

Witness Name: TUPUA URLICH

Statement No: WITN0743001

Dated: 10/08/2021

ROYAL COMMISSION OF INQUIRY INTO ABUSE IN CARE

WITNESS STATEMENT OF TUPUA URLICH

I, TUPUA URLICH state: -

INTRODUCTION

1. My full name is TUPUA WHAITIRI HAPUKU URLICH, I was born on
 1995.
2. In this statement I set out some of my experiences of being in state care. During this time, I experienced physical and psychological abuse on a regular basis.
3. I am giving this statement in the hope that no other children endure the abuse I did while under the care and protection of the state.

BACKGROUND

4. My mother is Croatian, and my father is Maori from Ngati Kahununu.
5. My mother fell pregnant at 17 years old and was forced to marry an abusive partner. I recall my mother telling me that one incident she lay down on the ground to protect her unborn baby from physical abuse. This was the first stage of trauma my mother experienced.

6. My mother had six children to four different fathers before I was born. My mother gave birth to my younger sister, 11 months after I was born.
7. My parents met in a Drug and Alcohol rehabilitation centre in Auckland.
8. My father spent a lot of time of his adult life in and out of jail due to his tough start in life which set him on a path of substance abuse and addictions.

EARLY YEARS

9. I spent the first five years of my life growing up in Auckland with Mum, Dad, and my siblings. There was lots of alcohol around but no physical abuse towards me.
10. I remember my earliest childhood memory was when I was five years old. We were just living a normal life.
11. There were reports of us children being neglected. I don't recall any neglect. I know we were always fed and we were happy. We adored our Mum.
12. I respect my mother; she knew what she had to do. Out of the love for us she made the call to my extended whanau in the Hawkes Bay, they had a hui about our care. I have a very vivid memory of the day the whanau came to collect us. This was my first memory of true trauma. I will never forget the day.
13. My younger sister and I were loaded into the van, as we reversed down the driveway, I recall my sister crying. I saw my mother collapse to the ground watching us leave. I recall the day the whanau came to collect us; the memory is very vivid. We were both sad as we were leaving our safety, our belonging our whanau and home.

14. We were four and five years old when we were torn away from everything we had known. I will never forget the pain that we felt of not knowing what was going on and where we were going.
15. My sister and I did not know our extended whanau. Sadly, after we arrived in Hawkes Bay we were split up. I was separated from my mother, siblings, and younger sister for many years.

MY EXPERIENCES IN CARE

16. I was five years old when I went to live with a caregiver in Flaxmere. His name was Michael [REDACTED] GRO-B [REDACTED] He is now deceased. He was a caregiver for Children Family and Young Persons Services. He was a nasty man. On top of the trauma of being separated from my sister. I was physically abused for the first time. I was a child being punched in the head by a full-grown man.
17. I suffered severe mental abuse while I was living with this man. I recall when my father passed away and the cruel way, he relayed the information was inhumane. I just received a huge beating, as I lay on the ground with a bleeding nose. The door opens, he turned to me and said, "Oh by the way your Dad is dead" and the door slammed. I was six years old.
18. I missed days of primary school because of the abuse. No one came to check on me to see if I was doing okay. I wondered where the people were that cared about me were. Eventually, I had enough of the abuse I suffered. I found the strength to speak up about what was happening to me.

19. I took the caregiver to court for the abuse, he inflicted on me. The beatings were severe. I suffered under his care. He was acquitted of all the charges except the one where he kicked me. He was sentenced to 30 hours community service. Even though I was incredibly young at the time. For me it was clear even then I was up against the system protecting another system.
20. I was placed in multiple different care settings by social welfare. I had no voice in that process. I do not recall social welfare discussing with me that I was moving, yet along why I was going to a different setting. I wasn't valued, it was more like you go where we say you are going it doesn't matter whether you understand it or not. I had multiple social workers, they kept changing all the time. I do not remember having one Māori social worker.

Examples of Racism in the System

21. I have had so many examples of racism, while I have been in care and protection. I remember one incident when I was about 15 years old. I went into the Children and Young Persons Office (CYFS) in Takapuna. I was hanging around waiting for a Social Worker. I had not long been discharged from hospital after an attempted suicide. One of the Youth Justice Workers said to me "Oh are you youth justice?" I replied "No, I'm care and protection." He replied, "Oh future justice then." I will never forget that comment, it really stuck with me. This attitude was coming from a person who is working in care and protection and is supposed to be offering us hope for our future and that is their attitude?

22. I remember when I was younger there is documentation in my file from well-known Māori figures reporting their concerns of the treatment that I was given from the system. A big part of that was my well-being. I was really desiring of my Māoridom. I wanted to attend a Hauora centre rather than go to see a counsellor, where I would sit down with some jellybeans. That was not my buzz.
23. When I was at the education centre, they were all Māori a lot of them were in the prospecting for the gangs. These guys were onto it, they were bright but not supported like non-Māori were. It played a huge role in their outcomes. You can imagine where they are now. If the support given was as fast as the same quality as non-Māori that would make an enormous difference. I haven't met Māori in the care system that haven't experienced racism. The fact that there are so many Māori (65 percent) in the care system is a good indication of racism.
24. There was racism across the board, being a light skinned Māori in the system, it exists on both sides. For me, the hardest part was knowing that I am in the system is a bit like train tracks. The destination is set and clear for them. How do I get off that and how do I stay okay within yourself? Everyone, is looking at you and waiting for you to fail without a willingness

Young people placed in Police Cells

25. I experienced as a young person being taken into the police cells. There are not healthy spaces, even if police try and look after those in custody. You are in a cell with adults who are often high on drugs, super aggressive and if you could be imagine being locked into a cave then you will know, they are not quiet places. I witnessed people banging on the doors, picking up their whole mattresses, slamming them on the doors. It is always noisy. There is swearing, yelling and lots of anger. It is unhealthy for young people to be placed in police cells.

My name is Tupua not Michael

26. One of caregivers that Oranga Tamariki placed me with started calling me Michael. That was driven by her purely religious views and her understanding of the word Tupua, it was evil and demonic. She changed my name to Michael. She believed my name was because of my behaviours rather than the trauma or separation and abuse. I will never forget going to school the first day she changed my name. The looks on the other kids faces and the way they were looking at me was so weird. I was getting called Michael and I would not respond to the name. I would get grilled by the teachers for not listening, but my name is Tupua not Michael.

IMPACT

27. The impact of the abuse I suffered while in the state care system was terrible. There was absolutely no stability, there was a strong lack of safety. As a result, my education suffered and so did my mental health, and those are some things that to this day I'm still working through.

Navigating the justice system at six years old

28. The worst part of it all is when you find the courage to speak up and ask for help. You have the justice system slap you in the face and call you a liar and let your abuser gets off. As a six-year-old experiencing the whole court process was nothing short of terrifying.
29. I remember going into the CYFS office at the time and the paper they gave me was of a body outline. You point to the parts of the body where you were abused.
30. Although I was giving evidence in a separate room from my abuser. I knew he was in the same building as me. After the court case I was still feeling terrified and ran to the car. This was the person I feared the most in my whole life in my world. That was emotionally the biggest challenge to overcome.
31. I recall the way in which the defence lawyer was speaking to me. It was so demeaning. I was a six-year-old child, being spoken to with no regard for my wellbeing. No one in the court system stepped into reprimand the way he was speaking to me, not even the judge. I was crying, and the defence lawyer claimed it was because I was dishonest. I was already upset.
32. The defence lawyer was very much out to upset me even more. I believe that no child should be treated to or spoken to in this way. The sad thing is I wasn't the only one pressing charges against the caregiver. There were multiple young people he had abused years after I left his care. He was charged again and given community hours.
33. From that day forward, I had no trust in any system, justice, police or whatever it is. I knew I only had me to rely on. It took years after leaving the care system as an adolescent to learn how to trust other people.

Impact of separation from my whanau

34. My mother was dealing with trauma and reached out to whanau for help regarding caring for many children. My sister and I were separated shortly after we left our whanau home. Being separated from my sister after being separated from my mother was nothing short of punishment. We didn't know the people we were living with. We left, and we moved away together, then we were separated. So that was like punishment on punishment. We didn't know why we were taken away. This had and continues to have lasting effect.
35. I am not close as I would like to be with my family that is a result of the state alienating me from my whanau. For four years of our childhood, we had not contact with each other. It wasn't until I saved up some of my pocket money to buy post stamps, write letters and any money I had left over I would send to her. That is the only way I could love my sister. I would post her lollies, buy phone cards, and call her. But you can't make up for those years lost.
36. A letter is great, but it cannot replace memories and experiences together. I will always love my sister. But it is the same response to which are vastly different relationships with whanau, hapu and Iwi. There is a colonial wedge that is permanently placed there. Just because you leave the system. That barrier is still there. The barrier is years and years of missed opportunities and years of relationships lost.

Loss of Cultural Identity

37. We are alienated because the system did not value us as Māori Tamariki as belonging to a collective whanau, hapu and iwi. They throw these words around that they don't understand. It shows how they treat our young people. The separation stays there. It is modern day colonisation. As an adult I still must deal with that because I am trying to develop relationships which should have been made and developed throughout my childhood it has left us disadvantaged as Māori. Once we have been told that being Māori is bad. It is ripped out; we know as Māori there is so much power there. I must work so hard to get too. If I had that from day one, it would be a completely different story. It would be a whole different picture. I would feel different, and it would be different.
38. Being Māori and raised in a system that is determined to separate you from your culture and knowledge. This is modern day colonisation. They want to detach us from our people, from our culture and fall into a system that feeds their privilege. It feeds their position in Aotearoa. So, to me my culture identity is my identity. My whakapapa is my identity, it's my people my place it is my history. In the context of my childhood, whakapapa is where I should have been, who I should have been with and where I belong.
39. Our tamariki don't belong to a Crown entity. Neither did I. Knowing who you are and where you come from along with values defined by tikanga they are the right foundations to develop strong, healthy independent ready young people. It's like day and night compared to the system we were raised in.

Tikanga and Te Reo

40. Te reo and tikanga was only really supported when I was at my education provider with Peter Nordstrom. Peter recognised and understood the importance of tikanga and Te reo. He had witnessed generations of those who had lost their cultural identity. Recently, I had a korero with him regarding his experience of 35 years of working in the sector. Based on his reflections, he noted that I was the one with absolutely the worst whanau base, and the worst case., I had no whanau base, absolutely nothing. So, his mahi with me was learning about my culture, tikanga and identity.
41. There were lots of reasons, why I was not supported by other places to learn tikanga and Te reo. One there was my behaviour, and lots of psychology and counselling appointments to attend, so there wasn't much room for learning Te reo. Secondly, when you live in a racist system it makes you view yourself differently. I was desiring to expand my knowledge of te ao Māori and Te Reo Māori in a safe setting.
42. Outside of that I wanted to dissociate, to me in my mind that was a negative thing. The only time I saw reference to Te Ao Māori was outside of the education centre in a CYFS building, there were koru patterns in the glass frostings of the meeting rooms. For me that was my small introduction to things Māori. That was all I had. That wasn't a nice place to be in. I deserved more than that.

INTERGENERATIONAL TRAUMA

43. I am the second generation on my father's side that have gone into the state care system. My dad and his siblings all went into care. They are all dead now. I am the eldest one left in my whanau, and I am only 25 years old. My father was killed. One of my uncles passed away. He had severe schizophrenia because of his experiences. The intergenerational harm caused by the state was apparent, there was hardly anyone at his tangi. The result of their abuse and trauma and what the state do to our people is present even in death. This mahi is important to me as I am the eldest left in my direct whanau line. You can't say that this isn't connected because it absolutely is.
44. My uncle only recently opened up to me before his death. This stuff is very real. The hardest part is living in a society that denies its real. It is like an infection if you are affected by it then you know it's real. If we were to respond to the intergeneration trauma and abuse of the state, the way we responded to covid and other things and prioritise that as much.
45. There is a lot of whanau who have suffered from intergenerational harm. I know many people who are cut themselves off from whanau, they live by themselves. They go it alone. They have grown up to believe their parents are bad people and so they just don't want to connect back to that.

REDRESS MECHANISMS

46. There are so many areas that have affected us negatively. I suffer from anxiety that drains you of energy. How do you make up for not having the energy? When all you want to do is play with your children and participate in activities with your whanau. How do you make up for the scars that I live with forever? The whanau that we have lost. The intergenerational slaughter.

47. My experience of the redress process was unsatisfactory. I recall being interviewed by two pākeha staff members about the abuse I endured while under state care. I do not recall anyone contacting me until six months later. An offer of compensation was presented, coupled with well you could take this offer or go to court. I didnt have a lot of options available to me at the time. I was only 17 years old, vulnerable and had not begun healing from my trauma. It wasn't until I was older through the lens of maturity. I came to realise that no amount of redress could make up for the pain I had suffered.
48. The government need to acknowledge that when you abuse children and leave them their education suffers, their opportunities in life suffer.

RECOMMENDATIONS THAT THE STATE COULD DO TO HELP

49. Establish an education scholarship that will provide an opportunity for a child to be brought up to the same level as everyone else. This is because the state has held us back and down it has been intentional.
50. When it comes to whanau, Māori iwi support services should be the ones that Māori contact, that is their people. The best thing the state can do is keep their hands off our children. They have a right to be there and a right and a willingness to have a healing role in the lives of our people. That is what feeds the racism. The fact is, is that the crown has created a system in which we fall through these gaps. They look like the helping hand up, but they are the ones pushing us down. Just allow Māori to exercise being Māori, tino rangatiratanga. We don't need the crown to give us power, we have always had it. They need to respect our power.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CHILDREN IN CARE

51. Children in care are viewed as less than other children and young people.

Young people at facilities should be supported by an independent advocate and listened to. All care and protection residences should be shut down. These environments are prison like for children with high needs. What part of prison is therapeutic?

52. New Zealand can no longer raise children in a system and isolate them from the decision-making and when they become age say alright, you're an adult now, you're ready to go. They need support and help.

53. My mahi with VOYCE Whakarongo mai advocates voice and connection for young people in care. Empowering children's voices to be heard and listened to and enabling a pathway to their cultural identity.

54. VOYCE Whakarongo mai supports key relationships with iwi. We are about acknowledging our tamariki and rangatahi as collectives of whanau hapu and iwi. The knowledge exists and the supports are out there. So rather than reinvent the world, it's about connecting with iwi. They are experts of their own. There is power of knowing where you belong the tikanga and connection and having those values instilled in you.

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.

Signe

GRO-C

Dated

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