



OUTLINE OF EVIDENCE OF AUNTY GLENYS WATTS

DECEMBER HEARINGS 2022 (CHILD PROTECTION)

5 DECEMBER 2022

I BACKGROUND

1. My name is Aunty Glenys Watts and I am a Gunaikurnai Elder.
2. I live in Gippsland, Victoria.
3. My present positions include:
 - (a) Chairperson of the Gunaikurnai Traditional Owner Land Management Board;
 - (b) Chairperson of the Gippsland Lakes Coordinating Committee;
 - (c) Board Member of the East Gippsland Catchment Management Authority;
 - (d) A member of the Elders' Council of the Gunaikurnai Land and Waters Aboriginal Corporation (**GLaWAC**) and the Board of Directors of GLaWAC; and
 - (e) A member of the Recognition and Settlement Agreement (**RSA**) team with GLaWAC.
4. I have also previously worked as the Regional Coordinator of East Gippsland Dhelk Dja (an Aboriginal-led strategy to address family violence) between 2015 to August 2022. In this role, I sat with the Aboriginal Engagement Unit of the then- Department of Health and Human Services (**DHHS**) (now the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (**DFFH**)).
5. My interests are my family, family history, land and water management.

II HISTORY OF COLONISATION

6. It is important to start with colonisation and the history of the treatment of Aboriginal people in Victoria from that time onwards.
7. Because it is our story.
8. Because all of these other things happened to lead up to it as well.

III MY ANCESTORS

9. My ancestors include:
 - (a) Mercawan, my great great great grandmother; and
 - (b) Granny Louisa Pepper Connolly and Nathaniel Pepper, who are my great great grandparents.
10. A simplified family tree is at [Attachment 1](#).

III LIFE EXPERIENCES OF GRANNY LOUISA PEPPER CONNOLLY AND NATHANIEL PEPPER (AS CAPTURED BY THE BOOK *YOU ARE WHAT YOU MAKE YOURSELF TO BE*)

11. The history of Granny Louisa and Nathaniel Pepper is captured in the book, *You Are What You Make Yourself To Be* at [Attachment 2](#).

Background to Granny Louisa Pepper Connolly

12. Mercawan was raped during the “big hunts” of Aboriginal people by colonisers. That is the first point in time that the white blood came into my family.
13. Mearwan later died when the family was living at Yarram. She was killed by settlers who shot at them with pellets.
14. Granny Louisa was injured but survived, and still had pellets in her body when she died many decades later.
15. After Mercawan’s death, Granny Louisa was taken in by Dr Arbuckle, whose last name she took on for a short period of time, and placed on Ramahyuck Mission.
16. At Ramahyuck, Granny Louisa met Nathaniel Pepper, who had come down from the Wimmera in Wotjobaluk Country, and they married.
17. Granny Louisa ran the orphanage at Ramahyuck, caring for all the children whose parents had died.
18. But when the Half Caste Act was introduced in 1886, Granny Louisa’s own family was removed. Her son, Percy Pepper, was taken to an orphanage in Brighton because he was classed as “half-caste”.

Survival, resilience and community contribution

19. Granny Louisa was inducted onto the Honour Roll of Victoria in 2020. I did not want to pretty up her story. I felt it was important for it to be recorded that Granny Louisa’s mother had been raped and that this is where the white blood had come in.
20. In Bairnsdale, there is a plaque that recognises Granny Louisa as having helped many children by running the orphanage and as a keeper of traditional language.
21. Aboriginal people in Victoria have bits and pieces of traditional language now, but were generally not allowed to use it growing up.
22. When I was growing up, my relatives would sometimes dance around in the kitchen, dress up and talk in language, but they would then feel shame and become shy, because they were not meant to speak language.
23. We also need to keep the history and practice of Aboriginal cultural activities alive, which are described in the *You Are What You Make Yourself To Be* book.

IV LIFE EXPERIENCES OF LUCY AND PERCY PEPPER (AS CAPTURED BY THE BOOK *FOOTPRINTS*)

24. My ancestors include Lucy Thorpe, who married Percy Pepper, who are my great grandparents.
25. The history of Lucy and Percy Pepper, including the various letters that both Lucy and Percy wrote to government representatives, including the Board for the Protection of Aborigines, and the letters they received in response, is captured in the *Footprints* book at [Attachment 3](#).

Introduction of Half Caste Act and removal of Percy Pepper

26. The Half Caste Act had a very significant impact on Aboriginal people. The Board for the Protection of Aborigines virtually took over and put numerous rules into place to govern how Aboriginal people lived.
27. As I mentioned earlier, Percy Pepper was removed from his mother’s care when he was around 10 or 11 years old to an orphanage in Brighton in 1889 because he was classed as a “half-caste”.

28. Percy Pepper ended up being put into a baker apprenticeship near Swan Hill. I don't know whether he was paid or not.
29. He eventually ran away from there because he heard that someone had died on Country. This shows that he had not lost his connection to his family and where they lived, despite being removed from his family under the Half Caste Act.
30. Lucy and Percy Pepper, who married in 1903, were on the outskirts of two worlds. They did not fit into the Aboriginal community and were not allowed onto the Lake Tyers mission. They were also not accepted by white people.
31. Because they were "half-caste" and not allowed on the mission, they had to ask for handouts, as shown by the letters.
32. The requests that Lucy and Percy Pepper made in their letters, often for rations and other support while Lucy was sick and Percy was unable to work, so that their family could remain healthy, were often dismissed.

Return from World War I and soldiers settlement blocks

33. Percy served for Australia in World War I.
34. During the war, he was hit in the head with shrapnel. He eventually returned home after two years because Lucy was sick.
35. After returning from service, Percy had to provide a lot more information and have support from other people to obtain a soldier settlement block, because he was Aboriginal.
36. The land that Percy was allocated was known as the 'swamps'. It wasn't proper land. It was lower quality land, which I believe he was given because he was Aboriginal.
37. Other white people that returned from service got soldier settlement blocks that was really good quality land, which they were then able to pass on to their families.
38. Percy tried to grow potatoes on the land. He also built a house on it. But eventually had the land taken off him because it was unproductive, often flooded, and he couldn't make repayments. Percy was angry about this.
39. Percy wrote to the newly-elected Premier of Victoria to stop the sale of his land and pleaded for another block of land so that he could bring his family back together, writing that:

"I would sooner all my Family under the one Roof and would like to be on the Land if the Board will Allow me".
40. Percy also pointed out in this letter that this was his grandfather's land, and that white people had already taken the land before.
41. The government sold Percy's land and I don't think he got any money from the auction.
42. This impacted the economic development of him and everyone else.
43. They kept moving from Stratford to Melbourne and ended up in Fitzroy.

Ongoing impact of the Half Caste Act, including segregation from family

44. At the same time as Percy was having his land taken off him Percy was also losing his wife due to illness.
45. Upon Lucy's death, she was not allowed to go back to Lake Tyers to be buried, even though all of my old ancestors were buried there.
46. Many people wrote letters about this, which is shown in the *Footprints* book.
47. It makes me so sad to think about.
48. Percy was living separately from his children after Lucy's death because of the Half Caste Act, because he was still classed as a 'half caste'.
49. He was trying to reunite with his family.

Reflections on the letters in the *Footprints* book

50. The *Footprints* book was published by the National Archives of Australia and the Public Record Office Victoria (**PROV**). The authors of the book were Simon Flagg and Sebastian Gurciullo.
51. Mum and I, consulting with other members of my family, worked with PROV to contribute to the *Footprints* book, including by reviewing the available written historical records, including the letters in the book.
52. When the *Footprints* book was being written, I brought together family members who were the descendants of Lucy and Percy Pepper's children, and we talked about the letters and stories together.
53. Conversations with Elders within my family about the book were recorded by PROV and four videos were made. We talked about the challenges and racist and discriminatory treatment that they and their family faced.
54. There was a travelling exhibition of *Footprints*. A brochure is at [Attachment 4](#).
55. I found the experience of reading the letters collated in the *Footprints* book to be like having someone grab my heart and squeeze it.
56. Lucy and Percy Pepper, and Aboriginal people generally, had to beg and get permission to do anything, which was and is very degrading.

V ONGOING RACISM AND DISCRIMINATION IN THE CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEM

57. I have seen firsthand that racism and discrimination continue to this day in the child protection system. In particular:
 - (a) child protection workers still have the same mentality about Aboriginal people as was encouraged by the Half Caste Act.
 - (b) child protection would rather put money into a non-Aboriginal family than an Aboriginal family and could not help Aboriginal families as they needed it then and there.
 - (c) it is traumatic and confusing for families to contact the authorities constantly to get anything done.
 - (d) It seems to repeat from generation to generation. Children are removed and sent to grandparents. The grandparents have to put up with the trauma that their grandchildren are going through and work out how to provide the support that the grandchildren need;
 - (e) child protection act too soon in taking kids away from Aboriginal families. Often a mother, who might have gone through family violence, only wants to move things forward for herself and for her family, but the first thing that child protection ask is whether the children are safe and when the mother is leaving. There is no help or support given.
 - (f) there should be deeper consideration of why the family has issues in the first place, such as whether they need help with rent and housing.
 - (g) In my time at DHHS, we came up with a number of things that child protection could do better, but they do not listen.
58. Some examples are summarised below.

Example #1

59. During my time at DHHS, I wrote a character reference letter to help an Aboriginal mother who was trying to get her kids back. The mother had helped us to prepare resources about family violence.
60. It was like the Department was not there to explain what was going on. The mother was very anxious and needed someone to talk to.
61. All that I could say was that I was listening to the mother and pass her on to someone else.

62. The system is not accessible for the Aboriginal people who interact with it, and the way that they talk to blackfellas is off-putting.

Example #2

63. I was contacted by a family whose brother had died and the children were in care.
64. They had to beg for the children to be allowed to go to the father's funeral.
65. What gave child protection the right to stop the children from going to the funeral?

Example #3

66. During my time working in the DHHS Bairnsdale office, I saw how non-Aboriginal workers in child protection group, who were all non-Aboriginal:
- (a) talked down about Aboriginal families;
 - (b) talked down about Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) that were trying to help Aboriginal children; and
 - (c) commonly said racist things and were screaming to each other across the office with these remarks.
67. The way that child protection workers were talking to Aboriginal grandparents, carers and youth was horrible.
68. I made complaints to senior management about the way that the child protection workers were carrying on. I also spoke to other staff members at the other end of the office, who shared my concerns and agreed that the child protection workers should not be allowed to talk so loudly and disrespectfully about our families.
69. This led to an internal meeting with senior management about this behaviour.
70. I didn't have to say anything, because the others raised their concerns about this behaviour.
71. One of my Aboriginal colleagues commented that this behaviour made them reflect about how her own father had been taken away from his family. She was imagining what her own father had experienced, given the way that child protection workers were treating Aboriginal people now.

Example #4

72. An Aboriginal family took in an 18-year-old Aboriginal girl.
73. The mother left younger children in the car with the 18-year-old girl.
74. Either DHHS or the police reported that the children had been left in the car, even though the 18-year-old girl was with them.
75. They said that the 18-year-old girl had not been put down as a carer for the children and the kids could not be left in the car with her.
76. So, the children were removed from the family's care, and child protection did not come back to collect their clothing and belongings.
77. The father of the family had a slight stroke because of everything that had started to happen.
78. They were making complaints and telling child protection what they needed, but child protection did not put it in place.
79. I was shocked that this had happened, because the kids could not be with better parents than this family.

Example #5

80. Another Aboriginal family fostered between 10 to 15 Aboriginal children, and had six children of their own. The kids were all in a good space together.
81. However, one of the kids told DHHS that they were slapped by one member of the family.
82. DHHS then removed the kids, and the parents were shocked.
83. The mother still hurts today because the kids were removed from her care.

Example #6

84. When I worked at DHHS, a manager who also worked there was asked to foster a very young Aboriginal baby.
85. The baby was dumped on them, as they did not receive any background about the baby or what they needed to support the baby. They had no support.
86. There was a similar situation with another staff member at DHHS who offered to help with an Aboriginal teenager.
87. The teenager was dumped on him, and there was no information provided about the issues that the teenager had.
88. The staff member ended up having to give the teenager back to keep his family safe, because child protection did not set anything up properly.
89. How awful for that child.
90. Child protection are meant to be protecting these kids, but they were taking young children to complete strangers, without providing any background information.
91. They are ticking the box and leaving them there.

Example #7

92. I know another woman who had gone through family violence and had been put down for so long, whose husband got locked up.
93. There was no mediation between the woman and her husband while he was in jail, to ensure that the husband wouldn't go straight to see his kids once he was released.
94. Child protection do not listen to our suggestions on these topics.

VI DIRECT EXPERIENCES OF OVERT RACISM

95. I worked as a hairdresser and my mother helped me in the shop.
96. Due to the difference in skin colour between my mother and I, a client once said to me, "*Isn't it nice that you've got a little Aboriginal woman working for you?*"
97. I replied, "*That little Aboriginal woman owns this shop.*"

Attachment 1

