TRANSCRIPT OF PROCEEDINGS

BOARD OF INQUIRY INTO HISTORICAL CHILD SEXUAL ABUSE IN BEAUMARIS PRIMARY SCHOOL AND CERTAIN OTHER GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS

PUBLIC HEARING
MELBOURNE

FRIDAY, 24 NOVEMBER 2023
AT 10AM

HEARING DAY 7 (PUBLIC VERSION)

APPEARANCES

MS F. RYAN SC – COUNSEL ASSISTING
MS K. STOWELL – COUNSEL ASSISTING

<THE HEARING RESUMED AT 10.00 AM

CHAIRPERSON: Good morning, everyone. As I mentioned yesterday, the restricted publication orders made by the Board of Inquiry during previous hearings will continue to apply. Thank you, Ms Ryan.

MS RYAN: Thank you, Chair. Chair, today's public hearing will focus on supporting healing. Research suggests that healing is a process that is active and happens within a person rather than to them. It can lead to improved functioning for the individual. Healing from child sexual abuse is a complex and dynamic process. Studies suggest that victim-survivors are resilient and that healing is certainly possible.

The concept of healing has particular meaning in some communities which the inquiry can draw on to inform its deliberations. According to the Victorian Aboriginal Controlled Health Organisation, the Aboriginal concept of healing embraces social, emotional, physical, cultural and spiritual dimensions of health and wellbeing. Healing approaches in Aboriginal communities can support a reduction in the impacts of trauma and abuse, increase social connection, improve social and emotional wellbeing and reduce suicide rates.

Victim-survivors of child sexual abuse can take decades, as we've heard, to disclose their experiences of abuse, but this disclosure does provide an opportunity for healing. And for many people, sharing their story can be the first step before healing. And as we've heard throughout this inquiry, acknowledgement of a person's experience can also support the healing journey.

We hope that this inquiry and its truth-telling processes, including private sessions where people can share their experiences with us in a private and safe environment, are part of people's healing process. A range of factors can contribute to a person's healing journey, including supportive relationships and peer groups, as well as therapeutic sessions and supports.

The healing process for secondary victims is also complex, and research suggests that healing and recovery of secondary victims is dependent on the healing of the victim-survivor. Trauma and healing both happen in a social context, making community connectedness crucial for the process of healing from trauma. Conversely, though, trauma can affect a person's ability to form interpersonal connections, as we've heard from the experts, making healing more difficult.

Community healing is embraced successfully in some communities where it is acknowledged that trauma is experienced as a community and that healing as a collective is culturally - is a culturally relevant response. And, Chair, this notion of community or collective healing is relevant to this inquiry where we have heard that many victim-survivors and secondary victims still feel a strong connection to Beaumaris.

The Terms of Reference do not limit our inquiry into appropriate ways to support healing, but they do expressly refer to formal apologies and memorialisation. In phase 2 of our hearings last week, the Secretary of the Department of Education formally apologised to victim-survivors. Apologies can be a component of an effective institutional response, providing a means to engage with victimised communities and address the legacy of the past. But to address this legacy, the apology should include the delivery of appropriate follow-through mechanisms.

Memorials also have the potential to positively impact victim-survivors and communities, and today we will hear from the principal of Trinity Grammar School about his experience in leading the school's delivery of a place-based memorial. We will also hear from LOUD Fence, which is a grassroots organisation that advocates for victim-survivors of child sexual abuse, and we will hear from Ms Hatcher about the establishment of that organisation and how they support victim-survivors of child sexual abuse and raise awareness of the issue.

We will also hear from a former Victorian Emergency Services Commissioner about his experience in using art to help individuals and communities heal from trauma. I will now hand over to Ms Stowell, who will call evidence from Maureen Hatcher from LOUD Fence.

CHAIRPERSON: Thank you, Ms Ryan. Ms Stowell.

MS STOWELL: Thank you, Chair. The inquiry calls Ms Maureen Hatcher.

<WITNESS MAUREEN JOAN HATCHER, AFFIRMED

<EXAMINATION BY MS STOWELL:

MS STOWELL: Thank you, Ms Hatcher. Could you please state your full name for the inquiry.

MS HATCHER: Sure. Maureen Joan Hatcher.

MS STOWELL: I just want to take you to your professional qualifications and background. You are the founder of the organisation known as LOUD Fence; is that correct?

MS HATCHER: That's correct.

MS STOWELL: And you hold an Advanced Diploma in Children's Services from the University of Ballarat, now known as Federation University; is that correct?

MS HATCHER: Correct.

MS STOWELL: And you're also employed as a development adviser at Playgroup Victoria; is that correct?

MS HATCHER: That's correct.

MS STOWELL: Thank you for travelling down from Ballarat to join us today. You've prepared a statement for this inquiry; is that correct?

MS HATCHER: That's right.

MS STOWELL: And are you satisfied that what's in that statement is true and correct?

MS HATCHER: Absolutely.

MS STOWELL: Ms Hatcher, we have an image here on the screen of a LOUD Fence with its vibrant colourful ribbons outside a church or a cathedral building. I'd just like to you imagine for a moment that you're speaking to someone who's never seen a LOUD Fence before, and could you tell us about where we might find one and what it means?

MS HATCHER: Sure. It is a beautiful image, isn't it? We tend to say now - and what I would say to somebody who didn't have that information is that every ribbon is a voice. It represents a voice of a victim-survivor, and it's important to listen to that voice. So LOUD Fence really came about, I suppose, because of the Royal Commission into Institutional Abuse, and what we found in our community of Ballarat, that many people that I knew were concerned that there was nothing we could do. We were hearing all these truths being spoken from these brave voices that spoke out, and there was nothing as a community we could do to let them know that we supported them.

So a few of us that had gone - attended the St Alipius Parish School and had gone to school together in primary school decided that we would tie ribbons to the former St Alipius Christian Brothers School, which is no longer, because that's where we heard some so many of these truths being spoken about. So that's what we did.

On the way, I quickly made a Facebook page and called it LOUD Fence, and the reason I called it LOUD Fence is because there's been too much silence. We had a discussion about what type of ribbons there should be. There's ribbons for all sorts of causes. And, again, we went with bold, loud, for the same reason. So really, I suppose, in talking to people - and, interestingly enough, it happens to me all the time. I happen to be near St Pats cathedral, which is that photo, and people just happen - they don't know who I am or that I founded the organisation, but they just happen to say, "What are the ribbons there for?" So I do tell them exactly that, that they represent the voices of victim-survivors and it's - it's a show of support.

MS STOWELL: You mentioned your connection to the St Alipius College in Ballarat and the first fence there. That was about 2015; is that right?

MS HATCHER: That's correct, yes.

MS STOWELL: Since 2015, how has LOUD Fence grown in Victoria, Australia and around the world?

MS HATCHER: Certainly taken off. It's taken off in a way that we didn't expect, I suppose. Tying those first ribbons onto the former Christian Brothers school, I thought that was the LOUD Fence. But what happened after that is, I think, you know, from that grassroots and the community point of view, it was a way of showing their support. So it grew, and we now have LOUD Fences at lots of places around Australia, but also overseas.

So there's what I'd probably call a branch of LOUD Fence in the UK, LOUD Fence UK. They primarily associate mostly with religious organisations. So it's a little bit different, but the premise is the same. And we've got them in Europe and soon to be in the USA as well. So it certainly took off, and I think because it is quite a simple yet visual reminder to people of the past. It's an acknowledgement.

MS STOWELL: And is it an organisation that's run by volunteers?

MS HATCHER: Yes. Sadly, it is.

MS STOWELL: Do you receive any sort of funding at all?

MS HATCHER: No, we do apply for grants. We've received one grant. We've only recently in the last two years become an incorporation. So prior to that it was myself and a few friends helping. Because it did grow so big, we now have a board. So we do have - we can apply for funding, et cetera, but all our board members, we're all volunteers and we also work full time mostly. So it's time constraints. So, no, really it's basically - basically voluntary work.

MS STOWELL: And who decides where a fence goes up and when?

MS HATCHER: That's a good question because originally it was pretty much dictated by us through our socials. But again, over time, people just took on LOUD Fences. So there was LOUD Fences popping up in all sorts of places that people just felt a need to have one at a particular church or a school because they had some link there, whether it be their child, a friend, an associate, whatever. So it wasn't something that - you know, eventually it became something. It wasn't planned or organised. It was really just taken on by people as a way of showing support.

And interestingly, even though it started as, you know, because of the Royal Commission, which was very much about institutional abuse, I've met many

people at fences that have travelled, like, older mums that have travelled from other towns to tie ribbons for their children that had taken their own lives. And that's their way because where else can you visually show that? So even though it may not have been clergy abuse or to do with the Catholic Church, they've actually used that fence in that way. So yeah. I often say that I think once the ribbons are tied to a fence, they become - they become something different. It's not just a ribbon anymore. It's got someone's heart in it, and it's got an acknowledgement in it, and they're quite magic in that way.

MS STOWELL: When a fence is established, has there been usually a prior discussion with the institution, the school, the church, whatever it might be? Or is it something that people just - do they just go and start tying ribbons?

MS HATCHER: Look, really, there's a bit of both. I suppose originally it was really - we just felt we needed to do it, so we didn't really ask anybody's permission or whatever, you know, the schools, the churches that were involved in the - that Royal Commission. Now, when people contact me, which is quite often, to say they want to start a LOUD Fence and what should they do, expecting that they're going to go out there in the middle of the night and put up ribbons, I actually suggest, for longevity, that they do contact the organisations first. And part of that's also now about educating the organisation as well, explaining what it is that you're doing. It's not necessarily a protest. It's actually a show of support for what has happened at that building or organisation.

MS STOWELL: And what's the response, if any, that LOUD Fence organisers tend to get from institutions?

MS HATCHER: It varies. I think if it's explained, people tend to be more on board. But we've certainly had ribbons being cut down and we've been abused when we've been putting ribbons on fences. And some people are quite reluctant to go there because they see it as sort of upsetting the brand, I would - I would think. The - I had a conversation with a high school in Ballarat and I met with the principal and someone from the Department of Education, and that was after there had been a case reported in the newspaper, local newspaper.

So I met with them for about an hour and a half, and it was interesting. They were really quite reluctant at having ribbons put on the fence. The actual victim-survivor in that case and her family were really keen to have a LOUD Fence. They - I think perhaps that's a generational thing too, like a teenager wanting to socially show something. So, yes, they - they really wanted that, and their family and friends had already been starting to put ribbons, but the school and the department were quite reluctant and, you know, they then were coming around slowly. We just want them on a certain panel. We just want them here. And all of a sudden all these rules and guidelines came into play.

We never once told people to go and tie ribbons there. We didn't put anything out on socials about tying ribbons there, and there are now probably thousands of

ribbons tied to that particular school's fence. So as I said, I may have been the founder, but I'm not the person that actually is telling people to go and tie ribbons anymore. People have taken that on themselves.

MS STOWELL: You've mentioned that, from time to time, there can be abuse from bystanders or criticism of the fence. Could you just expand on that?

MS HATCHER: Yes. Sure. Not that long ago we were tying ribbons to a fence at the St Patrick's Cathedral - in fact, probably at the same point where that photo's taken. It was fairly special event. It was an Indigenous lady that we know had been abused, attacked when she was out running. She asked us - she was doing - preparing for the American marathon and she asked us to be present at the fence on her way past on a bit of a practice, and we were there tying the ribbons - and they were actually Aboriginal flag colours - and we had people coming up and saying, you know, "You can't do that" that it was appalling, they lived across the road. You know, it didn't look very nice, and he even went as far as to call it graffiti.

MS STOWELL: How do you respond to that?

MS HATCHER: I did try and explain. I stayed - I tend to stay fairly calm in those situations, and I said, "Could I explain why we are tying these particular ribbons today", but he just wasn't interested. In fact, as I sort of approached him, he was backing away and eventually just walked off but still sort of yelling things out to us. So it is really difficult, and it's difficult to get across to some people that, you know, like I said, every ribbon is actually a voice.

MS STOWELL: Is a fence intended to be a permanent memorial or is it more temporary?

MS HATCHER: Look, it really depends. St Patrick's Cathedral has more or less turned into a bit of a permanent one because ribbons keep being tied there. But when the findings of the Royal Commission came out, the Catholic Church actually asked their parishioners to take along their nail scissors and cut all the ribbons down, and that was just before Christmas that year. As soon as they were all cut down, more ribbons started appearing at the front of the church and that continued. So it was only bare for probably 20 minutes. So that's what sort of tends to keep happening.

But other things, you know, other ribbons may be deliberately temporary in that they might go up at the local Ballarat court or the police station when there's a particular case on, or at a school if there's something mentioned. So, again, a little bit out of my control, but there's - there's certainly times when they do get taken down.

MS STOWELL: What's the impact on the victim-survivor community when the fence is taken down?

MS HATCHER: The majority are absolutely devastated because, as I said, we've really - I think most people in Ballarat and sort of part of this tribe are aware that those ribbons represent voices. So it is like having your voice silenced again, after finally visually and publicly being heard.

MS STOWELL: In addition to the fences, what other work does LOUD Fence do to promote healing with victim-survivors of historical child sexual abuse?

MS HATCHER: I think the biggest thing and probably what I'm most proud of with LOUD Fence is the connection that we've created between so many victim-survivors. So originally, as I said, it was very much based around institutional abuse, but I soon learnt that there was a gap needed for all victim-survivors. So we quickly changed that.

So in the past and currently, we've - we did get one grant where we could run workshops and pay facilitators to actually come in and do creative workshops with victim-survivors, and I have a Messenger group where I have about 20, 30 and 40 victim-survivors from around Australia that I'm linked with that we collaborate with. So we get ideas from them as to what they actually do want, and that works really well.

So we did a little survey. We found out people were really keen to get together and do some sort of creative workshops together and that's what we did. So we've had things from photography to African drumming to all sorts of things, because they're often - they're often classes, workshops and social situations that victim-survivors aren't keen to go to. You know, my understanding is that most would prefer to know who's going to be there and have a bit of an idea, not just want to pay and turn up to something. So they were all free workshops, and they were available to all victim-survivors and their supporters, loved ones, secondary victims.

MS STOWELL: Is that something you'd like to offer more of -

MS HATCHER: Absolutely.

MS STOWELL: - if the money wasn't a barrier?

MS HATCHER: Yes. That was really a dream to be able to do that. Before we did get a small amount of funding, we were doing it off our own back, so everyone involved was doing it voluntarily, and then we were able to pay facilitators to come in and run those workshops. So, absolutely, it's something that I think is needed and I think too, most - a lot of the victim-survivors that I know may live alone or not necessarily have that support system immediately. So to be able to go along to something and just have fun when you've had years - possibly years and years of counselling and be able to just know that you're in a safe space is incredibly important.

MS STOWELL: You've made a couple of mentions of social media and Messenger groups and things of that nature. How is that a really important tool for LOUD Fence's work?

MS HATCHER: Again, it wasn't planned. None of this was really planned; it's just sort of emerged. But we have been active on social media. I suppose Facebook - I think it's something like over 16,000 followers now, and it's - we've changed our approach over the years. So originally we did post articles, et cetera, to do with current cases, and we decided that we really wanted to put the focus on victim-survivors and not perpetrators. So why post pictures from the media which often have the perpetrator on the front page or the photo of the perpetrator? So we decided as a group not to do that anymore. And we haven't. So our social media tends to be quite positive and talk about social outings and things where - articles, perhaps, where victim-survivors are doing amazing things. And that's really the approach that LOUD Fence has.

MS STOWELL: In your statement, you talk about something called the Continuous Voices Programme, which I understand is in conjunction with the City of Ballarat. Could you tell us a little bit about that project? I understand it's just getting on its feet.

MS HATCHER: Absolutely. Look, it's been a few years in the making but that - if you want to do something well, that does take time. I'm not terribly patient but I've hung in there. So we have worked with the City of Ballarat and other services, and there will be this Continuous Voices memorial acknowledgement space going up in Ballarat at the Victoria Park. So we're at the stage now where there's been a lot of build-up to this, but really we're at the stage now of asking people to submit their designs and we will go from there. But we are really hoping to create a space that will be a space for reflection for victim-survivors to go to have our events, things like that. It's actually already a really beautiful space so I'm looking forward to seeing how it does turn out. But the victim-survivors in Ballarat have been asking for this for a really long time.

MS STOWELL: On the location - you mentioned Victoria Park in Ballarat - is that so that there's a centralised place in the city, rather than a courthouse, a school?

MS HATCHER: On the original - on the committee, we were offered a number of different spaces that were potential to have this Continuous Voices memorial, and it was decided on Victoria Park. And that was also working with the City of Ballarat and looking at the future landscape of Ballarat and what would be central. So Victoria Park was chosen.

MS STOWELL: And what, to your mind, is the real value of having that memorial, once it's there?

MS HATCHER: Well, again, it's about being heard when for, you know, years and years, decades, people have been pushed away, not listened to. So to have that acknowledgement is pretty incredible. You know, some of these victim-survivors I know, their abuse happened in the '60s and '70s and they've only just spoken about it, you know, in the last 10 years. So to be able to go somewhere and know again that it's a safe space and it means that your voice has been listened to in the community, I think, will be incredibly important.

MS STOWELL: LOUD Fence has been instrumental in the establishment of National Survivors Day which has just passed us on 14 November.

MS HATCHER: Correct.

MS STOWELL: Is there anything you would like this Board of Inquiry to know about National Survivors Day and how it's grown and what the plans are for the future?

MS HATCHER: Yes, look, this year was only the second year. Last year, I think we set ourselves a date and I think we had three months to organise it. So it happened in a bit of a rush, but this year a lot more planning went into it. Look, I just hope it grows. I hope it becomes a national day like many other national days where people will really acknowledge some of the darkness that's happened in our country, and allow people that chance to be acknowledged. Not just on that day, but it's important to have one day where people can come together. And last week we had a number of events at different government houses around Australia, and I was fortunate enough to travel back to Ballarat in a bus with a few victim-survivors, and it was amazing to hear how positive they felt, and it was a big thing, but just that acknowledgement is so important. And I think that's - you know, whether it be a memorial, whether it be ribbons, I think that visual is incredibly important to most victim-survivors I know.

MS STOWELL: What does the future hold for LOUD Fence? What are your aspirations for the organisation?

MS HATCHER: I've never really had set plans, but I suppose we will continue. Look, victim-survivors will always be our top priority, but we find that we fill a bit of a gap for organisations, institutions that want to acknowledge their past, because there's nobody else they can really go to to get that support. How do we start? How do we collaborate with victim-survivors? So I think we'll continue to work in that space too. Look, hopefully there will be some funding along the way and we can sort of increase what we're doing. I'd still like to do more in that connection space.

I'd like to see the model that we've, you know, started in Ballarat where we've connected so many victims - local victim-survivors replicated in other places, and possibly institutions around Australia. And, yes, we've done work with the likes of the University of Canberra, et cetera, so I think continuing to do that work,

continuing to let people know that there's victim-survivors there that really continue to need to be listened to as well.

MS STOWELL: What's been the nature of the work with the University of Canberra?

MS HATCHER: That was, again, a bit of an ongoing project, but that included - at the end, the end result was creating guidelines for the media when working with victim-survivors so they actually had a set of guidelines to follow. And also for victim-survivors, from the other hand, of working with media as well, and things they can expect and things they can actually ask for and request.

MS STOWELL: Chair, I have nothing further for Ms Hatcher. If there's anything that you have to ask.

CHAIRPERSON: I just had one question. You mentioned sometimes institutions coming to the organisation and saying, "We want to affirmatively take some steps to acknowledge and how do we do that?" Are you finding that that's something that's increasingly occurring rather than victim-survivors being the ones that have to go to the institution and ask for this to happen?

MS HATCHER: Yes, I would say there are more organisations now coming forward. It's probably still a mix but certainly compared to eight years ago, there's a lot more organisations that are coming to us asking for assistance.

CHAIRPERSON: Thank you. Ms Hatcher, thank you so much for coming and sharing all of this evidence with us today, particularly given how far you've travelled. It's an incredibly powerful movement and very moving, and being able to hear about it from you firsthand has been really useful for all of us.

MS HATCHER: Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON: Thank you very much.

MS HATCHER: Thank you.

<THE WITNESS WAS RELEASED

MS STOWELL: Thank you, Chair. Our next witness is Mr Adrian Farrer from Trinity Grammar School. I just propose we have a five minute break and I will see to Mr Farrer.

CHAIRPERSON: Thank you. We will adjourn for five minutes.

<THE HEARING ADJOURNED AT 10.32 AM

<THE HEARING RESUMED AT 10.38 AM

CHAIRPERSON: Thank you, Ms Stowell.

MS STOWELL: Thank you. The inquiry calls Adrian Farrer.

<WITNESS ADRIAN RALPH HOWARD FARRER, AFFIRMED

<EXAMINATION BY MS STOWELL:

MS STOWELL: Mr Farrer, could you please state your full name for the inquiry?

MR FARRER: Adrian Ralph Howard Farrer.

MS STOWELL: And I just want to take you to your professional background. You're currently the principal at Trinity Grammar School in Kew; correct?

MR FARRER: Correct.

MS STOWELL: And when did you commence in that role?

MR FARRER: In 2020, the start of 2020.

MS STOWELL: And prior to your role at Trinity, where were you employed?

MR FARRER: I was principal at Cathedral College in Wangaratta for seven years and prior to that at Camberwell Grammar, not far from Kew.

MS STOWELL: Could you please explain for the inquiry your university and professional qualifications?

MR FARRER: Bachelor of Education, Master of Educational Management.

MS STOWELL: Can we call the image to the screen, please. Thank you. Mr Farrer, the picture we have up here is the memorial to survivors of historical child sexual abuse at Trinity Grammar. It was dedicated in June of this year, 2023. Can I just ask you to walk us through this image and its various elements and tell us what they represent?

MR FARRER: I guess there are two main parts to that. One is where it is and the other one is what it - what makes it up. So what makes it up, the - all the base elements are the chair there, the crepe myrtle tree and then the blade, and the blade holds the school's statement, which is basically the failure to care statement. It's a - I guess what you'd call a whole of community approach. So the chair was funded by a parents association, the tree by our alumni group, and - and the blade, obviously, by the school. I guess the second and important element is where it sits. So that is on our site but faces onto the footpath onto Charles Street in Kew. So it's an open access area where people can choose to step onto Trinity's ground or not.

The other significant element is that that area sits directly in front of the chapel, so the building you can see behind is the chapel. It's an important placement because part of the school's failure to care in the past included elements of the clergy.

MS STOWELL: I appreciate there might be a bit of a lengthier story behind this next question, but when you came to the role of principal at Trinity in 2020, could you tell us the story of how and why you took up this task of the memorial for victim-survivors and how you went about that work?

MR FARRER: In the preceding few years to my arrival, the school, particularly through its governing body, our school council, had formed what I would call a deep conviction around the need to tackle the issues of the past and to - to stand up for victim-survivors. The how to do that included, of course, apologies where possible. Obviously meeting with victim-survivors. There's a whole lot of other work around counselling and all sorts of other things, but it was considered important to be able to have some sort of place-based memorial. So as a part of the exercise of me coming on board, it was made pretty clear to me that that conviction was real, and I shared that conviction, and therefore was keen to be able to do something constructive and authentic.

The challenge is - well, our challenge, I guess, was to be able to - to be able to create something that was meaningful and authentic and not in our image or one person's sort of image or understanding what that might be. Hence, it took three and a half years from me getting there to it arriving which is - you know, it's a long time, but we wanted to - to be a considered approach, and we wanted it to be something that reflected the school's conviction but was done with the victim-survivors who were willing to be able to help us on that journey. And we were very grateful that we had some - some really genuine assistance in that area. I strongly suspect that a key person who was involved in helping us in that journey will be tuning in right now.

MS STOWELL: Can you take us - you said three and a half years of work engagement with victim-survivors. Who else did you engage with along that way? Did you go to meetings? Consult with people?

MR FARRER: Yes. So I embarked on a - I guess a bit of a fact-finding mission in terms of thinking, well, there are lots of schools and institutions in our scenario, none exactly the same but approximate. And I wanted to answer the question of what is being done. And there was never going to be a facsimile situation that we could borrow and we weren't looking to do that, but what we did do, me and a couple of others from my school environment, was to go and visit some of the schools that were a bit further down in their path of discovery, a bit further down in attempting to heal.

And we visited Ballarat, a couple of schools in Ballarat, a couple of schools in Geelong. We went to Brisbane and also in other sites in Melbourne as a way of

trying to perhaps orientate ourselves to what was being done or what wasn't being done. And we found that every place had their own - or part of their journey in every place was discovering whether or not it was going to be useful to victim-survivors and to the school community to have a place-based memorial. Some avidly were on that path and some avidly were not. So the conviction needed to be ours around what we did. And - and I - as I indicated, I inherited from my school council a conviction about doing something. And that conviction evolved over those three and a half years with the knowledge of what was happening elsewhere with the - the learnt experiences.

And I guess probably you might call a forming community of practice around - around the establishment or otherwise of a memorial in that way. So when it came to what we did, we did something both distinctly different from anything we'd seen, but also thoroughly informed, I think, by the journeys which others had been on.

MS STOWELL: You mentioned also engagement with victim-survivors, former students of Trinity. How does Trinity go about engaging with the victim-survivors? In the creation of the memorial but also more generally.

MR FARRER: Well, we formally addressed our community in 2015 and beyond, asking for victim-survivors who - who were looking for assistance to come to the school and tell us their story. We continue that. This is part of that process, the visibility, I suppose, which is also reflected on our website where the statement sits, which is also reflected by us having an independent counsellor to whom it might be more likely that some victim-survivors might reach out to.

Also using another counselling group that, you know, obviously the school funds for those who need that level of support. So I guess there's a - there's a few different ways in which - in which we do that. We've also made, I think, quite visible, I hope, through our own communications to alumni and to families that - that this is an important part of our history such that we can improve into our future and, therefore, it's a part of our contemporary narrative, not really confined to the past.

So I think and hope that there's a number of access points for - for those who need our support to get to us. And even being here this morning, I suspect, is an example of us being keen to be able to do that.

MS STOWELL: On the day that this memorial was dedicated in June 2023, what happened on that day?

MR FARRER: So we had a ceremony, a dedication ceremony, in the chapel itself. It wasn't an Anglican service, as much as it was a gathering of our community. We invited those broadly, but targeted invites to those that we knew, for whatever reason, were involved in this story, in the Trinity story, including, you know, lawyers from all sides, including former staff and students, obviously,

current staff. Our school captain represented the student body, and we - we, through the chair of school council and through me in my role dedicated the memorial and perhaps indicated that we understand we're at the start of a long campaign of trying to - trying to provide the support needed for those who need it.

We heard from a prominent survivor, Macca, who I quote there on the blade, and he spoke on behalf of himself, of course, but victim-survivors beyond him. He did so passionately, eloquently and well and - and I think provided opportunity through that and the words that he said for us to be able to step forward with more confidence that we were providing that access but not being silly enough to think that, you know, this is an answer. It's a step. And he particularly has helped us understand that in his journey. And - and for those who attended, and there were many who attended that told us that they just simply did not think Trinity would ever do this, and that this day would never come, and that, as we heard from Maureen, that there was a voice there that had a hearing that hadn't previously occurred.

So it was a - it was a very moving and confronting day in all sorts of respects. But one that - that happened, I might add, in the course of a normal school day. So the noise of the school happened around this event, because we want it to be part of the memorial and we want our - our stance, if you like. We want that to be part of the life of the school.

MS STOWELL: You mentioned earlier the blade and the statement that's on the blade. And I think you referred to that as a failure to care statement. Can you expand on what that is?

MR FARRER: I think it's an acknowledgement. We make an acknowledgement that - we use the words "in the past our school has failed to care". And we make a commitment to looking after children, obviously, and we - we try and reach out through that in order to assist those who need it. We talk to the symbolism, to the whole of school community approach that I mentioned earlier. We talk to the element of the crepe myrtle, for instance, being in many people's eyes a common idea of symbol of hope and rebirth.

So the blade itself makes a fairly strong statement that I know is powerful because it's only two days ago that I walked my - walked someone that I was meeting with down to read it in the context of a conversation we were having, and it - it seems to elicit a strong and powerful response each time we do that. So it's not - it's - it's not crafted. It's not a legal statement. It's just a statement from the school about wanting to - to assist.

MS STOWELL: You mentioned also that the school captain spoke at the dedication.

MR FARRER: Sorry, he didn't speak. He was present, yes.

MS STOWELL: Present. Thank you. I imagine 17, 18 years of age. How does Trinity talk to children that age and younger about this memorial and these very serious issues?

MR FARRER: Yes, it's not easy. We're lucky, though. I work in a school with nearly 300 experts. So their ability to work with the students in their care and age and stage approach, I trust implicitly, obviously. We put a lot of support around Michael, our school captain, on the day for being there, and - and talked to him about the reasons why it was important. And, of course, he certainly didn't have to go. I think he understood that it is a part of our narrative and that, in that point of time, that he was able to represent the students and stand with the school on that.

You know, that - I think the language, by the way, of the blade is possibly impenetrable enough to the six year old to not provide concern but accessible enough for those who walk past every day, which is more around our year 8s to year 10s and some will stop and look and read and take some time and move on. And like other parts of the school, people walk past it and not really know what it is sometimes as well. But we are conscious of the student experience first and foremost. And, really, when you think about it, a major part of this is to safeguard our young people. So we don't want to hide from what's occurred in the past.

MS STOWELL: On reactions to the memorial from the broader school community, parents, other people associated with the school, what have you heard?

MR FARRER: Look, it's been a very positive response in the sense that I think there's a really tacit understanding as to why we've done what we've done. And I think because, since 2015, the school has been open and while we haven't done everything well and made some mistakes along the way, that process has meant that our school community is alert to what's occurred. I think it is undoubtedly confronting for some, and we're open to any of those discussions that people need to have, particularly around not just victim-survivors but, of course, the secondary victims and broader family members. It - for what might be for some seen as a really useful step in healing, for others might be a very confronting thing to have to understand. We acknowledge that.

On the balance of all of those things, our conviction has been that this has been the right way to go, and that has been confirmed by the reactions that we've had.

MS STOWELL: This inquiry is looking at Beaumaris Primary School and certain other government schools within the Department of Education. Do you think Trinity Grammar was perhaps uniquely placed to do this kind of work because it's not under the auspices of the department?

MR FARRER: Look, I think the privilege we've had is that the self-determination we enjoy has allowed us to be able to do this. I don't know what constrictions that might occur for government schools in this area, but I do know that without my

governance conviction, without the conviction of victim-survivors who assisted and helped drive the process and - and without mine, that it may not have looked like this or it may not have occurred. They're not easy - they're not easy things to do at one level, regardless of any regulatory or bureaucratic realities. But - but the conviction that it needs to happen is the thing that drove us through particularly. But certainly we do enjoy that self-determination.

MS STOWELL: If you were talking to another principal or someone came to you wanting advice on a memorial, what do you think are the crucial steps or crucial factors that need to be considered?

MR FARRER: The governance conviction is absolutely key. It also needs to be something that - I used the word authentic before, and that's something that we tested, obviously, with victim-survivors, but also the broader community. We - and also obviously by seeing what was happening in other places. Definitely need a champion to - to help drive it, to keep it important, but not recklessly so. We would have - my advice would include don't do something swiftly. You know, take the time. And I think that the buy-in - the broader buy-in from a community that has faced and walked through the challenges together is really really important rather than having something that might be considered an imposition.

So I - and one key element that probably I've reflected on more than most is it needs to - it needs to reflect the organisation itself. So this memorial is Trinity's. It's no one else's. I'm not sure it would work in other places in that - in the way that we've done it. Maybe elements would, maybe the perfume of it would, but the - but this is bespoke. This is us. And I would encourage any organisation that's doing that to spend the time, understand the conviction, see what's occurring in order to test what it should be for them, and to do their own version.

MS STOWELL: What are the future plans for the memorial?

MR FARRER: It's a great question in the sense that we wanted to be able to see what life it takes on of its own. I mean, it's deliberately seasonal. A photo of it at a different time doesn't have leaves on the tree or ivy at the back. It can be bare through winter, obviously. The tree will grow. We - in - like, bump and bruise in any school, students and others will use it roughly, probably, at times or not. So it will mature over time. And that will come down to the way it's used or not used.

We don't have any plans to add, to do anything different from the way it looks at the moment or the way it behaves. But we'll be informed as we go along. While it looks static at one level, we anticipate it's a dynamic part of our school, and - and now it's a part of our narrative.

MS STOWELL: Chair, I have nothing further for Mr Farrer. If you have anything?

CHAIRPERSON: I just had one question. We heard some evidence earlier today about some responses of some institutions to victim-survivors wanting to have a more public acknowledgement. So the cutting down with scissors of the LOUD Fence, that kind of approach. And you spoke of, when you started at Trinity, a deep conviction - I think you used those words - already having been formed that action needed to be taken. Now, many institutions don't take that step. Have you formed any views about what it might have been in the school's journey that led it to actually decide, "We want to confront and we want to take some steps that might be useful in thinking about the kinds of things that organisations or institutions need to do to kind of move along the journey"?

MR FARRER: Yes, I have formed opinions, and I think, significantly, it comes down to the personnel. Our story includes, like probably many institutions, there's a fork in the road around the way in which you respond to the reality that's occurred. And you either agree that there had been a failure to care in the past and you face up to it or you take a passive or even resistant approach where you try and survive institutionally. Our approach has been to - to be as open and overt as we can, because you can't be a school that cares if you fail to care.

The - there is no doubt in my mind that some key personnel on the school council at the time drove that attitude and, for me, when I came on, it was about an alignment of attitude. The - so there's the personnel in our governance structure. The other key, you know, from a survivor perspective, if we had tried to do something that was for the school and not for the survivors, we would have been found out in five minutes. And so it's the survivor drive that really means that this is in the ground, and that's personnel as well.

So I think the conviction of the people involved and those that have a particular perspective will determine the success or otherwise of a journey. Or perhaps not the success but the nature of it, and ours is as you see it.

CHAIRPERSON: Thank you. Thank you for that explanation. Mr Farrer, thank you so much for taking your time out of a very busy school day, I'm sure, as it is every day for you at school, to come and share your experiences and your perspectives with us. As I'm sure you're aware, it's highly relevant to a number of the issues that we're contemplating as part of our Terms of Reference and so to have your insights has been incredibly useful. Thank you very much.

<THE WITNESS WAS RELEASED

CHAIRPERSON: Ms Stowell, we are going to take a morning break, and we will take half an hour, and we will come back for Mr Esplin's evidence after that. Thank you.

<THE HEARING ADJOURNED AT 11.06 AM.

<THE HEARING RESUMED AT 11.42 AM.

CHAIRPERSON: Thank you, Ms Ryan.

MS RYAN: The Board calls Mr Bruce Esplin AM.

<WITNESS BRUCE ESPLIN, AFFIRMED

<EXAMINATION BY MS RYAN:

MS RYAN: Now, Mr Esplin, you were the Victorian Emergency Services Commissioner between 2001 and 2011; is that correct?

MR ESPLIN: That's correct.

MS RYAN: Apart from that role, you've had over 20 years' experience in emergency services management?

MR ESPLIN: Correct.

MS RYAN: You were also on the board and for seven years the Chair of Regional Arts Victoria.

MR ESPLIN: Correct.

MS RYAN: And you held that position from about 2014 to 2020?

MR ESPLIN: Correct.

MS RYAN: And apart from this extensive professional experience, can you just outline to the Board any relevant qualifications you hold?

MR ESPLIN: Probably the most relevant is a partially completed psychology degree, which I didn't get to finish because I dealt with cancer at a very young age and I went through a period of time where my priorities had changed after that, beating cancer. But my experience is really built around dealing with people in conflicts. So it's industrial relations, conflict resolution, a range of working with people-type experiences over probably the whole of my career.

MS RYAN: And in your role as Emergency Services Commissioner for the State of Victoria, you had, it's fair to say, very extensive engagement with individuals and communities who had been exposed to a whole variety of trauma?

MR ESPLIN: Correct.

MS RYAN: And you are here today to give evidence on - to give the Board some evidence about the concept of creative recovery and you're giving that evidence on

the basis of your extensive experience dealing with people who had been - who've been subjected to trauma and how creative recovery can assist them?

MR ESPLIN: Correct.

MS RYAN: Can I ask you to explain to the Board first of all what is creative recovery?

MR ESPLIN: To my mind, creative recovery is the use of a process that uses a making mechanism to take people into a space where it's a safe space, and it's a space where the use of an art practice, visual arts or singing or, in the case of examples that I'm aware of, woodworking which is the premise of men's sheds, gardening, or any creative practice just to take people - give them a break from the trauma they're dealing with, and take them into a space where they're making, and it's in the making that I feel the benefits accrue from creative recovery.

So creative recovery for me is the use of a making process as a tool to get people, in a sense, out of themselves and into a space where they feel safe and trusting and can start the process of dealing with their trauma. And the first thing that I've witnessed over all of those years is that when people are in that space, when they feel comfortable, when they settle down, they start talking, and, in my experience, talking - that first bit of talking is the first stage to the recovery for many of the traumas that accompany emergency management issues, disasters, terrorism events, whatever it might be. So creative recovery is just using creativity as a tool to take people into a safe space where they can begin the process of working a way forward.

MS RYAN: Could you give an example to the Board of an experience you've had in observing this concept of creative recovery and how it can work in practice?

MR ESPLIN: Probably the most - the most telling experience that I've had is that of all the events that I've witnessed of creative recovery opportunities provided to communities or individual, the overwhelming majority of the participants are female, and it seems to me that males are much harder to interest in attending these events and participating. But once they're frequently brought along by their wives - almost sometimes I found them very reluctant to come, but having been through the practice, it's been very hard to get them to leave. Because it's the first time they've actually sat down and felt confident to talk, not just about the experience that they've just had, but the emotions that accompany the experience and follow the experience after the sharp edge of it had passed away.

So my experience is that men really are so reluctant to talk and that can ultimately end up in physical ill health, psychological ill health, domestic violence in bad cases and sometimes suicides in even worse cases. And I think the quicker we can get people to talk about their experiences, then the more hope we have of achieving some sort of recovery from the collective trauma, in a community sense, or the individual trauma that might accompany what they've been through.

MS RYAN: And while we're on the experience of male survivors particularly, can you give the Board any example of something you've witnessed in terms of a male survivor, I suppose, thinking or experiencing shifting by reason of some sort of creative experience?

MR ESPLIN: There are two examples that have stuck in my mind since I witnessed them, and the first was a person that - I used to do a lot of public speaking in little community halls and talking to people about recovery and moving forward, and this one individual came to me and after probably four or five different talks over a six-month period, and at one stage he summoned the courage to say, "Can I go for a walk with you and tell you my story." And he told me his story and his story was that everybody in his small community thought he was a travelling salesman because he would disappear for periods of time of two weeks or whatever it might be.

And he proceeded to tell me that he hadn't been out selling. He had been lying in his bed dealing with deep depression and suicidal thoughts. And that had grown hugely following the Black Saturday bushfires. We talked a lot and I talked about the power of art to hopefully help take him to a safer place, and he listened and he seemed to be engaged. And I saw him one last time and he asked to go for another walk, and he told me his story and he told me that he'd fallen again into deep depression and taken to his bed and then decided he wasn't going to lie there and hope that it went away.

He booked a ticket up to Queensland where his mother lived. His mother was an artist and he sat down and told her the stories that we'd shared about the power of using art as a recovery tool. And his mother walked out of the room, she came back with a canvas, some brushes and paint and said, "What are you waiting for?" And the story he told me then was that now, in addition to the medical assistance he's getting, he also has this tool of painting every day. And the paintings that he makes describe his experience of his mood state at a period of time. And so now when he feels depression coming close, he makes an even greater effort to get into where he paints, and he paints as a way of dealing with his depression.

And he ended his story by telling me that he went to the men's shed in the community hall and he asked to talk, and he told the community that when he disappeared, it wasn't because he was away selling, it was because he was dealing with depression and had, on a couple of occasions, tried to take his own life. And he stood in front of his community and he faced his truth. He faced his demons and he told his truth to his community, and his community reached their arms out and embraced him. And so no longer was he dealing with his story, his experience alone; he had a community that was on his side. And I think art's not the whole reason he took those steps, but art certainly was a catalyst to help him take those steps. So that was the first story, and it's quite profound for me, the impact it had on just one person's life.

But the second story was a - I'd opened a hall in somewhere up towards Arthur's Creek, and it was a beautiful old community hall that had been turned into a performing arts centre on the top and some studio - studios for artists on the ground floor. And afterwards, with the scones and jam and cream, we were talking, and I was talking to a population that was - there was 120 people in the room, and there were two males, me and one man - one other man. And he was standing in the background with tears in his eyes, and I sort of went to talk to him, I said, "I'm sorry if I've upset you."

And he said, "You haven't, I just have a story that I'd like to share with you." And he was - he told me he was a metal sculptor, and he'd asked a friend of his who had just been dealing with bowel cancer would he care to come down to his studio and help him make a sculpture. And the guy said, "I'm not an artist. I don't have an artistic bone in my body", but, nevertheless, he went and picked him up, and they played with making a sculpture over the course of a day.

And for whatever reason, this artist said to the person, "When you were dealing with cancer and you weren't sure that you were going to get through it, did you ever talk to your wife about important things?" "No, I couldn't do that. I'd never do - that's sort of thing - I couldn't talk. That's not a blokey thing to do." Endlessly they talked about that, and at the end of the day, drove him home. He took a phone call from that friend's wife the next morning saying, "What did you do to my husband?" He said, "Nothing. We just talked. We made a sculpture and we talked. Why? What - is something wrong?"

The husband had gone down to the local bottle shop and bought a bottle of champagne, and he and his wife sat up all night and he told her all the things he'd never told her in his life, how much he loved her, how much he loved the kids, how much he loved every experience they had shared and what to do if the worst had happened. "Don't live as a widow, I want you to have a full life, so don't feel you have to sort of live alone because of me." Which was quite amazing, and the wife was just overcome with hearing these things for the first time in their married life.

A week later, against all the medical opinion, the person died of the cancer, and so in living through the trauma of first struggling with the cancer and then her husband being lost to cancer, at that last little bit of time, there was an opportunity for some communication, some really heartfelt communication that just made her loss just a tiny bit more bearable. But, again, it was that, the catalyst of two blokes standing over a bench working and one bloke having whatever intuition that he had to ask the question. And that individual, that sculptor when he gave me this story said, "Please share my story, please help men feel that it's okay to talk and share their sadness and share their feelings."

So they were two individuals' examples. On a collective vein there's been so many art events put in place, largely since the Black Saturday fires, I think. It became a common practice since then. But the events were everything you could imagine

from making mosaics to memorialise the experience of a community to establishing a steel pan band that required the steel pan drums to be made and then people to be taught how to play the music and then the music to be toured around the local community and then toured more broadly around Victoria. So, again, in this case it was - in that case, it was a musical event but that steel pan band is still going today.

MS RYAN: And just in relation to that musical event, was that a community initiative?

MR ESPLIN: It was.

MS RYAN: In relation to coming out of the Black Saturday bushfires.

MR ESPLIN: Yes, it was funding provided from a State government level that communities were given the opportunity to establish projects or programs that they felt might be beneficial. So there was a State government project that Regional Arts Victoria ran on behalf of the State government, and it was called Illuminated by Fire. It was an opportunity for a whole range of communities to establish a project that had, at its core, fire. But it wasn't just all bad fire. It was frequently - I mean, some cases it was the use of fire to make the world a better place. So fire to boil water to make steam to drive engines and equipment, bits and pieces.

But a lot of it was about people's lived experience during Black Saturday. And communities established a project, Regional Arts Victoria provided facilitators - not doers, not the teachers, not the leaders, but facilitators that could help the community through obstacles or blockages. And so the project worked because it was owned and driven by the community and only supported by the government and facilitated by Regional Arts Victoria, who are an independent part - an independent body. They're not part of government. So there were a whole range of projects that ultimately were launched and publicised at Federation Square, and it was an incredibly cathartic and cleansing process for all the communities that chose to participate.

And it's - it has a legacy benefit. People use the art that was made, the projects that were accomplished as a place to go and pay their respects. It's - which leads us probably a little bit into memorialising. We can talk about that a bit further. But it's - the projects, in my experience, that have succeeded have been the ones where the community owns them and the role of government or the role of even Regional Arts Victoria is to support and assist, and if a mistake's made or a significant problem's found, that they help the community through that significant problem and get them to start again, but not to take over.

MS RYAN: If we can move now to an experience you had. You were invited to a town in Gippsland, this is Callignee, to - it was about five years ago to open a

sculpture. Can you tell the Board what the background to that was, what the sculpture was, and what the opening involved?

MR ESPLIN: Callignee is a very small hamlet in the south of Gippsland, not too far from Traralgon. A tiny little hamlet and on Black Saturday, 11 lives were lost in the community there, and there was - the whole community was traumatised, and much of the core of the hamlet was burnt to the ground, their sports facilities, their halls, bits and pieces. I - in my role as commissioner, I spent a lot of time there trying to help, getting the telecommunications people to put in - to give everybody a mobile phone for six months, getting the power company to put in alternate generating capacity, getting the government to provide more support, working with the CFA captain, who was suffering from incredible post-traumatic stress, feeling that he had let the community down, feeling that he couldn't protect the people under his charge. I think - in modern psychological talk, I think he was - he had suffered a moral injury. He felt incredible sense of guilt and he wasn't getting the support that he needed. So we did - my office and myself did a lot of work down there.

In 2019, I got a request from a sculptor, would I come down and open a piece of work that had been done at Callignee. And I said, really, that's the role of government, of ministers; that's not the role of me. And she said the community have asked for you to come down because of the time you spent with them in the past. So I agreed to go down. And I got - I asked for some briefing so that I could understand it better. The sculptor chosen to do this piece of work is a local sculptor not far from Callignee. The community had decide they wanted another part. They already had a mosaic memorial walk but they wanted something to memorialise the loss of 11 lives and the tragic experience of everybody that was remotely from that area.

So the sculptor decided they would create a work of art that they called From Scrap to Sculpture. And she was a brave lady because she went to the community, and people, I think, would be familiar that one of the first images that media likes to play after bushfires is people being allowed back to what used to be their house for the first time. And they dig through the ashes and pull out treasures, and a lot of those treasures have been badly burned and melted and whatever.

The sculptor asked everybody, "Is there anybody that would be prepared to give me those things that I can turn them into a memorial?" And she expected very little response but she was overwhelmed by the response, and her intention was to create a memorial arch. She had so many pieces given to her that it became a double arch. She did the work and she did the design in the local men's shed and in the local community hall, and she worked with the people of the community to assemble the pieces. She became a technician. She didn't design it. The community more or less designed how the old wrenches and the bits of car and the bits of kettles and all the things that are just burnt in a fire, however they could be assembled into a sculpture.

So the name of her sculpture ultimately became From Scrap to Sculpture: Letting Go. And the message was this was drawing a line in the sand and that was the theme of my opening of the sculpture, the memorial, was it's time now. It's 2019. We're ten years after Black Saturday. I think it's time that we don't forget what experiences you've all been through and the loss of life and all the tragedy and trauma, but it's time to look forward. And I'd spoken to some in the community about what confidence they may or may not have to face another fire season. So I talked about drawing the line in the sand and moving forward, looking forward without forgetting, and that's where the memorial, I think, came into its most practical value.

Afterwards, talking to people who had been exposed to the fires and were there on the day, so many of them said that this notion of moving forward had become so important to them, and such an integral part of putting the trauma behind them and facing the future with confidence. And one couple in particular constantly talked to me about what we'd spoken about in visiting their farmhouse. They had a big farm. They were fairly getting on in years. And they came to me afterwards and said they'd decided to sell the farm, which I was a little bit shocked by because they suggested it was to do with our conversations. And I sort of hoped I hadn't led them to that view alone.

But they said they put it to their children, did they want to take over the farm, and none of the family wanted to take over the farm. And they'd faced the reality that, in their 80s and one in their 90s, they didn't have the capacity to face another fire season. And they were really honest with themselves and said, "We don't have the capacity to run the farm." They sold up. They were going to live in Traralgon. And they were really happy with their decision. It was a really good decision for them. It brought - it unloaded them of a responsibility that they were no longer capable of managing.

And so this whole notion of gathering from the community, working with the community to design and then to assemble and build. And the sculptor taught people to weld and how to put the pieces together to make this double memorial arch. And it was just a - to me, it was everything that a memorial should be. It was owned by the people who had been affected. It was designed by the people that were affected. It was at least in good part built by the people that were affected. And it was built by somebody locally. The government's sole role was, as part of the 10-year Black Saturday anniversary, to provide some funding to enable it to be made. So it's a good - to me it's a very powerful example of the principles that can make memorialising really, really successful.

MS RYAN: I might come back to those principles shortly, but I just - would you be able to tell the Board about observations you've made in terms of the value that art can bring to recovery and if you can reference your observations about what goes on at Royal Talbot Hospital, which is a rehabilitation hospital?

MR ESPLIN: Certainly.

MS RYAN: Dealing with people who've suffered a whole range of trauma from brain injuries to quadriplegia.

MR ESPLIN: Well, firstly, I suppose Royal Talbot Rehabilitation Hospital is an amazing place in the recovery centre. It deals with people who've had acquired brain injury, profound strokes, paraplegia, quadriplegia. I think it could be described as dealing with people for whom there won't be a return to normal; there will be the establishment of a new normal. It deals with the emotional - not just a physical injury but it deals with the emotional injury of recognising that your life has changed profoundly, and there's a need to establish what that new life, that new normal, will look like.

It offers four creative therapies: Gardening, music, woodworking and visual arts. And people have the opportunity and they are encouraged to participate, to some degree or another, within that framework of the four visual arts. The people who are employed in each of those visual arts - gardening, music and woodwork - are all not just highly trained artists, if I can put it that way, but they're also, in two cases, medically trained as, one, a nurse and I think one in psychology. So they are people who can create a safe place for the people who choose to participate. So that's a little bit of background.

And I think, at the time, Royal Talbot, when I became engaged with them for a while, Royal Talbot, basically, the rehabilitation part funded itself through selling records and secondhand books and making jam. It really wasn't well supported. And Royal Talbot heard me on the radio and asked if I'd come and spend a day with them, and then asked could I help them get a bit more publicity, a bit more media, a bit more interest in the work - the important work they were doing. They relied on volunteers really profoundly. Really highly regarded musicians would come and donate their time to work with people who wanted to use music therapy and similarly in the garden and all the other spaces.

I went and spent the day, and I spent a lot of time talking through each of the individual therapies, and I got to hear of a woman who'd lost her husband. She was married to a police officer. There was a bus crash just outside Cairo coming back from the pyramids, and a number of police officers from all over Australia lost their lives. She was injured and she was airlifted to a hospital. Her first memory, waking memory, was lying in a bed and seeing a number of Coptic priests in their black gowns walking down the corridor towards her, and she knew at that point that her husband had died and they were coming to tell her that her husband was dead.

She had no idea that she was a quadriplegic. She came back to Victoria, airlifted back to Victoria, and she went as an inpatient at Royal Talbot. She knew by then that the school that she was teaching at told her she wouldn't be able to come back because she was in a wheelchair and not mobile, and she couldn't be a teacher in that sort of a space. So she'd not only lost her husband, lost her mobility, but she'd

lost her career. She was regarded as a really strong person because she never showed her emotion, and she never talked about the loss of her husband, the loss of her job or her experience as being a new quadriplegic.

But she didn't want to engage in singing. She didn't want to engage in visual arts. She didn't want to engage in woodwork or gardening. The music therapist, who's an amazing - just an amazing practitioner encouraged her and encouraged her, and in the end, this person wrote a song, and the song was of her experiences. And it was the first time - I'm getting emotional now. It was the first time she'd shared what she was going through. And this song that she wrote that subsequently was, from my memory, sung by the people who were participating in the singing, was her first step towards healing, and it was - she couldn't talk about it but she could write it and she could put it into a song format, and that's quite incredible.

Now, coincidentally, I just opened - did some work for the Police Legacy and that lady is involved with Police Legacy and she's one of the volunteers that helps other legatees find a new way forward when they've lost a partner or lost a child or whatever it might be. So that process that she went through at Royal Talbot has become a sort of a part of her life now. She's not just absorbing other people providing a space for her to help herself. She's helping other people now.

And I think - the measure that I've looked for in the last 20 years is the legacy value of the things that people do. So I think it's all very easy to be focused on an all-singing, all-dancing, you know, great big event, but if it's all forgotten in a year, two years, then, really was it worthwhile? And the events that I've seen, whether it's memorials or whether it's steel pan bands, the ones that have had the greatest value on the community are the ones that are still going now, because they have this quite long-lived legacy value. And when I try to judge success or failure, that's one of the things I look for.

MS RYAN: In terms of that then, you've emphasised the importance of ensuring that something like a memorial, a public memorial, is that it not only provides short-term benefit but also long-term benefit. In your experience of observing memorials that, as you say, do provide a legacy benefit and aren't just short-lived, what are, in your opinion, the guiding principles around memorialisation to ensure that long-term benefit?

MR ESPLIN: I think the first one is that, in my experience, resilience and recovery build from the ground up. They build from the person who's suffering trauma or the community that's experienced disaster and is suffering trauma. It builds from that level. It's not something that comes top-down from government or the bureaucracy, if you like. So I think the ones that work really well are the ones that emerge from the community level.

I think the other thing is that the need for a recognition of embracing diversity, because what works in one town might not work in another town. One person might be ready to engage with help and support at a time when everybody else is

not ready to. Some people come to recognition that they need help very slowly, and one of the things that does happen in recovery, I think, is that windows of opportunity only stay open for a finite period of time, and some people miss out because they - it's a very Australian thing. There are a lot of people that say, "Look, I'm not so badly affected but Joe Bloggs down the street is really doing it hard. They should get the support, not me." And then four months later or three weeks later or six months later, they realise they do need help. So I think embracing diversity in terms of not trying to template the same thing over every community or over every individual. Diversity is a good thing. It can make things work. Timing needs to be flexible. And there needs to be recognition that people's willingness to be involved in recovery and creative recovery effort is - varies quite widely and what we put in place has to allow for that wide diversity of timing.

I think it's - communities want government and want people providing support to work with them, not do it for them. So I think that's not just empty words; it's a really critical measure of success, and that sort of builds on the notion that communities are not passive recipients of what we do for them. They're active participants in finding a way ahead, finding a way back to functioning, finding a new normal if that's what it's going to be. And I think that's the same with individuals. They're not somebody waiting for somebody to do it for them. It's about community owning it and community moving with it and driving it.

In an emergency management sense - and I've taken note of your use of language in the way this Board of Inquiry is being heard, but one of the great criticisms that came to me from survivors of bushfire is that everybody referred to them as "victims" and they were at pains to slap me around the head and say, "We're survivors. We're not victims. We're going to make our way forward. You get out of the way and help us. Just provide the help we want. We'll make that work for ourselves." So that notion of the semantics of how we describe people that have been through horrible traumas is critical to giving them the mental space where they can devote their attention to recovery, not taking offence at the way we're using language. So I think that's critically important.

The other thing that was such a negative to the community was the fact that so much of the media coverage refers to the aggregate numbers, how many lives were lost, how many people were in hospital, how many stock of each description were consumed in the fires, how many kilometres of fencing, how many houses, how many sheds. Where, for the individuals, every single instance is a trauma and a tragedy, and so just for everything to be graded up to a total number seemed to them to sort of just completely diminish what had happened to them.

And I think, in my experience, the person that loses their house in a house fire is experiencing exactly the same trauma and needs exactly the same amount of help as somebody that loses their house in a substantial bushfire. So that notion of not just thinking of all of this in big numbers is really critical to creating a mental space where people suffering trauma can keep going forward.

Using creative recovery, it has to be a safe space. It's not just finding an artist who can work with the community who's a good artist. It's finding somebody who has the empathy and the understanding, and, increasingly, I think it will be finding somebody that has the training in creative recovery. And I'm delighted that now there's a national Creative Recovery Network, and it's not a government entity. It's a group of like-minded people who are all working towards sharing experience, sharing professionalism, developing best practice and developing the skills and training more and more people in the skills of providing a safe place where creative recovery can help individuals and communities work through the trauma they have. So that's a really substantial step in the right direction.

I think it's – the other thing that strikes me is that thinking about art as – it's investigative, it's thoughtful. It can be provocative. It can provide even the opportunity to problem-solve, and I think in doing that, in a safe place, it provides the opportunity for people to have another way to just approach the trauma they've been through.

And the last example I'd love to share is – I don't have the detail of it. They're an organisation that I'm just in awe of, and it's called ANVAM. It's the Australian National Veterans Arts Museum, and by its charter it's basically using visual arts to provide an opportunity for veterans to process their lived experience, both during their service, their military service, and – I think increasingly frequently – their experience post-military service. And it's using art as the vehicle to help people that have served their country deal with what they've seen, what they've done and how they're experiencing a return to civilian life.

So it's – again, it seems to me, to be part of this broader and broader recognition that creative recovery can be applied to so many situations, and, done well, it will be a tool of great help and effectiveness.

MS RYAN: Chair, I have no further questions for Mr Esplin.

CHAIRPERSON: Thank you. Mr Esplin, thank you so much for giving your time to us today. I'm not sure if you were able to hear our other witnesses this morning, but there's been some really interesting commonalities and synchronicities between what you've had to say and some of the other evidence that we've heard, all of which is going to be really useful for us in thinking through a number of things, but in particular the memorialisation which you've spoken about today. So thank you very much for your time.

<**THE WITNESS WAS RELEASED**.

CHAIRPERSON: And you can return to your seat. Thank you, Mr Esplin. Thank you, Ms Ryan.

MS RYAN: Thank you, Chair. Chair, as I explained yesterday, this Board of Inquiry has sought to listen to and learn from the experiences of victim-survivors,

their families and friends, and members of affected communities, including in relation to their experiences of healing. Today, we share more of the experiences of those who have made submissions or attended private sessions.

The following summaries describe what they told us. As previously, if someone has asked for confidentiality, we have not referred to what they told us.

Many people who have come forward to the Board expressed to us ways in which the government can contribute to their healing. As explained yesterday, victim-survivors and their loved ones have emphasised that one size does not fit all when it comes to addressing the trauma of child sexual abuse and that the path to healing is an individual journey.

The first topic that has run through many of our private sessions is the importance of truth-telling, and the fact that for many people public acknowledgement of child sexual abuse is an important feature of the healing process. To victim-survivors and their loved ones, this means talking openly about it and allowing victim-survivors an opportunity to be heard and to share their stories in a safe space and without judgment and to remember and grieve for victim-survivors who are no longer with us.

One victim-survivor told us:

> "For me, the biggest impediment to my healing is the silencing. So if you feel that silencing, that push to not reveal it, it has nowhere to go except to be destructive to you as an individual or to people around you, which ultimately affects you. My experience is that this silencing in and of itself is so profound, and illness is a result."

We heard from some victim-survivors that this Board of Inquiry through its public hearings has been part of that process. This is so even for some people who are not ready to publicly share their stories and have only done so confidentially or anonymously. Some expressed hope that others would come forward and continue to share their stories.

The next subject that we heard about is apologies, and this idea and need for a public apology on behalf of government to victim-survivors has been raised by a whole range of victim-survivors with the Board. For many, an apology is closely related to this act of truth telling. Some victim-survivors have already received apologies from the Department of Education as part of their individual cases. Samuel, whose experience was shared last week, told us that he received an apology from the Secretary of the Department of Education but it was addressed to his lawyer.

Other victim-survivors have told us of their disappointment that they have not yet received an apology from the Department of Education or other government

services. Grant Holland told us he understood that sometimes legal considerations can prevent an apology being made but said:

> "After my disclosures became public, I actually wanted someone from the Education Department and the police to contact me and say, 'This must have been a terrible time for you. We are sorry, and we have improved in many areas to make sure this never happens again to little kids.' Of course, they have not done this and I'm left with the feeling that they did not listen or care then and they are not listening or do not care now. No one called."

Other victim-survivors and their supporters told us that a genuine wholehearted apology will be beneficial to their own healing and to the healing of the community. One victim-survivor told us:

> "It's another way of acknowledging the truth and not wanting to sweep things under the carpet. In principle, I think apologies are really critical and important and can be powerful."

Bernard told us he liked the idea of a public apology and recommended that the government sit down with victim-survivors and discuss the wording. Casey, the sibling of a victim-survivor, also thinks that there should be consultation with victim-survivors, families and communities in relation to the intent, preparation and delivery of an apology. Other victim-survivors considered that an apology alone was insufficient and needed to be backed by action.

Samuel told us:

> "I don't think an apology for what happened at Beaumaris Primary School is enough. The Education Department should apologise to all victim-survivors of child sexual abuse in Victorian schools. The Education Department needs to clear the decks and put everything on the table. The apology needs to be based in remorse, not just because they have been caught out. For some, I know an apology won't change anything, but I'm hopeful that it gives us somewhere to hang our burden. For me, at least, I think an apology would provide a sense of finality."

Casey thinks that an apology needs to be accompanied by meaningful actions by government, including a commitment to reporting on the progress being made to address the recommendations of the Royal Commission. Some called apologies overrated, asking, "What good is an apology if nothing changes?" Some victim-survivors doubted an apology would help at all.

Memorials. Some victim-survivors and their supporters agreed that a memorial would contribute to their healing, provide closure and be a mark of respect for victim-survivors. One victim-survivor told us:

> "I think that memorials are a powerful way that a community can acknowledge certain segments of their community have suffered and it's externalising that pain in a more creative and visual way."

Casey also expressed the view that permanent displays can be a powerful acknowledgement of child sexual abuse for victim-survivors, their families, friends and communities. Tim Courtney agreed that a memorial would be good. He said:

> "It does not need to be particularly big. It needs to be centralised. It needs to be at the behest of the department. It has to be positive, recognising the past but what the future looks like. It cannot be hidden."

Samuel told us:

> "I also like the idea of the Education Department putting up a memorial to victim-survivors of child sexual abuse. I would like to see a garden or a reflective place at Beaumaris Primary School and a broader memorial for victim-survivors of child sexual abuse in Victorian schools somewhere else. Perhaps similar to the Police Memorial at Kings Domain. I think that would be really powerful."

Others noted that any such memorials need to be carefully designed and implemented so that they do not unhelpfully expose current students to trauma.

As indicated, the process and experience of healing is different for all victim-survivors and their loved ones. Truth-telling processes, apologies and memorials are significant for some people and provide a public form of support. We heard, however, about a number of other important ways in which victim-survivors might be supported to heal. For some, it is achieved or promoted by access to support services. These services may be different from or in addition to counselling and other mental health services.

For others, the pursuit of justice is important. Some wish to see perpetrators named and their reputations corrected to acknowledge the harm they caused to young people. Some have stressed to us the importance of knowing that steps were being taken to ensure that this kind of abuse does not happen again. Some victim-survivors and their loved ones described how accessing information related to the abuse contributed to their healing. This includes accessing historical records held by government departments and agencies required for legal proceedings and other reasons. We heard how accessing these records can be difficult and the process of trying to access itself re-traumatising.

The ability to connect with a network of peer support was raised by several victim-survivors as a critical means of support for them. This includes having access to spaces that are led by the community of victim-survivors, where they can share their experiences and support one another. And for others, the healing

process has been very personal. Some described how their career choices or extracurricular and community activities have contributed to their healing. Others, like Grant Holland, told us how working towards being able to forgive their abuser is an important part of their healing.

Chair, I will now turn to the closing of phase 3 of the public hearings. Over the past two days, we've heard narratives from victim-survivors about their experiences with support services and their service needs. We've heard from Victorian Government representatives about what services the government currently funds or provides, and future reform directions. We've heard from expert Dr Robert Gordon OAM on the impacts of historical child sexual abuse, service needs of victim-survivors and what needs to change to ensure victim-survivors receive effective supports.

We heard this morning from Maureen Hatcher, LOUD Fence, and Adrian Farrer, Trinity Grammar, on their experiences supporting the healing of victim-survivors through grassroots activism and memorialisation, and we've just heard from Mr Bruce Esplin AM on creative recovery and the role that arts can play in healing, as well as his views and experiences of public memorialisation.

All this information is of critical importance. However, the work of the Board of Inquiry is not done. We will be hosting round tables with representatives from the service sector, other stakeholders and victim-survivors and secondary victims to further examine the Terms of Reference relating to support services and healing and explore the key themes and issues that have been raised over the past two days.

Now an overview of what we've heard. We've heard from victim-survivors about the impacts of child sexual abuse. The - we've been told about immediate impacts in that many victim-survivors describe the fear, powerlessness and shame and anger they felt when they were very young, immediately following the abuse. We've heard about the enduring impacts and the fact that the abuse often stayed with them throughout their lives. We've been told about mental health impacts, about anxiety, depression, obsessive behaviours and other mental illness, which were often chronic and severe.

Many victim-survivors have reported feelings of isolation and loneliness as a result of the child sexual abuse they experienced, and we've been told about a range of other impacts, being from alcohol and drug dependency to difficulties finding and maintaining employment and difficulties caring for their own children. These impacts align with what we've heard from experts on the impacts of historical child sexual abuse.

We've also heard about the impacts that abuse can have on communities. And while community reactions to child sexual abuse can vary from individual to individual, we know that knowledge of child sexual abuse can profoundly impact people's connection to their communities. In relation to the current service system,

we've heard from Victorian Government representatives about government-funded services. Some of these key services are outlined below. Victim-survivors can receive support from specialist sexual assault services, known as SSAS, which can provide counselling and advocacy for victim-survivors. The Sexual Assault Crisis Line also provides after-hours crisis counselling. Aboriginal community controlled organisations are also developing services for Aboriginal victim-survivors which take a whole-of-community healing approach.

Victim-survivors can also receive information, support and referral through the Victims of Crime Helpline and case management support from community service organisations delivering the Victims Assistance program. Individuals can also make an application to the National Redress Scheme, through which they may be able to receive a direct personal response from the responsible institution and/or counselling and psychological care. I note that inquiry into redress arrangements is outside the scope of this inquiry.

We have also heard from government about how the available services have changed over time, including very recently, and future reform directions to improve outcomes. However, we have heard that victim-survivors do not always receive the responses they need to support their healing and recovery for a number of reasons. They face difficulties trying to receive ongoing support and continuity of care. Critical services are not able to provide support for the length of time that they require. Victim-survivors may be able to receive support through private practitioners, but the financial cost of this is great. Not all victim-survivors are in a position to be able to do so.

We have heard that some victim-survivors require psychological treatment over a long period of time in order to deal adequately with what occurred to them. And victim-survivors may not be able to receive all the types of supports they require. Some have a range of needs that therapeutic services alone cannot address. They may be facing homelessness, experiencing substance dependency or have issues in their relationships. We have heard from experts that often victim-survivors do not have adequate support navigating these complex systems.

Survivors from certain communities face particular difficulties in receiving support, including LGBTIQ+ communities, culturally and linguistically diverse communities and older Australians. Further, victim-survivors in rural and regional Australia also face challenges in receiving support. The Board of Inquiry will continue to consider these issues.

We have heard evidence from a range of witnesses and victim-survivors about supporting healing. We know that effective service responses are critical to supporting healing and recovery, and we know that trauma from child sexual abuse is something that can be repeatedly experienced by victim-survivors over their lifetime. It is not something that necessarily stays in the past. We know that healing is much broader than simply engaging in therapeutic processes, and there are a range of ways that healing can be supported.

We have heard how participating in grassroots activism can be crucial to victim-survivors' healing and help them find their voice. The LOUD Fence ribbons that were displayed before provide a poignant reminder of the need to listen to survivors who have been silenced for too long. We heard from Maureen Hatcher that grassroots organisations can connect victim-survivors to one another and about the enormous benefit they gain from the peer support of others who have been through similar experiences.

We heard this morning from Adrian Farrer, principal of Trinity Grammar, that when a school as an institution has a conviction to do something tangible, that school can play an important role in supporting healing through public acknowledgement, and in that case, public memorialisation, and we heard about the importance of ensuring victim-survivors in the community are involved in the process of memorialisation, and that such involvement is crucial to a constructive and authentic outcome.

We have heard from Mr Esplin about how art has been used to support healing following trauma, and we've - and the fact that victim-survivors of child sexual abuse may well benefit from these types of approaches. And we've also heard about principles in forming responses to disasters could be used to support healing of communities in respect to historical child sexual abuse and that what is very important is a whole-of-community response and this concept of it being driven by the community.

Today, we conclude our public hearings, being our public scheduled hearings, but as I emphasised before, the work of this Board of Inquiry continues. As indicated, we will be conducting a series of round tables. We are still taking registrations for private sessions and accepting submissions from individuals, including victim-survivors and secondary victims. We will also continue to seek information from the State of Victoria.

The Board of Inquiry will consider all of this information as it develops its report and formulates its findings and recommendations which will be delivered to the Governor on 28 February 2024. Thank you, Chair.

CHAIRPERSON: Thank you, Ms Ryan. Today we conclude our three phases of scheduled public hearings. I want to again acknowledge and pay tribute to the courage and advocacy of victim-survivors of child sexual abuse in Victorian government schools, their families, friends and their supporters.

The first phase of our hearings sought to understand the effects of child sexual abuse and explore the individual and shared experiences of victim-survivors and secondary victims. We heard from Tim Courtney, Bernard, Paula, Casey and Dennis. We also heard from two experts: Dr Katie Wright and Professor Leah Bromfield.

The second phase focused on accountability. We again heard from those with lived experience, namely, Hank, Samuel, Grant Holland and Christie. We heard from another expert, Professor Patrick O'Leary. We also heard from the Secretary of the Department of Education, Ms Jenny Atta, who offered a formal apology on behalf of the department. And we also heard from the Deputy Secretary, Dr David Howes, who provided evidence about the department's knowledge of the abuse and its responses at the time.

This week, we have explored the theme of hope through a focus on support services and healing. We have heard from a panel of representatives from the Departments of Education; Families, Fairness and Housing; and Justice and Community Safety. We heard yesterday from Dr Robert Gordon and today from Ms Maureen Hatcher, Mr Adrian Farrer and Mr Bruce Esplin.

All of this evidence has been important to the work of the Board of Inquiry. At times, the evidence has been very difficult to hear. But there have also been moments of great empathy, deeper understanding, and hope. I thank all of those who have participated in our public hearings, but especially the victim-survivors and secondary victims who have generously shared their experiences and their insights with us. They have demonstrated an extraordinary level of compassion and concern for other victim-survivors and have offered their valuable thoughts and suggestions on opportunities for change and improvement.

These public hearings are part of our work to establish a public record of victim-survivors' experiences of child sexual abuse. The public hearings also assist to develop a shared understanding for all Victorians of the impact of such abuse on victim-survivors, secondary victims and affected communities. We also hope that these public hearings have contributed in a small way to an ongoing process of healing.

I thank everyone who has attended our public hearings, whether in person or online, for the interest that you have shown and for joining us in a shared commitment that the abuse which is the subject of this inquiry must not happen again. As Ms Ryan has said, the work of our inquiry will continue as we will review and reflect upon all of the information that we've received to date and that we continue to receive, including through further private sessions, until we deliver our report on 28 February next year.

We will now adjourn the public hearings.

<THE HEARING ADJOURNED AT 12.42 PM