

Witness Name: Natasha Emery

Statement No: WITN0578001

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ROYAL COMMISSION OF INQUIRY INTO ABUSE IN CARE

WITNESS STATEMENT OF NATASHA EMERY

I, **Natasha EMERY** state: -

1. Introduction

Ko Ngāi Te Rangi raua ko Ngāti Ranginui oku Iwi

Ko Poututerangi te Marae

Pirirākau te Hapū Ko te Uri tuarua o Te Arawa

Ko Waikōhatu te Marae

Ngāti Tarāwhai te Hapū

Ko Tuhakaraina, raua ko Malcolm oku Whānau Whānui.

1.1 My full name is Natasha Kaylene Hineru Emery.

1.2 I was born on [GRO-C] 1975 in Te Awamutu.

1.3 I have two siblings, my eldest brother Jason and my middle brother [GRO-B] My father later had two more sons [GRO-B] and [GRO-B] and my mother had another daughter, [GRO-B]

1.4 I live in [GRO-C] and work as a National Programme Manager for the Bachelor of Bicultural Social Work degree programme.

1.5 I have one son James and a daughter [GRO-B] My husband [GRO-B] and I have also been the whāngai parents to several children.

2. Early Years

Pukeatua, living with our grandparents 1975-1980

- 2.1 I was born in Te Awamutu maternity unit in 1975. My parents separated within a year of my birth, and my brother Jason and I were sent to live with our paternal grandparents, George and Ruth Sinclair. My mother, Hinemoa Malcolm, moved to Australia and later took my brother [GRO-B] when she returned to New Zealand.
- 2.2 My paternal grandparents provided a stable, loving home. Jason and I ultimately saw them as our parents. We were the only children in the home, and we felt like a family unit. There was never any violence, in fact it was rare for my grandparents to even raise their voices. I was my grandmother's golden child. This was the only time as a child that I felt safe.

3. The Savage Years

Tokoroa, living with our father 1980-1985

- 3.1 In 1980 when I was age 5 and Jason was age 7, my grandfather had a stroke, so we were sent to live with our father [GRO-B] and our stepmother [GRO-B]
- 3.2 Life was ok for the first three months, then my stepmother became nasty and cruel towards us. This was especially so after she gave birth to our brothers [GRO-B] and [GRO-B]. My stepmother would tell my father we had misbehaved so he would beat us. She would get mad for no reason and send us to the park behind the house where we would stay for most of the day.
- 3.3 If our stepmother was angry with us, Jason and I were not given any food. We were sent to school without breakfast or lunch and often we did not get dinner at night. Once, we had not eaten for 2 days so Jason stole a sandwich from another child's school bag. Our father punished him severely for this. Jason never did this again, so we went hungry. We got used to being hungry and would drink lots of water to cope with our hunger.
- 3.4 My stepmother especially hated Jason and he received the worst beatings. I was too scared to stop the assaults, but I was always there to take care for him afterwards. I would clean his wounds and try to comfort him as best I could. I felt for him during these times, he was hurt both physically and emotionally.
- 3.5 My father built a shed out back to effectively banish us from the house. We were only allowed inside to eat, toilet or bathe. We felt totally abandoned during this time, we hated living in a shed with only our beds and a small TV. During winter we had no heater so we would go cold. We tried our best to stay warm, but we were miserable.
- 3.6 The only time we felt genuine happiest was when we were allowed to stay with our grandparents. However, during one visit my grandmother saw bruises on Jason's legs. Our father had whipped him repeatedly with an electric cord. My grandmother called Social Welfare and after that visit we did not see our grandparents for 1 year. This was a very difficult time for us. The social worker had promised not to tell our father and stepmother, but she broke that promise. They punished us by stopping all visits for an entire year. They denied the allegations, and our file was closed.

The Far North and Te Kōpuru 1985-1987

- 3.7 We spent 7 years in Tokoroa with our father and stepmother. When they separated our father took Jason and I to live in a tiny one-bedroom bach at Pahi Beach in the Far North. We were enrolled at Otamatea High School. We spent our days on the beach eating oysters which were plentiful. Our father did not believe in benefits therefore the only source of income was odd jobs to pay the rent and purchase the absolute basics.
- 3.8 After a year, I was sent to live with our stepmother and brothers while Jason remained with our father. I was enrolled at Te Kōpuru School. While my stepmother did not physically abuse me, I was verbally abused every day.
- 3.9 During this time, my father and Jason had an altercation and Jason was removed from his care. My father returned to live with us, and the physical abuse started again. I remember I giggled about something my brother said and my father hit me across the face with a spatula. It hurt and I was really upset. I went to school and called my grandparents, begging them to come and get me. I ran away to my friend's house and waited there until they arrived. I was 11 years old when I returned to Te Awamutu to live with them.

Te Awamutu, living with my grandparents 1987-1988

- 3.10 I returned to my grandparent's care with an attitude. I started playing up, wagging school and sneaking out to parties. My grandparents could not cope with my behaviour so they called Social Welfare for help. I was removed from their care.
- 3.11 It was the school holidays, and I was walking down the street with my friends. A car pulled up beside us and four adults exited the car, 1 female and 3 males. I had 2 adults either side of me, they lifted me off the ground and carried me to the car. No one told me what was going on. Inside the car, an adult sat either side of me so I could not escape. I remember my friends were screaming and crying, we all thought I was being kidnapped.
- 3.12 I had no idea at the time but the Social Welfare Department had applied to the Court to make me a state ward. My grandparents had only asked for help and the State's response was to remove me from their care. I have had ample time to reflect on what happened to me. I was an angry, hurt adolescent living in a small 1-bedroom council flat with my grandparents. I slept in the lounge and had no privacy. I snuck out because I was bored, I had no privacy, so I wanted to hang out with my friends. All we needed was a bigger home and things would have been much better for us.

4. Ward of the State 1987/1988

- 4.1 During my time as a state ward, I lived in 3 different foster homes, and I had several stints in Hamilton Girls' Home on Dey Street. This was a facility for girls who had committed offences but my only offence was running away.

Collins Road Family Home, Hamilton 1987/1988

- 4.2 This was my first placement with the [GRO-B] and their children. They cared for a number of state wards, but we lived separately from the [GRO-B] family and we were treated differently to their children. Mrs [GRO-B] cooked for her family but we had to cook for ourselves. While they had good food, our food consisted of the cheapest and most basic food. They would have takeaways for dinner but we were never included in this. The [GRO-B] cleaned up after their children, but we were made to clean up after ourselves and take responsibility for our own living space.
- 4.3 I never felt loved or wanted in this home. I also never felt safe because Mr [GRO-B] touched my bottom and it made me feel very uncomfortable. It was not right. I told my social worker, Jani Van Schagen but nothing came of my disclosure. I felt like no one cared about me.
- 4.4 I ran back to my grandparents 6 times in total while in care but each time I would be found. I would be sent to Dey Street as punishment before they returned me to the [GRO-B]

Dey Street Girls Home, Hamilton

- 4.5 Dey Street looked and felt like a prison; the windows had bars and every door was locked and unlocked when you walked through it. My shortest stint was 1 week, and my longest stint was 6 weeks. It was petrifying for me, I was (12-13). Every stint started with time in the secure unit.
- 4.6 The girls in Dey Street were older than me, tougher than me and most of them had gang affiliations. It was about survival of the fittest. All newbies had to "rep" a side and you did whatever you were told. I was never beaten but I did what I was told which included being a 'lookout' or 'distractor' while the mean girls beat another girl or girls. I knew this was wrong, but I had to survive.
- 4.7 There was a lot of violence and the staff either encouraged it, turned a blind eye to it or did nothing to stop it. I never felt safe. The staff were also abusive and punished us by making us do things like scrub the entire basketball court. I recall an incident where 3 girls savagely beat another girl. The staff eventually stepped in but not before she was seriously injured. I heard one of the staff members tell her she deserved it for being "too mouthy". She was left there for an hour before an ambulance took her to hospital. She received a broken jaw, two black eyes and lost a few teeth. I did nothing, I was too scared to for fear of getting a hiding myself.
- 4.8 The fourth time I was placed in Dey Street, I was not returned to the [GRO-B] but taken to a family home on [Alfred] Street.

[Alfred] Street Family Home, Hamilton 1988-1989

- 4.9 I was 12 or 13 years old when I was placed in Alfred Street with the GRO-B family. I stayed there for 1 year. Mrs GRO-B was verbally and physically abusive towards me and the other children there. I recall one time Mrs GRO-B gave another girl in the home some cigarettes. She did not give me any cigarettes, so I decided to take some for myself. When Mrs GRO-B found out what I had done she slammed me up against a wall and beat me with a pool cue. I told my social worker about the beating, but nothing happened about it.
- 4.10 The social worker did however reconnect me with my mother. I went to stay with my brother GRO-B and GRO-B for a week in Wellington. I later found out in my Social Welfare file that my mother had written to my social worker saying she did not want me to live with her. It hurt, I felt rejected.
- 4.11 I was allowed to have limited phone calls and limited visits with my grandparents. I found out later that my grandmother used to call me every second night, but the GRO-B rarely allowed me to talk to her.
- 4.12 I was unhappy at Alfred Street, I ran away a few times but I was always returned back there.

Ranui Street Foster Home, Nawton 1989

- 4.13 When I was 14 years old, I was sent to live permanently with foster parents at Ranui Street. It was a nice home, they were nice people, and there was no abuse. However, I was not happy there and kept running away. My social worker, GRO-C GRO-C connected me with my mother's brother who was the Vice President of the Black Power in Te Awamutu. I had run away from Ranui Street and when GRO-C asked me if I wanted to live with my uncle, I agreed.

Kihikihi, Living with my Uncle 1990

- 4.14 I was 14 years old when I went to live with my uncle. I have checked my Social Welfare file for any information about this decision but there is nothing in my file. Mr GRO-C placed me here and I never saw him again.
- 4.15 My uncle lived in a 5-bedroom home with other patched black power gang members and their partners. I slept in the same room as my uncle and his partner. I was protected but I was also exposed to the gang life which included parties, drugs and violence.
- 4.16 I had been with my uncle for 6 months when he was sentenced to time in prison. My uncle later took his own life in prison. By that time, I was in a relationship with a black power gang member and pregnant.

5. My Son James

- 5.1 My partner and I moved into his parent's home, and I miscarried. I fell pregnant again and at age 16 I gave birth to James. My partner was very abusive towards me. I did little about the abuse believing this was how things were meant to be even though it was wrong.

- 5.2 I left James' father when I was 18 years old. I decided to leave my son with his grandparents until I could sort myself out. I did sort myself out but when I asked for James to be returned to my care, his grandparents refused and filed for custody of him. It was a difficult process for me, and I walked away thinking that if I fought them I would not see my son again. This is a decision that I have regretted all my life. I maintained contact with James, and I supported him financially.
- 5.3 James eventually had three children; I am raising his eldest child. My son followed in his father's footsteps and joined a gang which resulted in drug use and sale, and stints in jail. Despite this he was known to be a quiet and humble boy.
- 5.4 On 22 October 2020, James took his own life. I had him at my home for 4 nights and 400 people attended his tangihanga. I had applied for my redress money, but I never knew at the time I would be using it, not for myself, but to bury my son.

6. My Brother Jason

- 6.1 Our father abused Jason, and the abuse got worse during their time together in [GRO-B]. One day it finally got too much, and Jason retaliated by hitting our father with the same piece of wood he had been hitting him with. Jason was 13 years old and Social Welfare turned up and placed him in care for 3 years.
- 6.2 Jason's time in care was worse than mine, he was abused daily. Jason tried many times to run away from the abuse, but he was always found and returned to his abusers. He reported the abuse to social workers, but he was not believed, or they did not care. This weighed heavily on Jason.
- 6.3 Jason aged out of care, partnered and they had five children together. His partner had 4 children to previous partners, so Jason became a father to 9 children in total. In 2003, Jason was arrested for physically abusing his eldest daughter, [GRO-B]. I was so angry with Jason over this; we had made a pact that we would break that cycle and he had broken our pact.
- 6.4 On the 14 April 2004, Jason was on bail and returned to the family home with a loaded .308 rifle in his possession. He pointed it at his partner, fired but it jammed so no one was hurt. His partner called the Police and Jason took off.
- 6.5 Jason disappeared until the 21 April 2004 when he appeared out of nowhere and threatened his partner's sister. After that incident, he was never seen again.
- 6.6 The Police and I searched high and low for him for the next 6 years without success. In 2010, at a Coroner's hearing Jason was officially declared deceased. I was the only family member present, my parents declined to attend. The entire process was devastating for me.

7. Our (Jason and my) Time in Care

- 7.1 I speak on behalf of Jason first. There were a lot of factors that impacted on the choices Jason made in his life: an abusive father, a mother who never showed him love or acceptance all of which was compounded by his time in State care.
- 7.2 I honestly believe that if Jason and I had been left with our paternal grandparents and supported by the State, instead of being removed, our lives would have turned out differently.
- 7.3 Jason was a broken man. My love for him was not enough to save him. We both knew what had happened to us was wrong, we both knew we did not want our own children to suffer the same fate, but Jason was not able to break the cycle, he did not know how to.
- 7.4 Jason's children have all had extensive involvement with Oranga Tamariki ("OT"). Jason's three youngest children have all been taken into care. They were initially placed with me, but they all had behavioural issues which I could not deal with. In turn this was placing a lot of pressure on my family and my marriage. I felt I had no choice but to relinquish their care or I would lose my own family.
- 7.5 Jason's youngest child was pregnant at 13. OT took custody of the baby. She had another baby at 14 and while OT supported them to remain together, the placement broke down and that child was removed from her care. She lives in Auckland but has sporadic visits with her children.
- 7.6 Jason's other daughter has 2 children, and they live in Hamilton. OT are involved with them also.
- 7.7 Jason has a son aged 17, who has been in and out of youth detention facilities.
- 7.8 I raised Jason's oldest boy from the age of 11 to 17. He is doing well and works on a farm fulltime.
- 7.9 The sad thing for Jason is that the State has been involved with all of his children. He would not have wanted this for them.
- 7.10 I was stronger than Jason. I accepted our mother's rejection of us. I was treated differently by our father, abused but not as bad as Jason. I survived my time in care but not without scars. I have held tight to the love and affection my paternal grandparents showed me. I have also found strength from the love and support of my husband and the family we have made together.

8. Redress

- 8.1 I found out about the MSD historic claims process from a person I studied with and from a post or advert I saw on Facebook.
Claims process
- 8.2 My first interview occurred with two females, both Pākehā. They did not record the interview, so I was worried about the validity and the accuracy of the interview. I also had to follow up with them for an update.

- 8.3 My second interview was with a male and female, both were Māori. They asked a lot of questions about my claim. I felt uneasy as I had already provided the information. The questions felt repetitive. I felt frustrated by the process. My time in care was very personal and I felt disbelieved.
- 8.4 The final interview occurred with the same male and female. I told them my son had just died, but they did not offer to reschedule our final interview. I attended anyway. The man was very stoic throughout the interview, he completely lacked any empathy whatsoever. I recall feeling disappointed that my loss or child were not acknowledged. At one point the woman joked that I should work for OT when I was visibly upset, I thought this was inappropriate and lacked good judgment. MSD relied on my file to substantiate or unsubstantiate my claims. I felt like I was not believed.

Offer and apology

- 8.5 I received an offer for \$10,000.00 from MSD two weeks after burying my son. This offer was bittersweet. I did not make a claim with MSD for money, instead I wanted my voice heard and to be part of much needed change. When I was offered the money, I made it clear to the MSD caseworkers that I was only accepting it to pay for my son's tangi and headstone. I also received a letter of apology. Although it was probably a generic letter and I had no input into its wording, it still meant more than the money I received.
- 8.6 I was told at my first interview that the process would take 3 years. It took 2.5 years in total. I am not sure why it took this long when they had my social welfare file to determine my claim.

9. Recommendations

- 9.1 I think the MSD historic claims process can be significantly improved by the following:
- a. Better awareness that the claims process exists. MSD have records of who the claimants are, they have a responsibility to search out claimants not just sit and wait for claimants to find them.
 - b. Survivors do not need to be re-victimised by the claims process.
 - c. Support needs to be offered around the claims process factoring in claimant's vulnerabilities, capabilities and logistics (transportation, financial hardship, accessibility etc).
 - d. Those processing claims need to have cultural competency so claimants can be dealt with in a culturally sensitive way.
 - e. There needs to be consistent, frequent communication so claimants are fully informed of their claim at every stage.
 - f. The claim process should not take up to 3 years. This is too long.

9.2 I feel very passionate about survivors being compensated for what they endured in State care. I am personally helping other survivors through the claims process. Although no amount of money will ever erase what has occurred to survivors it helps a little.

10. Conclusion

- 10.1 I dedicated my Masters' thesis to the memory of my brother Jason. The writing process was healing for me in that I have been able to share Jason's story and it will always be there for his children and grandchildren. I get to keep his memory alive.
- 10.2 I will never completely let go of my brother. The Coroner may have made a declaration that he is deceased, but I continue to pray for the day when he walks back into our lives.
- 10.3 My hope is Jason's children will find their own way and break the cycle for themselves. I was able to do it; I hope they can do it to. I would have liked to have helped all 5 of Jason's children but as in turns out I was only able to help 2 of them.
- 10.4 I am proud of how far I have come. I was told by social workers in care that I was a naughty girl who had no ambition in life. I was told I would be barefoot and pregnant before I was 16. The end part turned out to be true, but the rest did not. I will not allow what the State did to me all those years ago define who I am now. I deliberately chose a career in social work because I want to make a difference in children's lives.
- 10.5 I have enrolled to completed a PhD. This thesis will be centered around the intergenerational trauma suffered by survivors of state care and their own families. My son's story will be told in order to show that the ongoing effects of state care travel into the lives of not only the survivor, but the survivor's future generation and beyond.
- 10.6 I believe that my son's death is a direct result of my time in state care. The trauma I experienced led to the environment I was ultimately placed in and lived in for a time. My son didn't stand a chance in the environment he was placed in with his father's family and I was powerless to stop it. While I don't hold MSD entirely responsible for my son's death, the environments I was placed in by MSD most certainly contributed to it.

Statement of Truth

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

Signed

GRO-C

Dated: 08/06/2021

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