



Board of Inquiry into historical child sexual abuse in Beaumaris Primary School and certain other government schools

WITNESS STATEMENT OF MAUREEN JOAN HATCHER

I, Maureen Joan Hatcher of [REDACTED], say as follows:

- 1 I make this statement in my personal capacity.
- 2 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.

Qualifications and experience

- 3 I am the founder of LOUD Fence Inc (**LOUD Fence**). I established LOUD Fence in May 2015.
- 4 I hold an Advanced Diploma in Children's Services from the University of Ballarat (which is now called Federation University Australia) which I obtained in 2010.
- 5 In addition to my work with LOUD Fence, I am also a Development Advisor at Playgroup Victoria. I commenced my role with Playgroup Victoria in August 2016.

About LOUD Fence

- 6 LOUD Fence aims to support and promote the healing of victim-survivors of historical and contemporary child sexual abuse. LOUD Fence provides victim-survivors with a voice and seeks to create connections between victim-survivors, the community, and organisations and institutions to promote positive discussions around healing.
- 7 Victim-survivors remain LOUD Fence's top priority. However, LOUD Fence also seeks to engage with institutions—such as schools and religious organisations—with a view to educating leaders about responding to instances of child sexual abuse in a trauma-informed way.
- 8 LOUD Fence is a grassroots organisation. The catalyst for the creation of LOUD Fence was the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse (the **Royal Commission**) and the evidence of victim-survivors that was provided to the Royal Commission. The Royal Commission held Stage 1 of its 'Case Study 28: Catholic

Church authorities in Ballarat' from 19 to 29 May 2015. During the coverage of the Royal Commission's public hearings, my friends and I discussed the idea of tying ribbons on the fence of the former St Alipius Christian Brothers School in Victoria Street, Ballarat East (**former St Alipius**) in support of, and to show solidarity with, our friends, family and loved ones who were victim-survivors (many of whom attended St Alipius).

- 9 On 21 May 2015, prior to leaving my home to go and tie ribbons on the fence of the former St Alipius, I decided to create a Facebook page for people wanting to show support for victim-survivors of child sexual abuse in Ballarat. I called the Facebook page 'LOUD Fences' because there had been too much silence in response to child sexual abuse. Initially, I posted a message on the group's Facebook page which called on people to tie ribbons on the front fence of the former St Alipius the following day. Over the course of the next week, many people went to the former St Alipius to tie ribbons on the front fence of the school as a show of support and solidarity with those who were sharing their truths through the Royal Commission. The first ribbon that I tied to the fence contained the name of a friend's brother, who was a former student at the former St Alipius that had taken his own life. This was how the first 'loud fence'—being a fence adorned with ribbons in "loud" colours—came into being.
- 10 The movement has since taken on a life of its own. In Ballarat, ribbons have been hung on the fences of the Ballarat Police Station, various churches, the Ballarat Magistrates' Court and the Australian Catholic University's Ballarat Campus. Beyond Ballarat, loud fences have sprung up outside interstate institutions, including at the Armidale Catholic Cathedral in New South Wales, and in international locations, such as in Christchurch, New Zealand. There is also a "branch" operating in the United Kingdom called LOUDfenceUK, which has the same principles as LOUD Fence but is more targeted towards religious institutions. I am aware that there are also loud fences in other European countries, such as France, and soon in the United States of America.
- 11 LOUD Fence relies on funding through grants, donations and from members. LOUD Fence is entirely volunteer-based. The funds are used towards activities arranged by LOUD Fence for victim-survivors, such as creative workshops to promote connection and healing.

How LOUD Fence supports healing for affected victim-survivors, secondary victims and affected communities

- 12 LOUD Fence supports healing for victim-survivors, secondary victims and communities in a variety of ways. Key activities undertaken by LOUD Fence to support healing are: the creation of loud fences, the organising of 'workshops' for victim-survivors, secondary

victims and members of the community, and by arranging peer support groups for victim-survivors. Each of these activities is discussed in turn.

- 13 As discussed above, loud fences involve tying colourful ribbons onto the fences of institutions and organisations where child sexual abuse has allegedly occurred and on the fences of homes and organisations who choose to show their support to victim-survivors. The ribbons are designed to draw people's attention to the issue of sexual abuse and break the stigma that is associated with sexual abuse. The ribbons are also a way of drawing a connection between fellow victim-survivors and demonstrating to victim-survivors that the community stands with them, and serve as a catalyst for difficult conversation among members of the community. They can also act as an acknowledgement from the institution that abuse occurred. In my experience, public acknowledgement is very important for victim-survivors.
- 14 The ribbons used are usually donated to LOUD Fence. However, we occasionally need to purchase ribbons by drawing on our personal funds.
- 15 As the movement has grown, people often contact me regarding their intention to establish a loud fence outside an institution at which abuse is alleged to have occurred. I have conversations with these people regarding how they should approach the establishment of a loud fence and offer general guidance. For example, I usually suggest that people have conversations with members of the organisation outside which the loud fence will be set up to ensure the fence's longevity. It is important to have discussions with institutions' representatives so that they are aware the ribbons do not represent an act of protest against the institution itself.
- 16 Nonetheless, the ribbons are occasionally met with a mixed reaction from leaders of institutions. It can be difficult to anticipate what type of response a loud fence, or the suggestion that a loud fence be created, will receive. For example, I recently held discussions with representatives of a Victorian school following an incident at that school. I was aware that the family of the victim, as well as the victim themselves, wanted to create a loud fence on the front fence of the school where the abuse occurred. I communicated this to school's representatives, who expressed some reluctance and discomfort at the suggestion of a loud fence. It was clear from my discussions with the school's representatives that they wanted the ribbons to be temporary.
- 17 It can also be difficult to balance LOUD Fence's priorities with those of the institution at which abuse has occurred. There is often a tension between what LOUD Fence wants to achieve, such as showing solidarity with victim-survivors, and the objectives of

schools, such as managing their property or not prejudicing court proceedings that are afoot.

- 18 Ribbons can also be met with a hostile response from members of the public. Individuals have told me that the ribbons are not aesthetically pleasing, and others do not want them on display in their neighbourhoods given their association with child sexual abuse. Recently, we were tying ribbons on a church fence in support of a victim-survivor in Melbourne, and we received negative comments from passers-by who said words to the effect of 'you shouldn't be doing that' and referred to the ribbons as 'graffiti'.
- 19 It is often the case that loud fence ribbons are taken down by individuals or groups of people, such as parishioners. The taking down of ribbons can have a devastating effect on victim-survivors. Victim-survivors are already carrying a lot of shame and when ribbons are removed it can make them feel as though they are being silenced and alienated even further.
- 20 For the past few years, LOUD Fence has been working on a project called 'Continuous Voices' which involves the creation of a permanent art memorial in Ballarat. I am a member of Continuous Voices' organising committee and LOUD Fence is one of several Partner Organisations involved in the project, which has also received support from the State Government and the City of Ballarat. The project will involve the creation of a space that will serve as a place of reflection and contribute to the healing of victim-survivors. It will be located near the lake adjacent to Plane Avenue in Victoria Park, Ballarat.
- 21 Another way that LOUD Fence supports healing for victim-survivors, secondary victims and members of the community is by arranging workshops. LOUD Fence has been arranging workshops for roughly one year on a weekly or fortnightly basis (depending on the time of year). We have paused the workshops for the time being due to the weather in Ballarat throughout winter, although we are looking to recommence them shortly.
- 22 The workshops are based around creative activities, free of charge and open to victim-survivors and their supporters, including secondary victims. Every workshop is a standalone event based on a creative activity. For example, previous workshops have involved photography, African drumming, painting and excursions to local outdoor sites (such as the Dementia Trail and photography walk around the Old Cemetery). The workshops provide victim-survivors with an opportunity to come together in a safe place to chat, have some fun and feel a part of the community. Importantly, the workshops also ensure that victim-survivors do not feel as though they are alone.

- 23 The workshops are run by volunteers (but since LOUD Fence received funding for its workshops, facilitators are now able to be paid) and even some victim-survivors who have a creative background. When choosing a location for a workshop, LOUD Fence considers any factors that could be triggering for victim-survivors and secondary survivors. We try to be very clear about what will happen at the workshops and how they will proceed because in my experience, victim-survivors value predictability.
- 24 LOUD Fence has collaborated with The Survivor Hub, an organisation based in Sydney, to host peer support groups—known as 'MeetUps'—which take the form of group discussions that are attended by victim-survivors in Ballarat. The MeetUps provide an opportunity for victim-survivors to connect with each other and ask questions, express concerns, learn from their individual experiences and heal. While I have not personally attended any of the MeetUps, I understand from my discussions with the facilitator who runs the sessions that separate workshops are held for two age groups: one for victim-survivors under 40 years of age; and another for victim-survivors over 40 years of age. The workshops are held on a monthly basis. The sessions are also attended by a trauma-informed facilitator who guides and facilitates the group discussions. People who participate in the MeetUps can submit questions to the facilitator prior to the discussions. The Survivor Hub also runs MeetUps in Melbourne.
- 25 In my experience, victim-survivors can be uncertain about the kind of support they want to assist them with the healing process. LOUD Fence recently published a survey via a private online group to try and better understand what activities victim-survivors would like to partake in. Approximately 23 people responded to the survey. The results of the survey showed that the majority of individuals wanted somewhere to go and interact with other victim-survivors. I believe that this is because many victim-survivors have been seeing counsellors and other specialists for many years and are now looking to connect with people in the community and have meaningful interactions without needing to repeat their past experiences.
- 26 I would really like to see LOUD Fence extend this model to other communities beyond Ballarat. I believe that this model would be a success in other communities because, from what I have observed, victim-survivors crave connection. The main barriers to expansion are a lack of financial support and time restraints faced by the board members of LOUD Fence (who serve on a voluntary basis).

Support services for victim-survivors

- 27 Through its social media channels, LOUD Fence also assists victim-survivors with accessing support services. The services with which LOUD Fence connects victim-survivors include Beyond Blue, headspace and the Kids Helpline.
- 28 Victim-survivors are often put in the position where they need to take control of their healing journey. In my experience, victim-survivors prefer to gain access to services in a manner that is bespoke, accessible, timely and trauma-informed.
- 29 Social media can play a significant role in the healing process. LOUD Fence has a presence on Facebook (which has over 16,000 followers), X (formerly known as Twitter), LinkedIn, Instagram and Threads. These pages and accounts are currently all operated solely by me, but LOUD Fence is in the process of recruiting new board members who I will ask to assist me with managing LOUD Fence's social media pages. On its social media, LOUD Fence shares content that is empowering and uplifting for victim-survivors. The content shared on LOUD Fence's Facebook page has changed over time: whereas in the past it used to focus on news events (such as George Pell's court proceedings), LOUD Fence has changed its approach in recent times to focus on support services and other positive content. This reflects LOUD Fence's desire to make social media a more positive and inclusive space: the focus is on victim-survivors, and not on perpetrators.
- 30 Furthermore, to assist victim-survivors I have created a virtual message group which comprises approximately 40 victim-survivors from across Australia. The group is very active, with members posting messages and asking for advice on a daily basis, and often several times each day. The questions can involve anything related to the experience of victim-survivors, including redress schemes and information about court processes. The group allows people to ask questions and receive answers at all hours. In my experience, websites and other more traditional platforms by which people access information can be exhausting and frustrating for victim-survivors. Social media and informal 'chat' groups can work well and provide victim-survivors with the community and forum they need to connect.
- 31 LOUD Fence has also done work with the University of Canberra by creating a media guide to better educate members of the media when interviewing and working with victim-survivors. It aims to educate the media about the impact of reporting child sexual abuse and the importance of taking a trauma-informed approach. We have also collaborated with the University of Canberra by creating a guide that informs victim-survivors how to deal with the media.

32 LOUD Fence's Board has also been working on a Best Practice Model for schools (both primary and secondary). This model, which will take the form of a document to be provided to schools, will provide guidance for schools regarding what to do when a sexual assault occurs. It goes beyond the policies and procedures that I understand are currently in place at schools. The model is focused on the victim-survivor, their loved ones, the school community and the community at large.

Signed:

Name:

Date:

