



WITNESS STATEMENT OF NELLIE FLAGG

I, Nellie Flagg, say as follows:

- 1 I make this statement on the basis of my own knowledge, save where otherwise stated. Where I make statements based on information provided by others, I believe such information to be true.

Background

- 2 I am a Taylor-Charles. My traditional countries are Wemba Wemba (Swan Hill), Dja Dja Wurrung (Bendigo) and Boonwurrung (south-metropolitan Melbourne).
- 3 I was born in 1957. My life growing up was one of joy, but also a lot of racism that impacted on me, my family and the Aboriginal community. Because of that, we were forced to keep to ourselves. We didn't talk outside the community about what was happening inside our family lives and the community.
- 4 My mum and dad had twelve children, but two of them passed before I was born. I grew up with ten children, me being the second-last.
- 5 We grew up in huts with no water or electricity and dirt floors. The last hut was an old corrugated iron hut with 3 bedrooms and open plan living. We had an open fire for heat and a source of cooking. It was horrible in summer when it was hot. We didn't have a fridge, we had an ice box.
- 6 We grew up very poor. Christmas was a wonderful time to come together and have a big feed, like everyone else, but ours was much simpler. I remember going to the abattoirs with Dad and getting a hessian bag of whatever we could for twenty cents. We would take it home and Mum would look through it and make something out of what she could, the rest went to the dogs. Mum was a great cook who could make something out of anything.
- 7 My first brand new pair of shoes came from the tip, but they were brand new in the box and they fitted me. Someone had thrown away new shoes in the box. I didn't care that they were from the tip. But we were really looked down on as dirty, lazy.
- 8 How we grew up was very different from a lot of white Australians. When I tell people these stories now, they say that it sounds horrible. But it wasn't horrible. It was our life and what we had to do. I loved it. These were good memories for me but I was belittled

and made to feel ashamed of my stories by white people. This stopped me from telling my stories to them.

- 9 One story shows the fear that we lived in. I used to be scared when we saw a car coming down the road. Mum and Dad would tell my brothers and sisters and I to hide. The girls would hide in the house or behind Mum and Dad. The boys would run off into the bush. It's not until you're older that the understanding of that gets you and you realise the fear our parents must have lived with. I would relive these moments and I would feel sick in the stomach and sad for my parents, knowing they had to live with this fear. It is hard to take that in and understand, but as a child we knew we were safe with Mum and Dad. Dad would never allow anyone to take us – he would say they have to kill me to take my children.
- 10 The boys when they ran off would not come home until dark. Mum would cook and us girls would have to go out and try to find the boys. We would call to them and say it was only police coming to tell us someone died. Usually it was not until when we were in bed, when it was dark, the door would open and they would come home.
- 11 When I was about eight my parents were asked by the government to move our family into a commission house. The house was in a small town with a population of around 110. It had electricity and running water, brand new on a quarter acre block, right in the middle of town. The first thing I did was flip the lights and turn on the tap. No more fetching water, boiling it and sieving it for us (that had been our job as kids). We loved the house.
- 12 The only person in the town who showed us any kindness was the lady who ran the general store. She gave us some of her buffalo grass to start the lawn. The rest didn't want us to move in because we were Aboriginal. Sometimes I stood in shops and didn't get served. When my sisters were bullied and I stood up for them, it was me who was threatened with being kicked out of school. Girls on my sports teams would talk to me on the field, but ignore me off it.

Racism

- 13 We were treated differently, always. That has an impact as a person. Racism has had a big impact on me. I have also seen the impact it has on my family and others in the Aboriginal community. Throughout my life society has rejected me as a person. I believe that they did not see me as Nellie: they saw me as an Aboriginal person. Their biases and their racist assumptions would come out, and they called me nasty names. That is now called bullying, but back in my day, people were encouraged to bully Aboriginal people.

- 14 Now, when I say I'm Aboriginal, people sometimes say, "You don't look it". The constant accountability I have to have for who I am is hard. You always have to explain who you are. I think, "Why should I have to explain who I am when they have no concept of an Aboriginal person's identity? I always wonder who would ask me these questions today. I am sick of explaining my culture to people who don't truly want to understand. You get tired of answering stupid questions. Sometimes it stops me from going places. You know people will judge you.

Trauma

- 15 Another thing that has affected me and that I have seen affect other Aboriginal people is trauma. It is a trauma that comes from the families sometimes – their stories. The breakdown of families from the heartache of being separated causes fractured families to constantly live with negativities and drama. This causes or leads to isolation, which furthers people's loss of self-respect and identity. If they are part of the Stolen Generation you can understand why. It is hard to understand, but they just didn't like Aboriginal people and don't understand our culture.
- 16 I have been called horrific things and I have had horrific things done to me. I was sexually abused as a child. I know there have been so many more of our people who have been abused.
- 17 Over the years I have seen and heard some horrific things. I had a nephew who was abused and didn't talk about it. He ended his life. Another cousin of that nephew who was very close to him later ended his life; we think it was because he couldn't live without him. They were so young and couldn't deal with the pain and the heartache they had to live with.

Loss

- 18 For Aboriginal people, there is also the trauma and sadness that comes from loss. I have lost so many of my family. I was married on 25 April 1978 and my dad died a month later. That destroyed me a bit. Our father was the strength of our family. He was only 67 when he died. He was too young.
- 19 I was pregnant when Dad died. Having my children was a joy, but we lost our first son at four months old to spina bifida. It was a horrific time for us.
- 20 Of the ten children raised by my parents, there are only four of us left. I am the third to reach 60. I had a brother who passed at 27 and a sister who passed at 37. I lost two of my brothers at 43, my older brother at 57 and my older sister at 59. She was really hoping to get to 60.

- 21 My niece was found dead at 26. A month later, my sister called to say that my other niece had passed. Her brother went to her funeral, and then about five weeks later, he died of cancer. In three more weeks, another nephew passed from cancer. You think you are just getting up, and you get floored again. This can break you and you become depressed all over again from the constant loss and grief of family.
- 22 My eldest son tried to take his own life. He struggled with a lot of things. One was being abused as a child. Getting pregnant and married at the young age of 16 was another. In his marriage, there was a difference in culture between him and his wife and he felt a lot of pressure to provide for his young family. All together, these things ended up with him trying to end his life.
- 23 My son tried a couple of non-Aboriginal counsellors. He told me they didn't understand where he was coming from. He was educating them about our culture during the sessions. He found an Aboriginal counsellor who made a difference. He didn't have to explain his culture; the Aboriginal counsellor made him feel at ease because he understood where my son was coming from.
- 24 After my son tried to take his life, I went into a deep depression, I couldn't get out of bed. When I was really down, everything – my whole life – was interrupted because I would keep thinking of things constantly. I couldn't get the rest I needed. I was given pills to take the edge off the anxiety. I took them for a couple of days, but I stopped taking them because they made feel fuzzy, sort of like a zombie, and lightheaded.
- 25 I cried constantly. Sometimes I wanted to go to sleep and not wake up.

My work with the mental health system

- 26 I have an employment history working within government and community organisations where I felt I could help. In our community, we have to be able to look after and care for each other. I have worked in Aboriginal affairs for over 40 years.
- 27 For five years starting from early 2000, I worked at the Centre Against Sexual Assault (CASA) in Carlton, which was attached to the Royal Women's Hospital. This involved working with people who were dealing with the trauma of sexual abuse and family violence. They were looking for an Aboriginal person. In the 10 years they had operating, they had one Aboriginal person on their books. I knew there were so many more of our people who have been abused. Our people would feel shame coming in there if anyone saw them, and they would get asked questions about what they were doing there. I would take them to have a coffee discreetly, or sit in a car, or invite them around to my house. By me going out, the number of Aboriginal people on their books increased tenfold.

- 28 I would listen to people tell their stories. I feel honoured that people have shared with me their stories. If just listening to their stories helps them, that is ok. I would stay with them as long as they wanted me to, and then pass them to a counsellor. If they wanted me to go with them see the counsellor, I would go. I would check in on them. Their stories still remain with me.
- 29 After CASA, I worked for the Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (**VACCHO**) in the Aboriginal social and emotional wellbeing team. My role was suicide prevention worker. A lot of our young people die by suicide because of the traumas that they have felt or were dealing with. It was heartbreaking to hear these stories and see the impact within the communities.
- 30 What the social and emotional wellbeing team did included holding forums and focus groups on a state-wide level. My role as a suicide prevention worker was to talk one-on-one with families about the trauma from the suicides, what their needs were and how we could meet their needs. We aimed to get out and find out what was happening in the communities. We had to compile our findings and then develop a report. That report was given to the Commonwealth government.
- 31 Some of the people who took their lives did it because of abuse by community members. People told me stories about community members, including partners of Aboriginal women, who abused them.
- 32 These stories still affect me because the abusers may still be in our community. Sometimes I am wary where I go for my own safety. I also deal with trauma because I have been told about abusers who are sometimes people in positions of influence in our community. I walked this journey with the people who told me about these things. This affects me and my mental health because I am living not only with my own traumas, but also with other people's traumas.

Problems with the mental health system

- 33 I have seen that there is a problem with access to detox facilities and health rehabilitation services. A lot of people struggle to come down to Melbourne to access these services. I have seen that they then continue to struggle and use drugs and alcohol to cope, which doesn't help.
- 34 Waiting times for detox facilities and rehabilitation are a problem. When I talk to someone about going to detox or rehab, they may say yes because they are in a crisis at the time. But then if they don't use drugs or alcohol for a couple of weeks, and there is a long waiting list to go in to a detox facility or rehabilitation service, they might feel comfortable, like the crisis has passed, and think they are ok. I have seen that people

- then don't go into these services because they think they don't need them. Then they fall down again, and so the cycle continues.
- 35 When Aboriginal people talk about our health, we don't do it in isolation. Mental, physical and spiritual health is holistic. We need not only to treat the person who is being damaged, but their families too. We want children to be safe, but to reconnect as a solid family, we need to treat them all.
- 36 Another problem with the system is that it does not understand Aboriginal spirituality. I grew up very spiritual. I can walk into a building and know there is something here and feel it. It may be a good or bad spirit. These are different to ghosts and I don't call them that.
- 37 I am in good mental health and definitely not crazy, but a medical person might think talking about spirits means bad mental health. If you are not open to that, as a doctor, the bells and whistles are going to go off. Because of this, you clam up, and don't talk about it, because of a fear they will think you have mental health problems.
- 38 In hospital psychiatric wards, I have felt that the environment was very sterile. It was not culturally sensitive. I have seen that Aboriginal people are afraid to stay or just feel uncomfortable there. I remember walking into a psychiatric ward with a client and he didn't want to go in, but knew he had to. He was comfortable with me taking him there, but he didn't like the place. I could feel it when I walked in. It didn't matter if someone was feeling they weren't coping just that day, they were put in with people who truly had serious mental health issues. I felt really unsafe just walking through with him.

Impact of mental health on my life and my family's life

- 39 My family has been afraid of people judging them for their mental health issues. They have been afraid to talk about it for fear of being labelled 'mental' or being unable to hold a job.
- 40 Chronic illness in my family has also been brought on by how people try to cope with their trauma and mental health issues, particularly by self-medicating with drugs or alcohol. This just adds more stress to their lives.
- 41 I have also seen that when my family or people in community are struggling with mental illness, this impacts on them not being able to find or hold a job when their mental illness gets to be too much for them. This is not just a problem in the Aboriginal community, but it is important to acknowledge. This leads to having no money and in some cases to people losing their home or their rental property and becoming homeless. Then they are even more vulnerable to drug and alcohol abuse.

Reform

- 42 We need money to build a lot of our services up. A lot more has to go into the kids. If they know their culture and their country and who is in their family, they are stronger. They are much better when they are connected to their family. This could be done by running more cultural programs and taking people back to country.
- 43 Funds need to be put into stopping bullying for kids. Racism is a disease and needs to be challenged. Schools need to do more to ensure they address bullying. Aboriginal cultural history must be taught in all school curriculums, which might educate non-Aboriginal students (and teachers) about the hardships that have impacted on Aboriginal people.
- 44 I think that young parents who are taking their children to primary school should be given an opportunity to attend parenting or skills classes at the same school. They could also be given an opportunity to talk about their issues or access other services through the school. This will be convenient if they are picking up or dropping off their kids. Young mums who would be using these services might feel like they are more included in the community and valued. I also think that if it makes them feel better about the education setting just by going into classrooms to better themselves, they might feel motivated to access further education.
- 45 More needs to be done around family violence. This is a major factor involved in the breakdown of families.
- 46 Drug and alcohol abuse also needs to be addressed. There should be more detox facilities and rehabilitation services in Melbourne and around Victoria. If detox facilities or rehabilitation services were closer to communities, it would give a sense of comfort to the people using the services that their families are not too far away. Some people do not want to go when they know there will be that distance between them.
- 47 We need more funding to be able to make people stronger. We need more of our own people to be counsellors. We also need a lot more of our people to be employed as doctors, lawyers, and in other roles where Aboriginal people who are unwell or who may have made a mistake will come into contact with them. Non-Aboriginal people who work with Aboriginal people should receive ongoing cultural training (not just a one-off to tick a box). Many Aboriginal people will be more likely to seek the help they need if the person who is helping them understands where they are coming from.
- 48 The system needs to provide pathways for young people to get involved in programs and self-help groups that promote self-esteem, assertiveness and finding the strength within themselves. They need to be motivated and able to stand up and have a voice of

their own to avoid being vulnerable to abuse by others, particularly in personal relationships.

- 49 I have a fantasy of "Aunty's Places" where families can go to live, learn and be themselves. We could teach parenting skills and help them learn how to do things they aren't good at. They could learn to cook and also learn to understand issues they have with their children and each other. If the kids are naughty, we can teach them how to be respectful. DHHS needs to give more funding to help those families strengthen to get help in culturally resourced services. We need to find out what the person does (what they like doing), and include that in the services.
- 50 Aboriginal people need to be given the opportunity to speak. I want other Aboriginal people to know I survived and got through it. It can give you some torment, but I continue to talk hoping that other Aboriginal people, women and men, are able to talk about what is hurting them.

sign here ▶

Nellie Flagg

print name Nellie Flagg

date

9th July 2019