

Yoorrook Submission

Background and early life

1. As far as I know, I wasn't named my first name after any family members, but my middle name is from my mother's middle name.
2. I was born in the Royal Women's Hospital in Melbourne, in Carlton. My mother had all her children there who were from the marriage to my father. There were seven children from this marriage, she had three from her previous relationships or marriage, ten children in all. I'm number five, and there's seven boys and three girls birthed by my mother.
3. I grew up on the Pines Estate in Frankston North in the Housing Commission. It was the only house we could get. Big family, many children. Times were tough and it wasn't easy. There was a lot of poverty, a lot of hunger and a lot of stress. My mother was very unwell mentally and it was only as I got older that I realised she had severe mental health issues that had affected her from her trauma, and her experience growing up in lutruwita, Tasmania.
4. Mum was Aboriginal, and the culture was very strong in her through her father, but we had to keep it in the four walls of the house. We weren't allowed to speak of it because she said we'd get taken or the police would come. Mum also spoke a lot of language. She had lots of stories and created a cultural space in her small space, the house was like an inside/outside area for all the animals that she gathered, cared for and loved. They often were fed before we were, such was her commitment to them. So, we grew up to hold a deep connection to all our animals and children, everything was on an equal level. Mum also held deep spiritual connections with the trees. She planted a lot of Tasmanian blue gums and large trees in the back yard. We had basic cultural advice only from her, but she was very frightened of saying we were Aboriginal. She was scared of it and she said to us sometimes that she was told our identity was shameful, whereas I was proud of it. I believe that she was socially engineered to think this way, it was hard for her to understand that it was not shameful given her

generation, this didn't sit well with me at all. Additionally, Mum always said you could be jailed if you spoke any language or even, you know, took it outside the house. That's why I was saying earlier our identity had to stay in the four walls of the house.

5. My memories of my childhood are not good, and I don't hold much in the way of quality relationships with my family. I remember starving all the time. We never got breakfast. We often didn't have shoes for school. I used to have to stand outside the art room because mum and dad hadn't paid the school fees, and it was pretty tough. The community basically raised us, and mum was very depressed. She used to cry a lot, and she didn't sort of prepare meals or anything. A lot of the time we used to have to steal food out of the neighbour's freezers that they used to have in their garages or sheds. It was pretty challenging those days. We were always hungry. I remember my brothers used to fight a lot because there just wasn't enough food and dad wasn't there much. He was always working.
6. My relationship with my brothers and sisters is quite fractured, but I have a strong relationship with one of my brothers. I don't have much to do with my sister because she never came to terms with our Aboriginal identity and I'm very strong with it, so we clash there. We've all gone our different ways, the childhood experience of trauma and hardship has left its legacy. Mum's mental health has also caused division into our adult lives and as children, we never had any solid role models. Dad was never there, and mum was not able to parent. We didn't have much guidance to stay together, and it's been a lot of work to keep us together, especially now as we're all getting old, we're not young anymore.

My mother's upbringing

7. Mum was Palawa of the Manegin community and her father, my grandfather, was from Cape Barren Island. If you met him, he'd introduce himself as the Cape Barren Island half caste. I know we don't use that term anymore, but that was his identity. I've always encouraged myself and my family to embrace our identity and I've done a big family tree,

and I have more information now than I ever did. It was all hushed up in Tasmania and you could be incarcerated for practicing culture.

8. Mum had deep connections to the Bruny Island mob and is now buried there at Adventure Bay.
9. My mother had a different upbringing. I know that she was quite traumatised because both her brothers come back from World War 2 and one was a prisoner of war in a Japanese POW Camp, and one was a Rat of Tobruk. After returning home from the war, they were severely traumatised and her father, my maternal grandfather, carried intergenerational trauma, he was so full of trauma. I remember this as a little girl, he used to cry all the time, no family, he didn't know who he was. He identified as an Aboriginal half caste but that's all he knew as he had lost his true family, history and cultural identity. This situation was tragic, and my uncles fought in the war as Aboriginal men, this was not recognised. The Aboriginal trauma of returning from the war and being subject to horrific experiences while prisoners of war added to the way they coped with trauma after the war. My mother went through the war, through the depression, it was quite traumatic.
10. As you know, the Aboriginality was considered to be something not to be proud of and Mum always used to say it brought shame to the family. I think she was conditioned to believe that. In contrast, she was proud of being Aboriginal as she always told us we were, and she always wanted us to know and be proud of that in some way. Then she would flit back and say, it's shameful because that's what we've got to deal with, so it was a mixture of polarised opinion she had of it, and she was full of trauma. She used to cry a lot too. Oh, all her family were criers. When I say that, I don't mean it disrespectfully. They didn't smile much. They all cried and had rare moments of happiness.
11. Mum was first married off at 16 by her mother because that was the thing they did. Mum said that marriage was very hard, her mother was very interfering, and she wasn't happy, so she left her husband and went home with two children at the age of 18. Mum then fell

pregnant in difficult circumstances. She had to hide in the house, her mum locked her in the house for nine months and then put her on a ferry and shipped her up from Hobart to Sydney to the Crown Women's Hospital, where the baby was born and adopted out.

12. Mum then met my father and eloped from Hobart. They eloped, threw all the past away, and she left her remaining two children with her mother. The third adopted child, she recovered, and she went back to Sydney and got him back. This was the baby that she was forced to give up. The older boy was abandoned, and the Salvation Army boys home raised him, and he was adopted again into a white family. When I say white, I mean non-Aboriginal family. It's very tragic. Out of the ten of us, I was raised with the seven children of my mum's second marriage. This was in Frankston on the Pines Estate and Housing Commission.

My father's upbringing

13. My father was of Irish and Scottish descent from Port Arthur. Dad was raised in Battery Point, Hobart, and he was an only child, and his family were of Irish and Scottish settlers who arrived in Hobart back in the 1800s. He had a privileged upbringing. He was privately educated and enjoyed a lot of sport and was a different man, very quiet and withdrawn. He didn't share a lot, to be honest. I don't have a big knowledge of his family I'm on that journey now. He was like the old English school where they didn't talk about things. I don't know whether that was by choice or just the way he was brought up to deal with life, he was a very hard worker. I know that much. He worked seven days a week. Forever.

Circumstances of my son's suicide – Forced removal of my son from home

14. The main topic I'll talk about today is the forced removal of my son from home, but also the trauma that's been created because he actually took his life, he died by suicide after that forced removal. And it's also a cultural loss because our culture was never acknowledged or

respected or considered during the process of working with the police and when child protection came to my home, it was just totally ignored.

My son's experience in the mental healthcare system

15. My son was quite mentally unwell. He started presenting with symptoms of illness at about aged 15, he was very introverted and acting rather strangely. There were behaviours there that I couldn't figure out, so I finally got him in for an assessment and they said that he had paranoid schizophrenia. He was in and out of the Flynn ward at the Latrobe Regional Hospital in Traralgon and his condition became worse and he deteriorated a lot. They would take him into the hospital and bring him home and then give him back to me and then the next psychosis, the same pattern would go on and on. I had a case manager and he used to come down and just give him the depot injection every two weeks, but his psychosis became accelerated.
16. Because I was in public housing at the time, I still am, they built a bungalow type of granny flat at the back of the house so he could do his own thing and I could care for him. However, that deteriorated, and his illness became so hard to manage safely. One night he got a machete, and he thought I was something else because he was very paranoid and he woke me up when he had it to my throat, I had to talk him round. There were other incidents where he was collecting knives and wanting to kill people and I was severely worried.

Mental Health, child protection and police involvement – the lack of family support

17. After this incident, I did contact the mental health services, and they came down, but they also called the police and they also called child protection. This is where the crux of the story sort of really begins because I had three other children under the age of 18 living in the house with me, under my care as a sole parent. When child protection came down, they told me that I had to get a restraining order on my son, an IVO to get rid of him out of the house, or they would remove my children, the remaining three. Now this was like being lined up at

the gas chambers for me because I had to choose. There was no support, there was no offer of alternate care for him or anything else. They told me there was nothing. I just had to get him out of the house to protect my other three.

18. While I was a mother and he was my son, I was his carer and I wasn't able to get any support anyway. Child protection just walked away and said, you have to do it. I wasn't happy with this. I madly searched for a way out, a place for him to go perhaps, or some extra services, some care. Anything but not to chuck him out onto the streets, because that's what I was made to do. I was that desperate. I even went to Russell Broadbent, who was the federal minister down here, and he was very unkind to me. He didn't want to know about my story. I asked him if he could do anything. He said, "Your time's up. Get out of my office." I went to Ian Maxfield, who was currently at that time in 2006 the state representative. All he did was got his assistant to photocopy reams and reams of photocopies of information on paranoid schizophrenia. So that didn't help me either.
19. In the end, child protection came down and they said, we will be removing your children because you haven't put an order on. I was forced to kick him out, and the result of this is they got him some flat down with the drug addicts in La Trobe Street, and he took a massive dose of methadone and passed away. That was two weeks after I was forced to evict him from my care and from my home. So, that's that story.
20. The injustice of the whole thing was that I was just under a colonial rule, and what they thought was the right thing to do because they were just ordering, they didn't understand my story, they didn't understand any cultural aspects. They didn't understand why this was not the right answer, which resulted in his death. I told them he will die if I kick him out because I was his only carer and the only person in the world that loved him, and his family of course, his siblings, but they didn't care about that. They didn't care about the bond. They didn't care about the outcomes. It was all about their structures and their systems to get the individual out and then we're protecting the children under 18. I think that's how they saw

it. However, that was not the answer, because the damage that has come from this is beyond unbearable. They also laid the law down to me and I just felt like I was just a thing at their systems and their processes. The woman that told me, I reckon she was probably 25, straight out of university, full of power, full of authority. They didn't really understand the situation. I did tell them, but no one listened.

Experience at the Coroner's Court

21. My deceased son was taken to the Coroners Court in Melbourne for an autopsy. I was not given any communication as to when the Coroners Court investigation would be held to determine my son's cause of death. I did not receive any communication so I could attend the investigation and hear the outcome, I was not included and was deeply upset to think that I missed this opportunity to hear the evidence. I never got an invite, I didn't even get a call or a letter, and I missed it. I just wasn't included.

22. The Coroners Court experience was awful. When my son was taken there, I had to view him through a glass screen, and I was not allowed to touch him as I was told I would tamper with the evidence. My son was dead, and I was controlled by this so called humane process! I had to view him blue and with breathing tubes and apparatus sticking out of his mouth, the experience was unbearable, and I am so traumatised by this.

Importance of Aboriginal culture

23. Aboriginal culture for me is my backbone. It's my strength, it has driven me to work in community and make change for our people. I've studied hard and I've done a lot of diverse roles out in community. I'm working in government now and all I think about is how we can strengthen our culture to bring the outcomes and get our children back on track because I've seen a lot of damage, I've got it in my own family as well, and trying to deal with all the trauma of trying to adjust all the systems is not easy. I'm very strong on culture, and many people don't understand me. I'm very spiritual.

My hopes for the Aboriginal community and what needs to change

24. My hope for the Aboriginal community is for a fairer go for a cultural understanding to right the wrongs of the past or the historical injustices. I know we're talking about from the late 1700s, but this is still going on today. I lost my son because of this practice, and I blame child protection, I blame the systems.
25. The hope for Aboriginal people is to have more control over the services and the care of their own people. If I had someone that was on my side, with some sort of authority or control, I think the outcome would have been very different. There was just nowhere, not a place for my son to go to. I know he was unsafe, but he was ill. He wasn't a criminal, and to ask a mother to put a restraining order on her own child, who she knows was very ill, is just beyond belief. That's just a racist and colonial system.
26. Ideally, I'd like my son back, but I know that's not going to happen. I think there's got to be more Aboriginal people making decisions for community and understanding the difficulties that people get into, to change the services that are so rigid. There was no recognition of culture or the way I thought about things and even just my human right as a mother trying to protect her child was not regarded at all. I was just told what to do.
27. I'd like to see the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples embedded into Australian law and ratified.
28. I'd like to see more community services run by Aboriginal people, for Aboriginal people.
29. I'd like the injustices to be acknowledged – that's the truth telling aspect and to actually truly be believed and acknowledged because no one listened to me. No one gave a damn about it, and I virtually had to suffer in silence.
30. I'd like to see more community control of the mental health services. I think from the grassroots, things have to change, racism, not understanding cultural aspects. These were my rights as a mother, too. Being Aboriginal was not even considered through these structures, there was nothing. I just had the law put down upon me.

31. I think child protection has too much power, and I think the Premier needs to really review what child protection is because as we know, the stolen gen keeps continuing. I was forced by a system to remove my son, which I really didn't want to do. I think the Premier needs to acknowledge that it's just not the right thing to do. It's not right. It's wrong. There's got to be other ways. I'm sure there are solutions that we can find but that was not a solution because I lost my boy over it.
32. If I was Premier or anyone in power, the laws need to change, whereby you haven't got these people from child protection making all the rules and thinking that they're like the ones that know best. It's got to come from community, and it's got to come from a good range of services who understand the situation as the laws are too punitive and they don't do any good. All they do is harm further, if I look at that child protection, the way they use the law on me. I just can't imagine how they can justify that through a law. They didn't care. When I told the case manager and said that my son had died, I was in trauma and grief. He just said, my job's finished with you. That's it and he didn't want anything to do with me. The money needs to go back into programs, services, we've got to change the focus of law, the tail end is punitive. We need to take a more preventative approach. It's got to be from a prevention approach rather than an end approach. So that's what I'd do with the laws, looking at how we can turn them around.
33. I think Patrick Wolf summed it up when he said colonisation is a structure and not an event. I think the community faces change because they're not of a big minority. I mean, the mainstream Australia were dominant, the powers of the dominant culture, the mistruths. We have to face the truth, but we have to face the impacts as well because as long as these severe harsh impacts of forced removal for children and giving people nowhere to go, all that's going to do is dig, dig a deeper hole for community. It doesn't accelerate and give hope for the future. We need change. It's got to come from the community, but they've got to be free enough and empowered enough to be able to make the changes.