

## Yoorrook Justice Commission

### BALERT KEETYARRA OF ISOBEL PAIPADJEROOK MORPHY-WALSH

#### Introduction

- 1 My full name is Isobel Paipadjerook Morphy-Walsh. I am a proud Nirim Baluk bagrook (woman) of The Dhaung Wurrung Nation. A member of the Eastern Kulin Nations. I carry familial links across the state and beyond. Connection is our way.
- 2 I currently live On Dja Dja Wurrung Djandjak (country) but I have also lived in my own ancestral Dhaung Wurrung Country and in Canberra on Ngunnawal, Nagambie land, in Melbourne on Wurundjeri (Woi wurrung) country and on Boon Wurrung Country. I have been blessed to travel much of what is now called 'Victoria'
- 3 I have borrowed this sentiment from my father's testimony. This testimony is not the sum of my story or of who I am. There are things about my life, culture, family and communities that I am incredibly proud of. I am simply trying to take after the long line of speakers and activists in my family. I am not the first in my family to speak at an enquiry. My Great Great Grandma Grannie Annie spoke at the Coranderrk Enquiry. My Father has spoken at enquiries into Deaths in Custody, Stolen Generations, Spent Criminal Convictions. My father, my Grannie Annie they were are so much more than the words captured by a process created by a culture that is not their own. So, too am I. I also want to say I'm able to give testimony because my father brought me into the process.
- 4 I have spent many years formal education, including 8 studying law, but have not come out with formal qualifications. Whilst I may have been the first in my line (not the first in the whole family – cousins older than me hit universities before I) to get to university, I still remain formal qualification free. I now work as a curator and in the cultural heritage, museum and gallery sector.
- 5 I worked with the Counsel and Solicitors Assisting team and my family to make this *balert keetyarra* (witness statement) ahead of the Elders' truth-telling *wurrek tyerrang* (hearings) for the Yoorrook Justice Commission, in support of my father, Uncle Larry Walsh.
- 6 This statement concerns my experiences as an Aboriginal person in Victoria, including:
  - (a) my experience as the daughter of a member of the Stolen Generations;
  - (b) the impact of intergenerational trauma and intergenerational poverty on me;

- (c) the difficulties we have faced in understanding what happened to my father and our history;
- (d) intergenerational poverty;
- (e) my connection to my culture

7 During the course of preparing this *balert keetyarra*, some questions have arisen, which I understand may be the subject of requests for documents (including Notice(s) to Produce). Given the possibility that further documents will become available, I have been advised by the Solicitor Assisting team that:

- (a) additional documentation relating to this *balert keetyarra* may be tendered in future; and
- (b) it is possible that I may be recalled at a later *wurrek tyerrang*.

#### **My experience as the daughter of a member of the Stolen Generations**

8 Before I begin this part of my testimony, I want to acknowledge my parents, particularly my dad, and my sister and their bravery and vulnerability in supporting me to talk about this. When one is giving testimony on the trauma that was handed to them by people that they love, because of reasons beyond either of your control it is hard. Dad and I have been talking about it a lot. Talking about why it is important. You see I've spent a lot of times working in Museums. I was at Museums Victoria for nearly 5 years and I know and have been a part of projects which document the trauma for the six generations of my family. From the apical ancestors to my Dad's Grandparents Nannie Effie and Poppa Joe, to my Dad's mum, to my dad and now by doing this testimony to me. Funnily enough Museums Victoria (a state institution) also has photos of all the generations of my family since documentation occurred. From Grannie Annie and Talguim Hamilton to today. I am giving this testimony today, my dad is supporting me giving this testimony today because we want this, we hope this can be a part of stopping this degrading cycle that has been placed on us since the late 1800's. We don't want the future generations experiencing these experiences based on our race.

9 When I was a child, I was often called little Larry. I looked exactly like my dad. People say I still do. My beard isn't quite as impressive, but I digress. He used to take me everywhere. I remember sitting in board meetings at the Koorie Heritage Trust and drawing while all the Aunties and Uncles worked around the table. There were many moments of my childhood that were hard and hard purely because of Dad's trauma. Birthdays. Turning 8, 9 and 10 for me were not fun birthdays. My Dad would try but inevitably he would see himself and be thrown back to his own past and it would derail the proceedings. I remember fighting with him when I was young saying 'just because your birthday was shit don't make mine'.

- 10 There were also moments in my childhood where my dad's PTSD would rear its head. Violence often towards himself and unbelievable pain would be on display at an age that I didn't understand what was happening.
- 11 My father is a good father. He's done best he can with the tools he had and the lack of healthy parenting model. But not having a healthy parenting model meant he didn't have normal or healthy parenting strategies when it got too much. He and I came to physical blows at 14. A shock for me, my sister and my mother, but dreaded and yet somewhat expected for my dad whom had had violence, power and love mixed together as his only model.
- 12 I remember when Kevin Rudd apologised. Dad was invited into parliament. He sat with my Uncle Choc and a few others I believe. Anyway, my whole family caught a community organised bus up to Canberra. I remember listening to my parents talk to one of my uncles before they went into parliament. I was 14 ish. It was the first time in my whole life that I had seen that uncle completely stone cold sober. I don't remember much as it wasn't my conversation but one thing he said always struck me. He said something to the effect of 'Bruz, I did it, I'm sober. The government is going to apologise to me while I am sober. They will apologise to me with all my pain on show'. Afterwards there was a big mob do at the Tent embassy. I remember watching him dance. It was a moment, just a moment in time of freedom; where his pain was acknowledged and real. It was a pity that that apology hasn't mounted to very much. We all had such high hopes.
- 13 The other thing I will say about being raised inside community and in my case by a stolen man was that I was taught and often quite harshly of the rights that had been gained for me. Often admonished through my childhood with corrections reminding me about the fact that my nan could not go to school, that my dad wasn't allowed to see his family nor were his mum, her mum and her mum. When you muck up as a kid and I don't mean serious muck ups but childish ones it's a heavy burden to be reminded of those whom have fought and died for your rights to go to school, go to the shops, walk where you want etc.
- 14 My father is, and always has been, very strong about his ability to protect his family from danger. My father's separation from his sister when he was 5 caused my dad extreme trauma and mental anguish. He felt like he couldn't protect his sister – she was ripped from him. He was ultimately punished for trying to protect her. It had a significant impact on both of their lives.
- 15 Weirdly or perhaps totally understandably it has also had a big impact on mine. Safety is a major concern. I know where my family is basically, kind of all the time. It's that thing where 'oh if I don't hear from sissy by Tuesday then she's not back from the bush so something's not quite right'. It's like the thing women do after a night out with their friends. A text to let them know you got home and check they did. Safety. And, the check ins. So many check ins.
- 16 You might think this is paranoid but every time we or I've become complacent something happens. Many of the issues the ancestors and previous generations (deceased and living)

have fought for are still occurring and happening today. The cycle hasn't broken yet. Kids are still removed at higher rates than non-Aboriginal kids, police cells still take Aboriginal lives, discrimination from state institutions including education, hospital and health and policing and judicial systems is still occurring. And I (like all my generation in community) could give testimony about direct instances of these that have occurred to me inside all these kinds of institutions. But today I was asked to provide testimony to support my dad's. Dad also asked me to provide testimony about intergenerational trauma in the hopes that including this content starts to be the basis for discussion of how we can ensure future generations aren't born into the burden that the systems currently place on a member of the Aboriginal race.

- 17 Reading over dad's files, helping him prepare this testimony and others that he has given in my adult life it makes me so angry. It makes me so sad. My sister Hannah and I used to play games. We would just play games and talk to ourselves – reading my father's files it sounds like dad was just like us. It made me so angry that he was belittled for this and was called crazy, whereas I know it as a sign of intelligence. My father repeatedly asked if he was Aboriginal and where his family was. Each time he was told that he was not wanted by his family and that he was not Aboriginal. I can't imagine what it would be like to be bullied and beaten for being black and then told by the powers that be that you weren't black you were just unwanted.
- 18 I also want to make a point in relation to my father's passage through the system as a ward of the state. He was knowingly put in dangerous homes. He is documented reporting and displaying his distress, he's even documented asking for help, for psych evaluations. This was never taken seriously and in fact in the instance of the psych evaluation while he was underage the judge granted it but commented that he thought dad was requesting it just to be a smart arse.
- 19 Dad's also got major physical injuries – scarring across his body in his muscle tissue – it's scarring that is typically seen in child soldiers and child slaves. Can you believe that? I mean I can because I live with him and I see the effect of the pain that he hides in public settings never wanting to not be seen as strong.

### **Intergenerational trauma**

- 20 I have complex post-traumatic stress disorder – so does my dad. I know that I have many aunts, uncles and cousins whom also have mental health issues, drug, alcohol and substance abuse issues that stem from in part the untreated or poorly treated trauma of the stolen generations' survivors. I say in part, for it is a big part or basis for much of my father and many in his generation's trauma and particularly those things that they handed on (in my case intense fear of doctors and hospitals, panic attacks). However, it is only a part.
- 21 We still live in a society that has racist views, thoughts, assumptions and biases embedded throughout it and its systems. We are still operating inside cultural institutions and epistemologies that are not our own Indigenous ways of being, knowing and doing.

- 22 I have had racist encounters with neo-Nazi's on public transport, I have had racist encounters with doctors whom I had attended for various care, I have had racist incidents in my formal schooling at all levels; primary, secondary and tertiary. Indeed, in primary school a state psychologist was called into the school as I was the only black child in a school of 40 students (on my ancestral land I might add) and I was being racially bullied. The state could find no solution so they funded me to attend school away from my family so I could be safe. I was moved off country to be safe.
- 23 I have experienced racist incidents in my professional career with colleagues, punters and random people. I have had incidents with police and PSO officers or have witnessed many take places with my darker community members or family. I too know mob in my generation losing their battles to trauma and addiction. These problems in society that have a disproportionate effect on my community haven't stopped.
- 24 I also want to talk very briefly about the journey to get mental health assistance for these serious matters. There is not the funding nor expertise in ACHO's I have come across to deal with the sheer volume of trauma in our community. This means quite often to get help and diagnosis we have to go outside our community. And this can be a danger in itself. You don't know the preconceptions of the psychiatrists you are dealing with. Shortly before I was finally correctly diagnosed with CPTSD I saw quite a sexist and racist psychiatrist. I went to him for help. He asked for my background. He told me I could not have experienced rape if I did not report it to the police. I tried to explain to him my feelings about the police and my safety inside that institution. I also explained to him that I had twice reported incidents both leaving me disenfranchised and with no perpetrator arrested. The first at age 17 and the second because it occurred in a workplace. I tried to explain my hesitation. He told me I must be lying. I got incredibly angry and left. He sent a report to my GP telling her I must have bi-polar because he believed I displayed an uncontrollable rage. I bring this up because the refusal to believe my cultural framework and viewpoint resulted in misdiagnosis and reinforced my lack of trust in the medical system that I have inherited from my father.
- 25 I never had a relationship with my grandmother. She used to refer to me and my sister as "those ones". Because my dad was taken, she could not look me in the eye her entire life. I had cousins who loved her – they said she was the "best nan". But she could not look me in the eye. That's the effect of trauma. I suppose the policy succeeded on that front. My dad's mother's shame and guilt (which was placed on her and didn't really belong to her) stopped her from being able to acknowledge me let alone have a relationship with me. My dad, my cousins, others, they were able to see different sides of her, but I can't talk for them just me. It's interesting after she passed, I learnt much more about her and found out she was one of the founding members of my mob's corporation. So was her sister my Aunt May. I'm now the Deputy Chair so despite not being close in a weird way I'm following a path she set into motion.

26 My dad's trauma permeates so deeply. He's frightened of doctors and hospitals and so am I. He's uncomfortable around police and so am I. He's aware that its possible for them (the state and its various institutions) to take someone. So am I. It has meant that we check in more then the average family. I have to know where my family is all the time – we all do. When I worked at Museums Victoria, I had a colleague who told me something that shocked me about myself. He told me that every time somebody left the room, I always asked them where they were going. He said he used to think that I was checking on them, checking in and monitoring whether he was working – and then he watched me and my dad one day when he came to do something at Melbourne Museum. He told me he realised that that's how we all operate, like knowing where someone was supposed to be was not a way to monitor them but to make sure they were safe. If someone's not where they're expected to be something might be very wrong. I need to know where everyone is so I can make sure they are safe. That is an aspect of intergenerational trauma.

### **Understanding our history**

27 We still don't have all the information about my father. We have tried, but we only get bits and pieces – and a lot of it is redacted.

28 It has also been difficult because for a long time we did not believe dad's stories about his criminal conviction. It was only when I first saw the conviction charge a few years ago that I realised he had been telling the truth this whole time. For dad, this was an unbelievable injustice – it has had a huge effect on his own life – and his children's lives. It's the reason I tried so hard for so many years to become a lawyer. It's not the reason I fell out love with the law. That's because I realised the Justice system was the 'Just Us' system and me and my mob, we weren't part of the 'us'. It felt like operating inside a framework that tried in its essence to take out Indigenous ways of being, knowing and doing. But again, I digress.

### **Intergenerational poverty**

29 My family and I could have broken the cycle of intergenerational poverty if my father had been given the piece of land that was promised to him by his foster family. Instead, he had a criminal conviction which forced us into poverty. The irony is that that piece of land is on our Country, on our clan land.

30 My sister, my community, my family and I fight many of the same battles as each other because of my father's disenfranchisement. I don't know what space I have to talk about this as I see my testimony as support for my father's experience and I am conscious I am sitting inside the elder's part of this testimony process.

### **My connection to my culture**

31 I have a strong connection to my culture. I am the same generation as my 21-year-old cousin's grandmother. I'm come from the youngest of the youngest in most of the 5

generations. I've been lucky I was raised inside my community and for a large part of my childhood and life on my ancestral country. I am part of the first generation of Dhaung Wurrung people to be able to live on country freely and without restriction. This is of course affected by education and job opportunities that are available across country. Whilst I haven't formally lived on country for a while now it calls me back most weekends. I am lucky to be part of the first generation since colonisation in Victoria to be able to grow up on my country knowing and simultaneously exploring my connections.

32 I don't really know what else to say on the front connection to country, culture and community other than these things make me who I am. The love I have for my community, country and culture drives everything I do; my art; my work in decolonising museum and gallery institutions; my brief time working at the Victorian Aboriginal Legal Service. My country, community and culture enter every facet of my life, personal and professional. And I can talk about this in many different contexts. I have worked on ceremony, storytelling, massacres, on south east Australian fire ecologies (bringing fire practises back into land management), megafauna, language reclamation, decolonising practises inside cultural intuitions, seasons and grass-based knowledge, history of Victorian Aboriginal cultures, and indigenous governance.

33 I am a part of the language reclamation and reawakening movement that is happening across the countries in 'Victoria' and have had the pleasure at being involved with Victorian Aboriginal Language Corporation and some of their research projects. I am a weaver and a song woman and have been involved with various ceremonies returning to country. Indeed, that's how my art practise began – making adornments for the mob to look beautiful while conducting ceremony. That and Uncle Lenny Tregonning's encouragement.

Dated 20 May 2022