

Yoorrook Justice Commission

Statement of Owen Butler

My name is Owen Butler. I'm 72 years of age. I'm a proud Wiradjuri man. I'd like to tell my story as I have a problem from my past to present day.

As its been told [REDACTED] was a member of the Stolen Generation. What I do know is that she was put into foster care. My great grandmother was fortunate enough to be able to place other family members into the same foster care family, which was very fatuous situation.

[REDACTED] was placed into foster care at a very young age and then worked in servitude at that outback station. It is not known at what age she left the station and went to live in Sydney and met my grandfather, then my father was born.

[REDACTED] movements were not reported so I don't know what happened during that period in her life. No one knows because [REDACTED] would never talk about it and what my father knew, he never spoke of either.

My father was born in Willoughby, NSW. He's always called himself a 27 model, as he was born in 1927. My father was never identified as a First Nations person for fear of being taken as [REDACTED] was. Subsequently the truth was never told down through further generations. My older sister and myself were never told or informed anything about [REDACTED] past, I never knew

that I was Aboriginal until I was about 13 or 14; I took a mate of mine to my Nan's place. When we left my mate said to me, 'Your Nan is Aboriginal', and my response there was, 'no, she's not.

That was because there's never been any conversation with regards to our Aboriginality at all. I went home to my sister, and I asked if we were Aboriginal and she said, 'yes we are. But don't say anything to Dad' because he was the enforcer. You didn't cross Dad, no one crossed Dad unless you wanted to pay the price. So that story never really was spoken about, and I lived the life of a white man until I started my journey 18 years ago when my first grandson was born.

I have four children, they knew that we were Aboriginal, but I couldn't share any information because I didn't have any information to give. My eldest daughter needed to find out about Nan's history. So that's when I started my journey, 18 years ago. At that time, I was working at the Northcote Fire Station. So, I went to the Aboriginal Advancement League to find my pathway and my journey.

To be perfectly honest, I didn't receive much help there. I don't know who I spoke to, but they just told me, it's like belting your head up against a brick wall and it will be very hard. I was advised to contact the missions because I knew Nan was born at a place called The Rock near Wagga Wagga.

And so, I started to do a ring around to several missions and it was **like belting my head against a brick wall**. There was no great help from any of those conversations.

I have a non-Indigenous cousin who lives in Parkes, New South Wales, whose granddaughter was doing a genealogy on Nan, and she was physically going out to the missions in Condobolin, around those areas around Peak Hill. She sent me information sourced including photos, which was extraordinary. It was a genealogy of my family, my family through my father's line. Dating back to my great, great grandmother. Family names in this information were familiar from conversations overheard because children were to be seen and not heard but I still had ears.

I first logged onto a website called Wiradjuri Language, where I thought it would be nice to learn some language, and then from there it suggested I join a group called Wiradjuri Mob. On that Facebook site, I found a photo I identified that I had a copy of; made a comment about this photo being my family as I need to be able to contact someone from the family. Well, from there I received numerous messages from my family, my disconnected family who I never knew I had.

So that led me to another site called Australian Naden's - my family name is Naden. And low and behold, the administrator was a cousin of mine, we made that connection, and strangely enough we were on the same committee up at Whittlesea Reconciliation Group. We sat opposite to each other and didn't know we were cousins. So, my world opened to me. At that point

I had a mother and a sister, that was my sole family. There was a Naden family reunion up at Gilgandra, NSW. So, I went to the family reunion and met all my cousins from another branch of the family tree. I was welcomed, and it was just a life changing experience.

The downside on that was that the family I met were so close knit that I felt the loss of not having family even more so. I really felt like my father did a disservice by not engaging with my Nan's family and keeping me away from that story of my ancestry.

I've also been able to find a few from my nan's line, which is the Florence-Naden line of that family tree. There's two people from Sydney and one from Grafton. Though they're the closest related family I do have, I still haven't met them. I am on a journey to meet my closest family.

So, what I feel deeply about, and I resent- I resent my father not identifying and being engaged with my Aboriginal family, which has made it really difficult especially when I was up at the family reunion and I saw all these cousins totally engaging, and loving, and laughing, and having fun, and I still felt like an outsider within my new found family. So, I intend to go back again and try and find out more information. But unfortunately, that line of the tree knew nothing about my nan. She was an enigma. They knew that Lyla Anne was one of the family. But she disappeared off the map. So no one could fill in that gaps that needed to be filled from when Nan left the station to when she became an adult and had a child, being my father.

So that part of the history, my history is lost. And I would dearly love to know about that. So, growing up with the lie, that was difficult, that was difficult because I knew I was Aboriginal.

I guess it really hurt first was when I first got married and the in-laws were not aware that I was Aboriginal. There was a problem right from the very start. Also, at my place of employment I would always hear criticisms or jokes about Aboriginal people. And at one point, it involved violence against an Aboriginal people in Fitzroy. I wasn't part of the violence, but it was very hard because I did not identify as being Aboriginal. It was the secrecy, perpetuating that lie that really did hurt.

I personally hadn't suffered any racism until I started identifying, but I do recall my father and my grandmother suffering racism. I never understood why. I would hear something, and my father would react violently. On one occasion it happened at my grandmother's place, and the next-door neighbour made a comment over the fence, and my father jumped the fence and when he jumped back, he said, we will not talk about this again. And he had steam coming from his ears and his eyes were glowing red, so I knew something bad had happened. I have rarely mentioned it.

I am still bitter. I'd just like to say I am bitter that I have never been able to identify being Aboriginal before, that I've lost that opportunity to have family and have a close connection to family. I'm somewhat disappointed that my children, that they do identify to be Aboriginal, but now they haven't got that passion that I have, and I'm working on it. I'm working on my grandchildren to be aware and proud. I'm sure my children are proud because

they love their great grandmother just so much and she loved them as well.

My father had a bit of a temper, and it wasn't a safe space to be for anyone around my father when he was like that. So naturally enough we didn't say anything. We just went on with our merry life and lived. My father and mother, they were great providers. I must say that because as I didn't identify, I did grow up in a privileged life. I was educated, received a good education which led to employment, led to housing.

And that continued with my family as well including my children they are all well-educated. I've been very lucky, but only because I've lived a privileged life and I now identify as a First Nations person.

I am now heavily engaged with Aboriginal community groups. It's my role and privilege to give back to community because I can. I have that ability to give and that gives me great pleasure in being able. I know, listening to the mob at our men's gathering place and other stories from other people, that aboriginal communities have really suffered badly.

We have an uncle who lived in numerous homes because they would be constantly on the road to avoid government, and for that very same reason, because the government knew they were Aboriginal, they were fearing that their children would be separated and taken. I was lucky enough not to be in that situation. Its so hard to imagine that a very close friend has suffered so badly during childhood and so many friends who

have been stolen. It could have happened to my father if identified or myself.

So, now, I'm committing to several aboriginal groups. I work for the fire brigade as a multicultural liaison officer, and I've had this opportunity to engage with five local governments across the northern suburbs. I have this opportunity and experience to talk to people, to engage with the mob who live in those areas.

The local government areas is that those who have Aboriginal communities living within those communities are serviced and identified by that local government, and they receive support. u The disappointing thing about the other local governments that do not have large communities, there is no care, or little thought given to those Aboriginal people. It's sort of like the local governments are compelled to take care of their community that live within that local government area and if no aboriginals, no care. So, this is something that I would really like to see change.

I know there are gatherings of municipal local governments having meetings, and it would be great to see some sort of compelling involvement, that all local governments are compelled to engage with and have policy about Aboriginal people, whether they have large Aboriginal communities within their LGA or not. So that's something I'd like to see changed. Since the start of my journey, I have joined LGA committees such as the Whittlesea Reconciliation Group, DAAC, Banyule RAP Action Committee.

The first comment I made was I'm a believer in change, but it's a believer in generational change. I was very excited about the

Referendum and how we might have change but I was wrong. You know, we can get change, but unfortunately 61% of Australians did not want to recognise us to be their First Nations People. And that was quite distressing.

So, I'm back to generational change now, and it's got to come from the education department. There's got to be policy right across Victoria in all primary schools, whether they be state or private or religious, that there's got to be that eventually, those who are born to no supporters will have factual knowledge because they were taught it at school. And as they grow up from primary school into high school, that education and enforcement will continue. And that will strengthen our true history told. So, cause to be recognised as the First Nations People and be included in the community. We're not included, we are excluded. We are a minority.

I always come up in conversation about systemic racism. Whether it be systemic or institutional with my employer. I mentioned before about problems 40 years ago. Now the employer has changed direction. As they are a statutory organisation, and they have a requirement to state government to implement change. That is fantastic. Still a long way to go, but it's great to see change.

We have a department there now that is engaging with the First Nations staff. It's interesting in the past I tried to find out how many Aboriginals we have in the fire brigade, and the answer was we don't keep that information. So that was quite telling. that the organisation I worked in for 30 years, didn't have any record of how many Aboriginals there were. So, I had to go back through word of mouth to find out.

But I think what's important also with systemic racism is that not only does the system have to change, we must change as well. It's important. There are a lot of angry Aboriginal people out there, and I would imagine rightly so. Because I live the privilege life, it's easy for me to say, to forgive and forget, but that's not going to happen, only time can make that happen. I know that maybe there needs to be generational change there as well so that we can have a good pathway to reconciliation, because it does take two parties to do that.

I just love going to the elders' luncheons at the Aboriginal Advancement League because I meet so many older people. I'm 72 and I'm talking about other older people, I call them older ladies and they just remind me so much of my nan that I just, I feel comfort by walking into that doorway for the elder's luncheon. And I love serving the tables. It's all part of community engagement and, you know, my journey.

I hope to one day I will get past that resentment of my father for not identifying, but that's my journey. And I just must get past it, that it brought me to that last point of two parties for reconciliation. I need to get past and to forgive, to start off with my family, forgive them and to move forward and try and make a better community.

And that's why I'm here at the gathering place to lend that support to the young people coming in, because it's just so distressing to see these young people in prison. I am an independent prisoner, volunteer at the prison system. And the young men there, it's just so sad to see. Where I work at the

Metropolitan Remand Centre there's a occupancy rate around about 30% Aboriginal, which is quite alarming. Not as alarming as Queensland and Northern Territory, when we're looking at 70 to 90%.

It's just so sad to see our young- who could and should be leaders of the future being caught up in the justice system. So, I'll continue that work I love. It's not a happy place to be, but it is a very rewarding place to be able to just go in and most of them just want to have a yarn. They don't want to cause any problems in there. They just need to have someone to talk to them, and just that engagement from the outside world.

I've met some cousins in there as well, which was quite sad. Very sad. I didn't know them. I only knew them by my family name. But they were happy to meet me. And they were well known. Not because of their criminality, but just because you know, mob are close. They're all close, we're all family.

I was only talking about one of them the other day to another prisoner, and he just said, 'oh, he's a really nice bloke, a really nice bloke'. A man mountain he is. I don't know what he did to become incarcerated, I'm not allowed to ask those questions, but yeah, he was a nice bloke to talk to.

Because I've lived on both sides of the fence. I can see and follow trains of thought from non-Indigenous people. Not that I respect it now, but I can, I can see where they're coming from. You know, and it all comes about from systemic racism. It's just so blatant. And unfortunately, people just don't realise sometimes

that they're being racist. They're just following on from something they've learnt and heard, comments.

And we've got an education system that must improve. And once again, it's the disengagement of education system is just totally appalling. We had a meeting up at Bundoora Parkland with Uncle Bill Nicholson and schoolteachers and school principals to work shop and to talk about decolonisation of the parkland up there. And Uncle Bill asked 'how can the schools help?' Well, the conversation that came out of that, was dead silence, and its apparent that there's no engagement from one school to the next. There's no engagement from the education department or policy down to schools.

So, if there's no policy coming down for schools to adhere to, then it's up to the principal or the person in charge, to implement something in the school. If you haven't got a principal who's willing to engage in that conversation, then it's not going to happen in the school. Plus, if it is happening in the school, and the teacher who has got Aboriginal studies training and were able to teach Aboriginal studies, if they get moved and it's replaced by another teacher who has not got those Aboriginal studies skills, then the children will not get taught, so the system fails.

It's just mind blowing, hearing about that disconnect between the education department, the head of the school and communication between schools, there is none. So how the hell are we going to make that improvement unless it comes from the top. It's got to come from our education department and provide a policy that goes into every school in Victoria. They must institute some sort of Indigenous studies. And what about the

universities, what are they doing to teach Indigenous studies? All DipEd students should have compulsory indigenous studies taught at university before they can become teachers.

I was up in Mildura during referendum weekend, at the polling booth by chance and I just dropped in just to say hello, but there was no one there, so I just hung around.. Running past my table with this queue ready to go in, there was this young bloke with two young boys, and he said to the sons, what are we going to vote today? Yes or no? And he didn't start this conversation until he got close to me. Are we going to vote yes or no? Well, the obvious answer for the child is a positive word is yes; well Dad said NO and I realised the nasty person wanted to wait for that conversation to have, so I could overhear it. I was the only one there at the time. And then the Salvation Army officer, the captain came to man the information stands where I was, The captain came in and he just said to me, oh look, I'm just so sorry. I'm just so sorry what's happening here today. Because he knew what the outcome was going to be. I think the result was something like 80, 90% no in Mildura. And he started crying.

And I said to him, well we're on the long journey here, and I know there's a problem here in Mildura. That's why I came up to the polling booth, just to have a yarn with whoever was on it. I said, don't, don't cry, don't cry for us, because we are on this journey. We've been on it a long time. Please just keep supporting, and time will change all. It's going to be generational change. There must be change for non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal as well.

I'm 72, you know, I have trouble engaging with young people. My role is community engagement, but to be able to engage with young people, that's another thing. I'm a couple of generations

away from them. It's quite difficult. So, I've got to work really hard. It's important for me. It is important for me to ensure that my grandchildren are up to speed. I've got that timeline gap in the family tree where I can't tell them what happened, you know? And that is a bad thing. It would explain to them that because we've been denied and there's no history, that the story hasn't been told yet. Why it impacts me so much. I don't want to make things difficult for my grandchildren, but it's important for them to know that their grandfather has been traumatised in the past, and still traumatised because I don't know my history. I haven't got my family history. And at this point I don't know how I'm going to get it. I'm running out of time, so I've got to remain on that journey.

END OF STATEMENT