

Witness Name: Shannon [GRO-A]

Statement No.: WITN0684001

Exhibit: WITN0684002

Dated: 19 June 2022

ROYAL COMMISSION OF INQUIRY INTO ABUSE IN CARE

WITNESS STATEMENT OF SHANNON [GRO-A]

I, Shannon [GRO-A], will say as follows:

1. Introduction

1.1. My name is Shannon [GRO-A]. I was born in Dunedin in 1984. I still live in Dunedin today.

Early life

1.2. My mum is [GRO-B] and she loves me but couldn't take care of me when I was young.

1.3. I have a younger sister and brother. I don't know who my father is. I had a nice stepdad for a while.

Foster Care

1.4. I went to my first foster home when I was seven. I liked it at first, but she got rough with me and would hurt me.

1.5. I had no proper way of communicating at home - only at school.

1.6. Then bad things happened, which is why I left to go the farm with the [GRO-B]

The Farm

1.7. I loved the farm with the [GRO-B]. My Ma is stoic and stern but loving. My Pa is a big softy. But my sister Leeann did everything a parent would do. She learnt to do facilitated communication and made-up new ways to communicate. She taught me how to be okay with feelings. I loved the other staff too.

- 1.8. We would go on trips and do jobs like feed the animals. I was looked after very well.
- 1.9. No bad stuff happened at the farm.

2. Abuse

Mount Cargill Trust – [GRO-C] House and [GRO-C]

- 2.1. When I was 15 I moved into houses run by Mount Cargill Trust (the Trust). These houses were called [GRO-C] House [GRO-C] and [GRO-C].
- 2.2. I liked it at [GRO-C] House the first time I lived there. I was at high school at the time. I had good staff and I liked most of my flatmates.
- 2.3. I didn't have my own bathroom, but I didn't care about that. The staff took good care of my hygiene.
- 2.4. I could do facilitated communication with some staff and that was really good. Facilitated communication helps me get my words from my mind to my hand, it earths my physical body.
- 2.5. I got my own Lightwriter when I was 15. When I got my own Lightwriter I could finally speak for the first time. I felt free to be me. It was exhilarating to be able to have a voice.
- 2.6. There were lots of teachers at school who could facilitate with me at this time. I did very well at high school. I got sixth in my maths class in the sixth form.
- 2.7. I also really like writing, I'm bloody good. After I left high school I studied creative writing at Massey University.
- 2.8. In third form I wrote something called "life in my own world". It is about how I was feeling at the time, and how far I had come. This piece of writing is annexed as Exhibit A.
- 2.9. Yes, something bad happened while I was at [GRO-C] House. I was assaulted by a flatmate. But I had been taught to scratch and he couldn't hurt me. He got taken away.
- 2.10. Then I moved to [GRO-C]. There were less people in [GRO-C] and I liked it better. I loved the head of the house; she was really good to me. Nothing bad happened.
- 2.11. I then went back to [GRO-C] House. It was not right - I didn't want to go back. I had good staff to start with then they changed. They stopped me from doing facilitated communication and I hated that. I couldn't tell anyone anything.
- 2.12. From 2012 onwards things were not good. I wasn't allowed to see Leeann for a long time, and I wasn't told why. I had people saying rude things about her to me. I couldn't answer back.
- 2.13. I had staff yelling at me and I was put on hard drugs that made me feel dopy and stupid. They didn't ask me whether I wanted to be on those drugs.
- 2.14. Some staff hurt me. I wasn't happy. I got spoken badly to, and sometimes grabbed by my shoulders and arms. They would swear at me and treat me like a moron. This made me feel shit.

- 2.15. I was not allowed to go out and do things. I wasn't able to be free.
- 2.16. My Lightwriter went missing around 2008, but I could still communicate through a facilitation board.
- 2.17. However, I had my facilitation board taken off me in 2012 by the management of the Trust. It made me feel really bad - I hated it. They took my voice away from me.
- 2.18. Some able-bodied people had decided they didn't believe in facilitated communication, despite the fact dozens of people had facilitated with me over the years. So all my communication was suddenly gone. I didn't have a say in any of it.
- 2.19. The staff replaced the facilitation board with laminated sheets of paper that said "Yes" and "No". That was all I had. It made me feel like shit to be treated like that. Why should able-bodied people be able to control me like that? I'd love to tape their mouth up to see how they like it.

Leeann's House

- 2.20. Then Leeann got me out of the Trust. It was the best move ever. I was so happy to live with Leeann. I got to be myself. She did everything for me.
- 2.21. I got a new Lightwriter and started doing stuff I liked. I was able to go out with my hand-picked support staff. I got to have things in the house that I liked. I was happy. I learnt how to do new things and I got to go on holiday twice with my support staff.
- 2.22. Leeann could get tired that I didn't like and sometimes we fought, but only occasionally.
- 2.23. I was a bit scared to leave and move into my own home, but Leeann made me feel strong.

My first house

- 2.24. I now live in my own house. I love it. I love being independent – I feel in control of my life. I love making my choices for myself. But I want to make more.
- 2.25. I still don't control my own money, but I don't mind that too much. It's easier for other people to do that.
- 2.26. I like watching television and reading. I like all sorts of stuff. I really love Jane Austin novels.
- 2.27. I like music too. I have a wonderful singing teacher. She is my rhythmic soul beat who I create tunes with. We create tunes on my keyboard.
- 2.28. I also volunteer at the Fringe Festival in Dunedin. I deliver pamphlets and posters, and I do a great job. It's my favourite thing. I even got a shout out on the Volunteer Otago Facebook page for my volunteering.
- 2.29. I struggle because my support staff can't do facilitated communication and need Leeann to help me tell them what the problem is. But it's still better than living in a home. My current carer [GRO-C] is trying to learn facilitated communication, but it's not going too well.
- 2.30. I recently got a new Lightwriter. A new Lightwriter costs \$7,500 and I had lots of trouble getting the funding for a new one. There is also no funding for specialised computer equipment, which I need so I can start writing again.

3. Looking forward

- 3.1. It's not right for able bodied people to dictate the lives of people with disabilities. I want to be able to live just like everyone else.
- 3.2. People need to stop treating us like idiots and society needs to respect that different ways of being are equal to able-bodied ways. Our homes and lives need to be designed around and for us, because why should we have to fit into able-bodied boxes? Everyone has the right to be different.
- 3.3. The government should stop making the rules fit their ableist thinking, and they should let people with disabilities design our own lives. They should work with abled-bodied communities to change their thinking of us, and help them realise their ways aren't always best.
- 3.4. Leeann has given me the best life I've had yet, but it's not everything that I should rightfully have.
- 3.5. I should have a community that fully accepts me, computers I can use, a job that's paid, lots of able-bodied friends who aren't paid, and my own home designed for my individual needs.
- 3.6. I want to tell the commissioners that living with Autism is great, and I wouldn't change a thing. We are just people who see the world through a different lens. That lens isn't wrong, and we aren't less.

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.

GRO-C

Signed _____

Dated: 19 June 2022