



Royal Commission

into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability

Statement of Dorothy Armstrong

Name: Dorothy Armstrong

Date of birth: 28/03/1971

Address: Known to the Royal Commission

Occupation: Adviser and Self-Advocate

Date:

1. This statement made by me accurately sets out the evidence that I am prepared to give to the Royal Commission into Violence, Abuse, Neglect and Exploitation of People with Disability. This statement is true and correct to the best of my knowledge and belief.
2. I have an Acquired Brain Injury (**ABI**). I was first told that I had an ABI in my late 30s but I first noticed that there was something different about my thinking patterns when I was 16 or 17. I also have had and do have mental health issues. I have required anti-depressants but not anti-psychotics. I have experienced a lot of physical violence and homelessness during my life.
3. I have experience in the criminal justice system as a victim and as an offender. I offended for the first time when I was 17 and the last time when I was 37. My offending took place when I was 17-18, in my late 20s, and then in my late 30s. When I was 37, I went to prison for the first and only time.
4. My life since leaving prison has been very different. I now live in my own apartment. I work as an Adviser & Peer Support Worker for the "Supporting Justice" project run by the Centre for Innovative Justice at RMIT University (**CIJ**) I worked to develop the Supporting Justice online resource supportingjustice.net with CIJ and Paper Giant. I have

Signature		Witness	
-----------	---	---------	---

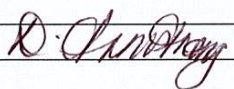
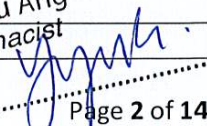
Ying Yu Ang
Pharmacist

also worked with CIJ and the Self Advocacy Resource Unit (**SARU**) to develop their "Voices for Justice" training. I was previously involved with the Enabling Justice Project also run by CIJ and Jesuit Social Services (**JSS**) as a member of the "Justice User Group".

5. In 2018 I received a Victorian Disability Award for "Excellence in promoting rights, fairness and safety".

My background and ABI

6. I was born in Queensland. I am the youngest of 11 children. My family moved to Victoria when I was five and I have spent most of my life here. My family moved all the time and we kids often did not have enough food. I experienced a lot of violence growing up, especially from three of my brothers. All 11 of us were raised to think "what happens in the house stays in the house".
7. I remember that when I was five I stood outside the family home waiting for my "real family" to come and get me.
8. Both of my parents and my two eldest brothers are deceased. I am no longer in contact with the rest of my family.
9. I do not know exactly when I developed my ABI. I have experienced physical violence throughout my life, from my family and later in abusive intimate relationships. When I was about 16 or 17 years old I began to notice a difference in myself. Before that age, I had a picture perfect memory and was excellent at English. As time went on my memory got worse.
10. For a long time I knew there was something really wrong with me but I didn't know what it was. My mind seems to operate in two ways. Sometimes, my thoughts are full on 24/7 and it can be unbearable. Sometimes I have been unable to communicate at all: there is nothing in my mind, there are no words. Not being able to communicate with people is terrifying. I also seemed to keep ending up in situations where I was abused or experiencing violence.

Signature		Witness	Ying Yu Ang Pharmacist 
-----------	---	---------	--

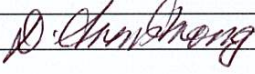
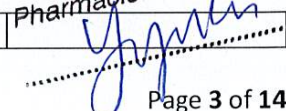
Page 2 of 14

CONTINUED STATEMENT OF: Dorothy Armstrong

11. From my early 20s, I looked for help. I did get some help from domestic violence services and places like the Salvation Army. I tried counsellors, doctors, medication, and self-help books. None of it worked. I did not even know what the problem was. I just desperately wanted things to be different and did not want to be suffering. I wanted to know why I was this way and how to stop it.
12. When I was 36 or 37, I was living with a man, who was very violent. He was the most violent man I have been with and I was in the hospital a lot. During these hospital admissions, scans showed bleeding and swelling around my brain. Around that time, tests were performed and I got a letter saying that I had an ABI.

My life before prison and my experience with the criminal justice system

13. When I was a child, the police would sometimes come to my house. The police were quite "punchy" back in those days and I found them scary.
14. My first direct experience with police was because of someone else's crime. I was 17 years old and living with a girlfriend in St Kilda. I called a police station because my handbag had been stolen. I was raped by a police officer who worked on the case. I tried to contact this police officer afterward to ask him why he did what he did. I called his police station many times and was eventually told "he doesn't work here anymore". At the time I believed it. I know better now.
15. After this experience and many more incidents, I have learned to be terrified of police. I know I am in a database somewhere with my history with that officer. When I was first working with CIJ I refused to use anything other than my nickname "Doddy" or to have any photos taken because I did not want police or previous violent men from my life to recognise me and track me down.
16. I got married when I was 22 years age and had two children. My life spiralled out of control. I had more contact with the police because of my ex-husband's violence

Signature		Witness	
-----------	---	---------	---

Ying Yu Ang
Pharmacist

CONTINUED STATEMENT OF: Dorothy Armstrong

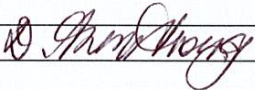
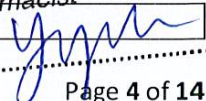
towards me. When I finally left him I was distressed and felt emotionally and mentally broken. I feel this set me on a path of no return.

17. When I was younger and more vulnerable, I used to get a lot of attention from men. I had very long blonde hair and I was very slim. That was an issue. I experienced physical and sexual violence from men. I struggled a lot with homelessness.
18. Getting help was challenging. I struggled to get my story right or in the right order. Often, police did not believe I was a victim of family violence or they did not follow up my complaint. I remember once I was attacked by three men and went to Geelong Police Station. My clothes were ripped and I was screaming and bloody. A police officer came out and yelled at me to "fuck off".
19. As well as issues with my ABI, I was embarrassed or ashamed because I was bruised or had other injuries. Secrecy was very ingrained in me because I was raised in a "don't tell household". But I also don't ever remember anyone in those moments asking me "what is happening in your home?" I think if someone had asked me that, I would have told them. Even when I was obviously a battered woman, nobody suggested I get an MRI. I never got the help I needed.
20. One exception is when I was 37 and in my most violent intimate relationship. Someone from the hospital rang me and said "the reason I am calling is that you present here so often. We have set up monitoring who visits the most. You present a lot so we want to try to help you". That was the same hospital that did the tests and found out I had an ABI. That meant a lot. But shortly after that I went to prison for the first time.

My experiences with prison

My time in prison

21. In 2008 I was living in a motel after my ex-partner had trashed my home. While there I was involved in a violent incident that led to my first and only term of imprisonment with a four year sentence. I was in prison for 16 months, which was the minimum non-

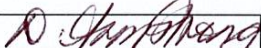
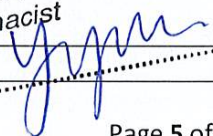
Signature		Witness	Ying Yu Ang Pharmacist 
-----------	---	---------	--

Page 4 of 14

CONTINUED STATEMENT OF: Dorothy Armstrong

parole period, and spent the rest of the sentence on parole. I started in a maximum security prison, Dame Phyllis Frost Centre, then later moved to Tarrengower minimum security prison for a while, then went back to Dame Phyllis Frost Centre until I was released.

22. I was in prison when I found out I had an ABI, I was terrified of being injured again and my injury getting worse. In prison there is metal and concrete everywhere. I thought "that's what my head is going to hit". It was overwhelming at first but there was no room for me to think about my feelings. I just needed to watch my back and survive.
23. When I first got into prison, I was asked where I wanted to go. I was told that there was a unit if you did not want to use drugs. I said "yeah, I want to go there". How naïve for me to think everyone felt the same way! That is not what it is for at all; it was exactly where you went to get drugs. There were six women including myself. There was a lot of violence in the unit. One woman was beaten up. Three women jumped me. I got put "in the slot" (solitary confinement) for two weeks after defending myself from those three women.
24. There was also a lot of stealing and mind games from the other women in the unit. I could not believe what some women would do to get a rise. I think I was targeted because I am generally quite reasonable and, in that instance, quite naïve and trying to be kind. I think there was a sense of "let's see what she's made of". They would play mind games and upset me or jump me, and when I tried to defend myself I got put in the slot. I was sent to the slot twice both times for two weeks. I was the odd one out in the altercations because it was my first time in prison. The women bullying me had been there numerous times or had been there for a long time. At the time I could not understand why they were doing it to me. I had done nothing to these women. Maybe they wanted relief from whatever they were going through. I reckon 10 years in prison would make me pretty nasty too. But at the end of the day, they were bullies. I cannot stand bullies.

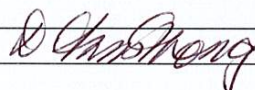
Signature		Witness	
-----------	---	---------	---

Ying Yu Ang
Pharmacist

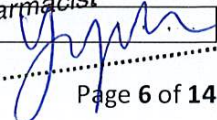
CONTINUED STATEMENT OF: Dorothy Armstrong

25. Being in the slot was really hard because it did not make sense to me and did not seem right. It had a massive impact on my mental health. I was on anti-depressant medication at the time and completely dependent on unreliable officers giving it to me. Sometimes the officers couldn't be bothered and I would go without. It is really scary being reliant on another person for medication you need to be well.
26. While I was in prison, I sometimes found it very hard to communicate or remember things. If I did not respond to officers in a timely fashion or if I was not able to have all of my facts correct and in a certain order, assumptions would be made about me as if I was resisting.
27. I did receive some good physical health care in prison. I had a compulsory pap smear and some things were discovered. As a result, I had surgery at Bendigo Hospital. I can never be thankful enough for that. But for everything else, I was on my own. I did not receive any form of therapy in prison or see anyone about my mental health or my ABI. I had told the prison nurse that I was on anti-depressants in the community and so I was given pills but if there was a psychiatrist I never saw one. I was on antidepressants the entire time I was in prison.
28. I started working as soon as I could. If I could get into a class, I would, but most of those were aimed at long-termers.
29. My whole experience in prison seemed like insanity to me. I knew that I deserved to be there, but my efforts to rehabilitate myself seemed frustrated by the corrections system. People like me got put in solitary or moved. The "squeaky wheels" were the ones who got left in the compound. If something happened, everything would shut down. The sense I got was that people just did not care. I was imprisoned with a woman who is now almost embedded in my mind. She obviously had physical disabilities. The way she was treated was horrifying. She was someone who obviously needed help but instead she was put in solitary because it was easier for the guards. She was bullied and bashed by the other women. It was shocking to see and reinforced not sharing

Signature



Witness

Ying Yu Ang
Pharmacist

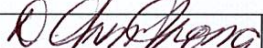
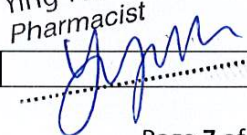
CONTINUED STATEMENT OF: Dorothy Armstrong

information about my ABI in case I was victimised like her. You don't talk about anything that would make you vulnerable in prison.

30. I heard the expression "good orderly running of the prison" numerous times. It was used to justify the way things were done.
31. I remember a particular day I was standing somewhere and it occurred to me the world was still going on and I thought "nobody knows where I am and nobody knows what the hell is going on here. This is really scary".

Life after prison

32. I was released on parole in February 2010 and was on parole for two years and eight months.
33. The man I was with before, was in prison when I got out. That helped me get free of a very violent man. But I was homeless and had nowhere to go. I had disconnected from the people I knew previously. I also had been living in the country and the prison was in Melbourne.
34. When I was getting closer to potential parole, I had a meeting with an officer. I do not remember whether I was called in or whether I approached her. I do remember that I told the officer "I don't have anywhere to live". The officer kept badgering me and saying "surely you must know somebody" she never offered to help me find housing. I eventually told the officer "there is an acquaintance I knew for about a month before I went to prison". The officer rang this woman. I did not want to have any part of it and I felt so bad that she was being bothered. To her credit, the woman agreed to let me stay with her. I was released on parole to that woman's address.
35. Three days after I was released my living arrangements broke down and I was homeless. I thought that I would be picked up and sent back to prison but I always told the truth whenever I saw Corrections. I was very clear that my housing was not stable. They never provided any help.

Signature		Witness	
-----------	---	---------	---

Ying Yu Ang
Pharmacist

CONTINUED STATEMENT OF: Dorothy Armstrong

36. I had to check in with Corrections three times a week for two years. Almost every time I went I had a different officer.
37. It was up to me to find help for myself. I found information about a housing service and every day I would call them on a payphone. Eventually I got into a boarding house, which was not fit for anything but at least it was an address.
38. I threw myself at services and begged for help. I went to Corrections, VACRO and ACSO for post-release programs but was ineligible for almost all of them. It was very hard to find anything. Sometimes the "books were closed" and sometimes I was not eligible. For one program I was too old. There were so many programs for men. There are things for finance, for anger management, for family, but there is almost nothing for women. I was always asking "please do you have anything? I would love to do that but it's for men". I understand that there is not enough funding and that places close their books for the year. But there was a part of me that thought "this is the story of my life".
39. I don't remember how this came about, but I got help from Melbourne City Mission. For a very short time a young woman named Jess worked with me. In late 2010, I remember Jess saying to me: "Doddy, I got this email. Apparently, there is this building being built. Would you be interested?" Anything other than a boarding house was music to my ears. I said "yes".
40. The apartment was provided through the service "Launch Housing". I believe the building was the first of its kind in Australia. The Victorian Government had given funding to Launch Housing to set them up. There were two types of tenants in the building. There were people like me, with long-term homelessness and issues like drug and alcohol abuse or mental health issues. Then there were people described as "low income". I went through the interview process and was offered an apartment. I am still there now.
41. At first each tenant was allocated a worker. The turnover of workers was really high; I had about five workers in five months. Eventually the manager at the time, Camille,

Signature		Witness	
-----------	---	---------	---

CONTINUED STATEMENT OF: Dorothy Armstrong

approached me and said "Doddy, how about you and I go out for coffee on Tuesday?" Camille is the kind of person who works 16 hours a day, so by her offering to go and have a coffee, I knew this meant that there was nobody else to provide me with support. I found this humiliating but I was really grateful and we started going out every Tuesday from then on. For months, she was the one person who kept me going and we continued meeting like this for years.

42. I made a decision early on that I would be friendly to everyone in the building but mind my own business. I established boundaries very quickly. I do not go to people's homes and they don't come to mine. I stay focused on where I am going and what I am doing.
43. After 12 months, in around late 2011 the funding for the building was cut. It has continued to go down. The building continues to operate but it is now on skeleton staff compared to before. I have a good relationship with most of the staff but I do not really get support. There are tenants who are very unwell and I understand that they need the support more than I do. But it is still difficult when I need help.

My advocacy work

44. I first became involved with CIJ in the Enabling Justice project in 2015, when I was invited to participate in the "Justice User Group". This was a group of people with ABIs who had experience with the criminal justice system. I was the first woman to participate and I was involved differently to the men. I worked directly with Jessica Richter and Anna Howard, who were in charge of the project. We attended justice conferences, law clinics, and places like that to talk about my experiences.
45. The Justice User Group was created to help find out why there were so many people with ABIs in prison. Our experiences were used to find out how people with ABIs are treated by different parts of the justice system. Part of our work was contributing to the report's recommendations and identifying the three key justice needs: recognition, respect and support.

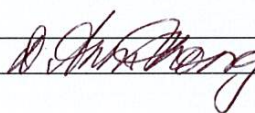
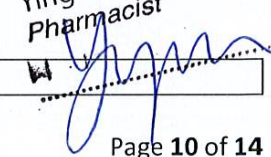
Signature

Witness

Ying Yu Ang
Pharmacist

CONTINUED STATEMENT OF: Dorothy Armstrong

46. At the end of the project, a report was written with recommendations for the government. This was an incredible result. The report was dated September 2017 and called "Recognition, Respect and Support, Enabling Justice for people with an Acquired Brain Injury". The report is attached to this statement as **annexure 1**.
47. I then became involved in the "Supporting Justice" project. I thought that I would be like a peer or support worker. But I was actually a staff member and I have been heavily involved in this project. I worked with Paper Giant to develop the online resource for the project. I helped develop a system map which shows all the paths which can lead people with disabilities into contact with police and the criminal justice system. The map shows where, between the available services, stakeholders and the individual, things most commonly breakdown. The map is a large diagram that needs to be explained in order for it to be fully understood. It outlines factors that might impact a person across their criminal justice journey. It identifies where opportunities to share information occur and where the provision of individual support is likely to have the greatest impact. I am enormously proud of this work and hope that it can be widely shared across the country.
48. Supporting Justice has identified four key priority areas:
- Early intervention;
 - Housing;
 - Disability and trauma awareness; and
 - System collaboration and information sharing.
49. I have also worked with CIJ and SARU to develop their training "Voices for Justice". This program helps people with cognitive disability and experience of the criminal justice system learn how to be self-advocates. The first round of self-advocates graduated in December 2019.

Signature		Witness	
-----------	---	---------	---

Ying Yu Ang
Pharmacist

CONTINUED STATEMENT OF: Dorothy Armstrong

50. I think that Voices for Justice has overall been an incredible success. There is so much fear and shame in speaking about experiences in the criminal justice system. A big motivator for me is accepting and treating people with basic dignity and respect, and offering them a way to help make things better for others. I think the motivation and engagement in this advocacy is a way people can say sorry for things they have done in the past and try to make things right for other people.
51. The graduates from "Voices for Justice" have now formed a self-advocacy group. It is for people with ABI who have had contact with the criminal justice system. This group is called "Voices for Change". They want to continue to contribute to making the criminal justice system better for people with ABI and raise areas of concern. I think people with lived experience are the best people to learn from about the criminal justice system. What does and does not work, and what happens to people like us in the system.

My life now

52. I still live in my apartment by myself in the building I moved into in 2010. All of my experiences have taught me that I have to rely on myself. I think that is a good thing, but not the way I had to learn it. I still wish I could get more help and it is hard when I am struggling. People make assumptions about me that I am doing better than I actually am because I can speak, and I smile, and I'm friendly. This can sometimes be to my disadvantage.
53. But I accept that I will not get more help, because I am not going to behave badly and it seems to me that you have to behave badly to get help. When I went to prison, I was very clear that, regardless of whatever anybody else did, it was my actions that had put me there. I was also clear that my actions would never put me there again. I don't even jaywalk now. I am also aware that there are other people who are worse off and need all the help in the world.

Signature

Witness

Ying Yu Ang
Pharmacist


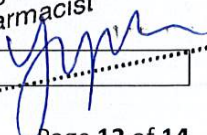
Page 11 of 14

CONTINUED STATEMENT OF: Dorothy Armstrong

54. I am still the happiest now that I have ever been. I am lucky enough to know how lucky I am. Somehow I have been able to change and that is what I have desperately wanted to do my whole life.
55. My accommodation is not perfect and horrendous things have happened in that building. But getting stable accommodation was still an enormous change. While I keep boundaries, the reality is that I can relate to a lot of people in my building. If nothing else I can relate to their suffering. And I do whatever I can to show them kindness. People are acutely aware that I am approachable. There is a café two doors down from the building and there is an ongoing joke that they are my counselling rooms. Whenever I get a coffee someone will come up saying "Oh Duddy..." It is such a beautiful thing to know that I can be someone in their life who treats them like a human being. I have my moments, but that is where I feel really lucky.
56. Finally, getting involved with CIJ was huge. I still remember the first time I was asked by people from CIJ and Jesuit Social Services "what happened?" I was so taken aback that someone wanted to know what happened to me. I broke down crying. I had not cried for a long time. I had not been able to really speak about my experiences before. That is part of why I love what CIJ does. Different people with different experiences get up and stand in the gap for people like me. I admire that and I respect it and I absolutely believe in it.

Royal Commission

57. I want the Royal Commission to listen to people like me who have had horrendous experiences at the hands of people in the criminal justice system. And then do something about changing it. We want to be heard.
58. There is so much that needs to change. I think that a lot of the problems for people with ABI are still exactly the same. The support is not there and the funding is not there.

Signature		Witness	
-----------	---	---------	---

Ying Yu Ang
Pharmacist

CONTINUED STATEMENT OF: Dorothy Armstrong

59. There needs to be more stable accommodation. This was life changing for me. As time has gone on, having that stability, being in that one place is one of the best things that ever happened. It made a massive difference.
60. There should be more awareness of gender issues. A lot of the things that have happened to me happened because I was a woman. Especially when I was a younger woman and more vulnerable. The perpetrators have said vile things as well, and the theme was always around me being a female. Disability trauma and gender awareness training is a necessity for anyone who works in the criminal justice system.
61. Everyone should talk to each other and share information freely rather than having all the different parts of the system hold information in silos. People with disability need to know what their rights are.
62. The attitude to people towards people with disability needs to be better. So much of my experience is just not being treated like a human being. Being treated with respect makes such a difference. About five years ago a man from my past tracked me down because of some advocacy I had been doing. I went to the police station to talk about an intervention order. The police officer I spoke to was so lovely to me, they were so kind and helpful. I could not stop thanking them. They just said "it's my job". That should always be the way.

Signature		Witness	
-----------	---	---------	---

Ying Yu Ang
Pharmacist

CONTINUED STATEMENT OF: Dorothy Armstrong

63. Finally, early intervention and support is vital. I think there are a lot of times this could have made such a difference to me - if someone had asked my parents why we were moving all the time and why the kids did not have enough food, if someone asked, when I was offending in my 20s, why I was alone and helped link me to services if someone had asked in my 30s why I had so many injuries and helped me find a way out of my situation... I spent so much time looking for help. Even now I cannot think of anything I could have done differently, except not bother trying at all. I can only imagine what difference someone asking me the question and offering support could have made to my life. Maybe I wouldn't have had some of the horrendous experiences, I can only imagine.

Signed: _____

Date: _____

Witness: _____

Date: _____

D. Armstrong
 29-04-2020.
 Ying Yu Ang
 Pharmacist
[Signature]
 29/04/2020.

Signature		Witness	
-----------	--	---------	--