



**Royal Commission**  
into Family Violence

## **WITNESS STATEMENT OF GARRY ROBERT HIGGINS**

I, Garry Robert Higgins, Membership Director, of Maryborough, in the State of Victoria, say as follows:

- 1 I am authorised by the Rotary Club of Maryborough Victoria (**Maryborough Rotary**) to make this statement on its behalf. I make this statement on the basis of my own knowledge, save where otherwise stated. Where I make statements based on information provided by others, I believe such information to be true.
- 2 Maryborough Rotary made a submission to the Royal Commission into Family Violence. I refer to and adopt that submission. Attached to this statement and marked **GH-1** is a copy of Maryborough Rotary's submission.

### **Current role**

- 3 I am currently the Membership Director of Maryborough Rotary. In this role I am responsible for maintaining and recruiting membership of Maryborough Rotary, requiring several hours' commitment per week.
- 4 My full time occupation is owner and manager of a bakery in Maryborough.

### **Background and qualifications**

- 5 I was born in Maryborough. I studied Physical Education at Victoria University (as it is now called). I was the first student union officer at Victoria University.
- 6 I started playing football for Carlton Football Club in the Victorian Football League in the mid-70s.
- 7 In approximately 1977, I started working for the State Government as a Regional Officer for Youth Support and Recreation. I was based in Ballarat.
- 8 In 1980 I started working as a Municipal Recreation Officer based in Maryborough.
- 9 I then became the Senior Recreation Manager for the Shire of Corio, which was at that time the state's biggest municipality. The Shire of Corio subsequently became part of the City of Greater Geelong.
- 10 In approximately 1985 I resigned from this position and bought a bakery in Leopold, on the Bellarine Peninsula.

- 11 In 1988 I moved back to Maryborough and have owned and run bakeries in Maryborough and surrounding areas since that time.
- 12 I also served a term on the City of Maryborough Council in approximately 1990.
- 13 I have been a member of Rotary International for approximately 10 years. For most of this time, I attended meetings and fundraisers but did not take a particularly active role. In 2013 I became President of the Maryborough Rotary. I held this role for 12 months. After that, I took up my current role as Memberships Director.
- 14 I have always been an active member of the community. Most of my community work has been with the Chamber of Commerce. I've also done a lot of football coaching and administration and netball coaching in my local community.

### **Maryborough Rotary**

- 15 Rotary International is an international service organisation whose purpose is to bring together business and professional leaders to exchange ideas and information in order to provide humanitarian services, encourage high ethical standards in all vocations, and help build goodwill and peace in the world. It is a secular organisation with a network of approximately 34,000 clubs and over 1.2 million members worldwide.
- 16 Maryborough Rotary is one of the clubs that forms part of the Rotary International network. It is located in the Central Goldfields region of Victoria (population 12,500). It is an organisation committed to addressing community issues and demonstrates its leadership by leveraging its social and business networks to partner with relevant organisations to achieve positive outcomes for the people of its district.
- 17 Rotary, as an organisation and as a network, has so much power. The Rotary clubs are local and connected to the community, but are part of a much wider, global network. The clubs are able to say things that others can't. In our case, we come from a community that has severe disadvantage. Rotary recognises that and is able to engage and pull the whole community together and address that issue.

### **Maryborough community**

- 18 Central Goldfields benefits from strong agricultural industries and a developing tourism sector. Nonetheless, it suffers from disadvantage in economic resources, health, education and jobs. Maryborough has one of the state's highest unemployment rates of 11 percent (which is around twice the state average of 6.7 percent) while the socio-economic indexes which look at disadvantage, economic resources, education and occupation, have consistently rated Maryborough among the lowest in the state.

- 19 Victoria Police reports on family violence indicate the region is over represented in the state. This, combined with anecdotal information that incidents may be severely under reported, has been of great concern to Maryborough Rotary.
- 20 Being officially identified as having one of the highest rates of family violence in the state and tagged at the lowest end of the socio-economic scale, has been highly confronting for Maryborough.
- 21 We were always called a 'resilient town'. In my view, this suggests we were willing to put up with the issues we faced as a community, like youth unemployment and suicide, illiteracy and problems with keeping kids in school. I believe the current feeling among Maryborough Rotary and the community more generally is that we are not putting up with it anymore. We want to win. We want to be a model for other towns that are facing the same problems. As community and business leaders, Maryborough Rotary is determined to help turn the tide by putting strategies in place to revive the liveability and wellbeing of its town.

### **SAFE project**

- 22 In 2013, during my time as President, Maryborough Rotary made contact with Central Goldfields Shire Council (our local council) to assist in creating Rotary Maryborough's strategic plan. Through the council we engaged with Go Goldfields. Go Goldfields is a council-led alliance of organisations created to deliver locally relevant responses to social issues that are too complex and too long-term for typical solutions. It aims to develop shire wide, community driven approaches to improve social, education and health outcomes for children, youth and families
- 23 Go Goldfields suggested that family violence should be a primary focus of the work of Maryborough Rotary. Prompted by this input, and by the increasing reports of family violence in the region, we were moved into action, based on the premise that remedying the family violence issue was the responsibility of everyone in the community who could help.
- 24 Among Maryborough Rotary's first tasks was to link and consult with government and non-government agencies, to become informed about the issues and determine what Maryborough Rotary could do.
- 25 We found a significant barrier to successfully tackling family violence was reluctance, and often fear within the community to openly discuss the issue. The broad cross section of rationale for 'silence' as anecdotally collated included the following.
- 25.1 Not wanting to make the situation worse.
- 25.2 A 'what happens in the family, stays in the family' attitude.

- 25.3 'It's none of my business' response.
- 25.4 Concerns about stigmatising the town socially and economically.
- 25.5 Despair in the system: 'it will come to nothing, just more grief for me'.
- 26 There was sufficient information to indicate that for some people, talking about the issue was regarded as taboo. Others, although recognising that family violence was unacceptable and wanted it dealt with, nonetheless preferred the issue not to be overly exposed within their district.
- 27 These revelations provided a call to action by Maryborough Rotary. We strongly believed that the lack of open conversation was a key causal factor for the problem remaining prevalent and largely untreated. As Maryborough Rotary is an organisation which believes in leading by example, one of our first steps was to make a public statement in the form of a White Ribbon oath, pledging to take a stand against family violence and to become strong advocates for its eradication. That experience seeded the motivation to put words into action.
- 28 The original concept was going to be an awareness campaign in the form of a series of posters. The first draft of these posters depicted the stereotypical shattered glass, battered woman and the child. We agreed that this was ultimately not entirely helpful; we were advertising a violent act with a violent image. We decided that the campaign needed to focus on safety and providing a safe environment.
- 29 We developed what we have named the 'SAFE model'. SAFE stands for:
- 29.1 support (via information, education and delivery of specified projects);
- 29.2 advice (provision of expert advice, especially regarding marketing communications);
- 29.3 facilitation (bridging stakeholders and assisting comprehension of strategy and priorities); and
- 29.4 early intervention (encouraging a proactive, collaborative community-based response).
- 30 The SAFE project aims to prevent or reduce the prevalence of family violence by mitigating its consequences through a number of initiatives, aimed to increase understanding of family violence, promote non-violent relationships and encourage conversation about the issue. I set out some of the initiatives below.

***Pride of Workmanship awards***

- 31 Because of Maryborough's geographical location, a lot of its middle and senior managers fly in and out, leaving only the locals on the weekend. We thought we

would try and improve Maryborough's social capital by providing vocational scholarships to some of the local people, to learn about best practice and successful strategies undertaken in overseas communities, with the view to these skills then feeding back into and enriching and resourcing the community. We created the Pride of Workmanship awards, which grant scholarships to people who work with and address family violence.

- 32 Our first scholarship was awarded to a young woman who is a physical education teacher. She did a course in San Diego on positive behaviour and language. It was about teachers modelling to students a positive way of communicating rather than a negative way of communicating. As one aspect of the severe disadvantage that is present in many areas of Maryborough, a lot of our local kids are from backgrounds where they only hear negative language. The impact at the local school was amazing; the children's use of language has changed significantly and there has been healthier engagement by not only students but a more positive attitude among the teachers.
- 33 The second was awarded to the head of the local childcare centre head to study world's best practice in 'wraparound services' in child care services at Pen Green in the United Kingdom. Wraparound services provide intensive, individualized care management process for children with serious or complex needs. The wraparound plan typically includes formal services, together with community services and interpersonal support and assistance provided by friends and other people drawn from the family's social networks
- 34 The third was awarded to a leading Senior Constable. He completed the Graduate Certification in Social Science (Male Family Violence) which looked at working with men involved in family violence and men's behavioural change.

#### ***Wallet cards and posters***

- 35 We created wallet cards and posters to distribute around Maryborough with messages and information about family violence. Attached to this statement and marked **GH-2** are copies of some of the wallet cards and posters that were distributed.

#### ***Bystander intervention training***

- 36 We recently ran a bystander intervention training day. The program was facilitated by Loddon Mallee Women's Health and was aimed at the major employers within the town. Over 30 CEOs, HR managers and key staff attended the day. The purpose of the program was to embed knowledge and responses to family violence in the workplace.

***Local media***

37 We have engaged with the local press. The local newspaper runs a banner along the bottom of the paper once a week in a double issue which says 'Say No To Family Violence' at the bottom of a page. They have also been supportive of running relevant articles.

***Football and netball community***

38 We engage with the local football and netball club in several different ways, including an initiative where we devote one round of the local football season to the issue of family violence. On Sunday 17 August 2014, we held the '#sayno2familyviolence football round'. This involved the players wearing white armbands, educational information was distributed to players and supporters and a perpetual shield was presented by a female Rotarian to the winning team. This received extensive coverage within the local media.

39 There is another round scheduled for August this year, in the same format using different teams. It will now become an annual event as part of the football/netball league's community round.

40 We have also done a couple of talks about family violence, what it means and how prevalent it is, at the football netball club.

***Elephant in the Room***

41 The Elephant in the Room is a colourful fibreglass elephant that was created by a group of women survivors of family violence. The aim of the Elephant in the Room, as the name suggests, is to encourage people to talk about the often hidden issue of family violence. One side of the elephant is black and white and the other side is colourful.

42 The Elephant in the Room is hosted at various venues, one of which was, in 2014/2015, the bakery I own in Maryborough. The amount of discussion that was generated by the elephant, with both women and men, about their family violence experience, was incredible. There were tears. In conjunction with the SAFE project, it created an environment where people feel confident and comfortable talking about their experiences.

43 One of the surprising stories that comes to mind was the story of one of our good customers who was in a same sex, abusive relationship. It was a really tearful conversation. I know a lot of family violence occurs against a woman by a man, but violence in a same sex relationship is an issue that needs airing as well.

44 Attached to this statement and marked Annexure **GH-3** are copies of pictures of the Elephant in the Room.

#### **Further initiatives**

45 In addition to the above, there have been several other initiatives coming out of the SAFE project. I refer to Annexure B of the Maryborough Rotary submission, which forms Annexure '**GH-1**' to this statement, which contains an overview of the various initiatives that have come out of the SAFE project

46 Going forward, I think there is also a role for large scale awareness campaigns. We are currently in negotiations with a major sporting event to try to use their network to spread the word, in the form of a sign with a 'no to violence' message of some kind.

47 We are also working with the local harness racing club. Maryborough has the most number of meetings outside of metropolitan Melbourne. On 19 October this year, Maryborough Rotary is going to sponsor a whole card. That event goes into 3600 TABs throughout Australia, with approximately 10 million viewers. We think this is the demographic that need to hear this message. We are going to look at sponsoring each race. We have the support from the local club and they are working with Harness Racing Victoria.

#### **Reflections on SAFE project**

48 I think the SAFE project has been really useful in that it creates an environment where people feel comfortable to talk about family violence. It creates dialogue and the issue becomes forefront of the community's mind. This assists with identifying and responding to issues of family violence and, hopefully, reducing incidents of family violence.

49 I think it has worked well because it has come from the bottom up, rather than the top down. We have had community engagement and a community response and things have started to change. However, there have also been the right leaders within the community. It is ultimately about personality. A project like this needs champions, driving it from within the community.

50 Importantly, it is not someone imposing a project and then moving onto the next job. With a project like this it is about engaging the community. The people at the top shouldn't be doing everything for those at the bottom. It is important that the community take ownership, and have a belief in positive change. The community has the ability to solve its own problems, but it does need some assistance, whether that be finance, resources or knowledge.

- 51 The outcomes of the SAFE project have been wide-ranging:
- 51.1 there has been a raised awareness of the issue in community;
  - 51.2 we've influenced local government and services' decision making;
  - 51.3 Go Goldfields is intending to establish a Family Violence project in shire with a dedicated worker;
  - 51.4 reporting of family violence, both primary and third party, has increased;
  - 51.5 a collaboration table has been introduced, which is a management system composed of service providers, service users and community representatives to manage community focussed services offered by our local government; and
  - 51.6 there has been an increase in recidivism. There are several theories as to why this is so. We believe that the campaign has given renewed confidence to those suffering family violence to report repeat incidences. There is some discussion that the reporting by victims is leading to retribution from abusive partners. I am advised that in other similar campaigns conducted internationally, there have been corresponding findings.

### **Importance of community**

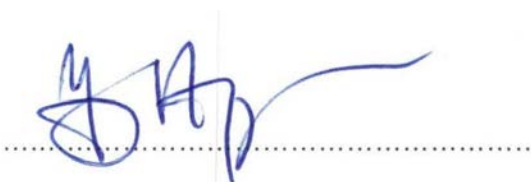
- 52 If we consider the world of 20 years ago, there was a lot more active strength in community organisations. Today, a lot of those community institutions have less power, fewer members and there is less interest in them, but, importantly, they continue to exist.
- 53 In my view, there are two reasons community organisations no longer have the same power they once did:
- 53.1 people are busier and have different working arrangements; and
  - 53.2 there is a growing sense that the work that community organisations used to do should be the responsibility of government.
- 54 However, the power of community should not be underestimated. I really believe in the proverb that it takes a whole village to raise a child, and I think the community of Maryborough has progressed, not only in terms of family violence outcomes but other social indicators, because we are all heading in the one direction. For example, as a result of our Go Goldfields initiatives, we have increased the number of students completing Year 12; we used to have around 28% of kids completing Year 12, now it is up to 50%. Previously, 60% of our preschool children required



speech therapy. Now, as a result of the Go Goldfields literacy programs, only 30% of children require such therapy.

55 We can leverage the power of community networks and community groups, of which Rotary is a classic example. Other community groups that have power in the community include sporting groups and churches. Part of it is having sufficient funding, but it should be money allocated for local community to make decisions about. A network like Rotary is so well set up. As a result of our campaign there are 15 or 20 other Rotary clubs that have shown an interest in rolling out a similar project.

56 I think government should acknowledge the value of community and its capacity to change the lives of individuals, and should resource community organisations accordingly.



**Garry Robert Higgins**

Dated: 7 August 2015