

Yoorrook Justice Commission

SUBMISSION OF AUNTY SHERRY BALCOMBE

I'm Sherry Balcombe. On my grandmother's side we're Ocala, of the Gunjan nation, in far north Queensland. And my grandfathers' side were Muluridji, of the Djabugay Nation. And that's on my grandmother and grandfather's side.

In the 1980s, I worked at VACCA. For six years I was an Independent Prison Visitor visiting Parkville (Youth Justice). I am currently an Independent Visitor at Thomas Embling Hospital.

I'm one of the lucky ones, you know, I've been educated, and I've had great support within my community. I could never ever give back to the Aboriginal community what they've given to me. I'll be forever grateful and anything I can ever do to help my community I will do, because it has supported me and supported my family.

But we need to support others too. And my hope is that from these conversations, that this can open a broader conversation about what we can do with our kids and even at a young age before they become institutionalised and change that path for them, give them another path.

We're only two per cent of the population but we're 30 to 40 per cent in kids' jails. How can we be 40 per cent even 30 to 40 per cent of the youth justice population? How? There's something vastly wrong. And what we find is the police would do sweeps of areas on the Aboriginal kids. And there would be all these kids from one area are all in jail, you know, they'd breached their bail, but the police had done a big cleanup. And so, they've all ended up in jail.

Our kids are spending a number of years, and then back again, like the revolving door. When will we stop? Culture and spirituality is what we need to be talking to our kids about. You know, train them up to be warriors, not to be victims.

The kids have got no hope. How can they, you know, when they're sending them home to drug affected parents. How is that child meant to change that when they're going home to drug affected parents?

There's no supports for these kids on being released. Many have difficult histories with their families. Upon returning nothing has changed. There's nothing for them to do, no services or programs plugged in to support their journey or to support their family to make, make changes necessary so that they have a chance of succeeding.

I had one kid say to me I had one kid who jarred me and turned around to me and said to me, "It's safer than home." And that nearly broke my heart, to think here's this child saying that the jail is safer than home. What's happening? Why is this

happening? Seeing kids return over and over again until they graduate to the bigger jails, it's heartbreaking.

What are we doing? When are we going to do something about this? How long is this going to continue? You know, we've got kids that are so institutionalised, the only thing they want to do is be in jail because it's safe. It's safe for them. You know, why aren't our co-ops at least we have cooperatives that we've got in every area. Can't they set up programs where, where we can get these kids doing programs? Even, you know, with doing work or doing culturally safe stuff.

How in the hell is a kid meant to change things when they're going back to that? And all right, we understand that not all families are functional. We get that. And that can be because of past traumas, but when are we going to do something different?

I know that most do not know who their VACCA worker is. Meanwhile, the VACCA main office is three suburbs away from the main kids' jail. Why are VACCA not there every week checking in with children and following up with their family and planning their return or alternative accommodation? They're three suburbs away. They've got a \$90 million budget. Why can't they have an Aboriginal worker go into that jail once a week and visit the Aboriginal kids in there, and find out what's happening? How can VACCA plug in family support so that these kids can achieve when they get out?

You know, VACCA don't do any follow up. Like, what's VACCA doing? What are they doing with their workers? Why aren't they contacting Aboriginal families. I want to know how are they protecting our children?

We can't expect them to spend all that time in jail, you know, coming from dysfunctional families, going back to dysfunctional families and all of a sudden, they're going to do something really good. It's not going to happen. So, we as communities need to stand up and say it's unacceptable and start to do something, and I really think this is a place too where, as a backup, she'd be filling that space, you know. They've got so many workers in there. Go out and visit the families as soon as the kid comes into care or is noted by the police or the welfare, go in and see the families, how can we help, what can we do?

Are we just going to let them keep building bigger jails and our kids are going to graduate from Parkville to Malmsbury and then off to off to the men's jail and to the women's jail? You know, where are those supports? What are we doing to change the trajectory of where our mob's going?

Connection with Country and community is essential for the healing of our children. By the time these children, you reach juvenile incarceration, they're already damaged and this is something that we must all, we must face up to and provide supports around, helping these kids break the bonds of our past and become warriors that they're meant to be.

We should be making sure that they're having healing and cultural safety programs. When a child is first brought to the attention of authorities, should not our peak welfare body be supporting the families at this stage, finding out what, what is, or what is not happening in the home? Why is this child getting in trouble? The first time they're identified by police. I know that VACCA have protocols within government. Why aren't they, as soon as the child's in trouble with police, going into that family and saying, "How can we help? Can we plug family supports in? What else can we do?" What services the family can access and offer support to support the children and their families as a whole before the children child is incarcerated. Why aren't they stepping in and offering those supports before the child gets into jail?

We should be helping families to connect with culture in a true and meaningful manner, not just an hour here, an hour here or there, once a month but true engagement, on Country, where and when possible, connecting families back to Country and back to each other. We should be doing those healing. Many families are damaged due to historic wounds. To nurture is not a learnt trait; not something that we are born with. And if our parents weren't nurtured then they have wounds of their own. How are they to provide how are they hang on. If their parents were not nurtured, or they have wounds of their own, how are they to provide to their children?

When are we going to start healing these children and families, really heal them, offering and supporting tailored programs?

You know, surely, surely, we have enough - enough in our budgets to be able to have, you know, even out at Parkville, I think the dream would be let's have a unit, a girls' and boys' unit that's just Aboriginal, just the Aboriginal kids. And let's have special programs running with those kids. Let's, let's start teaching them about culture. Let's start teaching them how to be warriors instead of reinforcing the institutionalisation of them.

I would love to have a place- I've talked about for many, many years, where it's out in the middle of the bush and we can take these kids, you know, and we can bring them back to Country and we can start to teach them about what a proud race of people we are and how strong we are. And yes, we do have intergenerational trauma, but we also have intergenerational strength. Let's draw on that strength. Let's draw on all those wonderful things we have in our community, and let's give these kids that.

END OF STATEMENT