Samoan descent.
2. I am currently living in GRO-B, Auckland with my husband GRO-B and our whānau.
3. We have three tamariki: GRO-B GRO-B and GRO-B our eldest mokopuna who we have raised as our tamaiti, and formally adopted at the age of six.
4. We also have four mokopuna who also live with us: GRO-B GRO-B GRO-B and GRO-B
5. I work at the GRO-B

6. I am currently completing a PhD at the [GRO-B] about the identity journeys of Māori who were adopted, often transracially, and under a closed adoption. This work has also included, where possible, the stories of tamariki and mokopuna of Māori adoptees and the intergenerational effects of closed adoption on whakapapa for whānau Māori.
7. The purpose of my statement is to share my adoption experience with the Inquiry as to the abuse I received while in care entrusted by the State even though it was an unsafe placement, no one cared once the adoption order was made.
8. My evidence is about the abuse I suffered under the adoption and the trauma of being disconnected from my culture and indigeneity. The pain and heartache of searching for links to whakapapa have been a lifelong journey.

### **The Adoption**

9. My birth mother was 16 years old, and unwed when she became pregnant with me. At that time, young women like her were not supported to keep their babies. Rather, they were encouraged to adopt their babies out because of their age and the shame associated with being unwed. They had no option but to cooperate, this included no say in who would adopt their baby or whether it was a culturally appropriate placement.
10. I was 3 months old when I was adopted by a white couple. My adoptive mother was English, and my adoptive father was South African and they had recently immigrated to New Zealand.
11. I lived with my adoptive parents until I was about 13 years old.
12. My adoptive parents had two sons of their own [GRO-B] and [GRO-B]. Following my adoption, they had a daughter [GRO-] and then they adopted [GRO-B-1] and [GRO-B-2]. There was a total of six children living in the home.
13. [GRO-B-1] and [GRO-B-2] are also of Māori descent, and I consider them to be my siblings in every sense of the word. I do not feel this way about my adoptive parent's biological children, because our adoptive parents treated us differently from their own biological children.

14. I remember being made to do lots of work on the farm and I have memories of often being hungry and being referred to as a “little brown darky”. I was often punished while their biological children were not.
15. Our adoptive parents always let us know we were adopted so we always felt different from their biological children. The community that we lived in all knew we were adopted but it was also obvious because of our different skin tones. Our adoptive father was praised by the community and by the church for his generosity in taking unwanted Māori children in and providing for them.
16. As the oldest adopted child, I also think I was treated differently from GRO-B-1 and GRO-B-2 I always seemed to cop the brunt of my adoptive parent’s anger, frustration, punishment and blame.
17. I have vivid memories of being unhappy and yearning for my real mother. I fantasised about what she looked like but also that she had not really given me up or forgotten about me as I was told. I imagined my mother turning up at school so my peers would see that I had a real mother, and I imagined that she would take me away forever. This of course never happened but my fantasies helped me deal with some of the unhappiness and block out the reality in my adoptive parent’s home.
18. I went to Ōratia Primary School, Bruce McLaren Intermediate and Henderson High School. I loved school though largely because I was not at home, but I was teased a lot. The other kids would call me marmite or shit-face and they were mostly Pākehā with many Yugoslavian children. There were hardly any Māori or Pasifika children in primary and intermediate school, just us. I would ignore the taunts and bury myself in books or schoolwork. I hated the weekends or school holidays because it meant I had to stay home where I was unhappy.
19. I was a good student and I always received excellent school reports. My adoptive parents did not care and were dismissive of my efforts or achievements. I excelled academically and in sporting activities, but it all went unnoticed in the home while their own children were praised and rewarded. I felt unvalued and worthless.

20. I also felt unwanted and unloved. I remember biking to primary school one day and falling off my bike. I broke my collar bone, my legs were badly grazed and bruised but despite being in a lot of pain I carried on biking to school because I was scared that my adopted parents would be angry at me. I was placed in the sick bay and the school called my adoptive mother to seek medical help for me. I remember that rather than comfort me, she was annoyed that I had injured myself because it was an inconvenience to her. I was made to feel bad about putting her out but then I was often made to feel this way.

### **Abuse from adopted parents**

21. I suffered verbal, physical and sexual abuse in the care of my adoptive parents.
22. I was constantly picked on, blamed, put down and criticised. I was never believed and constantly called a liar. If anything was broken, messy or dirty it was somehow my fault. I remember they were always annoyed at me for what were somewhat insignificant things that I had no control of like "you're growing too fast or your feet are too big, you're too tall".
23. I tried so hard to please them, but I never could. I wanted so badly to be loved or praised for doing good, but I never was.
24. I was physically abused for trivial things or for things that I never actually did and it sometimes felt that they didn't need to have a legitimate reason for hitting me, any reason would do. My adoptive mother often beat me with a large laundry stick or on the soles of my bare feet with a hairbrush or large scrubbing brush. My adoptive father would always beat me with his bare hands.
25. I don't think my adoptive parents were ever really interested in me, they much preferred their own biological children followed by GRO-B-1 and GRO-B-2 I don't know why they adopted me as I felt very insignificant in their home and as part of their lives.

### *Sexual abuse*

26. My adoptive father sexually abused me from about the age of 8 until I was removed from their care at the age of 13.



27. As an adult, I have reflected on the hidings that I received and I believe the sexual abuse may have started earlier than that. When he disciplined me, he would pull down my pants and underwear and place me over his knees. He would slap me repeatedly on my bare buttocks with his bare hands. The slaps were so hard they would cause welts which would sometimes bleed.
28. I distinctly remember something hard pressed up against me. As a child, I thought it was the laundry stick my adoptive mother used to beat me. I now realise that it was my adoptive father's erect penis. He took pleasure in beating me, it would sexually arouse him, and it was sexually gratifying to him. I remember he would grunt in a certain way and I came to recognise this grunt as a depiction or indication of his pleasure.
29. Once when I was about 10 years old, I was brave enough to speak up and called him a "dirty old man" during one of these hidings. It took courage to say something as my adoptive father was over 6 feet tall and had a very intimidating presence.
30. I told my adoptive mother about the sexual abuse, but she called me a liar and did nothing about it. I was vulnerable, helpless and unsafe in their home.
31. I do not wish to share further details of the sexual abuse because it is extremely difficult for me and there are also wider whānau dynamics involved.
32. This sexual abuse has had a significant impact on me growing up. I have had to process the internal anger, grief and pain but I also have issues trusting males, particularly tall white men who reminded me of my adoptive father. As a young adult, this extended to professional white men where at secondary school or in the workplace I have struggled to interact with them easily. I have experienced fear and have frozen or been paralyzed to even speak to them. I have had to carefully work through my fears, so I can function professionally and normally especially in a work environment.

### **Social workers**

33. I did not ever receive a visit or follow up from a social worker throughout my entire adoption.

34. I did however receive visits from Sister Bridget from the Salvation Army. The purpose of these visits was never explained to me, and I ended up telling her what I thought she wanted to hear. I wish I had been brave enough to tell her what was really going on for me with my adoptive family.

*Abduction and attack*

35. When I was 13 years old, I was biking home from school and was abducted by a carload of Mongrel Mob members. I was beaten and raped. They said they took me because they thought I was a "Head Hunter chick" yet I was in school uniform so this reason has always seemed to be odd. I was admitted to the hospital with significant injuries including a broken jaw.

36. My adoptive family did not visit or make contact with me in the hospital.

37. From the hospital, I was taken straight to Allendale Girl's Home. After about two weeks a staff member told me to put on a dress. It was a pretty dress and I remember thinking I had never worn such a pretty dress before. I was told that I was being taken to court, which I didn't understand what that was and they did not say why.

38. I arrived at court and stood in the witness box. My adoptive father was my only family member present. He stood in the court nearby me, and we both faced the Judge. This was the first time I had seen him since my abduction. He refused to acknowledge me or even look at me.

39. I stood there while my adoptive father told the Judge I was an out of control, delinquent child and they (my adoptive parents) were ashamed and embarrassed of me. He went on to tell the Judge that they no longer wanted me and that I could not return to live with them.

40. It was difficult to hear that they did not give a damn about what had happened to me, in fact, they seemed to blame it all on me. They wanted to throw me out like I was a piece of rubbish. They did not have a single ounce of pity or empathy for me. I desperately wanted to speak up and defend myself, but my jaw was wired shut. I could not utter a single word.

41. The Judge made a section 11 custody order. From that day forward, I was a ward of the State.

42. My last thought of my adoptive parents was an angry one as I was hurt and I thought “okay – see you later then.”
43. I was taken back to Allendale, but my sadness soon turned to relief when I realised that I would not have to return to that home again.

**Allendale Girls Home (“Allendale”) & Bollard Girls Home (“Bollard”)**

44. I spent about the next 2 years at Allendale and Bollard. I cannot be entirely accurate about the amount of time I spent in either facility. I do however remember absconding from Allendale and Bollard, and either being returned to Allendale or Bollard each time. I also recall that Bollard felt stricter than Allendale.
45. When I arrived at Allendale, I received a full medical examination (including an internal) by the only doctor there, a female. A staff member explained to me what was about to happen, but not why. I was barely an adult and still a child, and I could not fully understand what was happening to me.
46. Every time you entered Allendale or Bollard you spent time in the secure unit. Both secure units were like a prison, dark, lonely, with no windows and only a mattress on the floor. It was lonely and boring, there were a few magazines and books to read but not a lot else to do. I don't remember being allowed to exercise outdoors either so there was not a lot to do until you were released back into the main house.

*Allendale*

47. Allendale housed up to 30 girls at a time, I recall many of us were Māori.
48. We lived in dormitories with each dormitory having 2, 4 or 10 beds.
49. Most of the staff at Allendale were female and Pākeha.
50. All the girls shared kitchen duties and we were each responsible for making our own beds and keeping our living areas tidy.
51. A teacher came in daily to give us school lessons.
52. I also remember a kuia named Ana Tia coming into Allendale to teach us about Māori culture. I really enjoyed learning about my culture as it was something never provided to me by my adoptive parents. Learning about things Māori made me feel good and instilled pride in me.



53. Some of the staff at Allendale would take us out for outings to the beach and we always enjoyed this.
54. While I was at Allendale, I was allowed to attend Avondale College for about 6 months. I really liked the Principal Mr Woods because he encouraged me to sit School Certificate and he helped me get a job at Woolworths during the holidays. He was caring, and many of us met his family.
55. We were allowed to call home or send letters to our loved ones. I occasionally called my adoptive parents, but our conversations were strained and awkward. I missed them; they were still my family, but they never once contacted me.
56. I can recall social worker visits, but not how many visits. I remember Mr Pickens, he tried to talk to me, but I could not relate to him as it was difficult talking to a male stranger. He did tell me that he was the father of a girl that I went to school with, which made it more uncomfortable and an invasion of privacy.
57. It would be fair to say that I was fairly content at Allendale, more so than at Bollard. I absconded a number of times from Bollard, but the Police would always find me and take me back.

#### *Bollard*

58. Bollard had a kingpin system where the older girls bullied the younger girls, or the bigger girls bullied the smaller girls. I witnessed a lot of bullying, but I was fortunate enough not to be bullied myself.
59. I did not witness the staff bullying the girls, but they did intervene when the girls were bullying each other. I spent more time at Allendale than Bollard.
60. The last time I absconded I was returned to Bollard and was in the dining room when Mr Woods visited and stopped to talk to me. He asked how I was and if I was ok and I asked if I could come back to Allendale. Mr Woods was able to let me be returned to Allendale where I attended Avondale College from and stayed there until I was placed in a foster home.

#### **Foster Home**



61. I was 15 years old when I was placed in foster care to live with the [GRO-B-3] whānau. I was with them for almost 1 year.
62. I came to love the [GRO-B-3] whānau because they were good to me. For the first time in my life, I felt part of a “real” family where I was wanted and loved. I had never experienced this before. I have nothing but good memories of the [GRO-B-3] whānau.
63. My foster father was in the Army, and they had moved around a lot. I loved them so much I called them Mum and Dad.
64. Dad's last posting was to Sylvia Park, and we lived in army housing in Mount Wellington.
65. Dad had a part-time job at a local pub. He would take me to work with him and I would pick up glasses and do the dishes. Dad never let me drink alcohol or work behind the bar. I loved working with my Dad.
66. Unfortunately, Social Welfare found out about me being in the pub underage, so they removed me from their home as this was deemed to be inappropriate and a breach of safe care for a foster child.
67. I was sent back to the Girls' home briefly and then on to a hostel.

#### **Naumai Māori Girls Hostel (“the hostel”)**

68. I was 16 years old when I was placed at Naumai Hostel in Onehunga.
69. The hostel was run by a Māori man and his Pākehā wife, they were very religious and were active with the Brethren church. We were required to attend a bible class that was held at the hostel every Tuesday night and church services Sunday morning and afternoon. There was a range of ages at the hostel and most of us were Māori. Some worked full time and there were two other girls who also went to school with me. Some of the girls had disabilities. I recall we mostly got on with each other.
70. On the weekends and school holidays, I was allowed to go stay with the [GRO-B-3] whānau. I was grateful for this time with whānau as it felt like I was still included in their family.
71. Once I finished school, I got a job and boarded with a school friend and her family as I wasn't allowed to live with the [GRO-B-3] whānau full time.
72. I turned 18 years old. I remember a social worker turned up and said, “you are 18 years old now so that's it”. I was officially no longer a State Ward.

73. I was not offered any counselling to process what had happened to me. I was not offered any financial or any other support. I was only told, "that's it".

### **Reconnecting with whakapapa**

#### *Access to information*

74. I have not claimed compensation or any form of redress through the Ministry of Social Development's Historical Claims process.

75. For me, the biggest impact was my disconnection from culture, whānau and whakapapa. I do not know if there is anything that the State can do to address this. I have worked through this all on my own in my lifelong search for self, for my turangawaewae and reconnection to whakapapa.

### **My search for whakapapa**

76. In the late 80s, with my foster mother's support, I applied for my original birth certificate under the Adult Adoption Information Act 1985. While it gave me my birth parents' names, height, eye colour, occupations and hobbies it was insufficient for me to easily locate them.

77. I searched phone books and made many phone calls to various people to find my birth parents. I wrote to or left messages with lots of people, but no one got back to me with any leads or information.

78. I spent hours going through microfilm records at the city library and old Births, Deaths and Marriages (BDM) records and in newspapers. I would write to BDM and pay a fee for each search to be made on the details that I had and was able to eventually retrieve my birth mother and grandmother's birth and marriage certificates.

79. In finding my maternal grandmother's surname I was able to source information about her right up until the mid-1980s. I remember feeling sad because I thought it must have meant she had passed away. I was sad as this meant I would never get to meet her or know anything about her. I was grieving for someone I did not even know.

80. I had established a good relationship with the social worker who had provided me with my original birth certificate. She discovered that my grandmother was still receiving a pension, so she gave me the address used to obtain the pension.

81. I was able to obtain a copy of my birth mother's marriage certificate. It recorded that my birth mother had married [GRO-B] and they had lived with his sister [GRO-B]. I obtained [GRO-B] details and she sent me a photo of my birth mother. I got to see my birth mother for the very first time in my life, it was a strange but wonderful feeling.
82. The address provided by the social worker for my grandmother's pension was for a great aunt who lived in Mount Roskill. I was excited and I had prepared wording to say that I was looking for my birth mother under the guise of a school reunion. However, when she answered the phone all I could blurt out was "I'm [GRO-B-4] daughter." She was unaware of my birth, but she told me my mother and my grandmother were both living in America.
83. My life changed forever from that point.
84. We connected, and we wrote to each other regularly after this contact was made

*My birth mother* [GRO-B-4]

85. I was 32 years old when I met my birth mother in real life.
86. Our first contact occurred in 1993 when my birth mother and her husband travelled to NZ to spend Christmas with us. It was slightly unnerving because she tried very hard to be my mother instantly. I felt I already had a mother, my foster mother. I considered my foster parents to be my parents in every sense of the word. They had been good to me, I loved them. My foster mother was also the catalyst for my journey to try and reconnect with my birth parents and whakapapa. I am eternally grateful to her for this.
87. In 1998, my husband and I travelled to California with our children to spend more time with my birth mother.
88. In the late 1990s, my maternal grandmother was diagnosed with cancer, so she came back to NZ for treatment. Unfortunately, the treatment was unsuccessful, and she passed away shortly thereafter. I was able to see my birth mother again when she came back for the funeral.
89. There was another visit in the late 1990s when my birth mother returned for the birth of my aunt's, her sister's first baby. This was the last time my birth mother has visited NZ.



90. I also travelled to the US to attend my grandfather's funeral in 2001.

### ***Reconnecting with my birth mother***

91. Although I was overjoyed to find my birth mother, establishing a relationship with her has not been easy. She gave me up and has been absent from my life for most of it. My birth mother wanted to be an instant mother and it felt like she wanted to take immediate control over my whānau but excluded my foster family which did not feel right. I also needed to take things slowly and to establish trust.

92. I was also worried about rejection. I had been rejected by my adoptive parents and the foster families I had been with and I had to trust that she would not reject me again.

93. My fear of rejection has created a whole new level of trauma. I have constantly questioned why I was not wanted. I have constantly questioned my own self-worth as a person. I have had to work through this trauma on my own.

94. I have also had to navigate having two families, my foster family and my biological family. I have at times felt torn between them. I do not think my biological mother understands the love I have for my foster family. Reconnecting with my birth mother and preserving my relationship with my foster family has not always been an easy process.

95. I have had my birth mother in my life now for over 20 years. I have been diligent in keeping in touch with her and building on our relationship, but I often feel it is a one-sided relationship. I realise it is up to her.

### **My birth father**

96. In the process of finding my birth mother, I also found out who my birth father was, and it wasn't the name on my adoption file. He was born in Samoa and he was of Samoan and Māori descent. He passed away in 1998 so I never got to meet him.

97. He was married several times and I am one of many illegitimate children he had throughout his life, in total there are about 40 of us.

98. He moved to Hawai'i later leaving his numerous families in NZ behind, there he married a Samoan woman, and they had another family together. My birth father is buried there.

99. What little I know about my birth father has helped to provide me with some context around why my birth mother had to give me up for adoption. My birth mother already had very few options but without my birth father's love and support, she had no choice at all.

100. I did find out later that members of my grandfather's second family (he had remarried GRO-B from Samoa) did ask for me, to raise me as their child but my grandmother refused to consider this, unfortunately.

101. I visited Hawai'i in 2019 for a conference and was able to visit his grave and connect with some more of my half-siblings

102. I have largely been not particularly well received in the Samoan side of my biological father's family in New Zealand. Most of the half-siblings that I have met were largely raised by their Pākehā mothers and are not connected to their Samoan or Māori culture. In searching more on my biological father's side, it has always been the quest to find more information about my biological grandmother who was of Māori descent. The family have told me they don't know who she was.

#### *Importance of whakapapa*

103. I am Māori and Samoan through my biological father. My foster parents are Māori. Therefore, I also identify with my foster parent's whakapapa which is Ngāpuhi, Te Aupōuri and Ngāti Hine.

104. I am adopted and was then disowned and rejected by my adoptive parents. Therefore, my cultural identity, whakapapa and where I come from mean everything to me.

105. Finding my birth parents has allowed me to know something about who I am, where I come from and whom I am connected to.

106. The rejections I have faced in life have caused me significant pain. I believe that knowing my whakapapa would help to heal some of the pain caused by these rejections.

107. I had my first child in 1984. I looked at her and thought "wow this tiny person is actually related to me through toto". It was amazing to know this, to see this and to finally feel a connection to a bloodline.

108. I am proud to be Māori and Samoan. I have hope that where there have only been blanks, I will in time be able to fill those blanks. I want my tamariki and my mokopuna to know their Māori and Samoan heritage and all the richness, wealth and beauty that it brings.

**Impacts: A study into the intergenerational effects of closed adoption on whakapapa**

*Experiences of disconnect*

109. My PhD work examines the identity journeys of Māori and Pacific adoptees and how closed adoption has likely denied them access or connection to their culture. The underlying cause for the inability to connect with culture stems from the nature of closed adoptions, how with secrecy and closed files no information was made available to connect adoptees with their whakapapa. This was the case for me and many of the participants who have shared their identity journeys with me in this research. In addition to the physical, sexual and verbal abuse I suffered in the care of my adoptive parents, it was the severance of my ties to whānau and whakapapa that took away my opportunity to be raised immersed in my culture.

110. I do not wholly know where I come from and there is a deep sense of loss that comes with this. I feel fraudulent sometimes in giving a pepeha that I am connected to by heart, but not by blood. This has a ripple effect on my own tamariki, for example, my son feels confident and comfortable in sharing his Niuean side when he does a mihi, but he often omits my side because it is complex and complicated. He does not feel comfortable using my foster family's pepeha and my whakapapa is limited and complicated to unpack.

111. I believe closed adoptions are just wrong on so many levels, I believe everyone has a right to know where and whom they come from. Where you are indigenous you have a right to your own culture, language and people, no one should be denied this information and rights as an indigenous person. The issuing of a new birth certificate with a stranger's information listed on it is a lie and does not support the ties of whakapapa that are integral to one's wellbeing.



112. These are issues that I have discussed in my PhD, for example in te ao Māori we are often asked questions like “Ko wai koe?” or “Nō hea koe?” and although they are little questions, they have huge implications for those of us who can’t answer those questions wholly. It is complicated, it can leave me feeling like an imposter and it is that sense of disconnection that causes me a lot of heartache.
113. By studying at this level, I aim to set a positive example for my tamariki and mokopuna and to achieve an education that supports them in their lives. I want to enable them to be what they want to be in life and to lead a career that they can feel passionate about. My journey through education has been sporadic and I didn’t finish secondary school fully qualified and then worked for many years before commencing higher education in my forties. When I graduated for the first time with a Graduate Diploma, I never dreamt that one day I would be doing a PhD but after completing a Masters’ degree I was offered a scholarship to undertake a doctorate and I only proceeded if I could write about the identity journeys of Māori adoptees. Having had adoption shape most of my life, this topic was part of me. I thought it would help me complete my search for whakapapa and whānau for my tamariki and mokopuna. It has been a life-long search for self that I don’t believe will ever end.

*Journey towards healing*

114. Completing my PhD has given me the opportunity to read, speak and write openly about adoption and it has enabled me to discuss issues around closed adoptions with others, so I have been engaged in unpacking these issues well before the Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in Care (“Royal Commission”) was established and this has been hugely therapeutic and has given me a form of healing, that was quite unexpected.
115. I have met many other adoptees through this research work and made lifelong lasting connections with fellow adoptees who understand the feelings of displacement in a way that non-adopted people cannot. “As adopted people, we are often misunderstood because you never really belong anywhere, wholly.” I have conversations about this with my tamariki, but I don’t think they will ever really understand.

116. Through sharing stories with other adoptees, I have found inner peace and sense of calmness, something that I couldn't have fathomed some 20 years ago. My whānau has expanded through these networks with meeting and connecting with other adoptees as whānau.
117. Over the years, many people have encouraged me to go to counselling, but I think that the trauma always prevented me from taking that first step. I think all too often as Māori women we inherit the role of being a counsellor for our tamariki and mokopuna, to support them through their troubles, so we find it unsettling being on the receiving end of counselling.
118. My first time engaging with counselling services started through the Royal Commission and this has helped me unpack a whole bunch of things that I had suppressed for a long time. I can navigate many of the things that surfaced through counselling now as an adult because I can see it through a different lens. When I was younger, I believe I chose to shut out many of the issues that I was facing because of the abuse I suffered while in the care of my adoptive parents.
119. As a child in care, I think I was a very angry person and I held onto that anger for a long time. But I have learned to let go of that anger, to let go of the hara and to clear it out of my psyche. Letting go of these things was my way of not letting my experiences of abuse in care shape or define me.

## **Recommendations**

### *Making adoptions open*

120. Adoption law reforms are currently underway, and the Crown need to assess their stance on closed adoptions. Making adoptions open would be the first step towards addressing the issues that arise from closed adoptions.
121. Where decisions are being made about a child, all relevant parties must be included in the decision-making process, this includes the wider whānau. Ideally, the placement of children should happen within the whānau. The importance of whakapapa and culture should be considered for children who are adopted, open adoptions are key to a different experience for all children to help them keep their culture alive.

122. If a child is adopted, the state needs to ensure that the family and the home that the child is placed in, is safe for longer than what currently occurs. This would mean that like fostering there are regular checks, that the adoption is appropriate and that children are not left vulnerable to ill-care or abuse.
123. One of the primary issues that arose from my closed adoption, was the difficulty in reconnecting with my culture and whakapapa. The biggest barrier to this was the inaccessibility of information and the gaps in the information that was held in files. Accessibility to information and better systems of recording culturally relevant information will make this process easier for future adoptees and their whānau.

*Improving social worker practices*

124. I think that the social worker's relationship with the child is the key to getting it right when making decisions about where to place a child and how to best support the child. If there is no relationship, then the social worker will have no relevant knowledge of the child's background or an understanding of their individual needs.
125. This could be achieved by improving the cultural capabilities of social workers through embedding this into their formal training and education. There also needs to be greater resourcing and budgeting poured into Māori designed and led approaches to the care of our whānau. Few social workers seem to understand the issues faced by adoptees especially those who have been transracially adopted. These initiatives need to be connected with communities where it matters most and must be evident in the effectiveness of these solutions. Initiatives should be resourced according to need and more aligned to the whānau and communities that are being served.
126. The social welfare and care system should provide "wrap around" support services and should be centralised around the child and whānau, to make it easier for whānau to navigate. Within a "wrap around" approach, social workers should customise the approach to be appropriate for the whānau they are working with, it should not be a "one size fits all" approach.

*Recognising whāngai and empowering whānau*



127. The concept and practice of whāngai are disregarded within the care system and the law. As a starting point, there needs to be recognition of whāngai. Further to this, for whāngai to be effective we must first address the issues within whānau. Some whānau need to be supported and empowered to be able to care for their tamariki and mokopuna. This means that the Crown needs to effectively address whānau issues of; poverty, homelessness, addictions and health disparities, in order to uplift the mana of our whānau and to enable whāngai to be practised with mana.
128. I have been raising and caring for my four mokopuna as whāngai for about 10 years now. While I feed, clothe, love and do everything I can as a pseudo-parent, it can be hard emotionally and financially. We are not recognised in law as a legitimate form of care, and this is evident in the restrictions applied in being able to make decisions about their health, welfare, education and many other important things.
129. The processes that kaumātua must go through to adopt their mokopuna is a long and challenging process to navigate, and there are barriers for kaumātua who are raising their mokopuna. If whāngai was a supported accepted process then adoption may not be needed, and care could occur for mokopuna, by their whānau more seamlessly.
130. Access to information should be available to tamariki when they ask for it, the current age limit of 20 is not fair on some children and should be removed as they should have a right to have all the information about themselves and their whakapapa as a vital source of wellbeing.
131. Appropriate consideration should be given to the intergenerational impacts of these systems and challenges on whānau. For many of our whānau, we have had to work to address and overcome these barriers over generations. If the Crown genuinely wants to provide effective solutions to supporting whānau, they need to take immediate action and a long-term approach to changing these systems to support the work that is already being done within whānau.

**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.

GRO-C

Signed:

Dated: 11 December 2021

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