



WITNESS STATEMENT OF NATHAN TURNER

I, Nathan Turner,¹ say as follows:

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

2 My statement covers my experience of Victoria's mental health system based on my own experience and my work as a peer mentor with Space4Us and CHAMPS.

My story

3 When I was 10 I lived up in a small town near the Murray River. At school, I got bullied a lot. I got picked on and had a few anger problems because of all the bullying and also people were hurting me. I would get picked on, get angry and retaliate a lot. I couldn't really run away from it because of the fact that even when I got home, I had a step-brother who was also bullying me at home. So I didn't really get to have that much space to be by myself, I only had space when my step-brother was at his mum's house. I was raised by my mum, and didn't have a relationship with my dad until I was about 12 or 13.

4 I had my cousin, and we were like brothers and sisters. That's the type of relationship we had, even though we were cousins and she lived in Queensland. Every time we saw each other, it would just continue on from when we left off. She was the closest person I've ever had in my life.

5 She was only a year old than me and she had a lot of problems of her own. Her father ended his life when she was only young. Her mother was not very kind or nice to her.

6 I started to hear things from my cousin that at first I didn't completely understand. I also started noticing that she was self-harming. At that time, I didn't know what self-harming was, or what it meant. But obviously I asked her about it and she would tell me things, tell me her problems, and I would tell her my problems as well. And I started to follow doing it, not for the sake that she did it, but because I thought it was a way to get release. And from the age of 10 I would be scratching myself and things like that, which wasn't very good.

¹ The name and details of the witness referred to in this statement have been changed to protect their identity.

- 7 Mum and I moved to Melbourne in 2014 or 2015 when I was around 14. When we moved down here I was happy because I had a second chance. I made a lot of new friends. I figured out the art of being funny and using humour as a way to express myself.
- 8 But when I moved into high school, mum began to get sick. At the same time, my father started being a part of my life. My parents split up before I was born so for my first 12 or 13 years of my life I didn't really have contact with him. In Melbourne, I started learning about my dad's addictions on drugs and alcohol. That was when everything hit me really, really hard.
- 9 My mum began to get sick and so I started to take on more responsibility for things around the house. I had never really been used to doing all the chores. I was used to doing one or two chores a week. I started to have responsibility for doing the shopping and helping around the house. I just took it all on because I felt like I had to and I didn't want to ask any questions. It was a lot to take on at such a young age.
- 10 With my dad it was very hard because I didn't know anything about drugs or alcohol, I just knew that he was taking it and drinking it. I would notice that he would act differently to how he was an hour ago, or he just wouldn't be himself. It was really hard to understand why. I would just deal with it once again. I didn't tell anyone or say anything, I just accepted it. I feel like I just accepted everything that has happened. I haven't really sat back and said "this isn't right". I have just been like "Okay. This is happening. I'm just going to accept that it has happened and move on." Sometimes, I would have to pick up my dad off the ground because he was passed out and put him to bed. He would just make me feel very uncomfortable and I didn't feel safe when I was around him, but I just dealt with it. I don't know if it was just love or if it was just not me completely understanding what was going on. But looking back at it now, what I had to go through wasn't right and wasn't normal. It wasn't a nice way to grow up.
- 11 It got to a point where I was actually really, really scared. There was this one moment, where my grandma was picking him and me up to take us home and he forgot his keys. He got into an argument with her and she dropped us off at a bus stop because she didn't want to deal with him, which is fair enough. I was really, really angry at this point. I had already had enough. We were at a bus stop and we got into an argument and that led into me just leaving, I just left and walked back to my uncles' house.
- 12 Things got really bad between me and dad when it came to that stuff. It wasn't great seeing my dad like this. His own parents were telling him "you've got a son, you've got to take care of him, you've got to get clean, tackle that responsibility" but he didn't listen. My dad kept lying to me about being clean when he wasn't. He would continue to let me down over and over again. I didn't tell him that he was letting me down, I would just accept it.

- 13 Dad and I both go for the Richmond Tigers. In 2017, when Richmond won the premiership, this was something me and my dad had dreamed of because we were the most diehard fans in our family when it comes to Richmond. I think it really hit him when I wasn't able to spend time with him, or watch the grand final with him. And it really hit him then that he does have a child, he's got this responsibility and the fact he wasn't able to hang out with me really hurt him. And that put him back on track. Now, at the moment from what I know he is clean. At this point we have a really, really close bond, really really close relationship. I still continue to this day to do everything I can to help him out with any problems he's had. I've given myself that responsibility to take care of my dad, just as much as I take care of my mum.
- 14 The first contact that I basically had with the system was after being in a pretty bad place. I'm pretty sure it was in 2017. I'd lost someone very close to me and I found it very difficult to grieve. I started talking to the school wellbeing team. That slowly turned into me getting a counsellor who I went and saw weekly. After a few times meeting up with her, I went to the doctor and got a mental health plan. After that I was given 10 counselling sessions for free.
- 15 My mum, still to this day, is sick. I still help her around the house. She receives some support. We have a cleaner that comes once a week to help. Mum is also sent food which helps as she doesn't eat very much. At this stage of my life, it's just normal now. I do it without even thinking twice because it is my job. It feels like I have to take care of her. It feels like if I don't take care of her, then things just aren't going to go right, and that's not what I want.

Space4Us

- 16 My counsellor got me into a youth group called the Space4Us program. Space4Us is basically a young carers group run in the Western suburbs, where 15 to 18 year olds come together to talk about their experiences as young carers. The program runs for four days, six hours a day in the school holidays.
- 17 It was really nice to meet up with other kids. It was nice to talk to other kids about things they had gone through. We would share our stories.
- 18 It was pretty fun as well because we did activities, group activities, and you basically went and met new people and made some friends. I learnt a lot about mental health and mental illness. The key goal of the program was to teach us kids about why our parents were feeling the way they were feeling, why they had a mental illness and what that meant.
- 19 It was also just a way to tell us that what we were doing (caring for our parents) wasn't completely normal and doesn't happen to everyone. That made me feel alright. Because that was probably one of the scariest things, not knowing what my mum was going

through. Not knowing what was happening to my mum. Mum basically started feeling a bit sick when we moved from the country to Melbourne, probably around 2014 or 2015, when I was 14. It was a bit hard not knowing what was going on. But for me it was basically, okay, mum's sick, I've just got to grow up and do what I've got to do. I've got to do more chores. I've got to take more responsibility at the house. I just basically took that on but I felt like I just had to. I didn't want to ask any questions, say that anything was different or raise any issues because I didn't feel like it was right. I didn't feel it was my place to ask or to say anything about it.

20 Before the end of the program, one of the organisers asked me to become a peer mentor. I spoke to my counsellor who also had ties with the program and she went through the peer mentor training with me. I had to go through books and do the training.

21 In 2019, I had my first role as a peer mentor and it went really well. I was ready for it and it got me out of my comfort zone. I tried my best to do my part and also be there for the other kids because there's some things that they've gone through that I understand myself. I've been in their shoes, and they've also been in my shoes, so a lot of them could understand where I was coming from and I was able to talk to them. I've always been very open and the type of person that can open up about their problems. I feel that if you can open up, others can open up too because they are less embarrassed and there is trust there. If I've told them something about me, they'll be willing to tell me something about them. I've been in their shoes and they've also been in mine.

22 My role as a peer mentor is to be there and listen to the kids and to run them through the activities. Everything is confidential unless you become aware of a risk of harm to them or to someone else. A lot of kids would talk about what their parents were going through. They would tell me about times they were scared or a bit freaked out.

23 One of the first activities I was in charge of was around this idea of a bucket. The bucket represented what you are going through and the weight you could hold. You had to draw a bucket and pretend all your problems and stressors were water filling up the bucket, just basically a tap being turned on and it would flow into your bucket. Eventually the bucket would be overflowing, which is sometimes how you feel when your problems and stressors become too much. You just can't lift it all, and it would just overflow, and overflow. The thing about this bucket is that it had its own tap at the bottom of the bucket, and once you twisted that tap, all the water, stress and problems would leave the bucket. The point of the exercise was to explain that all we had to do was to twist the tap and then all that water, all that stress and all those problems would go through the tap and leave the bucket. I had to explain that sometimes it's really hard to turn a tap. So what I talk about with the group of kids was that we had to come up with ways that would make it easier to turn that tap on. Like playing sports or things like that, to take your mind off it to resolve that stress. I also had to get them to understand that sometimes you even need

help. Sometimes you need an extra hand to actually help, to really actually turn the tap. That was about seeking help and talking to people and getting people that you trust, and things like that. So that was a really cool activity to be a part of.

CHAMPS

- 24 Last year I got a call from a woman I knew through the Space4Us Program and she invited me to be a peer mentor in the CHAMPS program. CHAMPS is a program for younger children, aged between 8 and 13. Some, but not all, of these kids are carers with responsibility. The program focuses on getting kids to understand why their parents are the way they are. As I said above, the scariest thing is not knowing or understanding what your parents are going through.
- 25 The first time I was part of the CHAMPS program with the younger kids, there were two brothers who fought a lot. One of the things I really enjoyed was that by the end of it I was able to get them closer together. I helped them share their stories together, which was really rewarding. At my second CHAMPS program I had another kid that was very quiet but over the course of the program I was able to get her to open up about the things she was going through.
- 26 Being a peer mentor has been a very rewarding experience. As much as the little kids were a bit more of a challenge, they were still very, very nice and rewarding. Seeing kids at such a young age going through all these things surprised me. It surprised me how much they knew at such a young age.
- 27 I had been going through problems since I was around 10 years old. I had learnt a lot about self-harm and suicide which are things you shouldn't really know about at 10 years old, but I did. It was interesting to hear that these kids knew what these things were already and some of the kids would even come to me and tell me about things like stories about their parents, and stories about their grandparents and about them as well. To me it was like they'd normalised what was going on in their lives, because they are so young. That's what I did when I was younger. I didn't understand that what I was going through wasn't normal. It was just nice to see these kids and to help them and be able to talk to them. It was basically like they were already adults in some ways.
- 28 A lot of people told me how inspiring I was, the fact I was still going after all those things happened with my family. I didn't really know how to feel about that but it was nice to hear that.

Ways to improve the system

- 29 One of the biggest problems with the current system is the need to tell the same story over and over again. I like telling my story but the amount of times I have had to tell the

same story one on one with a counsellor has been annoying. In my view, different organisations should communicate so that if you change services or if counsellors change, they communicate with one another so that you don't have to start from the start again. It would be great if when you saw a new therapist for example, they understood everything about your past so that you didn't have to go into it again.

- 30 We need more education about what mental health is. I think there could never be enough education when it comes to mental health. I think people need to understand what it is. I was learning about these things at such a young age, and even though you feel you shouldn't know what these things are, in the long run this has helped me. It has helped me mature more quickly. I have had to be an adult since I was 16 years old. Back then it was really, really tough but it has helped me understand the world a lot quicker than others.
- 31 It would be good if we had more help with managing the house, including the budget. As I said above mum has a cleaner who comes to do the vacuuming and mopping as I don't have the time to do those things. Mum also gets food packages. I'm not sure how these things are organised but they do help us.
- 32 It would be good if there was a way that young carers could have a break from caring.
- 33 I also think that the young carers allowance needs to be communicated more, and it needs to be easier to get. I didn't end up applying for the allowance because I didn't hear about it until later on, and it was too difficult for me to understand how to apply. It would have been really helpful to have that allowance.
- 34 One of the biggest and hardest things as a young carer is juggling school while taking care of your parent. One of the biggest stresses is stressing about school and stressing about your parents, and it's really hard to deal with both of them. Tutoring would be really great and would impact a lot of people.
- 35 Workers in hospitals need to be kinder to parents and children when they are treating them. It's hard enough going through these things as a family and when workers are rude to you and your family it makes things worse. Having people who should be on your side, not on your side, makes it really hard. Workers should be more kind and caring.

Dated: 8 April 2020