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Wai 3060, #A6(d)

Witness Name: WHITI RONAKI

Statement No.: WITN1195001

Dated: 20.06.2022

ROYAL COMMISSION OF INQUIRY INTO ABUSE IN CARE

WITNESS STATEMENT OF WHITI RONAKI

I, Whiti Ronaki, will say as follows:

1. Introduction

1.1. My full name is Whiti Ronaki. I was born on GRO-C 1954. My tribal affiliations are Te Arawa, and my father is from Te Puke. I was born Hearing, but when I was three I got the meningitis and lost my hearing.

1.2. The following statement is about my life and focuses on when I attended Kelston School for the Deaf. I experienced physical, psychological, sexual and emotional abuse that continues to have negative impacts on my personal life and wellbeing. It has also affected the lives and the relationships with my children, my mōkopuna and whānau.

Early life

1.3. I was an only child. My parents' names were Pareārohi Paora and Bill Reha. Everyone knew my mother as Pauline. Pauline was a cousin of my birth mother.

1.4. In my birth family, Ronaki, I have siblings to the same parents. I was brought up as a Reha but went back to my birth name, Ronaki. I changed my name as an adult because they were abusive to me.

1.5. When I lost my hearing, I used to get hit and yelled at. They thought I was being cheeky, but I was Deaf. I was very creative, I used to make things. The doctor said I was Deaf, not Deaf and dumb. Because I couldn't hear, I had to learn everything with my eyes. I learned how to milk cows by hand.

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1.6. My father would physically attack me, which made me so scared. He used weapons, anything he could get his hands on: wood, cups, knives. I saw dad cut mum's back with a knife. He was angry that she was drinking too much.

1.7. Dad was an amputee and had only one leg, so I could run faster than him to avoid his violence. I used to hide under the house, and he would try to hit me with a stick to get me out.

1.8. I used to sleep in the chicken house because he couldn't get in the gate – it was too small. He would lift the house up and I would run. I would stay with the dog, which made me feel safe. I would also go for a walk down the farm, which I found peaceful.

1.9. I didn't eat much, because my dad would tell me to come and have a feed, but I would see his angry face and know to stay away from him. We lived in the country on a farm, so there was fresh fruit on the trees that I could eat. I would also go fishing and eat fish raw because I was so hungry.

1.10. My mum tried to protect me, by yelling at him and hugging me. But she couldn't protect me. I was lonely. There were two houses on the farm, and my grandfather lived there too. He had no legs or wheelchair, and he couldn't drive, but he looked after me.

1.11. Growing up they called me mischief. I had difficulty understanding whānau – I didn't understand how they were communicating with me. It was a problem.

Moving to Te Puke

1.12. From the farm, we moved to a town called Te Puke. My mother and father would go drinking at the pub and I would wait outside. Often it was dark and cold. There was a pool hall next door to the pub, and a nice Pākehā man worked there. He would give me food and drink, which was nice and warm. One day I went back, but he didn't work there anymore, and I wasn't allowed in.

1.13. It was easier for me to stay home than to go with them to the pub. I used to stay home with the dog, then they would come home after drinking and fight. It was scary, and I would hide.

Events leading up to admission in care

1.14. My birth father met my father and said that I should go to Kelston School for the Deaf. He said it would be a good thing for me. GRO-B .

GRO-B

2. Abuse

Kelston School for the Deaf

2.1. I arrived at Kelston in 1959, then aged six. I was a boarder pupil.

Arrival at Kelston

2.2. When I arrived, it was dead quiet. Nobody was talking. They were using sign language. They were asking each other who I was. I pointed to my ears to let them know I was Deaf too. The children my age encouraged me to go and play. Most of them were Pākehā. I was stiff. I couldn't relax.

2.3. Later at dinner, I didn't know how to use a knife and fork to eat – I had always used my hands. A teacher hit the back of my hand with the blade of a knife. That wasn't right, I didn't know how to use them. They should have known how to teach me nicely. I eventually learned how to use them by watching the other kids.

2.4. I was scared at the beginning. There were heaps of Deaf kids, and they were all signing. I didn't know how to, so I sat in the corner watching and learning. That night before bed, I learnt about toothbrushes – I had never used one before.

Day to day life at Kelston

2.5. There was a daily routine at Kelston. I would get up, have breakfast, go to school and take my lunch bag. After school I would come home, have dinner, have a bath or shower then get ready for bed. At school we were taught subjects like Maths and English.

2.6. There were two levels to our dormitories. The boys were downstairs and the girls were upstairs. They were like a T-shape, so the big kids were at the top of the T and the little kids were in the other part. They had showers, baths, and toilets in each part.

2.7. I used to love it out on the sports field playing rugby, but at Kelston there were no team sports. I was involved with scouts and cubs, and I would get my uniform all ironed so I could have the best uniform. Mr Hay would teach things like how to tie knots and weaving, and I liked that. He was good to us. He used to give us lollies. He was never grumpy, he had a big heart.

Neglect

2.8. Most of the day students were girls and they would give us food. The girls would get told off by the teachers who told them not to give us food. Why would the teachers stop us from getting food? We were hungry.

2.9. The teaching staff, who worked the day shift, didn't care about our wellbeing. They concentrated on the school work and didn't take any notice. Hostel staff worked nights, and they were different to the teaching staff.

2.10. We didn't have birthday celebrations at Kelston. I don't know if other children had celebrations when they got home, but I know they didn't have them at the school. I always went home for Easter, but I never got any eggs or anything from mum and dad. I saw the Hearing kids got eggs, but I got nothing.

Deaf silencing

2.11. When I went to Kelston in 1960 sign language was banned. If you tried to sign you were strapped – you had to be oral and talk. In the break time we would hide in the playground to sign, and if we saw a teacher we would stop. We learned to sign by watching each other. We made up our own way of communicating. When the teachers were gone we would teach each other.

2.12. This made learning in the classroom hard. I didn't know what the teacher was saying, and I wasn't allowed to sign and ask for help. I couldn't understand, I couldn't see what she was saying. She would write on the blackboard, but I would get frustrated and stamp on the floor.

2.13. We had to wear hearing aids. I didn't like it.

2.14. I would write to try to communicate. The teacher would growl me – she said we would have to listen. We wanted to sign, but even the government banned sign language. I was very comfortable with sign language, and it wasn't fair that we weren't allowed to use it.

Oralism

2.15. My mum and dad said I had to learn how to talk properly or we would get whacked. It took me a long time to learn how to say hello – they said my tongue was lazy, but I was trying my best and it wasn't fair. I had to put a feather in front of my mouth and spit on it to make it move and make the right sounds. It was very difficult.

Education

2.16. The whole class had to learn how to lip read. The teachers didn't know how to lip read.

2.17. I don't think I learned anything at school. I did learn about 15 English words, and they would test me on the same words. There were no new ones, just the same 15 words over and over again. Once I knew them I was frustrated – new and exciting words would have been good.

2.18. I couldn't wait to get out of the classroom. I was not happy because I couldn't understand. But out in the playground, it was better because we could talk using sign language.

2.19. It was a hard life; the day pupils used to do their school work with us then go home to their parents. They used to teach us things. My mum and dad didn't teach me anything.

Racism

2.20. Every morning and night I brushed my teeth. The Pākehā kids got toothpaste, but the Māori kids got soap. They would smell your mouth to make sure you brushed with soap. I was frightened. I complained to the principal, but he didn't believe me. The complaint failed even though I told the truth, and it was abuse.

2.21. The staff were Pākehā except for the cook, who was Māori. She used to take us in the kitchen and give us big bowls of ice cream. We would give her big hugs. It was just what we needed.

2.22. One staff member knew she was feeding us. They would ask, "Where have you been?" It was like being in a prison cell for all us Māori.

2.23. It was difficult because all the staff were Pākehā, and they didn't care about us. Some teachers said hello and were nice and some were grumpy. In my mind it was terrible. There were a few good ones but most of them were terrible and it got worse.

2.24. Some staff didn't like Māori children and didn't treat us the same as the Pākehā children. Others treated us equally. It depended on the staff.

Cultural neglect

2.25. There was no Māori culture or te reo Māori taught at school. All the teachers were Pākehā and it was the 1960s, so we didn't have to be taught our language and culture.

2.26. I was confused about my identity – I didn't know I was Māori. People would ask me if I was Māori, Islander or Indian. I didn't know, and mum and dad didn't explain anything to me. I learnt really late what it is to be Māori.

2.27. I used to come home for the holidays, and I saw a beautiful house. It took a long time for me to know and realise that the beautiful house was a mārae. I didn't understand until I was older.

2.28. I think there is a disconnection when Māori Deaf attend events on the mārae. When I go to a lot of events GRO-B translates for me. Māori sign language needs more interpreters, as not many are fluent in te reo Māori and sign language.

Bullying

2.29. There was bullying at the school by other students. We had lunch bags with our names on them, and the big kids used to take my lunch bag. The big Māori kids would pick on the little Māori kids. I would go hungry because they took my lunch. We would say to the teachers my lunch is gone when the lunches were given out, but the teachers would just say bad luck. We would be really hungry. Sometimes on the weekends we were given a bag of lollies with our names on it and the bigger Māori boys would say come here and then take your bag of lollies, give you two of the them and take the rest.

2.30. There was one boy I used to call 'skinny boy.' A bully picked on him, but we would surround him to protect him. It was a relief when the bully left the school and he wasn't picked on anymore. He told me he used to dream about the bully being in his bedroom.

2.31. The little kids were too scared to say anything, and the teachers didn't care. We had to look after each other. We supported each other to keep safe.

2.32. When I was about 10 or 11, I used to stand up for the children that were being picked on by the teachers. They knew I was strong, and I would look them in the eye. I would see in the children's body language that they were sad because they were being picked on.

Physical abuse

2.33. We used to get hit by the teachers with a leather strap. I got it six times for nothing. I got hit three times on each hand. The principal would decide whether it would be on your hand or on the bum.

2.34. We didn't get put in isolation or seclusion, but there was a dunce hat that we had to wear, and we had to sit in the corner and wait until we were allowed out.

Sexual abuse

2.35. There was rude touching in the bath. There used to be four boys in the bath when there should have only been one at a time.

2.36. There was a staff member named GRO-B and I hated him. There was another man too. They were terrible, they would use the soap and wash you for a long time then put their hands up your bum. The boys in the bath would play with each other too. I felt yuck.

2.37. The other kids would tell their parents what was going on. They would go to the principal, but he didn't believe it. I think there was a lot of abuse, and it depended on how old the boys were. I was in with the five-year-olds, but there was a room for the six-year-olds. The two staff that looked after them were bad.

2.38. I think there were other kinds of abuse, but we didn't talk about it. The Māori boys would talk about it, but the others didn't. But we could see it on their faces. We were all too scared to do anything about it.

Relationship with family

2.39. I went home in the holidays. I would get dropped off with all the other kids in Te Puke. The other parents would be there to pick their kids up. My mum would be at the pub and forget to come and get me.

2.40. I would be waiting in the dark. The police would pick me up and they knew I was Pauline's boy. They would tell me to get in the car, but I would say no and call for my mum because I was frightened. They would take me home. I think it happened about three times.

2.41. After living in the country, I was excited about going to the shops. My nana had moved from the farm into town to be able to get to the shops. Their house was across from the railway station, so I was happy. I loved my nana.

2.42. The abuse from my parents continued in the holidays. They were still the same. Most of the abuse was from my adoptive dad.

Finding out about biological family

2.43. I found out about my biological family when I was 18. Before that, I didn't know my mum was not my real mum. I didn't know what stepmother meant.

2.44. My siblings came to visit at my nana's house, and they looked like me. I didn't know or understand so I shut the door on them. I had never meet them before. I kept saying, "You are wrong, this is my father here."

2.45. The second time my real father visited, I remembered him from when I was little. He had visited when I was hiding under the house. He had known I was under the house. I asked if it had been him visiting the house, and he said yes it was.

2.46. He invited me to come to his family Christmas gathering. I asked my mum who he was, and she said she didn't want to tell me in case I got angry. No one explained what was going on to me.

2.47. When I was 20 they finally explained it to me. That is why I got into the gangs and fighting – I was frustrated with my life. I was fighting a lot, I was terrible.

2.48. One day, I asked my real dad why he gave me away. He told me to get out and closed down. He was so angry. His words hurt me, I had the right to ask. Maybe it was because he'd had too many children. All of them are gone now, except for my Deaf sibling

2.49.

2.50. GRO-B

Leaving Kelston

2.51. I left Kelston in 1969. It should have been in 1970, but I'd had enough. I was on holiday and I got a job with my biological father and my siblings at the freezing works. Dad called the school and they were okay about it. I started just pressure washing – getting the hair off the meat. Then I learnt how to use the knives. I was there for years.

2.52. My next job was at the port at Mt Maunganui driving fork lifts. All my siblings and my dad worked there too.

2.53. I have had a few jobs. My most recent job was at Kelston school as a voluntary kaumatua, which I have recently finished so now I am retired.

Working at Kelston

2.54. When I applied at Kelston, my CV didn't really say much, but they saw my experience and the staff wanted me to work with the Deaf Māori students. We would learn kapa haka, and weaving Māori arts and crafts.

2.55. Before I got the job at Kelston Village, the children feared me because I was covered in tattoos, all over my hands and neck. I went to WINZ and asked if I could get them removed. It cost me $20. When I got the job, the children asked where my tattoos had gone. I said they were butterflies and they flew away. I had changed – I became positive.

2.56. There were not many Māori staff at Kelston, there were only three of us. Now there are two. I worked with young people, helping them.

2.57. I visited a girl at school. She was about 10 and was always in trouble with the teacher. She was shocked when I met her, as she had not met a Deaf Māori man before. She told me that it was her teacher – her teacher was Pākehā and didn't understand Māori ways.

2.58. I told her, "You are Deaf, you are strong. I will help you feel better." I told her I wanted to see her stand strong. She gave me a hug. She also said that she was having difficulties with her mother and father.

2.59. I told the teacher what she said. I told the truth. It was not the teacher's fault, she doesn't know. I told the teacher that if she couldn't teach her, to get a Māori staff member or someone else. They asked me to come back and volunteer one day a week. I think that the Māori Deaf community needs more role models to help the youth.

3. Impact

Cultural disconnect

3.1. I feel that due to how and what I was taught at Kelston, I was alienated from both the Deaf and the Māori community. I couldn't understand the Deaf community because I wasn't allowed to learn in sign language. I got frustrated in the classroom and I gave up on education because I couldn't understand.

3.2. I was alienated from the Māori community, because I was not taught any language or cultural practices that would help me understand and be able to live as a Māori man. I had to learn later in life, so I know a lot more now.

3.3. There is also a disconnect between Deaf and Hearing people. A long time ago GRO-B GRO-B wanted to be an interpreter, so GRO-B signed up for a three year course at AUT. GRO-B kept failing. After the third time I went down to see them, and the teacher was Hearing. I objected – I told him the class should be taught by the Deaf. GRO-B loves to sign, and GRO-B is good at it.

3.4. Pākehā Hearing people controll how the course is run, but it should be taught by Māori. If it was, the outcome would be different. GRO-B gave up after failing all the time. This is still a barrier against Māori.

Name change to Ko Taku Reo

3.5. There was a meeting with all the Pākehā staff, to talk about the rules for Ko Taku Reo, the new name for Kelston. I was angry – I said, "where is the Deaf in this name?" Changing the name is not right, all the school has done is give it a Māori name, but there is nothing underneath it. It is pretending to be Māori.

3.6. I told GRO-B, and GRO-B called the principal to have a meeting. In the meeting GRO-B spoke in full te reo Māori. I was watching the principal and could see he didn't understand. GRO-B GRO-B asked, "how does that name reflect on GRO-B as Māori?" GRO-B said it was time for me to resign, and the principal said, "What about our kaumatua?"

3.7. When I sign in Māori I include Māori concepts, and mix it with English. When I do the karakia, on the marae, I sign in te reo. It should be voiced in Te Reo by the interpreter, to me it doesn't sound right to voice my karakia in English. If you don't understand Māori that is just bad luck. Afterwards I will explain it in English. If you visit my mārae, my whare, my powhiri that is my culture Māori. When people understand that switch in thinking, they get it.

3.8. It is hard because the guy that organises everything is in Christchurch, and he sets the rules. The principal flies to Christchurch to see him. For our meetings we have to use Zoom, but where is the equity in that?

Gang life

3.9. When I was young, I became a gang member. To me this was the result of all the abuse and trauma that I experienced in my childhood. I was young, big and strong. They asked me to join, they showed me the patch, and I said yes.

3.10. The Hearing guys were scared of me. I would tell them to get me a drink and they would say yes sir. I felt like a bully ordering the guys around with my voice. I sounded angry, but that was just my voice.

3.11. I think I was attracted to the gangs because it was a place that I had power and mana that I didn't have before. It was like family, whānau, my GRO-B were there. They would talk slowly at the pub and do basic and simple signs to ask if I was drinking or hungry. I would say yes, and they would order for me.

3.12. I was not involved in the Māori world, I didn't understand it. It was Hearing people that taught me bad things. I would fight with the Mongrel Mob, Black Power, Hells Angels – I didn't care, it didn't bother me. One day I thought, "why am I doing this? These guys have children." I didn't have children then.

3.13. In the gang, all the non-patched prospects had the responsibility of looking after the motorbikes while we were drinking and talking. They would take shifts. I would sign to tell them to look after the bikes and make a fist, so they would know what would happen if they didn't listen.

3.14. If anyone frowned at me, I would pull a fist and be angry. Growing up with the abuse, I would fight with the gangs, fight with whānau. It was wrong, no one taught me – not my parents, whānau, friends. I had to teach myself, and I was trouble.

3.15. The first gang I was with was the Filthy Few in Rotorua. It was like family; GRO-B were members too. I changed to Highway 61 when I moved to Auckland. Then I was fighting with GRO-B for leaving the Filthy Few.

3.16. The other guys used to mouth to me 'Wellington', so off we went. We would get up to mischief. I was drinking and did drugs. I would get locked up by the cops – they said I was drinking and riding my motorbike, but I just followed the gang.

3.17. I loved the gangs – I am a life member and they are old friends. I meet with them and have a few drinks, but I leave my patch at home.

3.18. I met another Deaf man and I told him I was in the gangs. He said, "What are you doing that for? Come to the Deaf club. You can talk, and we do fun things. We play sports, you should come."

3.19. I went clean to Deaf club without my patch, and I met heaps of people I went to school with. It was great talking and seeing them again. I did some self-reflection and I realised that I wanted to go back to my Deaf community and join the Māori Deaf community to help them and the young ones, the youth.

3.20. I take my patch and talk to Māori Deaf youth about my stories and my journey in gangs. I want to teach them and tell them my stories, to not get involved, to think and be careful. Someone could come up behind you and hit you on the head, but you can't hear them coming up. I want to help them, it is rough and really bad. I show them my patch to tell them how bad it is.

3.21. It's different for Deaf people in gangs. Our communication is different. For me, I did some self-reflection and I know I did wrong. I said, "Sorry guys, I did wrong. I'm going back to my Deaf community. I want to help them, tell them what I went through, teach them how to behave properly, and to be safe." GRO-B went to talk to the gang, he told them I was sorry, that I was not taught, and I didn't mean to hurt anyone. I went on to set up and became president of the South Auckland Deaf Club where Deaf people from all over Manukau would come. It was not as far for them to travel as going to the Auckland Deaf Society ("ADS") and entry was free, unlike at ADS.

3.22. I left the gang when I was 25. It was a difficult decision to change. I became a parent in my 30's, and my children and grandchildren are special. I am never abusive to them, and I did not want the gang life for them.

Arrests and going to court

3.23. When I left the gang life, the Māori Deaf community pressured me to change. It made me relax from the Police always getting at me, I was learning a new way and I was having fun. I started to self-reflect on myself and that is why I changed.

3.24. When I was in the gang, I used to go to the pub on payday. Usually on Thursday, Friday and Saturday I would get a jug of beer, and would be drinking it when the Police would come in. I couldn't communicate with them, so they would grab me and put me in the truck. I didn't get to finish my beer, which was a waste of money. I would be confused, I don't know why. They would get my cards out of my wallet to find out what my name is.

3.25. The police were hard on me. I didn't understand the way they communicated or the words they used – I used to ask them what they meant. They kept getting me over and over, locking me up every Thursday, Friday and Saturday. It was horrible and crazy.

3.26. They would make up stories, like saying I pissed in the garden. I would be charged and have to go to court. They would write a report that I didn't understand, and I wanted them to tell me, but there were no interpreters to communicate with me. It was all oral, and even though I tried to lip read, I couldn't follow what was going on.

3.27. When I went to court, I didn't have a court interpreter. I had no idea what was going on. I saw a lawyer, but I didn't know who he was. He didn't explain that he was a lawyer and was there to help me.

3.28. They asked if I was guilty or not guilty, but I didn't know what that meant. I would get fined, lots and lots of fines. I would get done for no reason.

3.29. They were all Pākehā picking on me because I am Māori, it was so frustrating. I would get angry. I didn't know why they treated me like that. I didn't understand them.

3.30. GRO-B. I told him about my past and he asked his boss if he could have a look at my files, but he was not permitted to. I wanted proof of what the police had done. I had never understood the police statements, and what the police said was different to what I said.

4. Looking forward

4.1. I had a hard upbringing. It hurt me to have no whānau support. My GRO-B wouldn't tell me what I wanted to know. I have support people now who help me, and I can do things for myself, but it's easier when I have my support people around me.

4.2. Some things have changed at Kelston that make it better and safer for the children. There are still boarding children, but now they are older, not really little like when I started. This makes it safer for them because they know how to ask for help if they need it. Before it was terrible.

4.3. Lots of the Māori children are not happy because the staff are all Pākehā, I have to tell them that they have to accept it for now. We don't have any Māori staff, and if there are Māori staff, they aren't enough. Some of the Pākehā staff are good and some are not.

4.4. You have to be careful when you talk to Māori Deaf children. They read facial expressions, and when some of the staff yell at the children that makes them feel uncomfortable. We need to help, support and train more staff and teach good communication skills that will help the children. I feel that the Māori Deaf children are still not treated the same as Pākehā children.

4.5. I think that children are still at risk of being abused because they are taken from their whānau. The children still go home for holidays, and when they come back I ask how their holiday was and they say boring. They tell me that when they go home, no one talks to them because their parents don't know sign language.

4.6. A barrier for the children is parents not being able to sign. It would be good if there was funding for teaching parents sign language, as some parents might not be able to afford it.

4.7. I didn't want my children to be abused, so I taught them sign language. People used to ask them if I was abusive and they said no. GRO-B GRO-B. They are precious to me.

4.8. I think there needs to be better relationships and support for the parents. I would like to visit and outreach to them, to support them with what's happening. Hopefully they would open up to me. I would visit them for about an hour and explain things to them. I want to know why they leave the children out – I want to ask them the hard questions. If the children want to learn about Deaf club and sports, the parents need to be involved and take them. If the parents don't want to take them, Māori Deaf will.

4.9. There needs to be social workers and support workers to help between the school and home. If parents are involved, it makes a difference for the children.

4.10. In the future, I think that sign language should be adapted to represent Māori concepts and this work should be done by Māori Deaf, for Māori Deaf. I will support Deaf research on how that should be done, making it better. We need to help each other and get everyone's different perspectives.

Statement of Truth

This statement is true to the best of my knowledge and belief and was made by me knowing that it may be used as evidence by the Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in Care.

Signed GRO-C

Dated: 20/06/2022

Consent to use my statement

GRO-C