



## OUTLINE OF EVIDENCE OF AUNTY EVA JO EDWARDS

### DECEMBER HEARINGS 2022 (CHILD PROTECTION)

#### 4 DECEMBER 2022

#### I BACKGROUND AND EARLY LIFE

1. My name is Eva Jo Edwards and I am a proud Boon Wurrung, Mutti Mutti and Yorta Yorta woman.
2. I was born on 8 August 1963 in Hillston, New South Wales, but have lived in Victoria since I was 5 years old and in Melbourne for 54 years.
3. I am one of six children. At age 5, my five siblings and I were removed from our mother and family in Swan Hill.
4. We were initially taken to the Allambie Reception Centre. We were then split up. My two older brothers aged 11 and 8 were taken to Burwood Boys Home. Myself and my 10 and 3 year old sisters and our 8 month old baby brother were taken to Lutheran Children's Home in Kew.
5. I knew I was different because of the colour of my skin, but that was all I knew. There were no cultural activities to empower us. Being institutionalised was nothing but a roof over your head.
6. Life in the institutions was highly regimented. Get up, make your bed. I was never told that I was loved, hugged or kissed. I can't recall being encouraged to think about what I might like to achieve later in life.
7. Overall, I was institutionalised for 13 years including in family group homes.
8. I cannot really remember life before the institutions. One early memory is of a torch being shone in my face whilst I was sleeping. From a discussion with my sister, I believe that this was the night before we were taken. The authorities, seeing us sleeping on the ground as a family, and then returning for us the following day.
9. I spent a large part of my childhood with my sister closest in age within the institutions. We were occasionally separated as we were moved between facilities, based on our age.
10. I was very protective of my beautiful baby brother. He was for a time adopted by a non-Aboriginal family, one of the matrons in the institutions. She really loved him. I remember she would throw birthday parties for him, and me and my siblings were invited to attend.
11. Sadly his adoptive mother passed away when she was only 25 years old from cancer. His adoptive father remarried, and his new wife did not want to raise a black kid. So my brother was returned to the institutions at approximately 6 years old.
12. I know now that my mother wrote letters to the authorities trying to get permission for us to go and live with her, including in Coober Pedy. This permission was denied and my sister and I have spoken about the missed opportunities from not having had the opportunity to live with her, including to learn about our culture and language.

## II ADULT LIFE

### ***Relationship with my mother***

13. I was reunited with my mother when I was around 15 years old. She cried and said she was sorry and that it wasn't her fault that we were taken. Looking back, I can see that she was trying to comfort me at that first meeting.
14. I believe that my mother may also have been removed as a child at some stage in her early life. I do not know much about her story, I'm still piecing it together.
15. I know that atleast my Aunty Teresa and Uncle Sam were in homes in NSW (Cootamundra Girls Home and Kinchela Boys Home).
16. My mother died early in 1985, in her late 50s, having had a difficult life.
17. It is a lifelong regret of mine that I did not have an opportunity to introduce her to my first child before she passed away. My children did not have a grandmother when they were growing up.

### ***Siblings and adult relationships***

18. I've stayed connected with my living siblings, we know that we are there for each other.
19. All of us siblings have had our challenges. It is hard to get past the abandonment and rejection we experienced.
20. Following being returned to the institutions, my baby brother suffered from a sense of abandonment and rejection. He fell into drug and alcohol issues from the trauma of his early life and ultimately very sadly took his own life at the age of 25, on his birthday, the 31<sup>st</sup> of July. It still impacts me. That is a very hard day.
21. Our early experiences have affected our romantic relationships as adults – not having the trust that someone wants to do good things for you.
22. Some of us have struggled with alcohol or drugs, on and off.
23. I look like I'm put together, but when my kids started leaving home I was feeling abandonment and rejection again. These feelings are still high up there for me.

### ***My own family***

24. I have six children of my own and have helped with the upbringing of other children.
25. I raised my children as a single mother in public housing, where I am still living now.
26. The experience of raising my children has made me realise the effects of my removal. I realise now that unbeknown, for a time, I repeated with my children what I experienced in the institutions: tough rules and a lack of affection. You don't set out to do that.
27. It is intergenerational. Several of my children have been impacted by my trauma and are on their own journeys of healing.
28. I have made a conscious effort to grow as a person, and to create a very loving environment for my family. We say "I love you" whenever we speak.
29. I raised my kids to be strong in who they are, with dance and culture and a sense of belonging and knowing who they are. They have all these things that I had to find along the way.

### ***Reconnecting with community***

30. I have also spent a lot of time with community. I enjoy finding out about my family connections. But I still have a sense of feeling a bit different from other people in community.
31. I have a prominent voice in Aboriginal community, but I still feel that I am on the outer, because I didn't grow up with the sense of culture, the language or the dancing. I think this feeling can be put down to not growing up with my family, the disconnectedness of being removed.

**Public acknowledgement and apologies**

32. I wasn't around for the Walk Across Sydney Bridge in 2000, but watching that on TV was pretty amazing from my perspective.
33. I was lucky enough to be in Canberra for the apology in 2008, to sit in the gallery. I was very overwhelmed. For me, my parents had passed, and my brother had passed. That was pretty hard. It's still pretty emotional for me. Some of us didn't want the apology. I know for me, it was one of a few things at that time that came together to be life-changing, empowering me.
34. To see the sea of people as we walked out of Parliament House, I thought there was hopefully going to be big change. I hadn't seen that amount of people come together prior to that.
35. I look forward to the apology from our Premier in time to come.
36. I want Traditional Owners to think about the ways that Stolen Generations survivors should be welcomed back home to country. The welcome home is what we survivors need to be able to move forward with our healing.
37. I would love to have an apology and welcome home done at Swan Hill because that is where I was removed from with my siblings.

**Child protection systems**

38. In my life, I have seen the best and worse of child 'protection' systems.
39. When my children were young, I was offered occasional respite care through the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (**VACCA**).
40. At first, I didn't think I needed it, and fought against them because I believed they wanted to steal my children from me. At the time I was working full time and a single mother to 6 kids under 10, and they must have seen that I could do with some help.
41. VACCA worked with me to choose a respite worker that I was comfortable with. There was self-determination in the approach they took. That respite worker was and still is family to us.
42. The work that VACCA caseworkers do is so important. Being supported by a VACCA case worker, having them know our culture and our ways and what the Stolen Generation is about, has been so important. Those case workers, not all of them are Aboriginal, but they are there for the right reasons, they are committed to helping the kids go home and ensure the parents are supported.
43. DFFH do nothing for us, other than tell us we need to do everything for ourselves. That cannot be self-determination, if these parents don't know what is out there to support them.

**III COMMUNITY ADVOCACY****Birri-on and speaking engagements**

44. Since 1998, I have become a public speaker, educator and advocate through my own business, Birri-on. I speak to government, corporate and education sectors about the impacts and effects of the Stolen Generation. I have been invited as a keynote speaker and Master of Ceremonies at many events.
45. In 1999, I started working with Uncle Kutcha Edwards and Aunty Cathy Dean to conduct workshops on the Stolen Generations in schools. These workshops are titled Banyip Kidjeka, meaning 'brother sister'. I present to kindergartens, festivals and primary schools by incorporating traditional and contemporary stories, dance, face painting and Aboriginal history into 'Aboriginal Storytime' and cultural talks. Kutcha and I are related on both sides. On the Edwards line and the Kirby line. On the Edwards line, he would be my uncle. On the Kirby line, I would be his Aunty. So I call him Uncle-Cuz.
46. We have educated students, as well as corporate and community organisations, about the impacts of assimilationist policies that have created intergenerational trauma by denying Aboriginal children their cultural heritage.

47. I also formed the dance troupe Birri-on Lakidjeka, meaning 'turning the children around'. I perform with young children a combination of traditional and contemporary Aboriginal dances. Engaging with traditional dance has been an important part of recapturing the culture that was denied to me, and making this culture a part of my children's lives as well as enlightening audiences we perform for.
48. I learned the dancing from the father of my youngest three children. He was teaching all the children how to dance, and then I thought we should also make a girls' dance group. I conversed with the elders in Melbourne to ensure I'm doing and teaching the right things. For someone who grew up outside of community being able to create my own dances, showing things like hunting and gathering, has been very empowering.

### **VACCA**

49. I initially started at VACCA in the late 1990s, initially as an admin support person.
50. From 2017 I was Senior Advisor for cultural support planning, a mentor at cultural camps for young people in out-of-home care, and a client support worker at VACCA's Ngarra Jarra Noun Redress Support Service for those that experienced sexual abuse whilst institutionalised as children.
51. The Ngarra Jarra Noun role is probably one of my greatest achievements, other than having my children. I have felt so honoured and empowered to have these people share their deepest, darkest secrets with me, that some of them had never spoken up about before, and to help them be compensated for that injustice.
52. I want to ensure that our children today in out-of-home care don't have to go through the same traumas that we did and that there are supports in place.

### ***Connecting Home, Link-Up and other Stolen Generations advocacy***

53. From 2010 to 2014, I was the Events and Community Engagement Officer with Connecting Home. Connecting Home supports Stolen Generations survivors and their children and grandchildren on their journey of healing. In this role, I also worked with new police recruits to introduce them to social diversity in community engagement. I am still actively involved in volunteering with Connecting Home as a Redress Support Worker.
54. I am an active supporter of Link-Up Victoria (part of VACCA) which assists Stolen Generations survivors to find and be reunited with their family, culture and traditional country.
55. For me, it was a 10-year journey with the Koorie Heritage Trust through the Koorie Family History Service before I uncovered my family history in 2017. It has helped me to feel more complete, knowing who my family is and where I am connected.
56. In 2018, I was honoured with the Westfield Doncaster Local Hero Award. Connecting Home and Link-Up shared the accompanying \$10,000 grant.
57. I have also served as a member of the Victorian Government's Stolen Generations Reparations Steering Committee since 2020. This year, I have been appointed to the Victorian Government's Stolen Generations Advisory Committee and the Independent Assessment Panel for Stolen Generations Reparations<sup>1</sup>.
58. I think that having continuing involvement in Stolen Generations advisory initiatives is important advocacy for our people.

### ***Other roles and initiatives***

59. In 2008, I worked with Deb Salvagno and the Darebin Council to create the Koorie Night Market, setting a vibrant atmosphere to showcase Aboriginal culture through arts, crafts, food, music and dance. These markets have since expanded to other local government areas around Victoria. The markets promote bridging and reconciliation between Aboriginal communities and the broader local communities, and enhance the cultural identity and profile of local Aboriginal people.
60. Between 2014 and 2016, I worked with the Victorian Aboriginal Health Service as the Program Coordinator for Family Violence Assistance.

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<sup>1</sup> See Attachment 1.

61. In 2016, I was appointed as an 'Elder or Respected Person' to the Koori Courts, providing cultural advice to the Magistrates' and Children's Court.

#### **IV VICTORIAN ABORIGINAL HONOUR ROLL**

62. Earlier this year, I was recognised as a 2022 inductee to the Victorian Aboriginal Honour Roll.<sup>2</sup>
63. I was extremely honoured to be recognised as a Stolen Generations survivor, emotional healer and inspirational storyteller.

#### **V RECENT FAMILY EXPERIENCE OF CHILD REMOVAL**

64. Over the same timeframe that I was been being recognised for my advocacy for Stolen Generations survivors, my family was battling the child protection system.
65. Approximately 19 months ago, my son's partner's three young children (for whom he had assumed a father role) were taken into out of home care, due to the intervention of the child 'protection' system. The children were taken from my son's partner, while she was pregnant, when she was an alleged victim of domestic violence.
66. There was a police investigation, the allegations weren't proven, but even then child protection wouldn't let it go, and launched their own investigation. Whatever that means.
67. The children were placed approximately 350 kilometres away (or a 700km round trip) in an unsafe environment with an Aboriginal family that neither they nor I would have wanted the children placed with. There were real concerns regarding the possible influence of drugs, alcohol and the presence of suspected sex offenders in that environment.
68. The children were in out of home care for 7 - 8 months. My son and his partner jumped through every hoop required of them to reunite with them, including drug screening, counselling, etc. Whilst the children are now back living with their mother, in my home, the Department's monitoring and requirements under Orders continue.
69. The stress of the allegations and separation was extreme, to the extent that I was very concerned that my son might take his own life. It is a testament to his strength that he didn't.
70. I am not saying that my child is an angel. There was conflict in their home environment, and they would and since have benefitted from some support. The Department should not have jumped straight to the removal of the children.
71. I would have been very happy to take the children myself, had I been consulted. As it happens, those children and my son's partner are now living in my home (together with my new grandchild). My life has been put on hold, I no longer live independently.
72. In the 7 - 8 month period that the children were in out of home care, we do not believe that the children saw their case worker in person even once, or received any trauma counselling.
73. I spent a Christmas separated from the remainder of my adult children, as a result of this situation.
74. The situation really started to turn around for my family when the case was referred to the Marram-Ngala Ganbu (MNG) program of the Broadmeadows Childrens Court. It understands Aboriginal families. We as families get to have a voice at the table and talk to the Magistrate about what we think is best for the children. As a family, it gives you the opportunity to make decisions and set goals.
75. The Court Orders will be in place until February, and it is only at this time that my son will be allowed to live with his family again, independently of me.

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<sup>2</sup> See Attachment 2.

76. I have sent an official complaint letter to the Department, and many other issues have been raised with the case workers. There has never been a proper response from the Department. I did receive one phone call confirming receipt of my letter, which I found to be quite condescending.
77. I have shared this story with the permission and support of my son and his partner.
78. This is the experience of so many Aboriginal families in Victoria. It just goes on and on.

**Further relevant documents:**

Attachment 1: *Stolen Generations Reparations Steering Committee Final Report*

Attachment 2: *First Peoples State Relations Biography for Eva Jo Edwards (Victorian Honour Role)*