

**Witness Name:** GRO-A Ms TU

**Statement No.:** WITN0548001

**Exhibits:** WITN0548002–WITN0548012

**Dated:** 29.06.2021

## ROYAL COMMISSION OF INQUIRY INTO ABUSE IN CARE

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**WITNESS STATEMENT OF** GRO-A Ms TU

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I, GRO-A Ms TU will say as follows: -

### INTRODUCTION

1. My full name is GRO-A Ms TU. I was born on GRO-A 1975 at Auckland Women's Hospital. I was adopted shortly after birth. It was a closed adoption.
2. My biological mother was Samoan. Her name was GRO-B (my biological mother). My biological father was Palagi. His name was GRO-B (my biological father).
3. My adoptive parents were both Palagi. At the time, my adoptive mother's name was GRO-B (my adoptive mother), but she later used her maiden name GRO-B. My adoptive father's name is GRO-B (my adoptive father).
4. The purpose of my statement is to share my adoption experience with the Inquiry. I experienced all forms of abuse in my adoption placement – physical, sexual and emotional abuse as well as neglect. It was not an appropriate care placement.
5. There are many stories which I could draw on to describe the process of locating my biological families. Adoption stories often focus on the feeling of

belongingness one gains from the experience of finding their biological parents. For me however, the process of meeting both my biological father and mother was not a process which gave me any sense of belonging, more a feeling of utter flux and dislocation. [WITN0548002]

6. I do not believe that closed adoptions should occur. I believe each child born has a right to know their biological background, identity and cultural heritage, that is their right.
7. The decision to adopt me out to Palagi people meant I became disconnected from my Samoan heritage and cultural roots. There are no words to describe the trauma created and the impact this has had on me.

## **FAMILY BACKGROUND AND EARLY LIFE**

### *Adoptive family*

8. My adoptive mother was 26 years old when I was born and my adoptive father was 35 years old. My adoptive father had a daughter from a previous relationship whose mother was of Māori descent.
9. My brother was adopted in 1973. His name is GRO-B (my brother) and he is of Rarotongan descent. My brother and I always knew we were adopted.
10. My adoptive mother's sister was also adopted. Her biological father was Māori. Even though we were a 'mixed' family in that sense, my parents were white so my brother and I were disconnected from our roots and cultural heritage from the beginning.
11. My adoptive mother couldn't have children of her own and she felt bad about that. She would always say "all I wanted was to have my own children". It hurt me when she would say this because she adopted us and we were, in this sense, her children.
12. My adoptive mother would say that she always wanted "brown" or "black" babies. As I got older I felt uncomfortable when I heard this, but I try and be gracious about this narrative. There was a lot of racism against Pacific Islanders in the 1970s, so perhaps my adoption was also about trying to provide a home to

children who might not have homes to go to. This is not the only racialised way we were spoken about. I remember being called a 'Pickaninny' by my adoptive maternal grandmother.

13. It would've been difficult to hide that my brother and I were adopted. I did not look white as a child, even though in winter my skin was quite fair. In summer I would go really brown. I also inherited the Samoan physique. I was a big child and I later developed body and self-esteem issues. **[WITN0548003; WITN0548004; WITN0548005]**

#### *Adoption records*

14. I can't remember when I found out that I was Samoan or who told me. I'm assuming my adoptive mother told me. But it was like breathing. I just knew it. I just grew up knowing it. I remember having to tell my school friends that I had birth parents and real parents to explain my situation.
15. I understand that my adoptive parents wanted information so that they could tell my brother and I more about my biological parents. I have a letter which explains little about what my biological mother had told the Department of Social Welfare. This is all the information I had growing up. **[WITN0548006; WITN0548007]**
16. I was also told that my biological mother had written a letter that I was meant to receive when I was 15 but it was left with a social worker, and nobody knew how to contact the social worker. This social worker would have known that there was a letter to be given to me on my 15<sup>th</sup> birthday. But no efforts were made to ensure I received this letter.
17. I was so upset on my 15<sup>th</sup> birthday that I did not receive the letter. I wondered why I was even told about it if it was not going to be given to me. The letter was so important to me.
18. At the age of 20 I was able to access my adoption records. There was barely any information about my Samoan family. I first had to track down my biological father. The focus of my journey was to locate my biological mother in the hopes of discovering my Samoan roots.

*My biological mother*

19. I always had a deep longing for my biological mother. I knew she was Western Samoan, but I suppose I was not quite clear what that meant, except that it was a Pacific Island.
20. I would think about my biological mother every birthday. I remember when I was really young, I think I was five, I used to think about my biological mother late at night, looking at the stars in the sky wondering who she was and where she was.
21. I used to sing to her. I just had a strong yearning to know her and to be reunited with her. I very rarely thought about who my biological father was.
22. When I finally found my biological mother at the age of 21, the full story of how I came to be adopted was told to me by her.
23. My biological mother told me that she grew up in Savai'i, Samoa, and migrated to New Zealand in the 1970s. She was chosen by my grandparents to travel to New Zealand to work. She sent remittances back to Samoa for her family.
24. When my biological mother arrived in New Zealand, she worked in a factory in Auckland. She was living with her two aunties, my grandmother's sisters. Neither of her aunties had children.
25. The aunty that had the most involvement with my biological mother and my birth was named [GRO-B] (my aunty). She used a Palagi name in the 70s, she was known as [GRO-B-1].
26. While working at the factory, my biological mother met my biological father. They were together for six months. My Palagi grandparents were against the relationship because my biological mother was Samoan. They wanted my biological father to end the relationship.
27. My biological parents were quite different. My biological father experienced culture shock because of how family-oriented my biological mother was. My biological father confirmed this with me when I eventually met him. My biological mother was also a Mormon and my biological father was an atheist.

*My biological mother's pregnancy*

28. My biological mother told me she didn't realise that she was pregnant until she got pneumonia and ended up in hospital. Her two aunts were with her and were in the hospital room when the doctors said, "You're pregnant". Unfortunately, they didn't react very well and one of the aunts walked out of the hospital room.
29. My biological mother said there was a lot of pressure on her from her friends and people she worked with at the factory to get rid of me but she did not want to do that.
30. She had another Samoan friend who was pregnant, and they supported each other throughout their pregnancies. Her friend also gave up her daughter for adoption. I do not know her friend's name, but her daughter has been in contact with me wanting to find her mum.
31. My biological mother was practically alone. She was the first one to come to New Zealand from her family after living in Samoa for the first 20 years of her life and she wouldn't have known what to do.

*The decision to adopt*

32. My biological mother gave birth to me on [GRO-A] 1975 at Auckland Women's Hospital, though she remembered my birthday as [GRO-A] 1975.
33. When I was born, the name that my biological mother gave me was [GRO-B-1]. She named me after her aunty.
34. Unfortunately, when my biological mother had to write her own details on the birth certificate, she put down a fake name. The name she wrote was [GRO-B-2]. [GRO-B-2]. This fake name caused a lot of difficulties when I was trying to locate my biological mother later in life.
35. My biological mother called my biological father to tell him that she had given birth. She pretended to be her aunty on the phone. She told him that "his daughter" had just been born at Auckland Women's Hospital, and he just hung up the phone. My biological father later confirmed this story.

36. My biological mother told me that she called him as her last chance to keep me. She said that she went through a two-week period where she wasn't sure about what she was going to do and stayed with me in the hospital.
37. My biological mother said that she felt she had little choice but to give me up because to keep me would've meant complete cultural isolation for her. She only had her aunties in New Zealand who did not want her to keep me and there was no other family support.
38. I was told that my adoption was a closed adoption. I wondered what an open adoption was. I didn't know whether these were options my biological mother knew about.
39. My biological mother told me that she knew there was a six-month period before the adoption was final. She told me that she wrote to her mum in Samoa and to one of her brothers in America to see whether they would be able to support her in raising me. She said that they both told her to stop the adoption. She said that either my uncle would come and take me back to America or she would take me to Samoa, where once my grandfather saw me he would have opened his arms to me.
40. By the time things could be arranged, it was too late, and the six-month date had passed. I believe that my biological mother is referring to the expiry of the interim adoption period and the order becoming final. I cannot clearly recollect why I thought she said six months, but I did write about this in 1997, where I recorded that she mentioned six months and said that she was too late to stop the adoption.
41. My adoption placement began as an interim order and I have a copy of that order.
42. She confirmed that she did write a letter to me telling me why she did what she did, that she loved me and asked for my forgiveness. As I mentioned before, I never received this letter.
43. My biological mother went on to have children with her Samoan husband, one of them is my sister GRO-B I have connected with my sister. She is six years

younger than me and she told me that our mum told her about me on her ninth birthday.

44. My sister said that my biological mother told her that she wanted to find me but did not know where to start and she was afraid to disrupt my life. My biological mother also told me that she would read the notices in the paper in case I put a public notice that I was trying to find her.

## **MY ABUSE**

### *Background*

45. In terms of my adoption placement, there was a lot of neglect, alcohol, physical and sexual abuse.
46. My adoptive parents separated when I was only 18 months old. We had a stepfather that moved in when we were still young. I remember my brother and I would sometimes sneak in and sleep in the same bed because we were scared of him.
47. My adoptive father ended up in Papua New Guinea. He then moved to Australia around 1983. My brother and I would still visit him or he would come and see us once or twice a year.
48. Visiting my adoptive father brings me some of my happiest childhood memories. He knew what was going on in the house, but he couldn't rescue us. He didn't know how. He was solid at caring for us though when we were with him. We would turn up without clothes and he would go out and buy us new clothes.
49. To his credit, he was completely our dad and that was pretty amazing. He never once made me feel unwanted. I think he recognised that things weren't right but he didn't know what to do. He left the property for my adoptive mother to care for us but when she started a relationship with my stepfather things rapidly deteriorated.

*Stepfather*

50. When my stepfather came into the picture, I must've been about two or three. He was an alcoholic and over time my adoptive mother became one too. They would drink a lot. My adoptive father said that my adoptive mother was a great mother to us in the beginning until my stepfather came onto the scene, but I do not remember these first 18 months of my life before they separated.
51. There was extreme violence in our home after my stepfather arrived. I remember that my stepfather would pull Mum across the room by her hair, there was strangulation and blood. Things only got worse as I got older.
52. We lived in terror because of him. I think he was a bit crueler towards my brother.  
GRO-B
53. There was also extreme gaslighting. If I did anything that my stepfather did not approve of, my toys would disappear. I had a favorite record; it was a Lionel Richie one. One morning, I came out and it had been snapped in half, but nothing was ever said or spoken about. I knew my that stepfather was responsible. I was six when this was going on.
54. Sometimes we were woken in the night by my adoptive mother telling us we had to leave quickly and would stay a night or a few nights or even longer in a motel.
55. When I was about nine, things started to get really bad and it felt like there was violence on a nightly basis. I put together a kit to protect my mum. I had a cricket bat and a vacuum hose and some other things. I felt like I needed to defend her.
56. There was one time, I ended up hitting my stepfather with a pillow to get him off her. He had my adoptive mother in a headlock and she was crying out "GRO-A help me". He looked shocked that I hit him and shoved me away. I was nine years old.
57. When violence happened, my brother and I would run up the road to get our grandma (my adoptive mother's mum). We did this when we could see that the beating wasn't going to end. Sometimes my adoptive mother would tell us to go and get help.



58. Our grandma lived about 15 minutes away, walking distance. We would run up at all times during the night. She would come down to our house to stop the fighting. This was a familiar routine.
59. We would stay the night at our grandma's house, and she would usually send us to school the next day.
60. It escalated to a point where my adoptive mother would scream things like, "I'm going to go mad". It was really intense psychological and physical violence. I think it just broke her. Things got worse after the separation between her and my stepfather. My mother would get drunk a lot.
61. I didn't know who to talk to and I had nowhere to go. It was such a normalised part of my life. I was really affected and I was pretty depressed at school. I was sent to a counsellor and I started to binge and compulsive eat around seven years old which affected my health.

#### *Neglect*

62. I remember not having lunch for school. At school, they also had to give me a set of knickers because I had re-worn knickers.
63. Despite this, child services wouldn't have even looked at us. For all intents and purposes, we were living with a respectable white family. I believe that the State should have checked in on us to see how we were going in our adoption placement. I felt so alone.
64. I looked at my reports the other day and I missed 20 days of school for a term. Why didn't they ask what was going on? Nobody asked.

#### *Sexual abuse*

65. [REDACTED] GRO-B [REDACTED]  
[REDACTED] GRO-B [REDACTED] Being around the [REDACTED] community was a big part of my childhood. My adoptive father told me that they were able to adopt my brother and I because of my adoptive maternal grandmother's connections with the State from this work.

66. My adoptive mother ended up becoming a social worker for people with disabilities. She had an incredible ability to connect with people from the disability community, she was a really great worker. To put myself through university from the age of 18 I also worked as a care worker with GRO-A  
GRO-A
67. My adoptive maternal grandmother had two intellectually handicapped children. One of them was relatively high-functioning. He sexually abused me and other family members. There was a complete failure on everyone's behalf to stop that from happening.
68. I remember when I was five or six years old, he sexually abused me. My grandmother's sister saw it happening, and I was blamed. He was a fully grown adult and I was still blamed.
69. I believe he knew what he was doing. He was capable enough to tell me to keep it a secret. He knew how to isolate me. He couldn't live independently without some assistance and that complicated matters and made things difficult.
70. When I was around nine years old I raised it with my grandma. My grandma told me, "Just tell him no". She was referring to her son.
71. I was sexually abused from an early age until I was 10.

### *Moving to Australia*

72. Things had become so bad at home, because my adoptive mother separated from my stepfather but was so affected by the physical abuse that her alcoholism became worse.
73. I called my adoptive father and asked if I could move to Australia with him. I was 11 years old. He had recently broken up with his partner at the time, so I left New Zealand to go live with him.
74. At the time I had been going to GRO-A It was a shame I left, because I had just started to do well at school, and this was a huge improvement from when I was struggling and completely traumatised. I had

found it hard to concentrate at school. While things at home were bad, I just started to engage with my school work and my grades started to go up.

75. Unfortunately, when I went to Queensland, things quickly went back to the way they were before and I struggled at school. I started getting bullied at school pretty much as soon as my first day. I actually stopped going to school without my adoptive father knowing, until the school rang him and asked him what was happening.
76. As mentioned previously, I started binge eating when I was six or seven years old and I was overweight for my age. However, when I was with my adoptive father in Queensland, I lost a lot of weight because I was in a very different living environment. I'm still a compulsive eater which now in my mid-forties is having a significant detrimental effect on my health.
77. Even though I had stopped compulsively eating for that short time with my adoptive father, I was still so depressed. Looking back, I think I had PTSD. I started to have panic attacks. My adoptive father didn't know what to do so he took me to see a priest. He's an atheist. He just didn't know what to do or how to help me. I do remember finding comfort in a bible though and praying, but I needed counselling.
78. Soon after, my adoptive mother and my brother ended up moving across and living with us in Queensland and things got worse.
79. The family reunion was short lived as my adoptive parents split again. I ended up back with my adoptive mother. I had the option not to go and live with her, but I felt sorry for her and she put pressure on me telling me that she could not live without me. I felt obligated and that she was my responsibility. In Queensland, my adoptive mother ended up with worse men than my stepfather.
80. When I tried to get out again, I asked my dad if I could live with him but he said that there was no space for me at his house as he was living with a new partner and had my brother and two stepchildren.

*Physical and sexual abuse in Australia*

81. When I was 12, my mum had gone on a few dates with a guy and one day she came home with a black eye. She said she hit her eye on a cupboard, but I knew she was lying. Not long after she ended up with another black eye and again I knew that it must have been him.
82. He was racist and called me a "black bitch" a lot. I knew that he hated me. I could feel it even before he started to call me names.
83. One night I tried to call the Police and he ran towards me. My adoptive mother tried to stop him and he backhanded her and split her mouth open in front of me. She had to go to hospital for stitches. I cried and could not breathe. He stayed in the house and was left to comfort me afterwards, which was so confusing. I was 13.
84. Another time he was threatening my adoptive mother and I grabbed a cricket bat and yelled at him to leave her alone. He threw a beer bottle at me and it hit me. I dropped the bat and cried uncontrollably. I was 14.
85. One of the times when my adoptive mum had broken up with him, he turned up to the house and I was there alone. He told me that he had a contract out on all our lives and that I would be the first one to be killed. I did not let him see me cry when he was telling me these things. As soon as he left, I could not breathe and shook uncontrollably and cried. I was 14.
86. He was the type of person that would come into the house when we were not there and you would find cigarette butts in your clothes, or he would drive into the garden at night and there would be tyre marks the next day. When my adoptive mother was trying to break up with him he would call all night. We even got a private number and he found it out and would call.
87. His relationship with my adoptive mother ended when I was 14 years old. He began stalking us, so my adoptive mother had to get a restraining order.
88. I was also sexually assaulted by two drunk guys my adoptive mother brought home. Once when I was 12 years old and the second time when I was 16 years old.

89. With the first guy, my adoptive mum put me on a foldout bed next to the couch where he was and before bed told me to be careful of him.
90. The second guy was just some random guy that Mum and another one of her boyfriends brought home from the pub. He came into my room and I went to my adoptive mum to get some help, I could see her falling off the bed drunk. It is hard to express in language what I felt, but I felt like my body was not my own and there was no one there to protect me.
91. I ended up pushing this second guy off when he was sexually assaulting me and yelled "no". Because my adoptive mother was drunk I jumped out the bathroom window wearing one of her dresses I found in the bathroom cupboard. I got on my push-bike and rode to my friend's house and told her I had just been raped.
92. My friend's mum took me home the next day and the guy was still there. I stayed in the car and I heard yelling and he left. I did not want to go inside and stayed with my friend for the rest of the day. When I got home there was no one there. I wanted my adoptive mother to comfort me and I was ready to talk about what happened. When she got home, I went out to see her and she was so drunk she could barely walk. I felt so alone. But this is how I felt pretty much most of my childhood and particularly as a teenager.
93. Sometimes when my adoptive mother would get really drunk, the music would go on and on and I'd never get any sleep. From the age of 12 until I left home at 17, she would be drunk at least 2-4 times a week. I used to come out and disconnect the music in a rage because I was trying to sleep and then she would scream at me in my bedroom until I put it back on. Or she would wake me up for whatever she needed. I would be so angry and cry. I always thought – wait until the morning when I tell you what you have done. When I tried to say something, she would just scream at me as if it was my fault. This was the cycle and I was never heard.
94. I started to work for money at the age of 14. I would need my adoptive mother to take me to work sometimes on a Saturday morning and she would scream at me the whole drive because I had woken her up and she was hungover. There was no public transport, so I ended up riding there.

95. I'd never bring friends home. The one time I did, I had to push my friend out of the front door as we walked in and let them in through my bedroom window because my adoptive mother was lying in plain sight with her pants down. I had to go and pick her up and get her to bed.
96. When I was 13, I fell down a hole and hurt my ankle and I was in so much pain. My adoptive mother continued drinking with her friend instead of taking me to the hospital. I was sleeping on a couch at my adoptive mother's friend's place. I was in so much physical pain from the sprained ankle and cried through the night. That night my adoptive mother lost her licence for drink driving and lost it for 9 months. I felt like alcohol was more important than I was. I still have an ankle injury.
97. I kept all of this hidden. I didn't tell anyone.

### **CULTURAL BACKGROUND**

98. I cannot remember talking to my brother about our cultural backgrounds when we were growing up. We were just trying to survive our childhoods. We both knew that we were not white and neither of us ever identified as white. I got a sense that my adoptive family were my family, but not my people.
99. I remember when we were in Whangaparoa around six or seven years old. There were people picking pipis, they were either Māori or Pacific. I got out and started mimicking them. Even from a young age, I was yearning for that connection.
100. My adoptive mother told me that she wanted us to be connected to our cultures but had no idea where to go and did not make any effort either. It was only much later in my life, in my twenties, that she would buy me books on the Pacific or on indigenous peoples.
101. When I tried to find my Samoan family, I felt guilty. I was told by my adoptive maternal grandmother that my Samoan family had not raised me and my loyalty was to them. My adoptive mother also needed me to support her through the process when I was looking for my biological mother, when what I needed was her emotional support. This kind of messaging made it very hard for me and also lacked the understanding that I was trying to reconnect with my cultural heritage.

They just did not understand and this has had long lasting damaging effects on me.

102. When I ended up GRO-A in Queensland from 1987, I was bullied at school, called “fat” when I wasn’t and “black bitch”. So there was a racialised element to our identities which I don’t think my adoptive family had the tools to deal with.
103. My home life contributed to me developing an unhealthy relationship with my identity. My mum’s boyfriends in Queensland used to call me a “black bitch” or “adoptees”. I remember one of my mum’s boyfriend’s saying that he heard people at the pub say, “She must’ve fucked a black man”.
104. This is all very difficult to talk about because I have an emotional connection to my adoptive family. I was attached to my adoptive mother as my mum who raised me. But I also grew up being angry and annoyed that she wanted to adopt kids, yet she was shit at caring for us. One of the hardest and painful memories for me is what she used to say to me when she was drunk. I was in my early teens, maybe around 14. She would tell me that she didn’t even want me and to go back to my real mother.
105. In terms of identity, I became obsessed with Martin Luther King at around 14 years old. I became obsessed with the civil rights movement. I watched a tele movie on the Nez Pez, who were American Indians fleeing to Canada from the US Army. I remember crying and feeling complete empathy with the Nez Pez.
106. My adoptive father and his family moved to GRO-B when I was 13. He was still in GRO-B when I was 21. I had two stepsisters that lived with him in GRO-B. I remember that he and my stepsisters used to say demeaning and racist things about Aboriginal peoples living in GRO-B. This used to upset me.
107. I always had this feeling that it was wrong and because I was not white, it confused me and made me feel uncomfortable. My adoptive father was working in construction and ended up working for an Aboriginal community and later became deeply embarrassed for holding these views.

## **DISCLOSURE OF ABUSE**

108. I didn't tell anyone about the rape that occurred when I was 12. Later when I was about 16 years old, that perpetrator bragged about it in the pub. My adoptive mother told me about it and asked whether it was true. I denied it because I was so embarrassed.
109. In relation to the second incident, I told a friend what happened two days after, and she told a teacher. The school contacted the Police to let them know that I was sexually assaulted at 16. Their response was really poor and they said, "We can't do anything". I remember the Police making a distinction between statutory rape and me being 16, in terms of the issue of consent.
110. I also told another teacher and she responded like she was just interested in the story, rather than genuinely trying to support me. No one spoke to my adoptive parents about it.
111. In general, I felt under-supported at school. When I was 13, the vice principal called me a "loser" and said I was just like my brother.

## **LATER LIFE AND IMPACTS OF ABUSE**

### *High school*

112. I started to smoke pot when I was 14 years old and nearly every day from 17 to 19 when I managed to stop. I also started to smoke cigarettes at 14 and I started to binge eat again at 12 when I moved back with my adoptive mother.
113. I was always interested in justice, even from a young age. I just knew what was right and wrong and that was important to me. I was inspired by Martin Luther King and I started to read about indigenous struggles.
114. I wanted to be a lawyer, but I didn't know if I would be good enough or even how to become one. I just decided at 14 that I was going to be one, but my grades were not very good. No one in my family took me seriously when I said I wanted to be a lawyer. I did not quite believe it myself, but I just held onto this dream. The guidance counsellor told me to choose something else and that I would never get the grades to get into law school.



115. After I decided I wanted to be lawyer, even though there was a lot going on in my life, I first started with lying on the ground reading stuff the night before. I then taught myself to sit at a desk and study. I used to do a lot of study in front of the television but for a week every day I would sit at the desk for a couple of hours and study. I got almost full marks for the test. I began testing myself by working out how much work I needed to do to get a particular grade. But I still struggled because part of me felt like I was dreaming about a goal that was beyond me and obviously it was hard to concentrate when there was so much going on in my home.

116. I ended up achieving in the top 15% of the State. I wasn't even trying my best.

### *University*

117. I didn't have the courage to apply for law school, so I ended up in [GRO-A] University [GRO-A] and I started a Bachelor of Arts. God knows how I survived my first year because I was hiding the PTSD and I was drinking a lot and smoking a lot of pot. I was also a binge drinker. I was really bad.

118. I actually ended up doing really well. I don't know how that was the case but I got enough marks to get into law school. I thought I wouldn't do well because I didn't have any support.

119. When I first was at law school, I had stopped drinking and smoking pot but I started to get panic attacks and was anxious all the time. I felt like the drinking and smoking pot was masking the PTSD and when I stopped, it was there. I felt like I was going mad, literally going mad. My brother has a severe mental illness and was showing signs of it around the same time. I also felt like there was something wrong with me, a feeling that I still live with daily and had to seek out the help of a psychiatrist. I have been seeing a counsellor in one form or another since I was 19 years old.

120. Going to law school was a big change in my life. I went to this amazing law school, it was [GRO-A] [GRO-A]. When I went to my property class, for example, the first three books were on colonisation and it was really amazing. Even before I met my Samoan family, I gravitated to trying to understand settler-

colonialism and the harm it does and the role of law in that harm. It felt like something I just understood.

121. While I was at law school, I felt like an imposter. There was never any kind of expectation that I would ever do well. Whenever I concentrated and did well, I would often get the top of the class. I would put things in late though because I was still very dysfunctional and a mess.
122. I did begin to have people around me who believed in me. I was picked up by a [GRO-A] anthropologist who taught me how to write. I was later supported by a legal academic who also supported me and paid for me to do my Master's degree in [GRO-A]. She is supporting me to work towards getting my PhD.

### *Legal career*

123. I ended up managing to convince a Judge [GRO-A] to give me a job [GRO-A], even though my grades were all over the place.
124. She hired me for a month, and I worked while she was on leave. Before she left to go on leave, she gave me an amazing question on common law rights of the child and within a week, I sent her a 10,000-word paper. I would get up at 4am so I would have something for when she was back. After she read it, she immediately hired me as a permanent staff member.
125. After a year and a half working [GRO-A], she offered me a position as her associate.
126. I became the first Pacific Islander to work [GRO-A] in Australia. Then they hired another Pacific Islander after me and we became friends. That was amazing.
127. Soon after I ended up working for a big corporate law firm. They were one of the top three law firms. I then worked as a barrister for six years and then I worked for [GRO-A] in the United States.
128. When I was at [GRO-A], I was working on indigenous environmental issues and read the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples

(“UNDRIP”). I came across the provision which said that indigenous children have the right not to be subjected to forced assimilation.

129. This provision and the other sections on the right to culture really resonated with me. I started to think about how I was placed with a white family and that there was no regard for my connection with my cultural heritage. I felt like the State tried to erase my history as a Samoan child. Regardless of whether there was any malice involved, I felt like this was a complete disregard for my needs as a cultural person. I wanted to write to the State and was thinking of contacting the Human Rights Commission. However, coming to these realisations never happen like a light bulb going off. This understanding was a slow bubble where I slowly started to understand my experience in a different light.
130. A lot of my legal work has involved helping Indigenous peoples. When I was a barrister I represented a lot of Aboriginal people [GRO-A]  
[GRO-A]  
[GRO-A] This kind of work comes naturally to me.
131. [GRO-A]  
[GRO-A] The focus of my work is [GRO-A] in the Pacific. It doesn't pay that well, but it's soul work and I feel that I am good at this work and my confidence as a Pasifika person is growing.

### *Cultural identity*

132. I have four siblings from my biological mother. They are all Samoan. They're just so connected to their culture. They're comfortable around aiga and Samoans. I don't have that. I do not think they can understand my experience. I realised recently that it is because they are so connected that they cannot imagine what it would be like not to be connected. I feel deep grief that I do not feel that same level of connection and sense of belonging that connection brings.
133. I think, obviously, all of that history has had an impact on the way that I feel. I feel deeply embarrassed that I don't speak Samoan and that when I try, I sound like a white person speaking it. I feel embarrassed that I have to learn. If I had

access to language and culture as a kid, it would've been completely different for me.

134. It feels like there is something missing. I constantly feel empty. I get panicked when I feel this way and end up self-harming through binge eating to try and feel full or I do other things, but it just makes me feel worse.
135. I also freeze up and get overwhelmed and I can't move. Sometimes this lasts for months or years. There are a few breaks where I challenge all the negative beliefs, but often I feel like I am being yelled at in my head. I want to reach out to my Samoan family. It becomes a deep desire, which I put off and put off until suddenly it is months or years later. It is hard for me to break this pattern.
136. I would've understood more of my culture if I was able to meet my Samoan family during my childhood years. I wasn't able to meet them until early adulthood. The State locked me out of that by not facilitating an open adoption.
137. The State could have also tried to find another Samoan family or required cultural education as part of my adoption. This would have kept me connected to culture.

#### *Finding my biological mother*

138. I cannot remember what age I was able to contact the State to find my mother. I believe I was about 20 years old. I wanted to look for my biological mother from that birthday, but I was unable to because I did not have the money to travel to New Zealand and had little knowledge of the process involved to get my information. Twenty years is far too long to wait to find out who you are and where you come from.
139. I had to get a passport and my Australian citizenship before I could travel back to New Zealand and then there were all these barriers for me to find my biological mother. When I called the adoption agency, they had nothing on my biological mother beyond what I already knew, except I was able to access my original birth certificate. I had very little help from them. They couldn't even check her name because my biological mother gave them a fake name. They had my biological father's details but couldn't give them to me.

140. When I travelled to New Zealand, I stayed with my adoptive aunty. A family friend who had adopted out a child helped me find my biological mother. She was really good at sleuthing. She managed to convince the adoption agency to guide her in the phone book towards my biological father's phone number. She would ask "How far along the phone book can I go to find him?". It wasn't technically unlawful and that's how we found him.
141. I wasn't intending to find my biological father at all because it was the Samoan connection that I was looking for, but I needed to find him to find my biological mother. When we called my biological father, he was able to give my biological mother's name. He said he was really shocked that she gave me up.
142. When I met my biological father, I started crying when he told me about my biological mother. Based on the information my biological father gave us, my aunty went to the old factory where my biological mother worked and there were still people there that knew how to get in contact with her. My aunty got her phone number and called her first to let her know I was trying to find her.

*Meeting my aiga – my biological mother and family*

143. My aunty called me and told me she had spoken to my biological mother. I was in shock and had so many emotions going through me. I had found her.
144. I called my biological mother and one of the first things she said on the phone was, "Do you forgive me?". I ended up meeting her when I was 21. I stayed in New Zealand for another month, getting to know her and my siblings and the rest of the family.
145. While I was there, my Samoan family performed an ifoga for me. The entire family in New Zealand were involved in it. Both of my Samoan grandparents were there, they were both matai and they spoke in Samoan.
146. I knew what was going on but I didn't understand the cultural significance of the ifoga until much later. If someone had explained this to me at the time, I think I would've felt more comfortable, I was so scared of being rejected.
147. My Samoan aunties who did not support my biological mother when I was born came and apologised to me and called me GRO-B-1 the name my biological

mother gave me at birth. It reminded me that the State intentionally wiped away my history as a Samoan child who is connected to a vast network of people. It reminded me that I am someone to my Samoan family. I mean something to them. They remembered me when I existed in the womb.

*Connecting with my aiga and culture*

148. I never told my biological mother what I went through in my adoptive family. I wanted to protect her because she may not have forgiven herself for giving me up and I didn't want her to feel more guilty than she already did. But I realise not telling her the truth left a barrier up, where she might have understood the deep pain and trauma I was holding.

149. I was also struggling with feeling like I was being disloyal to the family that raised me. My adoptive grandmother was still telling me that what I was doing was wrong. I felt like I was being pulled in a tug of war. While I was clear in my heart that I wanted a deep connection with my Samoan culture, I felt like I was being told by my other family that this was not who I was. I had been raised to say that biology doesn't matter. I didn't quite understand the emotions going on within me and the cultural stuff. It was very confusing and damaging for me. My biological mother and I would write letters to each other, some of which illustrate the struggles I was dealing with. **[WITN0548008; WITN0548009; WITN0548010; WITN0548011]**

150. My adoptive family didn't understand me, so I had to care for their worries and insecurities when I should've just told them, "This is me". You can't erase it. You can't pretend it doesn't exist.

151. My biological family have no understanding of what I had been through when I was adopted.

152. I travelled to New Zealand every Christmas holidays at the end of uni to spend that holiday period with my biological family.

153. I travelled to Samoa when I was 22. I went by myself and stayed with an aunty which my biological mother had contacted. It was incredible and overwhelming.

Every Tuesday night was family night and I wrote a poem for them.  
[WITN0548012]

154. I then went and lived with my biological family when I was 23 years old. I had known them for two years by this stage. I stayed for six months. I did a Treaty of Waitangi paper and a Samoan language course at [GRO-A] Uni during this time. It was so hard because I was messy. I had really severe PTSD and they did not know why I was like that.
155. I ended up forming a friendship with my Samoan siblings' dad [GRO-B]. He was at the same uni at the same time as me. He was almost like an informant, helping me understand what was going on in my Samoan family.
156. I had all these difficulties connecting with people and trusting relationships. I was 23 years old and dealing with stuff through drinking. My biological mother wasn't a practicing Mormon, but there was still no drinking allowed in the house. It was just really difficult. Nobody was there to teach me or tell me how to do things.
157. There were also all these expectations on me to be an older sister to my Samoan siblings, but I didn't know how to do that. I wanted someone to tell me and teach me. My biological mother said, "I can't tell her, I didn't raise her." But she should've just taught me. I am queer and they were Mormon. I didn't want to give them any reason to reject me.
158. I returned to Australia and my biological mother sent my sister over to live with me. It was fine, but at the time I was not well. I was on antidepressants from the stress, and I was overwhelmed by everything.
159. My sister and I had a falling out. Around that time, I started dating inappropriate people. I dated a white woman who ended up reflecting all my adoptive family's attitudes and did not understand the Samoan culture and how I should have been hosting my sister. My girlfriend was physically violent towards me. I did not know how to defend myself because she was reflecting all these adoptive family attitudes and I did not have the courage to say no. One time she hit me and I felt like I was my adoptive mother, I felt like I lost myself in that moment, like I was stuck in something I couldn't get out of.

160. When I picked my girlfriend over my sister, my biological mother wrote to me and said, "I'm always here for you. I'm your mum." I read it as a rejection letter because I was so traumatised and distrusting of relationships.
161. I didn't speak to my biological mother for two years. I was travelling in New York and I remember there was a screaming sensation inside me, urging me to contact my biological mother. But I didn't.
162. When I finally tried to contact her, when I felt I was ready and I had broken up from that damaging relationship and had established my legal career, I found out that she had passed away a month earlier. I had not left any contact details and had moved when my biological family tried to find me.
163. I cannot describe the feelings I had when I found out my biological mother passed away. I did not have long enough with her. I felt like I lost another connection to my culture. I was listening to a podcast the other day about a stolen generations man in Australia saying that he only had eight years with his Aboriginal mother before she died, and I understood his pain.
164. I needed time, but I just didn't have enough time. If I had met her earlier, at 8, 10, 12, or 15 even, it would have made a huge difference. It's easier to meet people when you're younger, to form relationships especially one as important as this. Meeting her at 21 years old was a huge barrier for me.
165. Not knowing my Samoan language still kills me. I know that in the last 20 years I could've learned Samoan if I had moved to New Zealand or Samoa. I would've had to make very big steps, but I had fears of reaching out to my Samoan family, particularly after my biological mother died.
166. One of the things that I constantly do now, everyday, is to try and reimagine my life. Either I imagine that there is an open adoption, or I meet my biological mother earlier as a child or as a young teenager. I think about an age where it would have been easier for me and it is always at a younger age than 21.
167. My brain is constantly trying to fix something that I can't fix. It becomes obsessive thinking – trying to fix it. Trying to find ways where I know my culture, where I know my family, where I am reunited with my biological mother. It is tiring



and painful to be stuck in this loop. I'm still having trouble connecting with my Samoan family even though the link has been made and part of that is my deep embarrassment that I was not there when Mum died.

168. I did not know how to reach out to the rest of my family. I did not trust the connections yet my family have always been there for me. But I do not know how to reach out. The abuse I experienced means that I have find it hard to trust relationships. Even when they are solid, I am always questioning them. And I also freeze. The same thing that happened when I wanted to reach out to my biological mother when I was in New York. I put off and put off against my deep desire.
169. I feel like I've suffered so much trauma. You can look at my CV and say, "She's achieved a lot". But my friend used to describe me as a duck that's gliding on the water but underneath there's the feet working away.
170. My Māori aunty calls me a miracle because she knows what I went through in our adoptive family. I'm dysfunctional. I have been seeing a counsellor since I was 19, I have an eating disorder, I'm obese and I can't tease out the cultural stuff and the trauma of living in that family. I've spent a lot of money on counselling. But I am still trying. I want to feel whole and full. I want to feel connected.
171. I spend more time working than caring for myself because finally I'm doing something that makes sense. I want to be a healthy person; I don't know how to do that. I feel like I'm constantly in this cycle of trauma.
172. Reading UNDRIP on assimilation was like a healing thing for me. It made me realise that this isn't my fault at least intellectually but emotionally I still blame myself.
173. I know that knowing my language would make a huge difference to how I feel in the world. I feel grief when I'm around Samoan speakers. But at the same time I also love hearing Samoan because it lifts my spirits. I just do not have enough access to it.
174. I've experienced being Samoan in a different way to my family. I make connections with different types of Samoans to who my siblings would. That

makes me feel good in the world. But the trauma gets in the way and I get frozen and lose connection.

175. When it comes to fa'asamoa stuff, I feel embarrassed. I'm a 1970s born Samoan, I should be fluent in Gagana Samoa and in fa'asamoa. I could've been fluent if I had the ability to connect with my family or if the State ensured I had access to language and community.
176. I have a right to culture. I had a right to my culture when I was born. It is a basic human right which existed when I was born. This is reflected in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, ICCPR (International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights) and the ICESCR (International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights).
177. When I met my grandparents, I couldn't speak to them in Samoan and they could not speak English and this was hard for me. I never had a conversation with them.
178. Given everything I've been through, I made the decision not to have children. I really regret not having children. Even this makes me feel disconnected to my Samoan family because having children is a major part of Pacific culture. This has been a huge loss for me. I'm really grieving that now. I'm 45 years old and it just caught up on me. I kept putting off having children because of the trauma.
179. I love my Samoan family and I love all my families, even the people who neglected me and abused me. Despite all the pain she caused me, I was there caring for my adoptive mum before she died. But her death also allowed me to be honest to myself about the neglect and abuse and the negative impact of her and that family on my sense of identity.

### *Getting my Malu*

180. In [GRO-A] I went to Samoa to get my Malu done. My sister, her husband and four children (at the time) and my best friend came with me. We stayed with my sister's dad.
181. The first time I went to Samoa in [GRO-A], one of my female cousins looked after me. She had a Malu and it was the first time that I started to learn about Samoan

tatau tradition. A number of women within the family I stayed with (my Samoan grandmother's sister's family) had a Malu. I grew up with white bodies being the norm and it was a norm that I did not fit into. This had really affected my self-esteem when I was growing up, particularly as a teenager and I was called fat when I was healthy. I was so attracted to how the Malu swept around Samoan women's thighs, I knew right away that I wanted to get a Malu. However, I also knew that you did not just get a Malu.

182. Despite this deep desire, it was not really until my adoptive mother died that I started to think about getting a Malu again. I think I was afraid of her making a dismissive comment about it, like, "What have you done to your beautiful thighs?", or not supporting me, that kept me from doing this earlier. But her death opened the space for me to slowly start to identify with my Samoan side more.
183. My sister's dad organised the tufuga for me. A few days before I got my Malu, I was bitten by a centipede. Centipedes ended up everywhere I was, which was strange because while I knew they were around, I hadn't really been affected by them before. My best friend also was bitten by a centipede when I was there. There was some talk that I needed to go and talk to the "old people" to make sure that it was ok for me to get the Malu. We ended up visiting my grandmother's sister and her family, and my sister told them what was happening to me and that I was getting a Malu. They said it was fine.
184. The night before they rang me to tell me that they would be coming down to support me. It meant so much to me that they did this and they insisted that I get a blessing after the Malu. My uncle from this family talked to the tufuga about my genealogy. My uncle pulled me aside before I started and told me that life was full of pain and suffering and the Malu is to teach me this lesson. He told me that I needed to surrender to the pain.
185. When I got through it, my aunty told me that I had mana now. They told me I could not be alone until the blessing, which would be a few hours later. They told me that my best friend had to even be with me when I showered.
186. When I got the blessing, they were there and my uncle spoke for our family. I did not know I had to siva afterwards and I did not know how, so my sister came and

danced for me. I felt embarrassed by this, but I was also proud of my accomplishment and the support that my family had given me.

## **REDRESS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### *Adoption information*

187. The State makes a decision regarding adoption placements with very little information. The State holds all the keys, all the information. It had the ability to collect more information. It was holding all the cards – I was an infant, I didn't have any say in any of this. The period of an interim adoption order is not enough time to know. I feel like I was forgotten about.
188. Better and more fulsome information should be kept about the background of the adoption and as much information about the biological family should be provided. Photographs wherever possible should be available.
189. Biological parents should be encouraged to leave correspondence for their child and if this happens, the State should undertake to deliver such correspondence. The letter that was to be given to me at the age of 15 meant everything to me and I was looking forward to the day I would receive it.

### *Appropriateness of the placement*

190. A big part of my complaint is that the placement was not suitable in a cultural sense and not suitable in terms of basic care. I firmly believe that my adoptive parents shouldn't have had us, or the State should've ensured that we had cultural connections somehow. I told my adoptive father this, who I have grown close with over the last few years.
191. The adoption order extinguished my rights. It cut off my ancestral links, it disconnected me from my culture. That is abuse by the State. It's like not having a limb, part of me is missing. I feel a lot of shame and embarrassment. I feel inauthentic. This is compounded by the fact that I will never know what it would have been like, I can't rewind time. My biological siblings are so connected in this web that of course they understand. Their identities are secure.

192. I think about what a huge difference it would've made if I was able to have access to my culture. It would've changed me. I would've felt connected to something and it would have been a protective factor – knowing that I belonged to something else, another culture, that I had another family out there, that I was much more than that situation that I was stuck in with my adoptive family. If I had some connection to my culture I feel that I would have been less traumatised that I am now.
193. I came to know that I was Samoan growing up, but I didn't have anywhere to go with that. Not being allowed to access records until you are 20 years old meant I was stuck in limbo for the most formative years of my life.
194. The loss of my cultural heritage is entirely separate from the neglect, physical, sexual and emotional abuse I suffered in my placement with my adoptive family. They are interrelated but the cultural loss and well-being effects of this are distinct to the decision by the State to place a Samoan child in the care of a Palagi family. The impacts are multiple and complex.
195. The ideal situation is that a child can be adopted into a family with the same cultural background. However, if a white family is the only option for a Samoan child, for example, the State should be providing opportunities for engagement and connection with culture, allowing adopted children to engage in language, dance and to be part of their cultural community. They should have social workers for that. I know that it's an expense, but we have a right to that cultural connection.

*Closed / open adoptions*

196. My biological mother was a recent immigrant from the islands. Adoption would have been a big decision for her. Even if she said no to an open adoption, it should've still been open and the adoptive parents should've been aware of that. My biological mother told me that she wanted to find me. My sister told me that my biological mother told her about me when she was nine and that she wanted to find me. If given the option of an open adoption, I truly believe my biological mother would have agreed.

197. The State needs to facilitate an adoption within the extended aiga as the priority. If that's not possible – and sometimes it might not be – then they should leave it as an open adoption. This is especially if it's a young person. It gives the mother and the family an opportunity to come back into the life of the child.
198. An open adoption would've given me some kind of protection or at least I might've known where to go. I knew that I was adopted, but I had nowhere to go. An open adoption would have given access to my aiga, culture and language. I would have felt connected, where I often feel disconnected and distrusting of relationships.
199. The State should have checked in on me to see how the adoption placement was going. I was still a baby when my adoptive parents separated.

#### *Access to records*

200. Adopted children in New Zealand cannot access their records until the age of 20 years old. Even then there are long processes and difficulties with sealed records. My adoption records were sparse, the information contained just a few documents for what was the single most defining moment in my life.
201. Access to adoption records should not have an age limit. When a child wishes to know their birth information they should be able to access this.

#### *Healing*

202. It was a real effort for me to go and make that connection with my biological mother. It was a lot of time and money, travelling to New Zealand. My adoptive mother got cancer at the same time. I was really struggling with the desire to be with my Samoan family and to be there for my adoptive mother.
203. I want to have the means to go to Samoa or pay for language tuition. There's a really great university course in Samoa but you need the means to do that because I would have to leave my job and it costs money. I guess it's about a form of individual restitution. Arguably I have a right to be placed in a position to recover culture and language and to be provided with the means to do that.

204. I have been in counselling since I was 19 years old. I have an eating disorder and I'm still trying to work through my loss of culture and identity, and the trauma of the abuse suffered in my childhood. I've spent a lot of money on counselling and would like support for this.

205. I think I managed to get out of the GRO-A and dream about being a lawyer because I knew that this awful life and childhood was not all I was. I believe that having access to my culture would have made me feel more comfortable in my body. It would have given me a protective barrier from the racial abuse because I would have felt rooted in a strong and proud culture.

206. A copy of my written consent to use my statement is **annexed** to this statement.

### **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-A

Dated: 29 / 06 / 2021

**Annexure A****Consent to use my statement**

I,  confirm that by submitting my signed witness statement to the Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in Care, I consent to its use in the following ways:

- reference and/or inclusion in any interim and/or final report;
- disclosure to those granted leave to appear, designated as core participants and where instructed, their legal representatives via the Inquiry's database or by any other means as directed by the Inquiry;
- presentation as evidence before the Inquiry, including at a public hearing;
- informing further investigation by the Inquiry;
- publication on the Inquiry website.

I also confirm that I have been advised of the option to seek anonymity and that if granted my identity may nevertheless be disclosed to a person or organisation, including any instructed legal representatives, who is the subject of criticism in my witness statement in order that they are afforded a fair opportunity to respond to the criticism.

Please tick one of the two following boxes:

if you are seeking anonymity

or

if you are happy for your identity to be known

Signed: .....

Date: 29 / 06 / 2021 .....