

Witness Name: Ihorangi Ahi Bay Potiki Reweti-Peters

Statement No.: WITN0528001

Dated: 18 January 2022

ROYAL COMMISSION OF INQUIRY INTO ABUSE IN CARE

WITNESS STATEMENT OF IHORANGI AHI BAY POTIKI REWETI-PETERS

I, Ihorangi Ahi Bay Potiki Reweti-Peters, will say as follows: -

Introduction

1. My full name is Ihorangi Ahi Bay Potiki Reweti-Peters. I was born on GRO-C 2005.
2. In this statement I set out my experiences of being in foster care and residential care. During this time, I experienced wonderful times and also very dark and scary situations, including physical and psychological abuse.
3. I am giving this statement in the hope that no other rangatahi and tamariki endure the abuse I did while under the care and protection of the state.

Ko Wai Au

4. I am 16 years old. I was born and raised in Christchurch.
5. My mother is Pākehā and my dad is Māori from Ngāti Tūwharetoa. I have two brothers and one sister. I am the youngest in my whānau.

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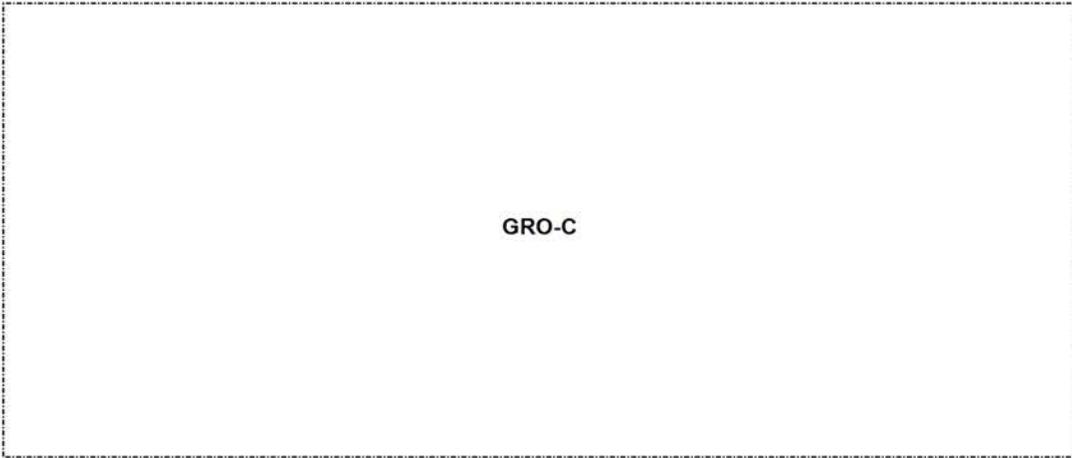
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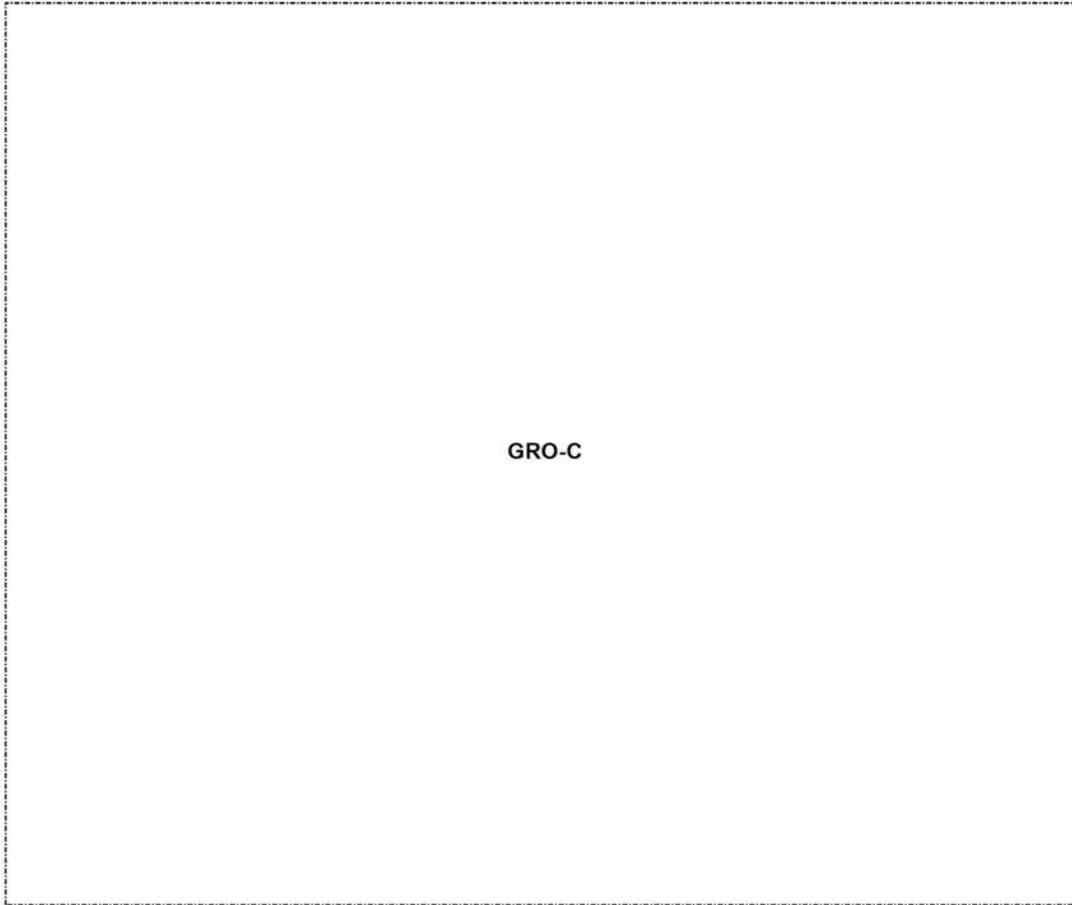
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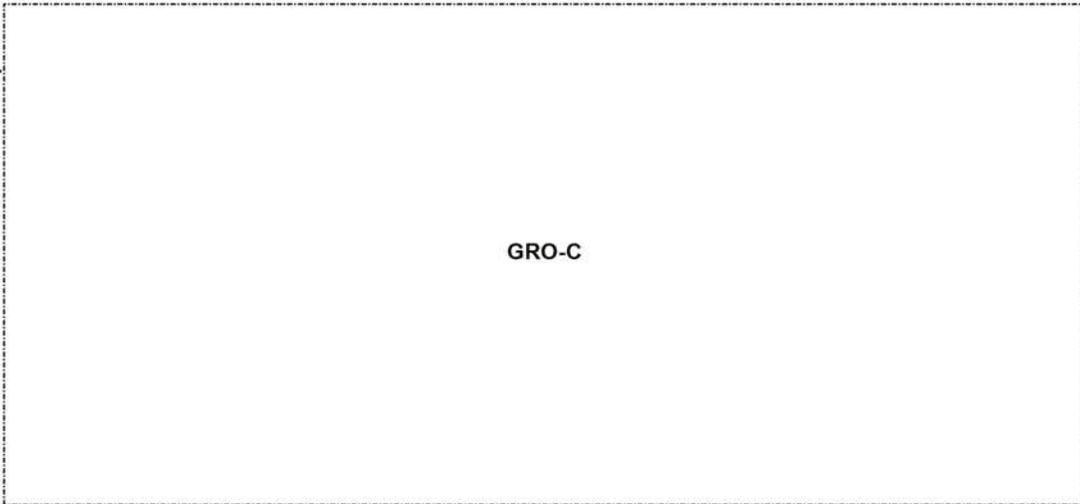
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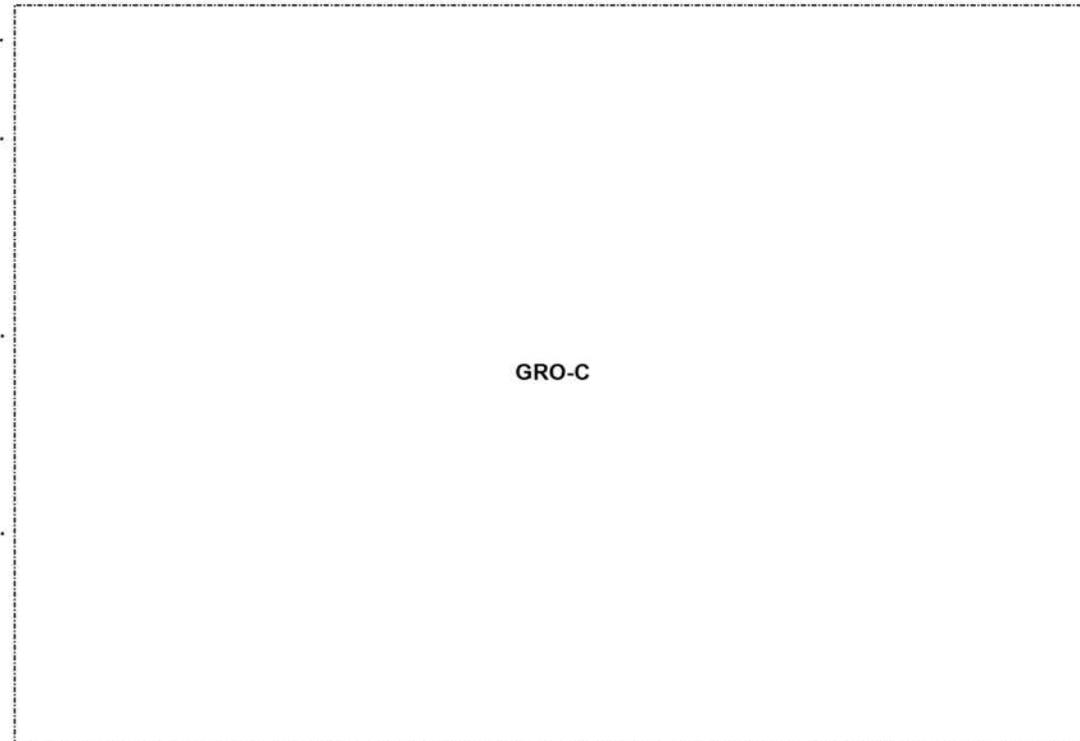
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49. This is my seventh placement in six years, since being moved into state care when I was 10.

Impact of multiple placements

50. Being placed in multiple family homes and sent to live with foster care givers has meant that my connection with my own family has weakened. I was separated from my brothers, and this has affected our bond. We don't talk to each other anymore.

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52. I know that the feelings of anger, suicide and stress come from being abused while in the care of the state.

53. Through it all, the support of my grandparents and VOYCE Whakarongo Mai, I have learned how to deal with these feelings. VOYCE Whakarongo Mai is an independent advocacy service for children in care that I have been engaging with for the last two years. Lately I have started working with them.

My advocacy work for rangatahi and tamariki in care

54. As I said at the start of this statement, I don't want any other rangatahi and tamariki to endure the abuse I did while under the care and protection of the state.
55. There are two things that I am passionate about – making the current state care system better for all rangatahi and tamariki, and advocating for young people's mental health.
56. In May 2021, I was invited to speak at the Child Poverty Action Group Post-Budget Breakfast about my experience and my hopes and dreams for rangatahi and tamariki in state care, and where I want to see improvements. That's when I made two of my many calls to action to Oranga Tamariki and the New Zealand Government.
57. The first call to action was to have mandatory counselling for rangatahi and tamariki in care. I have since amended my call to action to 'improving access for mental health and counselling and well-being support for rangatahi and tamariki', because I found out that counselling, at least, is already legislated for, it just isn't actually happening.
58. The second call to action was to ask the Government not to narrow the Royal Commission's scope by removing the requirement for the Commission to look at modern day care policy settings, which the Government announced in April 2021.
59. I wrote to Hon. Jan Tinetti, Minister for Internal Affairs and the Minister responsible for the Royal Commission, and emphasised that the Commission's Terms of Reference needed to be changed back to allow young people to share their experiences. The Minister responded that the removal of modern day care policy settings from the Commission's Terms of Reference meant that this was a matter for the Commission, but she "would advise any Rangatahi or Tamariki who are currently in care and have experienced abuse to contact the police."
60. I decided to write to the Prime Minister, explaining the problem with going to the police and other available options:
 - a. From my own experiences of engaging with the New Zealand Police, there is no direct way that young people can report what has happened to us in care via the police, and it is a daunting and traumatic experience to re-tell our accounts

of abuse. In my letter to the Prime Minister I agreed that this should be an option if the young person chooses it, but that the Royal Commission was an important pathway that young people should have to share their experiences and provide recommendations to help stop this cycle of poverty, abuse and neglect.

- b. Young people in the care of Oranga Tamariki don't feel comfortable raising their concerns and sharing their experiences with Oranga Tamariki's 'Feedback and Complaints Line', because Oranga Tamariki staff are the people that the young people have a problem with. Young people in care are scared to raise their concerns because they are worried that it may affect their current placement, put them in a bad position, or that they may experience further abuse and/or neglect.
 - c. To access the Historic Claims Unit at the Ministry of Social Development young people have to be over the age of 18 and have been out of the care system or a faith-based institution for at least two years.
61. That call to action by me (and others) was answered. The Government decided "to continue the discretion to allow the Royal Commission to consider issues ... after 1999 for the purposes of making recommendations on redress, or to ensure that factors that allowed abuse to occur in care do not persist". That is why I am here telling my story today.
62. My May 2021 speech received a lot of attention and got the word out. After that I was invited to meet with the Chief Executive of Oranga Tamariki to advocate for young people in care, and discuss how my call to action about mental health and wellbeing needed to be taken more seriously at all levels in Oranga Tamariki.
63. I am aware that 2,700 young people in care are described as having a mental illness and 80% of young people in state care have at least one suicidal thought in their lifetime. These numbers are high - too high. I believe that, if the issue was actually taken seriously within Oranga Tamariki then those figures wouldn't be so high. My own experience shows that Oranga Tamariki staff are not taking mental health seriously. I understand that there is no mental health or suicide prevention training among Oranga Tamariki staff and caregivers.

64. I have just helped to write a proposal document to Oranga Tamariki seeking a training workshop for suicide prevention. One of the recommendations is about improving the induction of social workers, staff and caregivers.
65. I have also met with the Mental Health and Wellbeing Commission and the Office of the Children's Commissioner about these issues.
66. I also spoke at Involve, the national conference for youth health and development in Aotearoa, about my experience in care. It was mostly a positive experience. However, my speech received a negative response from Oranga Tamariki staff members in attendance. In fact, one adult male staff member, while on stage, told the whole of the conference how the staff felt attacked by my speech and, while "he understood" my journey, "the other thing that isn't spoken about is that there is this new wave of people that are in the organisation". He said that even though he is Māori and a huge advocate for his people, he's also the Treaty partner now, so he can't go to the Government and say "you're not doing enough for my people", because he is responsible now. That was really hard for me. I don't like to upset people, but I didn't deserve to be publicly criticised just for sharing the truth about my experience – especially by one of the very people that is supposed to be concerned about my care. I also don't think he is right. If Māori staff in Oranga Tamariki can't tell the Crown that not enough is being done for their people, then that is not right, and needs to change.
67. I received support from local MPs to draft a Bill that makes properly resourced mental health and counselling support a statutory entitlement under the Oranga Tamariki Act for every young person in care, and to seek a policy change in the national care standards to include reference to mental health. We are currently in the development and consultation process. Part my mahi at VOYCE Whakarongo Mai is going to be facilitating some group discussion and gathering other young people's voices to add weight to the Bill.
68. I also ended up on the Christchurch Youth Council and won the 2021 Prime Minister's Oranga Tamariki Award, for the category of Te Iho Pūmanawa – Whakamana Tangata and the 2021 Young Change Maker Award at the Waitaha – Canterbury Youth Awards.

Moving Forward

Goals

69. I want to achieve some goals in my life. One of my career goals is to be a politician and advocate for those who are in care.
70. I also love riding horses and I enjoy the time I spend riding. One day, I would like to own my own horse.
71. I am trying to build my knowledge of my whakapapa more. Currently, it's proving to be challenging as Oranga Tamariki are not wanting to give it to me. They say it is because my whakapapa is confidential.
72. One day I plan to visit my tribal lands in Taupō, which is on my father's side. I want to explore the different marae in Tūwharetoa that I am from. I would like to learn more te reo Māori.
73. I want parents of children in care to have access to free counselling and drug rehabilitation services so there is hope the family unit can become one again.
74. I believe that Oranga Tamariki has a responsibility to help tamariki and rangatahi Māori visit their marae. This should be a priority. I think that Oranga Tamariki should fund our journey of discovery. They should pay for my trips to Taupō and Rotorua.
75. I would like an apology from Oranga Tamariki and the Minister responsible for Oranga Tamariki.

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:

18/1/2022

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