



## WITNESS STATEMENT OF DANIEL BOLGER

I, Daniel Bolger, say as follows:

- 1 I make this statement on the basis of my own knowledge, except where otherwise stated. Where I make statements based on information provided by others, I believe that information to be true.

### My story

- 2 When I was 14 or 15, I started using drugs. I was mainly using marijuana. And I was drinking too. I used off and on when I was 15, 16, 17. Then it started getting out of control. I used speed and ecstasy a handful of times. But mostly it was weed, Xanax, Valium and alcohol. I wasn't normally a bad person - I was going to school, going to football training, I had good mates - but when I was using those substances, I could change quite easily. Things could be going well, and I could be enjoying myself at a party, and suddenly I could get really angry or I could get really emotional.
- 3 It was getting out of control. I'd have a fight with my dad then I would leave and hang out with mates drinking for the whole weekend. Then I'd be depressed on the Sunday. I knew something was up, because a lot of my friends would drink and they would have hangovers, but it was a lot worse for me - I would feel really depressed and sometimes even slightly suicidal, especially if I had done something embarrassing the night before. And a handful of times, when I was really drunk, I might have even indicated to my friends that I wanted to kill myself. But I was a big strong dude, mental health was never a label that was used. I pushed it aside.
- 4 When I was 17, my family and friends tried to have interventions with me about four times when I was sober. They said I should see a professional to talk about what was going on. But I always said no.

### First psych ward visit

- 5 One night the police were called. Me and a friend had been drinking at my dad's house, and I started to get aggressive towards my dad so he called the police. When the police arrived, I was abusive towards them, telling them to f--- off. The police put me in the back of the van. They took me to a hospital, and when I arrived I could see I was getting taken into the psych ward. It was a weird feeling because now I knew something was wrong. That was my first experience with the system.

- 6 At the psych ward, I was assessed and they said I didn't have a mental illness but they recommended I spoke to someone. In a way that was right; my mental health probably was not bad enough then. It would have been the worst thing to do, to lock me up in a ward. They put it into my hands to seek my own help.
- 7 What I see around now are good male youth workers; that could have saved me. Not someone super professional – someone just like me, someone who could have talked to me about life in a normal way.
- 8 When I was 18, I again started losing control. I was hanging around negative people, and got heavier into drugs. I started using speed, ecstasy, Valium and Xanax regularly, and I also tried other things a handful of times like ice. I was smoking weed and drinking every day.
- 9 I stayed with a friend for two weeks while his mum was away. I stayed there and didn't go home that much. He just did marijuana, but I was using speed and pills. At the end of the two weeks, I was using more and more. And throughout that weekend, I started to feel a lot different than I usually did. I will never forget this moment. I was in his bathroom and I had a bunch of missed calls from my family. And I was tripping out. I had been on plenty of benders before but this felt different. I cried. It was the first time I'd cried for ages. I was extremely paranoid, so I just pretended everything was ok, smoked some more weed and left.
- 10 I went back to my dad's house but when I arrived he said I couldn't stay there anymore. He said "We can't have you coming in using drugs in the house. I can't see you like this anymore Dan." He was crying and I don't think I had ever seen that before.
- 11 At the time I just said "stuff you" and pushed him away. Then went upstairs. Fifteen minutes later three police cars came to the front of the house. I could hear them talking downstairs to my dad. I started shouting "you dogs get out of the house" and stuff like that. There was an altercation and things got physical. I'm not sure how it went down. But I was held down on the lounge room floor and put into cuffs.

### **Involuntary patient**

- 12 I was thrown in the police van and I became very aggressive. I was taken to the hospital again. I remember at the hospital they had all these security guards. So it took 6 or 8 of them to throw me into this white room. They jabbed me with a needle in my butt cheek and I slowly started to become groggy. They left me in the room.
- 13 I woke up hours later and looked through the little window. The room was all white but there was this little window on the door. I saw a clock, which was trippy. I wanted to

know what day it was. I saw three nurses there writing on paper. That tripped me out. They didn't speak to me. No-one spoke to me or told me what was going on.

- 14 I started yelling and became more and more agitated. A security guard came up to the window and asked me what was going on. I recognised him as one of the guys from before. He explained to me where I was and that I was going to be seen by a doctor in the next few hours. He goes "if you want mate, I can get you a bottle of Coke and some chips." That was all it took. It helped a lot. I reckon he would have bought them with his own money.
- 15 I had never been in the system before. I was only 18. No-one else spoke to me. They did give me medication though.
- 16 Then probably six hours later a psychiatrist or a psychologist or a doctor, I'm not sure which, came and saw me. He told me I had just had a drug-induced psychotic episode and that I was going through psychosis. I felt very scared and confused.
- 17 For about 48 hours I was in a sort of halfway hub with six or so other people. It was an adult facility and the people were all ages. I wasn't allowed any visitors. My parents couldn't come and see me.
- 18 After the halfway hub I then went to the main system. The experience was bad. Real bad. I would go out into the communal area and have the medication and meals, then sit in a room and cry. What was happening in my head was bad; and the shame.
- 19 I saw my dad. I apologised for cracking it at him. My family were really worried. My uncle had schizophrenia and died by suicide in his twenties. They were really scared. My mum came in to visit, and just started crying when she saw me.
- 20 I was an involuntary patient in there for two weeks. I wasn't allowed out, apart from leave passes; the doors were locked.
- 21 There was a nurse there who I got along with. He was this Scottish or English dude. I spent some time with him – he let me go to the gym for half an hour a day where I would hit the boxing bag. It was limited what you could do in there, no dumbbells or ropes. He was a good nurse.
- 22 There was a 40 year old dude in the room next to me, but we shared the same bathroom. He was huge, slept on the ground. He was hearing helicopters. Another guy – he would have been in his late twenties – he was dressed really nicely then flipped out. He was suddenly in his underwear. It was stuff I had never seen. It was all new to me. My parents never even drank.

- 23 I had a few leave passes home. I smoked weed and went back in. One time they even caught me smoking weed in the smoking section at the psych ward.
- 24 For the first time in my life I was scared to be alone. I was paranoid. I was not hearing voices at all really. I wasn't seeing things. But that is something that people don't understand. I was twitchy as - I would hear something and just feel jittery. In all honesty I was really scared, I thought I was going to be stuck like that forever. I was in my room all the time, listening to music and crying.
- 25 The meds gave me some time out from my thoughts. I was in such a bad place. I was miserable all the time. The meds just pretty much knocked me out and gave me time out.
- 26 It wasn't all bad. There were three nurses about my age who would talk to me. Having human contact was good. Otherwise I was just used to getting "hey Daniel take your medication".
- 27 I had a social worker come in at some stage. An older woman in 40s. I just said no initially as she wasn't the right person for me to talk to. If I had a young dude it could have been different.
- 28 When I got out, I got back on the drugs straight away. I didn't want to improve my mental health. I had a worker come over a few times with security guards to give my medication short. I was on a CTO (Community Treatment Order). I was not feeling better – I felt alone and isolated.

### **Another admission**

- 29 Another month later, I had another admission. This was hectic. I was at home and heard a knock on the door. I looked out and saw police and thought, not again. I went into the back yard. All these people came over my back fence. There were police but other people too in white uniforms. It really tripped me out. I ran across the back yard and tried to jump the side fence to the neighbour's house but had a taser pointing straight in my face.
- 30 They told me I'd broken the CTO by not taking my meds so I was taken back to the ward.
- 31 I had another two weeks in the same psych ward at the hospital. It felt like they wanted to hear me say I was really crazy. So I said I needed medication. Everyone knew that's what you had to say. Then I was released.

## **Spiralling**

- 32 My behaviour kept spiralling after the second admission. I was arrested a bunch of times. I ended up in the Melbourne Assessment Prison for two weeks, and then the Melbourne Remand Centre for six.
- 33 They had more professional mental health set ups than the hospital. I was monitored better. It was still very in and out, but it had structure. So at the ward they used to say you might see the doctor today or tomorrow, and it wouldn't happen. That was annoying as. To have no idea what was going on is not good for your mental health.
- 34 I was at the Melbourne Remand Centre for 6 weeks. My mental health got better. Predominantly because there I wasn't using drugs all time. I exercised too. Coming off the drugs was hard at first. The first few weeks I was in a double room with someone else my age. Later on I got my own room. And it was good for my mental health.
- 35 I went to Melbourne Magistrates' Court for a bail hearing. The judge indicated I could get bailed to the Bunjilwarra Koori Youth Healing Centre. The Koori Youth Healing Centre is an Aboriginal youth rehab centre. Andy Briggim, a worker from there, came and talked to me in a visiting area. That was the first time for a while that I had normal conversation. He knew everything about the system. He did the assessment straight away, he explained the process and didn't make any promises. He said I was accepted from the Healing Centre's perspective but the rest was up to judge. I was bailed there. It was a real special place. I finally had workers around me that I got along with and that cared about me. To me, the place was run perfect. At the time Craig Holloway was the manager – and all the staff really cared about the welfare of the clients.
- 36 One week after I was out I used drugs again. But it wasn't a failure. Stuff like that are building blocks for the success I had later in life. I wasn't ready for change, but I still stayed there for six months. It is a credit to how good the service was. It was a big step in the right direction.

## **Malmsbury**

- 37 About roughly fourteen months after I completed the program, I was charged again. I spent four months on bail at my dad's place, where I decided to make a change. I got a job. Started training with my football club again. And hanging around with my positive mates I used to go to school with. I wasn't using drugs that much.
- 38 I was brought back before the court just before my 21<sup>st</sup> birthday. I was facing 5 years jail. I was going to turn 21 on the Wednesday. They said plead and you'll spend 3 years in Malmsbury. I was sitting there listening to blokes get 7 years, 8 years. I was sentenced by the judge in the afternoon. I got 3 years but was told that I would spend

only 18 months with good behaviour. I couldn't believe it. I will never forget the look on my families' faces that day in the Court room. The judge let me have a few minutes to say goodbye before I was taken to Malmsbury. They were crying, but we all said it was a good result.

39 I remember getting transported that day from Court to Malmsbury. When I was in the van I said to myself I was never going to end up in a court room, police custody or anything like that ever again. I had been given a second chance and I was going to take it with both hands.

40 I was in Malmsbury for 12 months where I built up a really good relationship with my Aboriginal worker in there. It was just good to have someone to talk to that wasn't a guard. We could talk about footy. About life. About Culture. And what I was going to do when I got out. It gave me a sense of confidence knowing I had someone like him by my side. I also got along really well with the teachers at Parkville College. My time at Malmsbury was a really positive one. I learned a lot about myself in there. My mental health improved dramatically. I was extremely fit. Playing and watching footy. And for the first time since I was 17 I was happy.

### **Release**

41 After serving 12 months I was released in 2014 and played senior football for 2 years. The first year was going well. I was working full time. I was playing football. I was hanging out with new mates and I had a lot of positive people in my life. I felt accepted. But towards the end of the year I started to feel a little different.

### **Suicide attempt**

42 At the time I didn't know it but I was suffering from depression. People kept saying how well I was doing. But I was secretly battling. I wasn't ready to talk about it; I'd never spoken to anyone about it. It kept getting worse in 2015.

43 One Saturday in January 2016, my dad went out for the day. I was at an all-time low. About five times before that I thought about taking my own life. They were real close calls. I called Lifeline. I was really thinking about it. That's the crazy thing about suicide; you want to do it but I knew it would put everyone around me through hell. It shows you how much people are struggling when they decide to take their own life.

44 I had all these prescription medications. I took a cocktail of a whole lot of them, in an attempt on my own life. My two best mates knew I had issues. I messaged them saying thanks for your support, enjoy your life or something like that.

- 45 It was a Saturday and I thought my mates were playing cricket. One of them called me straight away. He was freaking out and asked what was I doing and where I was. I told him it was too late, I'd already had the pills.
- 46 He told me he found me vomiting in my bed; my head was tilted back so the vomit was not getting out of my mouth. He got me on my side. He more or less saved my life. The ambulance came and took me to hospital.
- 47 I woke up at the hospital with him and dad at the end of the bed. This time was different. I was not cuffed. It was not drug induced. I started crying and thought F---, look how close I got.
- 48 I had one night in the hospital and another in the psych ward. Then I saw the doctor. I said I was studying a diploma of counselling and working in the field of Aboriginal health. He let me go. I think he realised I was not better off in there.

### **Private hospital**

- 49 I got a referral and spent two weeks in a private hospital. It was so much better. The food was better, the programs were better, everything is explained better. They talk to you about what you are doing. Everyone's mental health would be better if the public system could mirror that.
- 50 The psychiatrist there was big on not diagnosing people into categories. He said people have shades. He said I have had bipolar traits; ups and downs. He gave me a mood stabiliser and I take a really small dose up to this day.

### **Opening up**

- 51 After that, I started opening up to friends. This time I realised I have to do everything I could to get better. Two weeks after I left the clinic it was a Saturday and I was in the same room as the day I'd tried to end my life. It triggered me. When it was in a place where the structure was good I was ok. But I flipped. I had an anxiety attack and didn't know what to do. I rang my friend who said to call my ex footy coach, Shane Morwood.
- 52 I called him straight away. He came and got me and took me to the beach. I will never forget that moment. I told him everything about my past life. He said "don't worry what other people think. All what's important is your friends, family and people around you who know you're a good person. We all love you Bolge." I can't speak highly enough for what that man has done for me.

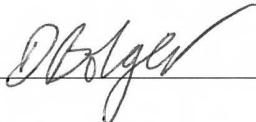
53 The rest of 2016 had its tough moments, but my mental health was improving. A few blokes around the footy club took their own lives. I decided I wanted to share my experience to help other people that were going through a similar situation as myself.

#### Life now

54 I now run workshops in schools and youth groups teaching them about the dangers of drugs and alcohol, bad decisions, mental health issues and resilience with the intention in assuring these young people live happy and meaningful lives. [REDACTED]

55 I have travelled around the world for 12 months, had Julia Gillard come and listen to one of my presentations, have the best parents and group of friends who have supported me through this journey, am engaged to my beautiful girlfriend and live a very happy life.

56 I hope by sharing my story Victoria can make some positive changes to the mental health system moving forward.

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print name Daniel Bolger \_\_\_\_\_

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