

Yoorrook Justice Commission**WITNESS STATEMENT OF ALMA BERYL THORPE****Introduction**

- 1 My full name is Alma Beryl Thorpe.
- 2 I am an Elder of and identify with the Gunditjmara.
- 3 I have previously:
 - (a) been a part of establishing the Victorian Aboriginal Health Service (**VAHS**) in 1973;
 - (b) been a director of VAHS for 30 years;
 - (c) helped to establish Aboriginal-led health organisations across Australia;
 - (d) conducted a study tour of 'barefoot doctors' in China in the mid-1970s and brought the concept back to Australia to use in Aboriginal health services through the Koori Kollij program;
 - (e) held positions on various committees, including the Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (**VACCHO**);
 - (f) been a part of setting up the National Aboriginal and Islander Health Organisation (**NAIHO**);
 - (g) established the Yappera Children's Service;
 - (h) been involved in the establishment of the Weeroona Cemetery;
 - (i) established a youth club and gym, now called Melbourne Aboriginal Youth Sport and Recreation (**MAYSAR**) with Jock Austin; and

- (j) been the Elder in Residence at the Institute of Koorie Education (which is now called the NIKERI Institute).
- 4 I have worked with Counsel and Solicitors Assisting to prepare this witness statement ahead of the Elders' truth-telling hearings for the Yoorrook Justice Commission (**Yoorrook**).
- 5 This witness statement sets out the experiences that I have had as an Aboriginal person, particularly under the Half-Caste Act (*Aborigines Protection Act 1886* (Vic)) and related assimilation laws and policies in Victoria. My witness statement covers the following:
- (a) my early life in Fitzroy and Yallourn, including the treatment that Aboriginal people experienced in those years;
 - (b) the historic and ongoing intergenerational impacts of the Half-Caste Act and related assimilation laws and policies;
 - (c) background regarding my family, ancestry and culture;
 - (d) the impacts of colonisation suffered by my family and my community, and other Aboriginal families and communities;
 - (e) the racism that me, my family and my community have suffered and continue to suffer;
 - (f) observations on health, living conditions and community;
 - (g) the funeral and health services that me, my family and my community have established to improve the health, dignity and lives of Aboriginal people;
 - (h) the struggle for Aboriginal people to be recognised as humans and to have a voice in this country;
 - (i) other stories that I believe it is important be told; and
 - (j) my thoughts about things that could be changed to address past wrongs, and to improve the lives of Aboriginal people and relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people.
- 6 I have previously contributed to or participated in a number of statements, interviews and articles about my life and issues faced by Aboriginal people, including:

- (a) an article authored by Meriki Onus (IndigenousX), entitled '*I want to be known as a Gunditjmara activist*' and dated 6 May 2021 (**Annexure A**);¹
- (b) an interview with 3KND radio station on 4 October 2018 as part of the 'Make Waves' program, discussing the launch of the Her Place Women's Museum at the Morwell Library;² and
- (c) an interview with 3CR radio station as part of the 'Yarra Elders Precious Memories' project.³

7 In preparing this witness statement, I have also reviewed other key information sources, including:

- (a) a thesis authored by Clare Land, entitled '*Shifting definitions: the 1886 Aborigines Protection Act, 'race' and 'half-castes'*' and dated October 2001 (**Annexure B**); and
- (b) a thesis authored by Michael Hemingway, entitled '*Community control: Aboriginal self-determination and Australian settler democracy: a History of the Victorian Aboriginal Health Service*' and dated 2012 (**Annexure C**).

8 This witness statement at times refers to, and is supported by, these statements, articles and other key information sources. I would like Yoorrook to consider these additional materials.

9 During the course of preparing this witness statement, some questions have arisen, which I understand may be the subject of requests for documents (Notice(s) to Produce). Given the possibility that further documents will become available, I have been advised by the Solicitors Assisting that:

- (a) additional documentation relevant to this witness statement may be tendered in future; and
- (b) it is possible that I will be recalled at a later hearing.

¹ See <https://indigenoux.com.au/i-want-to-be-known-as-a-gunditjmara-activist/>.

² See <https://soundcloud.com/3knd/041018-make-waves>.

³ See <https://www.3cr.org.au/sites/default/files/audio/projects/YarraElders/Aunty%20Alma%20Thorpe.mp3>.

Early life

Birth and growing up in Fitzroy

- 10 I was born in the Royal Women's Hospital in 1935, during the Great Depression. I grew up in Fitzroy.
- 11 My mother, Edna Brown, originally came to Fitzroy from Framlingham Aboriginal Reserve. She had to leave at the age of 14 because she was half-caste. My mum's life story, written by Annette Street and Margaret McGregor from 1988, and a letter to my mum from one of the authors (Margaret McGregor) enclosing the story, are at **Annexure D**.
- 12 My father was Scottish, but I'm finding out now that his mother could have been an Aboriginal woman. Old Jim Brown, his name was. This is what I mean about the lost people. Being an Aboriginal person and not knowing and having to survive in this country.
- 13 Dad used to be protective and watchful of my mother. He'd follow her around, so no man would be looking at her. One day he was at Wirth's circus, watching what Mum was doing, I can remember those days pretty well, and he got bitten by a tiger while he was keeping an eye.
- 14 My dad used to be a rag and bone man because men had no work. They used to go around to Toorak. We never went hungry. They were beggars. They would go and do a bit of a job, find some way to earn a crust, because men had no work. My dad was an alcoholic. This was in those days of the Depression. He would cook for us, and he taught me a lot, a wonderful man. My dad died in Collingwood in a vacant allotment. So, you feel the pain that goes through. But that was a fact of life then.
- 15 Mum always had work. She worked in the customs office for years as a cleaner. She was a cleaner for years, always worked from 5 in the morning till 8 in the morning, and then back again later in the day. She was one of the strongest women you ever could meet. She was very devout with her faith, she knew who she was, she was an Aboriginal woman, and there was no way that would be taken from her. She never stopped working from the day she came off the mission to the day she died. So I used to have to be older than I was, because of my brothers and sisters, getting them off to school, getting them ready. I always had a responsibility. It wasn't like a childhood. It was like that in those times of the Depression.

- 16 I went to school at George Street, Fitzroy. Nothing was ever said about Aboriginal people and history at school. I loved history. I used to know all about who was the explorer and all that type of thing, but there was nothing at all about Aboriginal people. You didn't know nothing about being a blackfella. The kids were treated pretty badly, black and white, because Fitzroy was poor. So, you had to battle to even sit in the classroom. We got belted with a thick strap or stick. It was really tough.
- 17 I left school just before I turned 12. You had to be pretty rich to go higher in school. There was nothing after Grade 6 at school, not for my sort of people.
- 18 I went to a factory and learnt to make shoes. I was working at 12, in a shoe factory, and I loved it because it was freedom and you earnt a pound. With my cousin, we lived in boarding rooms from that time on. Then we had Kent Street in Fitzroy, which was at the back of the Fitzroy lock up, Town Hall. I can remember those days. Very, very difficult, the blacks and the poor whites, they were just treated so badly.
- 19 A photograph in our backyard in Kent Street, Fitzroy, is at **Annexure E**. The photo shows: (front row from left to right) Rosie, my sister; me; Alan Brown (my brother); and (back row from left to right) my aunt (on my father's side) Betty Brown; Maude Carter/Pepper; Alice Lovett (the daughter of Elsie Lovett/Clarke and a Lovett man); and mum (Edna Brown). The Kent Street house was a very social place for Aboriginal families in Fitzroy, like a meeting place. Games of two-up, church, a Sunday roast. I don't know how mum managed that, but she did.
- 20 I know Fitzroy. But we could only step into certain places. There were rules, and Mum wouldn't let us roam around either. Because of my mum being a worker, and my dad being an alcoholic she would never leave us, and we had to come straight home from school. So we lived in a tight hold in those days in Fitzroy. My mum never let us out of her sight because so many were taken by the welfare during that time – the stolen generations had begun.
- 21 Fitzroy Town Hall was off limits for all us Aboriginals because we couldn't go to the libraries when we were children – we didn't know about books. And my father used to go to second-hand shops and get me books to read. The one that I was always proud of was actually American – it might have been called Little House on the Prairie. I used to love it. It was a cowboy book. Otherwise, we only had the bible. We were very Christianised. But you didn't have reading materials. We were so poor. I remember one Christmas I got an orange in my stocking. And you couldn't say you were hungry. You had to wait until it was time and eat what was given.

- 22 We were Christians, and we were reared Christians. You had to obey the law. That was instilled into us until my father came along, who was an atheist and a communist, and a white man. But he left his life as a white man, and he lived with us. My father's brothers Jacky Brown and George Brown also lived with us. Jacky ended up marrying Margaret McGuinness and George married Stella Nicholls.
- 23 We had to really struggle because we couldn't talk to one another in the street if you were black. It was called a Black Maria (police car) that used to go around. If two black people were standing and talking, they would pinch them. I remember those days. This was in the 1940s. You couldn't be caught consorting with other Aboriginal people. I remember standing on a corner in Fitzroy; I'll talk to my cousin on the street. The police van would come along and move us on.
- 24 I can remember in those days there was an older lady, Aboriginal from Tasmania, but she dressed Indian so she wouldn't be identified as black. People were scared to identify as Aboriginal. We formed a community that protected one another, of aunties and uncles. They'd see you in the street and choof you home. If you broke the law, straight away you were frightened of going away, incarcerated or battered. Always that fear that you could be taken. You know, that was very much the thing. And breaking the law was things like communicating or consorting with other Aboriginal people.
- 25 Blackfellas weren't allowed to do nothing at that time. Blackfellas weren't recognised. Aboriginal people never had a voice in those days. Up until the 1970s, you didn't have a voice to tell your story because you weren't allowed to talk. We were nobody. Those people had had their children taken, and they had come direct from the missions where they controlled everything you did. With the children that were stolen and the mothers that would wander, lost. So you have that sort of loss. I call the missions "death camps". The missions were actually concentration camps. Because they weren't allowed to do their language, and you had to learn the Bible. Very strict and poor conditions.
- 26 So on the mission you were never able to put your hand up to fight and be able to fight. Then we were brought up in that sort of scene in the 1930s and 1940s of not speaking up. That's why my story is important to me because of not being able to speak up – you don't know how it is psychologically, to experience that, but you were muted.

- 27 My mother was a free spirit and found her life after leaving Framlingham and work and all her life, and finding out she could fight. Mum learned she could put her hand up to fight and she did fight.
- 28 In the thirties, my mother danced in shows, the Corrobboree with old Marj Tucker. Under the communist people mind you. Because the communist people were nice to us. We have a big spectrum of culture. Aunty Marj Tucker she was called "Princess Laladia" by the communist people. And there was a restaurant in the city, and she used to sing. She was an opera singer. And these were one of the women who were dragged away from their home, dragged away and put in homes when they were babies. She's from Cummeragunja. Part of the Briggs mob.
- 29 She had a cultural voice as an Aboriginal woman and in her own community and even politically. She used to be in acting and circuses. My mum and a few of the black Aboriginal women would get up and do a dance. It would have been with the communists. Joycy Johnson, she was dancing. Eric Onus was on it, and mum doing a dance and Eric's wife, Winnie Onus. They used to sing in clubs and parks, and they used to be opera singers, they used to sing opera. And they used to sing in the café.
- 30 A lot of the people that did have a voice were thrown in jail. So if you said too much, you went to jail. I used to have a cousin who would get pinched – probably put in jail every couple of days – because he wouldn't back down. And they used to bash him all the way up Gertrude Street. That was Georgie Wright. Battered all his life. But they used to fight the system. As soon as he got to the Fitzroy lock-up, which was across the road from where I lived, he yelled out: "*Alma, come and get me!*" He might have been a street man, but he was a very clever, very smart man. He died of alcoholism. But they never gave up. They had a strength within them.
- 31 My mum and a few of the black Aboriginal women played a big part in bringing the community together. It was the companionship of people that we grew on and survived on. We took care of each other. In the black community in Fitzroy, if it wasn't for them, we'd be gone. We would have disappeared. The Half-Caste Act would have been a success. Assimilation would have been a success if it hadn't been for people like my mother and my aunts keeping the connections alive and trying to have a voice.
- 32 At least in Fitzroy you could be black, even if you had no rights. A lot of people in the rural parts of the country pretended they were white for survival. I have stories about Fitzroy that are amazing and wonderful. We had this unique community in Fitzroy

from the 1930-40s onwards. Very unique. But it was only for people who were game enough to flout the rule of the law.

- 33 I didn't like the church, I was frightened of it, the church at the corner of Gertrude and Fitzroy Street, Fitzroy, and we used to go to Sister Alice, but she used to bring in all the different Christians of different denominations. You used to have people come in that would faint on the floor.
- 34 Doug Nicholls started the church in Gore Street Fitzroy in the late 1940s or early 1950s. That's when he became a preacher after being an athlete. Used to come and watch that we were doing the right thing, he was one of the government boys, him and Alick Jackomos. Lovely man, Alick Jackomos was, but they were the government workers. We were careful in those days that everything was just so, and would use newspapers as a tablecloth. Because we were on the books. I believe it was under the Aboriginal Welfare Act or something.
- 35 My mum had left me in Melbourne and went to Moe, because she finally got a proper house. The only time they got housing was when the housing thing was set up in Moe. I think it was the SEC (State Electricity Commission).

Marriage and life in Yallourn

- 36 You were very restricted, and all my cousins married white, Maltese or Greek or whatever. Anything but Aboriginal. Interracial marriage was not allowed at the time, but poor white people were allowed to break the rules. Poor white people were the lowest rung of the ladder in society. There wasn't a rung on the ladder for blackfellas. We were the dirt the ladder stood on. I don't care about that because that's the proper place because we are the soil. I'm a great gardener and I'm in the dirt all the time.
- 37 I was related to most of the Aboriginal men in Fitzroy. Those marriage lines were important because we had lost so much of our identity.
- 38 We weren't allowed to marry black either. That was a no-no. By then, it was instilled into us not to marry black, even if you weren't a half-caste. There was a lot of pressure on me to marry white, you weren't allowed to breed black people, that was the sense. But I wanted to marry a blackfella, because I was determined that my family would be Aboriginal. That was from the time I was 12 years old. I knew I was going to marry a blackfella. I don't know why, but I knew I wanted my children to be Aboriginal. I said, "*No way am I going to marry a whitefella.*" So I had to find a blackfella that I wasn't related to.

- 39 I married a Gunai man from Gippsland and had seven children in nine years.
- 40 I didn't meet my husband until I was 16. I wasn't allowed to meet up with him, so it was through cousins and uncles that we were able to maybe see one another. He was a very strong man. He was a great footballer, and he and his brothers played for Warragul and Moe.
- 41 You weren't allowed to have a boyfriend in my days. I married my husband when I was 18 in Melbourne, no mucking around. I went to Yallourn when I was married. My husband was in the SEC. He used to clean rooves out. His job was vacuuming ceilings. They used to do one house every 12 months, and they'd have to go back to that house after 12 months because of the soot and coal dust.
- 42 Also, my sister-in-law, who married my brother, was a Moe girl. When they knew that she was going with a blackfella, they said "*You shouldn't be with him. You might have black kids.*"
- 43 In Yallourn, Aboriginal people had to look good and act good. We had to be good people, good blackfellas. The government was always watching you and if you weren't "good" you'd get in trouble or your kids would be taken.
- 44 My husband was a very good footballer and I think because of that we got on pretty well in Yallourn. His nickname was "The Black Cloud".
- 45 I have a lot of time for the people of Morwell. I really love them. I started a health service there. Many, many years ago.
- 46 In the 1960s, I separated from my husband and returned to Fitzroy. I was free for the first time in my life. I lived with the children in a one-bedroom flat and was working as a barmaid.

Family, culture and ancestry

Aboriginal people from the Western District

- 47 The people of Framlingham were from all around the Western District. Out of that country comes different clans, tribes, languages. They travelled all round the Western District. It was part of their lore to do that. At different times of the year and in different places, for catching fish, eels, black swan eggs. Before the missions they walked all around, and after the missions you still had those skills you would learn like how to catch the eels and make the nets.

- 48 You've got Port Campbell, Colac, Deen Maar Island, and that island is where our people came, or went to die. That part of the story of Bunjil when he became the eagle. I won't talk too much about those stories, but that's part of the story of that country, Gunditjmara and Djab Wurrung country. But Gariwerd caves and Deen Maar Island is very important.
- 49 Culturally our people in the Western District had marriage lines, and they were also very, very important. So, you didn't marry into the wrong people or into your wrong country. So South Australia was our marriage line, and you find a lot of people from Western District that married into South Australia. A bad marriage could bring loss of children and other harm. That was and is the belief. A lot of problems are caused by a wrong marriage. It didn't matter who you loved, it was who you had to marry. And you couldn't marry into your own.

Maternal connections

- 50 Mum was born and lived on the Hopkins River and that runs into our totems as the black swan and the eel.
- 51 I had two grannies, great grandmother, Granny Hannah McDonald Lovett who lived around Condah, Granny Alice Dixon Clarke from Framlingham, and I knew them well. So I had the two sides, Framingham and Condah. So that's my close connections in the Western District. For me, that was our cement at that time. That's how we knew who we were from that time of the missions and living in Fitzroy.
- 52 It's been where the authority of mother/grandmother rules as long as I can remember. Your older people are the bosses. I had older people in my life. They were the bosses. My mother, I couldn't put a foot wrong in my day. You had to be very brave to put your feet wrong. Because children were seen and not heard.

Granny Lovett

- 53 Granny Maryanne McLennan Lovett's mother was Hannah Lovett from Condah. We don't know exactly where Hannah was born, but she came back to the Western District and married a Lovett from South Australia.
- 54 Granny Lovett's sisters were Auntie May Lovett, and Auntie Annie Lovett, who left the missions to become workers for white people in the cities. So, they were sent out as domestics.

- 55 She married George Clarke, so she had Great Grandmother Clarke through his line. She had my mother and her two sisters, and adopted another boy.
- 56 But when all the things happened in the Western District, she took on children like the Austin mob, my Aunty Doris, the Wrights. She reared all the kids that were being left and lost in Fitzroy. She had about twenty kids when she died. And they were all my cousins. She looked after them until she died and she died young, she was only 59.
- 57 When she passed away, those kids came to Fitzroy. And it was pretty tough for them. That's when you find the lost people.
- 58 We were very close to Granny Lovett. My Granny Lovett used to travel down on a train and visit us. A photograph of Granny Lovett with my mother in Kent Street, Fitzroy, is at **Annexure F**.

Susannah (great, great grandmother)

- 59 'Susannah' was my great grandmother Hannah Lovett's mother. She is known as Susannah of the Trees, or Susannah of the Rocks. That story is very significant. I believe she was from Djab Wurrung originally, and came back to Condah. The story I know is that Susannah came with a famous explorer, who travelled parts of Victoria and Tasmania. They picked her up, and she travelled with them. He had that sex disease, syphilis.
- 60 Susannah brought two children back to Condah, they were hers, and they were called McDonalds. That isn't their real name. There was a man, McDonald – owned big properties – run cattle or sheep. And he named them the children. So that's all you know. We believe they may have been from South Australia, but they were hers and she brought them back to Condah to be raised on the mission.
- 61 But she wouldn't live on the mission, she lived in the stones, in the caves. And around Victoria. Susannah lived in the stones for a long time, and then she died in the stones. It was very volcanic around Condah – that's why there are a lot of stones and caves, that's why they call it the stony place. She is known as Susannah of the Rocks or Susannah of the Trees because of this. I can't find her Aboriginal name at the moment. I don't think they let her live on Condah.
- 62 You know, you found a lot of people were born of whalers, and you had to survive, it was a matter of survival. But the old people didn't tell you stories. You had to do as you were told. Very strict they were.

Granny Clarke

- 63 Granny Clarke was the mother of my maternal grandfather, George Clarke. She lived in Framlingham, Western District, and she died in her 90s. She and her husband Frank Clarke were from the tribe of Mortlake. There's no life in the lake, it's a salt-lake, and they were a tribe just at the base of the Grampians.
- 64 Granny Clarke was born of the rape and the killing of the people; she was red-haired and green-eyed. And my Pa, George Clarke, he had red hair and green eyes. All through the family we have women with red hair.
- 65 When Granny Clarke was a little girl, she was gathered from the bush and brought up by white people, in the homes. She was given the name Alice Dixon, and was educated and Christianised. But Granny Clarke grew up. And then she lived on Framingham all her life.
- 66 When she married, she married a Clarke, and he was actually from the same tribe as she was. But they met in the homes for the children down Port Fairy way I believe. And they connected. It's amazing that. Being taken into care and brought up as someone different. Called Alice Dixon. And that was the name of sheep owners. Cattle owners and all that, they give you names. Grew up as Alice Dixon, and then married a Frank Clarke, who was from the same country as she was. You wonder at how they found each other and connected.
- 67 All Granny Clarke's children were born down on the Hopkins River in Framlingham.
- 68 I can remember sitting in Granny Clarke's kitchen. We weren't allowed to speak, very strict, very strict. You spoke only when you were spoken to. She was like a queen type thing. But she was reared in homes, so learnt to cook and sew and be a lady, and that was their life, until she married old Frank Clarke and became a mother.
- 69 A photograph of my grandfather, George Clarke, with two of his brothers, Norman Clarke (Jimmy Berg's grandfather) with the moustache and Fleetwood Clarke on the left, is at **Annexure G**. My Granny Clarke was the mother of them. They were brothers, and that's our connection to country. It's an amazing photo, that.

Bunjil and caves

- 70 I've got a story from the Framlingham people about Bunjil.
- 71 When the Bunjil became the eagle, that's when it became the god. These are the spirits. Very rare that you hear a story. When I heard Johnny Lovett talk about the

snake, kill this fella and took them out to Lady Percy Island. It's called Deen Maar. When they went to Lady Percy, it's never been known by its Aboriginal name. It's where you went and you got your spirit of Bunjil because Bunjil is the spirit man. Very, very secret it was. Being part of the Grampians or the mountains there. That was a meeting place for Aboriginal people all over the country. That's where they traded for marriages, they traded their ochre, they traded their stories. They got caves there.

- 72 I won't go in a cave. My daughter took me and said, "*we'll go to the caves mum*". This was when the kids were little. The spirits followed us right along that track. This man, this thing was calling. The birds were screaming and everything. We get to the caves. The kids run up the hill and the next minute they run down. There were spirits there waiting. There is definitely spirits watching over. That's why I won't go into caves.

Assimilation and absorption policies

The Half-Caste Act

- 73 My family don't like me saying "half-caste", particularly the young ones, because they didn't understand how we lived under the Half-Caste Act because they grew up as strong black people. It's a dirty word. I'd say it to my daughter. She'd say, "*mum, don't say half caste*". I'm going to make my family read the Half-Caste Act because we're neither Aboriginal or white, so what are we? I mean, to me, in that day, the Half-Caste Act is what was the law. You had to follow that law. If you didn't, you got put in jail. That's when you couldn't talk on the corner, they brought in the law against "consorting". You couldn't consort. You couldn't talk to your mates on the corner.
- 74 My mother, Edna Brown, had to leave Framlingham when she was between 12 and 14 under the Half-Caste Act. The Half-Caste Act came in and said that they weren't going to look after half-castes. So, she hitched a ride to Melbourne with Bobby Lovett and lived in boarding rooms. I've got an adopted sister from Framlingham, who my mother took in when she was two years of age. I'm the last of my family. It's very important that when you were thrown off a mission, you were a half-caste. That affected me badly.
- 75 Being black, our blood don't come back. That's why they tried to breed us out, because eugenics was very much in the mix at the time. Even Darwin tried to find out how much we were human, his eugenics on black people was pretty bad. They were ignorant, and they measured our skulls. Up until the 1940s, they were measuring our skulls to see if they were longer or broader or whatever. The eugenics was very much

in the mix because a lot of my cousins, I believe they were sterilised, in the early days.

- 76 Why would they think we're not human? What are we if we're not human?
- 77 I mean, with genocide they killed you straight out. But the Half-Caste Act and Assimilation Act that was a different type of death. And I can remember all the girls of my age and the men of my age who died in their 30s and 40s. Whether it was from disease or with alcohol or whether it was through having an abortion that's in the backyard or whatever.
- 78 I'm reading through a thesis now, called "*Shifting definitions: the 1886 Aborigines Protection Act, 'race' and 'half-castes'*". It's a bit of an awakening, and it's sometimes hard to read.
- 79 When you read how the authorities were concerned about half -castes as a "*threat to... 'white' Australia*", when you read this, you get sick. Even though I lived it, it's another thing when you see it in black and white.
- 80 We came under this Half-Caste Act, which I found out they was trying to destroy whatever remnant that we were, because we were 'doomed'. So they had to save us, and we'd marry whites. In their view, you couldn't marry black, because they believed we were doomed as a race.
- 81 I never vote. And at the moment that's a choice.
- 82 I believe the assimilation policies and the Half-Caste Act had an impact on my life. I'm strong now, and I've always been a strong woman, but I think I have been scarred by the Half-Caste Act. I didn't feel free until 1972-1973, when we set up the organisations and given me a freedom. I've always identified as Aboriginal even in spite of the Half-Caste Act. But I've got a sadness and I've been to a psychiatrist because of those very things. And it's affected me in that way, that I can't let go.
- 83 I had to go to New Zealand to get a psychiatrist, find out where to get a psychiatrist. I know I'm not crazy, but there's something in me, a stiff rod, and I can't let go. And I think that's because of that. I've worked hard all my life, I'm always still trying to do my best, and I don't think I'm achieving it. It's a stricture within you that you don't let go. And I feel like that; I just can't let myself go. I think that's from the Half-Caste Act. And I've never had a holiday. I've been around the world. I can relax by digging in the yard for a couple of hours, in the dirt. But that's it. That's the only time I let go.

Treatment and perception of “half-caste” Aboriginal people

- 84 Half-caste people were treated differently than “full blood” people under the Half-Caste Act and the assimilation policies.
- 85 My Pa, Frank Clarke, used to chop wood for six months on the Mission to put a roof over his head, because half-castes didn’t get any government rations. They wouldn’t get food and had to provide their own.
- 86 My husband, a Gunai man, was half-caste, so he wasn’t able to go on Lake Tyers. That’s where his family was from, but they were barred because they were half-castes. They weren’t allowed to live on there. So they lived by picking beans, that’s my husband’s family. They were bean pickers, as they call them. Nowadays, I’ve got two daughters living on Lake Tyers, but it’s now held under a trust which isn’t very good. Very bad, when you think about it. Aboriginal people were non-people, that’s how you’ve got to look at it. Why not just give the land back? They have shares and all that.
- 87 I can remember going to Uluru many years ago to do a talk. I went on a four-seater plane with this old fella who was blind from the atomic testing at Maralinga. He described Uluru to me even though he couldn’t see. When I got there and I went to a meeting to set up the health service, this old fella said, “*You can’t talk. You are not allowed to talk because you’re yellow*” because I’m half caste. So I really had to defend myself. We had that thing of always blackfellas who called us yellow fellas. And you had to show respect. I said look old fella I said I am allowed to speak I’m from the Gunditjmarra people of the Western District. I have a voice and I can speak here and I was invited. I never went anywhere unless I was invited. But that’s naturally what he would say when they see half-castes, that you’re yellow.
- 88 I had an old fella in Queensland who says to me, “*If it wasn’t for you fellas who took the brunt of it, we’d be like you*”.

Intergenerational trauma associated with the Half-Caste Act and assimilation policies

- 89 The Half-Caste Act has caused intergenerational trauma. This intergenerational trauma has led to mental health issues, alcoholism and drug addiction for many Aboriginal people. It’s also why you have generations of Aboriginal people going to prison. Alcohol and drug use are a way of overcoming, hiding and deadening these feelings of trauma. And because they never really had a right. And as an Aboriginal person you are actually born a criminal in this country. I have never touched alcohol,

but alcoholism was a bad thing in my day. Now, heavy drugs have come in and they have really hit people hard.

- 90 It's important to open the door to let the truth out about our history, because otherwise it will fester.
- 91 You can be a negro or black American, and they've been slaves. But the whole thing is that they knew who they were, they knew they were black Americans. We've come to a thing where even in the future, we're still not going to know who we are, that's my interpretation. Because it's taken from us, and it's from the genocide of our minds, or the genocide of the people, and taking away that person, who was an Aboriginal person. And I hate saying "Aboriginal" person, because "Ab" doesn't mean much to me. We are the *original* people of this country, but we're nothing. That's why I got upset when I read about it again in Clare Land's thesis. But I lived it. And it says that, you're neither black nor white. So what are you?
- 92 And they found out too, that the Assimilation Act was going against them. So the white structure is saying that, "God, we've got to be careful because the blacks will marry into us, and we'll become Aboriginal". But they're not defining what "Aboriginal" is. I don't know, I may be wrong.
- 93 I've worked for years, I worked as a barmaid for years, and I've always had, "*Oh you look like you're Greek or you're Italian*", because of my skin, and I say, "*No, I'm Aboriginal*". "*But you could pass for white!*" So straightaway you know. That is sincere, what they're saying, so offensive but so ignorant. Ignorance is a weird word, and a lot of people have got it. Because of education and what's happening in our country is lack of education. We're a country of many nations now, how are they gonna get on in the future? Can't call it democracy, can you? I don't know, I don't believe in democracy. I don't really understand what it means for us.

Impacts of colonisation

Establishment of missions

- 94 Before the missions you were tribes all around the country. But when they set up the mission which was Framlingham, Lake Condah, you were gathered up and put there from all over country.
- 95 The missions were like prisons. They were only set up to gather up the blacks that were all around. At the mission they weren't allowed to speak language or practice culture. Corroborees were very, very important. But I know in Condah, and probably

in Framlingham too, they used to run away in the night in the bush and do a corroboree. But if they were caught you were punished. You weren't allowed to do that and pass it on. So that was cut out of your life. They called it worshipping, not worshipping god, so you are worshipping the devil. So you weren't allowed to do that. It was very secret. There were lots of secrets.

- 96 Condah was very much under strict Christian law. Framlingham wasn't as much under Christian law. People run away from Condah to Framlingham. So you had a lot of mixture. And because they weren't allowed to do their language, you had to learn the bible. And people were frightened. When you lived on a mission you had to get permission to leave. To even go off the mission to visit. If you had family up in Gippsland and you had someone die who was your family you couldn't go, you had to get permission, you had to get a card of leave. And so you were frightened to leave.
- 97 They ate eels and rabbits on the mish. Every now and then someone would steal a sheep, but you got shot for that. So you ate minimal.
- 98 You know I can remember, I don't know, because mum never talked very much, but all she said she can remember is bringing water, they had to bring up water to drink at the spring. There was no water on Framlingham, so they used to carry it up from the river. There was a spring, fresh-water spring, they didn't drink the river water, they drank from the spring. So that was a special spot so old people were always bringing water carrying water to drink and just little things like that. That were connected to culture and stories. We didn't have much. They treated people poorly. I mean missions were terrible places, they were terrible places, they lived in humpies. You hang on to the bits of stories and culture that you did get. It was a very fast eradicating of a people and their culture from the 1800s. Very fast.
- 99 I used to stay up in Framlingham when we were kids. I didn't like it at Condah. The old people would tell stories and I was frightened of it. And I never went there very much. Once or twice. You had to get a buggy.
- 100 For me, we know the things that we were allowed to know. And because of the mission life there was that disconnection from tribal lands then. A lot was lost.
- 101 And then that mission life was taken away from us and we became half-castes. That's my biggest thing, and my family don't agree with me, is that they made me a half-caste and I had no choice. So I'm a half-caste. And that was through the rape and that of my great, great grandmother, in that place, and whatever. I didn't ask for it.

Removal of Aboriginal people from land and massacres

- 102 Aboriginal people were all taken from their country and there were terrible massacres all over Victoria. There were more massacres around the Western District than anywhere. And the massacres, in the 1930s, this was a fact, there were only 34 full blood Aboriginal people in the Western District, out of the tribes. There were masses of tribes, they weren't big tribes, but they were different mobs. We never spoke about the massacres. It was all secret and not spoken about. I found out about it all a lot later. I remember Alice Dixon riding in her buggy in her high collared shirt to church, with the children running behind. She was half-caste. And everything was very proper.
- 103 Alice Dixon was from the tribe that lived at the base of the Grampians, at the dead lake. That tribe, when they were massacred, the remaining blacks were scattered. So all the people, everybody, moved in different directions. It was a way to move on.
- 104 The Thorpe family up in Gippsland, their kids were watching massacres happen. They were hiding in a log, watching people being killed. Billy Thorpe, who was 11 years old when they massacred his family, and his brother, were hiding in a log. We believe that a white Thorpe family then took Billy in, so he was given that white family's name. If you got a white name, you were safe.
- 105 The most massacres of Aboriginal people were in Victoria.
- 106 It's very important that those massacre maps come out, because no one really knows about it. The stories of what happened to the people. And to the survivors. I want to know what happened to all those people, and it should be part of the education.

Slavery

- 107 My great grandmother, Alice, was the daughter of a full-blooded Aboriginal woman who was raped by a white man. He was supposed to be a lieutenant in the army, or something like that. They raped the women. I was told there were slave camps. There were slave places where they put the women. They were hidden and my cousin used to show me that's where the slave places used to be. The women were gathered up and became slaves. You become the men's women. This was in the western districts, in Gunditjmara country. These women were half-castes.
- 108 If you've been to Mortlake, that lake is a salt lake. Always called a dead lake. At the base of that is a place where, my cousin told me, they had slave camps.

Knowledge of ancestry, culture and heritage

- 109 When you talk about my mob, they were the Gunditjmara. We didn't know that. I found out later in life. I'd always wanted to know about my heritage, I think I was born that way. I found that we were very lucky that we had a connection to where we came from. You could grab hold of that. That was through my grannies I got that.
- 110 I'm still finding out about where I came from and who my people were. It's amazing because there's nothing now. But, around that area, the western districts, there were many tribes. There were maybe around 20 or 30, up to 50, people in a tribe, but there were many tribes.
- 111 I am Gunditjmara, but my clan name is Korray-Worong, which means black swan totem. It's around the base of the Grampians.
- 112 Because of the conditions for our people, many things were not talked about, and many went to the grave not sharing the knowledge they held. There is a pain with that.
- 113 Oral history is the only thing I know. And I don't know much, because we didn't. But with the knowledge that gets passed down, it is very serious, and each story is important to protect and pass on. That's how we have found out most things. By word of mouth. All the names were assumed names, they were given to us. So you lost who you were. We only got knowledge by word of mouth. Even now, we rely on that. And so therefore its only who you know you are.
- 114 But the whole point is I know who I am, I know where I come from, and I know our country. That's the whole, that's the beginning and the end. Different generations that are coming in, they got a right to know, don't worry about that. The passing on was to protect one another. You had to keep that. You will find that knowledge came from your Elders, and from their Elders before. That's the choices of today. Assimilation is the brief of white Australia policy. But we can't give up who we are. We are Aboriginal.
- 115 I sort of don't feel that traditional culture the way courts see it fits our scene. Because our culture was stripped from us. And what we've got left is broken people looking for who they are. They are looking – who are they? They've got a little bit they know.
- 116 But people didn't know who they were and because of the system you were taken from missions. It didn't matter if it was Lake Condah, Framlingham, Ebenezer, Lake Tyers, wherever. They were taken from different places and mixed around, so you

didn't know your country. You will find in Gippsland that there are some mob from a different mob, but they've lived there for 50, 60 years so they never knew their country. This is only about the loss of, I don't know if I can make myself understood. You find that there was a loss, and if you didn't have a connection it was very hard. And so, I found that were very lucky that we had a connection. You could grab hold of that. In Fitzroy we were trying to make that reconnection and all over Victoria.

Stolen generations

- 117 There is also Talgum, who is a member of the Stolen Generations. He became a strong man later in life; he says "*sovereignty never ceded*". He has written this book, "Talgum of the Taungurung". He's a wonderful man. He's an Edwards. They were all taken, the Edwards. He didn't know he was Aboriginal, like old Jackie Charles. He was stolen, he was put in the homes, so he didn't know. They grew up not knowing they were black. They only found this out later on in life.
- 118 Old Jacky Charles – he was a quiet man – he only just came into the picture when he tried to go off the drugs and all that – his spirit gave him a different life. That's what I think. But I can always remember, in the early days, he never interfered or got into trouble. Whatever he did was very respectfully. He was a Fitzroy man, a gentle man.
- 119 The reason we set up the services – it was all about the same thing, getting a way for people young and old to connect to identity as blackfellas in the conditions of that time. For some of the people stolen from family, they didn't know anything till they came to Fitzroy. Because our culture was stripped from us. And what we've got left is broken people looking for who they are.
- 120 For me, it makes it more important to hang on to everything we've got. It's important for future generations. And to heal the fractures. You feel bad that who you are is taken away. So you are trying to find out who you are.
- 121 So you know, we are a lost tribe really. But in our own country. And what is my right in this country? If we are no-one. Something was taken, and it is not acknowledged.

Giving birth on the Mission

- 122 My grandmother, Alice Dixon, was the one delivering the babies at Framlingham. She was the midwife. She delivered most of the babies at Framlingham.
- 123 My mum was 14 years old, and still didn't know where babies come from. She used to have to saddle a horse and buggy to take granny to deliver a baby.

- 124 At Framlingham, they believed the babies came from the bush, that they were born under that bush. Everyone had a go at being a midwife if a baby was born because there were no hospitals, very rare.
- 125 The Aboriginal mothers would never go to the hospital in that day, although my mum was born in a hospital in Hamilton. They were moved around. My granny went to Healesville, to Coranderrk, to have my Aunty Ivy. She had TB. Coranderrk was different, so she went and had Ivy at Coranderrk
- 126 After she was born, my mum only knew the stories of what the grannies said, like where she was born and who she could visit. She'd go to Condah, and I know that she went to school in Condah for a while.

Birth in Fitzroy

- 127 A lot of bad things happened with our people with the loss of who they were, and people died, and there were mothers who had no way to look after their children.
- 128 I remember the name of this place, it was in North Fitzroy, called "the Haven". I used to go with my cousins because they came and lived in Melbourne with us when they moved away from Framlingham. They'd come to my mum and dad's or to aunty's and uncle's. At eight months, they'd be taken to the Haven at the Royal Women's Hospital, and those babies wouldn't be seen again.
- 129 I don't know what happened at the Haven. If you didn't have ways of looking after babies, they were adopted out. Older grannies looked after babies, but after a while they couldn't do it any longer. When my granny died on Framlingham, she was looking after eight of her grandchildren, and most of them had tuberculosis, they were very sick. My mum tried to see one of them but never seen again. They were adopted out. So, it was a lot of them adopted. They were looking after the children, the babies. They were not easy times for those mothers, and those women and the men, in that day and age. It was terrible. A lot of kids disappeared. So people would have to give their babies up if they didn't have ways of looking after them. There was no pensions or anything like that in those days. Some people might have a backyard abortion.
- 130 I always thank God that I had a mother like my mother, whether we lived rich or poor, and it was always poor, and that she was able to hold onto us.

Rearing of Aboriginal children in homes

- 131 When Aboriginal people were moved off into homes, terrible things happened.

- 132 I still think that I'm lucky that I didn't grow up in a home. I had my mother, so I was lucky. With the stolen generation in Fitzroy, I never felt scared as a child, but my mum never let us out of her sight. I know that she never left us with people either.
- 133 My mum only allowed one woman to look after me, Stella Nicholls, who was the niece of Doug Nicholls. She used to be like my nan.

Lack of a voice

- 134 You didn't have much of a voice as an Aboriginal person. Until the 1970s, you couldn't tell your story because you weren't allowed to talk. We were nobody, and you didn't own yourself. So you said nothing, and got by. We weren't allowed to cry, and I find I still can't.
- 135 The only people that ever gave the poor people of Fitzroy a hand were the Communist Party, the people who worked on the docks, the dockers, and maybe Father Tucker from the Christian Church. They were the only people that let you have a voice, the Communists. They weren't racists, and they accepted Aboriginal people as people. As equal. Well, that's how we seen it, because we were allowed to be with them, as them.
- 136 Ebenezer Lovett, who was my Granny's brother, was a secretary of the Communist Party in Fitzroy. He was murdered, run over in the streets, because he was a communist.
- 137 My mother was very active in the 1967 referendum. It really didn't give us any rights, didn't give us the justice that we looked for.
- 138 What we did in the 1970s with the health services was the beginning of having my voice. Through the health services I was a worker for my people, without pay. That part is important to me because I believe that money is the root of all evil. As soon as you accept the government's money you lose your autonomy, and you can't have a voice. You have to do what the government says. Bruce McGuinness stood strong on that too, along with others.

Impacts on Country and native title system

- 139 I can't go back to what our Country was, because it's so disturbed.
- 140 I was part of the land rights movement.

- 141 Since native title came in, I've had nothing to do with it and I won't be on the boards of any organisation. There's no way that I could be part of native title because it's caused angst and ugliness and fighting within our people. Although they're my blood, I refuse to be a part of that. It's worse than fighting the whitefellas in the 1940s. All native title has done is cause Aboriginal people to fight one another. And to me that's as bad as having a genocide on your hands.
- 142 Under the native title system, money is offered and passed, and it's been corrupted. I don't like to point fingers, but I won't have nothing to do with them. I find it very hard to talk about it. Money is a big, big thing. I want people to earn a crust; but without selling their soul.
- 143 Native title has caused angst. I don't know what native title really does. What is it? I mean, it set up an organisation, is that it? When we set up our services in the 1970s, all the jobs of today came out of that era. There was nobody employed in my day, in the early days, unless you worked for the department or places like that. We created jobs out of that type of thing. But it was not controlled by the government. It was Aboriginal workers working for their community,
- 144 I've been involved for a long time, and I can remember in the 1970s when old politician Whitlam was around. I've been disappointed ever since that day. We went for land rights, and we fought for land rights in Victoria. It was very strong within us. We wanted our land rights. Eddie Mabo got land rights. They got land rights and we got native title. They came to this big agreement. The island people, one islander man got land rights. It was a protest with the people that fought for land rights. But they got land rights and we got native title. It was a gammin thing.

Relics/cultural heritage

- 145 We've got bones buried at Weeroona that were gathered up from around Victoria. No one could claim them. We've made a particular area there where they buried over a hundred different bodies, children, men, women. They were in the museums and that for years. I won't know if that's part of the relics, the bodies. I don't know what's still in the museums or whatever now. But they're there.
- 146 I know that people are doing field work. I don't know if they find things, what happens to it. I know if they dug up the Melbourne market, that was a burial ground. God knows what's under that Victoria Market. Melbourne was a big place of Aboriginal people, and they are all gone. All of the tribes, they are all gone. When you think

about the killing that must have gone on that got rid of all those people from the Yarra.

- 147 They've destroyed the relics, like people are shocked when they hear about the eel farming of Lake Condah. That was an amazing construction of Aboriginal people done those eel traps. They lived in them houses and they were many tribes. I can only remember the eels were a main source of food in Framlingham from the Hopkins River, so I always heard stories of the eels of the Hopkins River and when they fish for them at certain times because they would all be running up the waterfall to breed.

Racism

- 148 My Uncle Lou went to war in Borneo when he was 17. When he came back to Australia, he'd put a turban on his head to go into the pub and have a drink, because they wouldn't serve blackfellas. If you were black, you didn't go in as an Aboriginal person, you'd put a turban on, and you were accepted as an Indian.
- 149 Even the cameleers, they married into Aboriginal people, and they had a stronger basis of their life, more acceptance, than we did.
- 150 When Doug Nicholls was playing for Fitzroy and Carlton, no one would rub him down after the game because he was too black. My Pa had to come in and be his trainer. They wouldn't touch him because he was Aboriginal. He was an amazing athlete; he could run and play football. But Pa used to be his trainer.
- 151 There is systemic racism in the government, innately in the system. How we set up our organisation in the past was very ethical, and everything has changed now. I sort of blame it as part of the system of the government. What's very systematic is the racism within the system. How do we overcome it in the future if we're looking at truth-telling? It's very racist even when you come down to the little bits and pieces. You can shout all you like about racism, but if it's instilled, then it's not easy to overcome. That's the beginning and the ending.
- 152 I've got nothing against white people, I love people. My dad was a white person. But it's the control of the government that is the problem. We never had the right. I wasn't allowed to identify as Aboriginal and I wasn't allowed to identify as white, so what were you? How can you get the truth out of that? I was always a blackfella, but in the system, you had no rights.

Health, living conditions and community

Life in Fitzroy

- 153 You had a terrible scene on the ground in Fitzroy because they were dying in the lanes. The men died. No one looks at the men that died in their thirties and forties. In Fitzroy, by the time you reached thirty or forty, in the fifties and sixties, there were no men my age. So that was another loss. There were no men to look after the women and the children. The women might have got a flat, but the men weren't allowed in, unless they were working. The government wouldn't let them live with their family and if they did the kids would be taken. And because of the system, blackfellas didn't have jobs. To me I found it a hard thing that the men were chopped out. You have a lot of men from my generation, they were lost peoples. They never had wives and children to look after them. So they lived in the lanes in Fitzroy.
- 154 The children had to have aunties, grandmothers, mothers that look after them. So, you had certain amounts of aunties who take that responsibilities. It was especially the case if a child was fair. They would be reared up by others. I don't know why. I think maybe the mothers wanted to make sure they grew up Aboriginal.
- 155 We didn't know our tribes in those days. We were culturally lost and never had that thing. Instead, we had Christianity and the missionaries. We were frightened to put a foot wrong. In that day we did know what we were, we knew who we were, but you weren't allowed to say too much. But you had that spirit story. But you sort of didn't think too much into what you weren't told. It's very strange. Even the ones who didn't know anything at all found their way to Fitzroy.
- 156 If you ever spoke to, even Archie Roach, he was one of the street boys. They lived in the lanes, and they were the lane boys. That's the only way they survived, living in the lanes. They couldn't live with their wives or their children. It was against the law to be there because the law would say, "He was no good and he wouldn't be able to look after his kids anyway". You had this generation of men who never reared their children. So, you can see how I feel about the Half-Caste Act that caused generational trauma of being in jail, being drug addicts, alcoholics or whatever. There is no-one of my age now, I'm probably one of the last of them.
- 157 And old Archie Roach, he's part of my Country. His sisters were part of Fitzroy, but he didn't know them, because when he was taken, they stole him from his mother, so he didn't know who his people were. But they lived in Fitzroy, so when he came looking for them, he found them. Archie came to Melbourne, and he was adopted out

by white people. He got on alright, I think. Just shows you they never were right because he came to Fitzroy and came straight to the lanes. Bootsy was one of the lane boys. He said that when Archie first came, he just wanted someone to talk to and that's how they met in the lanes. They talked and loved one another. That's what it was. There were many lanes. I always talked to Bootsy about the lanes. He became a lane boy when he had his kids taken off him and they were on the streets, him and his wife, in Fitzroy.

- 158 The men were really marginalised, so they were often alcoholics.
- 159 Blackfellas wouldn't go and see a doctor. People were sick but never went to see a doctor in my day. The first time I ever went to a doctor was when I was 12 years old, during a scabies outbreak. It was pretty bad, the scabies. That's the only time that I ever went to see a doctor.
- 160 It took years before my cousin George, who was an alcoholic, would even attempt to see a doctor, because he didn't trust them. My cousin George ended up bleeding to death. He was bleeding from drinking alcohol, he had cirrhosis. Bled to death actually. I said to him, "*You have to go George*". I took him to hospital and he said, "*All I wanted was a drink of alcohol, and now all I want is a drink of water, and I can't have it*". They wouldn't give him anything like that, but he died that day.

Sterilisations

- 161 I would like the Commissioners to look into sterilisations.
- 162 I believe a lot of relatives and community were sterilised against their will in the early days. There was a lot of tuberculosis and they were sick people. So, they were put in a hospital and then when they came out, they couldn't have babies. Blackfellas were afraid of doctors because of that.
- 163 In the 1970s, one of the things the health service went on strike for was because they wanted us to use a drug that would stop you getting pregnant. The health service went on strike over it because we refused to use it as sterilisation, and we got into a bit of trouble over that. You never knew what was in the injections, and with TB and the mental hospital in Ararat where a lot of our people were sent, well, a lot of women were sterile after.
- 164 There was also a big stir-up at the time that we first set up a health service in Alice Springs. The mob in Alice Springs were being sterilised, using an injection.

- 165 The people on the outskirts of Alice Springs were the first people they used to stop having babies, they used the experiment on them. I've been involved in health, and they used the inoculation to stop Aboriginal women having babies. That went all over you know, secret ones. I believe they sterilized a lot of women.
- 166 The sterilising injection is still used now for mental health. I believe there a lot of sterilisations performed without consent.

Burials and funeral services

- 167 My mother set up a funeral benefit scheme to help blackfellas get buried who couldn't get home. Before that they were being buried as paupers in unmarked graves.
- 168 So mum talked to the funeral director and put a deposit down, and those blackfellas would pay for their own funerals. Mum used to go around Fitzroy and collect 50 cents or something every pension day for their funeral. They wanted to do that, and my mum got them organised to do that.
- 169 It was about dignity. When you died, you died in dignity and went home in dignity.
- 170 Every now and again, you'd get a burial at Lake Tyers if someone came from there. She also took people back to Country in New South Wales.
- 171 We had our own hearse for the funeral service, which is now in the museum. Before the hearse, we used to use a station wagon. The hearse was donated through the Aborigines Advancement League, and Stewart Murray who operated the Victorian Aboriginal Funeral Service.
- 172 My mum also wanted a place to bury blackfellas. So my mum came up with the idea for the Weeroona Cemetery. She wouldn't take money from the government. She wrote a letter to the government demanding land for a cemetery and they said it was \$60,000 for a piece of land at the local cemetery, which probably would have buried two or three people.
- 173 She was a very strong woman. And all she cared about was the people of Fitzroy and that was her life. She'd run barrels as fundraisers, and the painter Lin Onus used to donate paintings in the early days, cos they were very close. We had a beautiful community in Fitzroy in the forties and fifties. There was a love there.
- 174 Eventually, in 1992, they got a piece of land at the Gellibrand Hill in Greenvale, which is where Weeroona is.

175 The Weeroona Cemetery is a beautiful place now, but it's got to be looked at again.

Aboriginal Health Services and having a voice

176 It wasn't until the 1970s that Aboriginal people got a voice. At that time, I became involved in setting up the health services around Australia. We opened the Victorian Aboriginal Health Service in the early 1970s. It was in Gertrude Street, Fitzroy.

177 And with the people like Bruce McGuinness of Fitzroy, they were strong community, and so that was our home, when we set up the health service. Among the lanes where the men lived. The singer Archie (Roach) captured it pretty well in his song. We called the health service "a home away from home". And that was to bring the people who were disconnected – a place to come to.

178 It was very unique, how we tried to do that, because it was something that couldn't be forced onto people. So we'd have people who would come to us, to talk and yarn and whatever, weeks and weeks or months before they even attempted to see a doctor. So it wasn't a matter of going to the doctor, it was going to have a talk. People would say, "I have a headache", so they'd go to the doctor, finally, but they had more wrong than a headache.

179 I was never a paid employee of the health service. I did what I did because that was what we did. I considered myself a worker for my people.

180 One of the inspirations for the health services was the Black Power movement in the 1970s and having a voice. We never had a voice until the 1970s, when we set up a hundred and something health services across Australia. Part of the role of the health service was to believe in who you were and bring back some of who you were, to make people feel good about themselves. Self-determination, sovereignty, land rights were the values that sat under, and the service developed around the same time as the tent embassy, with the same philosophies.

181 For us it was all about the same thing, getting a way for people young and old to connect to identity as blackfellas in the conditions of that time. For some of the people stolen from family, they didn't know anything till they came to Fitzroy.

182 Gary Foley was very much involved in setting up the health services and having a voice. That's what I mean about having a voice and being able to tell your story. Until the 1970s, you didn't have a voice to tell a story because you weren't allowed to talk. When we were setting up the health service, they were spying on us. I don't know if I have an ASIO file, but Gary Foley and Bruce McGuinness had one.

- 183 I was also involved in an ethics committee, and we wouldn't allow certain things to come through the health service for ethical reasons. So how we set up our organisation in the past was very ethical.
- 184 I went to China in 1976, where they had a different way of looking at things regarding health. I had seen 'barefoot doctoring', and this is where we came up with the concept of the Aboriginal Health Worker program, Koori Kollij, which we then tried to roll out across Australia. Koori Kollij gave people a voice. I often think about Koori Kollij. We all got certificates. You pass these exams. You went through a thing and became a health worker. We hoped to be employed by organisations as health workers. Now you need a Cert III. And there were some health workers who couldn't read and write who were amazing health workers. We couldn't have built the service without them.
- 185 When I was in Peking, because I was Aboriginal, the Aboriginal people of China, they invited me to a dinner. So there's Aboriginal Chinese, which I didn't know about.
- 186 When we talk about health, the concept of health was the whole of the person. It was a holistic concept of health, not just medical. You didn't look at people as a person with one particular thing. We looked at them as a whole of a person. We had 'Parkies', Aboriginal people dying in the park. They were afraid of seeing the doctor, because they knew if they went to hospital they would die. Parkies were homeless people who would gather together in Fitzroy, supporting each other, telling each other stories and drinking a lot.
- 187 Where we failed with health in Australia was with our old people, the whole of the person from babies to old. The communities should be the ones that are caring. If you don't care for your old people, you care for nobody.
- 188 In Alice Springs, when Aboriginal people had a baby, they thought that the blackfellas were stealing the remains from the hospital and eating them, which the hospitals were wanting to stop. They were blaming the blackfellas for scavenging around the hospital. They were actually looking for the afterbirth so that they could take it back to Country and bury it so they would know where they came from. The reason was the connection back to Country.
- 189 They really went through hell, the black people of Alice Springs, because they thought that the black people were marauders and were eating the afterbirth. They weren't scavenging. So, it's a very important story is the afterbirth, and if that was carried on there in scavenging round the hospital. And that tribal people, it would not

be only their tradition. In my time you weren't allowed the afterbirth from the hospital. I feel for the people in the top end cos they're losing very fast what we lost many years ago.

Corporations and the government

- 190 Very early on in setting up the health service, we refused to have corporate bodies involved. It had to be grassroots, and you earned everything that you did.
- 191 The health services would only be set up through the people. You only set them up as the people set them up. They were never set up by a body. They were set up on the people doing their own thing. It was self-determination, that was how we looked at it. If you did your own thing, then you'd look after it.
- 192 NAIHO was owned by the grassroots people. We only did things at a community's request. We felt that we would be no different to government if we just walked in and impose ourselves on an Aboriginal community. We were growing organisations across the country, but we didn't want to become a power, and that filtered through. The people on the NAIHO committee, who represented their organisation in whatever country, they were the ones that made the decisions.
- 193 It has all changed now, it's all about corporations and services have run to the government. They've become the workers of the government, that's what organisations are today. The corporate actors really destroyed us.
- 194 It's similar to why I never got involved with native title, because corporate bodies became the thing. Once the corporation became a part of your life, they owned you.
- 195 When we set up the health services, we wanted to do it in the way of barefoot doctoring, of looking after your own.
- 196 It used to be about self-determination, land rights and being who you are. Land rights meant to us that we never ceded our life. To me, it was hanging onto who we were. But with corporate bodies and the government getting involved, that has all changed. When you have Aboriginal people who do the will of the government, you lost the game. The government are right to fund those services, but they can't be under the rules and regulations of the government that don't work or mean anything in the black community. Otherwise its taking power away and keeping people in the dark on the things they have a right to.

- 197 I'm very anti-government. Once the government comes in, everything changes because you obey them. I worry about doing this statement and talking because I never trust the government and can never trust the government because they've tricked me all the time.

Resilience

Strength and resistance

- 198 There is now a generation of Aboriginal kids who wouldn't have a clue about what it's like being under the hammer. That's the life you had to live. In a way, you got strength out of it too. It gave you a backbone and it made you keep on fighting, so you wouldn't give up. You don't just give up and die.
- 199 I've always been an activist, except for when I was a young person. I've been a radical and that's been part of an Aboriginal movement. It's been a long life and a very rich life.
- 200 I just knew that I couldn't bend the knee. All my life, I could never bend the knee. Still I can't do it.

What needs to change

Story-telling and identity

- 201 It's so important to me that it is not only about me and my people. It's about non-Aboriginal people, Aboriginal people, whoever you are. Australia is a many-cultured lot of people who are not all white Australians. So, it's about the truth of how Australia was made. And came to be 'Australia', and getting rid of all the hidden lies. People don't know about the beginning of this country.
- 202 We've got to start there from the beginning when they came to the country and said "*this is not occupied*" and this is what we'll do. I've gone through a lot of history. I know they brought the disease, I know how they killed the people. It was so sad, but that's passed. But if we're going to live in the future, I want to remain who I am. To know that maybe my great grandchildren will know who they are. That's one of the things that is important to me. I want them to know who they are and never have that taken. They don't have to live white or be black or whatever, except to know who they are. I think it's important mentally because if you've got knowledge of that, if you know who are, you feel stronger. I know we've adopted many things, but when I think

about having something like identity and truth taken away, people trying to eradicate it, that can cause terrible harm.

203 Living in this country, I will die as an Aboriginal person. The whole point is that being an Aboriginal in our country means that I have lived and want to die as an Aboriginal person.

204 Most of the kids today have Aboriginal names, which is wonderful. There's lots of meanings in those names. When they tell me who their grandmother is, straightaway I can identify them or say that I grew up with those people.

205 I worry about the younger generation of today. I got grounding from my grandmother and aunties and all that. Our people were fractured, and so you didn't grow up with fathers and mothers, and you were very lucky if an aunty was around. And I was very lucky.

206 The big problem is that when you had a law, an Aboriginal law, it's very important that people knew who you were, you knew who you were, your blood meant something, and you had a reason to be on this earth. So, it's very important. And that was disturbed. Fractured. So that is why reconnecting is so important.

207 So supporting those young people and whoever with that is very important t.

208 I have spent most of my life in support of building connection to identity and family. So very important. People connecting to identity. It's the most important thing to me, If you can't reconnect, you haven't got a soul, your soul isn't there. A photograph of me with the Will Shakes Spears dance group, which includes my grandsons and great grandsons, at the launch of the Dardi Munwurro gathering hub in Preston, which was named the 'Aunty Alma Thorpe Gathering Space', is shown at **Annexure H**.⁴

209 There are still things I want to find out. Every day of my life is a learning thing of who I am, and that is the fact of the matter. Because that was taken. I don't want that to happen for the younger generation, and all should be educated fully.

⁴ Published by The Hon. Natalie Hutchins MP and dated 15 December 2021. See <https://twitter.com/NatHutchins/status/1470928277480955905/photo/1>.

Truth-telling

- 210 I believe in the truth and the ability to right the past through education. No-one is being taught about the truth, even at universities, and no-one is being told the story.
- 211 My aim is for the truth to be told. For everybody. All the different mobs and cultures. For me, I just want to tell the truth and say how I feel, but I can't expect miracles. It's very important that our education comes out, that our system is picked up. I know it's a miracle to make those things happen, but it's opening a door to let the truth out. That's why you've got generations of mental health problems, alcohol problems, drug problems, and the kids going to prison. It's generational trauma. And it's so very sad because the people are still dying today.
- 212 Psychologically, we've been trying to sort of heal that sort of thing with our own people for the last 50 years. I know my history back. Treaty and truth telling, it has to be treated as a serious thing. Very serious. So, the cultural bodies that are supposed to protect us, our human rights, cultural heritage, it's very important. It needs to come out now. Everyone needs to know where they stand.
- 213 My greatest desire is wanting community resolution and healing for the community to be able to love one another again. For peace and loving connection for the families who held together in the past and mobs across the country.
- 214 Non-Aboriginal people haven't been told the truth. And when you see the map of the genocide in Victoria, it's more in Victoria than anywhere else. And it just shows you, how many people of that country were murdered. And I wouldn't like to make a big thing, cause life's got to go on and things change, but I think if the truth is told, get on with it. Even the Germans have come to truth themselves, they've done well in their way, they've come to truth in certain ways. Hitler didn't, but there's a few Hitlers around in this country too. So one thing that I'd like to see is the truth and an education. Not look for reparation or anything like that. What's reparation? That's the money side of it.

Treaty

- 215 My grandsons and granddaughters are all on the Treaty bodies. I want them to be a part of it because our people, and white people, need to know the truth of what happened. They are there to move things forward, and I just hope they can hold to the strength of who they are.

Yoorrook

- 216 I worry about this truth telling because the government is running it.
- 217 I have hope but I want to know is this real or is it gammin? I just don't want to go through this thing without knowing that there's going to be some sort of proper ending and done properly. I want Yoorrook to make sure I get the answer. It won't make me feel like I'm just another cloud in the sky, you know.
- 218 When Yoorrook came out, then I see the big advertisement of the Queen. It comes up very sharp. I was ready to tear it up. It was an insult when I saw it. I was thinking "I'm not going to go through this Yoorrook thing". Of course, it is done on behalf of the Crown. If I am going to go for anyone, sue anybody, who do I go for? The Queen or the next King.
- 219 If the Queen and the British government don't know the truth, they should know the truth. What they did to us and all the other countries they invaded in their time. I did object to that, the Crown. I want Yoorrook to write to them and say "*Under your reign this happened*".
- 220 It's a big thing to come out and open up. I know there's a lot of blackfellas who will never open up and you'll never get an answer out of them. I think I'm talking for my mother and my old people too. I think about who I am as a person. I've got an obligation to keep going. I've always felt that. It's my role to tell the truth, and I'll put it that way. I just don't want it to be smoke and mirrors.
- 221 I just really can't bend the knee.

Dated: 4 May 2022