

## Yoorrook Justice Commission

### Statement of Annabelle Nikkelson

My name is Annabelle Nikkelson. I am a Wotjobaluk woman.

My statement is about my experiences of the child protection system, health system and support services, my experiences of racism, and what I see are the key issues facing Aboriginal people.

#### My early life

I was taken at the age of two and put into foster care into the Alexandra Babies' Home.

I had a pretty traumatic childhood. I had a horrid foster father. He was an absolute pig of a man. My foster mum on the other hand - she tried.

I was abused from the age of 11 to about 17, when I fell pregnant.

My foster mum took me to the doctors. The doctors confirmed that I was pregnant. Then she went to the State Welfare Board. They swept it straight under the table.

I was hospitalised on about a day before my 17th birthday. It was quite traumatic because I was three months pregnant. Then they induced the pregnancy. They took a big needle about this big, I still remember it. Then just as I was about to give birth my foster mother walked out the door, she didn't want to know about it - *What would the neighbours say?*

Then my foster grandmother turned around, said, "stuff what the neighbours say, this is your daughter". And my foster mother said "Oh, I can't look at her," you know? And back then it was, "What would the neighbours say?" because it was all about, you know, keeping up appearances.

Then when I was 17, I ran away. Then I sort of grew up, got in with the wrong crowd and turned to drugs to try and cope with the pain. When I turned 21, the doctor said to me, "Your next shot is going to be your last". The doctor said, "When we find you, we're going to find you in the gutter." So that was a wakeup call.

Then I spent about three months drying out. I was sent to the mental facility for the whole Christmas period which was an eye opener in itself.

At the mental facility I became traumatised. I got let out when I was 21. Then I sort of worked different jobs. Then I got married when I was about 23 and we went and lived in New South for a while and then came back here to Melbourne.

### **My experiences of the child protection system, VACCA and health services**

I don't know how DHS operate today but, yeah, back then you didn't need the qualifications and so your own private business wasn't your own.

You know, once you have a record with DHS, they carry on in your lives.

And VACCA back in those days, VACCA were no help. They just sat there. So, you know, and, like, there's been no apology, nothing, you know.

And so, yeah, they come in, like, they'd come in, mother and daughter, they'd come into your house, and they'd just judge your home. And these were Aboriginal people, supposedly Aboriginal people. They were supposed to be helping you. There was no qualifications, nothing.

It was just like my life was gossip. I'd walk into the health service, and everybody would know what was going on, you know. So yeah, I sort of after a while I just disengaged and didn't bother. I didn't know who to turn to, you know. That trust was broken, you know?

And I think in the system, in terms of Aboriginal women, they do not have a fair go, not back then, not in the '90s, and not even now. What's more, there's no cultural connection for the kids in care. I think the amount of kids that are still in the system that don't get that cultural connection, is shocking.

### **My experiences of racism**

I was one eighth Aboriginal and I was also part of the HalfCaste Act. I wasn't even allowed in certain stores. I still remember when I was four, when this shopkeeper turned around to my foster mum and said, "Get the effing little monkey out of my shop now." And all I wanted to do was feel the soft cashmere wool on my face because it felt so soft. And this shopkeeper said, "Get that effing little monkey out of my shop." Yep.

And this is in 2023 for God's sake, you know, that racism is still there. Especially for Aboriginal women, I mean, it's pretty hard for Aboriginal men, but being Aboriginal and

female, you're still behind the eight ball because you get stereotyped, and you still get profiled.

This time, where we bought our car, the salesman he goes, "Oh, we probably wouldn't have anything to suit your budget." And I'm like, "Excuse me, I'll have that over there" - it was a 2007 Suzuki Swift. I walked over to the saleswoman and she's like, "Oh that will be \$12,000." And that was the best bloody feeling, to be able to pull out the plastic and go, "Do you take EFTPOS?".

### **The issues impacting aboriginal people**

I'm a strong advocate for treaty. The treaty for me means stop taking kids, stop killing our men, you know? Do something about housing and fix up the gaps in things like education and a lot of other things that involve our youth. Mental health amongst our youth is disgusting and so is suicide, especially amongst our men. Our young men are struggling.

I'm a huge advocate for domestic violence services for men. There's no shelters for males, none. There's men's behavioural change, and that's about it. Where's a male go when he's been tossed out in the street, and had the living crap kicked out of him? Where does he go? You know, a woman gets put up in motels and stuff. But sometimes, it's women that are the perpetrators as well, you know? And the men's got nowhere to go. And they have to walk into a cop shop and say- "I've had the living shit kicked out of me".

I think there's no education on domestic violence for males. There's plenty for women, but nothing for males. Where's the justice in that? Coppers don't give a shit. And they still don't give a shit and they won't give a shit.

There needs to be change in the way people think around how we are as a people. That needs to change. Because that all goes back to childhood trauma and it's transgenerational. It's not just intergenerational, it's transgenerational as well. So, my grandson, my grandkids struggle to know who they are.

**END OF STATEMENT**