

Witness Name: GRO-A Ms EL

Statement No.: WITN0863001

Dated: 03/03/2022

ROYAL COMMISSION OF INQUIRY INTO ABUSE IN CARE

WITNESS STATEMENT OF: GRO-A Ms EL

I, GRO-A Ms EL, states as follows: -

Introduction

1. My full name is GRO-A Ms EL, that was also my name while I was in care. I am 55 years old, born GRO-B 1966 in GRO-B in Southland. I currently live in GRO-B
2. My statement covers my time in state care, including nine foster homes (in three of which I suffered abuse), and the year I spent in Kingslea.

Early life and childhood

3. I come from a family of five kids, we lived in Southland. I was the third oldest child, I had two brothers and two sisters.
4. My mother was called GRO-B my father was GRO-B GRO-B. Dad was a coal miner in the Ohai mine. He eventually died of cancer.
5. Mum was the dominant one in the relationship; Dad was a very placid man. My mum did some pretty horrific things to my dad but I never saw him raise a hand to my mother and he never even raised his voice. I think to him marriage vows were forever.

6. I believe my mother had psychological problems. She used to verbally and physically abuse me. I remember as a child trying to get out of swimming lessons because my backside was so bruised from her beatings. I knew it was wrong to be beaten that much, but I felt embarrassed by it. My father would take us kids away on the weekends, I think for some reprieve.
7. I have suffered extensive sexual abuse throughout my life. It began when I was a child, probably when I was about seven or eight years old. I was being abused by three or four people, they were either friends of my parents or [GRO-B] [GRO-B] I remember one of them was a man called [GRO-B] [GRO-B] I believe he also molested [GRO-B-1]
8. [GRO-B-2] also sexually molested me and [GRO-B-1] Prior to me going into care, the police and the district health nurse investigated the sexual abuse by [GRO-B-2]
9. As a kid, I was never told about the right and wrong of it. I just thought it was what just happened and I didn't know it was wrong.
10. Later, [GRO-B-1] fell pregnant to [GRO-B-2] The baby was given up for adoption.
11. When I was between about eight and 10 years old, I remember an attempted rape by a man that my dad worked with in the coal mines. The man attempted to hold me down and try and get me to take my clothes off. I wouldn't do it, so he tried to drown me in the river. I was saved by a man called [GRO-B] who got him off my back and punched him. This was reported to the police, and I had to undergo a rape exam. The man ended up being charged with attempted rape and going to jail.
12. Before I went into care, my mum sent me to see a psychiatrist in Ashburton. I don't know why this was, it might have been my behaviour because she really hated me smoking cigarettes. I'm not sure what the result of the psychiatrist visit was.
13. I was smoking cigarettes from a really young age because my brothers got me started. My smoking caused a few problems in different placements. At age 10 I started getting in trouble for stealing cigarettes.
14. After a while I ended up in the family court in Otautau. I was initially sent back with my parents with a two-month adjournment on the case (Case report for the Children and Young Persons Court, 11 December 1978 [ORT0050768]).

15. As a result of the second court appearance, I was offered an option to either attend a Catholic school or go into foster care. I decided to go into foster care because I thought it would keep me safe from what was happening at home. I was put under the guardianship of the state (Guardianship order, 12 February 1979 [ORT0050865]). None of my siblings went into state care.
16. My social worker was Miss Duff, who was from Invercargill. I know my mum had her in tears a lot, it was just games she was playing with her. She was my most consistent social worker. When I was in Gore I think there were others that helped cover for her. Miss Duff would often pick me up and drive me to new placements or when I went home to Mum and Dad's.

My Time in care

GRO-B-3 Home, Riverton

17. In February 1979, when I was 12 years old, I was initially placed in a home run by GRO-B-3 in Riverton. That home was okay, but it was only temporary for about three months before I was moved.

GRO-B-4 Home, Riverton

18. The GRO-B-4s lived in GRO-C Rd, Riverton. I was only there for a few days in May 1979 before I was moved on. Mrs GRO-B-4 wanted to know why I ended up in foster care, I was ashamed and didn't want to talk about it. She hit me with a belt around the backside until I told her why I was in care. She also belted me around my backside for smoking, but that was only a couple of times.
19. My mother actually kicked up a stink about this abuse, even though she herself had been physically abusing me. I think she wanted to take the chance to have a go at someone and demonstrate her dominance. She told the social worker I think, but nothing came of it.

GRO-B-5 Home, Wyndham and GRO-B-6 Home, Gore

20. In June 1979, I lived in these two foster homes. They were fine, but I do remember one of the carers getting a bee in her bonnet when my mother wouldn't let me go home for the weekends, as it was arranged I would. I recall I ended up having to go and stay with friends over a few weekends because I couldn't return home.

21. The [GRO-B-6] lived on [GRO-C] Street in Gore. This was supposed to be a permanent placement, but they were old and retired so I ended up being there for only a few months.

[GRO-B-7]
[GRO-B-8] Home, Mataura

22. On 28 September 1979, I went to [GRO-B-7]'s foster Home in Mataura. This was supposed to be a temporary placement, but by December the [GRO-B-7]
[GRO-B-8] had decided to accept me on a permanent basis. During the year I spent at the [GRO-B-7]
[GRO-B-8] Home, I also had some weekends at home, two weeks with my Aunt [GRO-B] in Ashburton in December 1979, and I had a temporary placement in Mataura with the [GRO-B-9] in March 1980.

23. Mrs [GRO-B-7] and her husband, [GRO-B-8] had also adopted a little boy called [GRO-B]. He would have been about one or two. I remember him being treated okay.

24. I wasn't treated well at the [GRO-B-7]
[GRO-B-8]. I was sexually abused by [GRO-B-8]. The sexual abuse happened in the shearing shed, the hay barn, and in the home if Mrs [GRO-B-7] was out. I was raped by [GRO-B-8] often, maybe three or four times a week. It was full penetration sexual intercourse.

25. I have blacked out a lot of it, but I don't remember him threatening me or telling me not tell anyone. As result of the abuse I had grown up with at home, I didn't know right from wrong.

26. I don't remember telling anyone about Mr [GRO-B-8]'s abuse, it was just normal for me. I think Mrs [GRO-B-7] must have known what was going on, but at the same time I was very good at covering it up. I had to do it my whole life.

27. At the [GRO-B-7]
[GRO-B-8] Home, I was also forced to do a lot of unpaid labour. Mrs [GRO-B-7] used me like a slave. I had to do all the washing and housework, look after the baby and work on the farm. I wasn't treated like a child who was there to be cared for. I don't think the amount of work I was expected to do was reasonable for someone of my age.

28. I was allowed to smoke while I lived at the [GRO-B-7]
[GRO-B-8] Home. I had to buy them out of my pocket money.

29. I think eventually they got sick of my behaviour, and I had to move homes (Social Welfare notes on placement with the [GRO-B-7]
[GRO-B-8]s, 10 March 1980 [ORT0050827]). I used to get aggressive and jealous of Mrs [GRO-B-7] and [GRO-B-8]

being together or having sex, I don't know why though. I would knock on their door to try and stop them.

30. I understand that I left the [GRO-B-7]
[GRO-B-8] in March 1980.

[GRO-B-9] *Home, Mataura*

31. I was then sent to the [GRO-B-9] in Mataura, I don't have any recollection of being there really.

32. Got kicked out for shop lifting – Mrs. [GRO-B-9] worked in the shop.

A Family Home in Southland

[GRO-B-500] [GRO-B-600]

[GRO-C]

33. On 14 November 1980, when I had just turned 14 years old, I was moved to live with [GRO-B-600] and [GRO-B-500] in [Southland]. I don't remember the name of the street, but it was a horseshoe shaped one way street close to the [Southland] River. It was about the third or fourth house in on the [Southland] River side. It was a single storey three-bedroom house.

34. I stayed there for about six months. There were no other foster children there, I think they had two or three other children of their own, aged between about five and 10, in the house when I arrived there.

35. [GRO-B-500] would have been in about his mid 30's, he had strawberry blonde hair, he was European and of solid build. He was clean shaven and wore glasses.

36. [GRO-B-500] sexually abused me, it started as play fighting and him putting his hands down the front my pants. His hand would be around my vagina area but not penetrating me. I think he was testing the waters to see how I would respond. I joined the play fighting because I wanted to be part of the family and I felt comfortable. This play fighting started not long after I arrived there, it was just me joining in with him and his kids play fighting.

37. Because of my upbringing and previous abuse, I didn't really know it was wrong. It was attention that I wasn't getting from anyone else, so I didn't stop it.

38. The play fighting happened a couple of times, then it moved to full sexual abuse, he would have full sex with me. This would happen at nights when everyone was in bed, or while his wife was out. Sometimes it happened in the lounge and sometimes in their bedroom as well as him coming into my

bedroom. He would take off my pants and underwear but would leave my top on.

39. I can safely say that he has sexually penetrated me at least six times, that is his penis penetrating my vagina. He never kissed me or anything, it was just about him satisfying himself. It was pretty regular, but I don't recall if there was any oral sex.
40. Apparently, [GRO-B-600] didn't know about it. She reckoned she never went out in the evenings, but she did. That suggests to me that she may have known.
41. Later, there was a police investigation into [GRO-B-500], and they found pornographic material on his computer, so then the police spoke to those of us who had lived with him. We told them what he had been doing to us. He was apparently also grooming his [GRO-B]. He had been a [GRO-C] before he was convicted, and I know they were concerned about the welfare of those kids.
42. In 2010, I gave evidence against him in a criminal prosecution. He was charged with abusing five of us and was found guilty of sexual offending, He went to prison for 11 years and nine months.
43. He was not convicted of any offences against me because I was unable to identify him in court. It had been too long between the abuse and court so I couldn't recognise him to say whether it was him or not.
44. Later when I went to Kingslea, I told either my mother or my social worker, [GRO-C] that [GRO-B-500] and Mr [GRO-B-8] had sexually abused me. Nothing was done.
45. I used to go out in the evenings when I lived with the [GRO-B-500
GRO-B-600]. Towards the end of my time there, I was walking home one night, and I was raped by five boys who lived around the road from the [GRO-B-500
GRO-B-600]s. They took me down by the river and all of them raped me. I used to have to walk past one of their houses every day on my way to school. I have never told anyone about this before, and it was never reported to the police or anyone.

[GRO-B-10] Home, Croydon, [GRO-B-11] Home, Gore; and [GRO-B-12] Home, Mataura

46. I was sent to live with [GRO-B-10] in Croydon near Invercargill in June 1981. I was only there for a month or so then sent to [GRO-B-11] in Gore for a few weeks.

47. From July until September 1981, I lived with [GRO-B-12] in Matura. Mr [GRO-B] was deaf. I remember they owned a bakery. I don't know why I left there. I found all these homes to be fine.

Kingslea Girls Home

48. I was at Kingslea from 8 September 1981 until August 1982. I think they had run out of options as they had tried me in all sorts of different homes with different children and family situations.
49. Before I was sent there, there had been some talk of me going to Salsbury in Nelson. I don't really remember any discussion or how it happened - perhaps they ran out of places for me to go. I had quite a few behavioural problems, I presume because of the abuse.
50. I flew on a plane from Invercargill to Christchurch where social workers picked me up. When I arrived at Kingslea I was searched for cigarettes. I think there may have been an initiation. I don't think I was locked up or anything there until after I ran away later on.
51. My main memory of Kingslea was being bullied by the other girls there. Some of them were from gang backgrounds. They'd make sure there were no staff around me and they would bully me. They threatened to cut my hair off. Once I stood up for myself at Kingslea things got better, the staff there were quite supportive. Despite this, I had no help or counselling arranged by social workers.
52. I ran away from Kingslea with a friend of mine. We hadn't planned to run away, but I was doing a hairdressing course in the city, and we spontaneously decided to go. We were gone for about two weeks and ended up in Invercargill, but I gave myself in as I got sick of being on the run.
53. When I returned to Kingslea, I was locked up by myself for two days in a cell. It was like a police cell – there was nothing to do, but you would get let out for an hours exercise of jumping on a trampoline and a shower. Other than being bored it was alright.
54. At Kingslea, I attended school for a while. Then I got put in a pre-employment course to learn life skills. I remember being treated really well by the sewing teacher as she gave me some of the affection I was looking for. I wanted to be a hairdresser and started this training. I couldn't read very well because I am dyslexic and that ended up falling apart. I then got a job working as a

kitchenhand, first at Kingslea and then at an old people's home. I continued to live at Kingslea and rode a bike in to work.

Social Welfare involvement while in care

55. Miss Duff was the most consistent social worker I had throughout my time in foster care and up until I went to Kingslea. I remember my mother was mean to her and had her in tears a lot. I think when I was in Gore, there might have been some others who covered for her. I spent a lot of time with GRO-C and I disclosed some of the sexual abuse to her, including the abuse at the GRO-B-7s and the GRO-B-500 GRO-B-600. Nothing was done about this. GRO-B-8

56. While I was at Kingslea, I had a consistent social worker, her name was Marnie Murrell. She was cool, I thought she was good.

Education

57. Throughout my time in care, I consistently attended school. I don't feel like I learnt particularly well though as a result of everything that was going on throughout my placements. Also because of the movements, I had to keep changing schools.

Life after care

Relationships

58. I don't know why I was released from Kingslea, but I went back home to Mum and Dad's, but that only lasted eight days. So, I went to GRO-B and was doing housekeeping for a woman called GRO-C

59. I met my first husband in GRO-B, he was a shearer. He had a daughter from a previous relationship, and we moved to the North Island. I was 17 at this stage. Once we were married in 1983, I was discharged from state care.

60. I had my first baby just after I turned 18. After I turned 23, I had five children but the fourth, a boy died after 19 hours.

61. Soon after I got pregnant with my first child, GRO-B-13 beat me up because I wanted to tell my mother face to face that I was pregnant. He beat me up because he thought I wasn't coming back.

62. GRO-B-13 was very controlling, emotionally and financially, I had no bank account or anything GRO-B
GRO-B

63. I met my [GRO-B] husband around nine years ago now. He is supportive of me.

64. I ended up looking after [GRO-B-14] the daughter of a friend of mine. My friend was a drug addict, and she couldn't take care of [GRO-B-14]. I didn't want [GRO-B-14] to end up in foster care and so I tried to look after her. She eventually did end up in foster care.

65. I still struggle to trust people and don't really have any close friends.

Criminal conviction

66. I have been involved in stealing over the years and have a criminal conviction for this. I think I used to steal partly because it was a bit of a game and I could get away with it, but also to try and regain some control in my life. Loss of opportunities through the criminal record – it doesn't go away. They say it goes away after seven years.

Health

67. A few years ago, I had an overdose in relation to a situation with my [GRO-B] [GRO-B-13]. My two friends and one of my [GRO-B] took my file and tried to have me sectioned under the Mental Health Act. That really affected my relationships with my friends and [GRO-B]. I find it really hard to trust people, especially when things like this have happened to me.

Effects

68. I have been in multiple abusive relationships over the years. I believe that my ability to have a normal relationship has been impacted by my experiences in care.

69. I had no relationship with my mother. She died about 16 years ago. I think about how going into social welfare care meant I had to give up my whole life I knew, yet they weren't even able to keep me safe. I may as well have stayed home for all it was worth. Changing houses and going from home to home was really unsettling for a kid. It was always going to be hard when I went to Kingslea, but I think if I had gone there from the start, I would have had more stability.

70. When I had my own kids, I struggled as a mother because I had no role model to teach me how to do it right. The issues I had with [GRO-B-13] didn't help my relationships with my kids either. My aim parenting has been to be a better

mother than my mother was to me. One of my [GRO-B] has mental health issues which has been challenging. It has been hard with the family dynamic and my new partner.

71. Holding a criminal conviction means I cannot work with vulnerable children or do the sorts of work that I would have loved to do. I have had various jobs in health care, but I do find work environments difficult because nobody knows about my past or what I have been through. Additionally, the limited education I received has impacted my ability to find work and maintain financial stability. I don't have the verbal or written skills to maintain the jobs that I would have liked to do.
72. I feel like I suffered a loss of opportunities as a result of my time in care. I'm really noticing this now at this point in my life. I'm also dyslexic and it's really hard to get a job. I was never given any learning support for my dyslexia, and I struggle with reading and writing.

Redress

73. Following the prosecution against [GRO-B-500], CYFS acknowledged that I had been molested by two people. That meant a lot to me, that it was their doing not mine.
74. I received \$50,000. CYFS notified me and assured me that this was not "hush money" but it was an acknowledgement of what I had been through. Getting that acknowledgement was a huge weight off my shoulders.
75. I never received any financial advice on how to manage this money and half of it just disappeared because of debts the guy I was with at the time had. He had never been very supportive, but he was very quick to take the money. If I had my time again, I would have invested in property or put the money in the family trust we had set up for the kids.
76. In terms of the trial, the police were really good. I met the Crown prosecutor earlier in the week before I gave evidence, so in Court I was talking to someone I was familiar with. She also stood in front of [GRO-B-500
GRO-B-600] so I didn't have to look at him all the time while I gave evidence. Victim Support also provided me support before, during, and after the prosecution.
77. [GRO-B-500] wasn't convicted of charges against me, he was convicted of the charges against the others. Apparently, there wasn't agreement about the

charges against me, I think he denied them. He was locked up for 11 years, so he will be due to get out soon.

78. I have had ACC counselling for the sexual abuse. I have never made an ACC claim, but my doctor has referred me to ACC. I had an ACC-appointed counsellor before the trial. I didn't always find her advice helpful however, so I stopped seeing her.

Recommendations for the future

79. For me, being in private homes was far worse than living in Kingslea. I think residential homes like Kingslea, although not perfect, are safer than private homes. I don't think foster care should continue, but if going to do foster care, need to provide more support.

80. I always thought it would have been hard if I had gone just to Kingslea in the beginning but it might have been better than all the homes and abuses.

81. Further, anyone applying to be a foster parent, or take children into their care should have to undergo a thorough background check for convictions or concerning things in their past. This will only be useful if the people have been caught, of course, but it should be a minimum requirement.

82. I think social workers should be provided with better support and be given smaller caseloads. They often have too many cases with not enough time. This can mean that they won't be familiar with the kids, and therefore won't be able to recognise behaviour patterns in the kids they are working with. When kids are acting out there is usually something wrong. All social workers would need to do is make some inquiries.

What I want from the Royal Commission

83. I would like a meaningful apology from the government. The one I got was a standardised letter, there was nothing personalised about it.

84. Financial help would be good. When I got the money from CYFS, I gave half to my partner, so I never saw the full benefit of 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 GRO-C _____

Dated: 03/03/2022