

Yoorrook Justice Commission
Statement of Tracy Roach and Lionel Roach

Tracy Roach

Hello, my name is Tracy Roach and I'm here to share my story with you. My story is about finding out about being stolen, and growing up.

The first memories I have are in a house in South Melbourne. It's not a house, it's a flat. It's off Clarendon Street and it's like a greeny-blue colour and rough walls. And then the next memory is I have of a house in Caulfield. I don't have really good memories of that home.

I have memories of being hit with the feather duster. I can remember sitting at the kitchen table and she'd cook tea for Dad and not cook for us. But then the funny memories I have of this woman, this Aboriginal woman, I didn't know she was Aboriginal. And I didn't know I was. And she'd come there when Dad would go off. I thought he was going off to work, to work at an office, and she would stay there all day with her friend, and they would drink all day. Sometimes we'd get put in the car, they'd drink and drive. All us kids, there was heaps of us.

I remember being hungry, really hungry. We had dogs, little silky terriers and we had to feed the dogs one day. There was heaps of meat on that bone and we went right down there to the end the house and we chewed them bones.

Dad was a painter and docker. I remember my childhood and sad things, like living in Caulfield and I can remember bullets, guns, you know, being shot at the window and us kids being thrown to the ground and then, you know, all the men going and the women staying.

I hated high school. The principal at Prahran High School. He was so mean and was telling me I had dirty tears and not to cry in his office. The other memories, of the kids always called me Kunta Kinte's mother, New Guinea woman, things like that. And if I retaliated, I was the one that was always dragged into the principal's office and then he would make me go and scrub the toilets. I didn't like that.

I never knew why I was always put to the back of the class when I sat at the front. I didn't understand that. I'd sit at the front; she would put me at the back. I'd get up again and I'd take myself down - I was determined until I just thought, well, I must be one of the naughty kids because I've been put up here. I wanted to learn.

In my area so Prahran, Windsor, Hawkesbury, all that area, I was the State champion swimmer. I could have gone somewhere with swimming, and that really hurts because I could have been. But then that opportunity was taken from me. Because was there support.

I fell pregnant at 15. I was taken to this clinic, and I thought it was a clinic where I was going to go and get checked out and it was an abortion clinic. It was unfair, it was hurtful, it hurt.

Then at about age 19, my name was Tracy Lee Sprowell. I wanted to get a drivers license so I applied for a birth certificate and then it came back saying no such person existed. And that was a shock because I didn't know. When I did applied for my birth certificate and it came back with no such person I had to go home and I was told that my mother was an alcoholic and couldn't look after me, that's why they took me away.

I went to see my Aunty. But she told me to come back in two days because I asked her "Do you know my mum and where she is?" And she said, "Yes, I do." And she told me, "Come back in a couple of days." These were the longest days ever I had. It was like I had a mum. I had a mum out there. I wonder if she'll like me, if she'll accept me, if she wants to see me, because I really wanted to see her and meet her. I wanted that mother's love. I really needed that. It was the longest two days ever.

I remember going to meet my mum and knocking on the door and this man opened the door and I said "my name is Tracy. I'm looking for a lady", and that's when she popped her head around the corner and she said, "Oh my god, it's you." She said, "I'm so sorry I never meant to give you away." I had found Mum. I needed that love from my mum which I found.

We spent the day there. We had a feed all in her little flat. There was these other four kids out there. I've just come in and there's my little brother. He was hiding under the table and Mum said that the way to get him out is have a game of cards with him. I was so excited because I had a brother and I looked at this brother, and I looked at this

mother and I looked like them. Because growing up with that family I looked like no one.

The first thing then I asked Mum is: "Did you name me?" And she said, "Yes." I said, "You named me?" She said, "Yes, Diane Roach." And I went, "Oh." I had to then go to births, deaths and marriages to tell them that my birth name is Dianne Roach but I have a name and it says "Tracy Lee Sprowell" but it's not registered.

I get angry because I was denied education. Without that education I couldn't give it to my kids then. I don't have anything to give. You know, I don't have what other people have and that hurts. In that sense where you need sometimes those material things. You know, I can't go to the bank and say to the kids, "There's money there for you." I've worked all my life. I've worked in schools but there's nothing to show for it.

I always find that because of the name "Tracy Lee Roach" doesn't exist. I have a birth certificate but in your white world with your white records and that, I don't exist there. And I don't understand your ways. I had a lack of education. I get scared to go to Centrelink. I'm so scared because I think I've done something wrong and that I'm going to get into trouble. So, I avoid going to them places and that makes it worse, but then how do I go and talk when I don't understand all that?

I don't understand centimetres and millimetres, just simple things that you're meant to know in life. Do you know how embarrassing it is, workers come to my house, and they'll say, "Can you measure that? Do you know how many centimetres is that?" And I just look at them and I get all hot, I start getting flustered and I go, "Look, sorry, love, I don't. I don't understand that. I'm sorry, lack of education. Not my fault." And that's that and I walk away. I wanted to be somebody, and I wasn't given that. And who's to say I wouldn't have got that with Mum? Who's to say all of us wouldn't have got that? I believe that we would have got that. We weren't given that, that was taken away from us when we were taken from Mum.

I want that love my sisters and my brothers share and I was never given. I get that love from them now and it's beautiful. But that pain and that ache that I have, the pain I've got, how do I get that back. I have to deal with that.

I've had friends who have contacted me now that I went to school with and asked and they've said, "You know, we've often wondered. Are you stolen?" And I went, "Yeah, I

found out” and, you know, they’re so sorry. Like I say to them, “It’s not your sorry.” Whose sorry is it? And I often think, you know, why did Mum keep me a secret, that hurts. But I don’t blame her. I had to find my mother to get that mother’s love so then I could be a mum too and give that love to.

And because I have lived in all these different places, and I’ve tried to connect. I’ve tried to find home. East Fram, I kept coming back to Fram. The first time I found Framlingham I did have that connection to it. Auntie brought me home and I sort of did connect to it. But my story is different to my siblings. They’ve had that stability and everything and I’m so blessed that they got that. I’m happy for them. I didn’t with the two mums and the dad who was a painter and docker.

My mum got acknowledged in an International Women’s Day function, after being gone for 20 years. They had a big thing there for 20 years acknowledging International Women’s Day. She was one of the women that was acknowledged. And I was looking out all these non- indigenous kids getting up and talking about my mum and I thought, “okay, you know, that’s my mum, isn’t it?”. At first, I was angry because I thought that’s my mum you’re talking about. Who are you? I didn’t know who they were. But after I got to talk to them, they were her street kids. I think she did that too because she loved all her children. This poor woman who was taken when she was only young and she was taken from Fram. Mum shouldn’t have been taken. She was working. She was working at the Purnim shop. And, you know, the stories I hear about poor Mum how they took her to Winlaton. Then I hear stories about how she tried to break the younger girls out. She tried to get them out and take them.

I think Mum thought, you know, being one of the older ones she was a protector and I think it’s just sad that I didn’t know anything about my mum. She never told me about being taken. It wasn’t until I was at an Uncle Archie’s house in Clingman Street, and he said to me, “Your aunties are coming from Fram.” And I went, “Oh, what’s Fram? What’s that?” And he said, “Framlingham, didn’t your mum ever tell you about Fram?” And I went, “No.” And it’s weird because every time then when I hear “Took the Children Away”, I would, I’d stand there and think, am I one of them children?

And I was one of those children. I found out, now at 60. So out of six of Mum’s children, five of us have been acknowledged as stolen and that hurts, it does because being stolen we can’t get back anything. And I live in a town where I am related to everyone here so being an Austin, I am related to everyone, yet I am so lonely.

I sit in that house, and I sit there by myself. Don't get invited to things because I didn't grow up with them, did I? You know, I want people to look at it and change it, change how you treat us from Stolen Gen. Don't shut the door on me. Open it. Invite me in and tell me the stories. Teach me what I missed out on.

I have this yearning to be a part of all this and by you shutting the door on me it makes it even worse. It makes it even more lonely. I sit there and I think what does the future hold when I'm gone. What's going to happen to my kids being a part of Stolen Generation when it's the family? They hurt, they do, because I think who's going to be here for my daughter and? How can they have what others have had?

It's not fair. There's no acknowledgement. The council here doesn't acknowledge me. I'm knocking on their door 24/7. They don't do anything here for Sorry days, Survival Day, there's nothing. I sit at home and play Uncle's music. That's been really hard since Uncle's gone. It's hard to play his music. It is. I really miss him, because it gives me strength but it's hard to play it at the same time because it's hearing his voice and he's not here.

My being Stolen Gen, the first time meeting a family member I was like, "Oh, my god, you're my family. I'll believe anything you tell me because you're my family, hey, and I need to hear" and they can, they can tell you anything that you want to hear.

And you know what's sad? I sat there with Uncle Archie and I just said, "I'm sorry, Uncle, I don't know why and then why he did what he did and then come back later." But I do get a bit angry now. I do sort of voice when - if I'm in a group with people and we're talking I will quietly say, "I don't acknowledge that person because he's had to do with my family." And I do have the proof. The saddest thing is that growing up here Elders now. I had an aunty in her eighties stop me and she said, "I remember that day. I remember now the day when the black cars pulled up and he was standing there and he turned to me and said, 'Get back into the house or you might be taken too'."

Something that I've learnt that, you know, is that it's not just us and Uncle Archie. It's all them old people too that fought for so long just to get recognised. I understand their pain because, you know, not to be able to talk about it and share what happened then nobody knows. Nobody knows. This did happen to us. I was taken. This man did

change my name. It didn't identify me as being Indigenous. I just must have thought I was a kid with a good tan.

And do you know why I took Roach? When I was at the Births, Deaths and Marriages and they said, "You're to make a new birth certificate" because I was like 19 or something, I couldn't be Diane as much as I wanted to be. I couldn't. So, I had to keep Tracy Lee and I did take Roach because when I was in Fitzroy and I said Tracy Lee Sprow, the looks I got, I didn't understand. When I went back and said, "My name is Tracy Lee Roach," "Oh, you're Roach, you're Aunty Alma's daughter."

If there is one thing I could change it would be family, open your doors to the ones who were taken. Don't shut the door and don't treat us like we're strangers. We're not. It wasn't our fault. Open up the doors, invite us in and listen to our stories.

One thing I promise is that because of the schooling I had and the way I was treated, I never want other Koori kids to be treated like that. So, I became one of the very first Aboriginal educators. I got my certificate. I did that course in Smith Street, Collingwood. And then from there I've used that a lot to get into the schools. But now I tell them, I am Stolen Gen and I want to come in. I want to tell you my story and what it was like to grow up, you know, to be this one person and then to be this other person, to find my family and connect. I now do that with all my art. You know, that's how I reconnect.

I said to my sister, "You grew up with culture." No. Stop. Just because she grew up in that Koori family don't mean she grew up with culture because she didn't. She didn't know her culture. They didn't know their culture and that was something that I did write into Stolen Gen and say that you can't say that. Just because you grew up in that Indigenous home it doesn't mean that you grew up with culture because culture - we didn't have culture then. We didn't know. A lot of people we're still finding. We've all learnt coming together and things we've found. Like, when Brother Boy, you know, travels up to Bundjalung Country and he shares all that information about Grandfather and, you know, we didn't know his tribe or anything. So, with us connecting, the siblings connecting, we've connected ourselves back to our culture.

I just don't want it to ever happen again. I want the world to know that this did happen. This did. And we were treated bad. We weren't treated nice. They may've you may have thought "Aren't these people lovely, taking in these little Aboriginal children." No,

never again. No child should ever grow up without their mother's love. It doesn't matter what colour you are.

When I go into the schools and I talk to the children, I say to them, "Growing up without my stories and that, I do find it hard when I do my art, but my art is a connection back to country, back to family."

You know, what I find about being Stolen Gen, is that you'll have family who are really truly sincere. And then you've just got the game ones that want to come in and tell you yeah, because they're having that conflict with that family.

And another thing is that I don't like the police. I had it was really hard growing up, and if I did end up in the police station it was like, you know, what was your name, Tracy Lee Sprowell. "Well, no you're not, you can't be his daughter, you're black." I had a policeman sit there once. They locked me in the cell. They put the handcuffs on me and they were that tight that my hands were going red. And he was just sitting there, constantly abusing me because I told him my name was Tracy Lee Sprowell. As soon as he heard dad come in the police station, because dad was yelling, you know, he swore a lot, used the f word. And was saying, you know, "You're weak as to lock up a woman." He couldn't get in that cell fast enough to get them handcuffs off me and everything. You know, that was my name. That's who I was.

Lionel Roach

We were taken away, all split up and scattered but we're the ones that have come back culturally strong, and we're saving our culture.

I remember one day we were walking around with mum and it was payday. I remember walking in the pub there with mum, it was a dark bar, there was about three white men in there, and the bartender and they all looked at us when we walked in there. I was only tiny. Mum got paid. She just bought me a kite and a doll. And mum said, "I just want one beer" and they just bloody gave her hell. Next minute the cops rocked up. So we walked out around that side alley and I looked and these two cops jumped out and started beating mum and having a go at her in front of us two kids.

So, that's what we grew up with: the cops beating up our mum in front of us. I was a little fighter. Even two or three, I tried to punch in with adults because, you know, that's what you do. They flogged us too and so that's why we grew up hating and, scared of cops and hating cops.

These days I believe in teaching respect about the way we lived, the true way we lived, about our amazing lifestyle. We were the first people in the world to do Aboriginal community, housing. We were the first people in the world to do nearly everything and we have an amazing way of life, you know. And we weren't just savages running around, it was incredible. We lived to well over 110. Traditionally in Victoria we were like one of the most oldest cultures on the planet.

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