

Witness Name: Sarah (Sunny) Webster

Statement No.: WITN0346001

Dated: 18/12/21

ROYAL COMMISSION OF INQUIRY INTO ABUSE IN CARE

FIRST WITNESS STATEMENT OF SARAH (SUNNY) WEBSTER

I, Sarah (Sunny) Webster, state as follows:

Introduction and upbringing

1. I was born in Scotland. My parents' names were [GRO-B] and [GRO-B]. They're deceased now. I have four siblings, [GRO-B]
[GRO-B]
2. We immigrated to New Zealand when I was two years old and we lived here for five years. During that time, we all became New Zealand citizens.
3. When I was about eight years old, my dad was offered a job with the United Nations. As a horticultural scientist he worked on dry land farming and seed experimenting to make them more drought resistant. From then we spent a lot of time travelling. We first moved to Cyprus and lived there for two years.
4. While living in Cyprus, I started being sexually abused by [GRO-B]
5. We then moved to Turkey when I was about 10 years old. In that time, I went to boarding school in Scotland with my elder sister [GRO-B]. We used to come home to Turkey in the school holidays.

6. We then moved to Zalingei, Sudan, which is located in a remote area in Africa. We lived there for three years. My dad was the project leader here and was supported by a group of Hungarian United Nations staff members. I did school by correspondence over that time.

7. **GRO-B During this time, I was sexually abused and sexually harassed many times.**

GRO-B

It

would be subtle, and I felt like I couldn't say anything because it was normal and everyone would just turn a blind eye. My parents would see this and not say anything. I never brought this up with my parents as I knew they would just blame me.

8. **GRO-B I was bullied and sexually abused for years when I lived in Africa.**

9. I never took any further action about this particular abuse. The culture over there was one of male dominance. In Sudan, being a Muslim country, all of the houses are divided in two, with the men's part being the public part and the women's being the private part. Women would be seen and not heard, our job was to be subservient to men. I believed for a long time that it was a woman's job to be available for any man whenever he wanted. Because that was what happened to me. I grew up with males abusing me in all sorts of ways, sometimes men feeling me up in public and my parents did nothing about it. This was my normal.

10. When I was 16 years old, my parents decided for me to return to New Zealand on my own. I was sent by myself from Zalingei to Khartoum to fly out and while I was in the Hotel there, I was raped by a Lebanese pilot.

Arriving in New Zealand

11. When I got back to New Zealand, I lived with a couple in Levin who had been friends of my parents when we had been living in Levin previously. I knew them from when I was growing up. The mum's name was and I think the father's name was . Their kids were and . They had just lost a son to Leukaemia.
12. I felt completely alone there. I didn't have anyone in New Zealand that I could confide in. The brother who I had been living with in Sudan was sent separately to Saint Kentigerns in Auckland. I would always write to my parents.
13. I went to school at Horowhenua College in Levin, in sixth form. I was here for just over a term. I was always bright at school. I always got really good school reports up until the age of eight and I never had a good report since. That was the year I was first abused in Cyprus. The academic results didn't drop, it was more my behaviour that the teachers didn't like. Before the abuse I was a happy-go-lucky kid with lots of friends. But afterwards, I always felt like a bit of an outcast.
14. I didn't know the New Zealand way of life when I first arrived. An example of this is when I had a cigarette on my bike on my way to school in my school uniform. A few days later the Headmaster called me into his office and said that I should know that smoking isn't allowed. But I had no reason to know that. I had come from the depths of Africa doing correspondence to this sixth form New Zealand college. I had no way to know that.
15. I didn't fit in there. The other students called me an alien because I talked funny, did funny things and talked about funny places, places they had never seen in their lives. What I had seen in my life was so different to New Zealand back then. The other kids hadn't seen people starving or had to rely on local African people in a country foreign to them, for their lives. They hadn't travelled all over the world by themselves, been sent from pillar to post, having to learn to cope on their own. People didn't understand that I'd lived in such a different culture and they didn't accept that I was different than other people as a result.

Manawaroa

16. The GRO-B thought I was depressed because I would walk with my head down. But the reason I would do this was because in Africa you would get bitten by snakes, spiders, scorpions if you didn't watch your step – it was a part of everyday life. It was a habit.
17. They sent me to the Psychiatric Hospital in Palmerston North, Manawaroa. I think it was attached to the main hospital. The GRO-B drove me there.
18. I can't remember much about my time in Manawaroa. I remember that I was there with adults only.
19. Manawaroa was where the heavy medication first started. Staff would tell me that I was getting medicated because I was acting up. In reality, I was only asking why I was there or what was going on. I never got any answer except that I would be right when my medication was sorted out. This over medicating continued for the next 16 years.
20. I stayed there for God knows how long. Because I was in hospital, my mum came back from overseas as she was concerned with how I was going and dad's term with the UN was about to end. He followed shortly afterwards and got a regular desk job.

Lake Alice

21. I had moved in with my mum and, one day, I ran away. I was away from home for three days. In that time, I was hitchhiking and was raped separately by three different men who had picked me up in their vehicles. I was picked up last by a man in a caravan and he ended up dropping me off at Manawaroa again.
22. The staff at Manawaroa took me to Lake Alice on the same day I arrived in August 1973. I was 16 years old at the time.
23. I don't really remember too much about Lake Alice. The Royal Commission Investigators have shown me my admission form and a clinical note written by Dr Selwyn Leeks. I had never seen these documents before.

24. The documents make my timeline a lot more understandable and provides a bit of clarity. However, I really wonder what happened there that is not included in those documents. As while I don't remember much from Lake Alice, a strong symptom of my PTSD which has been recognised by those around me is my aversion to electricity. I don't remember getting electroconvulsive therapy or shock treatment at Lake Alice, but if I did, that would explain this symptom.
25. I was diagnosed in Lake Alice with reactive depression, hysterical character disorder [WITN0346002]. This is not what was wrong with me and the document proves that I was misdiagnosed. Nowhere on there does it say that I was a victim of sexual abuse, and that was the problem.
26. I was discharged from Lake Alice early in September 1973.

Ward 10 – Auckland Hospital

27. I was then admitted into Ward 10 in Auckland Hospital. This was a psychiatric ward in the main hospital. There were both adults and children here.
28. When I think of Ward 10, I think of hell. Nothing was ever useful, they just went around and around in circles with treatments, and I would always come out worst.
29. We would be forced to do psychotherapy and psychodrama. They would make us re-enact traumatic experiences. They'd encourage us to be violent and have emotional outbursts. When we naturally reacted as a result of the trauma the psychodrama brought up, we would be injected by the staff with tranquilisers.
30. One time after a psychodrama session, the staff asked me to down my trousers in front of the rest of the patient group to be given an injection in my buttocks. I refused. They said that the injection would be a lot more painful in my arm. I still refused as I didn't want to pull down my pants in front of the group. They instead injected my arm and the next minute my hold arm started going into convulsions. The doctor who did this was Danish but I don't remember his name. I felt so embarrassed.

31. The same Danish doctor decided to get my parents involved in my treatment and asked them to come along for a session. He thought I didn't know my folks. He asked mum if she really thought it was a good idea for her and my father to have uprooted their kid's lives and drag them across the world and send them to boarding school. Mum said they did what they thought was best at the time. The doctor continued to challenge her, and she ended up leaving the room.
32. In another family group therapy session, the doctor asked dad if he really knew me and asked him some questions about me. I realised then that my dad didn't really know me at all. He didn't know who I was or what I was doing. As a result, the doctor recommended that we go on a camping trip in a caravan to get to know one another. We ended up doing this and it was actually really cool. When I was growing up, I was daddy's girl. One happy memory I have from when we initially lived in Levin, before any abuse took place, was sitting on my dad's knee by the fire and him reading me a bedtime story.
33. It was around this time that my parents decided to become Christian missionaries. I believe this decision was somewhat fuelled by mum's inability to handle the truth about my upbringing. From then, mum put God before everything, including family. They didn't finish their work as missionaries until they retired, coming home for a short time about every four years.
34. I was in and out of Ward 10 for years. When I was out of Ward 10, I would be flatting. I worked off and on in those years

Leaving Ward 10

35. At some stage after being in Ward 10, I went to Scotland because my sister was getting married. When I was over there I ran out of money and my sister decided I should go to London on my own. I arrived in London and knew nobody. I ended up in a terrible place in London.
36. My parents thought it would be a good idea to leave London and live with them in Lotubai, Kenya, because it was only another year or so before they were due for a furlough break from their missionary work.

37. I self-harmed while I was living in Kenya. It would be triggered by people telling me I was insane when I wasn't. From the beginning of my time in Kenya, I was treated as though I was nuts. I was told I was devil possessed and insane by the community there and my parents. That was when they fed me barbiturates on a regular basis. Nothing seemed to make real sense except for the pain of real harm. It was my reality in an unreal world of abandonment, being drugged up like a zombie, never feeling better. It was just a dark black world.
38. The local nurse, Mary, tried to stitch up my cuts but the needle broke. She tried to give me this medication that was like anaesthetic. It can be known to have bad side effects. All I know I was given the injection and passed out. Apparently, I had reacted badly and had made a scene. They decided this was further indication that I was insane.
39. While in Kenya, there were lots of kids who had polio and couldn't walk. We were with the Turkana people, a nomadic tribe. For them, if you can't walk and carry things on your head then you generally get left behind. I would make the kids callipers using steel, wooden platforms and goat skin to get these kids off the ground and walking again. I had some really good success with this. As a result, I became really interested in physiotherapy.
40. I stayed in Kenya for a couple of years and ultimately left because mum and dad were coming back to New Zealand. I came back to Auckland.
41. I left Auckland and was living in Hamilton City working for the physio-department in the hospital. I was working full time and sitting two UE subjects at school. I passed them both.
42. I was living with an Anglican reverend preacher, [GRO-B] and her husband. I was supposed to be religious because my parents were missionaries and they've always been religious, I kind of played their religion game. If I rebelled, my parents would say I wasn't good enough because I wasn't Christian.
43. [GRO-B] believed I was possessed by the Devil. She and her husband got their mates around to their house and essentially performed an unconsented exorcism on me. I remember lying on the ground being held down by this group of people, me yelling at them to stop and telling them there was no devil in me. They wouldn't listen and would instead say "pray louder the devil is listening." I didn't know the people who were there, all I knew is that they were members of the Anglican church.

44. This experience broke me. It was so wrong. I couldn't use my voice and was pinned to the ground. I was totally helpless.
45. Since this, I've never gone back to church.
46. I've never made any complaint about this event. I've never had anyone on my side or anyone to talk to about it.

Tokanui

47. I can't remember why I was admitted into Tokanui, but I was there for four years. I remember parts of my time there very clearly, and some not at all.
48. To start off, I was in the short-stay wards, wards 7 and 8. I would alternate between the two. There I was always told that I'd come right when they got my medication right. So they would try lots of different medication and tranquilisers.
49. At some stage during my admission, a male charge nurse who didn't like me, who I don't remember the name of, decided he would send me to the long-stay ward to teach me a lesson. I can't exactly remember what I did to result in me being sent to the long-stay ward. I think it had to do with an incident where I accidentally went to the wrong ward after a walk, and the charge nurse thinking I was attempting to abscond. But that wasn't the case, I thought it was my ward I was walking towards.
50. In the long stay ward, you wouldn't come out unless you were in a wooden box. Whereas the short-term ward was more temporary, but you could be staying there for years too.
51. The other patients in the long-term stay had severe psychiatric conditions. You couldn't have conversations with any of them because of their mental state.
52. There was a lot of violence in the long-stay ward amongst the patients. I remember regularly getting beaten up by the other patients. I learnt never to sit with my back not against the wall, because it was more than likely that someone would whack you over the head. When people go insane, they have superhuman strength, I saw this small dude pick up a full-size billiard table and tip it over.

53. The staff would eventually intervene and sedate the patients doing the attacking. There would generally only be two or three staff around watching the whole group. This lack of staff was the reason sedation and drugs were used so heavily – because it was the only tool, they had to deal with so many people.
54. During this time, I was put into seclusion. Sometimes for a week or more at a time. The rooms would have a mattress on the floor and two blankets sewn together. There was no toilet or bucket to go to the bathroom. I'd be put in there for asking the staff why I was there and asking to leave I would tell them "I'm not crazy, let me out of here". But I felt like this because no one ever came to see me. I felt completely abandoned in a ward that I didn't belong in. If I would ask why I was being locked up, I would be told that it was to protect society from me because I'm a nutball. You can't ever recover from that. These doctors and nurses, people you're supposed to trust, telling you things you don't understand.
55. I didn't belong in the long stay ward. It wasn't the right place for me. I felt like a nothing in there, just a blob. I didn't matter to anyone.
56. My human dignity was totally and utterly taken away from me. The bathroom had four baths in one room with no doors or cubicles between the baths. You'd have to bath in public in front of the other patients and staff.
57. A lot of the staff in Tokanui were Māori. They would really make use of you. They would sit in the office with their feet up and make you do their job for them. This would include checking on other patients.
58. I remember one staff nurse, I had just had a visit and I had a little make-up case with bits and pieces in it. After a visit, the staff would always do an examination of your stuff. On this occasion, this Māori nurse said that she liked it and that I didn't need it. So, she tipped out the case and kept it for herself.
59. I couldn't say no to this or to anything. It wasn't an option. There was no one to complain to and I was afraid that saying no would result in an injection or other negative consequences. That's how the ruled, in an environment of fear.
60. I don't think this environment of fear was necessary in the running of the ward. If there was understanding and compassion amongst the staff, you wouldn't have had a quarter of the mistreatment there.

Excessive use of medication

61. To administer injections, several staff would need to wrestle patients to the ground. They sometimes went a bit over and above in doing this and would be very rough. These were big male staff members and the level of force they used was unnecessary.
62. Paraldehyde was commonly used on me and other patients in Tokanui. When I first went into the ward at Tokanui, it smelt funny. It wasn't until I received paraldehyde there that I registered that was the smell.
63. Paraldehyde was the most awful experience ever. I would end up with huge bruises and for the weeks following my body would reek of this awful chemical smell. The smell was so enveloping and is now a trigger for my post-traumatic stress. The chemical blackness that would come over me would make me feel like nothing.
64. I noticed the effect of the drugs on my body when I'd do work in the long-stay vegetable garden in the sun. I couldn't use the spade for very long because my body would be so weak. I couldn't stay in the sun for too long because the drugs made my skin really sensitive to it, so my skin would burn in two seconds flat.
65. I'd get such major doses that my jaw would get locked up and I wouldn't be able to speak. So I'd go to the staff and they'd give me another injection to counteract the effects. I'd end up just being a chemical blob. I would get told that the drugs were supposed to be helping me, but if anything, they ruined me. I couldn't think for myself or do anything for myself. I was just a nothing.
66. The major tranquilisers were the worst, because they just drained everything out of you physically, I couldn't use my muscles. But they also drained me emotionally, mentally, my personality was gone – everything was just gone and I became this chemical blob controlled by these chemicals that were supposed to make me work
67. I was continuously told that would get better once they got the medication right.

Sleep narcosis

68. At some stage, I was being put under sleep narcosis for five to ten days at a time. This meant they'd force me to sleep for 24 hours each day. I was told that this would give my brain a rest so I wouldn't behave how I was before. I assume this included self-harming.

69. To induce the sleep narcosis, they would inject you with phenobarbitone

and then give you chlorpromazine and sleeping pills four-hourly to keep you asleep.

70. I'm not sure whether I consented to this, I suppose I must have if it actually took place. But in reality, I never felt like I had a choice when it came to my treatments. I remember waking up on occasion throughout this and telling the staff there that I didn't want to sleep anymore. But then there would be a needle and then blackness.

71. I was neglected in Tokanui in every way. One of the worst ways was that during the sleep narcosis, as a result of the tranquilisers I'd have no secretion and my body would dry up. I would be given these really old and dry sandwiches that I couldn't eat. During this time, they'd never ensure that I went to the loo. The drugs resulted in my digestive system not function as it should, and as a result I became really constipated. This to me was a basic form of neglect, particularly during sleep narcosis when you're asleep 24/7 so therefore unable to look after yourself. My metabolism wasn't working properly and I ended up gaining a lot of weight. I noticed that others in the long-stay ward gained weight too.

B Ward

72. Eventually there was a social worker called Katrina Ings and I asked to speak with her. Eventually, she helped me get out of the long-stay ward and go into another ward called 'B Ward'.

73. B Ward was a voluntary ward run by Dr Falicity Saxby, who ended up dying. B ward was better than other wards in Tokanui. Other wards would rely mainly on drugs to treat patients, whereas in B Ward they would attempt to solve your problems. In there they did more psychodrama. I don't think the psychodrama worked in B ward either. The real issue was the fact that I had been abused, and no one addressed this.

Sexual abuse at Tokanui

74. During my time in Tokanui, there were a couple of unconsented sexual abuse incidents. One was with a patient and one was with a staff member. I can't remember their names.

75. To my knowledge, these incidents were not reported to anyone and I didn't expect them to be. Sexual abuse was a normal part of life.

76. I became pregnant from one of these incidents and as a result I got an abortion in Tokanui. I can't remember how far through the pregnancy I was when I got the abortion. I also can't actually remember getting the abortion at the time and I don't know if I consented to it. But because I didn't know it was happening, I doubt I consented to it. All I remember is being sent to Waikato Hospital and having heavy bleeding afterwards.

77. The other long-stay female patients were all sterilised because pregnancies were too common. They would get sent to Waikato hospital for this. The mental capacity of women in that ward was such that they could not consent to sex. A lot of them couldn't talk, couldn't feed themselves and couldn't go to the toilet on their own. There is no way to view the sexual activity in there as consensual.

78. I wasn't in that ward long enough to get sterilized, thank god. I wouldn't have had my beautiful children if that had been the case.

Discharge from Tokanui

79. I was admitted and discharged from Tokanui on numerous different occasions. When I would be discharged I usually had nowhere to go, so was homeless. I remember on one occasion, being picked up by the Police and taken back to Tokanui because there was nowhere else for them to take me.

80. To try escape Tokanui for good, I managed to track down some marijuana and I smoked it. When I came back into the ward, I really exaggerated the effect so that they could tell I was on drugs. Because they had a no drugs policy, I was kicked out.
81. After Tokanui, my feet took me to Christchurch. There was no one in my life, no family support, no support from services, so I just wandered.
82. The Crisis Team in Christchurch would sometimes see me. They were part of the Psychiatric Unit attached to the Hospital Accident and Emergency Centre. They would try and help me sometimes, although I don't think they really helped me. Just like other psychiatric care, it just felt like I was going around and around in circles with their treatment with no results.

Sunnyside

83. I'm not exactly sure how I ended up in Sunnyside. But I assume it was through the Crisis Team.
84. I was in and out of Sunnyside a lot over a couple of years.
85. During my time in Sunnyside I was prescribed Valium. It was when I was on Valium that my self-harming was at its worst. I've later found out that one of the side effects of Valium was a lack of impulse control.
86. It was during this time that I began to seriously reconsider my diagnosis and the treatment I had endured over the years across the different institutions, as I was still no different from when I went in – if not worse.
87. I don't see Sunnyside to be as bad as the other institutions I had been in. However, I think this is due to my attitude as opposed to the institution itself. My mindset was against the institution and not against myself. By this point I had learnt how to play the system. I knew how to act in a way that would result in the least amount of punishment.

Life after care

88. At the age of 32, I decided there needed to be more to life than what I had experienced for the past 16 years. That was when I discharged myself from the system and left Sunnyside.

89. I was discharged from Sunnyside with a big bag of medication. The staff there told me I'd be on them for the rest of my life and that I need to get used to it. They discharged me as incurable and said I had four psychiatric illnesses. This again shows a misdiagnosis.
90. After so many years in the system, I had become institutionalised. When I was out in the community, I had to teach myself how to live from scratch. I received no support in this transition. It was made even more difficult due to my having lived overseas for a lot of my upbringing, so I still didn't completely understand the New Zealand way of life. I made some really bad mistakes in this transition.
91. For the next two years, I was homeless and lived in a night-shelter in Christchurch. I got in trouble with the law during this time.
92. I started going to drug rehab during this time. It was there that a doctor, Doug Sellman, helped me to get off all the medication Sunnyside had left me on. I first stopped all the major tranquilisers and the last thing for me to stop was the Valium. It took me two years to completely break my addiction to these.
93. Once I was drug free, for the first time in 16 years, it was like this black chemical haze that had been with me all those years disappeared and I was able to function like a normal human being. I was finally a real person.

ACC sexual abuse counselling

94. I eventually shifted back up to Auckland. It was then that I underwent sexual abuse counselling with ACC. I did about ten sessions and this was probably the best thing I ever did. My life made sense to me. I could understand why I self-harmed and that it wasn't my fault. It was because of the abuse that happened to me. This lifted a huge burden off me and, as a result, I have never self-harmed and have never been near a psychiatric facility again.
95. I should have received that type of support for my sexual abuse trauma during my 16 years in psychiatric care, but I didn't. That's where the system failed me. I was misdiagnosed for 16 years and no one cared. I went through hell, it wrecked me as a person.
96. It's hell to live with the fact that I'm seen as a failure of a person. But it wasn't me and it wasn't my fault.

ACC claim

97. The counsellor connected to the sexual abuse counselling suggested I make a claim to ACC for the abuse that happened when I was a child, before entering the care system. The claim went through with special consideration because it didn't quite fit the regular criteria, and it was accepted. I got a pay-out of \$12,500. That was \$10,000 for the abuse and \$2,500 for disfigurement and scarring.

My family

98. With the money from my ACC claim I bought myself a house truck and took it back up to Hokianga, Kohukohu (Koke). I lived in a bit of a hippy community and met the father of my children, [GRO-B-1] who also had a house truck on a piece of land there. I kept my house truck on his land.

99. [GRO-B-1] and I got married on his land there. My sister and some of our friends attended the ceremony.

100. About three months after [GRO-B-1] and I met, I became pregnant with our first child.

101. [GRO-B-1] and I had three children together. The oldest is [GRO-B-2] [GRO-B-2] and I both nearly died when she was born. The doctor didn't carry out the appropriate tests to determine that [GRO-B-2] was facing the wrong way. I was in labour for a long time and nothing happened. [GRO-B-1] and I decided to go to Kawakawa hospital. At this stage I was really tired after having been in labour for around 36 hours. When we arrived, they gave me an epidural and still nothing happened. Still no one had done a proper examination to find that [GRO-B-2] was facing the wrong way. They stopped the epidural and I felt the full impact of the contractions. [GRO-B-2] was stuck on my pelvis so couldn't come out. They then noticed she was in distress, which was when they decided to do an emergency caesarean. No one ever admitted that anything was done wrong in this process.

102. [GRO-B-2] is a healthcare assistant now.

103. [GRO-B-3] was our second baby. She again was a caesarean. She lives near to me now and works for [GRO-B]

104. [GRO-B-4] was our third baby. He was a planned caesarean and was the best of the births. He works at [GRO-B] in Auckland now. I got my tubes tied after [GRO-B-4] was born, I decided I didn't want any further children and was also told it wouldn't be safe to have any more caesareans.

105. These were probably the happiest years. We lived on the land, planted trees, I did a lot of landscaping work and gardening.

[GRO-B]

107. I believe my experience being institutionalised has impacted my relationship with men. Both of my long-term partners were very dominant men and I thought this was normal. I was used to not having control over my life.

108. For a long time, I didn't tell anyone about my experience in psychiatric institutions. When I did eventually tell [GRO-B-1] it ended the relationship. He couldn't handle that I passed a good part of my life in institutions. **We separated.**

[GRO-B]

109. When I left, I took [GRO-B-4] because he was still very young. [GRO-B-1] kept the girls. The kids would all be together with either [GRO-B-1] or myself on alternate weekends.

110. When [GRO-B-4] was about five, whenever the kids were together they would fight. Their being apart for most of the time wasn't working. [GRO-B-1] and I decided that they needed to be living together but had a disagreement as to who they would live with. [GRO-B]

He ended up with the kids because he used my past mental health history against me.

[GRO-B]

[GRO-B]. I would have them for one weekend a fortnight and for half of their school holidays. This was the setup until they were old enough to leave home.

111. While I had [GRO-B-4] I would get a third of the family financial support. After [GRO-B-4] was taken back by [GRO-B-1] I stopped getting the family financial support and had very little money to live on. I would have to do a big shop before the kids were due, then when they were gone I would live on what was left for the fortnight, which was hardly anything.
112. A year or so after [GRO-B-1] and I broke up, I met [GRO-B-5]. We were living on his farm that he inherited from his mother. This was a really happy time for me. I loved being on the farm with the animals and the space. Living the country life and living closer to nature. I've always been into bikes, and we turned one of his paddocks into a course.
113. During this time, my relationship with the kids was good. They liked having two homes and coming to the farm.
114. [GRO-B]

Class action

115. In 2006, I spoke with a retired lawyer in Koke called Linda Kaye. She had originally been a lawyer in Wellington and I think she had been friends with Sonya Cooper. She told me about the class action and suggested I take part. This was funded through legal aid.
116. One day, the Wellington lawyer rang me and we talked for about half an hour. I didn't have an opportunity to tell them the full extent of my story and the impacts on my life.
117. They had my clinical notes and saw the records of the impregnation and abortion at Tokanui. So on that point alone, I won my case.
118. I was advised by Cooper Legal in February 2012 by letter that the Crown Health Financing Agency had made an offer to provide a payment of \$18,000 [WITN0346003]. The letter stated that they payment was "*described by CHFA as a "wellness payment" in acknowledgment of your experiences in psychiatric hospital care and any costs you may have incurred in seeking wellness in the period since your treatment.*"

119. The letter also advised that they payment was *“full and final settlement - the settlement will be full and final. Put simply, you will be unable to bring any subsequent claim in any New Zealand Court (against any individual or organisation) arising from or relating to your experiences as a psychiatric patient.”*
120. The advice in the letter about pursuing with the claim any further made me feel as though I had no choice but to accept the offer.
121. \$18,000 equates just over \$1,000 for every year I was in the system. I don't think this is satisfactory. What does that value my life at?
122. In 2012, I received an apology letter from Crown Health Financing Agency [WITN0346004].
123. At the time of the case, I was happy that they found some evidence and that I was able to receive some compensation. Back then, I was still somewhat under the impression that the medical professional was always right and that you don't question what they say. I didn't really look at the broader picture. As time has gone on, I've understood more about what I've been through and the ways in which the system has failed me. That was when I started to chase up ACC and other Government officials to try get compensation for the wider wrongs.
124. As no one had ever been on my side, having Cooper Legal fighting for me was good. But this still wasn't satisfactory as my full story wasn't told.

Attempts for further compensation

125. I've spent a lot of time trying to find a lawyer to help me make a claim for further compensation. But no one ever takes the time to listen and so I've never been able to find someone to help. I found this very hard to handle, as I had no help or compensation to deal with the post-traumatic stress I suffered as a result of being in those institutions.
126. I first wrote to the Prime Minister on 9 February 2018 to try and seek support. This was passed on to Associate Minister of ACC, Claire Curren. She replied: *“I am pleased to be informed that matters have progressed since you wrote. ACC has advised me that it has been in contact with you and given you information about a potential entitlement for Loss of Potential Earnings (LOPE). Should you wish to proceed with an application for LOPE, I encourage you to continue to engage with ACC, as they are best placed to assist you, and provide appropriate advice and support.”* [WITN0346005]

127. I made a claim to ACC for loss of potential earnings. Every so often I would call ACC to check in on my claim. I would always get told that it's on hold or still being investigated or considered.
128. The claim was ultimately declined a year later. I received an obnoxious phone call from a man who told me that because I hadn't been in any school or training prior to Tokanui, I couldn't claim any loss of potential earnings. I told him that I had been in school prior to institutionalisation and that this consideration by ACC was a mistake. I was never involved in this decision-making process and the wrong decision was come to as a result. They did it with historical records and couldn't even see what the claim was for. As a result, I suffered.
129. ACC believed that the compensation I received for my first claim was for the abuse I had endured at Tokanui, whereas it was actually for abuse that happened overseas. When I clarified this, the ACC representative told me the first compensation had been a mistake and that I shouldn't have received any compensation for abuse that had taken place overseas.
130. It hurts. Every time I get a rejection, it hurts. It hurts more and more, and this one with ACC has made it worse because it makes me feel that my life is worth nothing.
131. I again wrote to the Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern, on 30 April 2019. This was passed on to Associate Minister of ACC, Hon Peeni Henare. He replied that he is unable to grant exemptions to the legislation for individual client circumstances. He also said he was unable to directly intervene in ACC operational matters, as these are the responsibility of the ACC Chief Executive [WITN0346006].
132. I tried writing to TVNZ's Fair Go, as I once saw on there that they helped a man make a ACC claim for physical injury. But they wrote back that they couldn't help me and suggested I go to my local MP.
133. I wrote to Shane Reti and explained my case. His team also wouldn't do anything to help me.
134. I've tried seeking support in every direction and I've had no body to help me with what I need to do or who I need to approach, in order to make a complaint.

Impacts

Post-traumatic stress disorder

135. I consider the PTSD I suffer from today is a result of my experience of being institutionalised. It's triggered by locked doors, chemical smells and electricity. Those things aren't associated with sexual abuse, they're associated with the abuse I endured at Tokanui.

Impacts on family relationships

136. During boarding school, my sister and I were close. For a long time since then, we had nothing to do with each other. However, we've got back in touch recently. Today, she's married, has kids, lives on GRO-B and had a business. But it's hard with her as she's had a successful life and she expects me to have had the same, but I haven't. GRO-B

GRO-B

138. My kids never noticed the scars on my arms until they were adults. They brought it up with me, but they ultimately didn't care and I was still their mother to them. I have scars on my face too, and these don't bother them. I think I'm touchier about them than they are.

139. GRO-B-2's reaction is the only one I really saw. I was talking to her about it once and she said that it never should have happened. And that's what I feel too.

140. All of the scars on my arms are self-inflicted. The extent of what I did was very severe. They tell a story of my life. On one arm, I have a tattoo over my scars. The other arm is too badly damaged to have a tattoo to cover them up.

141. I have recently asked with my son GRO-B-4 about what he knew and thought about my experiences as he was growing up. He said the following –

"I was very young when mum told me about her experience, I think I was about 10 years old. I vaguely recall feeling sad that she had such a bad experience and bad seeing how affected she was. Thinking about it now, it almost doesn't even feel real that this kind of thing could happen in New Zealand. It sounds like a horror movie or a bad dream, not something that would happen to my mum. When I think about it, it does explain some of the PTSD symptoms that mum has always had, such as her aversion to electricity and the decisions she has made on how to live her life since. My primary response is to want to fix thing, but this isn't something I can change, which I continue to find challenging."

Homelessness

142. Before I got my current home I struggled with homelessness and, after that, only having access to dodgy rentals because I couldn't afford anything better. On two separate occasions, I had to leave my rentals because I refused to sleep with the landlord. They were trying to substitute my rent with sex. So I left.
143. I was in Whangarei in a campervan for a while in my ex's garden. For so many days, I cried to myself because I couldn't afford to live.
144. The lawyers who helped me with my class action also helped me get my current home. My current set-up is really great. I'm in control as long as I pay my rent.

On authority

145. Because of my experiences, I can't begin to feel any respect for people in positions of authority. In my daily life, I try to have minimum contact with anyone with authority – including the library and other public institutions. I try avoiding anything to do with the system or society at large.
146. Once they start listening to me and giving me what I'm entitled to, then I'll listen. But until then, they deserve nothing from me.

Encounters with the Police

147. My first encounter with the Police was in Christchurch. I was selling some pills and got busted by the Police. They took me to the station and interviewed me. I was mistakenly put into a holding cell with all the men instead of the women's holding cell. When they came to get me, they couldn't find me because I wasn't where I was meant to be.
148. Selling drugs was a last resort for me at that time. I didn't work and was homeless. I was getting the drugs prescribed by the hospital and selling them on. I did it to survive. My circumstances at the time forced me into that situation.
149. As a result of this, I was on probation for a while.
150. Another time I got in trouble with the Police was when I was detoxing. My brother was getting married and I was travelling with this woman. We had a fight and I hit her. I went to court for assault.

Impact on relationships with medical professionals

151. I've been totally and utterly judged and treated differently because of my scars and my psychiatric history. This is particularly the case with medical professionals. It doesn't matter what's wrong with me physically, they'll always put it down to mental conditions. Hokianga Health are the worst with this. My doctor there, Clare Ward, didn't like me as a person and as a result, has never taken any interest in me as a patient. I try see the visiting locum doctor instead of her in the hopes that I might actually be taken seriously.
152. At one stage I was in hospital for my stomach ulcers. I get them from stress. A visiting doctor saw me and was asking about the scars on my arms and asked the doctor in front of me if I had some bad burns. The Superintendent of Rawene Hospital in Hokianga said at the top of his voice that it's not burns, it's from self-mutilation. Numerous people heard him and I felt humiliated and extremely angry. That information should have been confidential. The next time I saw Claire Ward I told her what happened and that I wasn't impressed with it. Her explanation was that he just wanted to show off his historical knowledge of my case. Nothing more was done.

153. Patient confidentiality doesn't extend to ex-psychiatric patients. That attitude is what I've lived with my whole life. I can't have any opinion that's different to the mainstream opinion because I have 'issues.' So it's never seen as a valid opinion.
154. It's not fair that my history of misdiagnosis is still on my medical record and still impacting me in the way that it is. It would be beneficial to have that removed so that I can be treated by medical professionals fairly and not pre-judged.
155. I've always struggled with Counselling. I've been told by many people that I should give it a try, but it was when my kids started asking me to try it that I decided it could be a good idea and got put in touch with a Counsellor through ACC. But from the moment the phone rang, my PTSD kicked in due to being back in touch with the psychiatric system. I could hardly function day-to-day around that time due to my PTSD. As the counsellor wasn't being helpful and it was doing more harm than good, I stopped after four sessions.
156. Recently, my daughters thought it would be a good idea for me to get an emotional help dog. To get this, I needed a referral from a Psychiatrist. I went to see one to get a diagnosis, and after about three hours of questioning, he asked if I ever heard voices and I remembered that I did – and this was mainly in the long-stay ward. But I think, as opposed to psychosis, this was because I felt so lonely in there that I would talk to myself. The Psychiatrist ultimately couldn't find anything wrong with me, apart from my PTSD as a result of my time in psychiatric care.
157. For a long time after leaving Sunnyside and overcoming my addictions, I couldn't take Panadol or other pain relief. I was in fear of that chemical blackness coming over me again. It took me a long time to realise that some pills were okay. This was a really hard fear to overcome.
158. Today, I hardly go near medical professionals.

Employment

159. Since being institutionalised, there has been no chance of me being able to get a proper job again. Throughout the years I've always kept my eye out for jobs and have continuously applied as I have always wanted to be a normal and functioning member of society. Not being able to get a full-time job was very demoralising.

160. I never gave up on trying to get a job. The last one I applied for was in 2020.
161. The lack of finances has been one of the main stresses in my life, to the extent I would get panic attacks at the supermarket when I didn't have enough money to pay for my groceries. This has happened quite a few times.
162. I see being able to have a full-time job as a privilege. What you miss out on by not having one is everything. The benefit is enough to survive on the bare minimum, but nothing more.
163. There's a stigma that attaches to being unemployed that I've had to live with for my whole life.
164. From time to time up north I would chop firewood and sell it to households.

Relationship with marijuana

165. Marijuana is the one drug that I haven't detoxed from. There was an occasion where I tried to stop and went to a medical clinic for assistance. I ended up getting a range of flashbacks, having nightmares and hallucinations. On one occasion, I hallucinated the room being on fire and thought I needed to escape by jumping out of a window. I badly injured my arm doing this. Because of this experience, continuing with the detox didn't feel like an option.

166. Marijuana hugely helps my PTSD.

GRO-C

GRO-C

Conclusion

169. I was a victim from the age of eight and I have paid for it for the rest of my life because the system won't admit that I was misdiagnosed.
170. Society and officials wonder why there's so many people in the public who are anti-society and anti-system, but it's because they made us hate them for treating us like shit for all of those years. They have refused to take responsibility and have given us no help in overcoming the trauma of those experiences.

171. What makes things even harder today is the fact that no one has ever told me "well done". For getting myself up from the gutter and becoming a functioning member of society, raising three beautiful healthy kids. Everyone's always at the ready to condemn and ostracise me for it. But no one acknowledges that this has been a really long and hard struggle for me. It continues to this day, even more so.

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:

18/12/21