

IN THE WAITANGI TRIBUNAL

**WAI 3060
WAI 2143
WAI 3073**

**IN THE MATTER
AND** of the Treaty of Waitangi Act 1975

**IN THE MATTER
AND** of the Justice Kaupapa Inquiry (Wai 3060)

**IN THE MATTER
AND** of a claim by Steven Wilson and Karen Pointon on behalf of Ngāti Turi (Māori Deaf) (Wai 2143)

IN THE MATTER of a claim by Tania Kingi on behalf of Te Roopu Waiora (Wai 3073)

BRIEF OF EVIDENCE OF WHITI RONAKI

Dated: 5 June 2025

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Waitangi Tribunal
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Ministry of Justice WELLINGTON

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MAY IT PLEASE THE TRIBUNAL

Introduction

Ko Te Arawa te waka

Ko of Tapuika te iwi

Ko Ngāti Moko te hapū

Ko Moko te marae

Ko Whiti Ronaki ahau

1. My name is Whiti Ronaki. I was born on 7 March 1954 in Te Puke.
2. I was born hearing. I went to kohanga reo until I was 3 years old. I could speak te reo Māori. But at 3 years old I became Deaf from meningitis, and I stopped talking. I lost my voice and my hearing.
3. I am currently a board member of Te Roopu Waiora. As a board member we work to address barriers that all whānau hauā face across our lives.
4. I have already given a kōrero to the health Waitangi Tribunal panel, where I set out my whole life story.¹

Background

5. When I was born, my birth mum gave me to my grandmother's sister. I don't know why I was given away. I tried to find out, but nobody would tell me and now they have passed away.
6. I didn't know about my birth parents until I was in my early 20s but that was at my birth dad's tangi, he died in 1975. By then, my birth mum had already died. She died in 1957. This had a huge impact on me.
7. Back then, there was just home signs and lip-reading English. Communication was difficult. I could only try and lipread when my stepparents were yelling at me, but it never worked. I would get so frustrated, and I would get in trouble for not knowing or understanding anything.

¹ Wai 2575, #J12.

8. I now know that I have several brothers and sisters. One of my sisters is also Deaf. I knew her at Kelston Deaf School, but I didn't know that she was my sister until much later.
9. I had a very abusive upbringing with my stepparents. That information is set out in my Royal Commission statement **attached** and marked **WR-01**. The transcript of my kōrero to the Royal Commission is **attached** and marked **WR-02**.
10. I gave this kōrero publicly to the Commission and I want to give this kōrero publicly to the Waitangi Tribunal. It is important that the government and the Tribunal know how Māori Deaf have suffered. The abuse that I suffered has had a huge impact on my life.

Kelston Deaf School

11. I started Kelston Deaf School when I was just 4 years old.
12. I had no idea what was happening, my step mum just dropped me at Te Puke train station. No hug or goodbye, nothing. She just dropped me there and took off. There was a man from Kelston there with a group of Deaf children. We picked up more Deaf children from Tauranga and Hamilton.
13. We all arrived at Kelston. We were in absolute fear. We had no idea what was happening to us, no one could explain anything. There were lots of Māori kids. It was the Māori kids who mainly boarded. We were all crying. They couldn't sign, no one could. We were all lined up and marched onto the bus from the train. There were more children on the bus.
14. We were not allowed to use any sign language. If we did, the staff would get a big ruler or a thick leather strap and whack us on the hand, three lashes on both hands. The staff thought we were being cheeky, and they would whack us, but most of the time we had no idea what we had done wrong.

15. Our hands were tiny, sore, and swollen. We would also get strapped on our behinds.
16. The only education we had was lip reading and vocalization. Any mistake and the staff would flick us on the mouth with a ruler or on the hands. Then we had to stand in the corner with a triangle hat for an hour.
17. But we never knew what we were doing wrong, so we never learnt. I didn't learn anything at school.

Racism

18. The Māori kids were treated differently to the Pākehā kids. The teachers supported the Pākehā students but not the Māori students.
19. They separated us and disregarded us. The Māori children were put in the dumb class. The Pākehā kids went into the other classes. The teachers just sat and read whatever they wanted. They would push us on the back of our necks to stand in a line. Then if we didn't, they wacked us on the head. They were constantly physically abusing us.
20. They thought we were dumb because we could not communicate. Children should never be treated this way.
21. The Pākehā kids got given toothpaste, but we were given soap. That's why I stopped brushing my teeth. It tasted so disgusting with the soap on the toothbrush. The older Māori boys would try and help me. They would give me some toothpaste. The staff were just awful.
22. The Pākehā kids lined up first for breakfast, the Māori kids were behind them, and so we often missed out. We were thin and hungry, so we started stealing food from the shops.
23. I had never learnt to eat with a knife and fork. No one taught me. But when I tried to eat with my hands, I would get waked on the back of my hands with the blunt side of a knife. This happened to lots of the Māori Deaf children. Eating with our hands was the only way we knew how. It was so sore on the back of our hands.

24. A lot of the Māori kids wouldn't eat because they were too scared that they would be wacked. We were told "this is the Pākehā way, that this is good manners", but I had no idea. The other Māori children were in the same situation.
25. There was just one Māori teacher when I was a student. But she didn't teach our class. One or two Māori women worked in the kitchen. They were lovely. They saw what happened, we were starving, we were hungry, and they would say, "Shh, come here" and we'd go in a little group to the kitchen and make sure no-one saw. They were so lovely; they gave us ice cream and we were so happy just eating with our hands. If we were fed our brains would work better. And then one day they weren't there, they were just gone.

My Whānau

26. I had two children in my 20s and four more to my ex-wife in my 30s. I am now also a grandfather.
27. My children are great, I taught them sign language, it is their first language. It is real taonga for me to be able to communicate with my children.
28. One of my sons is now a police officer. This was a confronting experience for me, and I have talked with him about my fear and hatred of police. But there have also been positive things, about eight years ago he came and talked to a group of Deaf people in Wellington. I was there too, and he talked about the issues Deaf face with police. He talked in NZSL and everyone there said wow he can sign and wow that is Whiti's son!

Gangs and Police

29. I started learning a lot more once I could sign. In my early 20s, I learnt more about my birth family and my real mum, dad, and siblings. Because my stepparents who raised me were so abusive, it made me really upset.

30. I was young, but I had grown into an angry man. I was isolated from my family and so I joined a gang, I had experienced a lot of pain and hurt.
31. I didn't really know what they were saying, but I wanted to learn to ride a motorbike, so I joined them. I loved the experience of being on a motorbike, the breeze, and driving around in a group. I thought gosh they look cool, and they have beautiful bikes, it was the thrill and the glamour of it. I didn't realize all the other things that came with it. The initiations, the violence, or how the gang worked.
32. For a while, they became my whānau. It wasn't until later that I understood that I had joined a gang.
33. I fumbled my way through. They would be arguing and fighting with the other gangs, and I would just be there.
34. I was young and just following what the other gang members were doing. They would say 'hide this gun Whiti'. I was being picked on as I am Deaf and didn't understand.
35. I realised later that what we were doing in the gangs was wrong. All the fighting and drinking. I wanted children, and I didn't want that for my children. I told the President and he let me leave. I said it's dangerous for me, I am Deaf. I can't hear things like a gunshot warning. If someone was running up behind me, they could stab me. The president said all right, okay, I understand. I was mid 20s when I left.
36. When I was with the gang I got into a lot of trouble with the police. The first time I was arrested I was at the pub. The police would follow me after work to the pub and come in and check on me. They would come in dressed in their big helmets and take my drink from me. They would come into the pub and hone in on me.
37. The first time they came and took my drink, and I tried to resist. I wasn't sure what was going on, what did I do, is buying a jug of beer illegal? I was frustrated and angry, that this was my jug of beer. I fell and injured my shoulder, but they cuffed me anyway. The cuffs were too tight, and my shoulder was sore, gosh it was a shock and cruel and painful.

38. I don't know how many times I was arrested, so many times I cannot count. They would take me away and lock me up every Thursday, Friday, and Saturday. All night, for one, two, or three nights. I didn't even know what I had done wrong and why, they would pick on me all the time. No one explained to me what was going on, there were no interpreters.
39. They would put me in hand cuffs behind my back so I couldn't use any sign language, or communicate and they would punch me.
40. The police officers would ask me questions and get angry, and I would try and gesture in response. I didn't know what they were asking or how to respond. Then they would write on paper, but I don't understand what was written. I couldn't understand what was being asked of me. Sometimes they would get so angry with me that the police officers would punch and kick me. There would be four or five police officers and just me. I was handcuffed so I wouldn't defend myself. Then they would chuck me in the cells overnight and I would go home with a really swollen face and other injuries. I would go home, and everyone would say wow you have been beaten up, and it wasn't by the gangs, it was by the police. Why would they pick on someone who is Deaf, I don't understand. This was at the Avondale, Mt Eden and Henderson police stations mainly, but all over Auckland and Taupō and Rotorua as well. There was no help for me, and that is the trauma that I talk about.
41. Once a gang member shot a gun and said I did it. I was taken to the police station but there were no interpreters. I didn't hear the gun, I didn't do it or know who did and they were all blaming it on me. When I realised, I was being targeted, it was really hard for me to express that to the police.
42. All these letters would arrive in my post. I had no idea what was happening, but they made me pay them lots of money. I had to go to court so many times I have lost count.
43. When I went to court, there were no interpreters. The judge would just ask "are you guilty or not guilty". The judge would then write it on a piece

of paper “guilty” OR “not guilty” and make me pick one. But I didn’t know what that meant. A lawyer was there, but I didn't know if he was on my side. They talked then it finished, and they said go home. I had no idea what had happened.

44. I never went to prison. Instead, I would get locked up at the police station and fined lots of money. I understood I was in trouble, but I didn't know why. I would have to go to the court office, and they showed me how much I had to pay. I have spent a lot of money on fines, but I have no idea what for. It was really awful.
45. Once I left the gang, my trouble with the police stopped.
46. Many Māori Deaf struggle with the police and the law. Even when NZSL interpreters are booked. Older Māori Deaf don't know much NZSL, and they use old signs. There are communication barriers everywhere.
47. Many Māori Deaf are not ready to talk about their traumatic issues, and so this is just the tip of the iceberg. There is so much trauma in our community, from our histories of abuse and isolation. There is only one Deaf counsellor that I know of, but they are not Māori.
48. More recently I have been supporting a younger Māori Deaf boy. The police found him and pointed a gun at him. He was unable to communicate, and he wanted to sign that he was Deaf. This is the sign for Deaf:



Deaf

turi

49. You can see how this also looks a bit like a gun, raising two fingers like this. He was terrified, he wanted to communicate but couldn't say he was Deaf or use his hands to talk because the police would think he was being threatening. Things like this can be really dangerous and terrifying. He was shocked and just at the wrong place at the wrong time. This experience caused him a lot of trauma and has made him a really anxious person.
50. Over the past five years, I have been asked a couple of times to talk to NZ Police about basic Deaf culture. I have not been paid for this work, but NZ Police really need to know basic things like:
- a. If you handcuff a Deaf person, they cannot communicate.
 - b. Deaf people need their eyes to understand what is going on, so turning them around or putting their head to the ground means there also is no incoming communication. As a Deaf person, I need to look at the speaker, to have any change of lip reading, especially when there are no interpreters.
 - c. Deaf people make Deaf noises and use their arms and body to communicate, this is not threatening behavior, it is just Deaf culture.

51. Interactions like this can be scary and intimidating. Sometime police officers also think we can read but many of us cannot. They just say, 'here are your rights, read them' and that's it.
52. In situations like this, Deaf can get scared and respond in fear and with force as there is a lack of understanding. They then get charged with resisting arrest as well.

Whiti Ronaki