

**Yoorrook Justice Commission  
Statement of Amber Briggs**

My name is Amber Briggs. I'm a Yorta Yorta, Wemba Wemba woman, and I live on Gunditjmara country in Warrnambool. I've actually lived in Warrnambool for around 24 years, so it's the longest I've ever been anywhere. Prior to that we moved around a lot when I was a kid.

We went from school to school growing up. I went to six different schools, but we had seven changes for various reasons. I feel most connected to Gunditjmara country. But I do have a yearning to have that connection with Yorta Yorta. I've only visited up there a few times.

I'll start just how us fullas start, just by talking about the generations that came before me, like, as briefly as I can. You know, you grow up learning about the people who came before you.

I'm the eldest of four kids, and I was raised by a single mum, and I was lucky enough to have aunties in my gravity pool who also raised me. And they were all single women - single black women that raised me, which has been a huge positive experience.

My mum is also the eldest and was raised by a single Aboriginal woman, my Nan. Nan had 4 kids and raised them up in Frankston. It was hard, mum says that they didn't have much and really scraped by to get through. Until she was able to earn money, mum had two skirts and two t-shirts and one jumper and one pair of shoes. And she would wear those to school all through the year for years. Mum reflected on her youth a lot as she raised us, and we grew to understand the notion of privileges and rights very intimately.

And Nan's mum, we don't know what happened to her. All we know is that she was married to my great grandfather, and then she disappeared one day. We haven't been able to locate her, it was presumed she was dead this probably happened in the 60's. So we always grew up thinking that she was gone until maybe like 15-20 years ago, there was news from New South Wales Hospital that there was a woman who they thought was her, but because she was so far gone in dementia, they couldn't get consent for DNA testing to prove if she was related to us or not. It started a new search for her, but we don't know where any of her documents are, no one can seem to find her. Every time we feel like we're getting close to meeting a relative who might know, like a nephew or something, they say they don't know where she went or what happened.

So this woman in the hospital, they couldn't locate her family anywhere. She was probably not my great-nan... The closest relatives and community that they could find, couldn't place her. So this poor woman just died in hospital by herself. Even if she wasn't my great nan. I just think, how sad...

That was really sad because my nan grew up without her mum after the age of 14. Her dad was violent and not always home, when he was home he would harm nan's mum, and great-nanna was in and out of hospital I assume now because of the impacts of family violence. Back then if the mother wasn't looking after the kids then they would be placed in "care". So nan was placed in "care" a lot...

She ran away from that home many times and then went to the boys home where her brothers were kept and one day she freed them, usually they'd catch her and bring her back. Then they took off back to the mission up at Moonahcullah. Nan told me she had mixed experiences in the home for girls, just losing her mum and missing her family whom she was separated from was very painful for her. I know now that her dad was married-up with another woman and I am told of her kindness. She took my Nan and siblings in and was their mother figure as much as she could be.

So, they grew up around Moonah, my grandmother and her siblings. And she had my mum when she was 17 in Dandenong. And that's where all the kids were, and they were raised in Frankston. I was born in Frankston, when mum was 19 she still lived at nan's.

I think that not having her mum around and being placed in institutions really influenced my nan's relationships with her kids. It's sad. You know, we have compassion for her, but there's resentment and we unfairly put that on nan it's not her fault that she didn't know how to be a mum. It was hard for my mum and her siblings growing up in that house in Frankston. They were poor, very, very poor. They survived.

And then when mum fell pregnant with me, I think she had to start thinking about the future, so we moved to Geelong. As a family we were involved in the local ACCO that was the 90's, I spent a lot of my childhood with the playgroup, homework group and holiday program. It allowed mum to work and it got us linked in with the community and doing cultural events. I loved that time in my life, such a stark contrast to my experience in the mainstream community.

And that's probably when I first started experiencing issues in the education system. I went to the kinder that was down the road, and next door was the primary school I went to.

Head lice was really normal. Like it would happen on a seasonal basis. There was this one time that there was head lice going around the school, and I don't think there was many other Aboriginal children in the school. It was just me and my sisters and maybe one other family. The principal came to my classroom, and my sister's classroom, picked us up and walked us home, and said that we're not allowed back at school until we don't have any moonas anymore. He didn't say moonas, we called them moonas. But basically, he said to mum that we keep bringing them moonas to school, and we're not allowed back at school until there's no head lice anymore. But we didn't have head lice at that time, mum cried when she combed our hair.

I remember walking with the principal home and thinking, oh my God, I get to go home early. You know, I'm only little, grade one or something, or grade two. And then mum was so upset when we came home, and we only lived up the road. And I think about that now, I think that's fucked up. Like that is so not fair. How can you - and that was only probably would have only been in like '97, '98. Like that's not that long ago.

I look back now and that probably wasn't the first racism I experienced. It wasn't obvious, but that is blatant and mean. I do remember my sister always getting in trouble at school. So, once they've identified an Aboriginal family in the school, I think there is a bit more of a hyper focus on that family as troubled, you know, or needs help. So mum was often getting checked, probably like checked in on or phone calls more often than other families. And we were late to school a lot. We were always late to school, and that was a problem apparently, even though we were there in the morning, probably like 9:30. You know what I mean? Like it's fine, just chill. We still made it to school, you know? But there was never any supports offered to mum at all, and doing that all by herself.

I remember getting ready for school one day, and she was in labour with my brother, and she was terrified because she didn't want to leave us, but she had to have a baby. And I remember I had some aunties and uncles come around and they're like, well, we'll have kids. I just remember there was just a lot happening in the house because mum didn't want to leave us, and she didn't know how long she was going to be in the hospital. Who's going to pick up the kids? Like, just too much thinking.

I did have a few good experiences in high school. I had a beautiful teacher teaching Chinese and she knew our family were Aboriginal, and when I was in the class, she's like, "no, I'm not going to be teaching you Chinese". And I was like, "oh, like, that's unfair. Like, I want to do what everybody else is doing". And she's like, "no, I want you to actually spend this time that you could be learning Chinese and actually researching about your mob, and I want you to learn your

own language". That's never happened to me before or since. And I haven't heard another teacher using that method at all. But she identified how important that was, and she knew and she was just obviously a very open minded person. And she was always very supportive of me and I never understood why, but I think knowing how the world works now, I understand. She was, in a roundabout way, really like encouraging me to explore my own identity, which was really lovely, but in terms of like, the education.

Well, we didn't have any Koori workers, so we didn't have any community education programs or anything like that. I never got to see an adult Aboriginal person at my school. That wasn't my family picking me up, you know? I think having more representation in the staff and also in the curriculum, having more flexibility, because school was hard.

I never did maths, in every math class I ever did I was drawing pictures all over the page. I didn't do a single activity, and I didn't get help. I was always at the back of the class, and the teacher just forgot about me and didn't worry about me, and I think I got to a certain grade and the teachers were shocked by my reading capacity because they were like, you're above average. It was a shock to them that they thought I was, you know, as good of a reader that I was.

But when I think about my nan and her experience in school, I'm pretty sure she didn't finish school because she had such a negative experience being bullied by the other kids, but also by the teachers. And targeted: "Aboriginal people belong in the bin". She was put in the bin by other kids one day, and the teacher supported that.

You know, she never really forced her kids to go to school. So, my mum and auntie and uncles kind of just chose when to drop out and get work instead. And she was always supportive of that because she would never force us to do anything in a system that was actively trying to push us out. And so, when - we were going to high school, mum was kind of very relaxed about it, and if we wanted to do something that was fine, but we had to really advocate for that if that's what we wanted. She always said, you can do whatever you put your mind to as long as you finish it... And I was empowered by this. And I really wanted to go to school. And so that was good, but I often would get criticism from the high school teachers saying "your mum doesn't care enough about your education, and she needs to do more, and more", you know? and just little remarks like that, that had no awareness of what it could have possibly have been like. Why do you think, mum, you know mum's - mum's trying to have such a safe distance so as not to cause more trouble, for us, or for herself, not to draw attention. You know what I mean? She had to toe the line.

So, it's just those interactions, those relationships with families are just not there. But you don't want government bodies to have too much of an involvement either because it's threatening.

I reached another hurdle when I tried to get into university, and they rejected my enrolment three times and I nearly gave up. But I applied for a different university and they allowed me in, and that was great. I did my degree and I wanted to do the next phase which is a postgraduate so that I can get into my masters. So, I'm learning psychology, so there's a particular pathway you've got to go through. And they knocked me back and they said "you don't have the grades to get into your fourth year". And I was so upset and I was like, okay, I've accepted that. And then I thought about all of the things that my family have gone through. And I'm the first person to finish high school, the first person who has got a degree, and I really want to push through that because I just think education can be a useful tool.

I think a couple of weeks after they knocked me back, I wrote them a letter. I read through all their policies. I read through their Reconciliation Action Plan. I did a lot of my research, and I said, you say that you want to support people that live in a regional area, and you say that you want to support people that are disadvantaged. I'm an Aboriginal single mum, I'm living in a regional area, and there is not a single university in a two-hour radius that offers this course, and you're telling me that I cannot access it. I really advocated hard and I wasn't angry, but I think, you know, there was a rage that sort of fuelled it. And I remember asking them, I cannot possibly find an alternative pathway, and I've spoken to many of your workers and support team, and no one can help me with an alternative pathway into this course. I want to talk to someone about that. And they they emailed me and said how well-written that email was, and - which was a weird thing to say. How well written that email was? What, for an Aboriginal woman? I don't know, but that I was right, and they were going to offer me the place with no consultation. They were like you're right, here you go, have this. So not even having the grades they enrolled me in. And I'm currently doing that course. And it's not as hard as I thought it was going to be. Like you don't need the numbers to be able to do this. What I'm learning right now is you must advocate for yourself. But that in itself is a learned skill, we don't all learn that part.

And that taught me an interesting lesson. The women that raised me were staunch and strong, but I don't think that they would ever speak for themselves. They would speak for others. Yeah, so that was a really big lesson for me.

And also some of the experiences that I had growing up probably affected me a lot more than I give it credit for, because it was so normalised. Because it was like, "oh, that happened again", you know? It's like when you're a woman

walking down the street and you get catcalled, and you get to the point where you don't even respond, you're like, oh, that happens all the time.

I think the main issue with the mental health system was that the accessibility, the misdiagnosis. Not that I've ever really had a formal one, but I know people in my family have had their files mishandled or just their cases were underappreciated, and so they never got the services that they fully needed. Like dyslexia or, you know, severe anxiety in the family and things like that. Like they were never fully explored, it was just like, "oh, this sounds like this, so just do some breathing and go outside, or have some more water". Like it was very blasé, and none of our contextual experiences ever came into play. I feel like generally, the system doesn't fully acknowledge the unique experiences that Aboriginal people live through. Now that I'm coming into that field of work, and I want to work in mental health.

I'm a massive advocate for the lived experience workers. I think we do need them, and we do need people that aren't highly academic in the spaces. We need more people that are like on the ground, you know, really understanding the lay of the land. Because just reading it out of a book and going to uni and learning about the "Aborigines of Australia" doesn't tell you anything at all.

I guess every counsellor that I've ever had through my life, I think I started counselling when I was nine because we moved here and that was an adjustment. And then my stepbrother died, and then that was a huge thing. And also dad wasn't always around either in prison or took off. So, there was also lots of things happening, so mum was like, "all right, you guys need counselling". It's hard to build a relationship with a person who doesn't look like you, or doesn't talk like you, and they ask you questions that you're like, I don't really understand what you're saying. Then you question yourself, you don't want to share too much.

So again, relationships, familiarity, and rapport would be straight off the cuff, the first things that you can do as a system, but going into counselling as an adult and after I had Theo, I had postnatal depression and I didn't recognise it in myself and I had to have many people in my life encourage me to get help before I acknowledged it. And the counsellor, she was a sister, she I think she called herself a sister, so I assume she was of the church. It was like a programme the church ran through the hospital, a different one of the hospitals. And I couldn't relate with her. I don't even remember how, if she even made me feel like it helped. I think I often left the sessions feeling worse, and I had to explain everything to her. Everything. I'd mention anything about culture, and then all of a sudden I'm training her and educating her on being an Aboriginal person, and it's less about me and my human experience and more about giving her a cultural awareness session.

And there's been other instances with counsellors and therapists now because I'm using it for supervision for my studies and, you know, just to manage the stress load, where it's almost as if my aboriginality is used against me, and they'll say things like, "oh, it's quite normal for Aboriginal women to blah blah blah". Or "actually there is research to suggest X, Y, Z. And, you know, because this is quite typical in the Aboriginal community", and it's just on and on and on deficit, deficit, deficit. And all I want to do is talk shit. You know, I need to vent. And they're like, that's because you're black. I don't want to hear it from you. Like, you know what I mean? I think it's one of the biggest discrepancies in our health system. Relationships require relatability even on a small level.

I did an internship with a local government institution, and they don't get a lot of Aboriginal people applying at this particular institution, because there's a stigma attached to them because of their being one of the main reasons why we have such like, trauma in our community. And being an Aboriginal woman who had an experience being removed from a parent as a child to go to the other parent. I just remember going here and going, I don't want to do this internship, but I'll learn something from it. And being introduced as the Aboriginal student and not having a name, and they would parade me around the office and say, this is our "golden unicorn". "Yes, we're very lucky, we've got an Aboriginal student." And I just felt so diminished. I was like, I have a name, I have a story, like I'm a whole human.

And then working at my last job, being introduced as the Aboriginal worker. It happens a lot. You get requests or questions coming at you that you're expected to be patient through and grit your teeth and hold their hand, and pat them on the back because they're doing a great job. And that emotional load that you're expected to do in the workplace, because you just have to expect racism, even on a subtle level. Just, it just chips away at you, because you suddenly realise they don't see you. You're not seen, you don't - you're not understood. They don't want to either, they have no curiosity about you because they've decided before you even walked in the room **what** you are, and that informs how they interact with you. So, it's like, "oh, that's the Aboriginal worker". That but also like, I can't talk to them about anything except Aboriginal stuff. It's like, wow.

So working with the mob again has been really healing for me. When you're in a room that you know you're a majority. Oh, it does a lot for the self-esteem because then you go, okay, because we're all blackfellas here. We get to be diverse when we're together.

But when you're in a room and you're the minority, you're like, you have to represent everyone because there's only one type of blackfella that exists they

only have this "prototype" and you have no way of influencing that. And you're not allowed to be angry. You can't be too quiet. Not allowed to be too quiet because that's - that gets in their way of doing work and slows them down, and they get frustrated because you're not talking. And you're not allowed to be assertive because that's misrepresented. And then you go to counselling to deal with the shit at work, and then they're doing it to you. And so, there's literally that - the number of safe spaces to deal with the chronic, perpetual racism that you experience is - I don't actually think we genuinely don't understand its full impacts. I wouldn't be surprised if that's most of the reason why we have health issues.

I'm pretty sure in my family there's some neurodivergence there. So just having to, like, protect my family from the judgement as well, like of being out. My mum is an active person in the community. She does so much for everyone and she pours her heart and soul out. And she comes home and she's wrecked, and she stays in bed. She'll come out for a cup of tea and she'll, you know, she'll do things. But she doesn't do anything for herself, she doesn't go on holidays, she doesn't do stuff like that - fun adventures, nothing. She works and she comes home and she's just this, like she's our mum, right? And growing up with a mum like, with a maternal figure like that, it makes you want to protect them because you know how draining the world is for them.

And there's thousands of things that I've been exposed to in my lifetime that isn't a typical sort of life story, but also I think it is for us mob it's normal. I've just come back from Darwin work conference and, you know, 600 majority Aboriginal attendees.

We'd sit around and we'd just yarn and then you'd get on to, you know, who's your mob? And did you know this person? Did you hear about that story? And you start talking and then it turns into this really deep, meaningful conversation. And there was a lot of bonding in that. And I just felt like this is normal. It's in those spaces where you talk about what you've been through, where the other person is like unrelatable. They're like, I can't relate. You kind of go, "oh, I must be an alien or something". But it's nice being with other mob, they would feel it too. There's a rest in it. It's healing.

I come from a family violence household, and I remember mum talking it down at the time, but I also remember feeling very scared a lot of the time. And I think that I don't really know if I've fully unpacked it completely, but I do know that that's shaped me as a person now. And I think also understanding why the women in my life have always been single black women that were like the matriarchs of their family, and raising the kids, and doing the jobs, and doing everything, and being just this staunch person.



So, without going into too much detail, I think that that family violence is a very normal experience in our communities, but it's also something that we don't really talk about. And I think, you know, I probably need to reflect a little bit more on the family violence topic to speak more to it.

Now, I am in a healthy relationship with a man who is also Aboriginal... One thing that I love about my current partner is that he looks after his mum, and he's an only son to her. And so I feel like Theo has something to relate with and visualise, and have a model of what family can be like, especially with the current situation that he's going through with the distance of other family members. Having family values is really important to me in raising Theo to be respectful. Huge, hugely important yeah, it shapes everything. Surrounding myself with community has been the single most positive experience, I want that for my son too.

**END OF STATEMENT**