

**Witness Name:** Arthur Gus Solomon

**Statement No.:** WITN0205001

**Exhibits:** N/A

**Dated:** 08.07.21

## ROYAL COMMISSION OF INQUIRY INTO ABUSE IN CARE

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### WITNESS STATEMENT OF ARTHUR GUS SOLOMON

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I, Arthur Gus Solomon, will say as follows: -

#### INTRODUCTION

1. My full name is Pulotu Arthur Gus Solomon. Pulotu is my Samoan chiefly title. I was born on GRO-C 1944 and I am 77 years old.
2. I am of Samoan and Palagi extraction, but I was born in Fiji and did my schooling there. I moved to New Zealand when I was 18 years old.
3. The purpose of this statement is to talk about my time working at Ōwairaka Boys' Home in Auckland. I worked there as a watchman from December 1970 for about four weeks. In that four weeks I saw so much violence that I had to get out of there; I couldn't stay there any longer. I left around the end of January 1971 to teach at St Mary's Convent Primary School in Avondale.

## **BACKGROUND**

4. In around 1962, when I was about 18 years old, the Brothers in Fiji sent me to New Zealand to become a Marist Brother.
5. This was before the thick of the dawn raids when we had to be so careful we felt that we had to wear our passports around our necks in case we were ever stopped in the street by Police.
6. When I arrived in New Zealand, I first went to Tuakau; that was where the finishing school for the Marist Brothers was located. After one year there, I went to Claremont in the South Island; that was where we did our noviceship, in other words, training to learn how to be religious.
7. I spent a year down there and then came up to Auckland and spent another year at the Scholastic in Mount Albert. The Scholastic is the Marist Brothers Training College where we learned how to be teachers. After one year at the Scholastic, I went to Samoa for my first appointment. I spent 20 months there before returning to New Zealand.
8. After returning to New Zealand, I spent one year at Vermont Street, a Marist Brothers Primary School, and another year at St Paul's College as a teacher. St Paul's College was a boarding and day school for boys. During my time there, I looked after the intermediate boarding students.
9. After one year working at St Paul's College, I met a young lady and decided that I wanted to start my own family, so I left the Brothers. That was when I got a job at Ōwairaka.

## **MY EXPERIENCE WORKING AT ŌWAIKAKA**

### *Starting at Ōwairaka*

10. It was about Christmas time in 1970 when I started working at Ōwairaka as a watchman. I was about 26 years old at the time. It was very different from what I had come from at St Paul's. I felt that St Paul's was a loving place where kids were looked after. On the other hand, this place was harsh and tough; it was not a happy place.

11. I remember going to an interview and filling out an application form. I think it was Mr Ricketts who interviewed me; he was the Headmaster or boss.
12. I also had to do a medical check-up by the doctor at Ōwairaka; I can't recall whether or not it was part of the recruitment process. The reason I remember doing a medical check-up is because I addressed the doctor as "Doc" and that made him angry. He said, "Don't call me Doc, it's Doctor to you". That incident really put me off speaking up and instead, I thought "Sheesh, you really need to keep quiet here".
13. As a watchman, I was just somebody there to make sure that the boys were doing their chores, work or whatever it was they were assigned to do, and to ensure that they did not abscond. It was a different role to that of a guard.
14. Nothing was mentioned about training like it is today, where the emphasis is on upskilling and training people. Maybe it was because I wasn't there long enough and they may have mentioned it if I was there longer.
15. I also don't remember any staff meetings being held in the time that I was there.

#### *Other Ōwairaka Staff*

16. Mr Ricketts was my boss. I didn't see him often. In the four weeks that I was there, I would have seen him four times. He was in his office all the time like a "mystery man" and we hardly talked.
17. I was assigned to work with Mr Pickering and he was the person who told me how things were done at Ōwairaka. He was like the foreman there and he was Mr Ricketts' right hand.
18. Mr Pickering was a young, European, English fellow who I remember drove a Land Rover. I think he had an Army or Navy background and he used to tell me about how he was a military man. He was nasty and wore his socks and shoes like a Navy man, and his shorts and belt. He used to hold a baton while at work.
19. There was another staff member there who I got to know very well, a young lady, a trusted colleague. She was there a few years before me. She was like a secretary and looked after the linen and all that sort of thing. She was very friendly to me and I knew her uncle because he was an ex Marist Brother too. My wife and I became friends with her.
20. I don't recall any other staff as being Pacific or Māori.

21. Even though I cannot recall every detail, I remember the names 'Mr Ricketts' and 'Mr Pickering' because they were so bad that they stood out to me.

*The Process for New Boys*

22. New boys were provided with clothing and linen. Administration staff would then determine whether they were placed in the secure unit or in the residential units. The Ōwairaka facility was U-shaped like a horseshoe and the secure unit was a concrete room in the middle by itself, independent of the other buildings. It had bars on the door. The secure unit was mainly used for locking up boys that absconded. The residential units were where the boys spent most of their time. I was not aware of the process around determining which new boys were placed in the secure unit or in the residential units.
23. I remember that an assembly was held every day with all the boys, which the new boys would also attend.
24. The boys at Ōwairaka were mainly Māori and Pacific Islanders. Even so, no attention was ever paid to the Treaty of Waitangi. In those days, the Treaty was nothing; thank God we've got something now.

*A Typical Day*

25. A typical day at Ōwairaka for the boys would be to wake up, have breakfast, attend an assembly, do cleaning chores, work in the garden, have lunch, go for a bus ride and then have dinner.
26. Every day at the assemblies Mr Pickering would have the boys line up before their duties were given to them. He would get them to stand up straight and would use a baton and push it into their stomachs to make sure that they stood up straight. Staff that were assigned to work with me also carried batons for this purpose.
27. Each morning the boys had to sweep the dormitories and foyers, wipe down the windows, dust the ledges and clean the toilets. One thing I remember was the way Mr Pickering told me to supervise the boys' chores in the morning. He told me to never pass off their work the first time as 'good'. He would tell me, "Always say, 'no, it's no good' at least three times." He told me that if they're wiping down the windowsills, don't pass it until they've done it three times. Same with the

toilets. It was a way of disciplining the boys. It really got to me. I would tell myself, "No, no, this is not me". It made me want to leave.

28. I was not aware if there were any educational programmes provided at Ōwairaka. That may have been because I was there during the Christmas and New Year period, I'm not sure.
29. We were not allowed to fraternise with the boys. The other staff would tell me that if you do that, then you become weak. If the boys were found speaking to me, senior staff would frown on them.
30. Not being able to speak with the boys was really against what I had come from, so I found that very hard. But still, I used to talk to them at night. I used to ask, "How are you?". At first, the boys were very suspicious; wondering whether I was for real or not, whether I was trying to get information from them. I could tell they were reluctant to say anything. But after a couple of weeks of talking to them, I think some of them knew that I was on their side. But I didn't want to push it because if they were found talking to me, then they would be in trouble. It was a sad place.

#### *Discipline and Absconding*

31. Absconding was a word I got to know very quickly. Mr Pickering used to say, "Any absconding, don't panic, go to the phone, ring up, if the managers are not here, just ring up the Police and they will be here within hours". Sure enough, maybe a few days after that spiel, one of the boys took off and the phone was used to call the cops. Within hours, the boy was back and put into the secure unit.
32. Mr Pickering asked me if I knew what happens to the boys who go into the secure unit. When I replied "no", he said that we put them in there for the night and the next day, we (referring to the guards) go in and we give them such a thrashing that they do not want to go out again. He confirmed that that was what the secure unit was for.
33. On Sundays, Mr Pickering ran a sort of games afternoon. I remember very clearly the boxing that would take place, where the boys would be forced to box each other. The staff would deliberately pair them off, especially if staff noticed during the week that some were fighting or were not happy with one another.

34. We would go to a place where a ring was set up and we all watched as they hammered one another to virtually pulp. The boxings were attended by staff that were rostered on that day, and at least a couple of our 'Heads' were there too, watching and cheering the boys on. All the kids were also made to stand on and cheer. One of the guards would act as a referee by keeping time for each boxing round and starting each round by saying, "Ready, ... Fight!". Everyone was forced to be a part of the afternoon's "entertainment".
35. There were plenty of injuries from the boxings; usually bloody noses, mouths and eyes, black eyes and all that sort of thing. The kids that were injured were taken to the infirmary.
36. I am not aware of the boys receiving any rewards for boxing. I also don't remember any boys refusing to box. If they did, I don't remember what happened to them. During the time I was there, there were at least two boxing sessions.
37. Watching the boxing made me feel crook, but it was part of the system. Being a newcomer to the place, I didn't want to open my mouth, so I just sat there and watched.
38. During the time that I worked at Ōwairaka, there was a famous raping by an 18 year old boy whose name I can't remember, but he was staying at Ōwairaka. When I started at Ōwairaka, he was just very new too. He was very well known in Auckland and the media for very bad rapes. He was one of the boys who was regularly chosen to box and many boys wanted to fight him in the boxing matches.

#### *Family Visits*

39. While I was working at Ōwairaka, I never saw any families, but I did used to hear them sometimes meeting with the boys in the cafeteria. I think it was on Sundays. I remember seeing some movement in the cafeteria, but I was never on duty at the time to supervise any of those visits.

#### *Leaving Ōwairaka*

40. I struggled with the job because it wasn't what I wanted; I wanted to help and teach the kids in any way I could. But that wasn't my function here. My function was just to watch, make sure that they were there, make sure they were

supervised going to the toilet, and make sure they didn't run away. It was a pretty thankless job.

41. The most grievous or grave incident that really worried me and caused me to make up my mind to leave was an incident involving Mr Ricketts. One day I was in his office and a smallish boy was brought in. A few questions were asked and before I could realise what was happening, Mr Ricketts lunged at him, punching and kicking him. I thought to myself, "What is going on here?". The boy was on the floor. His mate was standing there and so was I, as this poor kid was hammered to a pulp. It happened so fast. That's when I thought, "That's it, I'm out of here." I can't recall why Mr Ricketts beat the boy.
42. I consider myself a champion at lifting up image and confidence, and making people feel good; that's my job. That's why I couldn't stay there. It was just the complete opposite of what I was trained to do. It was a sad environment and one that I was not accustomed to, especially coming from an educational institute.
43. I remember my colleague's advice to me was, "Keep your trap shut, just do your work, don't say anything too much." It made me question what was going on there, but she would reassure me, saying, "No, just play it by the book." So, I left it at that.
44. I never told anyone about what I saw at Ōwairaka.
45. I felt helpless to say or do anything about what I saw because the abuse was coming right from the top. I did not feel I could make any difference, so I only stayed for a short period of time.
46. I think that is why my colleague used to say to me, "Don't waste your time boy, you're just going to get a bad name and be out the door. They could fix you up, you know". And I was still young at the time; I was just out of school. I think if I was older, I would have reported it.

### **LIFE AFTER ŌWAIRAKA**

47. After leaving Ōwairaka, I became a primary and secondary school teacher, which I did for about 20 years.
48. One of my teaching roles was with De La Salle College for boys, where I taught for 17 years. During that time, I observed a lot about educating young men and

particularly around service leadership. Service leadership is about modelling leadership values such as respect, care and empathy through service to one another. It was there that I also watched young men leave school with little by way of university entrance or employment.

49. My experience at De La Salle led to my wife and I co-founding Martin Hautus, the Pacific Peoples' Learning Institute, in Auckland in 1990. The purpose of Martin Hautus was to provide quality education and training for the people of Aotearoa, New Zealand. It had a particular focus on the growing numbers of Pacific and Māori learners who were failing at alarming rates in the mainstream, compulsory education system.
50. The style of education at Martin Hautus was a holistic one, underpinned by four pillars that constituted the ethos that permeated the Institute: Spiritual Values, Academic Excellence, Cultural Appreciation and Leadership Development.
51. Martin Hautus Institute also had an Alternative Education programme focused on catering to young people between 13-15 years of age who had been alienated from school for reasons dictated by the Principal. We ran this programme for two years free of charge before we were funded by the AIMHI (Achievement in Multi-Cultural High Schools) Consortium in Mangere.
52. In 2012, my wife and I established an early childhood education centre in Auckland called Incredible Angels. This was in response to the mantra that the first 1000 days of a child's life is critical for learning. It was also in response to attendance issues because we found that our adult students couldn't come to class if they had no one to look after their children.
53. In 2013, my wife and I established a Martin Hautus Institute in Samoa.
54. After 27 years of service to the community and along with shifts in government funding, we decided to close the doors at Martin Hautus Institute. Although we were sad that we couldn't continue the work, we understood that it was time to do other things.
55. My wife and I look back with fondness at the lives that we were privileged enough to serve and play a part in, to assist them to gain qualifications, sustainable employment and lifelong friendships.



56. In 2015, my wife and I were made Officers of the New Zealand Order of Merit for our services to education and the Pacific community.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

57. The kids in these institutions are there for a reason, so there is no use sending them to places where people will not look after them properly. What these kids need are people to be supportive, talk to them, care for them, be patient with them and listen to them.
58. I think it comes down to the quality of the people that run the institutions. These places need staff who are of high standing, with good morals and a good upbringing, who will lift the standards up. They need people who will be supportive and go the extra mile. There are people in the world who have been trained, brought up well, brought up to love and care for people, and those are the types of people we need in these areas, because it's tough going.
59. Although the concept of service leadership only became apparent to me with experience in my later years, I think it is an important element in the care and development of young people and vulnerable adults.
60. It is also not easy to get change the way staff are chosen to work in these areas. People need to be planning to work a certain period in these institutions to get the gist of the job and also to get a feel for the kids, before they are taken on as full-time, permanent employees.
61. I think my wife and I have been very successful with Martin Hautus because we would set people to work while they were training so that we could get to know them inside out. If he or she proved that they could turn up, dress well and be honest, then we would make them permanent employees. A great CV is not enough; it's about character.
62. In addition, I think there should be systems in any institution where people can feel safe enough to report something if they are not comfortable with what they're seeing. They should be able to make the report known to the bosses by not just talking to them, but also writing to them and talking to certain people who are able to pass on the information.

63. If there had been an independent body or person and their job was to come in and monitor institutions like Ōwairaka, I would have talked to them about what I saw, because that's the right thing to do.
64. As a final comment, I chose to provide information to the Commission because I know this will have far reaching effects and produce results for better services to those in state care.

### **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: 8 July 2021

## Consent to use my statement

I, **Pulotu Arthur Gus Solomon**, 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:

GRO-C

Date: 8 July 2021