

YOORROOK JUSTICE COMMISSION

Statement of Dyan Summers

My name's Dyan Summers. I'm a Bass Strait Islander Bunurong woman. I say that because my mother was born on the reserve on Cape Barren Island in the Bass Strait Islands, and she comes through a Bunurong woman by the name of Nandergoroke Granny Betty, as we as we know her as. They were moved when they were kidnapped from Point Nepean and taken to the Bass Strait Islands. And my grandmother birthed the first Bunurong baby in the Bass Strait Islands. So hence the Bass Strait Bunurong. That's how I label myself.

Where I live on Flinders Island is a really important piece of country that is the connection between Tasmania and Victoria. Very ancient country. It's beautiful country. I grew up on, on Flinders Island, which was a very, very racist place. We were certainly told that we were too white to be called black, but we had that bit of black blood. But we weren't really white either. So that's how I grew up. And I didn't know that words like half caste were actually racist because we grew up with it. It was part of our language that we heard every day. And I didn't know it was a racist word. I didn't know that it was a slur until I was much older.

My experience at school wasn't very good. I didn't struggle at school, but I didn't have a very good experience at school. But I guess that was because my mother was termed the half caste, but she wasn't considered a half caste as what the half caste was. But she was considered to be the half caste and where we live, that's how we were referred to. We weren't referred to as 'the children from the Shaw family'. We were referred to as 'the children from the half caste family'.

Even the word Aboriginal, when we were growing up, we weren't Aboriginal. We were Bass Strait Island people. We were different from Tasmania, and we were different from Victoria. We were a very close-knit community when it comes to supporting each other. Our families stuck together. It was like the Aboriginal families were always together.

I can recall going to dances when I was a young girl and my mother dancing because my father was never a dancer. He'd always be propped at the bar. But And mum loved dancing. She was a very good dancer. But if you know, if they weren't ever allowed to dance with the white men. It was always the other Aboriginal people on the island. They danced with because you'd see the white men, you know, they'd go like that, brushed up against you and things like that.

There's about probably close on a thousand people on the island now. There was around about three and a half thousand back when I was growing up. But it was at the time of the agricultural farm settlements to which was another thing that was a kick in the guts for Aboriginal people, you know, they never, ever got it. They went away and

fought for their countries, but they were never, ever offered any land in return for their service to the country.

My mum's brothers, they all went to the Second World War. And two of them were Prisoners of War, one died in London, one died of starvation when he malnutrition when he came home after the Second World War and Uncle George, he moved across to Victoria here. Uncle George had a very short fuse. But then I guess that's understandable because he was a Prisoner of War. He didn't come back from the war until 1947. It finished in '45 and he came back in '47. But he came back to nothing. There was nothing and he was in and out of the mental health hospital for years after the Second World War.

My mother's cousin, Uncle Ken, he was he was in the Second World War, and he put himself between the enemy and another Flinders Island person, and he was injured. After the Second World War, he went back to the island. And the person that he saved offered him work on his farm, that he got through a government grant. And he lived in a bagging tent. The man he saved didn't even give him a room in the house or build him a little shed. Uncle lived in a tent that was made of sugar bags.

My grandfather was Irish and my grandmother was Aboriginal. They bought land on Cape Barren Island just on the outskirts of the reserve, but one when they the policy came in and they moved everybody off the island. They were moved off. They lost their land.

Somebody ended up with the land, and I'm not going to go into how they got it, because that could land me in court. I'd rather not talk about it. But there was there was some stuff went on that shouldn't have went on. And I just think a few people that were a bit more cleverer than perhaps my grandmother was because she, you know, she didn't have an education as such and didn't understand a lot of things when it came to land title and stuff like that were other people did.

Then there all that trauma, I guess, that we carry today. I tell the same stories to my grandchildren today. Because I don't never, ever want those stories to be lost. They're important to me. They're important to my family.

I understand the trauma and I understand you know if someone was leaving the island. I guess they thought, well, you know, they're leaving the island. They're leaving the land. So that land would be up for grabs for somebody else. But that wasn't the case. But after my grandmother died the family went back to Cape Barren Island to reclaim the land, and it had already been given to somebody else.

Now there's a very small population of less than a couple of hundred people live there. It's a beautiful place, but it's a place of hopelessness. It's just it's very much a welfare mentality over there. There's no work. It's rife with drugs and alcohol and violence and crime.

But what I remember growing up on the island was my auntie sitting down and I'd sit down with my aunties because my uncles were fishermen and I'd sit down with, with

especially with Auntie Ella and Auntie Mary and they would mend their husband's fishing nets. And it wasn't until I was much older, probably in my late 50s, that I realised that what they were doing was something very special. And it's something today people just go and buy a net. Back in the day, back when I was a young girl, I mean that was only 73 years ago, you had to make the best of what you had. We weren't a throwaway society back then. If something got broken, we had to fix it.

My uncles used to go and set snares to catch wallaby. So that was one thing. And because we, we had a family, there were seven children of us and there was just the one boy. So, the girls had to, to do the boys things as well when it came to carting water and things like that, us older girls, we had to do the things that normally the boys would do.

So, we'd have to go and help the farmer where we lived. We'd have to help him milk his cows before he went to school in the morning. We would have to cart water from the windmill. Up home for mum to do the washing. We go around with uncle Mark and uncle Ted to get the wallabies out of the snares of a daytime of a morning. And if the snares were still sitting there every morning, we'd go back that afternoon hoping to get one.

I guess that part of my childhood was really, really good. It was great being around extended family. It wasn't us and them. It was 'us and them' when we were at school or community events. But when we were together, it was just us.

Some of my family were part of the Stolen Generation. So that hit home very, very hard. And we are just reconnecting now with some of the family. But I don't believe that there would be an Aboriginal family in Australia that isn't impacted one way or another by the Stolen Generation. And once fractures are made in families it's really hard.

I've always said that one of the biggest losses that I believe to Aboriginal society was the loss of our language. Because that was our identity. For our family, well, we didn't know that we were Bunurong. Mum always spoke to us about Granny Betty being from the Port Phillip tribe. We didn't know the Port Phillip Tribe or Bunurong people and didn't know that until probably 40 years ago.

But my dad always said that there's always two sides to every family. There's always the mother's family and the father's family. I was lucky to have the dad I did have, because, as I said, he was he wanted to make sure that we maintain contact with mum's family. That we never, ever lost that and I guess I always said that I would never, ever take that away from my children either. See, down home in Tassie, if I say down there, 'I'm Bunurong', then I get 'Get out of here. You can't be that'.

But then you come here to Victoria and there are certain elements of the community say, 'get back to Tassie where you belong', you know? And I just feel at times that I'm just in limbo. I don't know where I belong. It's about acceptance. And you know, just because I wasn't raised here on Bunurong country, it doesn't take away who I am. That's right. And you can't take the Tasmanian out of me. Because if you did, I wouldn't

be the person I am today. I mean we're pretty well urbanised now so in Victoria, so it'd be very hard to find a line of family groups that didn't have something that was outside of their community, you know?

I guess I'm lucky, because I grew up in a community that was very close. We had to be because we had to stick together because we had no one else. So, we knew each other. We knew where we fitted. We knew where we belonged. And don't you worry, if we stepped outside of where we were meant to be, we're very promptly put back in our place.

Now I would like to talk about the referendum. I felt very let down by the referendum. Extremely let down. I think because of the way that it was set up. And this is what really annoys me that we are only supposedly 3% of the population. I'd be more inclined to think we're probably getting close to 5 or maybe 6% now.

But still, when it comes to a decision on our people, it's got to be the other 96% of the population that makes the decision. It's not the 4% that it actually impacts. And that's what let me down very badly to think that. And I had some good friends on Flinders to think that it was the other 96 or 97% of the population made the decision on my future.

And I had some friends over there that I thought were good friends. I'd had them for many years. But let me tell you, this referendum certainly showed their true colours, and they weren't the people that I thought they were.

So, it created a big split in the community on the island. Although I think now, we're inching back to what we were pre-referendum and I think that we're going to get there. It's just going to take us another 20 years to catch up.

I just think if they're going to put something to referendum when it comes to First Peoples, they've got to do it the right way, not give it. Why did it have to even be a referendum? Well, couldn't have just gone through with a policy or a piece of legislation?

Because somebody's got to take responsibility for what happened. And I'm not saying blame anybody. Let's not lay blame. Things happened. Let's just admit that these things happened. Accept it. And until we admit to it, we can't move forward. Because this generational trauma is always going to be there. And it doesn't matter whether our lives get better and better and better. That trauma is still going to be there.

I also think that the justice system creates a lot of the racism. I worked in Aboriginal Legal Aid down in Tassie for 15 years. I'm not a stranger to courtrooms. But I wasn't there as a lawyer or anything. I didn't have the right to speak up unless somebody asked. But just the comments made by lawyers and other people in the court made somebody feel completely inadequate within themselves.

I also think that the gaps will never close. They're going to get wider and wider. And the gap and I don't suppose the gaps will ever close or even stop getting wider until

Aboriginal people are allowed to make decisions for themselves. But you know, we're entitled to our own self-determination.

END OF STATEMENT