

**Witness Name:** Matthew Frank Whiting

**Statement No.:** WITN0374001

**Dated:** 22.11.2021

## ROYAL COMMISSION OF INQUIRY INTO ABUSE IN CARE

### WITNESS STATEMENT OF MATTHEW FRANK WHITING

I, Matthew Frank Whiting, will say as follows:

#### 1. Introduction

- 1.1. My name is Matthew Frank Whiting. I was born GRO-C 1965. I grew up in Christchurch, New Zealand. I work as the Regional Disability Leadership Coordinator for the Southern Region (South Island) and as Service Manager – Adult Services in Christchurch at CCS Disability Action. I have been working there for almost 21 years.
- 1.2. My birth mother was Māori and my adoptive family were Pākehā. I was diagnosed with Cerebral Palsy when I was nine months old. I have Spastic Quadriplegia with a speech impairment. At the early stages of my diagnoses, the specialist believed I had a learning impairment as well. At around four-and-a-half years old, a child psychologist tested my intelligence and found that I was above average.

#### Early life

- 1.3. My birth mother lived in Auckland but I was born in Christchurch. Before I was born, my birth mother had a child who had been whangai'd out. Her father said you can only have one mistake. They were a Catholic family and both pregnancies were out of wedlock. He forced her to adopt me out.
- 1.4. When I was two weeks old, my adoptive parents, Bill and Mary, were phoned by a parish priest and asked if they wanted another baby. I don't suppose they were looking for another as they had already adopted two children, my brother, Anthony, and my sister, Mary-Ann. My understanding is that the adoption was official, but it was obviously an unusual approach, especially compared to the system we have now.
- 1.5. When I refer to my mum and dad, I am talking about Bill and Mary.

- 1.6. I contacted my birth mother in the late 1980s through an agency I recall being called the Social Welfare Adoption Information Service. They passed a letter from me to her. She said no to meeting me as she was scared of her father finding out. But I persisted, and I still wrote to her and rang her on occasions. I contacted her to let her know that I was going to be in Auckland for a conference. I told her the name of the hotel I was staying in and said now it's up to you. She came and met me. She had caught three buses to get there, which told me that she did really want to come. This was extremely emotional for both of us. My extended family mostly have 'blonde hair and blue eyes'. When I met my birth mother, it was the first time I saw someone who resembled me.

We met around seven years before she passed away. When she died, my half-brother found a letter I had sent her in her belongings and contacted me. We remain connected to this day. I have limited knowledge about my whakapapa.

### **Diagnosis**

- 1.7. When I was nine months old, Mum took me to the doctor as it had become clear that I was missing developmental milestones. The doctor told Mum not to make a fuss and that she was overreacting. She wasn't taken seriously at all. Mum asked for a second opinion and I was diagnosed with Cerebral Palsy with a cognitive impairment. She was told that I would live only until I was five years old. This had a huge effect on Mum's mental health. Therefore, she decided that she would not take any photos of me from then onwards.
- 1.8. Another consequence of this, some of my family members and my parents' friends told Mum and Dad to hand me back. You do need to remember this was all within the context of the time and the understanding of disability in our society, with its influential history of eugenics. Mum and Dad were told to return me and to get a 'perfect baby' instead.

### **Events leading up to admission in care**

- 1.9. At four, I had my first taste of institutional life. I have a very hazy memory of being in Templeton. Some professionals said I should go there, so I went there. This ended up being for a few months only, as a psychologist at Templeton said that I had some brains. The psychologist had me go to a special school, the School for Cerebral Palsy in Worcester Street, for further assessment for two weeks to see if I could learn. Obviously, that was not an issue. So, at four-and-a-half years old, my diagnosis of a learning impairment was found to be wrong. Thank **God** someone understood and got it right because if they didn't, I would have stayed in Templeton. I know many people who were probably as intelligent as I am and who never had the same opportunity to receive a proper diagnosis. They were institutionalised for a long time.
- 1.10. It wasn't that my parents pushed the issue of a more considered diagnosis. I was just fortunate. In those days, doctors had this remarkable power. My parents never said anything against them. Dad was a very perfect man in that regard, he was very compliant. Mum was very smart but she could not read. She never had the opportunity to get an education as she had rheumatic fever. Her memory was very good, no-one ever knew that she could not read.
- 1.11. After leaving Templeton, I lived at home. When I was five years old, I had a big operation on my legs to try and make me walk. It didn't work. The operation was a response of the

time and illustrates the medical model of disability that persisted.

I stayed in hospital to recuperate for six weeks. One day, my bed was moved from the main ward to a side room. I thought my parents would never be able to find me. I had no idea what was happening, no-one explained anything to me. I very clearly remember feeling distressed. Those feelings are very close to the surface for me, even now. That experience was probably the first time I felt traumatised.

- 1.12. Home life was difficult. Mum had mental health issues that were undiagnosed at this stage. She was very angry and screamed a lot. When I was 20 years old, she was diagnosed with schizophrenia and chronic depression. Dad was an alcoholic – his drinking was relatively severe and he was often out of control. I believe he had post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) from his time in Korea. The combination of the two of them meant that we had a difficult upbringing. I would describe it as significantly dysfunctional. There was a lot of verbal violence between mum and dad, at least once every day someone would go off. There was also violence between my siblings and my parents, and between my siblings.

I don't think my parents were equipped to raise children. My sister, **Mary-Ann**, was forced to take care of me and took me everywhere with her. She resented this as a teenager and a young woman. It has caused difficulty in our relationship with each other, in the past.

- 1.13. Mum had her first breakdown when I was seven. She was placed in the Ferguson Clinic at Sunnyside Hospital. I was taken there to see her once. She was in a small, square fully padded room and knocked out on drugs. I remember it so well. I didn't understand what was happening. Seeing my mother in there was the next time I remember being traumatised.

I was diagnosed with PTSD in 2018. It was those two incidents that were the beginning of my trauma and led to the PTSD.

- 1.14. When Mum was at Sunnyside, it was decided by the doctors and professionals working with our family that I would go into an IHC family home.

## 2. Abuse

### IHC family home, **GRO-C**, Christchurch

- 2.1. At only seven years old, I was removed from home. I don't have a learning impairment, but the IHC family home was the only place for me to go. I believe I was considered too much hard work for Dad to manage. Also, at the time, it was expected that children with sufficient impairments would not live at home.
- 2.2. I lived there with five or six other children. I was taken care of and Mrs **GRO-B** was nice to me but I hated it because it wasn't home. On the weekends I got to go back home and see Dad and my siblings. I really wanted to stay there. When I talk about being taken away from my home at only seven years old, I feel very upset. It really affected me and still does today. I was just a kid wanting to be at home. Nobody had any idea about how I

felt, there was no discussion about it or what I wanted. I just had to stuff down those feelings.

- 2.3. I lived at the IHC family home for at least six months, probably longer, until mum came home again. I then lived at home with my family until I was ten years old, and I attended the School for the Physically Disabled (formerly known as the School for Cerebral Palsy).
- 2.4. When I wasn't at my school because of holidays, I went to an IHC school. It was very boring. At seven years old, I was in the top class. I was in class with teenagers and young adults who had a learning disability.

In 1976, I was moved into a CCS family home.

**CCS family home, [GRO-C], Christchurch**

- 2.5. At ten years old, I was told I couldn't live at home. Not many people would go against what doctors said at that time. You trusted them and went with their recommendations – a medical model of disability dominated. My parents were the same. I was only ten, but it was not hard to pick up on the idea that it was my impairments that were to 'blame' for our family's difficulties. I was the only one who had to leave, at that stage. My brother and sister stayed at home for that moment. I'm not stupid, what else can you take from that? The theory was that if we take Matt away, everything will be hunky-dory for the family.
- 2.6. The files I have received from CCS do not include anything about my placements at CCS family homes. This is because these files are missing; I physically burnt the bastards sometime in the 1990s to assist with my anger.

From my recollection, I lived with a Dutch couple with two children of their own at a house owned by CCS. They took in children with disabilities who needed somewhere to live. There were four children, including myself, who lived there. The couple were quite strict and very particular.

- 2.7. I got pneumonia while I was living there and became very unwell. The couple thought I just had a cold and that I was getting better. They didn't recognise the seriousness of the illness, and I got worse. When they finally took me to a doctor, he said if I hadn't gone in that day I potentially could have died. I was off-school and recuperating in bed for eight weeks.
- 2.8. I kept attending the School for the Physically Disabled while I lived at the CCS family home. I wasn't being taught to my abilities, the teacher used to try and keep the whole class together despite there being a wide range of impairment. As an example, when I was 12, I was doing a level of work that was for eight-year-olds.
- 2.9. The Dutch couple decided not to carry on with having the family home. They indicated that they needed to exit, and so I had to exit. I was not told about the plan to close the Family Home. At 11 years old, I was told I was going on 'holiday' to Pukeora in Central Hawke's Bay.

## **Pukeora Hospital**

### ***Arrival at institution***

- 2.10. Whoever was making these decisions, the doctors and professionals, advised Mum and Dad not to tell me what the plan was and to let me think it was a holiday. Nobody asked me what I wanted. In reality, it was a seven-week trial visit to see if I would cope with living there permanently. It was my first ever time leaving Christchurch. I was alone, I didn't know one person. I was disempowered!
- 2.11. Hawke's Bay District Health Board have said they hold no files from my time at Pukeora. I can say that I am disappointed to not have any records, but I am not surprised.

### ***Day-to-day life in care***

- 2.12. It was an institution and you did what staff told you to do. It was impersonal. That's how you run institutions: power and control. The staff had huge issues with this – some people when they have that power, they abuse it. Pukeora was power and control every day. There were over one hundred people there, and it was mainly adults. I believe that I was the youngest. I was very far from home and very naïve.
- 2.13. The whole time I was in Pukeora, I was terrified. I felt like I was being controlled all the time. I needed to conform. The medical system and structure that Pukeora was operating within is a hierarchical system. Other residents would come up to me and try and intimidate me. The staff wouldn't notice. When you're institutionalised, this is what happens – the power and control issues start emerging in the people who live there.
- 2.14. It was like sending someone to prison at 11 years old.

### ***Physical and sexual abuse***

- 2.15. One day I went to go to my bed. We didn't have our own rooms, we were in dormitories. I went in and came across two guys performing oral sex on each other. They were probably in their early twenties. I didn't understand what was going on, I didn't have any experience to reference that to. What put me over the edge and created pure fear in me was what happened afterward.

I was in the bathroom when they cornered me. I was bailed up by these two men and threatened. They said if I ever told anybody what I saw, they would smash my fucking head in. I was very frightened. I couldn't physically defend myself. I did not have a powerchair at the time and I was physically cornered. I could push myself about in the chair I had at the time in a limited way. I was stuck there, unable to go anywhere. I was 11, and I had no fucking idea what had happened.

- 2.16. To cope, I just withdrew from everyone and went within myself. I was so scared, the last thing I wanted to do was speak to anybody about it. I absolutely believed that what they threatened was true. I have no idea if the staff noticed my behaviour. I had nobody to talk to.

- 2.17. These two men threatened me on multiple occasions. I felt completely vulnerable and powerless. I remember wondering if this was something I had to submit to. I told my mum about it several years later, it became too much to keep it inside. I remember that she gave me a hug. Mum believed me!
- 2.18. It was the absolute powerlessness I experienced in the toilets that really traumatised me, more so than the sexual stuff. I had no support. For those two men, their behaviour was reflective of the culture of the environment we were in.

### **Seclusion**

- 2.19. I was placed in a room by a staff member and the door was shut and I couldn't get out. I couldn't move about within the room as I found it hard to freely move my wheelchair on my own. I have a very vague memory of this, and I can't remember for how long I was in there or if it happened more than once. But I very strongly remember how I felt when I was in there.
- 2.20. I saw this happen to other people who were living at Pukeora too. It was always for punishment.

### **Burwood Hospital**

#### **Arrival at institution**

- 2.21. After my seven-week trial at Pukeora, I returned to Christchurch and lived at the CCS house, [GRO-C]. The professionals were trying to find a permanent place for me to live. The next year, that CCS family home closed for Christmas, so I had to be put somewhere. 20 December 1978, I got institutionalised. I was sent to Burwood as an emergency admission.
- 2.22. I was 13 years old. Burwood Hospital is operated by Canterbury District Health Board and is in the north-eastern suburbs of Christchurch. I was put in ward nine, which was meant to be for younger people and people with muscular issues. There were also people with brain injuries there. Obviously, sometimes, people with brain injuries can have resultant behavioural issues but when you are 13, you don't understand that – it's just scary.
- 2.23. When I was sent to Burwood, I never got told what their plan was. What happened was that a social worker came out from CCS to Burwood just before Christmas and took me for a drive, she told me that I was going to go back to Pukeora to live in two weeks' time. The initial plan had been to just hold me in Burwood before they sent me up to Pukeora permanently. I wasn't asked what I wanted or where I wanted to live. There was no choice. There were no discussions about me staying at home.

There was no way that I wanted to go back to Pukeora. I said, *there is no fucking way I am going there. I'd rather kill myself.* I cried for several days. I guess people wondered why I was so upset but the staff didn't stop and ask me what was going on. I didn't have any one in my life that I could talk to about Pukeora or why I didn't want to go back.

Dad negotiated with the charge nurse about giving me more time at Burwood. The thinking was that I would come around to the idea, if given a bit more time, and be calm enough to get on the flight. In the end, the charge nurse agreed that I could stay for one month more. Then it was extended by another two weeks. They thought I would get over it. I was so upset at the idea of going that my parents discussed selling up in Christchurch and moving up to Napier to be closer to me. I kept swearing my head off, I said it so many times, *I'm not fucking going*. My parents said that I had to go because that was what the professionals thought would be best for me.

This cycle continued on, and about ten weeks passed. The charge nurse asked if I wanted to stay at Burwood, *if you could stay here, would you be happy?* I said yes, if only because it was near my family, even though my family is in chaos, it was my family that loved. This started my imprisonment for eight years at Burwood Hospital. I don't use that word lightly. Burwood had the same hierarchical system as prison, but in the health system; it is just that there were no bars.

- 2.24. If I wasn't so fucking pig headed, I would've been sent back to Pukeora. Looking back, I think I did quite well in standing up for myself.

#### ***Day-to-day life in care at Burwood Hospital***

- 2.25. There were only one or two other people my age at Burwood. I had no choice in the time I went to bed or the food I ate or when I washed. I was living day after day in a system of power and control. In the dormitories on the wards, there were six beds on each side, so 12 people in total. They were mainly adults. I had my own things but no place of my own to put things. There was no privacy. I could hear grown men jacking off at night.
- 2.26. I would go home on the weekends. Home was an upset environment with Mum and Dad always arguing. But it was still better than Burwood. I was dropped back on a Sunday night. I hated that drive, knowing I was going back to Burwood. Even now, when I'm driving around my home and go on that same route, it is a reminder of being that little boy and those feelings. Dad knew I was upset, but if I talked to him he'd say, *what are you moaning about, you've got food and shelter, what's wrong?* He really believed Burwood was the best place for me.
- 2.27. When I was older, I was 'lucky' to have a single room. This is because I was doing fifth and sixth form at the time.

When someone in the dormitory was unwell or dying, I used to get moved out from the room. Then I would get moved back in after the person got well or had died.

- 2.28. It's a really hard thing to explain to people how you survive when you live in a hierarchical system. I used to play *The Bitch is Back* by Elton John on my ghetto blaster when a certain nurse came on duty. I did it on purpose. Everyone knew, but her. Another thing I used to do was go into the lifts and when they were halfway between floors, I would open the door and force the lift to stop. I'd hide in there so no-one could get me. This was important to me; it was somewhere to go when I needed personal space. From the lift, I could hear my name being called over the loudspeaker, "Matthew Whiting, please return

to ward nine". This really fucked that particular nurse off and the more she got wound up, the more I did it. It was a way to take my power back.

- 2.29. I remember being pushed around in my manual wheelchair to places I didn't want to go. When you can't move yourself, you don't have a choice. The way that staff members wanted things done, that was way it was done. There is a massive power imbalance in the systemic way we organise places like prisons, hospitals and residential care, and that was the case in Burwood too. There was very unequal power and no watchdog. There is always going to be people who love to have power over people and then some really weird shit that happens.

### ***Sexual abuse***

- 2.30. When I was 15, a nurse at Burwood Hospital befriended me. She felt sorry for me and she led me on in letting me think that we could be a 'thing'. She did some sexual kissing and touching with me. I didn't have a choice in what was happening. This went on for about a year. I felt really conflicted, it felt nice at the time but she also wasn't my girlfriend, she was a staff member. It was very secretive. It took me being an adult, and looking back, to realise that she was taking advantage of me and that it was abusive. I've spoken with my counsellor about this and it took a long time for me to understand it as abuse.
- 2.31. When I was 20, a different nurse came on to me. I responded by putting my hand up into her skirt and touching her. She went to the charge nurse and said that I had tried it on her. Fortunately, the charge nurse knew me enough to come to me and ask me what happened. It was lucky that she was on shift that day and she understood. But I was still the one who got told off. The charge nurse did have a conversation with that particular nurse, and she didn't try it on with me again.
- 2.32. These are just two examples of many power abuses around sexuality that I experienced at Burwood.
- 2.33. My realisations as an adult of these experiences as abuse has been really upsetting.

### ***Physical abuse***

- 2.34. We didn't have choice in the food we ate. One mealtime, I didn't want to eat what they were giving me. So, I refused it. A nurse got behind me, she held my nose and shoved the food down my throat. I was using a powerchair at that time. I backed it up to the wall, so she was caught between the wall and my chair to try and stop her force feeding me. She put my chair into manual, which meant I couldn't move it myself. It was easy for her to do things like that because she was in charge of the ward I was on.

### ***Seclusion***

- 2.35. A staff member put me into a room in Burwood and locked me in there. I couldn't leave. I have no idea of the length of time I was in there, but my guess is that I was in there because I hadn't been compliant beforehand.



This happened more than once. I saw this same punishment happen to other people.

***Education while at CCS family homes and while living at Burwood Hospital***

2.36. My education changed when Glenda Laurence started teaching at the School for the Physically Disabled. I was around 13 years old. I was given an opportunity again, just like when someone took the time to properly assess my academic ability. I know so many other people who had the same experience within education but were never given that same opportunity I was.

2.37. Glenda became a key person in my life and still is today. She had never taught disabled people before and so she never had the limited thoughts and perceptions about teaching disabled people. She didn't lump-in everybody's abilities, instead she had expectations of what 'ordinary' children would do. I had met a person who could believe in me. I became excited by learning, I wanted more and more and more. I loved mathematics. In about four months of being taught by her, I went up five year-levels.

It was like she placed all these dots – she introduced me to the civil rights movement and exposed me to ideas such as social justice, discrimination and being a strong advocate – then as an adult, I connected those dots. I had a very conservative father and a Catholic family but Glenda is not a traditionalist or conservative at all.

2.38. Glenda then asked me a question when I was about 14 years old. She said, *what do you really want?* And I said that I wanted to go to a normal school.

It took so much advocacy to get there. It was not easy. Glenda and a psychologist attached to the School for the Physically Disabled were on board. Glenda made it her own school project, even writing to the Ministry of Education. But 14-year-old me, I really advocated for myself. It came from within me. Finally, I went to Hagley High School in central Christchurch. I attended Hagley for three days a week and the School for the Physically Disabled for two days a week.

2.39. It was unusual for me to even be at Hagley High. At first, I was placed in a low stream, but this didn't last long and I was moved up. Within a couple of months, I was in the highest stream. I was pleased to be there and to get challenging work. I got involved with the classes. I got respect because of my academic ability and I finished school with sixth-form certificate and university entrance.

2.40. There was not much time for socialising or making friends. I used to get picked up from Burwood by a van operated by the Hospital Board and taken to school, and then taken straight away at the end of the day. I thought this was shit, but that was the deal. This was all before teacher aides. If I could have had a teacher aide at Hagley High, it might have made a difference. I needed more support in the classroom. I don't think this has changed much as my school experience is the same as what happens today for a lot of disabled children. The student needs support and so do other students and the teachers. They also needed guidance when it comes to supporting this – it has to be wraparound support.

### **Leaving Burwood**

- 2.41. When I decided to leave Burwood, it wasn't people coming to me and assisting and doing the organising. It was me saying, I'm going to leave.
- 2.42. I met a young social worker from CCS Disability Action at Burwood when I was about 19 years old. She was pretty naïve and new to working with disabled people. She asked me what I wanted in the future, and I said to leave Burwood. I kept on moaning about Burwood and how unfair it was, it was all I could talk about.

I had a real sucky year with my family and I was in a place where I wanted to hurt myself. I decided to kill myself. I had planned it all out, and I followed through with the plan. GRO-C

## **GRO-C**

GRO-C

Nobody knew, I didn't tell anybody about it for years and years. This was an important moment – even though it was not okay, it was an important part of me taking my path back.

- 2.43. About a year later, the social worker challenged me. Instead of responding to my complaints by going, *oh poor Matt, never mind*. She said things like, *if you are so angry about being here, why don't you do something? Stop complaining. I don't want to hear it anymore, I just want to see some action*. This surprised me as no one had spoken to me like this before. I took this as a challenge!! I was and still am very grateful with her approach. I regard this as setting me free! Thank you, Allison.

It took me about two years to get organised, but I did it. I moved out of Burwood at 21 years old.

- 2.44. I didn't have much support from my parents or the staff at Burwood about moving out. When I raised it with Dad, he said, *don't be stupid, just stay there. What's wrong with it?* It became quite a contentious issue, so I cut-off all communications with my parents about moving out. I continued regardless.

I'll always remember the phone call I then made to my parents to say I was moving out within the month and telling them my new address. Dad stopped talking to me for around two months. I think Dad was really scared; he had been told that I would need to live in Burwood until I died. I was also Catholic and moving in with my girlfriend.

My girlfriend was a nurse from Burwood. She moved into the state house with me. We had begun a relationship nine months earlier. Now, I can see that was a really unhealthy relationship.

Some staff thought I was being stupid. They said to me, *how can you move out when you can't dress yourself? When you can't talk yourself? When you can't do anything?*

- 2.45. I moved out of Burwood with no care, and only my girlfriend, a bed and a stereo. It came down to me being bloody pigheaded.

### 3. Impact

- 3.1. The placement in Pukeora and the abuse I experienced there, and then being told I was going to be placed there permanently had a huge impact on family relationships, particularly with my mum and dad. It caused distrust. For me, it completely broke the relationship. As an 11-year-old kid, from a child's perspective, I thought it was my mum and dad sending me away. This has had a huge impact on the rest of my life. This sense of distrust has been with me for a long time.

I did a presentation once about supported living and one of the cool things about it was that Dad came along. I used my own story in the presentation. I had applied for my files and used them in there as well. Dad got up and said he was wrong. Publicly. I didn't lose it at the presentation, but it was a huge moment for me. I was in my thirties before I forgave my parents and came to see that what had happened was a system issue, not a rejection by my parents.

Over time, our relationship repaired, and Dad came along to my wedding in November 2013. He was pleased to be there and see me get married. I was glad he got to see that before he died in November 2015.

- 3.2. When you're disabled and with a speech impairment, everybody thinks you're dumb. After I got university entrance, I really wanted to have a job. I was repeatedly told that I could not work as I was too disabled. I was 36 before I got my first permanent role. Before that, I set-up my own business and did short-term contracts, as I didn't want to be unemployed. I ran a care agency business with another disabled person.

I had applied for a job at CCS Disability Action 18 times over 15 years. For one application in 1999, I had an interview and I was asked different questions from the other applicants. I was interviewed by a different interview panel. They asked me questions like, *with your speech, how can you communicate?* I didn't take shit from them. I ended up taking them to the Human Rights Commission. They asked discriminatory questions within a discriminatory process. CCS didn't contest it at all. Two years later, I finally got a job with them and I am still there.

- 3.3. It is hard work to constantly be fighting back. Every day, it's hard work. I get fucked over – by systems, by individuals. I'm treated like a second-class citizen every day. On the bus. At the shops. At work. I'm treated like I can't do it, like I can't talk. I am put down. Every single day, my sense of self is affected. Every day this is underlined. It has a cumulative effect. And it sends me straight back to being bailed up in that toilet at Pukeora. Every day, I have to draw on strength. Every day, I have to hold on to my sense of self. Every single day.

But when you underestimate me, there's trouble. It gives me an advantage.

- 3.4. When I get stressed now, I revert to being institutionalised, even though it has been a long time. I had said to myself, no one will ever control me again. That resolution has turned out to be both good and bad – it has been really destructive for me as well as positive. I have been determined to not let anybody shut me up anymore, which has created some

issues at work. I get into a place where I can't back down, which isn't helpful. In situations where I feel powerless, I respond with immense distress. It is completely overwhelming. This is the reality of living with PTSD as a disabled person.

An example is fairly recently where a more senior person at work decided to target me. It was workplace bullying. This person thought I was doing unsafe practices at work, when in fact, I know I wasn't. I believe I was targeted because this person thought I was vulnerable – an easy target – and they had a bias towards disabled people. I was also outspoken and needed to have 'a lesson taught'. They had an opportunity presented to them to accuse me of failing in my duty of care for someone I was supporting. That was personal because of my strong sense of my duty care! All the other crap I could deal with, but I couldn't deal with that accusation. For me, I was triggered.

I was stood down for nearly six months. I had to obtain legal representation as I wasn't in the union at the time. I was prepared to go to the Human Rights Commission again. There were so many holes in this person's story. I stood up for myself, was supported, and got my role back. This person left – were they pushed or go on their own accord, who knows? But it took me back to the same place as institutionalisation – feeling disempowered. It pushed a lot of buttons and distressed me severely. It was not good for me at all.

#### **4. Redress**

##### **ACC Sensitive Claims**

- 4.1. I have had a supported assessment in 2019 and an ACC impairment assessment in 2020 as part of my sensitive claim with ACC. I had two assessments done as ACC decided to challenge the first.
- 4.2. My impression is that this ACC process was more about how much damage you could display. It looks at you based on a deficit-model. I am quite privileged in that I have never had some of the impacts that abuse has on people such as alcohol or drug abuse. I can function at a high-level by compartmentalising situations and I can continue to work. But it was as though I had to prove the impact on my life of the sexual abuse before I could get compensation. This is a narrow definition of my abuse and the impact it had and continues to have on my life. It needs to change.
- 4.3. Within this process, responsibility for the abuse does not get attributed. Responsibility lies with the Burwood Hospital Board. This ACC process was also only for the sexual offending against me – there is a gap for the rest of the abuse. When you have been institutionalised, it is impossible to separate out different forms of abuse. It's like trying to separate your grey hair and your natural hair – you can't. I don't think the ACC process can understand institutional abuse.
- 4.4. As a result of these assessments, I receive \$4000 every five years to compensate for the apparent ten per cent impairment I have from PTSD due to sexual abuse in care. I also receive counselling.

- 4.5. If you just look at eight years of imprisonment and living under power, what would somebody get for eight years of false imprisonment? It was even before then, every day I got up and I wasn't at home. I was forced from home at ten years old. How many kids leave home at ten years old?

## 5. Looking forward

- 5.1. CCS used to stand for Crippled Children's Society, which in the context of the time it was named, this was a proper name to give. It is now known as CCS Disability Action. It is the same company I work for now. I choose to work in this field to make a difference for other people. I would like to have CCS removed from the official name. The problem is that when it comes to bequests and donations, people won't know who to give the money to.
- 5.2. I don't want this commission to be a talk fest. There is so much money being spent on it. Political stuff and the election cycle always have an impact on any advocacy too. My concern is that there will be no systemic action and all of this will be for another report that will sit on a shelf. You can see how much this takes out of people and what we are doing in speaking to the commission. The commission's expectation of an outcome needs to be systemic and sustainable change.
- 5.3. We must change the way we think about support and the way we provide support as a country or nothing will change. Systemic change must address the imbalance of power. The system sets it up, it needs this and lets it happen. It does not safeguard against it. We operate on a hierarchical system, which leads to abuse of power. Within the system, there are two levels of power. It is in its hierarchical format and also an individual's power over another person. Both of these aspects of power are abused. By its very nature there is built-in power differential: this is how institutions work.

Some people, when they have power, they don't understand this – they don't recognise they have it. Some people do recognise this, and they abuse it. Often, the biggest oppressors are those who are oppressed themselves.

There must be a way of providing support without taking power away from people. We must get the power closer to the individual and teach people about recognising power and control. As a disability service coordinator, I had power over people, but I understood that I had that.

A watchdog would even the power differential. It would also orientate the care of disabled people to more of a customer-service model. We need to stop creating *systems* and start focusing on *services*.

- 5.4. It is essential that we learn from history. The current abuse and neglect endured by disabled people is a result of systemic issues. We need to learn how to stop the damage before it happens. If reforming the system, it is not about ticking boxes. It must be genuine. The current system is tick box. We still have narrow systemic thinking – if you can't fit here, then you go there. There are not many safeguards in place, the only ones we have are contractual. There is a severe lack of resources in the disability sector and it is significantly underfunded. The Disability Commissioner doesn't have enough power.

The Health and Disability Commission is medically orientated. The Ombudsman has huge financial pressure and a lack of resources.

Residential homes are mini institutions; there are not big institutions any longer, just smaller ones. While audits occur, they are scheduled and are only every two to three years. This is not regular enough. The auditors only see the good days.

Everyone should have control over their own belongings and the support they need to live independently. Some people might need a lot more support than others.

- 5.5. Maybe what we need is a Truth Commission – like what happened in South Africa with apartheid. It would hold organisations and the government to account and ensure that fault is found. It would make a finding that someone or an organisation is liable. It would seek out and go speak to people.

This commission isn't that type of commission. My account is being heard only because I rang the 0800 number and put myself forward. This commission has been called for by the disabled community for years and years. And for years and years, the government said no. Not only National, it was right across the board. It was no. The disabled community that the commission wants to tap into, they're often disempowered and often they don't have a voice. Often, they're still being controlled because they live in residential care.

- 5.6. For all of these reasons, even though it is painful to deal with, I wanted to speak out. I have the ability to do so, and I have the responsibility to do this for everyone.
- 5.7. I would like to finish my statement with this quote from Burton Blatt:

*"We need to empty the institutions. The quicker we accomplish that goal the quicker we will be able to repair the damage done to generations of innocent inmates. The quicker we set about converting our ideologies and resources to a community model, the quicker we will learn how to forget what we perpetuated in the name of humanity."*

### **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: 22/11/2021