



WITNESS STATEMENT OF TITAN DEBIRIOUN

I, Titan Debiroun, say as follows:

1. I am 21 years old and I'm a recording artist. I moved to Australia in 2004 from Sudan. I live in Tarneit.
2. I'm part of a group who design and co-design music programs in my neighbourhood to help get kids recording music and meeting other people in the community. It also gives them something to do, because there's not a lot to do in Tarneit so it keeps them out of trouble. We try to support them as much as we can.
3. I work with Foundation House in connecting the South Sudanese community with mental health services. We aim to get more community members access to services that exist that they don't know about – especially kids my age or younger.
4. I also do community work with the Centre for Multicultural Youth ('CMY') with kids and students from other migrant backgrounds. I talk to organisations and agencies about cultural and diversity training to make their workplace and ideas inclusive and more culturally respectful.

Music program

5. The music program I run is with a group of my friends who are musicians, artists and people who have an interest in doing work related to our community and culture. I call it an unofficial organisation. I've grown up knowing people in the music industry so I've been able to record for a while. We have a lot of recording equipment at my home. I realised a lot of younger kids in my neighbourhood wanted to do the same thing, they always approached me saying 'I want to record' and we would let them come over.
6. After a while it became too much for us to handle because there were too many people for the set up in our home. We realised we needed a space to run the program so we could build capacity of how many people were able to record, so they got more out of it. We proposed the idea of running a program to CMY and Multicultural Health Victoria and they accepted and supported it so we are partnering with them.
7. The first time we ran the program we called it 'Off the Grid' and it ran over six weeks. The kids came, got to know each other, learned how to write music and structure their

songs and what beats and style they like. The kids did way more music than we thought they were going to do. We were quite surprised at how much they were able to finish in that time.

8. At the moment, we run a four hour workshop on Thursdays after school at around 4.30/5.00pm. The program is aimed for kids aged 13 to 24/25, although sometimes we have younger kids coming through and we don't close the door on them. The program works like a 'drop in centre' where kids can come in for four hours, be with their friends, see creativity happening, see people making stuff and just chill out if they want to. It is a career development program for artists who want to learn how to write music. If you've just started music, you've already been releasing music or if you do performance – we cater to each of those categories.
9. The kids in the program get to learn rhyme schemes, how to write poetry, how to turn that into music, composition and the technical side. After they've made their beat or found a beat, the kids get an opportunity to work with mentors and develop a song. They use the studio room and record their song with sound engineers. The process teaches them all the etiquette in terms of being in a studio like how to use a mic, how to ask for what they want and after a while they develop their own style of how they want to record and they get a product out of it. They get their music at the end and then they repeat the process and get better slowly. They come up with new ways of creating music.
10. A lot of the time kids start making musical tracks where it's like 'I'm this, I'm that', focussing on surface level things, which is cool. But then after a while they start breaking that down and talking about everything else that's happening in their life. It becomes like a form of meditation – they get all their emotion out that they don't usually get out or they don't want to talk about. All of a sudden they put it in a song. You're in a studio with them and they feel free to talk about it. It's a really good way of talking to someone about stuff that they wouldn't talk to you about regardless before that.
11. After the recording process, we release a track for them which they get to promote. We get our friends in the industry in marketing and promotion to come through and run workshops about marketing and how the kids get their music out into the industry. They get to see a lot of different aspects of the process. Even though it's community radio, it's still a far cry from Tarneit and just being at home all the time.

12. We have funding to run the program for the rest of the year. We also have plans to expand the program and run it in other areas like Melton and start branching off to teach other people how to run the same program.
13. I've been at similar programs when I was a kid with people in the Australian music scene back then, people who are similar to Khalid. The programs weren't necessarily focused on recording, it was more writing, and it did a lot for me when I was growing up. I thought, okay, they passed down their songs to me when I was younger and gave me the opportunity to express myself in this way. Now that I'm able to be in the same position, I want to make sure it continues.
14. The program also gives kids the skills to mentor others. The kids who do the program are up skilled and they can come back and be mentors in the next program. They become self-sufficient.

Foundation House

15. I started doing work for Foundation House roughly two years ago. They had a forum with people from their sector and different agencies coming into Foundation House to talk about access into services, especially for migrant communities, and they invited me to be a panellist. After that, I developed a relationship with them. I saw what they were doing and they started inviting me to be involved in some of their programs.
16. Eventually Foundation House approached me to be involved in helping with their programs on sound community in practice. They wanted me to talk about how they could access the community better, how the program could serve the community better and how they could improve their services. I looked at their services and I looked at our community and talked to a few people. I told them the things we have to do to change it up. Ever since then we've been working on a variety of co-designed projects.
17. Being at Foundation House meant I was able to see all the services that I never knew were available. I felt like there were services I might have used, or people in my neighbourhood, but we didn't know about it. I realised this is where the disconnect is. I knew services existed because I was at Foundation House, things like resume writing, counselling, emergency help. I started speaking to people at Foundation House and told them I didn't know certain services existed or were free, and they were surprised. I realised there is a problem because a lot of services exist and money is being spent, but the people who need it and are trying to access it don't know it exists.
18. I told Foundation House that me and my friends could act as a bridge between organisations and our community, at least in our neighbourhood. Foundation House

started helping people in my community get good assistance and we've built the relationship from there. My work mainly involves telling people about things, running workshops in Tarneit or talking to Foundation House about how they can better reach the community, my generation or younger generations.

19. The use of services in my community has increased a bit, but I don't think it's at the point where it should be yet, or at a point that we want it to be, but it's slowly getting there. There is still a lot of distrust and the target group they are trying to assist are people that haven't really had access to services yet. They have a pool of people they work with that have been referred by other agencies or organisations who have been getting assistance for a while. But the people they're really trying to reach have a distrust of services that's hard to break down – that takes time and we've been working on it for a while now. We've realised the best way to do it is not to tell people to go to Foundation House, but to do something in our community and invite Foundation House. Then people already feel comfortable because they're in their own space and we can have someone from Foundation House slowly build that relationship. It takes time and you have to build that trust.
20. Building trust in communities has a lot to do with educating people about services, and not just about services, about mental health in general. A lot of us assume that people know about mental health or what negative mental health is and who they should call, but they really don't. You have to teach people about mental health in a way that is culturally appropriate. I have aunts, grandmas and cousins that can't speak English and they're in charge of younger people, they're the carers. So when young people go through things, the older generation is the one who is supposed to assist them and that's not happening because they don't know about mental health or they feel embarrassed about it or that it's something taboo. You have to face the issue first and once you start facing those issues, you make it easier for people to be willing to go to organisations and start building trust and a history with a service.
21. Once you have built trust with people, they can go back into the community and let other people know that the service did help them, and that what their kids are going through is not abnormal and it happens to a lot of people. People in the community will understand the services don't have crazy methods, it's not witchcraft. It takes time but you have to start educating and build up love first. A lot of people assume that if you go to one of these agencies they will give you drugs or wreck your child or something. Once people know it is the best thing for their child, friend or family member then the situation will improve.

Centre for Multicultural Youth

22. A lot of the work I do at CMY is workshops. I'm part of the 'Shout Out' speaker program. It is an agency program for organisations that need speakers or want more clarification about things that relate to multicultural youth, migrant youth and migrant communities in general. CMY has a pool of people with these experiences and they send call outs to people for workshops and key note speeches.
23. CMY also run a lot of programs that they need assistance in co-designing and delivering. They train people who have an interest and passion in particular areas, and I do a lot of that. The music program I run is in partnership with CMY and we sometimes apply for grants from CMY to run programs.
24. We are running another program at the moment in partnership with CMY. It's a program that isn't just marketing, writing, composition or DJ-ing, it will be about health in general for kids who want to do it. It's not by force, we will just offer it and if people want to be a part of it they can come to us. CMY is offering us the resources to be able to deliver the program in a space where the kids feel comfortable. We might run things like resume writing workshops and a few other things. Partnering with CMY means we can run the program in a space within Tarneit. It's been difficult getting a space because real estate agents don't take us seriously at our age and when they hear it's a music program for youth they get concerned about noise issues. Then coronavirus happened and that kind of derailed everything. We were supposed to have everything done but I don't know what our timeline's looking like now.

Helping the community during coronavirus

25. We were talking this past week about what's happening in our communities with coronavirus. As artists, we have had a lot of our gigs cancelled. Then we started thinking about how other members of our community that have six kids in the house not going to school with a single parent are dealing with stuff. If you can't go to Centrelink with six kids and you're scared for your health – what kind of assistance do you get? We couldn't really figure it out. A few of my friends work at different organisations that have been given grants to help communities with the response to coronavirus. We've been telling people about the importance of spreading information at the moment.
26. I am worried about people in emergency situations. For our community, pride is a huge thing so people won't say that they're going through something. They won't say that they have no food at home, or they don't know how to access Centrelink. So even if you don't hear anything from them, it doesn't mean something isn't happening. I am worried

about that. Also, I worry about how the kids at home without internet access and resources like computers will keep up with school. When they go back to school are they going to be at a disadvantage because they weren't keeping up like the rest of the class? What's happening with that?

My music

27. I grew up in the music industry and had mentors who have been working in the industry for a while.
28. We took a break from creating music for the last two years to focus on how we manage the business side of our music. We know that we can't all play music, we have to understand the legal and commercial side and build relationships. Now we've built those relationships and that foundation. So lately we've been working on a mixed tape, more music, release strategies, more meetings for agencies and stuff like that. It's been cool.

Maintaining culture

29. Culture is essential. That's something you can always link back to because it relates to your identity, and if you have a sense of identity it makes it easier to deal with lots of situations because you have something you feel you can fall back to. You have something you feel is a community that's surrounding you, which is a support base for a lot of kids. That's why it's essential. Especially when you're in a place where everything is so different all the time and you're reminded that you're different all the time, it's cool to have a sense of community and culture.
30. Life is a balance between Sudan and our parents, and then Australia. You're in the middle, because you don't believe everything your parents believe or care about everything they care about like politics back home. But then you're not completely the same as your peers, because you have this culture thing. You have to find middle ground and start building something there.
31. In Australia the African community – Sudanese, Ethiopians and Somalians – are all growing up together. They have this identity and culture they are forming together, but then they also have their own culture. My friend is Somalian and I'm Sudanese, but here we're 'African' right? So it's all these boxes you're in, you have to just find a balance and a safe zone and identity within that. It's a balance of everything – the Sudanese cultural stuff and then everything you're finding out here and internationally and how that influences you, who the world is telling you that you are. The balance of all these

identities is what goes into the future, which is black identity. That includes Aboriginal people as well. It's weird but it's cool.

Tailoring services for communities

32. To a certain extent services need to be tailored to communities. But there are similarities between a lot of cultures like Sudanese, Somalian and Ethiopian. There do need to be changes but I don't think you have to go to extremes about it. There needs to be more understanding of how you can interact in a culturally appropriate way with each community – what's appropriate to say and ask. However, if you take it to the extremes it will be too much of a financial burden on resources and it will be impossible to manage it. Organisations need to work together and start sharing information and resources more with each other.
33. I'm glad the Royal Commission is taking migrant mental health seriously and is starting to realise that there are holes and gaps. I think it is essential to start dealing with those holes and gaps because at the end of the day their future is Australia's future as well, so it's important to invest as much as you can to make sure they have equal ground mentally, physically, socially, economically – and the right to prepare themselves for what they want in the future and who they want to become.
34. There needs to be more of a focus on talking to communities. It can be hard to get in contact with communities, I do understand that. But it has to be more than talking to one person about what their community needs, or one organisation, and then doing what you think is best. You need to open up more into community and there needs to be a focus on capacity building before you can start addressing other things. You can't just put a Band-Aid over things and think that's a solution. You need to build the capacity for communities to be able to take information in and build within themselves as well, which means there needs to be a focus on educating communities on what mental health is.
35. There also needs to be a focus on connecting organisations within the sector that are supposed to be helping each other so they can compare how each service interacts with the community and how much of the community they are reaching who need their services. Services need to be reaching the kids that are at home saying 'I'm never going to talk to another person about my emotions', 'I'm never going to talk to this organisation' or 'white people don't understand me' because a lot of people feel like that. You have to deal with those situations and be truthful with it. You have to build that education and trust first because it doesn't matter how much money or resources get

thrown at mental health, if it doesn't get to the people that need it then it's just another program that wasn't used to its full capacity.

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date 19/06/2020 _____