

Yoorrook Justice Commission

Statement of Theresa Edwards

Hi, my name is Theresa Edwards. I'm part of Wadi Wadi in Swan Hill and Yorta Yorta over near Shep. Born and bred in Swan Hill on the sixth day on the ninth month in 1969, and pretty much been here ever since.

A bit about myself, I don't remember having my dad at any time, but he was around for a while. My mother had five daughters. My mother and father, Alexi Edwards and Ray and Sarah had myself and Angela. Then she had another relationship and had a sister named Shirley Atkinson. My family has been affected by the stolen generation. I also spent time at Winlaton.

Most of my life I spent in Swan Hill. In my younger years, used to try and get into sports and stuff, but back then, Kooris didn't seem to get the chance to get in there. You're always on the sideline. Never asked to join. So that was a bit hard. I used love tennis as a kid. I went to the tennis club. Pretty much the same environment there. Like, there was an old fella that used to train the white kids, and he ended up bringing a tennis racket one day for me to have a crack at just hitting this square bit of tin, and I swear I hit it all day.

Then I started at Swan Hill North pre-school, and a teacher named Ms McDonald when I was five years old. Then after that, that's when I went to Swan Hill North. And I reckon they were my best years ever in all my life, because they were such deadly, caring teachers, and they taught me a lot. I guess that the biggest lessons I got off them, you can do anything if you put your mind to it. Because to me, a lot of our people were never told that.

I had one teacher, I say, oh, you got the jackpot, because first class I go to was preps. She's there, so she's got to put up with me all that year. I could never shut up apparently. Always rowing with the teacher, yeah. Like I'm the one who's right, not you. To the point where, yeah, you can play teacher then. Go on, then I would just sit. So, she had me in preps. Then I go all the way to grade six. She got me again, I said: "you got the jackpot eh? You double served" she goes, "oh, my lord". So once again, you muck up or I don't want to do that, or I've already done it. "Well, you know what you can do? "Go to the principal's office," I would say. She'd go "no, you can go down to the preps and you can help miss so-and-so" "Huh? I get to go-" "Well, that's what you like, giving orders. And yeah, you told me that you loved the games that you teach them, blah, blah". And I go yeah, but it was one of those days where I didn't really feel like it and I wanted to dodge them all, but I used to go down and do it. I said, "oh, we've been probably better off having a naughty chair". And she says, "yeah, you'd have been in every day". And that's the truth.

And then we graduated, as they call it, and we go to Swan Hill Tech School. But there was also a high school, but it was pumped into our heads that it was really for the Captain Cook people, ones with money. And all the blacks seemed to go to the tech. And at the tech, we got a principal who's prejudiced. And you always had to face him over the littlest shit. No matter what you tried, it just never worked. I got caught smoking. Always caught smoking somewhere. Hiding out. He didn't like Blackfellas.

This one day, I got yelled at by the teacher. I didn't understand what he was saying, talking about- yeah, this equals this equal, blah, blah. So, say I'm looking at my friend going, "I don't get it sis". And then she goes, "don't worry about it", like, I'll explain it to you later". And then he'd be like, "Theresa". And then I swore at him.

Then later that day, I've got English, I had my hand up, and I knew the answer. But I was being ignored. Then, I look up, the teacher, he threw a book. Just missed me temple, had the biggest egg on my head. And I swore at him in the end, and my friend was sitting there horrified, like she could not believe that the teacher would do that. So he goes, "You can go up to the principal's office." I went, fuck that. I said, "I'm going home to get my mum." And I went and told her the story. And we went back to the school and mum made it clear to the principal that the teacher throwing a book at me was not going to happen again.

Then I go to work, go around just asking for jobs. I ended up being cleaner after, going back to school routine for the co-op. And I used to get \$80 a week back then. I used to love doing that. Then the bookkeeper that we had, her husband had his own business, so he needed a receptionist because she was playing bookkeeper at her co-op. So I got a job there, and by myself, so. And it was for AMP insurance receptionist, but done that at the age of 13. Then I went back, done more cleaning until I was old enough to get a real job. And then pretty much work for home and community care. I've always loved that sort of thing. That and cooking. They've gotta be my favourite things in life. And we're painting on the side.

I lived in Mildura for eight years. I met a lady from Alice Springs, and she used to paint, and I used to just watch, you know, in amazement. I'd call it the community painting because, you know, old girl she'd put down in the story, whatever. And then she might say to her granddaughter, Jessie Anne, I need you to come do a honey ant". Then they wanted another grandkid, "I need you to do kangaroo or something". I reckon she got ripped off heaps of money because when you seen them, oh, they were fucking beautiful.

The first painting that I done was just the butterflies. I like butterflies. To me they represent peace, harmony and some freedom. Something we ain't got now much of. Because with all my screwed-up life, and when I went missing and people were saying, "oh, she's just mental" or- "well, you get tired of hearing that once you get a certain age too, after everything else you've been through, it didn't happen to her. She's just full of shit. She believes her own lies". Well, we tried to commit suicide, yeah? I've been knocking on that door five times, but we're still here. And I think to myself, why? And all the pretty things I seen on them journeys.

I never laugh at people that say- what do you mean by you can see and you can hear. But I had pretty journeys. Like trying to open my eyes, and I was like fairy lights. I was in the tunnel of fairy lights, and there was, like, little kids flying around your head, around your body, laughing like joy. And they said I was there on the bed because I was in a coma, too, for six weeks. Yeah, that I was talking about the fairies or the angels or whatever they were, and star- like stardust. They reckon I was talking about Stardust. I go, my number's not up. I said, well, all I can think of why he wants you because my thing is let's keep it real. I'm a big believer of let's just keep everything real. Don't lie around like what we're doing now, I guess yeah.

I don't know what God's purpose is for me because I've had nothing but heartache. Misery. Suicidal thoughts for many years, especially after being molested from the age of six. That's not good. I've stood up for people with DHS. Saved a couple of kids where they didn't get to take them, how they would normally take them, and you don't see them for a long time. But in these cases, it was the women that had the mental issues or whatever reason the other one had. But yeah, it was the women. But yeah, I get a call. Yeah, and I tell them what to do, how to do it. And today they got their kids saved. Others helped others when they had no support.

Some of my family's even been in jail, Pentridge. Mum and nan would be visiting family in jail, and some of them had also been in Winlaton. I was also in Winlaton. What happened there was that they would give you pills you're out of it. I will never forget that experience. Turana was just down the road. And some of them girls used to jump out, go down wherever Turana was. I wasn't interested in that shit, and I used to think, in enough trouble now, go laying around with boys, you'd definitely be in trouble because one of them did get pregnant down there, too. And then whoever, from the government and that would come and sit around the table, they'd be talking about you, you know, like, oh, jeez, it's been going really well. You know, maybe she's nearly due for release, blah, blah, blah, you know?

I still think about that now. In fact, I had a pretty good life, I guess. Even though I went through the system. Except for the dying part where you were that depressed and stuff. Otherwise, you wouldn't have done none of that either. A lot of is to do with what people say to you, too, I suppose.

To tell my story, I can't say much else I'd have to say I'm a bit of a loner. If I do talk to anyone, it's probably my mum's first cousins. Yeah, I know that isn't very often either. If you see him, you see him. If you don't, you don't. Miss the days of the cup of tea, pop in and you'd yarn about anything. They don't happen no more.

END OF STATEMENT