

Witness Name: Erica Marie Dobson

Statement No.: WITN0856001

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ROYAL COMMISSION OF INQUIRY INTO ABUSE IN CARE

WITNESS STATEMENT OF ERICA MARIE DOBSON

I, Erica Marie Dobson, will say as follows: -

INTRODUCTION

1. My full name is Erica Marie Dobson. I was born in 1980 and I am 41 years old. I am Cook Island Māori.
2. Me and my [GRO-B] were placed in State care on 21 January 1981 when I was 10 months old. I spent some time in foster care and at the Baptist Children's Home in Manurewa. [GRO-B] were placed in a family home together. I returned to my mum's care in 1985 when I was five years old.
3. I was physically, sexually, emotionally, and psychologically abused and neglected by my foster carers, [GRO-B-1] and [GRO-B-2] (the [GRO-B-1
GRO-B-2]).
4. I am sharing my story with the Inquiry because I want to shed some light on areas of concern where me and my foster brother, the late Daryl Brougham, were let down when we were in foster care with the [GRO-B-1
GRO-B-2]. I hope that my care experience will help improve the care system for children and those who work in it.

5. I received some of my care files by email when I was going through the Ministry of Social Development (**MSD**) historical claims process in 2011. A lot of information was blacked out, but my foster carers and Daryl's names were revealed. This information shouldn't have been blacked out because it my care file.

FAMILY BACKGROUND AND EARLY LIFE

6. My biological mum is [GRO-B-4] She is from [an island] the Cook Islands, which is northwest of Rarotonga. It's a two-day boat trip to get to [the island] sometimes in bad weather conditions, which puts me off from visiting. I went to Rarotonga for the first time in 2014 to visit my sister.
7. My mum comes from a big family of 12 children. Her father, my grandad, was one of the first reverends in the Cook Islands. He was a beautiful man. [GRO-B]
[GRO-B] She served in the church and looked after mum and her siblings a lot as grandad travelled for work.
8. [GRO-B]
9. I grew up in South Auckland with my mum and sisters. I only ever grew up knowing my Cook Island side. [GRO-B]
[GRO-B]
10. My dad is [GRO-B-5] He is half Māori (Ngāti Kahungunu), half Pākehā. About six or seven years ago, I found out that dad was adopted as a baby to a Pākehā couple, [GRO-B]. He didn't know his biological family growing up. Dad's biological family also had well-respected Ministers. My dad was born out of wedlock which wasn't acceptable back in the day. His biological mum gave birth to him in Rotorua and left him in an orphanage where he was

adopted out. [GRO-B]
[GRO-B]

11. [GRO-B]

12. I never knew my Māori side growing up, so I didn't really have a connection. I met dad's Māori family for the first time about six or seven years ago. I found them through Facebook. It was such a beautiful, loving, warm and welcoming experience. I finally felt acceptance in my life, and it was like, where have you been all my life? I now also identify myself as part-Māori but for a long time, my abuse and trauma left me not knowing who I was. I have now reconnected and continue to stay in touch with my Māori family.

CIRCUMSTANCES OF GOING INTO CARE

13. My mum and dad [GRO-B] partied a lot, leaving us alone at home most of the time. [if they couldn't find a babysitter we'd just be home alone]
[GRO-B]

14. One time, when mum and dad went our partying, [GRO-B] went to the neighbour's house and told them we were home alone. At the time, there was unrest in our community because a murderer was on the loose. Our neighbour called the Police and reported we were home alone. I think [GRO-B] still feels some trauma and guilt from having to look after us as a [young child], telling on mum and dad, and then being the reason why we had to be taken into care.

15. On 21 January 1981 when I was 10 months old, me and [GRO-B] were uplifted from mum. I was placed under the custody of the Chief Executive of the Department of Social Welfare's (DSW) between 21 January and 11 May 1981 and placed under a guardianship order between 11 May 1981 and May 1986. My file says that I was malnourished when I was uplifted.

16. I was placed in foster care with the [GRO-B-1
GRO-B-2] on 21 January 1981. I was only a baby when I was with the [GRO-B-1
GRO-B-2].

17. My care files say that mum got to visit me sometimes, but I don't remember the visits as I was too young. I don't remember seeing any social workers, but my file notes say they were present in my file.
18. I left the [GRO-B-1] care in January 1985 when I was four years old. I was moved to another foster placement with the [GRO-B-6
GRO-B-7] before I returned home to mum. [GRO-B] returned to mum's care earlier. My file says that I was officially discharged from DSW's care in May 1986.
19. Those first few years of my life were the most important, but I experienced significant abuse and neglect which scars me for the rest of my life. I don't think a person can ever be normal after experiencing what I went through in the first four years of my life.

FOSTER CARE WITH THE [GRO-B-1 GRO-B-2]

20. I was in the care of the [GRO-B-1
GRO-B-2] between 21 January 1981 and January 1985.
21. The [GRO-B-1
GRO-B-2] were Pākehā. [GRO-B-1], the mum, was the head of the house. She was like a witch, just really evil. She was an extremely cold woman, and there was no love or warmth from her. [GRO-B-2] was an accountant. He was the nicer one. The [GRO-B-1
GRO-B-2] were well-off.
22. The [GRO-B-1
GRO-B-2] had three biological children aged 7 and 5 years and 21 months old, and an adopted child, [GRO-B-8], who was 8 years old. I was 10 months old, and Daryl was about 14 months old when we were placed with them. Daryl was placed in the care of the [GRO-B-1
GRO-B-2] around the same time but before me. The [GRO-B-1
GRO-B-2] had two more biological kids when we were in their care. In the end, they had eight kids in their care. I don't understand why DSW placed two babies with the [GRO-B-1
GRO-B-2] when they had their own kids.
23. In 1983, the [GRO-B-1
GRO-B-2] decided to move to the U.S.A and they asked my social worker if they could take me with them for three years. Around June 1983, my mum told my social worker that she didn't consent to me moving. This prompted the [GRO-B-1
GRO-B-2] to ring my social worker on 16 June 1983 and request that I be immediately removed from their care.

Temporary placement with the Baptist Children's Home, Manurewa

24. The following day, I was moved to the Baptist Children's Home in Manurewa. I was at this home for about seven weeks. I remember being sad and lonely and just having my clown doll with me. I remember being pretty emotionless. My file refers to me as passive and emotionless at the Children's Home.
25. Further medical assessments were done on me in July 1983, which found that I had been emotionally deprived, neglected and possibly abused. Over the seven weeks, my "physical health rapidly improved", however, it deteriorated again when I was taken back to the [GRO-B-1
GRO-B-2]
26. My file states that my mum changed her mind and consented to me moving to the U.S.A. I was moved back to the [GRO-B-1
GRO-B-2] care in August 1983.

Living in California with the [GRO-B-1
GRO-B-2]

27. In October 1983, me and Daryl went to California with the [GRO-B-1
GRO-B-2] We were in California for 14 months. Over 14 months, social welfare didn't monitor us directly. My file says that a "courtesy supervision arrangement" was in place between DSW and social services in California. I think [GRO-B-1
1] may have written some letters to the social worker in New Zealand saying we were fine, so no one ever came to visit us. I don't remember being visited or spoken to by a social worker in California.
28. Since April 1981, before we went to California, concerns were raised about me and Daryl's health and safety under the care of the [GRO-B-1
GRO-B-2] No one did anything about it until January 1985 when we were removed from them.
29. The [GRO-B-1
GRO-B-2] were not checked or vetted before I was placed in their care. They should've been. There were lots of doctor's notes in my file about concerns of abuse, and there were lots of notes about Mrs [GRO-B-1] always being angry, snappy, nasty, and trying to play super mum with all the children in her care. The abuse was littered throughout my file, so why did social welfare not intervene?
30. [GRO-B] I saw [GRO-B-1 GRO-B-2] on the news. [GRO-B-2] was convicted of fraud [GRO-B]

There were some media articles about them. I read somewhere that [GRO-B-1] had died as a poor lady but I'm not sure whether she is dead or alive.

ABUSE BY THE [GRO-B-1
GRO-B-2]

31. I was very young when I was with the [GRO-B-1
GRO-B-2], but I remember some of the things that happened to us. I've had flashbacks of some of the abuse.
32. My file shows that between April 1981 and 4 August 1983, before we went to California, many concerns were raised by medical professionals, social workers, and a neighbour about my welfare:
 - a. 30 April 1981: During a medical assessment, the doctor found that I had a loose lower left incisor and bruising on my fingertips. There was no explanation for this.
 - b. 11 December 1981: A bite mark was observed on my right cheek, which Daryl apparently did.
 - c. 28 April 1982: Bruising was observed on my body.
 - d. 5 July 1982: I had finger-tip bruising.
 - e. 9 November 1982: A neighbour raised concerns about how me and Daryl were treated very differently to the [GRO-B-1
GRO-B-2] children.
 - f. 20 February 1983: During a home visit, bruising was observed on my face.
 - g. 2 March 1983: I had bruising on my body.
 - h. 11 May 1983: I had a bite mark on my left cheek, apparently done by Daryl.
 - i. 16 May 1983: I had bruising consistent with bite marks on my body.
 - j. 14 June 1983: My left cheek was "quite scratched". The social worker noted in my file that whenever she saw me and Daryl, we either had a bruise or some kind of mark on our face.

- k. 16 June 1983: The [GRO-B-1
GRO-B-2] overreacted to the initial decision that I couldn't go to the U.S.A with them. They called the social worker and requested that I be immediately removed from their care.
- l. 17 June 1983: I was uplifted and placed in the Baptist Children's Home in Manurewa. My file said I was emotionless about the move.
- m. 22 July 1983: A doctor's assessment reported that I had been neglected, emotionally damaged, and possibly abused. My social worker didn't accept the doctor's conclusions, stating that it would be more damaging to remove me from the [GRO-B-1
GRO-B-2] care as I was already bonded to them.
- n. 4 August 1983: While at the Baptist Children's Home, a medical assessment was done on me which found that I was a "skinny child with protuberant abdomen", probably caused by emotional deprivation. The doctor noted that I had poor growth since being fostered.
33. Despite the above, my social worker moved me back to the [GRO-B-1
GRO-B-2] care in August 1983 and consented to me moving to California with them in October 1983.
34. I continued to suffer significant abuse from the [GRO-B-1
GRO-B-2] as a three/four-year-old. I can't remember whether it was at or before [GRO-B] we went to California, but I was constantly locked in a room with Daryl. I remember looking outside and it was always dark.
35. Me and Daryl were treated very badly compared to the [GRO-B-1
GRO-B-2] children. We always sat away from them during meals, and we weren't allowed to play together. The [GRO-B-1
GRO-B-2] kids got love and attention and me and [GRO-B₃] didn't. All I can remember is the bad things that happened to us.
36. I was repeatedly beaten by Mrs [GRO-B-1]. One time, she beat me with an iron on the shoulder drawing a massive amount of blood. I don't recall what I did wrong, just that she was angry at me. I remember being in a lot of pain and my shoulder was bleeding a lot. Mr [GRO-B-2] cleaned me up in the bathroom and it made me feel like he cared about me.

37. There was definitely sexual abuse from Mr and Mrs [GRO-B-1
GRO-B-2]. I've had some flashbacks of the sexual abuse over the years.
38. I was forced to eat soap and vinegar as punishment, which explains why I hate vinegar now. Me and Daryl always had to eat on the floor away from everyone else. I was also forced to sit in the chicken coop as punishment.
39. As mentioned above, I was locked in a room with Daryl all the time. We were always isolated together. We were always starving and thirsty when we were locked away. One time, Daryl ate a rotten apple from the rubbish which made him vomit. We were so thirsty that often, me and Daryl would sneak to the toilet and drink water from it using a cup. We were lucky to not have been caught doing this.
40. Another time, we broke out of the room we were locked in, stole food from the kitchen and hid it in a drawer. One of the [GRO-B-1
GRO-B-2] kids, [GRO-B-9] caught us and we begged him not to tell Mrs [GRO-B-1]. [GRO-B-9] went and told on us and Mrs [GRO-B-1] came into the room, found the food, and gave me and Daryl a big hiding with a belt. She then left us in the room again. We were so hungry.
41. Another time in California, me and Daryl were swimming in the pool and I nearly drowned. I couldn't get out because Mrs [GRO-B-1] removed the steps when we got into the pool. I was about three or four years old. Mrs [GRO-B-1] didn't seem to care. Daryl told me it was a neighbour who came over and helped us out. I don't recall too much detail around this incident.
42. I was also forced to sleep every night. Mrs [GRO-B-1] was a very pale white woman and at night time, she would sit at the end of my bed and just stare at me until I went to sleep. I found this quite scary.
43. I received no love or attention from Mrs [GRO-B-1]. She hated us. I always felt coldness from her. I think the [GRO-B-1
GRO-B-2] were twisted people. There was no love, they just wanted to torture children. Maybe it was because we weren't Pākehā like them – I just don't understand it. In hindsight, it was a blessing to have Daryl with me. We protected each other.

44. Me and Daryl should've never been placed with the [GRO-B-1
GRO-B-2]. We should've been removed from their care when DSW initially became aware of concerns of abuse in 1981.

POST-CALIFORNIA

Returning to New Zealand

45. When we were in California, the [GRO-B-1
GRO-B-2] wrote to DSW and requested that me and Daryl be removed from their care. I don't know exactly how the move back to New Zealand came about but I think from my records it was because social welfare was failing to visit us in the U.S.A.
46. We returned to New Zealand in December 1984, after 14 months. In January 1985, we were taken to the paediatric ward of Auckland Hospital due to concerns about our wellbeing. We were in hospital for about two weeks, but this felt like a really long time.
47. I was diagnosed with social neglect. The doctor noted that I had suffered years of poor growth, poor feeding, and emotional deprivation, was systemically starved and it was clear that I had been physically and emotionally abused. Apparently during a medical assessment, I showed concerning behaviour which indicated I had been sexually abused.
48. We felt safe at the ward. I remember the ward putting on a big party when we left the hospital.

Foster care with the [GRO-B-6 GRO-B-7]

49. When we left Auckland Hospital in January 1985, me and Daryl were placed in foster care with [GRO-B-6] and [GRO-B-7] in Bucklands Beach. I was four years old. [GRO-B-6 GRO-B-7] were beautiful people. We finally felt safe and loved in their home. My physical health continued to improve when I was with them.
50. I was removed from the [GRO-B-6
GRO-B-7] care before Daryl. I felt like I was with the [GRO-B-6
GRO-B-7] for a long time, but my file says I was only with them for one month.

51. The separation affected me so much. He was all I had, and he was the only person who truly cared for me. For many years, it left a hole in my heart.
52. I still stay in contact with the [GRO-B-6
GRO-B-7]. I met up with them in 2018. [GRO-B-5] shared that me and Daryl showed concerning behaviour which indicated we had been sexually abused by the [GRO-B-1
GRO-B-2]. For example, [GRO-B-6] said Daryl would always go under her skirt, and that me and Daryl liked to play mums and dads. I had blocked out a lot of these memories but have had flashbacks of the abuse over the years.

Return to mum's care

53. After a month with the [GRO-B-6
GRO-B-7], I went back to mum's care in February 1985. I was officially discharged from DSW's care in May 1986 and never entered State care again.
54. Mum had a new partner; he was a nice man. Mum wasn't a bad person; alcohol was just a [GRO-B] problem for her. [GRO-B].
[GRO-B]. My sisters were a bit older now, so they took care of me.
55. [I felt like my sisters were nasty to me, always fighting] I think they were going through their own trauma and it would've been easier to take it out on me. They always treated me differently, teased me, bullied me, always left me out of things and made me feel invisible.
56. Dad had also moved on with his life. He remarried and had children with his new wife. I would stay with them once in a blue moon. [GRO-B].
[GRO-B]
57. I used to suffer nightmares for years following. I just always felt undervalued and invisible which I think goes to the root of my trauma. My mum was never affectionate towards me. She never hugged me, or said I love you. It was just a lonely and painful life growing up.

DISCLOSURE OF ABUSE

58. For most of my life, I forgot about the trauma I experienced with the GRO-B-1
GRO-B-2. I somehow wiped it from my memory. I reunited with Daryl when he was going through his MSD claim about 10 years ago, which brought back a lot of memories for me.
59. When Daryl started talking about our time in care, I started realising the extent of the abuse we experienced under the GRO-B-1
GRO-B-2 care. Everything made sense to me – why I did things and why I was the way I was. I just never had anyone to talk to about this sort of stuff and I still wonder now where I fit in.

IMPACTS OF THE ABUSE ON ME

60. Because of the child abuse I suffered; I grew up with issues. The impacts of the abuse on my life have been massive.
61. Due to my poor development as a child, I struggled to concentrate in school especially in learning comprehension. I just couldn't comprehend what I was reading.
62. I always got into bad relationships or failed to maintain relationships. I would help people but just get abused by them. My biggest fear growing up was people not liking me so when I lost a boyfriend or someone close to me, it was really painful. I feared speaking in front of people, so I swore a lot to express how I was feeling.
63. I had really bad mental health and there were times when I nearly took my own life. I just had no balance in my life, and I was extremely lost. Even when my marriage broke down and when my kids were diagnosed with medical conditions, I nearly took my own life. I had no one to talk to about these things and it really took a toll on me. I just felt alone and lost. It was a life of heartache, rejection, being confused, low self-esteem, being angry and feeling no love. This is the effects of child abuse.
64. I was always skinny. When I returned to mum's care, I struggled with eating. I remember going to a friend's house and eating a lot of their food because I was

always starving with the GRO-B-1
GRO-B-2 I guess the positive thing out of this is that I have a passion to cook and feed the homeless and the disadvantaged.

65. I smoked a lot and I turned to alcohol like my parents, and I watched them do the same. It was a kind of false love for me. I had a lot of pain in my life. There was just no love from my parents. Drinking destroyed me a lot. All my emotional problems came out when I drank and after this, I would just want to take my own life.
66. It wasn't until I found my faith in Jesus recently when things started to turn around and get better for me. I'm a survivor of all of that. I finally have light and peace in my life. I want to share the goodness of God to all of humanity and bring light to darkness of every painful heart.

REDRESS: MSD CLAIM

67. On 19 October 2011, I started a historical claim with the MSD for the abuse I suffered in the care of the GRO-B-1
GRO-B-2
68. In July 2015, I declined a fast-track offer from the MSD because I felt that the amount offered did not reflect the abuse I suffered and the impact it had on me. I decided to go for a full assessment of my claim. I was interviewed by an MSD social worker, and I had to retell them my abuse and the impact it had on me.
69. In mid-2016, I was offered a higher sum of compensation and an apology from the Chief Executive of the MSD. I accepted this offer.
70. The process was long and exhausting. The process was like putting a band aid on the issues. For me, there is no amount of money that would ever heal the wounds and the years that have been stolen from my life because of the impacts of child abuse.

71. The MSD completed a case assessment for my claim. In this assessment, the Ministry acknowledged that there were two significant practice failures by the DSW during my time under the care of the GRO-B-1
GRO-B-2.
- a. There was a failure to follow the recruitment process for caregivers. The GRO-B-1
GRO-B-2 were not vetted, there were no referee checks, no home visits and no forms completed before they became my foster caregivers. It wasn't even noted on my placement record that the GRO-B-1
GRO-B-2 already had children, what their home situation was or whether there was any discussion about their roles and responsibilities as foster carers.
 - b. There was a failure by DSW to identify abuse and investigate concerns of abuse. This to me is obvious because the abuse was littered throughout my file.
72. Like I said before, the impacts of child abuse have been massive for me. When everything is wrong for the first five years of your life then it follows you for the rest of your life.

IDEAS FOR TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE

73. I think there needs to be better communication between the Ministry, caregivers, families of children and the children themselves. Without communication, there is no relationship. I don't recall ever being spoken to as a child.
74. There should be proper structures, policies, and procedures in place so that caregivers are always considered safe to care for the child. The mental health and the backgrounds of caregivers need to be looked into and understood. There must be ongoing check-ups and follow ups on caregivers and children and if there are any alarm bells, the Ministry should act on it.

75. I think that if the GRO-B-1
GRO-B-2 had been properly vetted and inspected, things may have been different for me and Daryl. The signs of child abuse were there from the beginning, but no one did anything about it.

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: Erica Dobson

Dated: 03/12/2021