

## **STATEMENT OF DALLAS PICKERING**

### **Introduction**

[1] My name is Dallas Pickering. I am a survivor of physical, sexual, emotional abuse and neglect in State care. While in care I was constantly scrutinised, but my voice was never heard. Today I want to share with you my story. Today is a day for my voice to be heard.

### **The beginning**

[2] I was born in 1970. My birth mother put me up for adoption. I have since found out my birth mother was 16 when she became pregnant. There was no benefit then and no support available for my birth mother. Her family did not know she was pregnant. My birth mother had no real choice except adoption. My natural father did not know I existed. My birth mother was Pākeha and my father was Māori. It was not recorded on my birth certificate or my adoption papers that my birth father was Māori. It stated my father had "brown eyes and light olive complexion."

### **An adopted baby**

[3] The state social workers placed me with strangers, a white middle class Pākeha family. The adoptive family did not know my father was Māori. The family already had one child, who was a few years older than me. I was not told that I was adopted until I was seven or eight. In the pre-adoption paperwork, the state social worker made some inquiries into my adoptive parents. The social worker noted concerns about the house being cold and not being fully furnished. The character references came from people who had known my adoptive parents for less than six months.

[4] From the age of 21 weeks there were indicators that my care in my adoptive family home was substandard. There are notes of concern from plunket, doctors, kindergarten,

neighbours, friends of family. These concerns were not linked together by one agency, and no formal complaints were made, not until I was four.

[5] I was hospitalised for six weeks. The doctor reported to the Senior Social worker that I had been "*insidiously neglected*." I was malnourished. I had broken bones. I was almost five years old, but I was the same weight as a 12-month-old baby. I have photos from the hospital. I would like the Commissioners to see these photos as they show the reality of care for some children in New Zealand.

[6] The Social Welfare department filed a complaint against my adoptive parents. As a result, I was placed under a supervision order for three years. This supervision order was supposed to ensure I had regular medical assessments and my adoptive parents were supposed to receive counselling. I was discharged from hospital. The psychologist said I should not be returned to my adoptive parents, but I was placed back with them.

[7] Within three months of being placed back at home, the school complained to social welfare about their concerns. I had bruises, was not allowed to wear shoes to school, had minimal lunches and yet my adopted brother had substantial lunches, I was not allowed to attend class trips, but my brother was. The Social Welfare department filed another complaint. I was then placed in social welfare custody.

[8] However, 18 months later I was placed back with my adoptive parents again. When I lived with my adoptive family I was;

- Malnourished.

I was not allowed to eat with the family. I would only have 2-3 minutes to eat before being told to get up from the table. I had to eat fast or I would lose my food. Then I would have to go to my bedroom for the rest of the night. Sometimes my food was thrown out to me on the lawn. If I wasn't fast enough the dogs would get it and I would miss out. When I stayed in foster homes, the foster parents commented on my behaviour around food, eating too quickly eating scraps and eating bread off the lawn left for the birds. I would steal lunches at school just to try and meet my needs.

- Physical abuse.

I was hit with a jug cord, beaten with a broom, burnt with the iron. I had bruises and sores. I became so fearful I started bedwetting. One time after I wet the bed, my adoptive parents burnt all my things.

-Isolated from the family.

I was left in the backyard by myself for hours. Sometimes till late at night. I learnt to survive. I drank water from the garden hose. I got passionfruit and grapes in the garden. The neighbour used to pass food to me under the hedge. I was forced to sit in the bath for hours and hours as a form of punishment, forced to scrub myself with Dettol and a nail brush because I was told I was dirty.

- Not allowed to go to school with shoes.

In the summer my feet would burn on the hot tar and in winter they would freeze. I did own shoes that I could have worn, but I was not allowed wear them. This was a punishment for me. I did not make any friends at school, just enemies.

-Sexual abuse

A family member abused me when I was about 9 years old. When I tried to speak up I was given a hiding.

[9] At around this time the neighbours formally complained about my treatment. The social worker lodged a third complaint, however, my parents voluntarily placed me under the care of Social welfare, so that complaint was withdrawn.

[10] I was placed in a foster home. Within three days of being placed in that foster home I was sexually abused by another child at the foster home. I was nine and this boy was 13. I told the foster parent what he had done to me. I also told the foster parent that I had been sexually abused by a family member at home.

[11] My disclosure of sexual abuse was recorded by social welfare. No action was taken by the social workers. Within nine months of disclosing the sexual abuse, social welfare placed me back with my family where I had experienced this abuse. My family did not want to pay the state maintenance for my care anymore, so the State placed me back with them.

[12] I did not have anyone I could talk to. Nobody ever asked me how I was.

## **Foster homes**

[13] My childhood and teenage years were spent being shifted from one home to another. I was shifted 12 times by the time I was 15 years old. I was placed in multiple foster homes, group family homes and returned to my adoptive family home on four occasions.

[14] The first time I was placed in a foster home was when I was 5 years old. I was removed from that foster home because of my behaviour. There were always comments and labels like, you're naughty, you're bad, you've got a chip on your shoulder. Nobody ever asked me why I was behaving in this way? I did behave badly, I got into fights at school, I was aggressive. My bad behaviour was always the focus. Nobody focused on how to help me deal with the trauma and abuse I had suffered.

[15] I was then placed in another foster home on a farm. I have good memories of that foster home, but the social workers took me away and placed me back with my adoptive family. My life was hell when I was placed back with my adoptive family. After neighbours complained again about my treatment, I was placed in a family group home.

[16] The first time I was placed in a family group home it was good. There were six bedrooms, so it housed between eight to twelve children. The first caregiver there was good. There were good boundaries, but this was only a temporary placement.

[17] I was then placed with another foster family. They were the best foster parents. They included me in the family, included me in their photos. Birthdays were a positive experience. I went on a family holiday. It felt like normal family life. My foster mother asked for a short break from me, due to my challenging behaviour. She requested counselling to assist me with

my behaviour. When she asked to have me back again, she was told I was not coming back. Instead of providing counselling to assist and support my foster family and me, the state decided to remove me from this foster home. I had been at this home for 18 months. I had built a secure attachment to that family and that was severed by the state. This caused me even more trauma. All the progress I had made while with that family, was undone. I felt guilt and shame for my behaviour that had contributed to this foster placement ending. I was not given an opportunity to repair the relationship. As an adult, I have since met with that family. We have now been able to repair the unresolved issues. I believe it is important to be allowed to try and repair unresolved issues.

[18] The state had nowhere else to put me. My birth parents had handed me over to the state for a closed stranger adoption. My adoptive parents had handed me over to state care. The state had removed me from the best foster home placement I had ever had.

[19] Family group homes, were supposed to be temporary placements for children, who were then re-homed. While other kids came and went from family group homes, I had nowhere else to go. I was stuck in a family group home until I was 16.

[20] The caregiver at this family group home was very violent. She ruled by fear and violence. There was no love or care in that home. It was supposed to be a family home, but the caregiver separated her family away from the rest of us. During the night I would hear the police drop a kid off at the house and when I would wake up and there was a new kid in the bed right next to me. I had no privacy, none of my few possessions were safe, my bedroom was not safe.

[21] Older kids would come into my bedroom at night and sexually abuse me. It became the norm. I did not feel safe at all.

[22] There was no supervision. There are no records of my time at this family group home. The caregiver was not supervised, and neither was I. I did not have any boundaries. I could smoke as long as I bought my own cigarettes. I started using drugs. I would leave the house, roam the streets, meet up with older adult men and have sex with them.

[23] While I was in that family group home, I was raped by the caregiver's brother. It was New Year's Day, the caregiver was out but her brother arrived. He came into my bedroom with cannabis and he raped me. I was too scared to tell the caregiver about this, because I knew I would get a hiding.

[24] This family group home was supposed to be a place of safety, but it was the complete opposite.

[25] A year later, on New Year's Eve, I had been sent to a respite caregivers' home for the Christmas holidays. That evening the respite caregiver got drunk and he raped me. I told his wife and she just told me to move over to a different side of the room.

[26] At 16 I became pregnant. There was no way I was going to adopt out my baby. I had my first child and three years later my second child. At around this time my birth mother turned up in my life. She didn't want to meet me. There was too much shame and guilt. We did not get on very well.

[27] I only found out that I was Māori when I met my Dad. But all my life I had felt that I was Māori. Over the last ten years I have had contact with my Dad. Because of the closed stranger adoption placement, he never had a choice as to whether he could be a father to me.

[28] I brought up my children on my own. I did the best I could, but I had never been shown how to be a good parent.

[29] I started going to Church and made some changes in my life. I studied and did my Diploma in Social Work and post graduate study. I have been working in the field of social work for the last twenty years.

[30] I participated in the Confidential Listening and Assistance Service. I felt like I had a voice there. I did apply for my files from the Ministry of Social Development, the District Health Board, and my adoption file. I did make a civil claim and I took legal advice. I found this process difficult. There were so many people going through the same claims process at the same time. I felt like just one of the very many. I was advised to just accept the apology and take the offer

of compensation. I was also told that none of the caregivers who had abused me in so many ways would be held to account. I still feel there is no real justice or closure for me. I feel that the childhood I experienced in the care of the state foster homes, family group homes and my adoptive families home robbed me of any sense of belonging or identity.

## **Future?**

[31] What has happened to me should not happen to children today, but from my observations and experiences it is still happening. I work in this area of social work and things need to change.

[32] The intergenerational abuse needs to be addressed. We need wrap around services within the home. We need to teach parents how to parent. How to play with their children. Some people and some families need intensive one on one guidance and support.

[33] There needs to be accountability of caregivers. Caregivers are there to support children with trauma. They need to receive specialist trauma training. Currently, caregivers are not focused on the child, rather they are focused on the child's behaviour. Caregivers need more mandatory training and support to be effective and ensure they do not go on to retraumatise the already traumatised children in their care. In situations where a caregiver is struggling with poor behaviour, that caregiver needs to be supported to work through the issues, rather than the current practice of the child being removed from them. The practical impact of this situation, is that caregivers, don't ask for help when they ought to, because they fear their foster children will be removed from them, so problems escalate.

[34] Social workers need to build real relationships with children. Currently, social workers must visit a child they are responsible for every eight weeks. For many this is just a tick box exercise. Social workers need to build trust with the children in state care. They need to be able to spend more time with the children.

[35] There needs to be a complaint mechanism where children are not too scared to complain. Children need to have a voice. Every time I tried to talk, I was given a hiding. It was a lonely place. Social workers who were supposed to be supervising me, did not talk to me,

they just talked to my adoptive mother. I did not have a teacher or a friend whom I could trust. I never felt wanted or loved.

[36] I was sent for counselling as a child, I didn't engage with the counsellor, so the sessions were stopped. As a traumatised child I needed time to build up trust before I could talk to anybody. Nobody persevered in getting me counselling support.

[37] Looking back, I feel like I was not believed or listened to, because I was a child speaking up against a white middle class Pākeha family. I believe if I had been complaining about a Māori family abusing me, then the state would not have placed me back with them, but because my adoptive family were Pākeha I was placed back with them.

[38] This statement cannot show you the lifelong impact this abuse has had on me. I carry with me a massive sense of shame. The stigma of being a foster kid, the stigma of my abuse can't be shaken off. People remember me in that way. I have struggled to form trusting relationships. I have not had anyone to share this with, so I have kept it all to myself.

[39] I have now come forward to share my story with the Royal Commission, and with the public of New Zealand, to help other children not have a childhood like mine.