



WITNESS STATEMENT OF LEONA COLEMAN

I, Leona Coleman,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 I have been diagnosed with schizophrenia.
- 3 My statement covers my experience of Victoria's mental health system, including before and after I committed a serious offence and was found not guilty because of mental impairment.

Experience of the mental health system prior to the offence

- 4 Prior to the offence, I had been admitted as an inpatient at a mental health facility four times. I had been on a range of medications but they had not been working for me. I don't think anyone knew the extent of how unwell I was. I don't think anyone would have ever thought I would do what I did. I don't even think I knew what I was capable of. I do know that I wasn't getting the help I needed.
- 5 I was smoking a lot of pot and taking a lot of Ice. I was into the rave scene so I was taking party drugs as well. I was becoming increasingly unwell. I was just getting sicker and sicker. In the year prior to my offence, I was admitted to hospital twice, once at the start and again in the middle of the year. I stayed in hospital for two months following that second admission. During this time I was also in a toxic relationship with my ex-partner.

Dame Phyllis Frost Centre and Thomas Embling Hospital

- 6 I was found not guilty of an offence because of mental impairment and was sent to Dame Phyllis Frost Centre (DPFC). For the first few months I was really heavily medicated. I remember being laughed at by the other prisoners because I was so dosed up. I didn't really know what was going on. I recall waking up one day in my cell thinking I was in my own home. I would write letters to people and given them to the prison officers, not thinking that they needed addresses. I had a couple of psychologists coming to see me but nothing was helping me much at that time.

¹ The name and details of the witness (and others) referred to in this statement have been changed to protect their identities.

- 7 For the next few months I was moved between Thomas Embling Hospital (**Thomas Embling**) and DPFC. It was a bit difficult moving back and forth, having to get my head around being in the different environments. Thomas Embling still felt like a jail but less so than DPFC.
- 8 Before Christmas I got a call and was told I was moving back to Thomas Embling to try a new medication. I was then put on a combination of medications, I'd take one in the morning and one at night. This medication has kept me well for a number of years now.
- 9 I had a lot of therapy at Thomas Embling which really helped me. I worked with a psychologist. She helped me to work and operate in what she described as the 'grey area'. I was always black and white, yes and no, good and bad but she helped me sit, which was very difficult for me for a very long time, in the grey area. This has helped me and it is a lot less pressure and stress as I'm not swinging between thinking things are good or bad.
- 10 I also took part in group therapy. I went to the offending group where you talk about your offence with a group of people and you have to put yourself in your victim's shoes. I also went to the dual diagnosis group (the drug and alcohol group) which helped me work through those issues too.
- 11 I haven't relapsed since getting well at Thomas Embling. I was initially granted extended leave from Thomas Embling. I am now on a non-custodial supervision order.

My life now

- 12 I still receive treatment and support in the community. I am on medication and see a counsellor who is really great and on the ball. I also see my local area mental health service who have worked with me to help me identify my early warning signs. It is my responsibility to keep myself well. I have a good National Disability Insurance Scheme package. I do singing lessons and art classes once a week. I have a cleaner and a gardener that helps me with my plants out in the courtyard. I also have a kitten which has changed my life. I am hoping to start a family soon.
- 13 I have a side business focusing on intuitive healing. My partner does the books for me. We are both really spiritual people. I ran my first spiritual cleanse workshop this year.
- 14 When I think about my offence I feel like I had hit rock bottom, like the light inside me went out. It felt like I had charcoal in my chest and I lived like that for years and years. It was not me that night. It was a different person. I know I have to live with what I did and that really hurts.

Recommendations

- 15 I don't know if more supports would have stopped my offending. I think that maybe one on one support might have helped, but I also think that no one could have got me out of that situation, not even myself. I don't think I was ready at that time to take on the medication.
- 16 There needs to be more education around mental health, particularly in schools. Maybe if someone said to me 10 years ago that this is the path you could go down, maybe I would have thought twice about seeking help.
- 17 There should be a Thomas Embling in the community. A facility where you can check in and constantly get support, medication, group therapy, workshops and courses. All these things help you learn more about yourself and what you are feeling. There also needs to be more peer supports workers.

4 May 2020