

Witness Name: Deborah Dickson

Statement No.: WITN0322001

Exhibits: WITN0322002 – WITN0322008

Dated: 9 April 2021

ROYAL COMMISSION OF INQUIRY INTO ABUSE IN CARE

WITNESS STATEMENT OF DEBORAH DICKSON

I, Deborah Dickson, will say as follows: –

- 1 My name is Deborah (Debbie) Dickson, and I was born on GRO-B 1969. I am 51 years old. I currently live in Palmerston North. I have four daughters and five grandchildren. I am a survivor of Lake Alice.

Early life

- 2 I was born in Marton and was brought up with my brother, who is 16 months older than me. My parents were hard on us. I remember being worked all the time. I would go to my grandparents' place by the beach in the holidays – that was my getaway.
- 3 There was never much love from my parents when I was growing up. I don't remember getting hugs or being showed much affection.

- 4 With my schooling, I started off at Marton Primary School, and then I went to boarding school when I was 11. In fifth form, I was expelled from boarding school and went to Rangitikei College until I was able to get a job. As soon as I had enough money and the means to get out, I left Marton.

How I came to be in Lake Alice

- 5 When I was two and half years old, I was admitted to Palmerston North hospital with meningitis. My parents were told that I had only hours to live. They were given a choice: I could be given antibiotics that could potentially result in me having a “feeble mind” in later life. If I didn’t get the treatment, I would die. (Lake Alice Examination Report, Dr Pugmire, dated 13 September 1978 **[WITN0322002]**) They chose to give me the treatment, and I made a full recovery.
- 6 However, for the rest of my childhood, they treated me like I had brain damage or some sort of mental disorder. This was despite the doctor telling them that I hadn’t suffered any effects and that any behavioural issues were from my home environment (Psychologist Report, Tennet, dated 18 October 1978 **[WITN0322003]**).
- 7 Two weeks before I went away to Lake Alice, my parents sent me to a health camp for my behavioural issues, such as tantrums. I was nine. I stayed there for two weeks before I was admitted to Lake Alice.
- 8 I believe my parents had already made up their minds to send me to Lake Alice because they just wanted me out of the house. They never told me why I was going there. I was only nine and believe I was just being a young kid. Yes, I was naughty sometimes, but I was just acting out. I didn’t have mental health issues that required me to be locked up.
- 9 I was admitted to Lake Alice on 12 September 1978. My psych report says it was because of “unmanageable behaviour at home” and “behaviour disorder” (Lake Alice Discharge Notes dated 14 November 1978 **[WITN0322004]**). My parents signed a form agreeing for me to go there and receive treatment including ECT and whatever drugs they chose to give me. (Consent for

Treatment Form dated 12 September 1978 [WITN0322005]). I was put in Villa 6. I was placed on pre-discharge trial leave on 10 November 1978 after spending two months there. I was pretty much “a good girl” the whole time (Psychiatrist Letter, dated 17 November 1978 [WITN0322006]).

- 10 When I was at primary school, I was a good kid and got along well with my classmates and the teaching staff. My teachers were surprised when they heard I had been admitted to Lake Alice [WITN0322002].

What I remember about Lake Alice

- 11 I was only nine years old when I went to Lake Alice, so I don't remember a lot of the detail, but the things I do remember are very clear in my head and will never be forgotten.
- 12 The understanding my parents had with Lake Alice was that I would go there Monday to Friday as an “inpatient” and then return to my parents in the weekends. We lived so close to Lake Alice that I would sometimes go back home for dinner on Wednesday night. I put up a fight every time my parents sent me back there. I just didn't know why I was being put in that place.
- 13 My mum would tell me that I hadn't changed – that I was still being naughty. Then I would go back, and they would up my dosage of medication.
- 14 When I first went to Lake Alice, I did not see any doctors and there were no assessments or tests done on me.
- 15 I remember the bedroom that I stayed in. I was all by myself. As you walked down the corridor, it was the room on the left. It just had one bed, with no toilet. As an adult looking back, it reminds me of a prison cell. They would lock me in at night. I remember feeling so scared when the lights went off and the doors were closed for the evening.
- 16 I remember the main common area where we would play. I was in the teen adolescent unit so most of the kids were much older than me. I was the youngest there. I actually don't remember any of the staff because I couldn't distinguish the adults from the teenagers – I was too young to really know.

- 17 We had a school that we would go to, but I don't remember any of the schoolwork that we did – if we did any. Everyone just kept to themselves, and I don't even know what we did all day. I was just trying to get through the day until I could leave Lake Alice for good.
- 18 One of my most vivid memories was movie nights. We would have them in the big gym where all patients would watch the movie. This was everyone, kids and adults all mixed in together. I was so terrified on these nights because some of the adults that they brought to hang out with us were pretty scary. They would scream and scream the whole time. As an adult now, I know that a lot of them were mentally insane.
- 19 The bathroom was horrible. There was just this one bathtub that we all had to wash in. It was raised above the ground, and I remember it being very open and feeling like anyone could come and see me having a wash anytime they wanted to. The actual bath time was horrible too. The staff would just dunk me in the bath very forcefully, like I was a prisoner, and they would wash my hair like I had lice – but I didn't. It felt like we were in a concentration camp. The actual water stank – I don't know what they put in the water. They didn't tell us, and you certainly didn't ask.
- 20 I remember thinking I was brought up to respect adults so surely they were doing what was good for me, and so I didn't resist them. But at the same time, they were treating us like we were dogs or something. I couldn't do anything. I was only nine, so I just did what I was told.
- 21 I remember lining up and going past a hole in the wall, and you are given a little cup, and one night, I fought against it, and I was taken to my room and the door was locked and I was left alone. It felt like ages. I don't think I ate anything that whole night.
- 22 No one came and saw me while I was in Lake Alice. I know it was because of the shame that the Lake Alice name had. Our whole community knew about Lake Alice and that if you went there, you were crazy. So even though my parents put me in there, they were embarrassed that I was there. They didn't tell my grandparents or my cousins. They told no one that I was in Lake Alice,

and so no one came to see me. Once I got out of Lake Alice, I didn't tell anyone either because of the stigma. I was ashamed. As soon as people found out I went there, they behaved as though I was mentally ill, so I just kept it a secret.

- 23 My nurse's notes say I suffered from "sexual manipulation/interference" by one of the other lady inmates (Doctor and Nurses Notes re Incident dated 19 October 1978 [WITN0322007]). I don't remember this happening to me. I think I have blocked it out. Reading the reports from the doctors and the nurses makes me sick. How could they do nothing about it. Simply sending me to the doctor for a check and noting that there was no physical harm is not enough. There was no follow-up to see if I was OK after being sexual abused, and as far as the notes are concerned, nothing happened to her. Like I said, I've clearly blocked it all out and I guess that's for the better.
- 24 Even though it says throughout my notes that I was a good, behaved girl and easy to look after, (Nurses Notes, various dates between Sep – Nov 1978 [WITN0322008]) and recommend that I be discharged as soon as possible, they still pumped me with drugs. My notes say I was given Largactil, Stelazine, Melleril, and Tofranil while I was at Lake Alice ([WITN0322008])

After Lake Alice

- 25 When I was discharged in November 1978, I was an outpatient for about 15 months. I would go back to Lake Alice with my mother now and then to be checked and to be kept on my medication. So I don't remember finally leaving Lake Alice. I just stopped going back there one day.
- 26 I remember going to boarding school in about 1980 or 1981 and not going back to Lake Alice. I remember running away a lot at boarding school too.
- 27 I had a shitty adulthood following Lake Alice. I'm a loner, and I hate socialising. My confidence is so low that, if I get into trouble, I can't manage it and I break down. I can't manage the criticism. So that has really affected the relationships I have made, and it has ruined my life.

Complaints and compensation

- 28 This is the first time I have felt strong enough to even address that I went to Lake Alice. I had heard about the Grant Cameron proceedings, but I wasn't ready then to talk about anything. And I remember thinking that Dr Leeks wasn't there when I went, so they wouldn't want to talk to me. So I just didn't bother.
- 29 I decided to tell my girls what happened to me when I decided to take part in the Royal Commission. That was a huge step for me, and it has affected my children in many different ways.

Effects of Lake Alice and state care on my life

- 30 My eldest grandchild is 15 now, and I have another four grandchildren. When I turn up on my motorbike, they run out and give me cuddles and want me to love them. We show each other love as much as we can and are able to. I made a promise to myself that I would make the choice to change and break the cycle of the environment I was exposed to as a young child.
- 31 We need to shower love on our children so that the abuse cycle doesn't continue. This is something that did not happen when I was little, and it only continued at Lake Alice.
- 32 Like I said above, I have struggled a lot with the relationships I have had since Lake Alice. I do not have any trust in authority. I just want to keep to myself and not expose myself to any hurt. This lack of trust in anybody has led to many relationship breakdowns. I was married for nearly three years, but it didn't work out as I was looking for acceptance and love everywhere, but I couldn't open up to believe in myself or the relationship I was in.
- 33 Not only in my marriage but in any relationship I have, with family or with friends, I generally feel that if I don't get too close then I won't have to be accountable or answerable to anyone and they too won't get to know who I really am. I don't want anyone to support me or believe in me in case I let them down. I feel more comfortable just keeping to myself.

- 34 The stigma over the years that came from being in Lake Alice has been a continual burden. Everyone in the area I grew up in knew that Lake Alice was a place you went to if you were crazy. This is what I had to fight every day, trying to prove that I wasn't crazy, and sometimes that would make me feel crazy. Once my employers would find out that I had been to Lake Alice, they would start to treat me differently. As an example, I was working in a rest home when an incident happened between myself and another staff member. Without even trying to understand the issue, my boss just blamed me and told me I needed to get counselling. I didn't do anything wrong, but they didn't even want to hear me out.
- 35 I don't talk about feelings. I bottle it up and don't express anything at all. If I'd expressed my feelings in Lake Alice, they would have thought I actually was crazy, so I learnt not to show my feelings.
- 36 I tried to kill myself a few times when I was younger. These were serious attempts. Even to this day, I have very down days and battle depression and the feeling of wanting to end my life. The only thing that keeps from actually doing it are my grandchildren, and I could never do that to my girls. They see me as strong and independent, and I need to be that person for them. I try every day.
- 37 I feel extremely out of place in social situations. I always feel like I'm always intruding in situations that I'm not supposed to be in. I avoid work functions and socialising. I think this stems from Lake Alice and being forced to isolate to keep safe. I don't know where I belong.

What I want from the Royal Commission

- 38 I am past counselling. I've just gotten over it myself so I don't think I want that, but you never know after the hearings. I might need to talk to someone.
- 39 What I would like to see:
- a. An apology;
 - b. I would like to see the doctors and psychiatrists held accountable;

- c. I want people to know what happened, and I want people to learn from what happened to us at Lake Alice so it never happens again;
- d. I want our voice to be heard. We need to finally be given a voice to speak up. This didn't happen when we were 9 or 12 or 16 or 21, but it needs to happen now;
- e. I want compensation for the suffering we have been put through as children who went through Lake Alice.

40 I wish to present my evidence to the Royal Commission so my voice can be heard.

Statement of Truth

41 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.

GRO-C

Signed: _____

Dated: 9 April 2021

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**INDEX OF DOCUMENTS FOR STATEMENT OF DEBBIE DICKSON
DATED 9 APRIL 2021**

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WITN0322002	Lake Alice Examination Report, Dr Pugmire	13 September 1978	5, 10
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