YOORROOK Justice Commission

OUTLINE OF EVIDENCE OF UNCLE ROSS MORGAN

FEBRUARY HEARINGS 2023

5 MARCH 2023

I BACKGROUND

1. I'm a Yorta Yorta man. My great grandmother was Yorta Yorta woman Elizabeth Walker and my great grandfather was Baggot Morgan. I have six sons and six daughters. I also have 12 grandkids.

2. I'm a qualified drug and alcohol counsellor and work at Dardi Munwurro. I am the Coordinator of Community Programs (Metro and Hume). I was previously the Coordinator of Ngarra Jarranounith Place at Dardi. Ngarra Jarranounith Place is a residential healing and behaviour change program for Aboriginal men who use or are at risk of using family violence. We help men make positive changes in their lives through one-on-one support and group activities.

3. I also work as an Elder at the Koori Court in Broadmeadows, Heidelberg and Melbourne Magistrates Court.

II CHILDHOOD & EARLY LIFE

4. I was separated from my mum as a kid, when I was about two or three years old. I was left on the riverbanks with Mum's Aunty who at that time I thought was my real Mum. From that time, I wasn't under the same roof as my real Mum – I lived with my Aunty and Uncle. To this day, I think of them as my Mum and Dad. There was a lot of trauma from that separation, and underlying trauma like this pushes our mob down the wrong path. I went to see my real Mum when I was about 36 – to talk about why I was separated from her (the reason being she married a violent man, who was racist and she was concerned about my safety), and was able to tell her I loved her and talk about what happened. But there was a lot of trauma there.

5. I lived at Daishes Paddock until I was about five years old, which is between Mooroopna and Shepparton. In around 1957/8, I was living down the riverbank with my Uncle and Aunty when the Queen drove past and asked what was over there at Daishes Paddock. All the blackfella huts were on the side of the highway along the river, but they'd put hessian bags up so the Queen couldn't see them. Shortly after that they moved us all from off the riverbank into Rumbalara. Rumba was 10 concrete slabs, 10 houses, and I lived there for a few years.

6. Then when I was about 7 years old, my Uncle and Aunty that I was living with died on the same day. It was just loss, after loss, after loss. After that, another Aunt took me in.

7. At Rumba people would call the police when family were visiting. I remember the police came in one day looking for permits for my Uncle and Aunty to be on Rumba. We had to get permits to leave town or move around.

8. Then they moved us out of Rumba into commission houses in Mooroopna to assimilate us. It was like they thought we were getting too organised. We had committees, we walked around to raise awareness of our plight and we were all strong, even though we had to walk everywhere and protest about conditions and all that. Eventually they moved everyone into town and broke everyone up so we were not altogether. When they moved us into town I was still going to Mooroopna Primary.

9. As a kid growing up, racism in the street and from police, pushes you in another direction. You might want to be a police officer or an ambulance officer as a kid but there's no way you're gonna get there. I had a dream of being a mechanic but there was no way that was going to happen.

10. Teachers at my high school were pretty racist. A lot of Aboriginal kids don't feel comfortable at school and a lot of them were forced out of school. There are a lot more people now finishing Year 12, but they didn't used to. At the end of the day I kind of threw it in when I was 16. I ran away with a couple of mates and a cousin, we found a bottle of wine and had my first take of alcohol – I thought 'that's it'. Didn't go back home, didn't go back to school, wasn't gonna go back to school. I blame the teachers, but was my fault as well.

11. I was sick of standing up for myself. At the end of the day, I just walked out, like 'you won'. That goes on continuously with our youth, just not accepted, even in society. After I left school, I went to work at the abattoirs in Shepparton, and did seasonal work picking tomatoes and pears with my Uncle and Aunt.

12. I was a pretty good kind of kid, very smart, and a good footballer. I just blew it all because of the underlying trauma and effects of racism – they pushed me to rebel.

III POLICE BRUTALITY, RACISM & THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

13. The police harassment and brutality probably started when I was about 15 or 16 years old.

14. When I was in a police station in Shepparton in about my mid-twenties, I was beaten up by eight police officers who stood around me punching me from one side to another. I've got tinnitus from police brutality I believe. I haven't had a full night's sleep in 40 years because my tinnitus wakes me up at one o'clock and three o'clock in the morning. I'm still suffering side effects from what happened in various police stations in Shepparton, or Fitzroy, you name it.

15. I was involved on and off in the criminal justice system for a period of over twenty years – from around 1971 until around 1997 or 1998. In that period I was in prisons for about six years and boys' homes for a year or two before that (so seven years all up). I was forced to go that way, there wasn't going to be any work because there wasn't any permanent work for Aboriginal people in Shepparton. Generally, you couldn't do an apprenticeship or get a permanent job.

16. For me, the brutality wasn't as bad in prisons as it was in police stations. The worst violence came from being chucked in the back of a divvy van or police cell. There was also racism in the police – I remember 20 years ago my sons and my nephews were walking in front of me to the swimming pool, minding their own business. Next minute the divvy van is driving really slowly (on the wrong side of the

road) next to them, more or less harassing them, and asking them what they're doing. I bolted up and told them to leave the kids alone - they're just going to the pool. If you're not Aboriginal it doesn't happen. This is a common thing – Aboriginal people being targeted and harassed by police.

17. In the prisons, I came through the hard divisions. But I never got assaulted by a prison officer. It was more racism – it's harder in prisons for us – you're not respected. I managed to keep my head down in prison, but there was violence – and people were killed in prisons while I was there.

18. Recently I was talking to a police officer (who was with the Aboriginal Liaison Officer) in the County Court in Shepparton. I said I didn't know if the racism and violence was as bad as it was before. He just nodded his head and said, "it is". Nothing's changed.

19. I got out of the criminal justice system when I woke up one day and realised I had almost died from drugs and alcohol, and I wanted to see my grandkids grow up. I called on the spirit of my ancestors and eventually God to get me out. I remember connecting spirit and being aware of what was going on.

20. Most of the young kids that have come up through the system all end up with a criminal record, that's the way it is. But most of us don't see ourselves as criminals. What's been taken from us is more than we'll ever take. We see society as the criminal more than us as the criminal. No one is taking responsibility for the crimes that were committed.

IV DEALING WITH TRAUMA, LOSS, DRUGS AND ALCOHOL

21. I've been clean for about 25 years this May. I'd tried before that to get clean, but didn't get it.

22. It's easier for us to take drugs and drink and not deal with our trauma, to push it down. Our men and women are good at pushing down the trauma with drug or drink and just getting on with it. I've lost family and so many mates to drugs and alcohol. I've lost a couple of sisters to alcohol addictions that led to other sicknesses, and two of my nephews passed before they were 40.

23. For our mob there were no other opportunities. People just say: 'what else am I going to do?' They don't see any other future and don't care. For me, I had to go back and look at myself to deal with my trauma, and to push my own addictions back. The separation from my Mum, and death of my Aunty and Uncle – it just becomes like constant trauma after trauma. Everyone that I loved along the way was taken away or they passed away. Even with my first daughter and second daughter, they were removed from their mothers and adopted. I say still removed, stolen, not allowed to see their mums, not allowed to know their culture.

24. In the Aboriginal community, we deal with, who knows, three or four deaths a month. Our community is never out of grieving. By the time you've dealt with the grief or loss of a loved one, and pushed that down, someone else is passing. If a friend dies, it's like a part of our community. More like family than friends. We are losing people constantly and in grief constantly. This might not sound like much, but at the end of the day when someone's trying to hold a job and be a responsible parent, it gets more and more difficult. A lot of it is about feeling abandoned, like you're going to lose something – you feel that the one you love the most is the one that's going to go.

25. Unless people can deal with their underlying trauma, nothing is really going to change. Drugs and alcohol mean you don't have to face it – it's a way of helping people to deal with their underlying

trauma. People turn to drink or drugs as it's the only way they can cope. There is no opportunity for young people to deal with their traumas and past history. Most of our people are disconnected and don't understand that journey of our culture, connection to spirit and to Country, and know how to practice various ceremonies and how to deal with it.

V IDENTITY

26. There is so much racism in this country – it's probably the worst in the world. Aboriginal people are still not accepted and given opportunities. We need to give more opportunities for our men – as the sense of any male role in Aboriginal communities has been taken away.

27. As an Aboriginal person, I didn't know I was always being defensive until I went to America. I was walking down Santa Monica Boulevard and I realised I felt free – my defences were down. It's strange, the first time in my life I felt free was when I was outside this country. This is our country and we're not free. I still don't feel free here. We're still more like captives in our own country.

28. That all comes from all of the stuff that's been happening over the years. We were meant to be wiped out, and then the assimilation policies, all of that. It means you feel pretty unconnected as an Aboriginal person, you can't find that connection and always have your defences up.

VI WORKING IN COMMUNITY SERVICES

29. My journey started when I walked up to the health service in Nicholson Street and saw the floors were dirty. I said I'd clean the floor. Three months later the drug and alcohol worker retired. I said to them there, "I can do that job", and started from there. They knew who I was. I had to get a Certificate 4 to become a drug and alcohol counsellor and have been working in that area ever since.

30. I've spent probably the last 20 years at least as a drug and alcohol counsellor, and as a support worker for the Stolen Generation. I've also spent about nine years now in family violence.

31. I do the men's behavioural change groups for family violence here in Melbourne, Echuca and Shepparton. Typically we focus first on what's happening this week - I don't want to add anything further on top of the stuff that's already there - let's get what's happening this week out of the way, then we can talk about other issues. There are different topics we cover each week (e.g. current behaviours, cycle of violence, cycle of addiction and how to deal with various types of stress). There is a lot of cultural business mentioned in the sessions, journey of ancestors and connection to Country.

32. I previously helped set up the Maya Healing Centre and was Program Manager there.

33. I've worked with the Stolen Generation at Link Up Victoria, and at VACCA before I started work with Dardi. At Link Up Victoria, I was taking people back to Country (central Queensland, NSW – back to their own people and their own Country). This was great, but it's still not enough – we were taking people back to country but it was quick – one day to get there, two days there, and one day to get back. They didn't get more than that – there's not enough funding for it.

VII MY WORK AT DARDI

34. I came to work for Dardi in 2017. Dardi gives guys somewhere to talk together as well as an opportunity to talk to a psychologist or an Elder.

35. Dardi isn't a one stop shop to solve all problems. It mainly focuses on family violence and not everyone identifies with family violence. We get a lot of men who have been mandated by Court and have to go and do a behavioural change program. There are people who have been through the program who are back in jail because unless you do something about the addiction, nothing changes. One guy who did the program said that all the stuff he learnt was really great and what he needed, but as soon as he was back on alcohol and drugs, he went back to his old behaviours. In June this year, we will get our own clinic for men and women going through detox.

36. Dardi's excellent – but it's not enough. Dardi runs a 16-week residential program, with about 15 blokes at the most, every three months. But three or four months in a man's life is not much really. Without more support, they'll go back out and pick up a drink or take a drug and pick up the same behaviour.

37. We need to be helping people beforehand, not after they commit a crime or after family violence. It's difficult as nothing is funded to create something beforehand – it's all about after. That's the good thing about Dardi – we're working with a lot of youth to try and break the cycle a little.

38. Dardi's also been doing great with its traffic management program, but there are still not enough jobs to go around there. We're also working on construction work as well and other stuff. There's a lot of work going but a lot of our men haven't got accommodation as well, they're staying all over the place.

39. With Dardi, what I've noticed is we mainly get our people from out of the prisons or out of the court system, generally we haven't had many referrals from Orange Door or L17s from any other place. But we're starting to receive more referrals from Orange Door. Otherwise we typically get an opportunity to help on the second rebound from prison.

VIII ISSUES WITH SERVICE DELIVERY & SUPPORT

40. In the old days community service providers worked together. Now the money is divvied up and everyone is competing against each other for funding. It's not one place that should be running any particular program – they all should. But that's not how it works.

41. It should be about connection and the importance of community, but that isn't there anymore. The spiritual connection with Country has been taken out by government policies and the way things are run. It's all focussed on statistics, and 'red tape' – you've got to have an intake form to join the men's group.

42. As soon as something is successful in the Aboriginal community, the Government come in and pull it all apart – try and control it. It loses its community control. That's Australia. It's impossible for Aboriginal people to do well.

43. It's also funding – when I ran the Maya Healing Centre we lost our funding because we hired a cook (who was Tanya Day), cleaner and maintenance man, but apparently that wasn't what the funding was for. When you get money from government, you have to tick all the boxes. It becomes white man's way and to me it's a white man's problem that's created all this trauma, death, dispossession and all that. Trying to use a white man's method to heal that. It's all about the money. I've seen it at organisations, it's about how many numbers you can get and how many figures you can get – there's no culture in methods used anymore. If we could control where the money goes and run own healing practices, we could make real change. That's the way I see it.

44. There is nothing focused on prevention. They're building new prisons and have more Aboriginal people being locked up now than ever before. It's all focused on after the fact. There is nothing that focuses on fixing kids or getting them strong again, it's about building new prisons and new youth detention centres. There's a whole industry in it. They just build a couple more prisons and think it's problem solved – to just keep locking our people up. There's no real attempt to heal anyone.

45. There are also too many procedural requirements to be able to get a job or access community services. You have to be able to work for two to three years before the government will let you, whereas in the old days you just started working. You also have to organise working with children's checks, referrals, intakes and things like that. Back in the day you could just start working.

46. When I go back to visit prisons I still get stamped with a 'CRN' (Corrections Reference Number). It's 25 years later and I'm still seen as a criminal, even though I've done more time out than in. I don't consider myself a criminal or a drug addict, I consider myself a warrior and a soldier, fighting against the oppression.