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TRANSCRIPT OF DAY 4 – PUBLIC HEARINGS

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**PROFESSOR ELEANOR BOURKE, Chair**  
**MS SUE-ANNE HUNTER, Commissioner**  
**DISTINGUISHED PROFESSOR MAGGIE WALTER, Commissioner**  
**PROFESSOR THE HON KEVIN BELL AM QC, Commissioner**  
**MR TRAVIS LOVETT, Commissioner**

**MONDAY, 6 MARCH 2023 AT 2.04 PM (AEST)**

**DAY 4**

**MR TIMOTHY GOODWIN, Counsel Assisting**  
**MR RICHARD KNOWLES KC for the State of Victoria**

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**LAW IN ORDER**  
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Yoorrook Justice Commission

CHAIR: Thank you. Good morning. Or good afternoon sorry, I had good morning for a 10 o'clock start. It's been amended to 2 pm, so good afternoon.

5 Today, we continue a further round of hearings focused on the priority areas of Child  
Protection and Criminal Justice system. This week we will be focused on the Criminal Justice  
system. But before we start today's hearings I would like to take this opportunity to  
acknowledge our new Commissioner, Kerrup Jmara Gunditjmara man, Commissioner Travis  
Lovett. Welcome, Travis, to your first hearing, we are very honoured to have you here. We  
are delighted that we are back to strength of five. And I think perhaps we probably should  
10 introduce the other Commissioners, Ross. Do you know -

UNCLE ROSS MORGAN: I've just met - yes, I know them now.

15 CHAIR: Sue-Anne, you know? Okay, we have just said hello, Maggie said hello as well.  
Great, okay.

All right, so I'd like now to invite Commissioner Hunter to give the Welcome to Country and  
Acknowledgement.

20 COMMISSIONER HUNTER: Thanks, Chair. I'd like to acknowledge that we are on the  
lands of the Wurundjeri and pay my respects to Elders and ancestors, all those that have come  
before us so we are able to have voice here today and acknowledge their resistance and their  
work in pushing forward in truth and justice.

25 I would also like to acknowledge our witness here today and his ancestors as well, and may  
Bunjil watch over us today as we conduct Aboriginal business.

30 CHAIR: Thank you, Commissioner. Welcome, welcome, Uncle Ross. Counsel, may I have  
appearances please?

MR GOODWIN: Yes, if the Commissioner pleases, I appear as counsel assisting.

MR KNOWLES: If the Commissioner pleases, I appear for the State of Victoria.

35 CHAIR: Counsel.

MR GOODWIN: Thank you, Chair. Before I introduce our first witness for today, we seek a  
standing order be made pursuant to s.26(1) of the Inquiries Act 2014, namely that:

40 1. Where approved by the Chair, at the request of Counsel Assisting, witness outlines and  
annexures to those outlines and other documents tendered as evidence may be deemed  
necessary to be withheld from publication or published in part where, based on the subject  
matter and following consultation with the witness as to their consents and preferences, the  
Chair considers that:

45 (a) prejudice or hardship may be caused to any person, including harm to their safety or  
reputation (s.26(1)(a));

(b) the nature and subject matter of the information is sensitive (s.26(1)(b));

(c) there is a possibility of any prejudice to legal proceedings (s.26(1)(c));

(d) the conduct would be more effective (s.26(1)(d));

5

Or (e) the Commissioner otherwise considers the prohibition or restriction appropriate (s.26(1)(e)).

2. Any oral evidence given by a witness at the hearing in respect of the matters in paragraph 1 to the extent captured in a transcript or video recording not be published.

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And 3. A copy of this order is to be published on Yoorrook's website, YoorrookJusticeCommission.org.au.

15 CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Goodwin. I make the orders in terms sought.

MR GOODWIN: Thank you, Chair. If the Commission pleases, I now call today's next witness, Uncle Ross Morgan.

20 <UNCLE ROSS MORGAN, CALLED

MR GOODWIN: Uncle Ross, do you undertake to provide truthful evidence to the Yoorrook Justice Commission today?

25 UNCLE ROSS MORGAN: Yes.

MR GOODWIN: You've provided an outline of evidence of 5 March 2023. Are you happy with the content of that statement?

30 UNCLE ROSS MORGAN: Yes.

MR GOODWIN: I tender that statement, Chair.

CHAIR: Thank you.

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MR GOODWIN: Uncle Ross, could you please first introduce yourself personally and culturally to the Commissioners?

40 UNCLE ROSS MORGAN: Yeah, my name is Ross Morgan. I'm Yorta Yorta Elder. I also have connections to Taungurung People through great great great grandfather - great great grandfather and - no, Taungurung through a great great great grandfather and Gunditjmara through great great grandfather but I identify as a Yorta Yorta man through my Yorta Yorta grandfather and grandmother and mother.

45 MR GOODWIN: And when were you born, Uncle Ross?

UNCLE ROSS MORGAN: I was born on 14th of October, 1954.

MR GOODWIN: And you're a qualified drug and alcohol counsellor and currently work at the organisation Dardi Munwurro as a coordinator of community programs right now?

5 UNCLE ROSS MORGAN: Yeah, I - well, one of the things I do was drug and alcohol with VAHS, Victorian Aboriginal Health Service, but now I work with Dardi Munwurro as community programs coordinator for the northern and new region with men's group, men's behavioural change groups.

10 MR GOODWIN: And so you've been working in that space for the last 20 years. Is that right?

15 UNCLE ROSS MORGAN: No, not with Dardi but in that area, like drug and alcohol. I worked with Stolen Gen, Link Up Victoria for about seven years - might have been about five years out of the seven years before I went from there to Dardi.

MR GOODWIN: And I just want to ask some questions now about your childhood, and I know some of this story is hard and involves trauma, so we will just take our time. Whereabouts did you grow up?

20 UNCLE ROSS MORGAN: Initially I grew up in Mooroopna, which is in the Goulburn Valley not far from Shepparton, so Shepparton and Mooroopna were my areas where I grew up. As a baby, I was left on the river bank at The Flats in Daish's Paddock in between Shepparton and Mooroopna. Then, from when I was about five or six years old, moved into Rumbalara once that got established and eventually from there moved into Rosalind Street in  
25 Mooroopna, and spent most of my childhood life growing up Rumba and Rosalind Street.

MR GOODWIN: And so you were first raised at Daish's Paddock when you were very young. Do you remember - do you have any memories of that time at Daish's Paddock?

30 UNCLE ROSS MORGAN: Yeah, I remember The Flats. The Flats were on the river, right on the river, and we'd only move up to Daish's Paddock when there was a flood, so I don't recall any floods when I was there, but we moved up - I remember - I remember the floor and I remember my mum and dad there then, but they eventually adopted me. They weren't my  
35 mum and dad, they were aunties of - an aunty of my mother, and they were - I was raised believing that they were my mum and dad, so until - I didn't realise until probably just before my teens that they weren't my mum and dad.

MR GOODWIN: And what was it like growing up with them, first in Daish's Paddock, and then when you eventually moved to Rumba?

40 UNCLE ROSS MORGAN: Oh, that was the best. You know, my childhood with them was loving and caring and really well looked after. I think I was one of the most spoilt kids on Rumba at the time and had everything going. I was the first kid to ever get a football and, you know, like, I used to lend it out to other kids. But, yeah, that was - they both died on the same  
45 day when I was seven years old. Well, I believed it was the same day, I was told it was the same day, but I learnt years later, many years later, that it was a little bit after, one died a little bit after the other. So there was a lot of trauma there around separation in my childhood growing up.

MR GOODWIN: And just you mention in your statement a story that you heard about the Queen driving past Daish's Paddock.

UNCLE ROSS MORGAN: Yeah.

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MR GOODWIN: Could you tell the Commissioners that story?

UNCLE ROSS MORGAN: Yeah, that was - that's a story of Daish's Paddock. It's about, you know like, the houses on the side of the road and they were down on The Flats side, there was hessian bags put up along these trees and that to cover the Aboriginal people and the Queen apparently asked, "What's down there? What's behind that?", and she was told that it was - that's where the Aboriginal shanties or whatever they - humpies are. That's where the Aboriginal people live down there. I was born that year. I wasn't there at that time, but it wasn't long after that, that I was sent down there. Because I remember - I actually remember the hessian bags around. They ended up using them for part of their arts.

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The timber and the tin were gotten out of the local tip. You know, everyone got their building material out of the tip, and we lived on the edge of the tip at Daish's Paddock and, yeah, the Queen went past there in '54 and I believe that's why they eventually established Rumbalara, which was done a fair few, about three years later, I think, eventually sent us all to Rumbalara.

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MR GOODWIN: And was it a large Aboriginal community at Rumbalara when you were growing up there?

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UNCLE ROSS MORGAN: It was 10 concrete slab huts that were built and I think there was two bedrooms and a kitchen and lounge all in one. Eventually, many years later, they built laundries or wash houses on the back of them, but that was many years later before - and it wasn't long after that that they closed it down.

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MR GOODWIN: And you mention in your statement a story about your aunty and uncle, or your mum and dad, being asked by police for permits to live at Rumbalara.

UNCLE ROSS MORGAN: Yeah.

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MR GOODWIN: Do you remember that story?

UNCLE ROSS MORGAN: That was another uncle and aunty who'd come from Melbourne. That was Aunty Merle and Uncle Alick Jackomos who come to visit us. And a divvy van pulled up then. I think it was an old HR divvy van or HD divvy van. And a couple of young constables jumped out and tried to get my uncle and aunty to leave Rumbalara, because they never had permits to visit us.

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And my aunty really got aggravated and told him to, you know, "Where are your superiors? I need to talk to your superiors. Youse can't do this" and eventually after a couple of - not threats, but told them that "We're going to see into this", they left, and left them there actually. But the old chook farmer, Mr Young, across the way every time he'd see a car coming on to Rumba, he'd let the police know. So it was just common thing that if police

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come on there - that if people come on there in cars police would come out and check out who they were.

5 MR GOODWIN: And eventually you were moved out of Rumba into commission houses in Mooroopna, and you say in your statement "that was done to assimilate us", to assimilate.

10 UNCLE ROSS MORGAN: Well, honestly, I'm thinking it was, if for no other reason the same thing happened pre-walk-off at Cummeragunja. Once, you know, we get organised as Aboriginal people - and there were people walking around organising - it was just to get the Rumba organisation established for the Rumbalara people, medical centres and that, be it, and I think because we were getting too outspoken about how we were living, we were eventually all - not all at the same time, eventually most of us got moved into town, and I think, I think - although I loved living at Rosalind Street, I think that was a part of our downfall, when we were disconnected and we weren't kind of really, really communicating all that  
15 much about staying strong. Although, not long after that Rumbalara was developed.

I seen it as another, you know, like, thing where - another process where they disconnect us and - as a group and assimilate us. And I think that was a view taken by a lot of people, but, at the end of the day, I didn't - I didn't mind living in Mooroopna, because I went to school at Mooroopna and I played football for Mooroopna, as a kid. Yeah.  
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MR GOODWIN: And you've just mentioned going to school in Mooroopna, you've described in your statement a number of experiences of racism while you were at school and the challenge of that. Do you mind telling the Commissioners what racism you experienced or saw while you were at school?  
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30 UNCLE ROSS MORGAN: Just - it's just a feeling of race - racism is that you don't get the same opportunity, you don't get the same chance as non-Indigenous children and, you know, even being called, you know, black bastards and stuff like that, you know, and not expecting to - not expected to succeed in anything anyhow, so why give them the opportunity, you know? Like, my experiences with it all is that every time we did succeed in anything, they'd pull it apart, you know. I felt that from an early age. That's why I left school around 16 years old.

35 MR GOODWIN: And so that racism that you experienced had an impact on you that meant that you left school at the age of 16. Is that right?

40 UNCLE ROSS MORGAN: Yeah, I didn't have a, a sense of freedom or any experience. It was sort of like I was being watched and being controlled and even when, in my teens, police started to - you know, I started to be harassed by police and all that kind of stuff and it was like, it felt like that I never - I was never going to get an opportunity, you know, like, and everything I did didn't - it wasn't worth the effort, you know?

45 MR GOODWIN: And you mention in your statement that that police harassment and brutality probably started when you were about 15 or 16 years old.

UNCLE ROSS MORGAN: Yeah, I did - probably not 16, maybe 17, something like that - experience violence from police and over the years, there was some extreme violence that I experienced as well, but more - probably more into my 20s, it became more extreme.

MR GOODWIN: And what are some of the incidents that you went through of police violence?

5 UNCLE ROSS MORGAN: Well, I've been bashed a few times in the Shepparton cells pre coming to Melbourne, and it all happened down here as well, but I remember one day being in the cells, and it was about, maybe six, maybe seven, maybe eight police standing around in a circle and they'd just punch me from one side to another, and I'd be kind of screaming at them, and that went on for a fair while. And then one of the young constables, who was  
10 probably about the youngest out of all of them, he just walked into the room. He said - he just pulled them all up, you know, pulled all these older police officers up and said "What are youse effing doing? You know, pull it up". And it was just common - it was just common practice for our people back then to get violated against or get violence, and it wasn't the only incident.

15 There was another instance where I got pulled - well I never got pulled over. It was actually we pulled into a hotel in Shepparton there and the police pulled in after us and there was an incident where they said the car's overloaded, and I just jumped out and I said, "Well, I'll just jump out and that'll solve the problem", you know, like - and they just said, "Are you going to be a smart arse" or something, like, to them terms, and then I got batted with batons by two of  
20 the officers and the other one was - kicked me and - a couple of times and then chucked in the back of the divvy.

And when I got out of that - they had nothing to hold me on, I think - I went and seen lawyers and that. We talked about charging them. And eventually - you know, we had a pretty strong case. We had a lot of witnesses. And eventually my lawyer and whoever was investigating them come up with a solution that they charged me because I knocked off a police officer's hat, and I didn't knock his hat off. His hat fell off while he was bashing me with a baton. And the other cop said that I assaulted him.

30 And I never even lifted my hands, really, never lifted me arm once. And the solution was that they were - they come up with a solution was they're gonna charge me with assault and they'd throw the assault charges out if I dropped my assault charges and the lawyer at the time said, "It's in your best interests if you just drop them", you know, like, so I was gonna get charged and I said, "Oh well, can't be stuffed going through". And we just made an agreement to drop  
35 it all.

MR GOODWIN: That type of incident, when you've tried to do something about the experience that you've gone through, through the legal system, to then have to compromise  
40 because of a suggestion that you've assaulted a police officer by reason of knocking his hat off, you know, what kind of impact did that have on you?

UNCLE ROSS MORGAN: Well, it just gives you a sense that you've got no right and it doesn't matter, you know. Like, it just like, "Are you kidding?" These people can do whatever  
45 they want whenever they want, however they want, and it's like with no consequences, you know, like, and at the end of the day, all I did was jump out of the car and said, "Okay, I'm out of the car. I won't bother about going", you know, like, and they just dived on me, you know, like as if I was smart. I wasn't smart at all. I just got attacked, really.

MR GOODWIN: The first incident that you mentioned to the Commissioners in the police cell where there were a number of police officers that you've said were in the cell with you -

UNCLE ROSS MORGAN: In the police station, not in the cell.

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MR GOODWIN: In the police station. And you mention in your statement that there were some serious health consequences from being beaten. What can you tell the Commissioner about that?

10 UNCLE ROSS MORGAN: I've had constant headaches and hearing - not actually hearing problems, but hearing - I've got tinnitus because, I believe, of police brutality. And I've more recently got a hearing aid that plays some white noise so I'm not - in 2 or 3 o'clock in the morning this just screeches, you know. I've got to put the hearing aid in to play something to stop it from - so I've never had - it might be over 40 years, but I've never had a full night's  
15 sleep in all that long and it's like I've constantly have got this ear that rings and I can't recall ever having - since then, having a good night's sleep, you know.

MR GOODWIN: Do you know other Aboriginal people in Victoria who have had similar experiences to yours, in terms of -

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UNCLE ROSS MORGAN: I hear them all the time. Even before I come here, I seen Uncle Talgium's thing on Facebook around his case and his - the police brutality he mentioned, so it was just common - common thing that - and that people were getting - experiencing violence.

25 MR GOODWIN: And you also mention a story about your experience of racism on the part of police and a story of around 20 years ago walking with your sons and nephews on the way to the swimming pool. Can you please tell the Commissioner that story?

30 UNCLE ROSS MORGAN: Yeah, it's just one of the incidents. I was walking to Mooroopna pool taking my son and daughter and two of me nephews up to the pool. They were probably 20 yards or even further in front of us, because they run up ahead, and the police divisional van or divvy was just driving right beside them on the wrong side of the road, more or less harassing them or, you know - not even talking to them, just driving beside them and by the time I got up there, they were saying something to me son and I just screamed out "What  
35 the" - you know "What the F are youse after? What do youse want? Leave the kids alone". We're less than 100 yards from the pool and they've got towels over their shoulders and they're being harassed by police, so it's constant.

40 And, look, I've experienced many, many times like that, not only my kids, but myself and my mates and just constantly. You know, this is - I talk about being free, you know, and I went overseas and I felt free. The first time I felt free was when I was outside of this country. Inside of this country, I can't feel free because, you know, I've always got me defences up for either racism or violence, you know, like, and it's happened constantly. And that's through the police, what the police have installed in me and probably society has installed in me, you  
45 know.

MR GOODWIN: You mention in your statement that you've had interactions, personal interactions, with the Criminal Justice system for about 25 to 30 years, including one or two years in a boy's home and around six years in prison. You also mention that brutality wasn't

as bad in prisons as it was in police stations, but there was still a lot of racism. What type of racism did you experience while you were in custody in prison?

5 UNCLE ROSS MORGAN: In the prison system, there was a lot of violence in there, but it wasn't mainly from the prison officers. But it was always, you know, like, Aboriginal people wouldn't get the same opportunities as non-Aboriginal prisoners or - and I don't know, it seemed like racism to me, but you still get - you wouldn't get the same opportunities as everyone else and you'd even get, you know, called names like, you know, blackfella or Abbo or stuff like that. It was pretty common.

10 MR GOODWIN: And what type of impact does that have on you during your time in prison?

15 UNCLE ROSS MORGAN: Well, it is a big impact, I think, because you know, like, at the end of the day, you know, you just push that crap down, you know, like, over the years, and at the end of the day you end up with this big lot of baggage that you've pushed down over many years, you know? And the effects of that - you know, like I said before, it's like you single out. Been singled out all me life for my, you know, being Aboriginal.

20 MR GOODWIN: You say something quite powerful at paragraph 20 of your statement, if I can just read that out:

25 *"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."*

30 In terms of making that statement, how much do you see that - your own experiences playing out today for other young men going through the system? Have things gotten better or changed or do you still see some of the same problems happening today?

35 UNCLE ROSS MORGAN: I think it's all the same. Nothing much has changed at all, in that, you know, we're talking about trauma and transgenerational trauma, stuff that our ancestors have experienced. We still carry that. We don't get much opportunity at all. Just read that out again, because I've missed half of it.

MR GOODWIN: Yeah, sure:

40 *"Most of the young kids that 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."*

45 ROSS MORGAN: Well, it just says everything, doesn't it. Like, we're judged as criminals in our own country. And the people that have taken our - be it land, our spirit, our identity as Aboriginal men - they've pretty much taken our, you know, our initiation from boyhood to manhood, kind of. They've taken our role as Aboriginal men away and even our women have been dispossessed as - more, if not more than we have. But it's taken away from us and no-one's taken the responsibility for that, I believe. It's - are youse kidding? What I'm saying

is that we're seen as the thieves and we look at this society as, you know, not taking ownership of what actually has happened here, you know.

5 How do I explain it more? It's pretty much self-explanatory, really. No-one's said, "Okay, we've taken your land, we've taken your country, we've taken your kids, we've taken your life. How can we - how can we" - not compensate - "how can we fix up that? How can we have you feeling like you're free in your own country, on your own land, or on your own", you know like, it's not gonna happen, you know, like, and I'd like to think that Yoorrook can change things around or the Justice Commission can have a look at that and get someone to  
10 put their hand up and say, "Okay, let's change it". But this society is not gonna take responsibility.

15 MR GOODWIN: You've been clean for 25 years this May and you mention reasserting your connection to culture as part of that journey. What inspired you to get clean in your life?

UNCLE ROSS MORGAN: It's a spiritual thing. It's like reconnect spiritually to make myself stronger. Whereas previous to that, addiction was the solution to problems. You know, it could be just relying on alcohol, just relying on yandri or whatever drugs were out there to deal with the underlying trauma, pain and loss, you know. So addiction served its purpose,  
20 although it did cause a lot of other dramas. It also dealt with some of the underlying stuff.

And this is the stuff that I'm talking about today and that I had to mask out a lot of the losses, a lot of the hurts and a lot of the - well, is it racism and freedom - loss of freedom and until I got to a certain age and I thought, "No, no, if I continue, I'd lose my life", you know. And I  
25 made a decision that I wanted to see my grand-kids grow up and at that point I might have only had one grandchild in Canberra, I believe, and - there was one, yeah.

And I made a decision, you know, that I wanted to be around. I wanted to be a strong - be a mentor or an ancestor for my grandchildren and stopped, after a little of effort, but eventually  
30 turning back to my connection to spirit, you know, like, and my connection to culture. Culture is a big part of me becoming more connected spiritually, you know.

35 MR GOODWIN: And you reconnected with your mum when you were about 36 years old. How important was that to your journey?

UNCLE ROSS MORGAN: Might have been a little bit older than that, maybe 36, 38, something like that. It was just going back, and I'd known of her and seen her a couple of times in the previous years, but never had no connection, never lived under the roof - same roof with her. I just needed to know what happened and why - why - why I was left and she  
40 didn't come back. And her explanation was valid, was accepted, and I was able to move on from that, because she told me that she remarried and had other children, but she couldn't come back and get me because he was a very violent person. And she said, her exact words were "He would have killed you if you had come back into this house".

45 And he wasn't an Aboriginal man, he was a German man, very violent towards my brothers and sister - well, at least one of my brothers and sister and as well as - she said that, "You couldn't have come back into that home". Although I did meet him once I accepted her explanation and moved on from that. I was pretty happy with the mum I grew up with. Her

aunty and her husband actually got married on Rumbalara to adopt me. And I remember that experience as well, and I accepted them as my mum and dad.

5 But yeah, she passed away not long after - well, my real mum passed away not long after that explanation and I was able to say thank you for bringing me into the world, and I was able to take my youngest son to the Echuca Hospital when she did pass. On the same fortnight when she was in hospital, they then sent her home to Cummeragunja where she passed away, but I was able to take my son there to meet her, and I let her know that I loved her and was able to say goodbye to her, yeah.

10 MR GOODWIN: You mentioned early in your evidence that you've been working for a number of years now, for two decades, in drug and alcohol work, including for Aboriginal health services, as a support worker for members of the Stolen Generations and now assisting men who are involved in family violence. What are some of the struggles that you see faced by the Aboriginal people you've worked with over the years?

20 UNCLE ROSS MORGAN: Well, the Stolen Gen years with Link Up Victoria, that was - I loved that. I really liked taking people back to country and meeting people. And it's really, really strong and really loved that. That was - I probably jumped the gun there. Before that, after I did over 25 years ago, I was able to work in the Aboriginal health services as a cleaner. And I remember talking to one of the staff there, who was the drug and alcohol counsellor, and I had an inkling that she didn't know what she was doing, and I thought to myself "I'm going to have her job". And I was cleaning floors.

25 And, anyhow, in three months time, maybe a little bit longer, that person left because she was sick or she actually burnt out because - I think she might have got sick as well, and I said to one of the workers there, Alan - Alan, I was saying H and it's A. Alan Brown, and I said, "I want that job" and he said, "It's yours". You know, like, it was that easy. I went from cleaning floors to becoming the drug and alcohol counsellor, and that was great.

30 I went and done the Cert IV in drug and alcohol and got that qualification, among others. I've got - you know, since then I've got heaps of qualifications. And, you know, I started with a drug and alcohol counsellor and worked with our people trying to get people clean and deal with trauma. Then went to Link Up and worked with Stolen Gen. Before that, actually, I went up to Eden, Bega and Wallaga Lake and run three men's groups up there, and that was a good experience as well.

40 I come back, 'cause me younger son was playing - starting to play football that year so I came back and went back to Link Up again and then started working with Dardi when Alan Thorpe and John Byrne, they were there, and they got funding to started a men's residential program. And I jumped on board with them, you know, to do the - eventually ended up managing the men's residential program and done that for a couple of years. We actually won an award for that program that year.

45 MR GOODWIN: You've been working with Dardi since 2017, and you mention in your statement the 16-week residential program that Dardi runs for men who've been involved in family violence, or at risk of being involved in family violence. Can you tell the Commissioners about that program and what that program does?

UNCLE ROSS MORGAN: Well, yeah, the Ngarra Jarranounith men's residential program goes for 16 weeks and it works with men mainly who have had family violence or forms of violence or are at risk of being violent towards family. We've taken in guys that have got various types of anger problems and trauma problems. And the program goes for 16 weeks, and that can be extended to 20, 24. We've had guys staying there up to nine months really because, you know, it's really hard to go from a well-structured, supported place back out into community or back into society. Sometimes guys want to stay a lot longer.

And it's a nine-bed program, very successful in getting people to look at their anger issues, their trauma issues and underlying stuff that - you know, it's about - and it's more, nowadays, focused on the addiction side of it. With addiction comes the bad behaviour, so a big part of it is looking at where they're at. We're currently going back to a total abstinence base in the men's residential, and it's a harm minimisation focus in the area where I'm at now with the community men's programs. So I run - I've been a part of running in three different, in Melbourne, Shepparton and Echuca now. And we have got them groups going into Warrnambool, Gippsland, Morwell and Bairnsdale, so there's behavioural change groups going right across the State.

And we also do a lot of the groups on Zoom for those guys that are working. So there's a lot of stuff happening, but it's all family violence based. It's all, you know, after the fact. It's like, once the problem's arisen, let's deal with it. It's kind of - I'd like to see things - a lot of things happening beforehand. And Dardi has been really good at that as well. We've got a lot of youth programs. We've got work, labour and traffic management and people being trained up to work, and people - these are people without family violence but some, you know, like that want to go on and work.

So there's all different areas that we're working with and I'd like to see it a lot more focused on - there's a lot of people out there that don't do violence towards their family that ain't getting supported as well, so I'd like to build that up as well.

MR GOODWIN: I want to ask you some questions about the importance of prevention that you highlighted in your statement. But before I do that, in terms of the work that you do do at Dardi right now, you mention in your statement that, in your experience, addiction is often as a result of the underlying trauma that a lot -

UNCLE ROSS MORGAN: Yeah.

MR GOODWIN: - Aboriginal people are suffering from, and I just wondered if you could just explain that to the Commissioners in terms of your work and how you see that play out for Aboriginal people.

UNCLE ROSS MORGAN: I don't know, like, people get on these paths or these journeys and they constantly go down, down, down, down. And I want to be able to stop them before they go too far down, you know, or there's too much - there's a lot of trauma. And I even get it today with my teenage son and my other second eldest - second youngest son. You know, there's not that much opportunity, and they get on a thing where they're going down instead of - there has got to be a way to kind of pull it up and, you know, like, make a - make it a lot easier for our youth to succeed instead of continue that journey down, you know, to where they continue to go until there's, you know, there's too much trouble. And then they've got to

do something about themselves. I don't know what you mean. It's just - you know, we've just got to have far more opportunity for our fellas. That's all.

5 MR GOODWIN: And one of the programs where Dardi is trying to create some of those opportunities, as I understand it, is some of the work in running a traffic management program and employment opportunities in construction.

UNCLE ROSS MORGAN: Yeah.

10 MR GOODWIN: Can you tell the Commissioners just about those programs?

15 UNCLE ROSS MORGAN: There's been a lot of talk with a few of the construction teams that come around. I've seen Alan in lots of talks with some of the guys that run some of those construction - not sites, but teams that employ Aboriginal people. Joel - I forget his second name, but he's a Wright - as well as some of the other guys that turn up there from construction sites, there's always discussion around employing Aboriginal people for the construction sites, train tunnels, all this stuff that's been going now.

20 So there's a lot of talk around employment for Aboriginal people, where in the past years gone by, there was never no - no future for Aboriginal people in permanent employment, you know. Like, it was always going to be a seasonal work or part-time. And I worked part-time in Shepparton abattoirs for years, and also through seasonal work for years as well. I never had an opportunity down there. But since I've been to Melbourne - like, it's been 25 years. I've probably worked 23 years of it, so - and that was a choice I made to turn my life around.  
25 So the choice is not there for a lot of people to turn it around, you know? And with what Dardi is doing - and I'm sure there are other organisations putting things in place for our mob to be successful.

30 You know, like, places like VACCA and stuff like that, you know, like - and the prison. I see a lot of our children still being removed. I see a lot more women in prisons than ever before. And I think there's a lot more men in prisons than ever before. And I can't put words to it, describe what's happening, you know, like, it's getting worse. And a lot of our organisations can become a part of the system that's not providing any solutions for our people.

35 MR GOODWIN: And you mention in your statement one of the challenges for Dardi is also funding competition between organisations and the difficulties with getting funding and some of the requirements that are imposed on organisations as a result of funding. Can you just describe to the Commissioners some of those challenges?

40 UNCLE ROSS MORGAN: Well, I don't know. I'm pretty illiterate when it comes to, you know, applying for funding and doing all that, but I'm just kind of - I'm busy on the ground working with my people. But at the end of the day, what I see is there's competitions between organisations. Okay, we've built all these great organisations, and it would be good if they all were given money to do what they needed to do instead of compete with each other to get  
45 that - get that bucket of money.

You know, like, there's very limited amount that's coming back to our people that really need the help. And organisations have, I think, been disempowered spiritually, and it's around the ability to - you know, you've got to compete with other organisations. I remember we were

all one people and we were all - there was that spiritual - it is a spiritual thing that we all had where we were all fighting this fight as one and now it's all been disconnected and separated.

5 Like, I remember when I first worked in - when I was working in Aboriginal - in VAHS, Victorian Aboriginal Health Service, and we were all just one mob. You know, we were all there and we would all support each other. And all of a sudden it was like you can't get this funding unless you go in partnership with this mainstream organisation, or we have to become partnerships, you know. Like, I thought - straightaway as soon as that started to happen I thought, "Here we go again. We're gonna lose everything again", and we pretty  
10 much - it's not the same community-controlled organisation as it was when it was a community-controlled organisation. It's pretty much - like, we've lost that connection as community.

15 MR GOODWIN: And you also mention an experience you had when you were running the Maya Healing Centre, at paragraph 43 of your statement, where you said you lost your funding because you hired a cook, a cleaner and a maintenance man, but apparently it wasn't what the funding was for. Can you just tell the Commissioners?

20 UNCLE ROSS MORGAN: Yeah, it was pretty much - the Maya Healing Centre was the first Aboriginal healing centre in Victoria, and we were very successful. We operated for eight years, five years voluntarily, and then the last three years we become registered as Maya, and we were looking for drug and alcohol money to deal with the addiction in the community and start trauma programs. We already had people in there training us up in the area of trauma and dealing with trauma and all that kind of stuff.

25 And then at the time Uncle Reg, he was - Uncle Reg Blow, he was the CEO, and I kind of got into his ear a year or two before that to chase more funding, and he kind of mentioned that had we weren't ready for it yet, and I said, "When ain't you ready for more funding?". And anyhow, we did get some more money to run the - we applied for drug and alcohol money and couldn't get that to run drug and alcohol programs, but we got money for the family  
30 violence program.

35 We run successful family violence programs and we kind of got two and a half years into that three-year funding and I think we ended up having about \$90,000 surplus. And Uncle Reg out of his - had a bright idea to hire a cook and - a cook and a cleaner and a maintenance worker out of that for the next six months. And that cook was Tanya Day, if you remember her. She was the cook and her partner was the cleaner. And there was some family violence issues there. That's why they had come there, and they were doing really well.

40 And next minute we know we were pulled over the coals because that was not - that funding wasn't appropriate for staff. It was program money. And we got defunded for that. We weren't going to be re-funded to continue the program. So it ended up stopping, the Maya, and I think VAHS took it over and then I think Dardi took it over from VAHS as well. So it was the same money, same program that we had had initially. But we got stopped because of  
45 using money inappropriately.

And if Uncle Reg had have just went and got some more funding for the cook and that, it would have been still going, I suppose, but at the end of the day it was just one of those experiences, and I thought something that I needed to let go and didn't bother with following

up anything around that. Although Maya's still a registered body today and it still has - it's just got a new building in Echuca. I'm not a part of that no more, for now.

5 MR GOODWIN: In terms of - you've been heavily involved in running men's programs and that's a key part of what you do now. Can you tell the Commissioners about, given your history and your involvement in criminal justice issues for a long time and now in drug and alcohol counselling, what's your approach during men's groups? How do you work with men who might be struggling with addiction, given your own lived experience?

10 UNCLE ROSS MORGAN: Look, I'm probably not classed as a drug and alcohol counsellor now. I've gone on to do a lot more than them credentials. I've done a postgraduate certificate in family therapy. I've become a therapist in journey healing, I've become a therapist in soul link healing. So I've got all these different modalities. But my main thing is to work with Aboriginal men at the moment, and I focus mainly around the men's behavioural change stuff  
15 with family violence. That's where I'm at at the moment. What was the last part of that?

MR GOODWIN: What's your approach? What approach do you take with all your skills and lived experience?

20 UNCLE ROSS MORGAN: When I was at NJP, Ngarra Jarranounith, the men's residential, we were at a total abstinence model and we got an 82 per cent success rate. I think it's gone down to less than 60 per cent now, because there was other - you know, people could come in using medications and using drug replacements. I think that's going to go out again, because unless you're ready to do a men's behavioural change you're not going to really get much out  
25 of it, if you're on a - how do you pronounce it? Not drug replacement. That sounds -

COMMISSIONER BELL: Buprenorphine?

30 UNCLE ROSS MORGAN: Yeah, buprenorphine or methadone - or not methadone, but pharma-therapeutical programs, they did away with that. And nothing much can be taught, and nothing much can be experienced with learning and connecting to spirit if you continue on that. So when the guys are ready, they can come in, if they want to get off - eventually, they can come in and do that. Or if they want to do that, they can do the community  
35 programs.

We're not - you know, like, men's behavioural change programs that are run through the community programs accepts people that are still drinking and doing drugs, and that's okay. But I think to get to the men's residential stage of it, you are extreme. You know, we're taking people out of jails, taking people out of - you know, like, straight out of court that are going  
40 to prison. Them guys have got to take it very serious.

A lot of our men in the community programs can really manage to work and can manage to still be in community, you know, so my thing is about - I teach a lot of the guys about what addiction is, the cycles of addiction is and what addiction is and the mental obsession,  
45 coupled with the physicality and all the stuff that goes with addiction and how to pretty much understand what addiction is. And you wouldn't believe it, I forgot to turn my phone off. One of our clients.

Sorry about that. I turned that off when I was in there, but I turned it back on to make a phone call and forgot to turn it off again. Let's hope no-one else rings us in the next half-hour.

5 Where was I? Yeah, I like to pass on, you know, like, my experience during some of this for Aboriginal men. It makes it real - really easier to understand the journey of their own people through the - what they've been going through, you know. Like, so we've had really good success rates, especially with that guy that's just ringing me. He's waiting to go into the men's residential, and that's under the recommendations of - you know, that's someone I've done work with in prison and outside as well. Really strong community member.

10 But, you know, just passing on my own life experience and understanding of culture and our connection spiritually, you know. People don't really get that until you drum it into their head and - well, you don't have to drum it into their head. You've just got to explain it to them and they understand, you know, like our journey spiritually as a people. You know, I just let them know that we've been here for thousands and thousands of years spiritually. But as - you know, as humans, we've only been here for less than 60, most of them, less than 50 - a lot younger than that, a lot of them.

20 So it's just understanding our ancestors' journey and our connection spiritually that a lot of our youth have lost. They don't understand. A lot of our youth don't understand the importance of their identity and their connection to culture, so it's just a lot of getting a lot of people to understand that and using that as a strength to get them through this dark period of their life.

25 MR GOODWIN: You mentioned a few times today and also in your statement that you'd like to see more prevention programs, that a lot of the programs you've worked on happen once family violence has occurred or addiction issues have arisen. What are some of the prevention programs you'd like to see existing for Aboriginal Victorians?

30 UNCLE ROSS MORGAN: It's really - it's really difficult. I'd like to be able to teach a lot of the stuff that we do in schools. I'd like to be able to tell our children what this is about, and I'd like to get a lot of help out to the families that really are disconnected and that are not going to get opportunities, you know? Like, there's a lot of people - look, a lot of our people are doing really well and that's great. And I'm probably one of them, although I've got problems still, that - and will get lots of opportunity, you know.

40 But there's a lot of our kids out there that - youth growing up and families, that are not going to get much opportunity. And so places like Dardi are doing excellent, great. I'd like to see places like VAHS and even VACCA focused on different areas of making families stronger. I'd like to see the Maya Healing Centre up and running again. It was defunded. And it was - we had three staff working with 30 or 40 people a day, you know, and these people were staying clean and sober to come to our programs.

45 Just stuff like that, you know. I'd like to see more opportunity for - I know there's healing centres going up, but are they focusing on the right people? I know that we've been there in the past and we were successful, so I'd like to see probably more opportunity around the addiction side of it as well. People who survive that have to continually be at a rock bottom to survive it. Is there some way that we can work on getting people, you know - I'm working with a lot during -of community programs, during our men's behavioural change group. Some

of these people haven't got family violence history. Just making sure that there are healing centres there that continue to help our people.

5 MR GOODWIN: And you mention in your statement that in June of this year, Dardi will get its own clinic for men and women going through detox. Why is that important for Dardi to be running its own clinic?

10 UNCLE ROSS MORGAN: Well, if you give the person or our people the opportunity to look at new directions in life other than, you know, continuing down that road, we can turn it around. You know, like, Victoria is a big, big place. We've got towns everywhere, and there's a lot of addiction in every town, really. If we can focus on helping - I think Dardi has got the building. It's just refurbishing it now to open up its own detox.

15 And then people coming through the detox will go into rehab, be it Galiamble or Winja Ulupna or be it our own houses. We've got our own houses that will also be a part of a rehab situation. So and straight from there into work or training to work, you know, getting people work-ready and opportunities to leave that lifestyle behind. And that lifestyle's going to always be there, because there's a lot of trauma in our communities and there's a lot of dispossession. We've got a lot of drug dealers that prey on vulnerable people. And we know  
20 that's the way it works, you know. Like, there's a lot of money to be made off people's trauma as well.

MR GOODWIN: A final issue before I ask if the Commissioners have any questions. You're  
25 an Elder or have been an Elder at Koori Court including at Broadmeadows, Heidelberg and in Melbourne. What's been your experience of the Koori Court and how do you think that can contribute to issues in criminal justice?

30 UNCLE ROSS MORGAN: Look, a lot of community don't like Koori Court, but I love it. I've watched me own son go through there and I supported him when he was going through there, and it was a kind of the first time he'd got to sit down and talk to Elders about his journey and what he was doing with his life, and eventually he turned it around, you know. It's been five years since he's been there. But, you know, like, I took the opportunity of applying and now sitting on Broadmeadows and Heidelberg and Melbourne Magistrates Court as an Elder.

35 And, you know, just letting them know that that journey that they're on is not the right journey they should be on and that there is places now that are looking at the particular problems, be it alcohol, drugs. And, you know, I've even got some women involved in the women's group at Dardi for, you know, like family violence, you know, like - and that there's  
40 a lot more opportunity, you know, not only with Dardi Munwurro but there's VAHS, there's drug and alcohol counsellors, there's counsellors and trauma therapists there that deal with underlying trauma.

45 So I like sitting on it because I can direct them and ask them - I can talk to them about what they're doing, ask them what they're doing about their particular addiction problem and all that kind of stuff, like, and direct them. And I think I get a lot of - not only respect from them, but, you know, they thank you for the advice that you give them. And a lot of them will follow up, but a lot of them just ain't ready as well. Some of them just ain't ready. A lot of them will follow up what you do. But mainly I point them towards the right services and

make sure that they follow it up and even give them my card to make sure they ring us or ring VAHS or ring whoever, you know.

5 MR GOODWIN: I've only got one last question, but I thought I'd ask Commissioners if there were any questions that you wanted to ask Uncle Ross?

CHAIR: I might start this end. Maggie, would you like -

10 COMMISSIONER WALTER: Just a small one, Ross. Thank you. I was struck when you talked about the different services you work with, including the Maya Healing Centre, which was then defunded, and just the problem. You've got places like Dardi who are doing fantastic stuff and now doing this and more and more and more, but there is always the threat of defunding or limits being placed on what - where they can go, so I guess I'm asking how would you see - if you could design the funding system to be more self-determining, rather  
15 than constantly relying on applying for different funding for different things, how would you do that?

20 UNCLE ROSS MORGAN: Well, my ideal solution is someone take responsibility for what's happened in this country and fund appropriately - appropriate programs, instead of making a system where people in different organisations are competing against each other to do what they need to do.

25 So that would be the perfect solution, if someone would say, "Yes, we've done this. Let us fix it. Here. Go for it". But that's never going to happen in my lifetime, I don't think. But I suppose it's still a numbers game and still about the figures and still about, you know, how many are getting through. Like, we got 82 per cent through and we have got over capacity of our residential program.

30 And even in our men's behavioural change groups, it's like I do 30 men - I do a group with 30 men on a Monday night and, you know, eight up in Shep, 10 - there was nine of us up in Echuca the other day. So the groups are getting bigger. We don't get funded for all them. We don't get funded for Echuca and we don't - we just do it, you know, because the men need something. We go up there. And we're gonna talk a little bit more about what we can get,  
35 even if it's just some petrol money or something.

I don't know. How would you go about it? Yeah. It's all about the stats and the numbers you get through and what you do. Just go to the cemeteries and see how many Aboriginal people are dying before they're 50, you know, before they're 40, before they're 30, even. You know, like, suicide's bloody way up there compared with lots of - with other years, anyhow. So the  
40 stats are already there. Go to the prison, see how many Aboriginal people are in there. The stats are there, you know. You don't need to be a program running by the stats you provide. You know, like, it's like the prison system and the funeral parlours will give you the stats of what's happening.

45 I think it's become too reliant - and I had to miss a smoke ceremony this morning. Dardi runs a smoke ceremony every Monday and every Friday. I had to miss one because I had to go into a staff meeting to talk about, you know, other stuff around our running the program properly, which was okay, but I'd just like to relax and go out and take everyone out and just do the bloody ceremony instead of worrying about government structures that take away our

culture and our connection, you know? So that's pretty much my beliefs, is we're never gonna succeed, we're never gonna be united because of the structures that the government has put in place.

5 CHAIR: Commissioner Lovett?

COMMISSIONER LOVETT: Yeah. Thanks for coming in and sharing your story as well. Can you talk to us about - you work with a lot of, you know, men and women but particularly men you've talked about today, and disconnected to culture, country and community. How many or - and, obviously, we're not asking for, you know, exact figures or anything but how many have been engaged in the Child Protection system that you've had to work with, over your journey?

15 UNCLE ROSS MORGAN: Within the last five years I've been with Dardi, and I've been working with Thorpey and with Maya and all that through family violence forever. I don't know. I thought it was all because of child protection, you know, all those years working with Aboriginal men and Aboriginal families. It was always about making the family strong or getting the family right for the children. But so I presumed it was all about child protection, you know. But what do you mean, actually?

20 COMMISSIONER LOVETT: The men that you're working with.

UNCLE ROSS MORGAN: Yeah.

25 COMMISSIONER LOVETT: That have a lot of historical trauma but are also disconnected from culture, country.

UNCLE ROSS MORGAN: Yes.

30 COMMISSIONER LOVETT: Are those men been engaged in the Child Protection system who are now later on in life you are working with them to try to help them change their lifestyle?

35 UNCLE ROSS MORGAN: Now I get what you're talking about. No, not necessarily. Not all of them have come through that Child Protection system that I know of. I'm not too sure of the exact amount, but there are a few that have come through, but I'm not too sure about how many, though.

40 COMMISSIONER LOVETT: Can I have another one? Koori Court system, you're talking about being an Elder on the Koori Courts. You've been there how long now, a few years?

UNCLE ROSS MORGAN: I think this is my - might be my third year.

45 COMMISSIONER LOVETT: Third year, yes. So there's some limitations with the Koori Court model, but have you - do you have any ideas around how the model could be enhanced to further support our people going before the system?

UNCLE ROSS MORGAN: Going before the system?

COMMISSIONER LOVETT: Yeah, so at the moment, we don't hear family violence matters or matters - you know, like, adults have to plead guilty, for instance, and so forth. Do you have any ideas around how, you know, how the Koori Courts could do things differently, in your view?

5

UNCLE ROSS MORGAN: Well, the way I see it now the Koori Court doesn't deal with family violence. There was some training for the Elders, and including myself and I was a part of that training as well, to build up their ability to be able to hear family violence cases. But it hasn't gone ahead as yet, so we're still not taking family violence in - I think it might have been Melbourne, Broady and Heidelberg. That's going to change in the future, I think.

10

I think there is family violence heard in some of the County Courts, not the Magistrates Courts. So I don't do the County Courts as yet. Only because I'm overworked at the moment and I don't want to kind of jump into that as yet, so I'm at the moment just filling in for the Koori Courts, probably lucky to get once a fortnight. I just haven't got the time.

15

CHAIR: Commissioner Hunter?

COMMISSIONER HUNTER: Thanks, Uncle, for coming and giving your evidence. It's an honour. I just wanted to ask, in your witness statement, it says there's nothing focused on prevention. It's all focused on after the fact. And I was just - from your perspective, what does prevention look like?

20

UNCLE ROSS MORGAN: Well, probably prevention is - be it prevention from committing crimes or prevention from doing drugs and doing alcohol. You've got places like Fitzroy Stars footy club and all that, really good at prevention, although they have got problems with - over the years they have had problems, but it's more focused now on a more, you know, sport and more positive lifestyle, whereas the old Fitzroy Stars days, it was a little bit different than that where there was sometimes drugs and a lot of alcohol around. But it's not as much of the focus no more.

25

30

It's like more of a positive lifestyle, sportsman-like lifestyle. And that's what I think about prevention, something like that, be it - it doesn't have to be football. It could be boxing, we've had Fitzroy Stars gym. There is a lot of gyms Australia-wide where focus is on healthy lifestyle and discipline in their sport, you know? So golf is another one that is up and running with some of the - I don't know about the youth, but a lot of the older fellas are out there playing in the Koori youth team, you know.

35

But, you know, some positive stuff would be to build programs where - education in schools, you know, having people come in like myself or people come in talking about, "This is the lifestyle. This is where you're going. This is what's going to happen". Teaching something about our culture and our language in schools would be great. But more of - and I think a lot of the organisations are starting to work on it, but Rumba and that have got some good things happening up there in the new college that's going up, up there. I forget the name of it. The School of Excellence or something like that.

40

45

But just some positive - more positive stuff that's to prevent that road downhill, you know? Although, there's still a lot of people out there that are turning to drugs and alcohol, but make it really difficult.

COMMISSIONER HUNTER: And just because other people in their evidence talk about the disconnection from culture and you mentioned before in some of the work - and I know you've worked at Link Up and places like that - that reconnection work that you said you do  
 5 within sort of men's behaviour, you talk about culture and, you know - do you find that connection - just a little bit more about that connecting people back to their culture and their - who they are as an Aboriginal man.

UNCLE ROSS MORGAN: I find, you know, like, it's really easy to talk to Aboriginal men and even women, but even men who have been displaced and lost to understand, even if you  
 10 are just talking to them, they make the decision that there is that spirit there, that there is that spirit of our ancestors are still with us and gonna make us strong. If they just - it's just a belief that they have got to connect to and they have got to be told about, you know what I mean? And so it's already there with you. You've just got to reach out and connect to it, you know,  
 15 like, and believe it. It can be as simple as that.

But just letting - because a lot of the guys are just walking around lost and either in their addiction or in their trauma, and thinking that, "This is it. I don't want to - what am I going to  
 20 do with my life? I'm going to give up" and all that, but, you know, you're strong. You're a strong person. Your ancestors have come through, like, the last 240 years or something, 30 something years, 50 times more trauma than you will ever, ever, ever go through. You've got it good now compared to what they've gone through.

So, you know, and they come through connected to that culture and that spirit. You make  
 25 sure that you want that. And it's just about making a decision that, okay, "I'm gonna be strong. I'm going to connect to my ancestor's spirit. I'm going to connect to creator. I'm gonna connect to whatever it is', be it God - I believe in God. There is no problem there with me. A lot of our people don't want to mention God, but they don't understand that God's a  
 30 word for creator, just a short word, you know.

So it's pretty easy to explain to them and pretty easy for them to accept. You're gonna  
 35 get - those ones that don't accept are the ones mentally incapable, due to be it addiction or hard-headedness or mentally incapable or just unable to become honest with themselves, and you can sort them out. Them guys don't want help and they don't hang around for long. But the other guys who really do want help, they'll listen and they'll connect, and they'll make a few slip-ups but eventually they'll remember what you said and eventually they'll pull through it.

COMMISSIONER HUNTER: Thank you. Thank you so much.  
 40

COMMISSIONER BELL: Yes. Thank you. Uncle Ross, thank you for sharing your story and your wisdom. The Commission is very well aware of where you grew up, on The Flats. We have been there, and we were led by Uncle Colin, by Uncle Wayne. It was a memorable  
 45 occasion and I honour that place and I honour that place for its importance to you and many other people in the community.

My first question is similar to the one that Commissioner Hunter asked, but I want to ask specifically about the issue of spiritual connection with country, and in paragraph 40 and 41 of your statement you begin by saying that:

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*"Money is divided up and everyone is made to compete with each other. There is not one place running a program."*

5 And you've covered that. In the next paragraph, you say:

*"It should be about connection and the importance of community, but that's not there anymore. The spiritual connection with country has been taken out by government policies, and that's the way things now run."*

10

What do you mean by this statement:

*"The spiritual connection with country has been taken out by government policies."*

15 UNCLE ROSS MORGAN: What do I mean by that? Probably not so much country, but community. There's this separation and pulling apart of us Aboriginal people as a spiritual entity, you know. Like, we've only got to sit together and we know we're connecting spiritually. You know, like, an Aboriginal person has only got to be sitting down talking to each other and they can understand that connection spiritually. But I'm thinking about how  
20 it's been done through our organisations, through the funding bodies, through the separation, and our connection to country pretty much stems from that, you know? Like our - read that again to me.

25

COMMISSIONER BELL: Really, you make a complaint, and the complaint is that:

*"Spiritual connection with country has been taken out by government policies in the programs that are funded."*

30

UNCLE ROSS MORGAN: Yeah, I don't know. It's probably - I'm looking at my own country, Yorta Yorta country, Yorta Yorta nations, and our - okay, we've got the RAP as the Yorta Yorta nations and most of our people have, you know, got that connection to country because, you know, like, it's run by one entity and, you know, you can go down the river and all that and connect but, I mean, it's like we should be all free and all accepted and there should be enough for everyone, you know. There's very little for all people in Yorta Yorta  
35 nations, very little, and a lot of our people don't receive anything.

COMMISSIONER BELL: Yes.

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UNCLE ROSS MORGAN: Know what I mean? Whereas we've got very few workers, although we are getting stuff happening, like other enterprises happening through Yorta Yorta nation, but I'm just thinking most of our people don't see anything and don't do anything, you know? So that connection to our country is like we are Yorta Yorta people here and we're not getting nothing for it.

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So it's just back to that basic recognition that, you know, like, our land has been taken from us. We get rights to, what do you call it? Crown Land, you know, Crown Land. You can go and look after Crown Land. That's you. You know, that's your identity is you're - we have got staff looking after Crown Land, you know. Like, and it's all our land you know what I mean? We got no recognition of it, you know? Like, when we lost our native title thing, it was

because we couldn't prove we lived off the land. I mean, we were forced off the bloody land? Well, what do you mean? How we expected to live off the land when we're forced off it, you know on the missions and that, you know, like and -

5 COMMISSIONER BELL: Thank you my next question is directed to you in relation to the Koori Court and to you as an Elder with that court. We have heard a lot of evidence complaining that it's necessary to plead guilty in order to appear in the Koori Court as an Aboriginal person. In some other countries, there are three kinds of pleas. We only have two. The two we have got are guilty and not guilty. In other countries, offenders - accused persons  
10 can plead no contest. So not guilty, guilty or no contest. In other words, they don't want to plead guilty but they agree that they won't fight the charge. I don't want to put you on the spot and I'm not sure that you have fully understood exactly what I've said.

15 UNCLE ROSS MORGAN: It's my favourite subject.

COMMISSIONER BELL: Your favourite subject. I'm just asking for your -

20 UNCLE ROSS MORGAN: I'm old school. You know, if you do the crime, you do the time, you know. Like, it's like - and you don't have to plead guilty. Don't go to Koori Court, simple as that.

COMMISSIONER BELL: Simple as that.

25 UNCLE ROSS MORGAN: Yeah, that's how I see it. And you've got Koori Court there. If you've been caught and you're willing to accept that you've been caught, then plead guilty and you're sitting next to the Elders and we'll tell you what you should be doing, you know. Or if you're not guilty, why would you be sitting there pleading guilty? You know what I mean? I've been to court at least three times that I've fought charges and beat them, through County Court in my years, you know, like, and so I'm big on, you know, if you're doing the crime,  
30 you're going to do the time, you know. Either that, go and see the Elders, go and talk about it and pull your head in, change your behaviour. You know, that's my thing.

COMMISSIONER BELL: Understood, thank you. Thank you.

35 CHAIR: Thank you, I don't have a question, but I do want to thank you for the evidence you've given and the way you've told your story and used it as a way to make change, quite frankly, and for my part, I'm very - I won't forget your last sentence in 20:

40 *"No-one is taking responsibility for the crimes that were committed."*

This Royal Commission is about making some redress for crimes committed towards our people, and I hope that we're able to do that successfully. So thank you, thank you.

45 UNCLE ROSS MORGAN: Excellent. Thanks, Aunty.

MR GOODWIN: Thank you, Uncle Ross. Is there anything else that you wanted to tell the Commissioners before we finish?

UNCLE ROSS MORGAN: No, no, probably not at this stage. I'm kind of - yeah, no, I'm pretty happy with how I've been treated here today, and I want to thank youse all for the really good work.

5 I'm just concerned about the whole treaty process that's happening now. I've got major concerns about that, around, you know, our people signing a peace treaty with anyone means that, you know, like, in my view - and I don't know if it's the right view or not, is that we sign a peace treaty with the Australian Government or with the State Government, is that we sign away our sovereignty. We kind of - it's like, "Okay. You've got our land. You're on stolen  
10 land. Now we've signed this peace treaty, that land is no longer stolen", that's my concern. You know?

CHAIR: Do you think any of our people will want to sign a peace treaty?

15 UNCLE ROSS MORGAN: Is it a peace treaty? Or is it - what is the treaty though.

CHAIR: No, I don't think - I couldn't imagine people wanting to sign a peace treaty. They'd want a purposeful treaty.

20 UNCLE ROSS MORGAN: No. Yeah, but that's what a treaty is. It's a peace treaty, isn't it? It's not necessarily a peace treaty?

CHAIR: Well, I think it can be many things, can it not? Many things.

25 UNCLE ROSS MORGAN: I'm not too sure about where Yoorrook goes with the treaty, that's all. That's probably my concern.

CHAIR: You're one of the first few to raise treaty, actually.

30 UNCLE ROSS MORGAN: Hey?

CHAIR: You're one of the first few people to raise treaty with us.

UNCLE ROSS MORGAN: Yeah, I just thought -

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CHAIR: But we haven't heard, really, from our communities what they are thinking about treaty, really, at this stage.

UNCLE ROSS MORGAN: Okay.

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CHAIR: So - anyway, thank you.

UNCLE ROSS MORGAN: I just thought I'd mention it, that was one of my concerns. Someone said, "Have you got any other concerns?". I like Yoorrook Justice Commission  
45 Truth-Telling and all that. It's great. It's got to be done. I just thought I'd mention - I don't know what the treaty is about.

CHAIR: More to be said, I'm sure. More to be said.

UNCLE ROSS MORGAN: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Thanks.

CHAIR: Thank you.

5 MR GOODWIN: Thank you, Chair. Those are the questions that I had.

CHAIR: So we've concluded today's session, so thank you very much again. Thank you. Thank you, Commissioners. Thank you very much.

10 <THE WITNESS WITHDREW

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