

Yoorrook Justice Commission
Statement of Aunty Sherree Francis

1. One's journey in life doesn't always go in the direction you think. My story began one day when I was fifty-eight years old when my mother said out of the blue that her father was an Aboriginal man. I was elated to hear this news. I always felt my mother hiding something.
2. From the age of thirteen my mother was told to not mention anything about her Aboriginal father, she waited sixty-eight years before she told me. We, being my daughters had always sensed something different about my mother. She always claimed there was Italian blood in her veins because she wore earrings and had black curly hair with brown eyes.
3. My elderly mother had blurted out that she had a different father to her six siblings. She was much darker in her skin, hair and eyes, so much so that at school she was called derogatory names which hurt her. Her brothers taught her to fight to defend herself.
4. As a teenager during World War 11 my mother was a tram conductress, collecting the fare money. Her shift sometimes travelled along Gertrude St Fitzroy, where most of the First Nations people lived. She refused to take their fares in fear of someone recognising her. She learnt to stay inside during summer to stop her skin from getting darker. Her sister had pale skin and my mother longed to have that sort of skin. It wasn't to be, and my mother had a secret to keep.
5. Many people asked my mother who her mob was. She answered always that she wasn't First Nations. I was witness to one episode when she denied her Aboriginality to an Aboriginal woman. Her life was all about denial. She didn't want anyone to know, including her family of two daughters and one son.
6. It took the death of one of her grandchildren that life was shorter than you think when she finally revealed to me about her Aboriginality. I cannot remember the day or place when she told me. All I remember was that my identity had been revealed, I was and am a First Nations person just like my mother.
7. So, at the age of fifty-six I became a different person embraced First Nations Culture. I was amazed how much knowledge I had, and I wanted to share it. I joined the local First Nations Community, and I took my mother to the group so she could associate with her people at last. She felt out of place because for sixty-eight years she had been denied of her Culture. But my mother couldn't fit in. She had been denied of her Culture, brought up as a white person, abused as a black person learning, how bad the Aboriginals were. This neglect was passed down to the next generation. This assimilation of white-washing Aboriginal Culture was to obliterate a Culture which had continued for over sixty thousand years.
8. Those not affected by the invaders felt the trauma through intergenerational stress, the pain from parents and grandparents was transferred to the next generation without

knowing why they experienced the pain. The search for identity was confusing, something was not right, there was a sense of not belonging, a question of who am I?

9. From the age of twelve I found myself gravitating towards the First Nations Culture, reading what I could find. The information was reported through the eyes of the invaders which showed First Nations people as pagans, primitive and not worth being educated. These readings stayed with me through high school.
10. At the end of last century, I decided to become a guide at Healesville Sanctuary. To be precise it was in 1994. I had time on my hands, so I waited for the advertisement to appear in the local newspaper. It didn't take long before the Sanctuary was in contact with me. I was required to attend an interview with three guides on the committee. It didn't take long to realise that most guides were retired school teachers, including myself.
11. I was accepted into Class 14, 1994. It didn't take long before we discovered there was six months training before our graduation. Our attitude was that we once were teachers educating children and we knew about Australian flora and fauna. It didn't take long before we knew very little. So, for three months once a week we attended the Sanctuary learning about the animals, the layout of the animals, the keepers, the vets, the administrators, admissions and all the different occupations.
12. After three weeks in attendance, I had to leave the course most reluctantly because my husband was made redundant, and he needed the family car more than me. I was not happy. The Sanctuary was commencing another course in May 1994. I was placed in Class 15 automatically. This course was held on the weekend. I agreed to join. However, before the course started, I found myself in hospital having major surgery. I needed to withdraw again from the class. This wasn't as I planned.
13. In 1995 I joined Class 16 and finally graduated as a fully trained guide at Healesville Sanctuary to give visitors a guided tour around the Sanctuary explaining details about the life in their natural habitat. I enjoyed meeting people from overseas, interstate and locally. It was all amazing until one week I couldn't move my legs or arms properly. I was sent home by myself. I didn't feel safe driving however I got home.
14. This was the beginning of another stage of my life. I had acquired a rare auto-immune disease. I had to learn how to walk with a walking stick and a walker. My guiding was over. This was not my plan. I kept in touch with the Sanctuary, attending when my body would allow me. Sometimes I needed to be wheelchaired around.

END OF STATEMENT