

HANDOUT ONE – STOLEN GENERATION TESTIMONIES

DONNA MEEHAN TRANSCRIPT

My name's Donna Meehan and I'm a Gamilaroi woman from Coonamble, North West New South Wales. I lived with my people the Gamilaroi people for the first five years of my life.

It was a happy camp. I remember being sung to sleep by my grandparents and aunties. They would have a singalong every night so music has just always been a part of my life. I remember playing with my cousins everyday, we just had a carefree life and I was probably influenced by the women at the camp my grandma, aunties, my mum. A lot of the men went away working. You didn't have a pension or any benefits in those days so the men would go away trapping or building fences, breaking in horses and so they would come home maybe after a few weeks when they got paid so that the little camp um you know just children and women.

[BEING TAKEN]

One day my mum got a letter and I'm not long, I'm not sure how long she had that in her possession but I remember one day my mum said tomorrow you kids are going for a ride on the train and we were that excited because only the rich kids got to ride the train. And we woke up that morning and we had new clothes to wear and you know my mum was brushing our hair and telling us to use our manners, remember our manners and so we were taken by taxi to the train station.

We had to be there at 10 o'clock in the morning and for us kids we were just excited because we could ride the train. We were running in and out of people's legs and playing tips and excited that we had new clothes on and new shoes and that there was lots of adults there, but we took no notice and when we heard the train pulling into the station we were just jumping up for delight and squealing and it was so big. I remember looking up at this huge big you know steam train and the black grey smoke just puffing into the air and all the noises of the train pulling in the station.

When it stopped we all scrambled on board and at that time my brother Barry was the eldest so he was 9, Widdy was 7, I was 5 1/2, Robbie was four, um Sooty, Kevin was two and Jane and Wayne were three months old. They were twins. Um so we got on the train and just so excited checking out the seats and opening, shutting the windows and checking out the toilets and we, we were just happy to be able go for a ride and then we were told to take our seats and I sat down and um Barry and Widdy were opposite me and a white lady with a red hat came and sat next to me. And I was thinking 'oh, where's my mum where's my aunties?' and I thought they'll get on in a minute and just waited and waited and I was looking at my brothers.

When the train pulled out of the station um I, I'd it was just really weird because I thought where's my mum and where's my aunties? And so it is pulling out of the station and I was looking along the platform and just seeing all these faces and then I saw my mum and um she was standing there and um she had on her favourite blue dress and um my aunties were with her and she was waving this little white hanky and um I just thought why, why is she there and my mum was crying and I just pressed my face against that window and I just watched her for as long as I could until her dress ah faded into a little blue dot, and um.

I believe that was the first time in my life that I was frightened and I just cried and cried and Barry was crying and he said don't worry sis I'll look after you and I just thought but, he and Widdy are crying too, so that was the day I was taken away from Coonamble so um I was 5 1/2.

And we were on that train a long time. Um, it was a day, a night and a day journey. We arrived at

Sydney um early that morning and then I was told to stay on the train, my brothers were taken off and the lady, the white lady said no you stay here, you'll see your brothers soon. And then the train took off again and it um it came through to Newcastle.

I arrived in Newcastle on the 22 April 1960. When I got off at that station it was very different to Coonamble. There was buildings and lots of cars and different noises and it had a different scent to the red dirt I was used to at Coonamble but and it took me a while to work out what was different and then I noticed everybody was white. This, the lady that was with me said take a seat, sit down, have a drink um I'll be back in a minute and I was sitting there and I was looking all these shoes you know and I realised that people were wearing shoes, we didn't in Coonamble. And then she came back and she had ah a tall dark man with her and a shorter white woman and she lent forward and she said um 'Donna this is your new mummy and daddy. You go with them they'll give you something to eat'. And you're only 5 1/2 and you just go, and um but the white lady she lent over and she said 'hello Donna' and she had a really nice gentle face and um so I just went with them but um my eyes were hurting they were stinging from all the tears that I'd shed that previous day and night.

So that's when I arrived in Newcastle and these were my foster parents. I was the only child in this house, you know I didn't live in a tin shack, and there was no other kids and no other adults. And there was no singing me to sleep um. So I was a bit scared of my dad because I wasn't used to men, and so it took me a couple of months to adjust to him. Um I used to run and hide when he'd come home from work.

I used to go to Sunday school. I used to love Sunday school because I would see other kids and I used to pretend they were my brothers and sisters. Well I was given two dolls, one was a teddy bear and one was a black gollywog and um I used to play with them everyday and I called the gollywog Barry and the teddy bear Widdy and so I used to pretend that they were my brothers.

We moved house a few times, um we lived in different suburbs. And through that experience it meant that each time I was an only Aboriginal child at every primary school I went to, so I heard the name calling from every different school I went to. And um you just accept it and I... kids used to tease me. I just thought it would be so much easier I'd think if my brothers were here they'd stick up for me.

My parents are very kind. They were new Australian. Dad was Yugoslav. Mum was German. And they would say, 'You know, don't take notice of the names they call you, you're an Aboriginal person. Aboriginal people were in this country first, you know, we are the strangers, you be proud to be Aboriginal'. But somehow when I got to the school gate I was all alone again. So they were very supportive and they loved me and they treated me well. And I got used to a new type of food, had European food, and um, but I was very lonely cause I'd gone from a very strong extended family to this nuclear family with just parents and me.

Um I guess by the time I was nine I was getting angry with my mob. I thought why don't they come and get me and I had a lot of anger in me. Ah, by the time I was 13 I was now in denial. I wouldn't say I was Aboriginal because I knew the ignorant comments the children would make. And I didn't see another Aboriginal person in Newcastle until Jimmy Little brought out his record um royal telephone and I remember I was in the bath and mum was in the kitchen and she started screaming 'Donna, Donna quick get out of the bath, come and have a look there's an Aboriginal man on the television' and um I come out and had a look and I was looking at him and he looked like my uncles and that was the first time I saw another Aboriginal person since I'd left Coonamble.

When I got to high school there were two other Aboriginal girls but strangely enough we didn't become friends. They sat on the opposite side of the playground and um I often wondered, was it too confronting for us? Were they in denial too but we didn't become friends.

[Life as a young adult]

I left school when I was 15 and my parents had a business and I worked with the family business. And um I met my husband when I was 17 and a half. I met him when I was 17 but um when I was 18 we were married and he loved Aboriginal people. It never entered my mind to marry an Aboriginal person because I didn't know any.

My husband could see the anger in me. Um I never showed it visibly but he knew there was something missing. It brought me to the point of wanting to suicide and um on the morning when I wanted to go through with that because I just felt so lonely and empty and even though I had a husband and a baby, I'd just, there was always something missing. And it had felt like I had lived my whole life sitting on the fence looking at white society and I knew I didn't belong and I just sort of lived in my own bubble, my own world. And I think that was hard because in my adoptive family there were no grandparents, no aunts and uncles, they were all overseas. There was just mum and dad and me. And um we didn't have Aboriginal studies at school so I um my life was just I guess just a fog.

[Meeting Mum]

When I was 27 I went to a lady's meeting one day and there was one Aboriginal woman in front of me and when I checked out what her name was it was the same as my birth mother. And I thought, can she be living here in Newcastle? And um I waited till morning tea to go up to her cause I used to be very a shy person. I didn't know how to say hello or to keep a conversation going.

And I waited virtually until the end of morning tea and I went up to her and I said um 'i noticed your name' and she said 'Yeah, I'm Margaret' and um she said 'What's your name' and I said 'Donna' and she said 'Where you from?' and I said you know my home town Edgeworth where i lived and she said 'no I mean before that. Where you been born?' and I said 'Oh, Coonamble' and she said 'I know your mother'. She said 'We've been looking for you all these years' and she, she just lived 5 miles away from me.

The next week was so long cause the following Sunday was Mother's Day. So I went and bought a Mother's Day card and I wrote her a letter. I posted it Wednesday. She should have got it Friday but she wasn't home. She was in Walgett. And um my brother, one of my brothers was at home and he took the letter to Walgett. Um, he started out early Saturday morning at six o'clock and usually you could get a lift pretty quick and he said 'sis I walked three quarters of the way', nobody would pick him up. But he took that letter to my mum, so she got it that afternoon, Saturday afternoon and she said it was the best Mother's Day present she could have.

She told me that the welfare had said, told her that they'd sent me New Zealand so she stopped looking she thought I'd never find you. She said 'if I knew you were here in Newcastle I would've walk all that way just to find you'. When I asked her why she gave me away she just welled up with tears and she said 'I don't know why they took you away' but she said that that day at the train station that she'd lost seven children overnight. And many times she wanted to suicide. But grandfather said 'no you have to be here for when the children come home'. He said you know that old Murri spirit, it will call the children back, they'll come home and you have to be here. So a happy little camp um just became a real sad little camp, and the singing stopped and um they

started drinking, as you do when your heart is breaking and um... I don't know how my mum survived that... and how hard it would have been for her to say, no I'm not getting on the train with you...you know... she just kept saying, always remember your manners.

My sense of spirituality is in knowing who I belong to, what tribe it is, that was you know was the most important factors in my life. Meeting my family. Not everybody of the Stolen Generations' that went home could meet family cause they'd passed on and I'd even heard were sent away a second time and I thought, how traumatic would that be to be rejected again.

Every time in my childhood and adulthood I saw a white woman with a red hat I'd think of the welfare officer and you know there probably an instant dislike to that person and when I was at the Sydney Writer's Festival, um I read a couple of chapters of my book and I was reading the Joyride, the train journey from Coonamble, this dear old sweet lady came up to me afterwards and I thought don't tell me you're that lady and she said well, I'm not the welfare lady in your book but I am a white woman and I am wearing a red hat and I just want you to know how very sorry I am and I love your people and she was just the gentlest soul and so from that day on I thought, well I'll think about her in the future and um that probably took me close to 35 years to come to that place.

END TRANSCRIPT