

Yoorrook Justice Commission**BALERT KEETYARRA OF UNCLE JACK CHARLES****Introduction**

- 1 My full name is Jack Charles. I was born on 6 September 1943.
- 2 I currently live in Northcote.
- 3 I am an Aboriginal man, with connections to several Victorian nations, including Taungurung, Boon Wurrung, Dja Dja Wurrung, Woiwurrung and Yorta Yorta. I also have connections to the Wiradjuri nation in New South Wales, and Tasmanian ancestry, from the Palawa people.
- 4 I have worked with Counsel and Solicitors Assisting to prepare this *Balert Keetyarra* (witness statement) ahead of the Elders' Truth-Telling *Wurrek Tyerrang* (hearings) for the Yoorrook Justice Commission (**Yoorrook**). It covers the following aspects of my life:
 - (a) my experiences as a member of the Stolen Generations, having been removed from my mother when I was about 4 months old;
 - (b) my experiences as a ward of the State in homes and foster care, including a lack of care and love, and physical, emotional and sexual abuse;
 - (c) my eventual reunion with my mother in my late teens;
 - (d) meeting some of my siblings in childhood and adulthood, my difficulties connecting with them, and their own struggles, particularly in the case of my brother Archie;
 - (e) my drug addiction developed in my early adulthood;
 - (f) my criminal record, from burglaries (or "burgs") to fund my addiction, leading to long stretches of time in prison;
 - (g) the programs in prison which put me on a different path, and inspired me to connect with my Aboriginal identity and contribute to community;
 - (h) my successful acting career, spanning theatre, film and TV; and

- (i) recent discoveries about by ancestry and identity, from my participation in a TV program *Who Do You Think You Are?*
- 5 I have previously contributed to a number of books, documentaries and films about my life, including:
- (a) ***Who Do You Think You Are? Jack Charles (2021)***¹: In 2021, I appeared in an episode of the SBS television program *Who Do You Think You Are?* In this episode, I traced my family history back across two centuries and learnt more about the history of my ancestors, including aspects of my heritage and identity that I had not known about as a member of the Stolen Generations.
- (b) ***Born-Again Blakfella (2019)***²: *Born-Again Blakfella*, which was published in August 2019, is a memoir about my life. It recounts my experiences throughout my life as an actor, burglar, musician, addict, activist and Aboriginal Elder.
- (c) ***Bastardy (2008)***³: *Bastardy*, which was released in 2008, is a documentary film that followed my life for a period of six years during a period where I juggled acting work with homelessness, addiction and burglary.
- 6 I have also previously given a witness statement concerning my experiences of abuse at the Box Hill Boys' Home:
- (a) ***Witness Statement for Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (RCIRCSA Statement)*** (2015): In September 2015, I prepared a witness statement, which related to 'Case Study 33: *The Salvation Army (Southern Territory)*'. The statement describes my experiences of physical and sexual abuse while I was a ward of the State at the Box Hill Boys' Home, and the ongoing and significant impact of these experiences on my life.
- 7 This *Balert Keetyarra* at times refers to, and is supported by, these key information sources. I would like Yoorrook to consider these additional materials.
- 8 During the course of preparing this *Balert Keetyarra*, some questions have arisen, which I understand will be the subject of requests for documents (including Notice(s) to Produce). Given both these the breadth of the matters in this *Balert Keetyarra*, and the

¹ SBS Television, *Who Do You Think You Are?* Season 12, Episode 5.

See: <https://www.sbs.com.au/ondemand/program/who-do-you-think-you-are>

² J. Charles with N. Benson (2019) *Born-Again Blakfella*, Penguin Australia Pty Ltd.

See: <https://www.penguin.com.au/books/jack-charles-9781760899158>

³ A. Courtin-Wilson and P Campey (2008).

See: <https://www.screenaustralia.gov.au/the-screen-guide/t/bastardy-2009/20129/>

possibility of further documents becoming available, I have been advised by the Solicitor Assisting team that:

- (a) additional documentation relevant to this *Balert Keetyarra* may be tendered in future; and
- (b) it is possible that I will be recalled at a later *Wurrek Tyerrang*.

Stolen Child

9 I was four months old when I was **snatched** from my mother, Blanchie Charles, and placed into City Mission Home for Babies in Brunswick. My mother was 15 years old at the time that I was taken, and I believe at that time, she was herself a ward of the State.⁴

10 From that time, I was a ward of the State.

11 I understand that I am the eldest of eleven children taken from my mother. The siblings I know of are:

- (a) Esme Charles;
- (b) Eva Jo Charles;
- (c) Zenip Charles; and
- (d) Arthur (Artie / Archie) Charles.

12 I understand that another two children died at birth.⁵ To this day, I don't know what happened to six of my siblings.⁶

13 I was taken from my Mum and placed in a series of homes to be raised as a white person. Nobody ever taught me love. I was never raised in a loving situation, never held. I can't remember ever being held as a child, as a baby.⁷

14 I was not told anything about Aboriginal people, our languages or our culture. I knew I looked different, but didn't understand the differences in culture at all.

15 I experienced the policies of child removal as a divide-and-conquer method of destroying my sense of identity and self-esteem. Ignorance, misdirection and miseducation were central to keeping me from knowing who I was.⁸

⁴ *Born-Again Blakfella* pdf 17; RCIRCSA Statement, [6].

⁵ *Who Do You Think You Are?* 31:53 – 32; *Born-Again Blakfella* pdf 53.

⁶ *Born-Again Blakfella* pdf 53.

⁷ *Bastardy* (2009), 46:13.

⁸ *Born-Again Blakfella*, pp. 218-220.

Institutional abuse

- 16 In my early years, I lived:⁹
- (a) in City Mission Home for babies in Brunswick until the age of 2;
 - (b) at the Salvation Army Boys' Home, Box Hill from the age of 2 to 4;
 - (c) in Cardinia Children's Home in Geelong for approximately 14 months;
 - (d) again at the Salvation Army Boys' Home from the age of 5 to 13; and
 - (e) from the age of 14, at foster home, with a family called the Murphys.
- 17 For most of my time at the Box Hill Boys' Home, until the very last months, I was the only Aboriginal child. Seeing photos of myself there, different homes would have the group home shot, there I was, deadset in the middle. I must have been a novelty, being the only black fella there.
- 18 There's photographs of me that we have pulled from the Salvo archives of a group of us at Mt Donna Buang or something. There's us, the Box Hill Boys' Home boys, on an excursion, and there's a clump of snow on my head. Is that a metaphor for the life I experienced growing up? The world I inhabited is snow field white.
- 19 I was a person of interest with the Salvation Army people. They could make use of me being their favourite little Aboriginal boy.
- 20 I was given elocution lessons in the Box Hill Boys' Home by a teacher who took me in tow. Basically at the state school based in the home, SS4151, I was the cleaner there and I was sent out often to the garden to grow chrysanthemums and enter them into the annual Box Hill Horticulture Society. I did get a semblance of education. I was looked after by this one teacher there who taught me elocution, taught me the monetary system, so I left the home knowing the monetary system pretty well, and a very well-spoken boy. The teacher who gave me elocution lessons, he was fond of me, in the right way. And the headmaster was also fond of me.
- 21 Anyway, the teacher who gave me elocution lessons, he died. And a group of us at the home were allowed to go to the Box Hill for the cemetery and et cetera. And because I cried at the funeral, the older boys when I got back to the home bashed me, pretty hard too. So I remember that, that was traumatic. Because, you know, he was a

⁹ RCIRCSA Statement, [6]-[8]; *Born-Again Blakfella*, pdf 27 - 28.

wonderful fella and because I cried at his funeral; I got bashed. I didn't cry at funerals after that.

22 Whilst at the Box Hill Boys' Home, I suffered neglect, physical and sexual abuse from both the staff and other boys, who were repeating what was being done to them.¹⁰

23 For decades after I left the home, I carried my silence and shame of those years, conveniently blocking out names and incidents. My defence mechanism was to pretend it never happened. I didn't dwell on what I'd endured there or what I'd do if I saw any of my abusers again. I never got counselling. I counselled myself through those terrible times.¹¹

24 From my experiences, I was immune to being sensitive, and had difficulties connecting intimately with others, including in romantic relationships.¹² It wasn't just the abuse that traumatised me, the Box Hill Boys' Home stripped me of my Aboriginality. It's hard to convey the damage that place did to me.

25 That silencing of my pain and anguish led to a heroin addiction, which took over much of my adult life. It numbed the deep pain. But in the end, it couldn't numb all the pain, and in truth on more than one occasion I attempted suicide, but failed each time.¹³

26 The abuse also had a significant impact on my sexual identity. I grew up thinking that sexual abuse was normal. I didn't understand the difference between consensual and non-consensual sex as all I had experienced at Box Hill was forced sexual interaction.¹⁴

Early encounters with my siblings

27 A month or two before I was leaving Box Hill, there were a bunch of Aboriginal kids coming through. I wasn't allowed to, but I snuck around and spoke to them. One young lad said, "*my name's Charles*". I remember saying "*it would be funny if we were brothers mate*", but the sister wasn't allowed to tell us. The Salvos wasn't allowed to tell us what I later found out, that this young fella Arthur Charles was indeed my brother.

28 I used sing at old people's homes with a Methodist church group. Irony of ironies, we went up to Nunawading to entertain the girls at Winlaton Girls Home. Amongst all those little girls there were these two small waiflike Aboriginal children. And of course I

¹⁰ See RCIRCSA Statement.

¹¹ *Born-Again Blakfella*, pdf 26.

¹² See *Bastardy* (2009), 46:13 – 50:47.

¹³ *Born-Again Blakfella*, pp. 218-220.

¹⁴ RCIRCSA Statement, [40] – [41].

just had to go up to ask them their names. The elder of the two shyly responded “*I’m Esmee and this is my sister Eva-Joe*”. I said, “*What are your last names ladies?*” And she said “*Charles*”. I said “*well I’m a Charles too, and wouldn’t it be funny if we were brothers and sisters?*”

29 And of course, I later found out that we were.

Adolescence and early adulthood

30 From the age of 14, I lived with the Murphy family as a foster child. This was after Mrs Murphy wrote to the Aborigines Welfare Board asking to take me on permanently.¹⁵

31 I felt like a ‘tolerated outsider’. Despite this, I called Mrs Murphy ‘Mum’.

32 I kept trying to ask Mrs Murphy questions about my background. I recall one particular moment, which happened about nine months after I’d started living with her. It took all my courage to raise this with Mum – she was so set in her ways. I said to her: ‘*There was a young fella that came to Box Hill just before I left, Mum. His name was Archie and he had the same last name, Charles. I reckon he could be my brother.*’ She responded with, ‘*No, he couldn’t be. No, no, Jack. All those kids are orphans too.*’ I didn’t argue the point but her dismissiveness stung my soul. I knew she was wrong.

33 From the time I moved in, I was working in a glass bevelling apprenticeship arranged by the Aborigines Welfare Board. I paid ‘full board,’ or 80% of my wages to Mrs Murphy.

34 My workmates encouraged me to connect with my Aboriginality. Just shy of my seventeenth birthday and only six months off completing my apprenticeship, I jumped on a tram to Fitzroy. I hadn’t thought of asking permission from Mrs Murphy.¹⁶

35 After I jumped off the tram, I stood on the corner of Napier and Gertrude streets, trying to get my bearings about where to go. Within minutes, an old blackfella approached me and grabbed my arm. “*You’re Blanchie Charles’s boy!*” he shouted. It was the first time I’d heard this name. Blanchie Charles. My real mum’s name.¹⁷

36 The man gestured for me to follow him into the Royal Hotel. Walking into that building absolutely blew my mind. Nearly every face in the place was black. I couldn’t believe it! For my entire life, I’d been the only noticeably black person in any space and yet here I

¹⁵ *Born-again Blakfella*, pdf 29.

¹⁶ *Born-again Blakfella*, pdf 34.

¹⁷ *Born-again Blakfella*, pdf 35.

was, in a sea of blackfellas. I couldn't believe this was Melbourne – I'd never experienced a Melbourne that looked like this.¹⁸

37 As people began to notice my presence, they started rushing up to introduce themselves, all smiles, telling me we were family and explaining how we were related. I got hugs, friendly slaps on the back and offers of beer (which I politely declined). I was engulfed by overwhelming feelings of shock and delight. It was like a piece had clicked into the jigsaw. People knew that I was a Charles. They knew my mother, Blanchie.¹⁹

38 I ripped open my pay packet, which I'd never done before. Mrs Murphy was always the one to open the envelope and dole out my share. I shouted a few beers and happily settled down with a lemon squash as I continued chatting, connecting and learning more about my culture, my family, these people.²⁰

39 One old woman revealed that my mum was still alive. *"She's up in Swan Hill, little fella. You have to go and see her. Oh, I'm gonna tell her about you, the first chance I get."*²¹

40 So it was with great joy that I arrived home at Mrs Murphy's. I saw the lights on as I approached the house and was happy that Mrs Murphy was still up. I bounced through the door and my first words were: *"Mum. I've just found Mum!"*²²

41 Her reaction was not what I expected. She stood cold and distant. She dismissed me and reiterated what she'd always told me, that I was an orphan. My confusion turned to rage. We were soon embroiled in a furious argument. When she said, *"Those people will tell you anything"* I saw red. *"Well, I believe them!"* I shot back and raised my arms in emphasis. *"Get to bed!"* she hissed.²³

42 I headed to my room. I took off my work clothes and had just finished putting on my pyjamas when 'Mum' called my name. I came out and saw her standing at the front door. She motioned to me, telling me I had to go outside. Puzzled, I went out the door. It was the police. Mrs Murphy didn't say a word. Two policemen escorted me to the divvy wagon. They told me to jump in. I didn't understand why they'd been called, or what I had done wrong, but I was in too much shock to speak.²⁴

43 We drove for what felt like an eternity. I had no idea where they were taking me. Eventually we stopped. The door opened and I was told to step out. We were at a

¹⁸ *Born-again Blakfella*, pdf 35.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Born-again Blakfella*, pdf 36.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

place called Turana, a youth detention centre in Parkville. It was the place that marked the beginning of my criminalisation.²⁵ I was locked alone in my cell, and cried myself to sleep that night.

- 44 My boss at the glass bevelling factory on Riversdale Road in Hawthorn, Alf Clark, bailed me out because I was his best Aboriginal worker. He called Mum when I didn't come to work, and she would have told him that she didn't want a bar of me.

Further attempts at connection with community

- 45 At that point I became independent from the Murphys.
- 46 But I still had a yearning for family so I decided to return to the mob in Fitzroy and Collingwood. I felt a distance between us. That distance was magnified by my paranoia – I was very aware all of a sudden that I had been raised away from my family, essentially had been raised up 'white'. Many of the older mob I met had been brought up by mothers, fathers, uncles, aunties, cousins, and so on. Somehow or other, they had the right names or the right words to attach to themselves.

Reconnection with my mother

- 47 My workmates at my apprenticeship pointed out that I could write the letter to my mother and address it care of the Swan Hill police. So I did. The sergeant wrote back saying, "*It would be good to see you. I know your mum well.*"²⁶ I made plans to venture up to meet Mum. Apparently she lived between Moulamein and Swan Hill, about forty kilometres out. Her humpy was on the banks of the Edwards River.
- 48 I told my boss "*Alf I'm going up to meet my mum, I'll be in Swan Hill over the Christmas holidays*". Alf said "*You bloody prodigal, I'll fly you up Jack*".
- 49 The sergeant said he would meet me at the airport to take me to Mum. He suggested I bring a gift. "*Look, Jack,*" he said, "*you're playing the prodigal son.*" He used that same phrase. "*You'll get a better reception from your mum if you take her a carton of Melbourne Bitter. She likes a drink.*"²⁷
- 50 Once the details of my visit were locked in, I wrote a letter directly to Mum, care of the sergeant. I didn't quite know how to form the words. I decided to keep the letter simple: "*I am Jack Charles. I believe I am your son. I'm flying up around Christmas time.*"

²⁵ *Born-again Blakfella*, pdf 37.

²⁶ *Born-again Blakfella*, pp 49-50.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

*Apparently the sergeant in Swan Hill is going to pick me up, Mum. He will arrange to have me delivered to your place".*²⁸

51 I stayed with Mum for three weeks. We didn't exactly bond. I believe this is because all of her 11 children were removed.²⁹ All of us were taken, and I think, what a hard life my mum must have had.³⁰

52 When I was there, I plucked up the courage to ask about siblings. I asked her, "*is there an Arthur?*" and she said "*Artie, your brother's name is Artie. Named after Artie Smith, living in Moe.*" I said "*okay, is there an Esme and Eva-Jo?*" she said "*yes, but you have a third sister, Zenip, you look out for them*". I had seen them, I told her I had met them. She said, "*you look after them*".³¹

53 I wasn't told anything else about her life and was not told who my father was. I do not know the reasons she became a ward of the State.

54 I discovered that she liked to be alone. She didn't want anything to do with the other blacks in the black fella camp behind the Federal Hotel. In that camp, the houses there looked like the wooden huts from the slave era that I've read in books in America, carbon copies of the same kind of huts. I was a little bit frightened to venture into that area.

55 We lived a wonderful life, I thought it was great. There were five surrounding farms, looked after by old Clary Pike and mum, mostly Clary. We had two Ford Prefect utilities, so I was able to learn to drive. We would go to various properties nearby to help contain the rabbit population down. Clary and mum were making good money from that. I liked rabbit, and wild duck for breakfast and all that, and we were on the river. It was a good life.

56 I found out later that Mum had been ostracised by community because of her role in a killing, involving a prominent Aboriginal family in NSW. It had isolated her, and the memory of the events seemed to still haunt her.³²

57 I was a gay, black, young man in the outback, out of place in Swan Hill. Trying to impress and be part of this community. But the community was soaked in alcohol, and I wasn't happy with it. That's why I went.

²⁸ *Born-again Blakfella*, pp 49-50.

²⁹ *Born-again Blakfella*, 52.

³⁰ *Who Do You Think You Are?* 31:53 – 32.

³¹ *Born-again Blakfella*, p 43.

³² *Born-again Blakfella*, p 52.

58 I went into Swan Hill and sent a telegram to Alf my boss and said, "*I'm not coming back*".

59 After about 6 months working jackaroo-ing on a property between Finley and Tocumwal, I went back to Melbourne. and was working in a hostel and that's where I was discovered, a bit after that. The hostel was by the new theatre, and I got into theatre that way.

Drug addiction, homelessness, criminal justice and incarceration

Drug addiction

60 In my late teens I dabbled in alcohol, marijuana, recreational drugs before moving onto heroin in 1973.³³

61 Heroin helped with my 'heavy heart'.³⁴ It became what I lived for. I could have a whack and put my pain on the back burner.

62 I often dreamt about the pain my mother endured losing all 13 of her children. I would deal with this by having a whack. I do rue the day, however, that I did start.³⁵

Crime

63 I began burgling people in Toorak, Kew, South Yarra and Camberwell in my teens.³⁶

64 When I started robbing people, I classified it as 'collecting the rent'. I justified my actions as a hunter gatherer, going onto prime Aboriginal land – my mother's lands, to collect what was due.³⁷ I couldn't take it [that rationale] to the judge, he'd give me another 5 years to wake up to myself.

65 The police love me here in Victoria. I always cleaned their books up for them. They took me for long rides and I pointed out the houses I had robbed. I was given fair treatment for having done so. They took me for my word and believed me. I was upfront about those things.

66 I was, however, mistreated by the police on several occasions.

67 I had a .38 shoved in my mouth in Prahran lock up one time. I told the bullshitter to pull the trigger. He nearly pulled it, and yanked the pistol out. The sight at the end of the

³³ *Born-Again Blakfella*, 'Prologue'.

³⁴ *Bastardy* (2009): 13:16.

³⁵ *Bastardy* (2009): 4:04 – 5:40.

³⁶ *Born-Again Blakfella*, pdf 62.

³⁷ *Bastardy* (2009): 25:40 – 27:20; *Born-Again Blakfella*, pp. 48.

barrel there knocked a chip out of one of my beautiful buck teeth. He wanted to shut me up, I was having a go at him.

68 Another time, I was taken by some detectives up into the hills where I was told I was going to be murdered. They wanted to get information out of me. I was living with a gangster at the time in Camberwell. I thought it was gonna be the end of me. But no, no, they had to drive me back down.

69 Special treatment for Aboriginal people was par for the course. Blackfellas were an object to be used to blood the young cadets.

Incarceration

70 I was always glad when I did get busted as I would get a break from it all in prison, a rest from the burgs. I would adjust to prison life.

71 I celebrated my 20th, 30th, 40th and 50th birthdays behind bars³⁸. The last time I was imprisoned, it was my twenty-second time.³⁹

72 When I first went into Pentridge, everyone knew me, most of the rising talent in the gangsterdom were ex-boys home old boys – Burwood, Bayswater, Box Hill et cetera. We all met, many of us, many of us were the Stolen Generations. We gave each other a measure of protection.

73 I never had any troubles about my elocution. I suspected everybody knew that I was gay, that I was a poof, going into Pentridge. So, I was afforded that respect. Many of these gangsters, Chopper Read type people, would ask me to write their letters for them. In the morning in the D Division wing after brekky, they would give me a choccy bar, but nobody ever came at me wanting to have their way with me in all the years that I have done in all the jails that I have done time in.

74 In the old days you'd be asked by the classification governors, '*Jack, you're doing 5 years this time, you've done Castlemaine and Bendigo, would you like Beechworth?*' They gave you a choice. I did all three jails in Dja Dja Wurrung Country and I really enjoyed my time there in those jails because I got educated and I learned the fine art of ceramics there in that jail and I became a leading light. I taught people how to throw pots on a wheel, I taught them how to control and contain themselves in that environment.

³⁸ *Bastardy* (2009): 1:13.

³⁹ *Born-Again Blakfella*, chapter 12; *Bastardy* (2009): 1:01:36 – 1:02:50, 1:08 – 1:11.

75 In the open camp Wron Wron in Gippsland had my pottery shop open 7 days a week from 8am – 8pm, that’s how well I had the Governor wrapped around my little finger. Because we made a profit, and it went back to the prison, not only to the education department but for new gear for the footy club or the cricketing club in Wron Wron jail. I called it “Psycho-ceramica”, because you had to be a crackpot to be in there in the first place.

Homelessness

76 I lived in a state of homelessness throughout the majority of my life.

77 In *Bastardy*, I describe some of the places I used to sleep when living on the streets.⁴⁰ That documentary also showed the time that the Aboriginal Health Service assisted me to find my first unit. They said “*we’re sick and tired of you being homeless, we’re going to give you a unit*”. I was so lucky to get this unit; it was the first winter I’d spent under cover. I was about 60 years old at this time.⁴¹

78 Once I was embedded there, I only ever did one more robbery. And that’s the one you see in *Bastardy*, the doco. The idea of putting that all down on a big screen for the world to see, doesn’t embarrass me, it’s no shame job, because my life, as I see it, is a variation on so many other lives, they don’t have the opportunity like I have through *Bastardy*, through *Jack Charles Vs The Crown*, through *Who Do You Think You Are?* to be given the full scope of that which had been lost, denied and hidden from me.

79 It took about 6 years off and on filming *Bastardy*, I outed myself in so many ways that I hadn’t really intended to, but it all went well because other people seeing that, black and white, seeing that documentary enabled them in their own right to take stock of their situation, and to move themselves out of that particular rut that they saw me in at the time.

Racism and segregation

80 There were many occasions in my life where I have been faced with discriminatory behaviour on the basis of my race.

81 At 18 years of age, I wasn’t allowed to swim in the Swan Hill City Baths. I was knocked back from going in there. I was so shocked. I was in the queue for some time. This big bloke behind me with his kids picked me up and set me aside so he could gain entry

⁴⁰ *Bastardy* (2009): 7:00 – 9:25.

⁴¹ *Bastardy* (2009): 51:30 – 52:10.

with his kids into the Baths. I was shell shocked. I was told that I had to swim in the Murray.

82 The night after I was awarded Senior Victorian Australian of the Year, a taxi driver insisted that I pay, or that my manager pay, in advance of accepting my fare as “*he may not pay.*”⁴² I had been on such a high from the thrill of the event. But the racial vilification from the taxi driver and humiliation ruined my night and undermined that experience.

83 Taxi drivers either refusing to pick me up, or demanding payment in advance, has happened many times and each incident is like a pinch on my soul, my humanity. It knocks me around that for all of my accolades, both on and off the stage, I am still regularly refused a ride.⁴³

Identity and reconnecting

84 I never knew who my father was for my whole life, until I recently appeared on the SBS television program *Who Do You Think You Are?* During the filming of that program I learnt my father’s true identity through DNA testing. I was told that he was Hilton Hamilton Walsh, an Aboriginal man of the Walsh family. There are a number of Walshes that live in Melbourne that I have come to know over the years, but I had no idea that we were related.

85 When I was told Hilton Walsh was my father, it came out of the blue and hit me like a ton of bricks, it floored me.⁴⁴ Through that show, I met a younger brother, Grady Walsh. I hadn’t really expected that I’d find my father, let alone having any living siblings.

86 I understand that I have another 13 siblings through my father, but all are deceased except Grady.

87 It’s great to have all these different elements of your heritage being given on to you. However, the process was also confronting and overwhelming. I have a profound sense of pissed-offedness about what’s gone by and what’s not been allowed until my latter years in life. It took a lot of time and many resources to find out my identity as a member of the Stolen Generations. If I had not had such a high profile, I would never have received this information.

⁴² *Born-Again Blakfella* 200-204.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Who Do You Think You Are?* 13:10 – 16:50.

- 88 It's tough being denied the rightful inheritance of who I really am – my identity. At times it's traumatic, because I'm almost at the end of the journey and I'm still discovering my story.⁴⁵
- 89 Through *Who Do You Think You Are?* I also learned that my Great Grandmother 'Granny Annie' experienced difficult times at Coranderrk, including at times a reduction of rations, watering down of medicine.
- 90 The records also captured Granny Annie's resilience – she rebelled against the Government and successfully fought for Coranderrk to become a permanent reserve where Aboriginal people could work the land as they saw fit, and in doing so was 1 of 4 Aboriginal women who gave evidence at the Government Inquiry about the poor living conditions.⁴⁶
- 91 Through *Who Do You Think You Are?*, I also learnt that my maternal ancestry traces back to Tasmania, and that my four times Great Grandmother was Woretemoeteyenner and five times great grandfather was Mannalargenna, a senior and important man of the Plangermaireener people.
- 92 The story of Woretemoeteyenner and Mannalargenna is told through this program, including that they were taken from their country and moved to a reservation on Flinders Island, with Mannalargenna dying seven weeks after moving to Flinders Island.⁴⁷
- 93 I found it so amazing to learn how far back my people did go. My story was lost, but slowly it has been found again, and I was proud to learn I came from so many resilient people.
- 94 My people the Palawa, my great-great-great-great-greats, were set upon. I heard some horrible stories down there, it was the men that were telling me the hard truths. The women were floating over the more difficult subjects, like when Woretemoeteyenner was latched onto by George Briggs, part of the sealers mob, they grabbed onto the women, they realised that as the rest of the country was going through killing everyone else, these sealers realised that this was women's business killing the seals, not men's. So they had a woman and a killer of seals. So George Briggs latched onto Woretemoeteyenner, and they had kids.

⁴⁵ *Born-Again Blakfella* pp. 218-220.

⁴⁶ *Who Do You Think You Are?* 19:00 – 27:33.

⁴⁷ *Who Do You Think You Are?* 52:58 – 57:10.

- 95 When they decimated the population of the seals and walrus around Tassie, some of them went over to New Zealand and some went to Albany. And my great-great-grandmother was placed on an island off Albany and left there because George Briggs was asked to come back to chart the entire coast of Tasmania for the government and then after that he was asked to go back and build more ships, probably to bring more convicts back to Tasmania.
- 96 Thereafter, George Augustus Robinson was a renowned person working with the Palawa people. I've worked it out that this man had been charged with the responsibility of developing a final solution for the Aboriginal problem in Tasmania. A final solution. So he conned my great (times five) grandfather, they were on good terms apparently to get his people to board a ship to take them over the Flinders Island and some over to Lady Cape Barron Island, and it was designed as a death camp. Very few people were allowed to leave. You see me reading a letter in that episode of *Who Do You Think You Are*, written by Dalrymple, one of Woretemoetyenner's daughters, asking the authorities to allow her mum to come back to her to live in Tasmania, which the authorities did. A few people were allowed to leave the island, only on those kind of written requests from their daughters and their sons.
- 97 I was fully involved in learning to understand what terrible times our great-great-great-great-greats had. The suffering that was brought upon them. Especially the women. The men were telling me that it was the women who suffered the most. They were tortured before they were killed. There were bonfires of black bodies. How could you bleed this onto any Tasmanian state school's curriculum? This is something that is within my responsibility as an elder statesperson, as a man of conscience to try and impress the Minister for Education and the Premier of Tasmania and here in Victoria, let's bleed truth in history into our school curriculum.
- 98 Alan Tudge, some time ago when he was the Federal Minister for Education had loudly scoffed at the idea, that we cannot bleed what really happened here in Australia onto our school's curriculums, "*Australian children might not like Australia*". Those were his words.
- 99 I can understand why truth in history has never been done here. We have an attempt with this truth telling commission in allaying that problem. We are setting the bar here.
- 100 But you can sense that I am really upset and learning this new information about who exactly I am. It has been strengthening, these tidbits of information I'm getting from people emailing me saying they're related to the great Mannalargenna, they're related to Dalrymple from Perth et cetera. There are so many people reaching out to me via

email telling me of their connection with my family because they saw me on TV. I'm a known article so people feel obliged to contact me and tell me of their connections as family. It's great.

Adult relationships with siblings

101 The Koorie Heritage Trust gave me some documents in around 2008, after *Bastardy*, which confirmed that Esme, Eva Jo, Zenip and Archie were my siblings. How we sought to reconnect later in life. We tried our darndest to bond beyond all the years we had lost.⁴⁸

102 I recall also seeing some documents about my six missing Charles siblings, their names.

Archie

103 Archie, like me, came to be addicted to drugs.⁴⁹ Archie, like me, ended up in prison for stealing.

104 Archie had a much more difficult time in prison due to his lack of understanding of unspoken rules. If you looked at a prison officer, for example, you were immediately bashed against a bluestone wall. Archie, through no fault of his own, struggled to understand these rules.⁵⁰

105 At some point, Archie was moved from an ordinary prison to a prison for the criminally insane. He was taken to the Aradale institution for the criminally insane. I've since spoken to a couple of guys who were up there with him, and they told me they saw my brother being raped and overloaded with psych drugs.⁵¹

106 Seeing him really shocked me when he came out, because physically he'd changed so much. He was limping, he had a hunched back, and his arm was often stretched up and curled over his head. Someone said it was a sign of Archie protecting himself from the bashings, but I knew it was more than that, likely an overload of the psych drugs they'd given him.

⁴⁸ *Born-again Blakfella*, p. 142.

⁴⁹ *Born-again Blakfella*: Chapter 10 'Archie'.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

- 107 I tried to go to the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal to seek a proper care package for Archie. However, it was too difficult to get records from any of the prisons he had been in, Pentridge, Aradale, H Division. The records could not be found.⁵²
- 108 I wish I had been in a position to do more for Archie, although I was battling with my own issues.
- 109 Before he died, he was deaf in one ear, blind in one eye, he had AIDS, he had tuberculosis, his arse didn't work, he had kidney problems, and his heart was not functioning at all well.
- 110 The system didn't seem to be capable of dealing with Archie's high-level needs, on account of his mental difficulties.
- 111 I was suggesting that maybe he should be put in a special unit down in Royal Melbourne Hospital, down there, and given heroin. Then he could be stable enough for them to work on his other problems, his medical problems. But no, I couldn't be heard, I couldn't be the one to give them sage advice, because I was fucked up myself.

Film and theatre

- 112 I started a career in acting in 1964 at age 19.⁵³ In a way it saved me; I think I owe my life to having found the theatre.⁵⁴
- 113 It was through theatre that I began to understand and connect with my Aboriginality. My life in the arts, including film and theatre, stirred my awareness of Indigeneity, and my understanding of the truth of Australia's treatment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.⁵⁵
- 114 In 1971, in conjunction with Bob Maza, I co-founded Aboriginal theatre company Nindethana. Theatre gave us a platform to reclaim ownership over our hidden and stolen stories.⁵⁶
- 115 I have performed in a number of productions, movies and series, including: *The Blood Knot*, *Jack Charles Is Up and Fighting*, *Brumby Innes*, *Bastardy*, *Ben Hall*, *Carriage*, *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith*, *No Sugar*, *Pan* and *Jack Charles v The Crown*.⁵⁷

⁵² *Born-again Blakfella*: Chapter 10 'Archie', pdf 98.

⁵³ *Bastardy* (2009): 10:00 – 12:15.

⁵⁴ RCIRCSA Statement, [46].

⁵⁵ *Born-Again Blakfella*, Chapter 9.

⁵⁶ *Born-Again Blakfella* pp. 107-108, 122-137, 175; *Bastardy* (2009): 9:58 – 12:04.

⁵⁷ *Born-Again Blakfella* pp.107-108, 122-137, 175.

- 116 The Pentridge people allowed me to leave the jail to go and see the premiere of *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith*. They shouldn't have released me, I was sentenced to two years. They said "go to the premiere, it's your night".
- 117 *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith* was one of the best films I ever did. I felt I did well for myself as the character, Harry Edwards the murderer who gets raped and hung by Ray Barrett the copper.
- 118 My other achievements in the arts and public life include:⁵⁸
- (a) I was photographed as part of Rod McNicol's series called 'A Portrait Revisited' which won the 2012 National Photographic Portrait Prize and was acquired by the National Portrait Gallery;
 - (b) I appeared in Ahn Do's TV program Brush with Fame in 2017, with the painting winning the People's Choice Award at the Archibald Prize; and
 - (c) I was named Senior Victorian of the Year in 2016 for my community work as an Elder and actor.

Community work and priorities for the future

- 119 Prisons need to support Elders coming in and talking, having these roundtable conversations. As a prisoner, you need to understand that this place is a safe environment for you to talk about what you've witnessed with your own family. It's no shame job to admit down the track, once you're comfortable with this process, that you were one of the bashers. You're on a road, it's difficult to even step onto that particular road, but you wanna change it, you want to walk forward.
- 120 Another thing we need to re-introduce is the gold shield to go into any police station - it used to happen in the 70s, people from the Aboriginal Health Service were given gold shields, they could go into any police station to keep a black watch.
- 121 If we had community hubs, we'd entice the police to bring blackfellas into the community hub, rather than into the police cells. We'd look after them. We need to have these community hubs revisited, restocked, refurbished, refunded and that.
- 122 The program Marumali changed my life by teaching me about my kin, and culture. It provided me with certainty and clarity.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ *Born-Again Blakfella* pp 197-211.

⁵⁹ *Born-Again Blakfella* pp. 213-220.

- 123 After my last stint in prison I managed to end my addiction to heroin and then methadone, after which I undertook the role of my community's missing feather-foot, Kadiaitcha man, lore man, and this helped me find my purpose.⁶⁰
- 124 Wron Wron has been decommissioned as a jail and is a healing place now. People are asked by the Magistrates, '*what would you like to do, would you like to go to the healing place or go to the jail?*'. Many of them reconnect there. All the cells have disappeared, but the cottages are there, the education centre is still there, and evidence of my time there still stands.
- 125 I'm proud that I went through Wron Wron and now it's looked after by Sean Braybrook, wonderful bloke, and his missus. They've had successes in turning people's lives around and had success with reconnecting people because of the opportunity by firstly a Magistrate or Judge asking people 'would you like to do Wron Wron?'. It's a healing place.
- 126 I've gone out and spoken to them, real black fellas. The message I'm giving them whether I'm zooming into jails or appearing in the flesh. I give them my timely advice. "*Real black fellas ought not to be shooting white powder*".
- 127 It is my mission to reach out to as many of these kids as I can to remind them that they are seen and loved.⁶¹

Dated: 26 April 2022

⁶⁰ *Born-Again Blakfella* pdf 125.

⁶¹ *Born-Again Blakfella* pp. 213-220.

Yoorrook Justice Commission**BALERT KEETYARRA OF UNCLE JACK CHARLES****Introduction**

- 1 My full name is Jack Charles. I was born on 6 September 1943.
- 2 I currently live in Northcote.
- 3 I am an Aboriginal man, with connections to several Victorian nations, including Taungurung, Boon Wurrung, Dja Dja Wurrung, Woiwurrung and Yorta Yorta. I also have connections to the Wiradjuri nation in New South Wales, and Tasmanian ancestry, from the Palawa people.
- 4 I have worked with Counsel and Solicitors Assisting to prepare this *Balert Keetyarra* (witness statement) ahead of the Elders' Truth-Telling *Wurrek Tyerrang* (hearings) for the Yoorrook Justice Commission (**Yoorrook**). It covers the following aspects of my life:
 - (a) my experiences as a member of the Stolen Generations, having been removed from my mother when I was about 4 months old;
 - (b) my experiences as a ward of the State in homes and foster care, including a lack of care and love, and physical, emotional and sexual abuse;
 - (c) my eventual reunion with my mother in my late teens;
 - (d) meeting some of my siblings in childhood and adulthood, my difficulties connecting with them, and their own struggles, particularly in the case of my brother Archie;
 - (e) my drug addiction developed in my early adulthood;
 - (f) my criminal record, from burglaries (or "burgs") to fund my addiction, leading to long stretches of time in prison;
 - (g) the programs in prison which put me on a different path, and inspired me to connect with my Aboriginal identity and contribute to community;
 - (h) my successful acting career, spanning theatre, film and TV; and

- (i) recent discoveries about by ancestry and identity, from my participation in a TV program *Who Do You Think You Are?*
- 5 I have previously contributed to a number of books, documentaries and films about my life, including:
- (a) ***Who Do You Think You Are? Jack Charles (2021)***¹: In 2021, I appeared in an episode of the SBS television program *Who Do You Think You Are?* In this episode, I traced my family history back across two centuries and learnt more about the history of my ancestors, including aspects of my heritage and identity that I had not known about as a member of the Stolen Generations.
- (b) ***Born-Again Blakfella (2019)***²: *Born-Again Blakfella*, which was published in August 2019, is a memoir about my life. It recounts my experiences throughout my life as an actor, burglar, musician, addict, activist and Aboriginal Elder.
- (c) ***Bastardy (2008)***³: *Bastardy*, which was released in 2008, is a documentary film that followed my life for a period of six years during a period where I juggled acting work with homelessness, addiction and burglary.
- 6 I have also previously given a witness statement concerning my experiences of abuse at the Box Hill Boys' Home:
- (a) ***Witness Statement for Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (RCIRCSA Statement)*** (2015): In September 2015, I prepared a witness statement, which related to 'Case Study 33: *The Salvation Army (Southern Territory)*'. The statement describes my experiences of physical and sexual abuse while I was a ward of the State at the Box Hill Boys' Home, and the ongoing and significant impact of these experiences on my life.
- 7 This *Balert Keetyarra* at times refers to, and is supported by, these key information sources. I would like Yoorrook to consider these additional materials.
- 8 During the course of preparing this *Balert Keetyarra*, some questions have arisen, which I understand will be the subject of requests for documents (including Notice(s) to Produce). Given both these the breadth of the matters in this *Balert Keetyarra*, and the

¹ SBS Television, *Who Do You Think You Are?* Season 12, Episode 5.

See: <https://www.sbs.com.au/ondemand/program/who-do-you-think-you-are>

² J. Charles with N. Benson (2019) *Born-Again Blakfella*, Penguin Australia Pty Ltd.

See: <https://www.penguin.com.au/books/jack-charles-9781760899158>

³ A. Courtin-Wilson and P Campey (2008).

See: <https://www.screenaustralia.gov.au/the-screen-guide/t/bastardy-2009/20129/>

possibility of further documents becoming available, I have been advised by the Solicitor Assisting team that:

- (a) additional documentation relevant to this *Balert Keetyarra* may be tendered in future; and
- (b) it is possible that I will be recalled at a later *Wurrek Tyerrang*.

Stolen Child

9 I was four months old when I was **snatched** from my mother, Blanchie Charles, and placed into City Mission Home for Babies in Brunswick. My mother was 15 years old at the time that I was taken, and I believe at that time, she was herself a ward of the State.⁴

10 From that time, I was a ward of the State.

11 I understand that I am the eldest of eleven children taken from my mother. The siblings I know of are:

- (a) Esme Charles;
- (b) Eva Jo Charles;
- (c) Zenip Charles; and
- (d) Arthur (Artie / Archie) Charles.

12 I understand that another two children died at birth.⁵ To this day, I don't know what happened to six of my siblings.⁶

13 I was taken from my Mum and placed in a series of homes to be raised as a white person. Nobody ever taught me love. I was never raised in a loving situation, never held. I can't remember ever being held as a child, as a baby.⁷

14 I was not told anything about Aboriginal people, our languages or our culture. I knew I looked different, but didn't understand the differences in culture at all.

15 I experienced the policies of child removal as a divide-and-conquer method of destroying my sense of identity and self-esteem. Ignorance, misdirection and miseducation were central to keeping me from knowing who I was.⁸

⁴ *Born-Again Blakfella* pdf 17; RCIRCSA Statement, [6].

⁵ *Who Do You Think You Are?* 31:53 – 32; *Born-Again Blakfella* pdf 53.

⁶ *Born-Again Blakfella* pdf 53.

⁷ *Bastardy* (2009), 46:13.

⁸ *Born-Again Blakfella*, pp. 218-220.

Institutional abuse

- 16 In my early years, I lived:⁹
- (a) in City Mission Home for babies in Brunswick until the age of 2;
 - (b) at the Salvation Army Boys' Home, Box Hill from the age of 2 to 4;
 - (c) in Cardinia Children's Home in Geelong for approximately 14 months;
 - (d) again at the Salvation Army Boys' Home from the age of 5 to 13; and
 - (e) from the age of 14, at foster home, with a family called the Murphys.
- 17 For most of my time at the Box Hill Boys' Home, until the very last months, I was the only Aboriginal child. Seeing photos of myself there, different homes would have the group home shot, there I was, deadset in the middle. I must have been a novelty, being the only black fella there.
- 18 There's photographs of me that we have pulled from the Salvo archives of a group of us at Mt Donna Buang or something. There's us, the Box Hill Boys' Home boys, on an excursion, and there's a clump of snow on my head. Is that a metaphor for the life I experienced growing up? The world I inhabited is snow field white.
- 19 I was a person of interest with the Salvation Army people. They could make use of me being their favourite little Aboriginal boy.
- 20 I was given elocution lessons in the Box Hill Boys' Home by a teacher who took me in tow. Basically at the state school based in the home, SS4151, I was the cleaner there and I was sent out often to the garden to grow chrysanthemums and enter them into the annual Box Hill Horticulture Society. I did get a semblance of education. I was looked after by this one teacher there who taught me elocution, taught me the monetary system, so I left the home knowing the monetary system pretty well, and a very well-spoken boy. The teacher who gave me elocution lessons, he was fond of me, in the right way. And the headmaster was also fond of me.
- 21 Anyway, the teacher who gave me elocution lessons, he died. And a group of us at the home were allowed to go to the Box Hill for the cemetery and et cetera. And because I cried at the funeral, the older boys when I got back to the home bashed me, pretty hard too. So I remember that, that was traumatic. Because, you know, he was a

⁹ RCIRCSA Statement, [6]-[8]; *Born-Again Blakfella*, pdf 27 - 28.

wonderful fella and because I cried at his funeral; I got bashed. I didn't cry at funerals after that.

22 Whilst at the Box Hill Boys' Home, I suffered neglect, physical and sexual abuse from both the staff and other boys, who were repeating what was being done to them.¹⁰

23 For decades after I left the home, I carried my silence and shame of those years, conveniently blocking out names and incidents. My defence mechanism was to pretend it never happened. I didn't dwell on what I'd endured there or what I'd do if I saw any of my abusers again. I never got counselling. I counselled myself through those terrible times.¹¹

24 From my experiences, I was immune to being sensitive, and had difficulties connecting intimately with others, including in romantic relationships.¹² It wasn't just the abuse that traumatised me, the Box Hill Boys' Home stripped me of my Aboriginality. It's hard to convey the damage that place did to me.

25 That silencing of my pain and anguish led to a heroin addiction, which took over much of my adult life. It numbed the deep pain. But in the end, it couldn't numb all the pain, and in truth on more than one occasion I attempted suicide, but failed each time.¹³

26 The abuse also had a significant impact on my sexual identity. I grew up thinking that sexual abuse was normal. I didn't understand the difference between consensual and non-consensual sex as all I had experienced at Box Hill was forced sexual interaction.¹⁴

Early encounters with my siblings

27 A month or two before I was leaving Box Hill, there were a bunch of Aboriginal kids coming through. I wasn't allowed to, but I snuck around and spoke to them. One young lad said, "*my name's Charles*". I remember saying "*it would be funny if we were brothers mate*", but the sister wasn't allowed to tell us. The Salvos wasn't allowed to tell us what I later found out, that this young fella Arthur Charles was indeed my brother.

28 I used sing at old people's homes with a Methodist church group. Irony of ironies, we went up to Nunawading to entertain the girls at Winlaton Girls Home. Amongst all those little girls there were these two small waiflike Aboriginal children. And of course I

¹⁰ See RCIRCSA Statement.

¹¹ *Born-Again Blakfella*, pdf 26.

¹² See *Bastardy* (2009), 46:13 – 50:47.

¹³ *Born-Again Blakfella*, pp. 218-220.

¹⁴ RCIRCSA Statement, [40] – [41].

just had to go up to ask them their names. The elder of the two shyly responded “*I’m Esmee and this is my sister Eva-Joe*”. I said, “*What are your last names ladies?*” And she said “*Charles*”. I said “*well I’m a Charles too, and wouldn’t it be funny if we were brothers and sisters?*”

29 And of course, I later found out that we were.

Adolescence and early adulthood

30 From the age of 14, I lived with the Murphy family as a foster child. This was after Mrs Murphy wrote to the Aborigines Welfare Board asking to take me on permanently.¹⁵

31 I felt like a ‘tolerated outsider’. Despite this, I called Mrs Murphy ‘Mum’.

32 I kept trying to ask Mrs Murphy questions about my background. I recall one particular moment, which happened about nine months after I’d started living with her. It took all my courage to raise this with Mum – she was so set in her ways. I said to her: ‘*There was a young fella that came to Box Hill just before I left, Mum. His name was Archie and he had the same last name, Charles. I reckon he could be my brother.*’ She responded with, ‘*No, he couldn’t be. No, no, Jack. All those kids are orphans too.*’ I didn’t argue the point but her dismissiveness stung my soul. I knew she was wrong.

33 From the time I moved in, I was working in a glass bevelling apprenticeship arranged by the Aborigines Welfare Board. I paid ‘full board,’ or 80% of my wages to Mrs Murphy.

34 My workmates encouraged me to connect with my Aboriginality. Just shy of my seventeenth birthday and only six months off completing my apprenticeship, I jumped on a tram to Fitzroy. I hadn’t thought of asking permission from Mrs Murphy.¹⁶

35 After I jumped off the tram, I stood on the corner of Napier and Gertrude streets, trying to get my bearings about where to go. Within minutes, an old blackfella approached me and grabbed my arm. “*You’re Blanchie Charles’s boy!*” he shouted. It was the first time I’d heard this name. Blanchie Charles. My real mum’s name.¹⁷

36 The man gestured for me to follow him into the Royal Hotel. Walking into that building absolutely blew my mind. Nearly every face in the place was black. I couldn’t believe it! For my entire life, I’d been the only noticeably black person in any space and yet here I

¹⁵ *Born-again Blakfella*, pdf 29.

¹⁶ *Born-again Blakfella*, pdf 34.

¹⁷ *Born-again Blakfella*, pdf 35.

was, in a sea of blackfellas. I couldn't believe this was Melbourne – I'd never experienced a Melbourne that looked like this.¹⁸

37 As people began to notice my presence, they started rushing up to introduce themselves, all smiles, telling me we were family and explaining how we were related. I got hugs, friendly slaps on the back and offers of beer (which I politely declined). I was engulfed by overwhelming feelings of shock and delight. It was like a piece had clicked into the jigsaw. People knew that I was a Charles. They knew my mother, Blanchie.¹⁹

38 I ripped open my pay packet, which I'd never done before. Mrs Murphy was always the one to open the envelope and dole out my share. I shouted a few beers and happily settled down with a lemon squash as I continued chatting, connecting and learning more about my culture, my family, these people.²⁰

39 One old woman revealed that my mum was still alive. *"She's up in Swan Hill, little fella. You have to go and see her. Oh, I'm gonna tell her about you, the first chance I get."*²¹

40 So it was with great joy that I arrived home at Mrs Murphy's. I saw the lights on as I approached the house and was happy that Mrs Murphy was still up. I bounced through the door and my first words were: *"Mum. I've just found Mum!"*²²

41 Her reaction was not what I expected. She stood cold and distant. She dismissed me and reiterated what she'd always told me, that I was an orphan. My confusion turned to rage. We were soon embroiled in a furious argument. When she said, *"Those people will tell you anything"* I saw red. *"Well, I believe them!"* I shot back and raised my arms in emphasis. *"Get to bed!"* she hissed.²³

42 I headed to my room. I took off my work clothes and had just finished putting on my pyjamas when 'Mum' called my name. I came out and saw her standing at the front door. She motioned to me, telling me I had to go outside. Puzzled, I went out the door. It was the police. Mrs Murphy didn't say a word. Two policemen escorted me to the divvy wagon. They told me to jump in. I didn't understand why they'd been called, or what I had done wrong, but I was in too much shock to speak.²⁴

43 We drove for what felt like an eternity. I had no idea where they were taking me. Eventually we stopped. The door opened and I was told to step out. We were at a

¹⁸ *Born-again Blakfella*, pdf 35.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Born-again Blakfella*, pdf 36.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

place called Turana, a youth detention centre in Parkville. It was the place that marked the beginning of my criminalisation.²⁵ I was locked alone in my cell, and cried myself to sleep that night.

- 44 My boss at the glass bevelling factory on Riversdale Road in Hawthorn, Alf Clark, bailed me out because I was his best Aboriginal worker. He called Mum when I didn't come to work, and she would have told him that she didn't want a bar of me.

Further attempts at connection with community

- 45 At that point I became independent from the Murphys.
- 46 But I still had a yearning for family so I decided to return to the mob in Fitzroy and Collingwood. I felt a distance between us. That distance was magnified by my paranoia – I was very aware all of a sudden that I had been raised away from my family, essentially had been raised up 'white'. Many of the older mob I met had been brought up by mothers, fathers, uncles, aunties, cousins, and so on. Somehow or other, they had the right names or the right words to attach to themselves.

Reconnection with my mother

- 47 My workmates at my apprenticeship pointed out that I could write the letter to my mother and address it care of the Swan Hill police. So I did. The sergeant wrote back saying, "*It would be good to see you. I know your mum well.*"²⁶ I made plans to venture up to meet Mum. Apparently she lived between Moulamein and Swan Hill, about forty kilometres out. Her humpy was on the banks of the Edwards River.
- 48 I told my boss "*Alf I'm going up to meet my mum, I'll be in Swan Hill over the Christmas holidays*". Alf said "*You bloody prodigal, I'll fly you up Jack*".
- 49 The sergeant said he would meet me at the airport to take me to Mum. He suggested I bring a gift. "*Look, Jack,*" he said, "*you're playing the prodigal son.*" He used that same phrase. "*You'll get a better reception from your mum if you take her a carton of Melbourne Bitter. She likes a drink.*"²⁷
- 50 Once the details of my visit were locked in, I wrote a letter directly to Mum, care of the sergeant. I didn't quite know how to form the words. I decided to keep the letter simple: "*I am Jack Charles. I believe I am your son. I'm flying up around Christmas time.*"

²⁵ *Born-again Blakfella*, pdf 37.

²⁶ *Born-again Blakfella*, pp 49-50.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

*Apparently the sergeant in Swan Hill is going to pick me up, Mum. He will arrange to have me delivered to your place".*²⁸

51 I stayed with Mum for three weeks. We didn't exactly bond. I believe this is because all of her 11 children were removed.²⁹ All of us were taken, and I think, what a hard life my mum must have had.³⁰

52 When I was there, I plucked up the courage to ask about siblings. I asked her, "*is there an Arthur?*" and she said "*Artie, your brother's name is Artie. Named after Artie Smith, living in Moe.*" I said "*okay, is there an Esme and Eva-Jo?*" she said "*yes, but you have a third sister, Zenip, you look out for them*". I had seen them, I told her I had met them. She said, "*you look after them*".³¹

53 I wasn't told anything else about her life and was not told who my father was. I do not know the reasons she became a ward of the State.

54 I discovered that she liked to be alone. She didn't want anything to do with the other blacks in the black fella camp behind the Federal Hotel. In that camp, the houses there looked like the wooden huts from the slave era that I've read in books in America, carbon copies of the same kind of huts. I was a little bit frightened to venture into that area.

55 We lived a wonderful life, I thought it was great. There were five surrounding farms, looked after by old Clary Pike and mum, mostly Clary. We had two Ford Prefect utilities, so I was able to learn to drive. We would go to various properties nearby to help contain the rabbit population down. Clary and mum were making good money from that. I liked rabbit, and wild duck for breakfast and all that, and we were on the river. It was a good life.

56 I found out later that Mum had been ostracised by community because of her role in a killing, involving a prominent Aboriginal family in NSW. It had isolated her, and the memory of the events seemed to still haunt her.³²

57 I was a gay, black, young man in the outback, out of place in Swan Hill. Trying to impress and be part of this community. But the community was soaked in alcohol, and I wasn't happy with it. That's why I went.

²⁸ *Born-again Blakfella*, pp 49-50.

²⁹ *Born-again Blakfella*, 52.

³⁰ *Who Do You Think You Are?* 31:53 – 32.

³¹ *Born-again Blakfella*, p 43.

³² *Born-again Blakfella*, p 52.

58 I went into Swan Hill and sent a telegram to Alf my boss and said, "*I'm not coming back*".

59 After about 6 months working jackaroo-ing on a property between Finley and Tocumwal, I went back to Melbourne. and was working in a hostel and that's where I was discovered, a bit after that. The hostel was by the new theatre, and I got into theatre that way.

Drug addiction, homelessness, criminal justice and incarceration

Drug addiction

60 In my late teens I dabbled in alcohol, marijuana, recreational drugs before moving onto heroin in 1973.³³

61 Heroin helped with my 'heavy heart'.³⁴ It became what I lived for. I could have a whack and put my pain on the back burner.

62 I often dreamt about the pain my mother endured losing all 13 of her children. I would deal with this by having a whack. I do rue the day, however, that I did start.³⁵

Crime

63 I began burgling people in Toorak, Kew, South Yarra and Camberwell in my teens.³⁶

64 When I started robbing people, I classified it as 'collecting the rent'. I justified my actions as a hunter gatherer, going onto prime Aboriginal land – my mother's lands, to collect what was due.³⁷ I couldn't take it [that rationale] to the judge, he'd give me another 5 years to wake up to myself.

65 The police love me here in Victoria. I always cleaned their books up for them. They took me for long rides and I pointed out the houses I had robbed. I was given fair treatment for having done so. They took me for my word and believed me. I was upfront about those things.

66 I was, however, mistreated by the police on several occasions.

67 I had a .38 shoved in my mouth in Prahran lock up one time. I told the bullshitter to pull the trigger. He nearly pulled it, and yanked the pistol out. The sight at the end of the

³³ *Born-Again Blakfella*, 'Prologue'.

³⁴ *Bastardy* (2009): 13:16.

³⁵ *Bastardy* (2009): 4:04 – 5:40.

³⁶ *Born-Again Blakfella*, pdf 62.

³⁷ *Bastardy* (2009): 25:40 – 27:20; *Born-Again Blakfella*, pp. 48.

barrel there knocked a chip out of one of my beautiful buck teeth. He wanted to shut me up, I was having a go at him.

68 Another time, I was taken by some detectives up into the hills where I was told I was going to be murdered. They wanted to get information out of me. I was living with a gangster at the time in Camberwell. I thought it was gonna be the end of me. But no, no, they had to drive me back down.

69 Special treatment for Aboriginal people was par for the course. Blackfellas were an object to be used to blood the young cadets.

Incarceration

70 I was always glad when I did get busted as I would get a break from it all in prison, a rest from the burgs. I would adjust to prison life.

71 I celebrated my 20th, 30th, 40th and 50th birthdays behind bars³⁸. The last time I was imprisoned, it was my twenty-second time.³⁹

72 When I first went into Pentridge, everyone knew me, most of the rising talent in the gangsterdom were ex-boys home old boys – Burwood, Bayswater, Box Hill et cetera. We all met, many of us, many of us were the Stolen Generations. We gave each other a measure of protection.

73 I never had any troubles about my elocution. I suspected everybody knew that I was gay, that I was a poof, going into Pentridge. So, I was afforded that respect. Many of these gangsters, Chopper Read type people, would ask me to write their letters for them. In the morning in the D Division wing after brekky, they would give me a choccy bar, but nobody ever came at me wanting to have their way with me in all the years that I have done in all the jails that I have done time in.

74 In the old days you'd be asked by the classification governors, '*Jack, you're doing 5 years this time, you've done Castlemaine and Bendigo, would you like Beechworth?*' They gave you a choice. I did all three jails in Dja Dja Wurrung Country and I really enjoyed my time there in those jails because I got educated and I learned the fine art of ceramics there in that jail and I became a leading light. I taught people how to throw pots on a wheel, I taught them how to control and contain themselves in that environment.

³⁸ *Bastardy* (2009): 1:13.

³⁹ *Born-Again Blakfella*, chapter 12; *Bastardy* (2009): 1:01:36 – 1:02:50, 1:08 – 1:11.

75 In the open camp Wron Wron in Gippsland had my pottery shop open 7 days a week from 8am – 8pm, that’s how well I had the Governor wrapped around my little finger. Because we made a profit, and it went back to the prison, not only to the education department but for new gear for the footy club or the cricketing club in Wron Wron jail. I called it “Psycho-ceramica”, because you had to be a crackpot to be in there in the first place.

Homelessness

76 I lived in a state of homelessness throughout the majority of my life.

77 In *Bastardy*, I describe some of the places I used to sleep when living on the streets.⁴⁰ That documentary also showed the time that the Aboriginal Health Service assisted me to find my first unit. They said “*we’re sick and tired of you being homeless, we’re going to give you a unit*”. I was so lucky to get this unit; it was the first winter I’d spent under cover. I was about 60 years old at this time.⁴¹

78 Once I was embedded there, I only ever did one more robbery. And that’s the one you see in *Bastardy*, the doco. The idea of putting that all down on a big screen for the world to see, doesn’t embarrass me, it’s no shame job, because my life, as I see it, is a variation on so many other lives, they don’t have the opportunity like I have through *Bastardy*, through *Jack Charles Vs The Crown*, through *Who Do You Think You Are?* to be given the full scope of that which had been lost, denied and hidden from me.

79 It took about 6 years off and on filming *Bastardy*, I outed myself in so many ways that I hadn’t really intended to, but it all went well because other people seeing that, black and white, seeing that documentary enabled them in their own right to take stock of their situation, and to move themselves out of that particular rut that they saw me in at the time.

Racism and segregation

80 There were many occasions in my life where I have been faced with discriminatory behaviour on the basis of my race.

81 At 18 years of age, I wasn’t allowed to swim in the Swan Hill City Baths. I was knocked back from going in there. I was so shocked. I was in the queue for some time. This big bloke behind me with his kids picked me up and set me aside so he could gain entry

⁴⁰ *Bastardy* (2009): 7:00 – 9:25.

⁴¹ *Bastardy* (2009): 51:30 – 52:10.

with his kids into the Baths. I was shell shocked. I was told that I had to swim in the Murray.

82 The night after I was awarded Senior Victorian Australian of the Year, a taxi driver insisted that I pay, or that my manager pay, in advance of accepting my fare as “*he may not pay*.”⁴² I had been on such a high from the thrill of the event. But the racial vilification from the taxi driver and humiliation ruined my night and undermined that experience.

83 Taxi drivers either refusing to pick me up, or demanding payment in advance, has happened many times and each incident is like a pinch on my soul, my humanity. It knocks me around that for all of my accolades, both on and off the stage, I am still regularly refused a ride.⁴³

Identity and reconnecting

84 I never knew who my father was for my whole life, until I recently appeared on the SBS television program *Who Do You Think You Are?* During the filming of that program I learnt my father’s true identity through DNA testing. I was told that he was Hilton Hamilton Walsh, an Aboriginal man of the Walsh family. There are a number of Walshes that live in Melbourne that I have come to know over the years, but I had no idea that we were related.

85 When I was told Hilton Walsh was my father, it came out of the blue and hit me like a ton of bricks, it floored me.⁴⁴ Through that show, I met a younger brother, Grady Walsh. I hadn’t really expected that I’d find my father, let alone having any living siblings.

86 I understand that I have another 13 siblings through my father, but all are deceased except Grady.

87 It’s great to have all these different elements of your heritage being given on to you. However, the process was also confronting and overwhelming. I have a profound sense of pissed-offedness about what’s gone by and what’s not been allowed until my latter years in life. It took a lot of time and many resources to find out my identity as a member of the Stolen Generations. If I had not had such a high profile, I would never have received this information.

⁴² *Born-Again Blakfella* 200-204.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Who Do You Think You Are?* 13:10 – 16:50.

- 88 It's tough being denied the rightful inheritance of who I really am – my identity. At times it's traumatic, because I'm almost at the end of the journey and I'm still discovering my story.⁴⁵
- 89 Through *Who Do You Think You Are?* I also learned that my Great Grandmother 'Granny Annie' experienced difficult times at Coranderrk, including at times a reduction of rations, watering down of medicine.
- 90 The records also captured Granny Annie's resilience – she rebelled against the Government and successfully fought for Coranderrk to become a permanent reserve where Aboriginal people could work the land as they saw fit, and in doing so was 1 of 4 Aboriginal women who gave evidence at the Government Inquiry about the poor living conditions.⁴⁶
- 91 Through *Who Do You Think You Are?*, I also learnt that my maternal ancestry traces back to Tasmania, and that my four times Great Grandmother was Woretemoeteyenner and five times great grandfather was Mannalargenna, a senior and important man of the Plangermaireener people.
- 92 The story of Woretemoeteyenner and Mannalargenna is told through this program, including that they were taken from their country and moved to a reservation on Flinders Island, with Mannalargenna dying seven weeks after moving to Flinders Island.⁴⁷
- 93 I found it so amazing to learn how far back my people did go. My story was lost, but slowly it has been found again, and I was proud to learn I came from so many resilient people.
- 94 My people the Palawa, my great-great-great-great-greats, were set upon. I heard some horrible stories down there, it was the men that were telling me the hard truths. The women were floating over the more difficult subjects, like when Woretemoeteyenner was latched onto by George Briggs, part of the sealers mob, they grabbed onto the women, they realised that as the rest of the country was going through killing everyone else, these sealers realised that this was women's business killing the seals, not men's. So they had a woman and a killer of seals. So George Briggs latched onto Woretemoeteyenner, and they had kids.

⁴⁵ *Born-Again Blakfella* pp. 218-220.

⁴⁶ *Who Do You Think You Are?* 19:00 – 27:33.

⁴⁷ *Who Do You Think You Are?* 52:58 – 57:10.

- 95 When they decimated the population of the seals and walruses around Tassie, some of them went over to New Zealand and some went to Albany. And my great-great-grandmother was placed on an island off Albany and left there because George Briggs was asked to come back to chart the entire coast of Tasmania for the government and then after that he was asked to go back and build more ships, probably to bring more convicts back to Tasmania.
- 96 Thereafter, George Augustus Robinson was a renowned person working with the Palawa people. I've worked it out that this man had been charged with the responsibility of developing a final solution for the Aboriginal problem in Tasmania. A final solution. So he conned my great (times five) grandfather, they were on good terms apparently to get his people to board a ship to take them over the Flinders Island and some over to Lady Cape Barron Island, and it was designed as a death camp. Very few people were allowed to leave. You see me reading a letter in that episode of *Who Do You Think You Are*, written by Dalrymple, one of Woretemoetyenner's daughters, asking the authorities to allow her mum to come back to her to live in Tasmania, which the authorities did. A few people were allowed to leave the island, only on those kind of written requests from their daughters and their sons.
- 97 I was fully involved in learning to understand what terrible times our great-great-great-great-greats had. The suffering that was brought upon them. Especially the women. The men were telling me that it was the women who suffered the most. They were tortured before they were killed. There were bonfires of black bodies. How could you bleed this onto any Tasmanian state school's curriculum? This is something that is within my responsibility as an elder statesperson, as a man of conscience to try and impress the Minister for Education and the Premier of Tasmania and here in Victoria, let's bleed truth in history into our school curriculum.
- 98 Alan Tudge, some time ago when he was the Federal Minister for Education had loudly scoffed at the idea, that we cannot bleed what really happened here in Australia onto our school's curriculums, "*Australian children might not like Australia*". Those were his words.
- 99 I can understand why truth in history has never been done here. We have an attempt with this truth telling commission in allaying that problem. We are setting the bar here.
- 100 But you can sense that I am really upset and learning this new information about who exactly I am. It has been strengthening, these tidbits of information I'm getting from people emailing me saying they're related to the great Mannalargenna, they're related to Dalrymple from Perth et cetera. There are so many people reaching out to me via

email telling me of their connection with my family because they saw me on TV. I'm a known article so people feel obliged to contact me and tell me of their connections as family. It's great.

Adult relationships with siblings

101 The Koorie Heritage Trust gave me some documents in around 2008, after *Bastardy*, which confirmed that Esme, Eva Jo, Zenip and Archie were my siblings. How we sought to reconnect later in life. We tried our darndest to bond beyond all the years we had lost.⁴⁸

102 I recall also seeing some documents about my six missing Charles siblings, their names.

Archie

103 Archie, like me, came to be addicted to drugs.⁴⁹ Archie, like me, ended up in prison for stealing.

104 Archie had a much more difficult time in prison due to his lack of understanding of unspoken rules. If you looked at a prison officer, for example, you were immediately bashed against a bluestone wall. Archie, through no fault of his own, struggled to understand these rules.⁵⁰

105 At some point, Archie was moved from an ordinary prison to a prison for the criminally insane. He was taken to the Aradale institution for the criminally insane. I've since spoken to a couple of guys who were up there with him, and they told me they saw my brother being raped and overloaded with psych drugs.⁵¹

106 Seeing him really shocked me when he came out, because physically he'd changed so much. He was limping, he had a hunched back, and his arm was often stretched up and curled over his head. Someone said it was a sign of Archie protecting himself from the bashings, but I knew it was more than that, likely an overload of the psych drugs they'd given him.

⁴⁸ *Born-again Blakfella*, p. 142.

⁴⁹ *Born-again Blakfella*: Chapter 10 'Archie'.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

- 107 I tried to go to the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal to seek a proper care package for Archie. However, it was too difficult to get records from any of the prisons he had been in, Pentridge, Aradale, H Division. The records could not be found.⁵²
- 108 I wish I had been in a position to do more for Archie, although I was battling with my own issues.
- 109 Before he died, he was deaf in one ear, blind in one eye, he had AIDS, he had tuberculosis, his arse didn't work, he had kidney problems, and his heart was not functioning at all well.
- 110 The system didn't seem to be capable of dealing with Archie's high-level needs, on account of his mental difficulties.
- 111 I was suggesting that maybe he should be put in a special unit down in Royal Melbourne Hospital, down there, and given heroin. Then he could be stable enough for them to work on his other problems, his medical problems. But no, I couldn't be heard, I couldn't be the one to give them sage advice, because I was fucked up myself.

Film and theatre

- 112 I started a career in acting in 1964 at age 19.⁵³ In a way it saved me; I think I owe my life to having found the theatre.⁵⁴
- 113 It was through theatre that I began to understand and connect with my Aboriginality. My life in the arts, including film and theatre, stirred my awareness of Indigeneity, and my understanding of the truth of Australia's treatment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.⁵⁵
- 114 In 1971, in conjunction with Bob Maza, I co-founded Aboriginal theatre company Nindethana. Theatre gave us a platform to reclaim ownership over our hidden and stolen stories.⁵⁶
- 115 I have performed in a number of productions, movies and series, including: *The Blood Knot*, *Jack Charles Is Up and Fighting*, *Brumby Innes*, *Bastardy*, *Ben Hall*, *Carriage*, *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith*, *No Sugar*, *Pan* and *Jack Charles v The Crown*.⁵⁷

⁵² *Born-again Blakfella*: Chapter 10 'Archie', pdf 98.

⁵³ *Bastardy* (2009): 10:00 – 12:15.

⁵⁴ RCIRCSA Statement, [46].

⁵⁵ *Born-Again Blakfella*, Chapter 9.

⁵⁶ *Born-Again Blakfella* pp. 107-108, 122-137, 175; *Bastardy* (2009): 9:58 – 12:04.

⁵⁷ *Born-Again Blakfella* pp.107-108, 122-137, 175.

- 116 The Pentridge people allowed me to leave the jail to go and see the premiere of *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith*. They shouldn't have released me, I was sentenced to two years. They said "go to the premiere, it's your night".
- 117 *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith* was one of the best films I ever did. I felt I did well for myself as the character, Harry Edwards the murderer who gets raped and hung by Ray Barrett the copper.
- 118 My other achievements in the arts and public life include:⁵⁸
- (a) I was photographed as part of Rod McNicol's series called 'A Portrait Revisited' which won the 2012 National Photographic Portrait Prize and was acquired by the National Portrait Gallery;
 - (b) I appeared in Ahn Do's TV program Brush with Fame in 2017, with the painting winning the People's Choice Award at the Archibald Prize; and
 - (c) I was named Senior Victorian of the Year in 2016 for my community work as an Elder and actor.

Community work and priorities for the future

- 119 Prisons need to support Elders coming in and talking, having these roundtable conversations. As a prisoner, you need to understand that this place is a safe environment for you to talk about what you've witnessed with your own family. It's no shame job to admit down the track, once you're comfortable with this process, that you were one of the bashers. You're on a road, it's difficult to even step onto that particular road, but you wanna change it, you want to walk forward.
- 120 Another thing we need to re-introduce is the gold shield to go into any police station - it used to happen in the 70s, people from the Aboriginal Health Service were given gold shields, they could go into any police station to keep a black watch.
- 121 If we had community hubs, we'd entice the police to bring blackfellas into the community hub, rather than into the police cells. We'd look after them. We need to have these community hubs revisited, restocked, refurbished, refunded and that.
- 122 The program Marumali changed my life by teaching me about my kin, and culture. It provided me with certainty and clarity.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ *Born-Again Blakfella* pp 197-211.

⁵⁹ *Born-Again Blakfella* pp. 213-220.

- 123 After my last stint in prison I managed to end my addiction to heroin and then methadone, after which I undertook the role of my community's missing feather-foot, Kadiaitcha man, lore man, and this helped me find my purpose.⁶⁰
- 124 Wron Wron has been decommissioned as a jail and is a healing place now. People are asked by the Magistrates, '*what would you like to do, would you like to go to the healing place or go to the jail?*'. Many of them reconnect there. All the cells have disappeared, but the cottages are there, the education centre is still there, and evidence of my time there still stands.
- 125 I'm proud that I went through Wron Wron and now it's looked after by Sean Braybrook, wonderful bloke, and his missus. They've had successes in turning people's lives around and had success with reconnecting people because of the opportunity by firstly a Magistrate or Judge asking people 'would you like to do Wron Wron?'. It's a healing place.
- 126 I've gone out and spoken to them, real black fellas. The message I'm giving them whether I'm zooming into jails or appearing in the flesh. I give them my timely advice. "*Real black fellas ought not to be shooting white powder*".
- 127 It is my mission to reach out to as many of these kids as I can to remind them that they are seen and loved.⁶¹

Dated: 26 April 2022

⁶⁰ *Born-Again Blakfella* pdf 125.

⁶¹ *Born-Again Blakfella* pp. 213-220.

Yoorrook Justice Commission**BALERT KEETYARRA OF UNCLE JACK CHARLES****Introduction**

- 1 My full name is Jack Charles. I was born on 6 September 1943.
- 2 I currently live in Northcote.
- 3 I am an Aboriginal man, with connections to several Victorian nations, including Taungurung, Boon Wurrung, Dja Dja Wurrung, Woiwurrung and Yorta Yorta. I also have connections to the Wiradjuri nation in New South Wales, and Tasmanian ancestry, from the Palawa people.
- 4 I have worked with Counsel and Solicitors Assisting to prepare this *Balert Keetyarra* (witness statement) ahead of the Elders' Truth-Telling *Wurrek Tyerrang* (hearings) for the Yoorrook Justice Commission (**Yoorrook**). It covers the following aspects of my life:
 - (a) my experiences as a member of the Stolen Generations, having been removed from my mother when I was about 4 months old;
 - (b) my experiences as a ward of the State in homes and foster care, including a lack of care and love, and physical, emotional and sexual abuse;
 - (c) my eventual reunion with my mother in my late teens;
 - (d) meeting some of my siblings in childhood and adulthood, my difficulties connecting with them, and their own struggles, particularly in the case of my brother Archie;
 - (e) my drug addiction developed in my early adulthood;
 - (f) my criminal record, from burglaries (or "burgs") to fund my addiction, leading to long stretches of time in prison;
 - (g) the programs in prison which put me on a different path, and inspired me to connect with my Aboriginal identity and contribute to community;
 - (h) my successful acting career, spanning theatre, film and TV; and

- (i) recent discoveries about by ancestry and identity, from my participation in a TV program *Who Do You Think You Are?*
- 5 I have previously contributed to a number of books, documentaries and films about my life, including:
- (a) ***Who Do You Think You Are? Jack Charles (2021)***¹: In 2021, I appeared in an episode of the SBS television program *Who Do You Think You Are?* In this episode, I traced my family history back across two centuries and learnt more about the history of my ancestors, including aspects of my heritage and identity that I had not known about as a member of the Stolen Generations.
- (b) ***Born-Again Blakfella (2019)***²: *Born-Again Blakfella*, which was published in August 2019, is a memoir about my life. It recounts my experiences throughout my life as an actor, burglar, musician, addict, activist and Aboriginal Elder.
- (c) ***Bastardy (2008)***³: *Bastardy*, which was released in 2008, is a documentary film that followed my life for a period of six years during a period where I juggled acting work with homelessness, addiction and burglary.
- 6 I have also previously given a witness statement concerning my experiences of abuse at the Box Hill Boys' Home:
- (a) ***Witness Statement for Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (RCIRCSA Statement)*** (2015): In September 2015, I prepared a witness statement, which related to 'Case Study 33: *The Salvation Army (Southern Territory)*'. The statement describes my experiences of physical and sexual abuse while I was a ward of the State at the Box Hill Boys' Home, and the ongoing and significant impact of these experiences on my life.
- 7 This *Balert Keetyarra* at times refers to, and is supported by, these key information sources. I would like Yoorrook to consider these additional materials.
- 8 During the course of preparing this *Balert Keetyarra*, some questions have arisen, which I understand will be the subject of requests for documents (including Notice(s) to Produce). Given both these the breadth of the matters in this *Balert Keetyarra*, and the

¹ SBS Television, *Who Do You Think You Are?* Season 12, Episode 5.

See: <https://www.sbs.com.au/ondemand/program/who-do-you-think-you-are>

² J. Charles with N. Benson (2019) *Born-Again Blakfella*, Penguin Australia Pty Ltd.

See: <https://www.penguin.com.au/books/jack-charles-9781760899158>

³ A. Courtin-Wilson and P Campey (2008).

See: <https://www.screenaustralia.gov.au/the-screen-guide/t/bastardy-2009/20129/>

possibility of further documents becoming available, I have been advised by the Solicitor Assisting team that:

- (a) additional documentation relevant to this *Balert Keetyarra* may be tendered in future; and
- (b) it is possible that I will be recalled at a later *Wurrek Tyerrang*.

Stolen Child

9 I was four months old when I was **snatched** from my mother, Blanchie Charles, and placed into City Mission Home for Babies in Brunswick. My mother was 15 years old at the time that I was taken, and I believe at that time, she was herself a ward of the State.⁴

10 From that time, I was a ward of the State.

11 I understand that I am the eldest of eleven children taken from my mother. The siblings I know of are:

- (a) Esme Charles;
- (b) Eva Jo Charles;
- (c) Zenip Charles; and
- (d) Arthur (Artie / Archie) Charles.

12 I understand that another two children died at birth.⁵ To this day, I don't know what happened to six of my siblings.⁶

13 I was taken from my Mum and placed in a series of homes to be raised as a white person. Nobody ever taught me love. I was never raised in a loving situation, never held. I can't remember ever being held as a child, as a baby.⁷

14 I was not told anything about Aboriginal people, our languages or our culture. I knew I looked different, but didn't understand the differences in culture at all.

15 I experienced the policies of child removal as a divide-and-conquer method of destroying my sense of identity and self-esteem. Ignorance, misdirection and miseducation were central to keeping me from knowing who I was.⁸

⁴ *Born-Again Blakfella* pdf 17; RCIRCSA Statement, [6].

⁵ *Who Do You Think You Are?* 31:53 – 32; *Born-Again Blakfella* pdf 53.

⁶ *Born-Again Blakfella* pdf 53.

⁷ *Bastardy* (2009), 46:13.

⁸ *Born-Again Blakfella*, pp. 218-220.

Institutional abuse

- 16 In my early years, I lived:⁹
- (a) in City Mission Home for babies in Brunswick until the age of 2;
 - (b) at the Salvation Army Boys' Home, Box Hill from the age of 2 to 4;
 - (c) in Cardinia Children's Home in Geelong for approximately 14 months;
 - (d) again at the Salvation Army Boys' Home from the age of 5 to 13; and
 - (e) from the age of 14, at foster home, with a family called the Murphys.
- 17 For most of my time at the Box Hill Boys' Home, until the very last months, I was the only Aboriginal child. Seeing photos of myself there, different homes would have the group home shot, there I was, deadset in the middle. I must have been a novelty, being the only black fella there.
- 18 There's photographs of me that we have pulled from the Salvo archives of a group of us at Mt Donna Buang or something. There's us, the Box Hill Boys' Home boys, on an excursion, and there's a clump of snow on my head. Is that a metaphor for the life I experienced growing up? The world I inhabited is snow field white.
- 19 I was a person of interest with the Salvation Army people. They could make use of me being their favourite little Aboriginal boy.
- 20 I was given elocution lessons in the Box Hill Boys' Home by a teacher who took me in tow. Basically at the state school based in the home, SS4151, I was the cleaner there and I was sent out often to the garden to grow chrysanthemums and enter them into the annual Box Hill Horticulture Society. I did get a semblance of education. I was looked after by this one teacher there who taught me elocution, taught me the monetary system, so I left the home knowing the monetary system pretty well, and a very well-spoken boy. The teacher who gave me elocution lessons, he was fond of me, in the right way. And the headmaster was also fond of me.
- 21 Anyway, the teacher who gave me elocution lessons, he died. And a group of us at the home were allowed to go to the Box Hill for the cemetery and et cetera. And because I cried at the funeral, the older boys when I got back to the home bashed me, pretty hard too. So I remember that, that was traumatic. Because, you know, he was a

⁹ RCIRCSA Statement, [6]-[8]; *Born-Again Blakfella*, pdf 27 - 28.

wonderful fella and because I cried at his funeral; I got bashed. I didn't cry at funerals after that.

22 Whilst at the Box Hill Boys' Home, I suffered neglect, physical and sexual abuse from both the staff and other boys, who were repeating what was being done to them.¹⁰

23 For decades after I left the home, I carried my silence and shame of those years, conveniently blocking out names and incidents. My defence mechanism was to pretend it never happened. I didn't dwell on what I'd endured there or what I'd do if I saw any of my abusers again. I never got counselling. I counselled myself through those terrible times.¹¹

24 From my experiences, I was immune to being sensitive, and had difficulties connecting intimately with others, including in romantic relationships.¹² It wasn't just the abuse that traumatised me, the Box Hill Boys' Home stripped me of my Aboriginality. It's hard to convey the damage that place did to me.

25 That silencing of my pain and anguish led to a heroin addiction, which took over much of my adult life. It numbed the deep pain. But in the end, it couldn't numb all the pain, and in truth on more than one occasion I attempted suicide, but failed each time.¹³

26 The abuse also had a significant impact on my sexual identity. I grew up thinking that sexual abuse was normal. I didn't understand the difference between consensual and non-consensual sex as all I had experienced at Box Hill was forced sexual interaction.¹⁴

Early encounters with my siblings

27 A month or two before I was leaving Box Hill, there were a bunch of Aboriginal kids coming through. I wasn't allowed to, but I snuck around and spoke to them. One young lad said, "*my name's Charles*". I remember saying "*it would be funny if we were brothers mate*", but the sister wasn't allowed to tell us. The Salvos wasn't allowed to tell us what I later found out, that this young fella Arthur Charles was indeed my brother.

28 I used sing at old people's homes with a Methodist church group. Irony of ironies, we went up to Nunawading to entertain the girls at Winlaton Girls Home. Amongst all those little girls there were these two small waiflike Aboriginal children. And of course I

¹⁰ See RCIRCSA Statement.

¹¹ *Born-Again Blakfella*, pdf 26.

¹² See *Bastardy* (2009), 46:13 – 50:47.

¹³ *Born-Again Blakfella*, pp. 218-220.

¹⁴ RCIRCSA Statement, [40] – [41].

just had to go up to ask them their names. The elder of the two shyly responded “*I’m Esmee and this is my sister Eva-Joe*”. I said, “*What are your last names ladies?*” And she said “*Charles*”. I said “*well I’m a Charles too, and wouldn’t it be funny if we were brothers and sisters?*”

29 And of course, I later found out that we were.

Adolescence and early adulthood

30 From the age of 14, I lived with the Murphy family as a foster child. This was after Mrs Murphy wrote to the Aborigines Welfare Board asking to take me on permanently.¹⁵

31 I felt like a ‘tolerated outsider’. Despite this, I called Mrs Murphy ‘Mum’.

32 I kept trying to ask Mrs Murphy questions about my background. I recall one particular moment, which happened about nine months after I’d started living with her. It took all my courage to raise this with Mum – she was so set in her ways. I said to her: ‘*There was a young fella that came to Box Hill just before I left, Mum. His name was Archie and he had the same last name, Charles. I reckon he could be my brother.*’ She responded with, ‘*No, he couldn’t be. No, no, Jack. All those kids are orphans too.*’ I didn’t argue the point but her dismissiveness stung my soul. I knew she was wrong.

33 From the time I moved in, I was working in a glass bevelling apprenticeship arranged by the Aborigines Welfare Board. I paid ‘full board,’ or 80% of my wages to Mrs Murphy.

34 My workmates encouraged me to connect with my Aboriginality. Just shy of my seventeenth birthday and only six months off completing my apprenticeship, I jumped on a tram to Fitzroy. I hadn’t thought of asking permission from Mrs Murphy.¹⁶

35 After I jumped off the tram, I stood on the corner of Napier and Gertrude streets, trying to get my bearings about where to go. Within minutes, an old blackfella approached me and grabbed my arm. “*You’re Blanchie Charles’s boy!*” he shouted. It was the first time I’d heard this name. Blanchie Charles. My real mum’s name.¹⁷

36 The man gestured for me to follow him into the Royal Hotel. Walking into that building absolutely blew my mind. Nearly every face in the place was black. I couldn’t believe it! For my entire life, I’d been the only noticeably black person in any space and yet here I

¹⁵ *Born-again Blakfella*, pdf 29.

¹⁶ *Born-again Blakfella*, pdf 34.

¹⁷ *Born-again Blakfella*, pdf 35.

was, in a sea of blackfellas. I couldn't believe this was Melbourne – I'd never experienced a Melbourne that looked like this.¹⁸

37 As people began to notice my presence, they started rushing up to introduce themselves, all smiles, telling me we were family and explaining how we were related. I got hugs, friendly slaps on the back and offers of beer (which I politely declined). I was engulfed by overwhelming feelings of shock and delight. It was like a piece had clicked into the jigsaw. People knew that I was a Charles. They knew my mother, Blanchie.¹⁹

38 I ripped open my pay packet, which I'd never done before. Mrs Murphy was always the one to open the envelope and dole out my share. I shouted a few beers and happily settled down with a lemon squash as I continued chatting, connecting and learning more about my culture, my family, these people.²⁰

39 One old woman revealed that my mum was still alive. *"She's up in Swan Hill, little fella. You have to go and see her. Oh, I'm gonna tell her about you, the first chance I get."*²¹

40 So it was with great joy that I arrived home at Mrs Murphy's. I saw the lights on as I approached the house and was happy that Mrs Murphy was still up. I bounced through the door and my first words were: *"Mum. I've just found Mum!"*²²

41 Her reaction was not what I expected. She stood cold and distant. She dismissed me and reiterated what she'd always told me, that I was an orphan. My confusion turned to rage. We were soon embroiled in a furious argument. When she said, *"Those people will tell you anything"* I saw red. *"Well, I believe them!"* I shot back and raised my arms in emphasis. *"Get to bed!"* she hissed.²³

42 I headed to my room. I took off my work clothes and had just finished putting on my pyjamas when 'Mum' called my name. I came out and saw her standing at the front door. She motioned to me, telling me I had to go outside. Puzzled, I went out the door. It was the police. Mrs Murphy didn't say a word. Two policemen escorted me to the divvy wagon. They told me to jump in. I didn't understand why they'd been called, or what I had done wrong, but I was in too much shock to speak.²⁴

43 We drove for what felt like an eternity. I had no idea where they were taking me. Eventually we stopped. The door opened and I was told to step out. We were at a

¹⁸ *Born-again Blakfella*, pdf 35.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Born-again Blakfella*, pdf 36.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

place called Turana, a youth detention centre in Parkville. It was the place that marked the beginning of my criminalisation.²⁵ I was locked alone in my cell, and cried myself to sleep that night.

- 44 My boss at the glass bevelling factory on Riversdale Road in Hawthorn, Alf Clark, bailed me out because I was his best Aboriginal worker. He called Mum when I didn't come to work, and she would have told him that she didn't want a bar of me.

Further attempts at connection with community

- 45 At that point I became independent from the Murphys.
- 46 But I still had a yearning for family so I decided to return to the mob in Fitzroy and Collingwood. I felt a distance between us. That distance was magnified by my paranoia – I was very aware all of a sudden that I had been raised away from my family, essentially had been raised up 'white'. Many of the older mob I met had been brought up by mothers, fathers, uncles, aunties, cousins, and so on. Somehow or other, they had the right names or the right words to attach to themselves.

Reconnection with my mother

- 47 My workmates at my apprenticeship pointed out that I could write the letter to my mother and address it care of the Swan Hill police. So I did. The sergeant wrote back saying, "*It would be good to see you. I know your mum well.*"²⁶ I made plans to venture up to meet Mum. Apparently she lived between Moulamein and Swan Hill, about forty kilometres out. Her humpy was on the banks of the Edwards River.
- 48 I told my boss "*Alf I'm going up to meet my mum, I'll be in Swan Hill over the Christmas holidays*". Alf said "*You bloody prodigal, I'll fly you up Jack*".
- 49 The sergeant said he would meet me at the airport to take me to Mum. He suggested I bring a gift. "*Look, Jack,*" he said, "*you're playing the prodigal son.*" He used that same phrase. "*You'll get a better reception from your mum if you take her a carton of Melbourne Bitter. She likes a drink.*"²⁷
- 50 Once the details of my visit were locked in, I wrote a letter directly to Mum, care of the sergeant. I didn't quite know how to form the words. I decided to keep the letter simple: "*I am Jack Charles. I believe I am your son. I'm flying up around Christmas time.*"

²⁵ *Born-again Blakfella*, pdf 37.

²⁶ *Born-again Blakfella*, pp 49-50.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

*Apparently the sergeant in Swan Hill is going to pick me up, Mum. He will arrange to have me delivered to your place".*²⁸

51 I stayed with Mum for three weeks. We didn't exactly bond. I believe this is because all of her 11 children were removed.²⁹ All of us were taken, and I think, what a hard life my mum must have had.³⁰

52 When I was there, I plucked up the courage to ask about siblings. I asked her, "*is there an Arthur?*" and she said "*Artie, your brother's name is Artie. Named after Artie Smith, living in Moe.*" I said "*okay, is there an Esme and Eva-Jo?*" she said "*yes, but you have a third sister, Zenip, you look out for them*". I had seen them, I told her I had met them. She said, "*you look after them*".³¹

53 I wasn't told anything else about her life and was not told who my father was. I do not know the reasons she became a ward of the State.

54 I discovered that she liked to be alone. She didn't want anything to do with the other blacks in the black fella camp behind the Federal Hotel. In that camp, the houses there looked like the wooden huts from the slave era that I've read in books in America, carbon copies of the same kind of huts. I was a little bit frightened to venture into that area.

55 We lived a wonderful life, I thought it was great. There were five surrounding farms, looked after by old Clary Pike and mum, mostly Clary. We had two Ford Prefect utilities, so I was able to learn to drive. We would go to various properties nearby to help contain the rabbit population down. Clary and mum were making good money from that. I liked rabbit, and wild duck for breakfast and all that, and we were on the river. It was a good life.

56 I found out later that Mum had been ostracised by community because of her role in a killing, involving a prominent Aboriginal family in NSW. It had isolated her, and the memory of the events seemed to still haunt her.³²

57 I was a gay, black, young man in the outback, out of place in Swan Hill. Trying to impress and be part of this community. But the community was soaked in alcohol, and I wasn't happy with it. That's why I went.

²⁸ *Born-again Blakfella*, pp 49-50.

²⁹ *Born-again Blakfella*, 52.

³⁰ *Who Do You Think You Are?* 31:53 – 32.

³¹ *Born-again Blakfella*, p 43.

³² *Born-again Blakfella*, p 52.

58 I went into Swan Hill and sent a telegram to Alf my boss and said, "*I'm not coming back*".

59 After about 6 months working jackaroo-ing on a property between Finley and Tocumwal, I went back to Melbourne. and was working in a hostel and that's where I was discovered, a bit after that. The hostel was by the new theatre, and I got into theatre that way.

Drug addiction, homelessness, criminal justice and incarceration

Drug addiction

60 In my late teens I dabbled in alcohol, marijuana, recreational drugs before moving onto heroin in 1973.³³

61 Heroin helped with my 'heavy heart'.³⁴ It became what I lived for. I could have a whack and put my pain on the back burner.

62 I often dreamt about the pain my mother endured losing all 13 of her children. I would deal with this by having a whack. I do rue the day, however, that I did start.³⁵

Crime

63 I began burgling people in Toorak, Kew, South Yarra and Camberwell in my teens.³⁶

64 When I started robbing people, I classified it as 'collecting the rent'. I justified my actions as a hunter gatherer, going onto prime Aboriginal land – my mother's lands, to collect what was due.³⁷ I couldn't take it [that rationale] to the judge, he'd give me another 5 years to wake up to myself.

65 The police love me here in Victoria. I always cleaned their books up for them. They took me for long rides and I pointed out the houses I had robbed. I was given fair treatment for having done so. They took me for my word and believed me. I was upfront about those things.

66 I was, however, mistreated by the police on several occasions.

67 I had a .38 shoved in my mouth in Prahran lock up one time. I told the bullshitter to pull the trigger. He nearly pulled it, and yanked the pistol out. The sight at the end of the

³³ *Born-Again Blakfella*, 'Prologue'.

³⁴ *Bastardy* (2009): 13:16.

³⁵ *Bastardy* (2009): 4:04 – 5:40.

³⁶ *Born-Again Blakfella*, pdf 62.

³⁷ *Bastardy* (2009): 25:40 – 27:20; *Born-Again Blakfella*, pp. 48.

barrel there knocked a chip out of one of my beautiful buck teeth. He wanted to shut me up, I was having a go at him.

68 Another time, I was taken by some detectives up into the hills where I was told I was going to be murdered. They wanted to get information out of me. I was living with a gangster at the time in Camberwell. I thought it was gonna be the end of me. But no, no, they had to drive me back down.

69 Special treatment for Aboriginal people was par for the course. Blackfellas were an object to be used to blood the young cadets.

Incarceration

70 I was always glad when I did get busted as I would get a break from it all in prison, a rest from the burgs. I would adjust to prison life.

71 I celebrated my 20th, 30th, 40th and 50th birthdays behind bars³⁸. The last time I was imprisoned, it was my twenty-second time.³⁹

72 When I first went into Pentridge, everyone knew me, most of the rising talent in the gangsterdom were ex-boys home old boys – Burwood, Bayswater, Box Hill et cetera. We all met, many of us, many of us were the Stolen Generations. We gave each other a measure of protection.

73 I never had any troubles about my elocution. I suspected everybody knew that I was gay, that I was a poof, going into Pentridge. So, I was afforded that respect. Many of these gangsters, Chopper Read type people, would ask me to write their letters for them. In the morning in the D Division wing after brekky, they would give me a choccy bar, but nobody ever came at me wanting to have their way with me in all the years that I have done in all the jails that I have done time in.

74 In the old days you'd be asked by the classification governors, '*Jack, you're doing 5 years this time, you've done Castlemaine and Bendigo, would you like Beechworth?*' They gave you a choice. I did all three jails in Dja Dja Wurrung Country and I really enjoyed my time there in those jails because I got educated and I learned the fine art of ceramics there in that jail and I became a leading light. I taught people how to throw pots on a wheel, I taught them how to control and contain themselves in that environment.

³⁸ *Bastardy* (2009): 1:13.

³⁹ *Born-Again Blakfella*, chapter 12; *Bastardy* (2009): 1:01:36 – 1:02:50, 1:08 – 1:11.

75 In the open camp Wron Wron in Gippsland had my pottery shop open 7 days a week from 8am – 8pm, that’s how well I had the Governor wrapped around my little finger. Because we made a profit, and it went back to the prison, not only to the education department but for new gear for the footy club or the cricketing club in Wron Wron jail. I called it “Psycho-ceramica”, because you had to be a crackpot to be in there in the first place.

Homelessness

76 I lived in a state of homelessness throughout the majority of my life.

77 In *Bastardy*, I describe some of the places I used to sleep when living on the streets.⁴⁰ That documentary also showed the time that the Aboriginal Health Service assisted me to find my first unit. They said “*we’re sick and tired of you being homeless, we’re going to give you a unit*”. I was so lucky to get this unit; it was the first winter I’d spent under cover. I was about 60 years old at this time.⁴¹

78 Once I was embedded there, I only ever did one more robbery. And that’s the one you see in *Bastardy*, the doco. The idea of putting that all down on a big screen for the world to see, doesn’t embarrass me, it’s no shame job, because my life, as I see it, is a variation on so many other lives, they don’t have the opportunity like I have through *Bastardy*, through *Jack Charles Vs The Crown*, through *Who Do You Think You Are?* to be given the full scope of that which had been lost, denied and hidden from me.

79 It took about 6 years off and on filming *Bastardy*, I outed myself in so many ways that I hadn’t really intended to, but it all went well because other people seeing that, black and white, seeing that documentary enabled them in their own right to take stock of their situation, and to move themselves out of that particular rut that they saw me in at the time.

Racism and segregation

80 There were many occasions in my life where I have been faced with discriminatory behaviour on the basis of my race.

81 At 18 years of age, I wasn’t allowed to swim in the Swan Hill City Baths. I was knocked back from going in there. I was so shocked. I was in the queue for some time. This big bloke behind me with his kids picked me up and set me aside so he could gain entry

⁴⁰ *Bastardy* (2009): 7:00 – 9:25.

⁴¹ *Bastardy* (2009): 51:30 – 52:10.

with his kids into the Baths. I was shell shocked. I was told that I had to swim in the Murray.

82 The night after I was awarded Senior Victorian Australian of the Year, a taxi driver insisted that I pay, or that my manager pay, in advance of accepting my fare as “*he may not pay.*”⁴² I had been on such a high from the thrill of the event. But the racial vilification from the taxi driver and humiliation ruined my night and undermined that experience.

83 Taxi drivers either refusing to pick me up, or demanding payment in advance, has happened many times and each incident is like a pinch on my soul, my humanity. It knocks me around that for all of my accolades, both on and off the stage, I am still regularly refused a ride.⁴³

Identity and reconnecting

84 I never knew who my father was for my whole life, until I recently appeared on the SBS television program *Who Do You Think You Are?* During the filming of that program I learnt my father’s true identity through DNA testing. I was told that he was Hilton Hamilton Walsh, an Aboriginal man of the Walsh family. There are a number of Walshes that live in Melbourne that I have come to know over the years, but I had no idea that we were related.

85 When I was told Hilton Walsh was my father, it came out of the blue and hit me like a ton of bricks, it floored me.⁴⁴ Through that show, I met a younger brother, Grady Walsh. I hadn’t really expected that I’d find my father, let alone having any living siblings.

86 I understand that I have another 13 siblings through my father, but all are deceased except Grady.

87 It’s great to have all these different elements of your heritage being given on to you. However, the process was also confronting and overwhelming. I have a profound sense of pissed-offedness about what’s gone by and what’s not been allowed until my latter years in life. It took a lot of time and many resources to find out my identity as a member of the Stolen Generations. If I had not had such a high profile, I would never have received this information.

⁴² *Born-Again Blakfella* 200-204.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Who Do You Think You Are?* 13:10 – 16:50.

- 88 It's tough being denied the rightful inheritance of who I really am – my identity. At times it's traumatic, because I'm almost at the end of the journey and I'm still discovering my story.⁴⁵
- 89 Through *Who Do You Think You Are?* I also learned that my Great Grandmother 'Granny Annie' experienced difficult times at Coranderrk, including at times a reduction of rations, watering down of medicine.
- 90 The records also captured Granny Annie's resilience – she rebelled against the Government and successfully fought for Coranderrk to become a permanent reserve where Aboriginal people could work the land as they saw fit, and in doing so was 1 of 4 Aboriginal women who gave evidence at the Government Inquiry about the poor living conditions.⁴⁶
- 91 Through *Who Do You Think You Are?*, I also learnt that my maternal ancestry traces back to Tasmania, and that my four times Great Grandmother was Woretemoeteyenner and five times great grandfather was Mannalargenna, a senior and important man of the Plangermaireener people.
- 92 The story of Woretemoeteyenner and Mannalargenna is told through this program, including that they were taken from their country and moved to a reservation on Flinders Island, with Mannalargenna dying seven weeks after moving to Flinders Island.⁴⁷
- 93 I found it so amazing to learn how far back my people did go. My story was lost, but slowly it has been found again, and I was proud to learn I came from so many resilient people.
- 94 My people the Palawa, my great-great-great-great-greats, were set upon. I heard some horrible stories down there, it was the men that were telling me the hard truths. The women were floating over the more difficult subjects, like when Woretemoeteyenner was latched onto by George Briggs, part of the sealers mob, they grabbed onto the women, they realised that as the rest of the country was going through killing everyone else, these sealers realised that this was women's business killing the seals, not men's. So they had a woman and a killer of seals. So George Briggs latched onto Woretemoeteyenner, and they had kids.

⁴⁵ *Born-Again Blakfella* pp. 218-220.

⁴⁶ *Who Do You Think You Are?* 19:00 – 27:33.

⁴⁷ *Who Do You Think You Are?* 52:58 – 57:10.

- 95 When they decimated the population of the seals and walruses around Tassie, some of them went over to New Zealand and some went to Albany. And my great-great-grandmother was placed on an island off Albany and left there because George Briggs was asked to come back to chart the entire coast of Tasmania for the government and then after that he was asked to go back and build more ships, probably to bring more convicts back to Tasmania.
- 96 Thereafter, George Augustus Robinson was a renowned person working with the Palawa people. I've worked it out that this man had been charged with the responsibility of developing a final solution for the Aboriginal problem in Tasmania. A final solution. So he conned my great (times five) grandfather, they were on good terms apparently to get his people to board a ship to take them over the Flinders Island and some over to Lady Cape Barron Island, and it was designed as a death camp. Very few people were allowed to leave. You see me reading a letter in that episode of *Who Do You Think You Are*, written by Dalrymple, one of Woretemoetyenner's daughters, asking the authorities to allow her mum to come back to her to live in Tasmania, which the authorities did. A few people were allowed to leave the island, only on those kind of written requests from their daughters and their sons.
- 97 I was fully involved in learning to understand what terrible times our great-great-great-great-greats had. The suffering that was brought upon them. Especially the women. The men were telling me that it was the women who suffered the most. They were tortured before they were killed. There were bonfires of black bodies. How could you bleed this onto any Tasmanian state school's curriculum? This is something that is within my responsibility as an elder statesperson, as a man of conscience to try and impress the Minister for Education and the Premier of Tasmania and here in Victoria, let's bleed truth in history into our school curriculum.
- 98 Alan Tudge, some time ago when he was the Federal Minister for Education had loudly scoffed at the idea, that we cannot bleed what really happened here in Australia onto our school's curriculums, "*Australian children might not like Australia*". Those were his words.
- 99 I can understand why truth in history has never been done here. We have an attempt with this truth telling commission in allaying that problem. We are setting the bar here.
- 100 But you can sense that I am really upset and learning this new information about who exactly I am. It has been strengthening, these tidbits of information I'm getting from people emailing me saying they're related to the great Mannalargenna, they're related to Dalrymple from Perth et cetera. There are so many people reaching out to me via

email telling me of their connection with my family because they saw me on TV. I'm a known article so people feel obliged to contact me and tell me of their connections as family. It's great.

Adult relationships with siblings

101 The Koorie Heritage Trust gave me some documents in around 2008, after *Bastardy*, which confirmed that Esme, Eva Jo, Zenip and Archie were my siblings. How we sought to reconnect later in life. We tried our darndest to bond beyond all the years we had lost.⁴⁸

102 I recall also seeing some documents about my six missing Charles siblings, their names.

Archie

103 Archie, like me, came to be addicted to drugs.⁴⁹ Archie, like me, ended up in prison for stealing.

104 Archie had a much more difficult time in prison due to his lack of understanding of unspoken rules. If you looked at a prison officer, for example, you were immediately bashed against a bluestone wall. Archie, through no fault of his own, struggled to understand these rules.⁵⁰

105 At some point, Archie was moved from an ordinary prison to a prison for the criminally insane. He was taken to the Aradale institution for the criminally insane. I've since spoken to a couple of guys who were up there with him, and they told me they saw my brother being raped and overloaded with psych drugs.⁵¹

106 Seeing him really shocked me when he came out, because physically he'd changed so much. He was limping, he had a hunched back, and his arm was often stretched up and curled over his head. Someone said it was a sign of Archie protecting himself from the bashings, but I knew it was more than that, likely an overload of the psych drugs they'd given him.

⁴⁸ *Born-again Blakfella*, p. 142.

⁴⁹ *Born-again Blakfella*: Chapter 10 'Archie'.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

- 107 I tried to go to the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal to seek a proper care package for Archie. However, it was too difficult to get records from any of the prisons he had been in, Pentridge, Aradale, H Division. The records could not be found.⁵²
- 108 I wish I had been in a position to do more for Archie, although I was battling with my own issues.
- 109 Before he died, he was deaf in one ear, blind in one eye, he had AIDS, he had tuberculosis, his arse didn't work, he had kidney problems, and his heart was not functioning at all well.
- 110 The system didn't seem to be capable of dealing with Archie's high-level needs, on account of his mental difficulties.
- 111 I was suggesting that maybe he should be put in a special unit down in Royal Melbourne Hospital, down there, and given heroin. Then he could be stable enough for them to work on his other problems, his medical problems. But no, I couldn't be heard, I couldn't be the one to give them sage advice, because I was fucked up myself.

Film and theatre

- 112 I started a career in acting in 1964 at age 19.⁵³ In a way it saved me; I think I owe my life to having found the theatre.⁵⁴
- 113 It was through theatre that I began to understand and connect with my Aboriginality. My life in the arts, including film and theatre, stirred my awareness of Indigeneity, and my understanding of the truth of Australia's treatment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.⁵⁵
- 114 In 1971, in conjunction with Bob Maza, I co-founded Aboriginal theatre company Nindethana. Theatre gave us a platform to reclaim ownership over our hidden and stolen stories.⁵⁶
- 115 I have performed in a number of productions, movies and series, including: *The Blood Knot*, *Jack Charles Is Up and Fighting*, *Brumby Innes*, *Bastardy*, *Ben Hall*, *Carriage*, *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith*, *No Sugar*, *Pan* and *Jack Charles v The Crown*.⁵⁷

⁵² *Born-again Blakfella*: Chapter 10 'Archie', pdf 98.

⁵³ *Bastardy* (2009): 10:00 – 12:15.

⁵⁴ RCIRCSA Statement, [46].

⁵⁵ *Born-Again Blakfella*, Chapter 9.

⁵⁶ *Born-Again Blakfella* pp. 107-108, 122-137, 175; *Bastardy* (2009): 9:58 – 12:04.

⁵⁷ *Born-Again Blakfella* pp.107-108, 122-137, 175.

- 116 The Pentridge people allowed me to leave the jail to go and see the premiere of *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith*. They shouldn't have released me, I was sentenced to two years. They said "go to the premiere, it's your night".
- 117 *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith* was one of the best films I ever did. I felt I did well for myself as the character, Harry Edwards the murderer who gets raped and hung by Ray Barrett the copper.
- 118 My other achievements in the arts and public life include:⁵⁸
- (a) I was photographed as part of Rod McNicol's series called 'A Portrait Revisited' which won the 2012 National Photographic Portrait Prize and was acquired by the National Portrait Gallery;
 - (b) I appeared in Ahn Do's TV program Brush with Fame in 2017, with the painting winning the People's Choice Award at the Archibald Prize; and
 - (c) I was named Senior Victorian of the Year in 2016 for my community work as an Elder and actor.

Community work and priorities for the future

- 119 Prisons need to support Elders coming in and talking, having these roundtable conversations. As a prisoner, you need to understand that this place is a safe environment for you to talk about what you've witnessed with your own family. It's no shame job to admit down the track, once you're comfortable with this process, that you were one of the bashers. You're on a road, it's difficult to even step onto that particular road, but you wanna change it, you want to walk forward.
- 120 Another thing we need to re-introduce is the gold shield to go into any police station - it used to happen in the 70s, people from the Aboriginal Health Service were given gold shields, they could go into any police station to keep a black watch.
- 121 If we had community hubs, we'd entice the police to bring blackfellas into the community hub, rather than into the police cells. We'd look after them. We need to have these community hubs revisited, restocked, refurbished, refunded and that.
- 122 The program Marumali changed my life by teaching me about my kin, and culture. It provided me with certainty and clarity.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ *Born-Again Blakfella* pp 197-211.

⁵⁹ *Born-Again Blakfella* pp. 213-220.

- 123 After my last stint in prison I managed to end my addiction to heroin and then methadone, after which I undertook the role of my community's missing feather-foot, Kadiaitcha man, lore man, and this helped me find my purpose.⁶⁰
- 124 Wron Wron has been decommissioned as a jail and is a healing place now. People are asked by the Magistrates, '*what would you like to do, would you like to go to the healing place or go to the jail?*'. Many of them reconnect there. All the cells have disappeared, but the cottages are there, the education centre is still there, and evidence of my time there still stands.
- 125 I'm proud that I went through Wron Wron and now it's looked after by Sean Braybrook, wonderful bloke, and his missus. They've had successes in turning people's lives around and had success with reconnecting people because of the opportunity by firstly a Magistrate or Judge asking people 'would you like to do Wron Wron?'. It's a healing place.
- 126 I've gone out and spoken to them, real black fellas. The message I'm giving them whether I'm zooming into jails or appearing in the flesh. I give them my timely advice. "*Real black fellas ought not to be shooting white powder*".
- 127 It is my mission to reach out to as many of these kids as I can to remind them that they are seen and loved.⁶¹

Dated: 26 April 2022

⁶⁰ *Born-Again Blakfella* pdf 125.

⁶¹ *Born-Again Blakfella* pp. 213-220.

Yoorrook Justice Commission**BALERT KEETYARRA OF UNCLE JACK CHARLES****Introduction**

- 1 My full name is Jack Charles. I was born on 6 September 1943.
- 2 I currently live in Northcote.
- 3 I am an Aboriginal man, with connections to several Victorian nations, including Taungurung, Boon Wurrung, Dja Dja Wurrung, Woiwurrung and Yorta Yorta. I also have connections to the Wiradjuri nation in New South Wales, and Tasmanian ancestry, from the Palawa people.
- 4 I have worked with Counsel and Solicitors Assisting to prepare this *Balert Keetyarra* (witness statement) ahead of the Elders' Truth-Telling *Wurrek Tyerrang* (hearings) for the Yoorrook Justice Commission (**Yoorrook**). It covers the following aspects of my life:
 - (a) my experiences as a member of the Stolen Generations, having been removed from my mother when I was about 4 months old;
 - (b) my experiences as a ward of the State in homes and foster care, including a lack of care and love, and physical, emotional and sexual abuse;
 - (c) my eventual reunion with my mother in my late teens;
 - (d) meeting some of my siblings in childhood and adulthood, my difficulties connecting with them, and their own struggles, particularly in the case of my brother Archie;
 - (e) my drug addiction developed in my early adulthood;
 - (f) my criminal record, from burglaries (or "burgs") to fund my addiction, leading to long stretches of time in prison;
 - (g) the programs in prison which put me on a different path, and inspired me to connect with my Aboriginal identity and contribute to community;
 - (h) my successful acting career, spanning theatre, film and TV; and

- (i) recent discoveries about by ancestry and identity, from my participation in a TV program *Who Do You Think You Are?*
- 5 I have previously contributed to a number of books, documentaries and films about my life, including:
- (a) ***Who Do You Think You Are? Jack Charles (2021)***¹: In 2021, I appeared in an episode of the SBS television program *Who Do You Think You Are?* In this episode, I traced my family history back across two centuries and learnt more about the history of my ancestors, including aspects of my heritage and identity that I had not known about as a member of the Stolen Generations.
- (b) ***Born-Again Blakfella (2019)***²: *Born-Again Blakfella*, which was published in August 2019, is a memoir about my life. It recounts my experiences throughout my life as an actor, burglar, musician, addict, activist and Aboriginal Elder.
- (c) ***Bastardy (2008)***³: *Bastardy*, which was released in 2008, is a documentary film that followed my life for a period of six years during a period where I juggled acting work with homelessness, addiction and burglary.
- 6 I have also previously given a witness statement concerning my experiences of abuse at the Box Hill Boys' Home:
- (a) ***Witness Statement for Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (RCIRCSA Statement)*** (2015): In September 2015, I prepared a witness statement, which related to 'Case Study 33: *The Salvation Army (Southern Territory)*'. The statement describes my experiences of physical and sexual abuse while I was a ward of the State at the Box Hill Boys' Home, and the ongoing and significant impact of these experiences on my life.
- 7 This *Balert Keetyarra* at times refers to, and is supported by, these key information sources. I would like Yoorrook to consider these additional materials.
- 8 During the course of preparing this *Balert Keetyarra*, some questions have arisen, which I understand will be the subject of requests for documents (including Notice(s) to Produce). Given both these the breadth of the matters in this *Balert Keetyarra*, and the

¹ SBS Television, *Who Do You Think You Are?* Season 12, Episode 5.

See: <https://www.sbs.com.au/ondemand/program/who-do-you-think-you-are>

² J. Charles with N. Benson (2019) *Born-Again Blakfella*, Penguin Australia Pty Ltd.

See: <https://www.penguin.com.au/books/jack-charles-9781760899158>

³ A. Courtin-Wilson and P Campey (2008).

See: <https://www.screenaustralia.gov.au/the-screen-guide/t/bastardy-2009/20129/>

possibility of further documents becoming available, I have been advised by the Solicitor Assisting team that:

- (a) additional documentation relevant to this *Balert Keetyarra* may be tendered in future; and
- (b) it is possible that I will be recalled at a later *Wurrek Tyerrang*.

Stolen Child

9 I was four months old when I was **snatched** from my mother, Blanchie Charles, and placed into City Mission Home for Babies in Brunswick. My mother was 15 years old at the time that I was taken, and I believe at that time, she was herself a ward of the State.⁴

10 From that time, I was a ward of the State.

11 I understand that I am the eldest of eleven children taken from my mother. The siblings I know of are:

- (a) Esme Charles;
- (b) Eva Jo Charles;
- (c) Zenip Charles; and
- (d) Arthur (Artie / Archie) Charles.

12 I understand that another two children died at birth.⁵ To this day, I don't know what happened to six of my siblings.⁶

13 I was taken from my Mum and placed in a series of homes to be raised as a white person. Nobody ever taught me love. I was never raised in a loving situation, never held. I can't remember ever being held as a child, as a baby.⁷

14 I was not told anything about Aboriginal people, our languages or our culture. I knew I looked different, but didn't understand the differences in culture at all.

15 I experienced the policies of child removal as a divide-and-conquer method of destroying my sense of identity and self-esteem. Ignorance, misdirection and miseducation were central to keeping me from knowing who I was.⁸

⁴ *Born-Again Blakfella* pdf 17; RCIRCSA Statement, [6].

⁵ *Who Do You Think You Are?* 31:53 – 32; *Born-Again Blakfella* pdf 53.

⁶ *Born-Again Blakfella* pdf 53.

⁷ *Bastardy* (2009), 46:13.

⁸ *Born-Again Blakfella*, pp. 218-220.

Institutional abuse

- 16 In my early years, I lived:⁹
- (a) in City Mission Home for babies in Brunswick until the age of 2;
 - (b) at the Salvation Army Boys' Home, Box Hill from the age of 2 to 4;
 - (c) in Cardinia Children's Home in Geelong for approximately 14 months;
 - (d) again at the Salvation Army Boys' Home from the age of 5 to 13; and
 - (e) from the age of 14, at foster home, with a family called the Murphys.
- 17 For most of my time at the Box Hill Boys' Home, until the very last months, I was the only Aboriginal child. Seeing photos of myself there, different homes would have the group home shot, there I was, deadset in the middle. I must have been a novelty, being the only black fella there.
- 18 There's photographs of me that we have pulled from the Salvo archives of a group of us at Mt Donna Buang or something. There's us, the Box Hill Boys' Home boys, on an excursion, and there's a clump of snow on my head. Is that a metaphor for the life I experienced growing up? The world I inhabited is snow field white.
- 19 I was a person of interest with the Salvation Army people. They could make use of me being their favourite little Aboriginal boy.
- 20 I was given elocution lessons in the Box Hill Boys' Home by a teacher who took me in tow. Basically at the state school based in the home, SS4151, I was the cleaner there and I was sent out often to the garden to grow chrysanthemums and enter them into the annual Box Hill Horticulture Society. I did get a semblance of education. I was looked after by this one teacher there who taught me elocution, taught me the monetary system, so I left the home knowing the monetary system pretty well, and a very well-spoken boy. The teacher who gave me elocution lessons, he was fond of me, in the right way. And the headmaster was also fond of me.
- 21 Anyway, the teacher who gave me elocution lessons, he died. And a group of us at the home were allowed to go to the Box Hill for the cemetery and et cetera. And because I cried at the funeral, the older boys when I got back to the home bashed me, pretty hard too. So I remember that, that was traumatic. Because, you know, he was a

⁹ RCIRCSA Statement, [6]-[8]; *Born-Again Blakfella*, pdf 27 - 28.

wonderful fella and because I cried at his funeral; I got bashed. I didn't cry at funerals after that.

22 Whilst at the Box Hill Boys' Home, I suffered neglect, physical and sexual abuse from both the staff and other boys, who were repeating what was being done to them.¹⁰

23 For decades after I left the home, I carried my silence and shame of those years, conveniently blocking out names and incidents. My defence mechanism was to pretend it never happened. I didn't dwell on what I'd endured there or what I'd do if I saw any of my abusers again. I never got counselling. I counselled myself through those terrible times.¹¹

24 From my experiences, I was immune to being sensitive, and had difficulties connecting intimately with others, including in romantic relationships.¹² It wasn't just the abuse that traumatised me, the Box Hill Boys' Home stripped me of my Aboriginality. It's hard to convey the damage that place did to me.

25 That silencing of my pain and anguish led to a heroin addiction, which took over much of my adult life. It numbed the deep pain. But in the end, it couldn't numb all the pain, and in truth on more than one occasion I attempted suicide, but failed each time.¹³

26 The abuse also had a significant impact on my sexual identity. I grew up thinking that sexual abuse was normal. I didn't understand the difference between consensual and non-consensual sex as all I had experienced at Box Hill was forced sexual interaction.¹⁴

Early encounters with my siblings

27 A month or two before I was leaving Box Hill, there were a bunch of Aboriginal kids coming through. I wasn't allowed to, but I snuck around and spoke to them. One young lad said, "*my name's Charles*". I remember saying "*it would be funny if we were brothers mate*", but the sister wasn't allowed to tell us. The Salvos wasn't allowed to tell us what I later found out, that this young fella Arthur Charles was indeed my brother.

28 I used sing at old people's homes with a Methodist church group. Irony of ironies, we went up to Nunawading to entertain the girls at Winlaton Girls Home. Amongst all those little girls there were these two small waiflike Aboriginal children. And of course I

¹⁰ See RCIRCSA Statement.

¹¹ *Born-Again Blakfella*, pdf 26.

¹² See *Bastardy* (2009), 46:13 – 50:47.

¹³ *Born-Again Blakfella*, pp. 218-220.

¹⁴ RCIRCSA Statement, [40] – [41].

just had to go up to ask them their names. The elder of the two shyly responded "*I'm Esmee and this is my sister Eva-Joe*". I said, "*What are your last names ladies?*" And she said "*Charles*". I said "*well I'm a Charles too, and wouldn't it be funny if we were brothers and sisters?*"

29 And of course, I later found out that we were.

Adolescence and early adulthood

30 From the age of 14, I lived with the Murphy family as a foster child. This was after Mrs Murphy wrote to the Aborigines Welfare Board asking to take me on permanently.¹⁵

31 I felt like a 'tolerated outsider'. Despite this, I called Mrs Murphy 'Mum'.

32 I kept trying to ask Mrs Murphy questions about my background. I recall one particular moment, which happened about nine months after I'd started living with her. It took all my courage to raise this with Mum – she was so set in her ways. I said to her: '*There was a young fella that came to Box Hill just before I left, Mum. His name was Archie and he had the same last name, Charles. I reckon he could be my brother.*' She responded with, '*No, he couldn't be. No, no, Jack. All those kids are orphans too.*' I didn't argue the point but her dismissiveness stung my soul. I knew she was wrong.

33 From the time I moved in, I was working in a glass bevelling apprenticeship arranged by the Aborigines Welfare Board. I paid 'full board,' or 80% of my wages to Mrs Murphy.

34 My workmates encouraged me to connect with my Aboriginality. Just shy of my seventeenth birthday and only six months off completing my apprenticeship, I jumped on a tram to Fitzroy. I hadn't thought of asking permission from Mrs Murphy.¹⁶

35 After I jumped off the tram, I stood on the corner of Napier and Gertrude streets, trying to get my bearings about where to go. Within minutes, an old blackfella approached me and grabbed my arm. "*You're Blanchie Charles's boy!*" he shouted. It was the first time I'd heard this name. Blanchie Charles. My real mum's name.¹⁷

36 The man gestured for me to follow him into the Royal Hotel. Walking into that building absolutely blew my mind. Nearly every face in the place was black. I couldn't believe it! For my entire life, I'd been the only noticeably black person in any space and yet here I

¹⁵ *Born-again Blakfella*, pdf 29.

¹⁶ *Born-again Blakfella*, pdf 34.

¹⁷ *Born-again Blakfella*, pdf 35.

was, in a sea of blackfellas. I couldn't believe this was Melbourne – I'd never experienced a Melbourne that looked like this.¹⁸

37 As people began to notice my presence, they started rushing up to introduce themselves, all smiles, telling me we were family and explaining how we were related. I got hugs, friendly slaps on the back and offers of beer (which I politely declined). I was engulfed by overwhelming feelings of shock and delight. It was like a piece had clicked into the jigsaw. People knew that I was a Charles. They knew my mother, Blanchie.¹⁹

38 I ripped open my pay packet, which I'd never done before. Mrs Murphy was always the one to open the envelope and dole out my share. I shouted a few beers and happily settled down with a lemon squash as I continued chatting, connecting and learning more about my culture, my family, these people.²⁰

39 One old woman revealed that my mum was still alive. "*She's up in Swan Hill, little fella. You have to go and see her. Oh, I'm gonna tell her about you, the first chance I get.*"²¹

40 So it was with great joy that I arrived home at Mrs Murphy's. I saw the lights on as I approached the house and was happy that Mrs Murphy was still up. I bounced through the door and my first words were: "*Mum. I've just found Mum!*"²²

41 Her reaction was not what I expected. She stood cold and distant. She dismissed me and reiterated what she'd always told me, that I was an orphan. My confusion turned to rage. We were soon embroiled in a furious argument. When she said, "*Those people will tell you anything*" I saw red. "*Well, I believe them!*" I shot back and raised my arms in emphasis. "*Get to bed!*" she hissed.²³

42 I headed to my room. I took off my work clothes and had just finished putting on my pyjamas when 'Mum' called my name. I came out and saw her standing at the front door. She motioned to me, telling me I had to go outside. Puzzled, I went out the door. It was the police. Mrs Murphy didn't say a word. Two policemen escorted me to the divvy wagon. They told me to jump in. I didn't understand why they'd been called, or what I had done wrong, but I was in too much shock to speak.²⁴

43 We drove for what felt like an eternity. I had no idea where they were taking me. Eventually we stopped. The door opened and I was told to step out. We were at a

¹⁸ *Born-again Blakfella*, pdf 35.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Born-again Blakfella*, pdf 36.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

place called Turana, a youth detention centre in Parkville. It was the place that marked the beginning of my criminalisation.²⁵ I was locked alone in my cell, and cried myself to sleep that night.

- 44 My boss at the glass bevelling factory on Riversdale Road in Hawthorn, Alf Clark, bailed me out because I was his best Aboriginal worker. He called Mum when I didn't come to work, and she would have told him that she didn't want a bar of me.

Further attempts at connection with community

- 45 At that point I became independent from the Murphys.
- 46 But I still had a yearning for family so I decided to return to the mob in Fitzroy and Collingwood. I felt a distance between us. That distance was magnified by my paranoia – I was very aware all of a sudden that I had been raised away from my family, essentially had been raised up 'white'. Many of the older mob I met had been brought up by mothers, fathers, uncles, aunties, cousins, and so on. Somehow or other, they had the right names or the right words to attach to themselves.

Reconnection with my mother

- 47 My workmates at my apprenticeship pointed out that I could write the letter to my mother and address it care of the Swan Hill police. So I did. The sergeant wrote back saying, "*It would be good to see you. I know your mum well.*"²⁶ I made plans to venture up to meet Mum. Apparently she lived between Moulamein and Swan Hill, about forty kilometres out. Her humpy was on the banks of the Edwards River.
- 48 I told my boss "*Alf I'm going up to meet my mum, I'll be in Swan Hill over the Christmas holidays*". Alf said "*You bloody prodigal, I'll fly you up Jack*".
- 49 The sergeant said he would meet me at the airport to take me to Mum. He suggested I bring a gift. "*Look, Jack,*" he said, "*you're playing the prodigal son.*" He used that same phrase. "*You'll get a better reception from your mum if you take her a carton of Melbourne Bitter. She likes a drink.*"²⁷
- 50 Once the details of my visit were locked in, I wrote a letter directly to Mum, care of the sergeant. I didn't quite know how to form the words. I decided to keep the letter simple: "*I am Jack Charles. I believe I am your son. I'm flying up around Christmas time.*"

²⁵ *Born-again Blakfella*, pdf 37.

²⁶ *Born-again Blakfella*, pp 49-50.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

Apparently the sergeant in Swan Hill is going to pick me up, Mum. He will arrange to have me delivered to your place".²⁸

51 I stayed with Mum for three weeks. We didn't exactly bond. I believe this is because all of her 11 children were removed.²⁹ All of us were taken, and I think, what a hard life my mum must have had.³⁰

52 When I was there, I plucked up the courage to ask about siblings. I asked her, "*is there an Arthur?*" and she said "*Artie, your brother's name is Artie. Named after Artie Smith, living in Moe.*" I said "*okay, is there an Esme and Eva-Jo?*" she said "*yes, but you have a third sister, Zenip, you look out for them*". I had seen them, I told her I had met them. She said, "*you look after them*".³¹

53 I wasn't told anything else about her life and was not told who my father was. I do not know the reasons she became a ward of the State.

54 I discovered that she liked to be alone. She didn't want anything to do with the other blacks in the black fella camp behind the Federal Hotel. In that camp, the houses there looked like the wooden huts from the slave era that I've read in books in America, carbon copies of the same kind of huts. I was a little bit frightened to venture into that area.

55 We lived a wonderful life, I thought it was great. There were five surrounding farms, looked after by old Clary Pike and mum, mostly Clary. We had two Ford Prefect utilities, so I was able to learn to drive. We would go to various properties nearby to help contain the rabbit population down. Clary and mum were making good money from that. I liked rabbit, and wild duck for breakfast and all that, and we were on the river. It was a good life.

56 I found out later that Mum had been ostracised by community because of her role in a killing, involving a prominent Aboriginal family in NSW. It had isolated her, and the memory of the events seemed to still haunt her.³²

57 I was a gay, black, young man in the outback, out of place in Swan Hill. Trying to impress and be part of this community. But the community was soaked in alcohol, and I wasn't happy with it. That's why I went.

²⁸ *Born-again Blakfella*, pp 49-50.

²⁹ *Born-again Blakfella*, 52.

³⁰ *Who Do You Think You Are?* 31:53 – 32.

³¹ *Born-again Blakfella*, p 43.

³² *Born-again Blakfella*, p 52.

58 I went into Swan Hill and sent a telegram to Alf my boss and said, "*I'm not coming back*".

59 After about 6 months working jackaroo-ing on a property between Finley and Tocumwal, I went back to Melbourne. and was working in a hostel and that's where I was discovered, a bit after that. The hostel was by the new theatre, and I got into theatre that way.

Drug addiction, homelessness, criminal justice and incarceration

Drug addiction

60 In my late teens I dabbled in alcohol, marijuana, recreational drugs before moving onto heroin in 1973.³³

61 Heroin helped with my 'heavy heart'.³⁴ It became what I lived for. I could have a whack and put my pain on the back burner.

62 I often dreamt about the pain my mother endured losing all 13 of her children. I would deal with this by having a whack. I do rue the day, however, that I did start.³⁵

Crime

63 I began burgling people in Toorak, Kew, South Yarra and Camberwell in my teens.³⁶

64 When I started robbing people, I classified it as 'collecting the rent'. I justified my actions as a hunter gatherer, going onto prime Aboriginal land – my mother's lands, to collect what was due.³⁷ I couldn't take it [that rationale] to the judge, he'd give me another 5 years to wake up to myself.

65 The police love me here in Victoria. I always cleaned their books up for them. They took me for long rides and I pointed out the houses I had robbed. I was given fair treatment for having done so. They took me for my word and believed me. I was upfront about those things.

66 I was, however, mistreated by the police on several occasions.

67 I had a .38 shoved in my mouth in Prahran lock up one time. I told the bullshitter to pull the trigger. He nearly pulled it, and yanked the pistol out. The sight at the end of the

³³ *Born-Again Blakfella*, 'Prologue'.

³⁴ *Bastardy* (2009): 13:16.

³⁵ *Bastardy* (2009): 4:04 – 5:40.

³⁶ *Born-Again Blakfella*, pdf 62.

³⁷ *Bastardy* (2009): 25:40 – 27:20; *Born-Again Blakfella*, pp. 48.

barrel there knocked a chip out of one of my beautiful buck teeth. He wanted to shut me up, I was having a go at him.

68 Another time, I was taken by some detectives up into the hills where I was told I was going to be murdered. They wanted to get information out of me. I was living with a gangster at the time in Camberwell. I thought it was gonna be the end of me. But no, no, they had to drive me back down.

69 Special treatment for Aboriginal people was par for the course. Blackfellas were an object to be used to blood the young cadets.

Incarceration

70 I was always glad when I did get busted as I would get a break from it all in prison, a rest from the burgs. I would adjust to prison life.

71 I celebrated my 20th, 30th, 40th and 50th birthdays behind bars³⁸. The last time I was imprisoned, it was my twenty-second time.³⁹

72 When I first went into Pentridge, everyone knew me, most of the rising talent in the gangsterdom were ex-boys home old boys – Burwood, Bayswater, Box Hill et cetera. We all met, many of us, many of us were the Stolen Generations. We gave each other a measure of protection.

73 I never had any troubles about my elocution. I suspected everybody knew that I was gay, that I was a poof, going into Pentridge. So, I was afforded that respect. Many of these gangsters, Chopper Read type people, would ask me to write their letters for them. In the morning in the D Division wing after brekky, they would give me a choccy bar, but nobody ever came at me wanting to have their way with me in all the years that I have done in all the jails that I have done time in.

74 In the old days you'd be asked by the classification governors, '*Jack, you're doing 5 years this time, you've done Castlemaine and Bendigo, would you like Beechworth?*' They gave you a choice. I did all three jails in Dja Dja Wurrung Country and I really enjoyed my time there in those jails because I got educated and I learned the fine art of ceramics there in that jail and I became a leading light. I taught people how to throw pots on a wheel, I taught them how to control and contain themselves in that environment.

³⁸ *Bastardy* (2009): 1:13.

³⁹ *Born-Again Blakfella*, chapter 12; *Bastardy* (2009): 1:01:36 – 1:02:50, 1:08 – 1:11.

75 In the open camp Wron Wron in Gippsland had my pottery shop open 7 days a week from 8am – 8pm, that’s how well I had the Governor wrapped around my little finger. Because we made a profit, and it went back to the prison, not only to the education department but for new gear for the footy club or the cricketing club in Wron Wron jail. I called it “Psycho-ceramica”, because you had to be a crackpot to be in there in the first place.

Homelessness

76 I lived in a state of homelessness throughout the majority of my life.

77 In *Bastardy*, I describe some of the places I used to sleep when living on the streets.⁴⁰ That documentary also showed the time that the Aboriginal Health Service assisted me to find my first unit. They said “*we’re sick and tired of you being homeless, we’re going to give you a unit*”. I was so lucky to get this unit; it was the first winter I’d spent under cover. I was about 60 years old at this time.⁴¹

78 Once I was embedded there, I only ever did one more robbery. And that’s the one you see in *Bastardy*, the doco. The idea of putting that all down on a big screen for the world to see, doesn’t embarrass me, it’s no shame job, because my life, as I see it, is a variation on so many other lives, they don’t have the opportunity like I have through *Bastardy*, through *Jack Charles Vs The Crown*, through *Who Do You Think You Are?* to be given the full scope of that which had been lost, denied and hidden from me.

79 It took about 6 years off and on filming *Bastardy*, I outed myself in so many ways that I hadn’t really intended to, but it all went well because other people seeing that, black and white, seeing that documentary enabled them in their own right to take stock of their situation, and to move themselves out of that particular rut that they saw me in at the time.

Racism and segregation

80 There were many occasions in my life where I have been faced with discriminatory behaviour on the basis of my race.

81 At 18 years of age, I wasn’t allowed to swim in the Swan Hill City Baths. I was knocked back from going in there. I was so shocked. I was in the queue for some time. This big bloke behind me with his kids picked me up and set me aside so he could gain entry

⁴⁰ *Bastardy* (2009): 7:00 – 9:25.

⁴¹ *Bastardy* (2009): 51:30 – 52:10.

with his kids into the Baths. I was shell shocked. I was told that I had to swim in the Murray.

82 The night after I was awarded Senior Victorian Australian of the Year, a taxi driver insisted that I pay, or that my manager pay, in advance of accepting my fare as “*he may not pay.*”⁴² I had been on such a high from the thrill of the event. But the racial vilification from the taxi driver and humiliation ruined my night and undermined that experience.

83 Taxi drivers either refusing to pick me up, or demanding payment in advance, has happened many times and each incident is like a pinch on my soul, my humanity. It knocks me around that for all of my accolades, both on and off the stage, I am still regularly refused a ride.⁴³

Identity and reconnecting

84 I never knew who my father was for my whole life, until I recently appeared on the SBS television program *Who Do You Think You Are?* During the filming of that program I learnt my father’s true identity through DNA testing. I was told that he was Hilton Hamilton Walsh, an Aboriginal man of the Walsh family. There are a number of Walshes that live in Melbourne that I have come to know over the years, but I had no idea that we were related.

85 When I was told Hilton Walsh was my father, it came out of the blue and hit me like a ton of bricks, it floored me.⁴⁴ Through that show, I met a younger brother, Grady Walsh. I hadn’t really expected that I’d find my father, let alone having any living siblings.

86 I understand that I have another 13 siblings through my father, but all are deceased except Grady.

87 It’s great to have all these different elements of your heritage being given on to you. However, the process was also confronting and overwhelming. I have a profound sense of pissed-offedness about what’s gone by and what’s not been allowed until my latter years in life. It took a lot of time and many resources to find out my identity as a member of the Stolen Generations. If I had not had such a high profile, I would never have received this information.

⁴² *Born-Again Blakfella* 200-204.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Who Do You Think You Are?* 13:10 – 16:50.

- 88 It's tough being denied the rightful inheritance of who I really am – my identity. At times it's traumatic, because I'm almost at the end of the journey and I'm still discovering my story.⁴⁵
- 89 Through *Who Do You Think You Are?* I also learned that my Great Grandmother 'Granny Annie' experienced difficult times at Coranderrk, including at times a reduction of rations, watering down of medicine.
- 90 The records also captured Granny Annie's resilience – she rebelled against the Government and successfully fought for Coranderrk to become a permanent reserve where Aboriginal people could work the land as they saw fit, and in doing so was 1 of 4 Aboriginal women who gave evidence at the Government Inquiry about the poor living conditions.⁴⁶
- 91 Through *Who Do You Think You Are?*, I also learnt that my maternal ancestry traces back to Tasmania, and that my four times Great Grandmother was Woretemoeteyenner and five times great grandfather was Mannalargenna, a senior and important man of the Plangermaireener people.
- 92 The story of Woretemoeteyenner and Mannalargenna is told through this program, including that they were taken from their country and moved to a reservation on Flinders Island, with Mannalargenna dying seven weeks after moving to Flinders Island.⁴⁷
- 93 I found it so amazing to learn how far back my people did go. My story was lost, but slowly it has been found again, and I was proud to learn I came from so many resilient people.
- 94 My people the Palawa, my great-great-great-great-greats, were set upon. I heard some horrible stories down there, it was the men that were telling me the hard truths. The women were floating over the more difficult subjects, like when Woretemoeteyenner was latched onto by George Briggs, part of the sealers mob, they grabbed onto the women, they realised that as the rest of the country was going through killing everyone else, these sealers realised that this was women's business killing the seals, not men's. So they had a woman and a killer of seals. So George Briggs latched onto Woretemoeteyenner, and they had kids.

⁴⁵ *Born-Again Blakfella* pp. 218-220.

⁴⁶ *Who Do You Think You Are?* 19:00 – 27:33.

⁴⁷ *Who Do You Think You Are?* 52:58 – 57:10.

- 95 When they decimated the population of the seals and walrus around Tassie, some of them went over to New Zealand and some went to Albany. And my great-great-grandmother was placed on an island off Albany and left there because George Briggs was asked to come back to chart the entire coast of Tasmania for the government and then after that he was asked to go back and build more ships, probably to bring more convicts back to Tasmania.
- 96 Thereafter, George Augustus Robinson was a renowned person working with the Palawa people. I've worked it out that this man had been charged with the responsibility of developing a final solution for the Aboriginal problem in Tasmania. A final solution. So he conned my great (times five) grandfather, they were on good terms apparently to get his people to board a ship to take them over the Flinders Island and some over to Lady Cape Barron Island, and it was designed as a death camp. Very few people were allowed to leave. You see me reading a letter in that episode of *Who Do You Think You Are*, written by Dalrymple, one of Woretemoetyenner's daughters, asking the authorities to allow her mum to come back to her to live in Tasmania, which the authorities did. A few people were allowed to leave the island, only on those kind of written requests from their daughters and their sons.
- 97 I was fully involved in learning to understand what terrible times our great-great-great-great-greats had. The suffering that was brought upon them. Especially the women. The men were telling me that it was the women who suffered the most. They were tortured before they were killed. There were bonfires of black bodies. How could you bleed this onto any Tasmanian state school's curriculum? This is something that is within my responsibility as an elder statesperson, as a man of conscience to try and impress the Minister for Education and the Premier of Tasmania and here in Victoria, let's bleed truth in history into our school curriculum.
- 98 Alan Tudge, some time ago when he was the Federal Minister for Education had loudly scoffed at the idea, that we cannot bleed what really happened here in Australia onto our school's curriculums, "*Australian children might not like Australia*". Those were his words.
- 99 I can understand why truth in history has never been done here. We have an attempt with this truth telling commission in allaying that problem. We are setting the bar here.
- 100 But you can sense that I am really upset and learning this new information about who exactly I am. It has been strengthening, these tidbits of information I'm getting from people emailing me saying they're related to the great Mannalargenna, they're related to Dalrymple from Perth et cetera. There are so many people reaching out to me via

email telling me of their connection with my family because they saw me on TV. I'm a known article so people feel obliged to contact me and tell me of their connections as family. It's great.

Adult relationships with siblings

101 The Koorie Heritage Trust gave me some documents in around 2008, after *Bastardy*, which confirmed that Esme, Eva Jo, Zenip and Archie were my siblings. How we sought to reconnect later in life. We tried our darndest to bond beyond all the years we had lost.⁴⁸

102 I recall also seeing some documents about my six missing Charles siblings, their names.

Archie

103 Archie, like me, came to be addicted to drugs.⁴⁹ Archie, like me, ended up in prison for stealing.

104 Archie had a much more difficult time in prison due to his lack of understanding of unspoken rules. If you looked at a prison officer, for example, you were immediately bashed against a bluestone wall. Archie, through no fault of his own, struggled to understand these rules.⁵⁰

105 At some point, Archie was moved from an ordinary prison to a prison for the criminally insane. He was taken to the Aradale institution for the criminally insane. I've since spoken to a couple of guys who were up there with him, and they told me they saw my brother being raped and overloaded with psych drugs.⁵¹

106 Seeing him really shocked me when he came out, because physically he'd changed so much. He was limping, he had a hunched back, and his arm was often stretched up and curled over his head. Someone said it was a sign of Archie protecting himself from the bashings, but I knew it was more than that, likely an overload of the psych drugs they'd given him.

⁴⁸ *Born-again Blakfella*, p. 142.

⁴⁹ *Born-again Blakfella*: Chapter 10 'Archie'.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

- 107 I tried to go to the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal to seek a proper care package for Archie. However, it was too difficult to get records from any of the prisons he had been in, Pentridge, Aradale, H Division. The records could not be found.⁵²
- 108 I wish I had been in a position to do more for Archie, although I was battling with my own issues.
- 109 Before he died, he was deaf in one ear, blind in one eye, he had AIDS, he had tuberculosis, his arse didn't work, he had kidney problems, and his heart was not functioning at all well.
- 110 The system didn't seem to be capable of dealing with Archie's high-level needs, on account of his mental difficulties.
- 111 I was suggesting that maybe he should be put in a special unit down in Royal Melbourne Hospital, down there, and given heroin. Then he could be stable enough for them to work on his other problems, his medical problems. But no, I couldn't be heard, I couldn't be the one to give them sage advice, because I was fucked up myself.

Film and theatre

- 112 I started a career in acting in 1964 at age 19.⁵³ In a way it saved me; I think I owe my life to having found the theatre.⁵⁴
- 113 It was through theatre that I began to understand and connect with my Aboriginality. My life in the arts, including film and theatre, stirred my awareness of Indigeneity, and my understanding of the truth of Australia's treatment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.⁵⁵
- 114 In 1971, in conjunction with Bob Maza, I co-founded Aboriginal theatre company Nindethana. Theatre gave us a platform to reclaim ownership over our hidden and stolen stories.⁵⁶
- 115 I have performed in a number of productions, movies and series, including: *The Blood Knot*, *Jack Charles Is Up and Fighting*, *Brumby Innes*, *Bastardy*, *Ben Hall*, *Carriage*, *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith*, *No Sugar*, *Pan* and *Jack Charles v The Crown*.⁵⁷

⁵² *Born-again Blakfella*: Chapter 10 'Archie', pdf 98.

⁵³ *Bastardy* (2009): 10:00 – 12:15.

⁵⁴ RCIRCSA Statement, [46].

⁵⁵ *Born-Again Blakfella*, Chapter 9.

⁵⁶ *Born-Again Blakfella* pp. 107-108, 122-137, 175; *Bastardy* (2009): 9:58 – 12:04.

⁵⁷ *Born-Again Blakfella* pp.107-108, 122-137, 175.

- 116 The Pentridge people allowed me to leave the jail to go and see the premiere of *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith*. They shouldn't have released me, I was sentenced to two years. They said "go to the premiere, it's your night".
- 117 *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith* was one of the best films I ever did. I felt I did well for myself as the character, Harry Edwards the murderer who gets raped and hung by Ray Barrett the copper.
- 118 My other achievements in the arts and public life include:⁵⁸
- (a) I was photographed as part of Rod McNicol's series called 'A Portrait Revisited' which won the 2012 National Photographic Portrait Prize and was acquired by the National Portrait Gallery;
 - (b) I appeared in Ahn Do's TV program Brush with Fame in 2017, with the painting winning the People's Choice Award at the Archibald Prize; and
 - (c) I was named Senior Victorian of the Year in 2016 for my community work as an Elder and actor.

Community work and priorities for the future

- 119 Prisons need to support Elders coming in and talking, having these roundtable conversations. As a prisoner, you need to understand that this place is a safe environment for you to talk about what you've witnessed with your own family. It's no shame job to admit down the track, once you're comfortable with this process, that you were one of the bashers. You're on a road, it's difficult to even step onto that particular road, but you wanna change it, you want to walk forward.
- 120 Another thing we need to re-introduce is the gold shield to go into any police station - it used to happen in the 70s, people from the Aboriginal Health Service were given gold shields, they could go into any police station to keep a black watch.
- 121 If we had community hubs, we'd entice the police to bring blackfellas into the community hub, rather than into the police cells. We'd look after them. We need to have these community hubs revisited, restocked, refurbished, refunded and that.
- 122 The program Marumali changed my life by teaching me about my kin, and culture. It provided me with certainty and clarity.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ *Born-Again Blakfella* pp 197-211.

⁵⁹ *Born-Again Blakfella* pp. 213-220.

- 123 After my last stint in prison I managed to end my addiction to heroin and then methadone, after which I undertook the role of my community's missing feather-foot, Kadiaitcha man, lore man, and this helped me find my purpose.⁶⁰
- 124 Wron Wron has been decommissioned as a jail and is a healing place now. People are asked by the Magistrates, '*what would you like to do, would you like to go to the healing place or go to the jail?*'. Many of them reconnect there. All the cells have disappeared, but the cottages are there, the education centre is still there, and evidence of my time there still stands.
- 125 I'm proud that I went through Wron Wron and now it's looked after by Sean Braybrook, wonderful bloke, and his missus. They've had successes in turning people's lives around and had success with reconnecting people because of the opportunity by firstly a Magistrate or Judge asking people 'would you like to do Wron Wron?'. It's a healing place.
- 126 I've gone out and spoken to them, real black fellas. The message I'm giving them whether I'm zooming into jails or appearing in the flesh. I give them my timely advice. "*Real black fellas ought not to be shooting white powder*".
- 127 It is my mission to reach out to as many of these kids as I can to remind them that they are seen and loved.⁶¹

Dated: 26 April 2022

⁶⁰ *Born-Again Blakfella* pdf 125.

⁶¹ *Born-Again Blakfella* pp. 213-220.

Yoorrook Justice Commission**BALERT KEETYARRA OF UNCLE JACK CHARLES****Introduction**

- 1 My full name is Jack Charles. I was born on 6 September 1943.
- 2 I currently live in Northcote.
- 3 I am an Aboriginal man, with connections to several Victorian nations, including Taungurung, Boon Wurrung, Dja Dja Wurrung, Woiwurrung and Yorta Yorta. I also have connections to the Wiradjuri nation in New South Wales, and Tasmanian ancestry, from the Palawa people.
- 4 I have worked with Counsel and Solicitors Assisting to prepare this *Balert Keetyarra* (witness statement) ahead of the Elders' Truth-Telling *Wurrek Tyerrang* (hearings) for the Yoorrook Justice Commission (**Yoorrook**). It covers the following aspects of my life:
 - (a) my experiences as a member of the Stolen Generations, having been removed from my mother when I was about 4 months old;
 - (b) my experiences as a ward of the State in homes and foster care, including a lack of care and love, and physical, emotional and sexual abuse;
 - (c) my eventual reunion with my mother in my late teens;
 - (d) meeting some of my siblings in childhood and adulthood, my difficulties connecting with them, and their own struggles, particularly in the case of my brother Archie;
 - (e) my drug addiction developed in my early adulthood;
 - (f) my criminal record, from burglaries (or "burgs") to fund my addiction, leading to long stretches of time in prison;
 - (g) the programs in prison which put me on a different path, and inspired me to connect with my Aboriginal identity and contribute to community;
 - (h) my successful acting career, spanning theatre, film and TV; and

- (i) recent discoveries about by ancestry and identity, from my participation in a TV program *Who Do You Think You Are?*
- 5 I have previously contributed to a number of books, documentaries and films about my life, including:
- (a) ***Who Do You Think You Are? Jack Charles (2021)***¹: In 2021, I appeared in an episode of the SBS television program *Who Do You Think You Are?* In this episode, I traced my family history back across two centuries and learnt more about the history of my ancestors, including aspects of my heritage and identity that I had not known about as a member of the Stolen Generations.
- (b) ***Born-Again Blakfella (2019)***²: *Born-Again Blakfella*, which was published in August 2019, is a memoir about my life. It recounts my experiences throughout my life as an actor, burglar, musician, addict, activist and Aboriginal Elder.
- (c) ***Bastardy (2008)***³: *Bastardy*, which was released in 2008, is a documentary film that followed my life for a period of six years during a period where I juggled acting work with homelessness, addiction and burglary.
- 6 I have also previously given a witness statement concerning my experiences of abuse at the Box Hill Boys' Home:
- (a) ***Witness Statement for Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (RCIRCSA Statement)*** (2015): In September 2015, I prepared a witness statement, which related to 'Case Study 33: *The Salvation Army (Southern Territory)*'. The statement describes my experiences of physical and sexual abuse while I was a ward of the State at the Box Hill Boys' Home, and the ongoing and significant impact of these experiences on my life.
- 7 This *Balert Keetyarra* at times refers to, and is supported by, these key information sources. I would like Yoorrook to consider these additional materials.
- 8 During the course of preparing this *Balert Keetyarra*, some questions have arisen, which I understand will be the subject of requests for documents (including Notice(s) to Produce). Given both these the breadth of the matters in this *Balert Keetyarra*, and the

¹ SBS Television, *Who Do You Think You Are?* Season 12, Episode 5.

See: <https://www.sbs.com.au/ondemand/program/who-do-you-think-you-are>

² J. Charles with N. Benson (2019) *Born-Again Blakfella*, Penguin Australia Pty Ltd.

See: <https://www.penguin.com.au/books/jack-charles-9781760899158>

³ A. Courtin-Wilson and P Campey (2008).

See: <https://www.screenaustralia.gov.au/the-screen-guide/t/bastardy-2009/20129/>

possibility of further documents becoming available, I have been advised by the Solicitor Assisting team that:

- (a) additional documentation relevant to this *Balert Keetyarra* may be tendered in future; and
- (b) it is possible that I will be recalled at a later *Wurrek Tyerrang*.

Stolen Child

9 I was four months old when I was **snatched** from my mother, Blanchie Charles, and placed into City Mission Home for Babies in Brunswick. My mother was 15 years old at the time that I was taken, and I believe at that time, she was herself a ward of the State.⁴

10 From that time, I was a ward of the State.

11 I understand that I am the eldest of eleven children taken from my mother. The siblings I know of are:

- (a) Esme Charles;
- (b) Eva Jo Charles;
- (c) Zenip Charles; and
- (d) Arthur (Artie / Archie) Charles.

12 I understand that another two children died at birth.⁵ To this day, I don't know what happened to six of my siblings.⁶

13 I was taken from my Mum and placed in a series of homes to be raised as a white person. Nobody ever taught me love. I was never raised in a loving situation, never held. I can't remember ever being held as a child, as a baby.⁷

14 I was not told anything about Aboriginal people, our languages or our culture. I knew I looked different, but didn't understand the differences in culture at all.

15 I experienced the policies of child removal as a divide-and-conquer method of destroying my sense of identity and self-esteem. Ignorance, misdirection and miseducation were central to keeping me from knowing who I was.⁸

⁴ *Born-Again Blakfella* pdf 17; RCIRCSA Statement, [6].

⁵ *Who Do You Think You Are?* 31:53 – 32; *Born-Again Blakfella* pdf 53.

⁶ *Born-Again Blakfella* pdf 53.

⁷ *Bastardy* (2009), 46:13.

⁸ *Born-Again Blakfella*, pp. 218-220.

Institutional abuse

- 16 In my early years, I lived:⁹
- (a) in City Mission Home for babies in Brunswick until the age of 2;
 - (b) at the Salvation Army Boys' Home, Box Hill from the age of 2 to 4;
 - (c) in Cardinia Children's Home in Geelong for approximately 14 months;
 - (d) again at the Salvation Army Boys' Home from the age of 5 to 13; and
 - (e) from the age of 14, at foster home, with a family called the Murphys.
- 17 For most of my time at the Box Hill Boys' Home, until the very last months, I was the only Aboriginal child. Seeing photos of myself there, different homes would have the group home shot, there I was, deadset in the middle. I must have been a novelty, being the only black fella there.
- 18 There's photographs of me that we have pulled from the Salvo archives of a group of us at Mt Donna Buang or something. There's us, the Box Hill Boys' Home boys, on an excursion, and there's a clump of snow on my head. Is that a metaphor for the life I experienced growing up? The world I inhabited is snow field white.
- 19 I was a person of interest with the Salvation Army people. They could make use of me being their favourite little Aboriginal boy.
- 20 I was given elocution lessons in the Box Hill Boys' Home by a teacher who took me in tow. Basically at the state school based in the home, SS4151, I was the cleaner there and I was sent out often to the garden to grow chrysanthemums and enter them into the annual Box Hill Horticulture Society. I did get a semblance of education. I was looked after by this one teacher there who taught me elocution, taught me the monetary system, so I left the home knowing the monetary system pretty well, and a very well-spoken boy. The teacher who gave me elocution lessons, he was fond of me, in the right way. And the headmaster was also fond of me.
- 21 Anyway, the teacher who gave me elocution lessons, he died. And a group of us at the home were allowed to go to the Box Hill for the cemetery and et cetera. And because I cried at the funeral, the older boys when I got back to the home bashed me, pretty hard too. So I remember that, that was traumatic. Because, you know, he was a

⁹ RCIRCSA Statement, [6]-[8]; *Born-Again Blakfella*, pdf 27 - 28.

wonderful fella and because I cried at his funeral; I got bashed. I didn't cry at funerals after that.

22 Whilst at the Box Hill Boys' Home, I suffered neglect, physical and sexual abuse from both the staff and other boys, who were repeating what was being done to them.¹⁰

23 For decades after I left the home, I carried my silence and shame of those years, conveniently blocking out names and incidents. My defence mechanism was to pretend it never happened. I didn't dwell on what I'd endured there or what I'd do if I saw any of my abusers again. I never got counselling. I counselled myself through those terrible times.¹¹

24 From my experiences, I was immune to being sensitive, and had difficulties connecting intimately with others, including in romantic relationships.¹² It wasn't just the abuse that traumatised me, the Box Hill Boys' Home stripped me of my Aboriginality. It's hard to convey the damage that place did to me.

25 That silencing of my pain and anguish led to a heroin addiction, which took over much of my adult life. It numbed the deep pain. But in the end, it couldn't numb all the pain, and in truth on more than one occasion I attempted suicide, but failed each time.¹³

26 The abuse also had a significant impact on my sexual identity. I grew up thinking that sexual abuse was normal. I didn't understand the difference between consensual and non-consensual sex as all I had experienced at Box Hill was forced sexual interaction.¹⁴

Early encounters with my siblings

27 A month or two before I was leaving Box Hill, there were a bunch of Aboriginal kids coming through. I wasn't allowed to, but I snuck around and spoke to them. One young lad said, "*my name's Charles*". I remember saying "*it would be funny if we were brothers mate*", but the sister wasn't allowed to tell us. The Salvos wasn't allowed to tell us what I later found out, that this young fella Arthur Charles was indeed my brother.

28 I used sing at old people's homes with a Methodist church group. Irony of ironies, we went up to Nunawading to entertain the girls at Winlaton Girls Home. Amongst all those little girls there were these two small waiflike Aboriginal children. And of course I

¹⁰ See RCIRCSA Statement.

¹¹ *Born-Again Blakfella*, pdf 26.

¹² See *Bastardy* (2009), 46:13 – 50:47.

¹³ *Born-Again Blakfella*, pp. 218-220.

¹⁴ RCIRCSA Statement, [40] – [41].

just had to go up to ask them their names. The elder of the two shyly responded “*I’m Esmee and this is my sister Eva-Joe*”. I said, “*What are your last names ladies?*” And she said “*Charles*”. I said “*well I’m a Charles too, and wouldn’t it be funny if we were brothers and sisters?*”

29 And of course, I later found out that we were.

Adolescence and early adulthood

30 From the age of 14, I lived with the Murphy family as a foster child. This was after Mrs Murphy wrote to the Aborigines Welfare Board asking to take me on permanently.¹⁵

31 I felt like a ‘tolerated outsider’. Despite this, I called Mrs Murphy ‘Mum’.

32 I kept trying to ask Mrs Murphy questions about my background. I recall one particular moment, which happened about nine months after I’d started living with her. It took all my courage to raise this with Mum – she was so set in her ways. I said to her: ‘*There was a young fella that came to Box Hill just before I left, Mum. His name was Archie and he had the same last name, Charles. I reckon he could be my brother.*’ She responded with, ‘*No, he couldn’t be. No, no, Jack. All those kids are orphans too.*’ I didn’t argue the point but her dismissiveness stung my soul. I knew she was wrong.

33 From the time I moved in, I was working in a glass bevelling apprenticeship arranged by the Aborigines Welfare Board. I paid ‘full board,’ or 80% of my wages to Mrs Murphy.

34 My workmates encouraged me to connect with my Aboriginality. Just shy of my seventeenth birthday and only six months off completing my apprenticeship, I jumped on a tram to Fitzroy. I hadn’t thought of asking permission from Mrs Murphy.¹⁶

35 After I jumped off the tram, I stood on the corner of Napier and Gertrude streets, trying to get my bearings about where to go. Within minutes, an old blackfella approached me and grabbed my arm. “*You’re Blanchie Charles’s boy!*” he shouted. It was the first time I’d heard this name. Blanchie Charles. My real mum’s name.¹⁷

36 The man gestured for me to follow him into the Royal Hotel. Walking into that building absolutely blew my mind. Nearly every face in the place was black. I couldn’t believe it! For my entire life, I’d been the only noticeably black person in any space and yet here I

¹⁵ *Born-again Blakfella*, pdf 29.

¹⁶ *Born-again Blakfella*, pdf 34.

¹⁷ *Born-again Blakfella*, pdf 35.

was, in a sea of blackfellas. I couldn't believe this was Melbourne – I'd never experienced a Melbourne that looked like this.¹⁸

37 As people began to notice my presence, they started rushing up to introduce themselves, all smiles, telling me we were family and explaining how we were related. I got hugs, friendly slaps on the back and offers of beer (which I politely declined). I was engulfed by overwhelming feelings of shock and delight. It was like a piece had clicked into the jigsaw. People knew that I was a Charles. They knew my mother, Blanchie.¹⁹

38 I ripped open my pay packet, which I'd never done before. Mrs Murphy was always the one to open the envelope and dole out my share. I shouted a few beers and happily settled down with a lemon squash as I continued chatting, connecting and learning more about my culture, my family, these people.²⁰

39 One old woman revealed that my mum was still alive. "*She's up in Swan Hill, little fella. You have to go and see her. Oh, I'm gonna tell her about you, the first chance I get.*"²¹

40 So it was with great joy that I arrived home at Mrs Murphy's. I saw the lights on as I approached the house and was happy that Mrs Murphy was still up. I bounced through the door and my first words were: "*Mum. I've just found Mum!*"²²

41 Her reaction was not what I expected. She stood cold and distant. She dismissed me and reiterated what she'd always told me, that I was an orphan. My confusion turned to rage. We were soon embroiled in a furious argument. When she said, "*Those people will tell you anything*" I saw red. "*Well, I believe them!*" I shot back and raised my arms in emphasis. "*Get to bed!*" she hissed.²³

42 I headed to my room. I took off my work clothes and had just finished putting on my pyjamas when 'Mum' called my name. I came out and saw her standing at the front door. She motioned to me, telling me I had to go outside. Puzzled, I went out the door. It was the police. Mrs Murphy didn't say a word. Two policemen escorted me to the divvy wagon. They told me to jump in. I didn't understand why they'd been called, or what I had done wrong, but I was in too much shock to speak.²⁴

43 We drove for what felt like an eternity. I had no idea where they were taking me. Eventually we stopped. The door opened and I was told to step out. We were at a

¹⁸ *Born-again Blakfella*, pdf 35.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Born-again Blakfella*, pdf 36.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

place called Turana, a youth detention centre in Parkville. It was the place that marked the beginning of my criminalisation.²⁵ I was locked alone in my cell, and cried myself to sleep that night.

- 44 My boss at the glass bevelling factory on Riversdale Road in Hawthorn, Alf Clark, bailed me out because I was his best Aboriginal worker. He called Mum when I didn't come to work, and she would have told him that she didn't want a bar of me.

Further attempts at connection with community

- 45 At that point I became independent from the Murphys.
- 46 But I still had a yearning for family so I decided to return to the mob in Fitzroy and Collingwood. I felt a distance between us. That distance was magnified by my paranoia – I was very aware all of a sudden that I had been raised away from my family, essentially had been raised up 'white'. Many of the older mob I met had been brought up by mothers, fathers, uncles, aunties, cousins, and so on. Somehow or other, they had the right names or the right words to attach to themselves.

Reconnection with my mother

- 47 My workmates at my apprenticeship pointed out that I could write the letter to my mother and address it care of the Swan Hill police. So I did. The sergeant wrote back saying, "*It would be good to see you. I know your mum well.*"²⁶ I made plans to venture up to meet Mum. Apparently she lived between Moulamein and Swan Hill, about forty kilometres out. Her humpy was on the banks of the Edwards River.
- 48 I told my boss "*Alf I'm going up to meet my mum, I'll be in Swan Hill over the Christmas holidays*". Alf said "*You bloody prodigal, I'll fly you up Jack*".
- 49 The sergeant said he would meet me at the airport to take me to Mum. He suggested I bring a gift. "*Look, Jack,*" he said, "*you're playing the prodigal son.*" He used that same phrase. "*You'll get a better reception from your mum if you take her a carton of Melbourne Bitter. She likes a drink.*"²⁷
- 50 Once the details of my visit were locked in, I wrote a letter directly to Mum, care of the sergeant. I didn't quite know how to form the words. I decided to keep the letter simple: "*I am Jack Charles. I believe I am your son. I'm flying up around Christmas time.*"

²⁵ *Born-again Blakfella*, pdf 37.

²⁶ *Born-again Blakfella*, pp 49-50.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

*Apparently the sergeant in Swan Hill is going to pick me up, Mum. He will arrange to have me delivered to your place".*²⁸

51 I stayed with Mum for three weeks. We didn't exactly bond. I believe this is because all of her 11 children were removed.²⁹ All of us were taken, and I think, what a hard life my mum must have had.³⁰

52 When I was there, I plucked up the courage to ask about siblings. I asked her, "*is there an Arthur?*" and she said "*Artie, your brother's name is Artie. Named after Artie Smith, living in Moe.*" I said "*okay, is there an Esme and Eva-Jo?*" she said "*yes, but you have a third sister, Zenip, you look out for them*". I had seen them, I told her I had met them. She said, "*you look after them*".³¹

53 I wasn't told anything else about her life and was not told who my father was. I do not know the reasons she became a ward of the State.

54 I discovered that she liked to be alone. She didn't want anything to do with the other blacks in the black fella camp behind the Federal Hotel. In that camp, the houses there looked like the wooden huts from the slave era that I've read in books in America, carbon copies of the same kind of huts. I was a little bit frightened to venture into that area.

55 We lived a wonderful life, I thought it was great. There were five surrounding farms, looked after by old Clary Pike and mum, mostly Clary. We had two Ford Prefect utilities, so I was able to learn to drive. We would go to various properties nearby to help contain the rabbit population down. Clary and mum were making good money from that. I liked rabbit, and wild duck for breakfast and all that, and we were on the river. It was a good life.

56 I found out later that Mum had been ostracised by community because of her role in a killing, involving a prominent Aboriginal family in NSW. It had isolated her, and the memory of the events seemed to still haunt her.³²

57 I was a gay, black, young man in the outback, out of place in Swan Hill. Trying to impress and be part of this community. But the community was soaked in alcohol, and I wasn't happy with it. That's why I went.

²⁸ *Born-again Blakfella*, pp 49-50.

²⁹ *Born-again Blakfella*, 52.

³⁰ *Who Do You Think You Are?* 31:53 – 32.

³¹ *Born-again Blakfella*, p 43.

³² *Born-again Blakfella*, p 52.

58 I went into Swan Hill and sent a telegram to Alf my boss and said, "*I'm not coming back*".

59 After about 6 months working jackaroo-ing on a property between Finley and Tocumwal, I went back to Melbourne. and was working in a hostel and that's where I was discovered, a bit after that. The hostel was by the new theatre, and I got into theatre that way.

Drug addiction, homelessness, criminal justice and incarceration

Drug addiction

60 In my late teens I dabbled in alcohol, marijuana, recreational drugs before moving onto heroin in 1973.³³

61 Heroin helped with my 'heavy heart'.³⁴ It became what I lived for. I could have a whack and put my pain on the back burner.

62 I often dreamt about the pain my mother endured losing all 13 of her children. I would deal with this by having a whack. I do rue the day, however, that I did start.³⁵

Crime

63 I began burgling people in Toorak, Kew, South Yarra and Camberwell in my teens.³⁶

64 When I started robbing people, I classified it as 'collecting the rent'. I justified my actions as a hunter gatherer, going onto prime Aboriginal land – my mother's lands, to collect what was due.³⁷ I couldn't take it [that rationale] to the judge, he'd give me another 5 years to wake up to myself.

65 The police love me here in Victoria. I always cleaned their books up for them. They took me for long rides and I pointed out the houses I had robbed. I was given fair treatment for having done so. They took me for my word and believed me. I was upfront about those things.

66 I was, however, mistreated by the police on several occasions.

67 I had a .38 shoved in my mouth in Prahran lock up one time. I told the bullshitter to pull the trigger. He nearly pulled it, and yanked the pistol out. The sight at the end of the

³³ *Born-Again Blakfella*, 'Prologue'.

³⁴ *Bastardy* (2009): 13:16.

³⁵ *Bastardy* (2009): 4:04 – 5:40.

³⁶ *Born-Again Blakfella*, pdf 62.

³⁷ *Bastardy* (2009): 25:40 – 27:20; *Born-Again Blakfella*, pp. 48.

barrel there knocked a chip out of one of my beautiful buck teeth. He wanted to shut me up, I was having a go at him.

68 Another time, I was taken by some detectives up into the hills where I was told I was going to be murdered. They wanted to get information out of me. I was living with a gangster at the time in Camberwell. I thought it was gonna be the end of me. But no, no, they had to drive me back down.

69 Special treatment for Aboriginal people was par for the course. Blackfellas were an object to be used to blood the young cadets.

Incarceration

70 I was always glad when I did get busted as I would get a break from it all in prison, a rest from the burgs. I would adjust to prison life.

71 I celebrated my 20th, 30th, 40th and 50th birthdays behind bars³⁸. The last time I was imprisoned, it was my twenty-second time.³⁹

72 When I first went into Pentridge, everyone knew me, most of the rising talent in the gangsterdom were ex-boys home old boys – Burwood, Bayswater, Box Hill et cetera. We all met, many of us, many of us were the Stolen Generations. We gave each other a measure of protection.

73 I never had any troubles about my elocution. I suspected everybody knew that I was gay, that I was a poof, going into Pentridge. So, I was afforded that respect. Many of these gangsters, Chopper Read type people, would ask me to write their letters for them. In the morning in the D Division wing after brekky, they would give me a choccy bar, but nobody ever came at me wanting to have their way with me in all the years that I have done in all the jails that I have done time in.

74 In the old days you'd be asked by the classification governors, '*Jack, you're doing 5 years this time, you've done Castlemaine and Bendigo, would you like Beechworth?*' They gave you a choice. I did all three jails in Dja Dja Wurrung Country and I really enjoyed my time there in those jails because I got educated and I learned the fine art of ceramics there in that jail and I became a leading light. I taught people how to throw pots on a wheel, I taught them how to control and contain themselves in that environment.

³⁸ *Bastardy* (2009): 1:13.

³⁹ *Born-Again Blakfella*, chapter 12; *Bastardy* (2009): 1:01:36 – 1:02:50, 1:08 – 1:11.

75 In the open camp Wron Wron in Gippsland had my pottery shop open 7 days a week from 8am – 8pm, that’s how well I had the Governor wrapped around my little finger. Because we made a profit, and it went back to the prison, not only to the education department but for new gear for the footy club or the cricketing club in Wron Wron jail. I called it “Psycho-ceramica”, because you had to be a crackpot to be in there in the first place.

Homelessness

76 I lived in a state of homelessness throughout the majority of my life.

77 In *Bastardy*, I describe some of the places I used to sleep when living on the streets.⁴⁰ That documentary also showed the time that the Aboriginal Health Service assisted me to find my first unit. They said “*we’re sick and tired of you being homeless, we’re going to give you a unit*”. I was so lucky to get this unit; it was the first winter I’d spent under cover. I was about 60 years old at this time.⁴¹

78 Once I was embedded there, I only ever did one more robbery. And that’s the one you see in *Bastardy*, the doco. The idea of putting that all down on a big screen for the world to see, doesn’t embarrass me, it’s no shame job, because my life, as I see it, is a variation on so many other lives, they don’t have the opportunity like I have through *Bastardy*, through *Jack Charles Vs The Crown*, through *Who Do You Think You Are?* to be given the full scope of that which had been lost, denied and hidden from me.

79 It took about 6 years off and on filming *Bastardy*, I outed myself in so many ways that I hadn’t really intended to, but it all went well because other people seeing that, black and white, seeing that documentary enabled them in their own right to take stock of their situation, and to move themselves out of that particular rut that they saw me in at the time.

Racism and segregation

80 There were many occasions in my life where I have been faced with discriminatory behaviour on the basis of my race.

81 At 18 years of age, I wasn’t allowed to swim in the Swan Hill City Baths. I was knocked back from going in there. I was so shocked. I was in the queue for some time. This big bloke behind me with his kids picked me up and set me aside so he could gain entry

⁴⁰ *Bastardy* (2009): 7:00 – 9:25.

⁴¹ *Bastardy* (2009): 51:30 – 52:10.

with his kids into the Baths. I was shell shocked. I was told that I had to swim in the Murray.

82 The night after I was awarded Senior Victorian Australian of the Year, a taxi driver insisted that I pay, or that my manager pay, in advance of accepting my fare as “*he may not pay*.”⁴² I had been on such a high from the thrill of the event. But the racial vilification from the taxi driver and humiliation ruined my night and undermined that experience.

83 Taxi drivers either refusing to pick me up, or demanding payment in advance, has happened many times and each incident is like a pinch on my soul, my humanity. It knocks me around that for all of my accolades, both on and off the stage, I am still regularly refused a ride.⁴³

Identity and reconnecting

84 I never knew who my father was for my whole life, until I recently appeared on the SBS television program *Who Do You Think You Are?* During the filming of that program I learnt my father’s true identity through DNA testing. I was told that he was Hilton Hamilton Walsh, an Aboriginal man of the Walsh family. There are a number of Walshes that live in Melbourne that I have come to know over the years, but I had no idea that we were related.

85 When I was told Hilton Walsh was my father, it came out of the blue and hit me like a ton of bricks, it floored me.⁴⁴ Through that show, I met a younger brother, Grady Walsh. I hadn’t really expected that I’d find my father, let alone having any living siblings.

86 I understand that I have another 13 siblings through my father, but all are deceased except Grady.

87 It’s great to have all these different elements of your heritage being given on to you. However, the process was also confronting and overwhelming. I have a profound sense of pissed-offedness about what’s gone by and what’s not been allowed until my latter years in life. It took a lot of time and many resources to find out my identity as a member of the Stolen Generations. If I had not had such a high profile, I would never have received this information.

⁴² *Born-Again Blakfella* 200-204.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Who Do You Think You Are?* 13:10 – 16:50.

- 88 It's tough being denied the rightful inheritance of who I really am – my identity. At times it's traumatic, because I'm almost at the end of the journey and I'm still discovering my story.⁴⁵
- 89 Through *Who Do You Think You Are?* I also learned that my Great Grandmother 'Granny Annie' experienced difficult times at Coranderrk, including at times a reduction of rations, watering down of medicine.
- 90 The records also captured Granny Annie's resilience – she rebelled against the Government and successfully fought for Coranderrk to become a permanent reserve where Aboriginal people could work the land as they saw fit, and in doing so was 1 of 4 Aboriginal women who gave evidence at the Government Inquiry about the poor living conditions.⁴⁶
- 91 Through *Who Do You Think You Are?*, I also learnt that my maternal ancestry traces back to Tasmania, and that my four times Great Grandmother was Woretemoeteyenner and five times great grandfather was Mannalargenna, a senior and important man of the Plangermaireener people.
- 92 The story of Woretemoeteyenner and Mannalargenna is told through this program, including that they were taken from their country and moved to a reservation on Flinders Island, with Mannalargenna dying seven weeks after moving to Flinders Island.⁴⁷
- 93 I found it so amazing to learn how far back my people did go. My story was lost, but slowly it has been found again, and I was proud to learn I came from so many resilient people.
- 94 My people the Palawa, my great-great-great-great-greats, were set upon. I heard some horrible stories down there, it was the men that were telling me the hard truths. The women were floating over the more difficult subjects, like when Woretemoeteyenner was latched onto by George Briggs, part of the sealers mob, they grabbed onto the women, they realised that as the rest of the country was going through killing everyone else, these sealers realised that this was women's business killing the seals, not men's. So they had a woman and a killer of seals. So George Briggs latched onto Woretemoeteyenner, and they had kids.

⁴⁵ *Born-Again Blakfella* pp. 218-220.

⁴⁶ *Who Do You Think You Are?* 19:00 – 27:33.

⁴⁷ *Who Do You Think You Are?* 52:58 – 57:10.

- 95 When they decimated the population of the seals and walruses around Tassie, some of them went over to New Zealand and some went to Albany. And my great-great-grandmother was placed on an island off Albany and left there because George Briggs was asked to come back to chart the entire coast of Tasmania for the government and then after that he was asked to go back and build more ships, probably to bring more convicts back to Tasmania.
- 96 Thereafter, George Augustus Robinson was a renowned person working with the Palawa people. I've worked it out that this man had been charged with the responsibility of developing a final solution for the Aboriginal problem in Tasmania. A final solution. So he conned my great (times five) grandfather, they were on good terms apparently to get his people to board a ship to take them over the Flinders Island and some over to Lady Cape Barron Island, and it was designed as a death camp. Very few people were allowed to leave. You see me reading a letter in that episode of *Who Do You Think You Are*, written by Dalrymple, one of Woretemoetyenner's daughters, asking the authorities to allow her mum to come back to her to live in Tasmania, which the authorities did. A few people were allowed to leave the island, only on those kind of written requests from their daughters and their sons.
- 97 I was fully involved in learning to understand what terrible times our great-great-great-great-greats had. The suffering that was brought upon them. Especially the women. The men were telling me that it was the women who suffered the most. They were tortured before they were killed. There were bonfires of black bodies. How could you bleed this onto any Tasmanian state school's curriculum? This is something that is within my responsibility as an elder statesperson, as a man of conscience to try and impress the Minister for Education and the Premier of Tasmania and here in Victoria, let's bleed truth in history into our school curriculum.
- 98 Alan Tudge, some time ago when he was the Federal Minister for Education had loudly scoffed at the idea, that we cannot bleed what really happened here in Australia onto our school's curriculums, "*Australian children might not like Australia*". Those were his words.
- 99 I can understand why truth in history has never been done here. We have an attempt with this truth telling commission in allaying that problem. We are setting the bar here.
- 100 But you can sense that I am really upset and learning this new information about who exactly I am. It has been strengthening, these tidbits of information I'm getting from people emailing me saying they're related to the great Mannalargenna, they're related to Dalrymple from Perth et cetera. There are so many people reaching out to me via

email telling me of their connection with my family because they saw me on TV. I'm a known article so people feel obliged to contact me and tell me of their connections as family. It's great.

Adult relationships with siblings

- 101 The Koorie Heritage Trust gave me some documents in around 2008, after *Bastardy*, which confirmed that Esme, Eva Jo, Zenip and Archie were my siblings. How we sought to reconnect later in life. We tried our darndest to bond beyond all the years we had lost.⁴⁸
- 102 I recall also seeing some documents about my six missing Charles siblings, their names.

Archie

- 103 Archie, like me, came to be addicted to drugs.⁴⁹ Archie, like me, ended up in prison for stealing.
- 104 Archie had a much more difficult time in prison due to his lack of understanding of unspoken rules. If you looked at a prison officer, for example, you were immediately bashed against a bluestone wall. Archie, through no fault of his own, struggled to understand these rules.⁵⁰
- 105 At some point, Archie was moved from an ordinary prison to a prison for the criminally insane. He was taken to the Aradale institution for the criminally insane. I've since spoken to a couple of guys who were up there with him, and they told me they saw my brother being raped and overloaded with psych drugs.⁵¹
- 106 Seeing him really shocked me when he came out, because physically he'd changed so much. He was limping, he had a hunched back, and his arm was often stretched up and curled over his head. Someone said it was a sign of Archie protecting himself from the bashings, but I knew it was more than that, likely an overload of the psych drugs they'd given him.

⁴⁸ *Born-again Blakfella*, p. 142.

⁴⁹ *Born-again Blakfella*: Chapter 10 'Archie'.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

- 107 I tried to go to the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal to seek a proper care package for Archie. However, it was too difficult to get records from any of the prisons he had been in, Pentridge, Aradale, H Division. The records could not be found.⁵²
- 108 I wish I had been in a position to do more for Archie, although I was battling with my own issues.
- 109 Before he died, he was deaf in one ear, blind in one eye, he had AIDS, he had tuberculosis, his arse didn't work, he had kidney problems, and his heart was not functioning at all well.
- 110 The system didn't seem to be capable of dealing with Archie's high-level needs, on account of his mental difficulties.
- 111 I was suggesting that maybe he should be put in a special unit down in Royal Melbourne Hospital, down there, and given heroin. Then he could be stable enough for them to work on his other problems, his medical problems. But no, I couldn't be heard, I couldn't be the one to give them sage advice, because I was fucked up myself.

Film and theatre

- 112 I started a career in acting in 1964 at age 19.⁵³ In a way it saved me; I think I owe my life to having found the theatre.⁵⁴
- 113 It was through theatre that I began to understand and connect with my Aboriginality. My life in the arts, including film and theatre, stirred my awareness of Indigeneity, and my understanding of the truth of Australia's treatment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.⁵⁵
- 114 In 1971, in conjunction with Bob Maza, I co-founded Aboriginal theatre company Nindethana. Theatre gave us a platform to reclaim ownership over our hidden and stolen stories.⁵⁶
- 115 I have performed in a number of productions, movies and series, including: *The Blood Knot*, *Jack Charles Is Up and Fighting*, *Brumby Innes*, *Bastardy*, *Ben Hall*, *Carriage*, *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith*, *No Sugar*, *Pan* and *Jack Charles v The Crown*.⁵⁷

⁵² *Born-again Blakfella*: Chapter 10 'Archie', pdf 98.

⁵³ *Bastardy* (2009): 10:00 – 12:15.

⁵⁴ RCIRCSA Statement, [46].

⁵⁵ *Born-Again Blakfella*, Chapter 9.

⁵⁶ *Born-Again Blakfella* pp. 107-108, 122-137, 175; *Bastardy* (2009): 9:58 – 12:04.

⁵⁷ *Born-Again Blakfella* pp.107-108, 122-137, 175.

- 116 The Pentridge people allowed me to leave the jail to go and see the premiere of *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith*. They shouldn't have released me, I was sentenced to two years. They said "go to the premiere, it's your night".
- 117 *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith* was one of the best films I ever did. I felt I did well for myself as the character, Harry Edwards the murderer who gets raped and hung by Ray Barrett the copper.
- 118 My other achievements in the arts and public life include:⁵⁸
- (a) I was photographed as part of Rod McNicol's series called 'A Portrait Revisited' which won the 2012 National Photographic Portrait Prize and was acquired by the National Portrait Gallery;
 - (b) I appeared in Ahn Do's TV program Brush with Fame in 2017, with the painting winning the People's Choice Award at the Archibald Prize; and
 - (c) I was named Senior Victorian of the Year in 2016 for my community work as an Elder and actor.

Community work and priorities for the future

- 119 Prisons need to support Elders coming in and talking, having these roundtable conversations. As a prisoner, you need to understand that this place is a safe environment for you to talk about what you've witnessed with your own family. It's no shame job to admit down the track, once you're comfortable with this process, that you were one of the bashers. You're on a road, it's difficult to even step onto that particular road, but you wanna change it, you want to walk forward.
- 120 Another thing we need to re-introduce is the gold shield to go into any police station - it used to happen in the 70s, people from the Aboriginal Health Service were given gold shields, they could go into any police station to keep a black watch.
- 121 If we had community hubs, we'd entice the police to bring blackfellas into the community hub, rather than into the police cells. We'd look after them. We need to have these community hubs revisited, restocked, refurbished, refunded and that.
- 122 The program Marumali changed my life by teaching me about my kin, and culture. It provided me with certainty and clarity.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ *Born-Again Blakfella* pp 197-211.

⁵⁹ *Born-Again Blakfella* pp. 213-220.

- 123 After my last stint in prison I managed to end my addiction to heroin and then methadone, after which I undertook the role of my community's missing feather-foot, Kadiaitcha man, lore man, and this helped me find my purpose.⁶⁰
- 124 Wron Wron has been decommissioned as a jail and is a healing place now. People are asked by the Magistrates, '*what would you like to do, would you like to go to the healing place or go to the jail?*'. Many of them reconnect there. All the cells have disappeared, but the cottages are there, the education centre is still there, and evidence of my time there still stands.
- 125 I'm proud that I went through Wron Wron and now it's looked after by Sean Braybrook, wonderful bloke, and his missus. They've had successes in turning people's lives around and had success with reconnecting people because of the opportunity by firstly a Magistrate or Judge asking people 'would you like to do Wron Wron?'. It's a healing place.
- 126 I've gone out and spoken to them, real black fellas. The message I'm giving them whether I'm zooming into jails or appearing in the flesh. I give them my timely advice. "*Real black fellas ought not to be shooting white powder*".
- 127 It is my mission to reach out to as many of these kids as I can to remind them that they are seen and loved.⁶¹

Dated: 26 April 2022

⁶⁰ *Born-Again Blakfella* pdf 125.

⁶¹ *Born-Again Blakfella* pp. 213-220.

Yoorrook Justice Commission**BALERT KEETYARRA OF UNCLE JACK CHARLES****Introduction**

- 1 My full name is Jack Charles. I was born on 6 September 1943.
- 2 I currently live in Northcote.
- 3 I am an Aboriginal man, with connections to several Victorian nations, including Taungurung, Boon Wurrung, Dja Dja Wurrung, Woiewurrung and Yorta Yorta. I also have connections to the Wiradjuri nation in New South Wales, and Tasmanian ancestry, from the Palawa people.
- 4 I have worked with Counsel and Solicitors Assisting to prepare this *Balert Keetyarra* (witness statement) ahead of the Elders' Truth-Telling *Wurrek Tyerrang* (hearings) for the Yoorrook Justice Commission (**Yoorrook**). It covers the following aspects of my life:
 - (a) my experiences as a member of the Stolen Generations, having been removed from my mother when I was about 4 months old;
 - (b) my experiences as a ward of the State in homes and foster care, including a lack of care and love, and physical, emotional and sexual abuse;
 - (c) my eventual reunion with my mother in my late teens;
 - (d) meeting some of my siblings in childhood and adulthood, my difficulties connecting with them, and their own struggles, particularly in the case of my brother Archie;
 - (e) my drug addiction developed in my early adulthood;
 - (f) my criminal record, from burglaries (or "burgs") to fund my addiction, leading to long stretches of time in prison;
 - (g) the programs in prison which put me on a different path, and inspired me to connect with my Aboriginal identity and contribute to community;
 - (h) my successful acting career, spanning theatre, film and TV; and

- (i) recent discoveries about by ancestry and identity, from my participation in a TV program *Who Do You Think You Are?*
- 5 I have previously contributed to a number of books, documentaries and films about my life, including:
- (a) ***Who Do You Think You Are? Jack Charles (2021)***¹: In 2021, I appeared in an episode of the SBS television program *Who Do You Think You Are?* In this episode, I traced my family history back across two centuries and learnt more about the history of my ancestors, including aspects of my heritage and identity that I had not known about as a member of the Stolen Generations.
- (b) ***Born-Again Blakfella (2019)***²: *Born-Again Blakfella*, which was published in August 2019, is a memoir about my life. It recounts my experiences throughout my life as an actor, burglar, musician, addict, activist and Aboriginal Elder.
- (c) ***Bastardy (2008)***³: *Bastardy*, which was released in 2008, is a documentary film that followed my life for a period of six years during a period where I juggled acting work with homelessness, addiction and burglary.
- 6 I have also previously given a witness statement concerning my experiences of abuse at the Box Hill Boys' Home:
- (a) ***Witness Statement for Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (RCIRCSA Statement)*** (2015): In September 2015, I prepared a witness statement, which related to 'Case Study 33: *The Salvation Army (Southern Territory)*'. The statement describes my experiences of physical and sexual abuse while I was a ward of the State at the Box Hill Boys' Home, and the ongoing and significant impact of these experiences on my life.
- 7 This *Balert Keetyarra* at times refers to, and is supported by, these key information sources. I would like Yoorrook to consider these additional materials.
- 8 During the course of preparing this *Balert Keetyarra*, some questions have arisen, which I understand will be the subject of requests for documents (including Notice(s) to Produce). Given both these the breadth of the matters in this *Balert Keetyarra*, and the

¹ SBS Television, *Who Do You Think You Are?* Season 12, Episode 5.

See: <https://www.sbs.com.au/ondemand/program/who-do-you-think-you-are>

² J. Charles with N. Benson (2019) *Born-Again Blakfella*, Penguin Australia Pty Ltd.

See: <https://www.penguin.com.au/books/jack-charles-9781760899158>

³ A. Courtin-Wilson and P Campey (2008).

See: <https://www.screenaustralia.gov.au/the-screen-guide/t/bastardy-2009/20129/>

possibility of further documents becoming available, I have been advised by the Solicitor Assisting team that:

- (a) additional documentation relevant to this *Balert Keetyarra* may be tendered in future; and
- (b) it is possible that I will be recalled at a later *Wurrek Tyerrang*.

Stolen Child

9 I was four months old when I was **snatched** from my mother, Blanchie Charles, and placed into City Mission Home for Babies in Brunswick. My mother was 15 years old at the time that I was taken, and I believe at that time, she was herself a ward of the State.⁴

10 From that time, I was a ward of the State.

11 I understand that I am the eldest of eleven children taken from my mother. The siblings I know of are:

- (a) Esme Charles;
- (b) Eva Jo Charles;
- (c) Zenip Charles; and
- (d) Arthur (Artie / Archie) Charles.

12 I understand that another two children died at birth.⁵ To this day, I don't know what happened to six of my siblings.⁶

13 I was taken from my Mum and placed in a series of homes to be raised as a white person. Nobody ever taught me love. I was never raised in a loving situation, never held. I can't remember ever being held as a child, as a baby.⁷

14 I was not told anything about Aboriginal people, our languages or our culture. I knew I looked different, but didn't understand the differences in culture at all.

15 I experienced the policies of child removal as a divide-and-conquer method of destroying my sense of identity and self-esteem. Ignorance, misdirection and miseducation were central to keeping me from knowing who I was.⁸

⁴ *Born-Again Blakfella* pdf 17; RCIRCSA Statement, [6].

⁵ *Who Do You Think You Are?* 31:53 – 32; *Born-Again Blakfella* pdf 53.

⁶ *Born-Again Blakfella* pdf 53.

⁷ *Bastardy* (2009), 46:13.

⁸ *Born-Again Blakfella*, pp. 218-220.

Institutional abuse

- 16 In my early years, I lived:⁹
- (a) in City Mission Home for babies in Brunswick until the age of 2;
 - (b) at the Salvation Army Boys' Home, Box Hill from the age of 2 to 4;
 - (c) in Cardinia Children's Home in Geelong for approximately 14 months;
 - (d) again at the Salvation Army Boys' Home from the age of 5 to 13; and
 - (e) from the age of 14, at foster home, with a family called the Murphys.
- 17 For most of my time at the Box Hill Boys' Home, until the very last months, I was the only Aboriginal child. Seeing photos of myself there, different homes would have the group home shot, there I was, deadset in the middle. I must have been a novelty, being the only black fella there.
- 18 There's photographs of me that we have pulled from the Salvo archives of a group of us at Mt Donna Buang or something. There's us, the Box Hill Boys' Home boys, on an excursion, and there's a clump of snow on my head. Is that a metaphor for the life I experienced growing up? The world I inhabited is snow field white.
- 19 I was a person of interest with the Salvation Army people. They could make use of me being their favourite little Aboriginal boy.
- 20 I was given elocution lessons in the Box Hill Boys' Home by a teacher who took me in tow. Basically at the state school based in the home, SS4151, I was the cleaner there and I was sent out often to the garden to grow chrysanthemums and enter them into the annual Box Hill Horticulture Society. I did get a semblance of education. I was looked after by this one teacher there who taught me elocution, taught me the monetary system, so I left the home knowing the monetary system pretty well, and a very well-spoken boy. The teacher who gave me elocution lessons, he was fond of me, in the right way. And the headmaster was also fond of me.
- 21 Anyway, the teacher who gave me elocution lessons, he died. And a group of us at the home were allowed to go to the Box Hill for the cemetery and et cetera. And because I cried at the funeral, the older boys when I got back to the home bashed me, pretty hard too. So I remember that, that was traumatic. Because, you know, he was a

⁹ RCIRCSA Statement, [6]-[8]; *Born-Again Blakfella*, pdf 27 - 28.

wonderful fella and because I cried at his funeral; I got bashed. I didn't cry at funerals after that.

22 Whilst at the Box Hill Boys' Home, I suffered neglect, physical and sexual abuse from both the staff and other boys, who were repeating what was being done to them.¹⁰

23 For decades after I left the home, I carried my silence and shame of those years, conveniently blocking out names and incidents. My defence mechanism was to pretend it never happened. I didn't dwell on what I'd endured there or what I'd do if I saw any of my abusers again. I never got counselling. I counselled myself through those terrible times.¹¹

24 From my experiences, I was immune to being sensitive, and had difficulties connecting intimately with others, including in romantic relationships.¹² It wasn't just the abuse that traumatised me, the Box Hill Boys' Home stripped me of my Aboriginality. It's hard to convey the damage that place did to me.

25 That silencing of my pain and anguish led to a heroin addiction, which took over much of my adult life. It numbed the deep pain. But in the end, it couldn't numb all the pain, and in truth on more than one occasion I attempted suicide, but failed each time.¹³

26 The abuse also had a significant impact on my sexual identity. I grew up thinking that sexual abuse was normal. I didn't understand the difference between consensual and non-consensual sex as all I had experienced at Box Hill was forced sexual interaction.¹⁴

Early encounters with my siblings

27 A month or two before I was leaving Box Hill, there were a bunch of Aboriginal kids coming through. I wasn't allowed to, but I snuck around and spoke to them. One young lad said, "*my name's Charles*". I remember saying "*it would be funny if we were brothers mate*", but the sister wasn't allowed to tell us. The Salvos wasn't allowed to tell us what I later found out, that this young fella Arthur Charles was indeed my brother.

28 I used sing at old people's homes with a Methodist church group. Irony of ironies, we went up to Nunawading to entertain the girls at Winlaton Girls Home. Amongst all those little girls there were these two small waiflike Aboriginal children. And of course I

¹⁰ See RCIRCSA Statement.

¹¹ *Born-Again Blakfella*, pdf 26.

¹² See *Bastardy* (2009), 46:13 – 50:47.

¹³ *Born-Again Blakfella*, pp. 218-220.

¹⁴ RCIRCSA Statement, [40] – [41].

just had to go up to ask them their names. The elder of the two shyly responded "*I'm Esmee and this is my sister Eva-Joe*". I said, "*What are your last names ladies?*" And she said "*Charles*". I said "*well I'm a Charles too, and wouldn't it be funny if we were brothers and sisters?*"

29 And of course, I later found out that we were.

Adolescence and early adulthood

30 From the age of 14, I lived with the Murphy family as a foster child. This was after Mrs Murphy wrote to the Aborigines Welfare Board asking to take me on permanently.¹⁵

31 I felt like a 'tolerated outsider'. Despite this, I called Mrs Murphy 'Mum'.

32 I kept trying to ask Mrs Murphy questions about my background. I recall one particular moment, which happened about nine months after I'd started living with her. It took all my courage to raise this with Mum – she was so set in her ways. I said to her: '*There was a young fella that came to Box Hill just before I left, Mum. His name was Archie and he had the same last name, Charles. I reckon he could be my brother.*' She responded with, '*No, he couldn't be. No, no, Jack. All those kids are orphans too.*' I didn't argue the point but her dismissiveness stung my soul. I knew she was wrong.

33 From the time I moved in, I was working in a glass bevelling apprenticeship arranged by the Aborigines Welfare Board. I paid 'full board,' or 80% of my wages to Mrs Murphy.

34 My workmates encouraged me to connect with my Aboriginality. Just shy of my seventeenth birthday and only six months off completing my apprenticeship, I jumped on a tram to Fitzroy. I hadn't thought of asking permission from Mrs Murphy.¹⁶

35 After I jumped off the tram, I stood on the corner of Napier and Gertrude streets, trying to get my bearings about where to go. Within minutes, an old blackfella approached me and grabbed my arm. "*You're Blanchie Charles's boy!*" he shouted. It was the first time I'd heard this name. Blanchie Charles. My real mum's name.¹⁷

36 The man gestured for me to follow him into the Royal Hotel. Walking into that building absolutely blew my mind. Nearly every face in the place was black. I couldn't believe it! For my entire life, I'd been the only noticeably black person in any space and yet here I

¹⁵ *Born-again Blakfella*, pdf 29.

¹⁶ *Born-again Blakfella*, pdf 34.

¹⁷ *Born-again Blakfella*, pdf 35.

was, in a sea of blackfellas. I couldn't believe this was Melbourne – I'd never experienced a Melbourne that looked like this.¹⁸

37 As people began to notice my presence, they started rushing up to introduce themselves, all smiles, telling me we were family and explaining how we were related. I got hugs, friendly slaps on the back and offers of beer (which I politely declined). I was engulfed by overwhelming feelings of shock and delight. It was like a piece had clicked into the jigsaw. People knew that I was a Charles. They knew my mother, Blanchie.¹⁹

38 I ripped open my pay packet, which I'd never done before. Mrs Murphy was always the one to open the envelope and dole out my share. I shouted a few beers and happily settled down with a lemon squash as I continued chatting, connecting and learning more about my culture, my family, these people.²⁰

39 One old woman revealed that my mum was still alive. *"She's up in Swan Hill, little fella. You have to go and see her. Oh, I'm gonna tell her about you, the first chance I get."*²¹

40 So it was with great joy that I arrived home at Mrs Murphy's. I saw the lights on as I approached the house and was happy that Mrs Murphy was still up. I bounced through the door and my first words were: *"Mum. I've just found Mum!"*²²

41 Her reaction was not what I expected. She stood cold and distant. She dismissed me and reiterated what she'd always told me, that I was an orphan. My confusion turned to rage. We were soon embroiled in a furious argument. When she said, *"Those people will tell you anything"* I saw red. *"Well, I believe them!"* I shot back and raised my arms in emphasis. *"Get to bed!"* she hissed.²³

42 I headed to my room. I took off my work clothes and had just finished putting on my pyjamas when 'Mum' called my name. I came out and saw her standing at the front door. She motioned to me, telling me I had to go outside. Puzzled, I went out the door. It was the police. Mrs Murphy didn't say a word. Two policemen escorted me to the divvy wagon. They told me to jump in. I didn't understand why they'd been called, or what I had done wrong, but I was in too much shock to speak.²⁴

43 We drove for what felt like an eternity. I had no idea where they were taking me. Eventually we stopped. The door opened and I was told to step out. We were at a

¹⁸ *Born-again Blakfella*, pdf 35.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Born-again Blakfella*, pdf 36.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

place called Turana, a youth detention centre in Parkville. It was the place that marked the beginning of my criminalisation.²⁵ I was locked alone in my cell, and cried myself to sleep that night.

- 44 My boss at the glass bevelling factory on Riversdale Road in Hawthorn, Alf Clark, bailed me out because I was his best Aboriginal worker. He called Mum when I didn't come to work, and she would have told him that she didn't want a bar of me.

Further attempts at connection with community

- 45 At that point I became independent from the Murphys.
- 46 But I still had a yearning for family so I decided to return to the mob in Fitzroy and Collingwood. I felt a distance between us. That distance was magnified by my paranoia – I was very aware all of a sudden that I had been raised away from my family, essentially had been raised up 'white'. Many of the older mob I met had been brought up by mothers, fathers, uncles, aunties, cousins, and so on. Somehow or other, they had the right names or the right words to attach to themselves.

Reconnection with my mother

- 47 My workmates at my apprenticeship pointed out that I could write the letter to my mother and address it care of the Swan Hill police. So I did. The sergeant wrote back saying, "*It would be good to see you. I know your mum well.*"²⁶ I made plans to venture up to meet Mum. Apparently she lived between Moulamein and Swan Hill, about forty kilometres out. Her humpy was on the banks of the Edwards River.
- 48 I told my boss "*Alf I'm going up to meet my mum, I'll be in Swan Hill over the Christmas holidays*". Alf said "*You bloody prodigal, I'll fly you up Jack*".
- 49 The sergeant said he would meet me at the airport to take me to Mum. He suggested I bring a gift. "*Look, Jack,*" he said, "*you're playing the prodigal son.*" He used that same phrase. "*You'll get a better reception from your mum if you take her a carton of Melbourne Bitter. She likes a drink.*"²⁷
- 50 Once the details of my visit were locked in, I wrote a letter directly to Mum, care of the sergeant. I didn't quite know how to form the words. I decided to keep the letter simple: "*I am Jack Charles. I believe I am your son. I'm flying up around Christmas time.*"

²⁵ *Born-again Blakfella*, pdf 37.

²⁶ *Born-again Blakfella*, pp 49-50.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

*Apparently the sergeant in Swan Hill is going to pick me up, Mum. He will arrange to have me delivered to your place".*²⁸

51 I stayed with Mum for three weeks. We didn't exactly bond. I believe this is because all of her 11 children were removed.²⁹ All of us were taken, and I think, what a hard life my mum must have had.³⁰

52 When I was there, I plucked up the courage to ask about siblings. I asked her, "*is there an Arthur?*" and she said "*Artie, your brother's name is Artie. Named after Artie Smith, living in Moe.*" I said "*okay, is there an Esme and Eva-Jo?*" she said "*yes, but you have a third sister, Zenip, you look out for them*". I had seen them, I told her I had met them. She said, "*you look after them*".³¹

53 I wasn't told anything else about her life and was not told who my father was. I do not know the reasons she became a ward of the State.

54 I discovered that she liked to be alone. She didn't want anything to do with the other blacks in the black fella camp behind the Federal Hotel. In that camp, the houses there looked like the wooden huts from the slave era that I've read in books in America, carbon copies of the same kind of huts. I was a little bit frightened to venture into that area.

55 We lived a wonderful life, I thought it was great. There were five surrounding farms, looked after by old Clary Pike and mum, mostly Clary. We had two Ford Prefect utilities, so I was able to learn to drive. We would go to various properties nearby to help contain the rabbit population down. Clary and mum were making good money from that. I liked rabbit, and wild duck for breakfast and all that, and we were on the river. It was a good life.

56 I found out later that Mum had been ostracised by community because of her role in a killing, involving a prominent Aboriginal family in NSW. It had isolated her, and the memory of the events seemed to still haunt her.³²

57 I was a gay, black, young man in the outback, out of place in Swan Hill. Trying to impress and be part of this community. But the community was soaked in alcohol, and I wasn't happy with it. That's why I went.

²⁸ *Born-again Blakfella*, pp 49-50.

²⁹ *Born-again Blakfella*, 52.

³⁰ *Who Do You Think You Are?* 31:53 – 32.

³¹ *Born-again Blakfella*, p 43.

³² *Born-again Blakfella*, p 52.

58 I went into Swan Hill and sent a telegram to Alf my boss and said, "*I'm not coming back*".

59 After about 6 months working jackaroo-ing on a property between Finley and Tocumwal, I went back to Melbourne. and was working in a hostel and that's where I was discovered, a bit after that. The hostel was by the new theatre, and I got into theatre that way.

Drug addiction, homelessness, criminal justice and incarceration

Drug addiction

60 In my late teens I dabbled in alcohol, marijuana, recreational drugs before moving onto heroin in 1973.³³

61 Heroin helped with my 'heavy heart'.³⁴ It became what I lived for. I could have a whack and put my pain on the back burner.

62 I often dreamt about the pain my mother endured losing all 13 of her children. I would deal with this by having a whack. I do rue the day, however, that I did start.³⁵

Crime

63 I began burgling people in Toorak, Kew, South Yarra and Camberwell in my teens.³⁶

64 When I started robbing people, I classified it as 'collecting the rent'. I justified my actions as a hunter gatherer, going onto prime Aboriginal land – my mother's lands, to collect what was due.³⁷ I couldn't take it [that rationale] to the judge, he'd give me another 5 years to wake up to myself.

65 The police love me here in Victoria. I always cleaned their books up for them. They took me for long rides and I pointed out the houses I had robbed. I was given fair treatment for having done so. They took me for my word and believed me. I was upfront about those things.

66 I was, however, mistreated by the police on several occasions.

67 I had a .38 shoved in my mouth in Prahran lock up one time. I told the bullshitter to pull the trigger. He nearly pulled it, and yanked the pistol out. The sight at the end of the

³³ *Born-Again Blakfella*, 'Prologue'.

³⁴ *Bastardy* (2009): 13:16.

³⁵ *Bastardy* (2009): 4:04 – 5:40.

³⁶ *Born-Again Blakfella*, pdf 62.

³⁷ *Bastardy* (2009): 25:40 – 27:20; *Born-Again Blakfella*, pp. 48.

barrel there knocked a chip out of one of my beautiful buck teeth. He wanted to shut me up, I was having a go at him.

68 Another time, I was taken by some detectives up into the hills where I was told I was going to be murdered. They wanted to get information out of me. I was living with a gangster at the time in Camberwell. I thought it was gonna be the end of me. But no, no, they had to drive me back down.

69 Special treatment for Aboriginal people was par for the course. Blackfellas were an object to be used to blood the young cadets.

Incarceration

70 I was always glad when I did get busted as I would get a break from it all in prison, a rest from the burgs. I would adjust to prison life.

71 I celebrated my 20th, 30th, 40th and 50th birthdays behind bars³⁸. The last time I was imprisoned, it was my twenty-second time.³⁹

72 When I first went into Pentridge, everyone knew me, most of the rising talent in the gangsterdom were ex-boys home old boys – Burwood, Bayswater, Box Hill et cetera. We all met, many of us, many of us were the Stolen Generations. We gave each other a measure of protection.

73 I never had any troubles about my elocution. I suspected everybody knew that I was gay, that I was a poof, going into Pentridge. So, I was afforded that respect. Many of these gangsters, Chopper Read type people, would ask me to write their letters for them. In the morning in the D Division wing after brekky, they would give me a choccy bar, but nobody ever came at me wanting to have their way with me in all the years that I have done in all the jails that I have done time in.

74 In the old days you'd be asked by the classification governors, '*Jack, you're doing 5 years this time, you've done Castlemaine and Bendigo, would you like Beechworth?*' They gave you a choice. I did all three jails in Dja Dja Wurrung Country and I really enjoyed my time there in those jails because I got educated and I learned the fine art of ceramics there in that jail and I became a leading light. I taught people how to throw pots on a wheel, I taught them how to control and contain themselves in that environment.

³⁸ *Bastardy* (2009): 1:13.

³⁹ *Born-Again Blakfella*, chapter 12; *Bastardy* (2009): 1:01:36 – 1:02:50, 1:08 – 1:11.

75 In the open camp Wron Wron in Gippsland had my pottery shop open 7 days a week from 8am – 8pm, that’s how well I had the Governor wrapped around my little finger. Because we made a profit, and it went back to the prison, not only to the education department but for new gear for the footy club or the cricketing club in Wron Wron jail. I called it “Psycho-ceramica”, because you had to be a crackpot to be in there in the first place.

Homelessness

76 I lived in a state of homelessness throughout the majority of my life.

77 In *Bastardy*, I describe some of the places I used to sleep when living on the streets.⁴⁰ That documentary also showed the time that the Aboriginal Health Service assisted me to find my first unit. They said “*we’re sick and tired of you being homeless, we’re going to give you a unit*”. I was so lucky to get this unit; it was the first winter I’d spent under cover. I was about 60 years old at this time.⁴¹

78 Once I was embedded there, I only ever did one more robbery. And that’s the one you see in *Bastardy*, the doco. The idea of putting that all down on a big screen for the world to see, doesn’t embarrass me, it’s no shame job, because my life, as I see it, is a variation on so many other lives, they don’t have the opportunity like I have through *Bastardy*, through *Jack Charles Vs The Crown*, through *Who Do You Think You Are?* to be given the full scope of that which had been lost, denied and hidden from me.

79 It took about 6 years off and on filming *Bastardy*, I outed myself in so many ways that I hadn’t really intended to, but it all went well because other people seeing that, black and white, seeing that documentary enabled them in their own right to take stock of their situation, and to move themselves out of that particular rut that they saw me in at the time.

Racism and segregation

80 There were many occasions in my life where I have been faced with discriminatory behaviour on the basis of my race.

81 At 18 years of age, I wasn’t allowed to swim in the Swan Hill City Baths. I was knocked back from going in there. I was so shocked. I was in the queue for some time. This big bloke behind me with his kids picked me up and set me aside so he could gain entry

⁴⁰ *Bastardy* (2009): 7:00 – 9:25.

⁴¹ *Bastardy* (2009): 51:30 – 52:10.

with his kids into the Baths. I was shell shocked. I was told that I had to swim in the Murray.

82 The night after I was awarded Senior Victorian Australian of the Year, a taxi driver insisted that I pay, or that my manager pay, in advance of accepting my fare as “*he may not pay*.”⁴² I had been on such a high from the thrill of the event. But the racial vilification from the taxi driver and humiliation ruined my night and undermined that experience.

83 Taxi drivers either refusing to pick me up, or demanding payment in advance, has happened many times and each incident is like a pinch on my soul, my humanity. It knocks me around that for all of my accolades, both on and off the stage, I am still regularly refused a ride.⁴³

Identity and reconnecting

84 I never knew who my father was for my whole life, until I recently appeared on the SBS television program *Who Do You Think You Are?* During the filming of that program I learnt my father’s true identity through DNA testing. I was told that he was Hilton Hamilton Walsh, an Aboriginal man of the Walsh family. There are a number of Walshes that live in Melbourne that I have come to know over the years, but I had no idea that we were related.

85 When I was told Hilton Walsh was my father, it came out of the blue and hit me like a ton of bricks, it floored me.⁴⁴ Through that show, I met a younger brother, Grady Walsh. I hadn’t really expected that I’d find my father, let alone having any living siblings.

86 I understand that I have another 13 siblings through my father, but all are deceased except Grady.

87 It’s great to have all these different elements of your heritage being given on to you. However, the process was also confronting and overwhelming. I have a profound sense of pissed-offedness about what’s gone by and what’s not been allowed until my latter years in life. It took a lot of time and many resources to find out my identity as a member of the Stolen Generations. If I had not had such a high profile, I would never have received this information.

⁴² *Born-Again Blakfella* 200-204.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Who Do You Think You Are?* 13:10 – 16:50.

- 88 It's tough being denied the rightful inheritance of who I really am – my identity. At times it's traumatic, because I'm almost at the end of the journey and I'm still discovering my story.⁴⁵
- 89 Through *Who Do You Think You Are?* I also learned that my Great Grandmother 'Granny Annie' experienced difficult times at Coranderrk, including at times a reduction of rations, watering down of medicine.
- 90 The records also captured Granny Annie's resilience – she rebelled against the Government and successfully fought for Coranderrk to become a permanent reserve where Aboriginal people could work the land as they saw fit, and in doing so was 1 of 4 Aboriginal women who gave evidence at the Government Inquiry about the poor living conditions.⁴⁶
- 91 Through *Who Do You Think You Are?*, I also learnt that my maternal ancestry traces back to Tasmania, and that my four times Great Grandmother was Woretemoeteyenner and five times great grandfather was Mannalargenna, a senior and important man of the Plangermaireener people.
- 92 The story of Woretemoeteyenner and Mannalargenna is told through this program, including that they were taken from their country and moved to a reservation on Flinders Island, with Mannalargenna dying seven weeks after moving to Flinders Island.⁴⁷
- 93 I found it so amazing to learn how far back my people did go. My story was lost, but slowly it has been found again, and I was proud to learn I came from so many resilient people.
- 94 My people the Palawa, my great-great-great-great-greats, were set upon. I heard some horrible stories down there, it was the men that were telling me the hard truths. The women were floating over the more difficult subjects, like when Woretemoeteyenner was latched onto by George Briggs, part of the sealers mob, they grabbed onto the women, they realised that as the rest of the country was going through killing everyone else, these sealers realised that this was women's business killing the seals, not men's. So they had a woman and a killer of seals. So George Briggs latched onto Woretemoeteyenner, and they had kids.

⁴⁵ *Born-Again Blakfella* pp. 218-220.

⁴⁶ *Who Do You Think You Are?* 19:00 – 27:33.

⁴⁷ *Who Do You Think You Are?* 52:58 – 57:10.

- 95 When they decimated the population of the seals and walrus around Tassie, some of them went over to New Zealand and some went to Albany. And my great-great-grandmother was placed on an island off Albany and left there because George Briggs was asked to come back to chart the entire coast of Tasmania for the government and then after that he was asked to go back and build more ships, probably to bring more convicts back to Tasmania.
- 96 Thereafter, George Augustus Robinson was a renowned person working with the Palawa people. I've worked it out that this man had been charged with the responsibility of developing a final solution for the Aboriginal problem in Tasmania. A final solution. So he conned my great (times five) grandfather, they were on good terms apparently to get his people to board a ship to take them over the Flinders Island and some over to Lady Cape Barron Island, and it was designed as a death camp. Very few people were allowed to leave. You see me reading a letter in that episode of *Who Do You Think You Are*, written by Dalrymple, one of Woretemoetyenner's daughters, asking the authorities to allow her mum to come back to her to live in Tasmania, which the authorities did. A few people were allowed to leave the island, only on those kind of written requests from their daughters and their sons.
- 97 I was fully involved in learning to understand what terrible times our great-great-great-great-greats had. The suffering that was brought upon them. Especially the women. The men were telling me that it was the women who suffered the most. They were tortured before they were killed. There were bonfires of black bodies. How could you bleed this onto any Tasmanian state school's curriculum? This is something that is within my responsibility as an elder statesperson, as a man of conscience to try and impress the Minister for Education and the Premier of Tasmania and here in Victoria, let's bleed truth in history into our school curriculum.
- 98 Alan Tudge, some time ago when he was the Federal Minister for Education had loudly scoffed at the idea, that we cannot bleed what really happened here in Australia onto our school's curriculums, "*Australian children might not like Australia*". Those were his words.
- 99 I can understand why truth in history has never been done here. We have an attempt with this truth telling commission in allaying that problem. We are setting the bar here.
- 100 But you can sense that I am really upset and learning this new information about who exactly I am. It has been strengthening, these tidbits of information I'm getting from people emailing me saying they're related to the great Mannalargenna, they're related to Dalrymple from Perth et cetera. There are so many people reaching out to me via

email telling me of their connection with my family because they saw me on TV. I'm a known article so people feel obliged to contact me and tell me of their connections as family. It's great.

Adult relationships with siblings

- 101 The Koorie Heritage Trust gave me some documents in around 2008, after *Bastardy*, which confirmed that Esme, Eva Jo, Zenip and Archie were my siblings. How we sought to reconnect later in life. We tried our darndest to bond beyond all the years we had lost.⁴⁸
- 102 I recall also seeing some documents about my six missing Charles siblings, their names.

Archie

- 103 Archie, like me, came to be addicted to drugs.⁴⁹ Archie, like me, ended up in prison for stealing.
- 104 Archie had a much more difficult time in prison due to his lack of understanding of unspoken rules. If you looked at a prison officer, for example, you were immediately bashed against a bluestone wall. Archie, through no fault of his own, struggled to understand these rules.⁵⁰
- 105 At some point, Archie was moved from an ordinary prison to a prison for the criminally insane. He was taken to the Aradale institution for the criminally insane. I've since spoken to a couple of guys who were up there with him, and they told me they saw my brother being raped and overloaded with psych drugs.⁵¹
- 106 Seeing him really shocked me when he came out, because physically he'd changed so much. He was limping, he had a hunched back, and his arm was often stretched up and curled over his head. Someone said it was a sign of Archie protecting himself from the bashings, but I knew it was more than that, likely an overload of the psych drugs they'd given him.

⁴⁸ *Born-again Blakfella*, p. 142.

⁴⁹ *Born-again Blakfella*: Chapter 10 'Archie'.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

- 107 I tried to go to the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal to seek a proper care package for Archie. However, it was too difficult to get records from any of the prisons he had been in, Pentridge, Aradale, H Division. The records could not be found.⁵²
- 108 I wish I had been in a position to do more for Archie, although I was battling with my own issues.
- 109 Before he died, he was deaf in one ear, blind in one eye, he had AIDS, he had tuberculosis, his arse didn't work, he had kidney problems, and his heart was not functioning at all well.
- 110 The system didn't seem to be capable of dealing with Archie's high-level needs, on account of his mental difficulties.
- 111 I was suggesting that maybe he should be put in a special unit down in Royal Melbourne Hospital, down there, and given heroin. Then he could be stable enough for them to work on his other problems, his medical problems. But no, I couldn't be heard, I couldn't be the one to give them sage advice, because I was fucked up myself.

Film and theatre

- 112 I started a career in acting in 1964 at age 19.⁵³ In a way it saved me; I think I owe my life to having found the theatre.⁵⁴
- 113 It was through theatre that I began to understand and connect with my Aboriginality. My life in the arts, including film and theatre, stirred my awareness of Indigeneity, and my understanding of the truth of Australia's treatment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.⁵⁵
- 114 In 1971, in conjunction with Bob Maza, I co-founded Aboriginal theatre company Nindethana. Theatre gave us a platform to reclaim ownership over our hidden and stolen stories.⁵⁶
- 115 I have performed in a number of productions, movies and series, including: *The Blood Knot*, *Jack Charles Is Up and Fighting*, *Brumby Innes*, *Bastardy*, *Ben Hall*, *Carriage*, *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith*, *No Sugar*, *Pan* and *Jack Charles v The Crown*.⁵⁷

⁵² *Born-again Blakfella*: Chapter 10 'Archie', pdf 98.

⁵³ *Bastardy* (2009): 10:00 – 12:15.

⁵⁴ RCIRCSA Statement, [46].

⁵⁵ *Born-Again Blakfella*, Chapter 9.

⁵⁶ *Born-Again Blakfella* pp. 107-108, 122-137, 175; *Bastardy* (2009): 9:58 – 12:04.

⁵⁷ *Born-Again Blakfella* pp.107-108, 122-137, 175.

- 116 The Pentridge people allowed me to leave the jail to go and see the premiere of *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith*. They shouldn't have released me, I was sentenced to two years. They said "go to the premiere, it's your night".
- 117 *The Chant of Jimmy Blacksmith* was one of the best films I ever did. I felt I did well for myself as the character, Harry Edwards the murderer who gets raped and hung by Ray Barrett the copper.
- 118 My other achievements in the arts and public life include:⁵⁸
- (a) I was photographed as part of Rod McNicol's series called 'A Portrait Revisited' which won the 2012 National Photographic Portrait Prize and was acquired by the National Portrait Gallery;
 - (b) I appeared in Ahn Do's TV program Brush with Fame in 2017, with the painting winning the People's Choice Award at the Archibald Prize; and
 - (c) I was named Senior Victorian of the Year in 2016 for my community work as an Elder and actor.

Community work and priorities for the future

- 119 Prisons need to support Elders coming in and talking, having these roundtable conversations. As a prisoner, you need to understand that this place is a safe environment for you to talk about what you've witnessed with your own family. It's no shame job to admit down the track, once you're comfortable with this process, that you were one of the bashers. You're on a road, it's difficult to even step onto that particular road, but you wanna change it, you want to walk forward.
- 120 Another thing we need to re-introduce is the gold shield to go into any police station - it used to happen in the 70s, people from the Aboriginal Health Service were given gold shields, they could go into any police station to keep a black watch.
- 121 If we had community hubs, we'd entice the police to bring blackfellas into the community hub, rather than into the police cells. We'd look after them. We need to have these community hubs revisited, restocked, refurbished, refunded and that.
- 122 The program Marumali changed my life by teaching me about my kin, and culture. It provided me with certainty and clarity.⁵⁹

⁵⁸ *Born-Again Blakfella* pp 197-211.

⁵⁹ *Born-Again Blakfella* pp. 213-220.

- 123 After my last stint in prison I managed to end my addiction to heroin and then methadone, after which I undertook the role of my community's missing feather-foot, Kadiaitcha man, lore man, and this helped me find my purpose.⁶⁰
- 124 Wron Wron has been decommissioned as a jail and is a healing place now. People are asked by the Magistrates, '*what would you like to do, would you like to go to the healing place or go to the jail?*'. Many of them reconnect there. All the cells have disappeared, but the cottages are there, the education centre is still there, and evidence of my time there still stands.
- 125 I'm proud that I went through Wron Wron and now it's looked after by Sean Braybrook, wonderful bloke, and his missus. They've had successes in turning people's lives around and had success with reconnecting people because of the opportunity by firstly a Magistrate or Judge asking people 'would you like to do Wron Wron?'. It's a healing place.
- 126 I've gone out and spoken to them, real black fellas. The message I'm giving them whether I'm zooming into jails or appearing in the flesh. I give them my timely advice. "*Real black fellas ought not to be shooting white powder*".
- 127 It is my mission to reach out to as many of these kids as I can to remind them that they are seen and loved.⁶¹

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⁶⁰ *Born-Again Blakfella* pdf 125.

⁶¹ *Born-Again Blakfella* pp. 213-220.