

Statement of Mary Thomson (Rishi Hridayananda)

Name Mary Thomson (Rishi Hridayananda)

Address Known to the Royal Commission

Occupation

Date 13 November, 2014

1. This statement made by me accurately sets out the evidence that I am prepared to give to the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse. This statement is true and correct to the best of my knowledge and belief. Where direct speech is referred to in this statement, it is provided in words or words to the effect of those which were used to the best of my recollection.
2. My full name is Mary Thomson^{J.T.}, My spiritual name is Rishi Hridayananda. I am married to Brian Thomson. I was born on **RE** 1942. I have three sons and four grandchildren.

Initial involvement with Satyananda Yoga and the Mangrove Mountain Yoga Ashram

1. I started practicing Yoga in 1960. I was taught by Swami Saraswati and accredited as a Yoga Teacher. She had her studio in Margaret Street in Sydney and this is where I was taught.
2. I, my husband, Roma Blair and Barbara Rivette bought the Ashram on 28 November, 1974. My intention to have the place as an Ashram was so that families could have a sanctuary to learn and practice yoga.
3. I recall I met Swami Satyananda in 1969, I think in Sydney. I think that he was here for a conference. I recall that at the time I met him I was a secretary to Swami Saraswati who ran yoga classes in a building in Market Street, Sydney. I cannot remember the exact address.

Signature: J. Thomson

Witness: Bagnell JP 159340

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4. Whilst I was the secretary for Swami Saraswati I was a teacher as well.
5. When we bought the property I was the secretary and my husband was the president. There were 12 disciples all together. They did not live there at the time, however they came to visit on the weekends. I recall some of the names of these individuals. I recall , whose spiritual name was . I also recall her husband , their daughter , and their son .
6. Sometime in 1973 I went to a different Ashram in India, the Bihar School of Yoga, to learn more about Ashrams. I was there for about a month by myself.
7. In 1974 I sent my two children, aged 10 and 11 to the Ashram in India, the Bihar School of Yoga for their school holidays. My husband Brian Thomson went to India to pick them up to return to Australia in January 1974. However, both my sons took the Sannyas. This means they then became masters of the mind and meant that they could stay on by themselves. They did so for twelve years. My eldest son now lives in Delhi, India and works for Echo, a financial banking service for women in India. My second child who visited the Ashram is now a builder.
8. In 1976 my Guru, Swami Satyananda wanted me to organise a convention for Yoga at what was then called the Sydney Showgrounds. My husband Brian Thomson and I organised this event and over two thousand people attended. After that we had a greater understanding of how much interest there was in Sydney in the subject of Yoga. With that in mind, we felt encouraged to try to enlarge the Ashram at Mangrove Mountain so as to meet that interest.

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9. After the Sydney Showground convention I recall in about November of 1976, I went back to India with my youngest son when he was six years of age. We both decided to stay and ultimately remained there for another ten years.
10. Then, in 1977 my husband joined us to live in India. Throughout this time, I had no involvement with the Ashram in Mangrove Mountain. I was running an Ashram in Calcutta, the Bihar School of Yoga.
11. In about 1986 there was a change to Indian citizenship and immigration laws and as a result of that we no longer had the necessary legal permits or visas to stay in the country. So our entire family returned to Australia.
12. Upon our return to Australia, my family and I lived at Collaroy on the Northern Beaches. Due to the fact that we had not been receiving any income for the past ten years we all returned to work. I had to work multiple jobs in order to support myself and my family. I worked in a coffee shop, as a nanny, and as a nurse in a nursing retirement home.

Return to Mangrove Yoga Ashram

13. I had contact with people connected to the Mangrove Yoga Ashram but was not directly involved with the Ashram. I returned on the 14th of November 1995.
14. Around 1993, my husband and I met with my Guru in India, Swami Satyananda. He indicated his wish that we return to the Mangrove Ashram to, "give it shape" by maintaining the physical and spiritual essence of the Ashram. My husband and I returned to the Ashram in about November 1994 and took up those duties. We have both lived there ever since in a residence at the top of the mountain where the Ashram is situated.

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15. Since then my role in this organisation is as what we call an, "Acharya", which means the spiritual head of the whole Australasian region.
16. However, when I returned I was completely unaware of the allegations against Swami Akhandananda Saraswati. It was not until quite sometime later that I found out about what had happened. I don't know why I wasn't told by my Guru or even if my Guru knew.
17. When the Royal Commission came to me for information I began to try to remember any conversations about what had happened with Swami Akhandananda Saraswati. I cannot recall a single conversation with anyone regarding the matter upon my return to the Ashram in 1994.
18. Since then I have been the spear head of the Ashram to spiritually guide, to provide love and care to all living and visiting the Ashram. I also provide spiritual guidance to all of the management team as they are also a part of the Ashram. I do not have management or operational responsibilities.
19. Around 1995 whilst at the Ashram I was teaching some yoga classes. I remember around this time I answered a general call at the front reception desk. The call was from Swami Akhandananda Saraswati, he said, "I am coming back to the Ashram" I listened for a small time then just hung up the phone.
20. I came to know that Swami Akhandananda Saraswati had been in gaol, but was not aware of the specific findings made against him. I was informed by the people at the Mangrove soon after my arrival but cannot recall exactly who told me.

Guidelines and PoliciesSignature: J. MousonWitness: Bagnell JP 159540

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21. I am aware of the guidelines and policies we have at Mangrove Yoga Ashram, though I do not play a role in their composition. We try our best to be compliant with the rules and procedures and keep them up to date. Sometimes we fail at that, but we do the best we can with what we have.

22. I am aware that the Mangrove Yoga Ashram has child protection policies currently, however I was not involved in the formation and authoring of these. I am aware that Bert Franzen in conjunction with the management team formulated our current policies.

Contact with any Victims

23. We call people who have been abused "survivors" and not "victims". We do that because we believe it shows them respect, accords them support and identifies their strength to overcome what has happened to them.

24. I have never had any contact with any of the survivors either by telephone or face to face. No survivors have approached me.

25. As I was not present at the time and did not know any of the survivors I felt it was inappropriate to make contact with them.

Working Together Taskforce

26. I was informed by of the formation of this taskforce by Swami Yogasandhan and Swami Suryamitra however, I was not directly involved in it.

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27. On this subject, I believe it is important for the Royal Commission to understand that our organisational structure is not a pyramid or vertical system, it is a flat line where I am not a boss or manager, I am just a spiritual resource for all to draw upon.
28. I knew Mr Bert Frenzen because he had become someone who had come to the Ashram and over time provided his assistance and help to us in his area of professional expertise. I believe Bert was an expert in human resources. Over time he began to help the Ashram with organisation improvements and as the Royal Commission and complaints came to be known he provided advice on how to handle the situation. I think it is probably fair to say we didn't know what to do and really needed professional advice and help. It seemed Mr Frenzen could provide that advice and help – so we looked to him and he volunteered his assistance - together with that of his firm and its people.
29. I believe that Mr Frenzen took a lead role in the creation of the taskforce and our response to the issues of child abuse that were being brought to light. I understand him to have been instrumental in shaping that response and the way we handled the matter.
30. I did not have direct contact with Mr Frenzen regarding these matters as this went through the task force and he seemed to require that we keep a narrow focus on who was involved in the response by the Ashram. I don't know why.
31. He helped us immensely with developing appropriate procedures and policies to deal with what had happened.

Facebook and Emails Regarding Victims, Bahkti Manning or Mary Smith

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32. I briefly saw some of the Facebook materials, but that is it. I didn't look into the material further as it was too horrifying.

33. I never gave any recommendations or directions to anyone at the Ashram. As noted above, we sought out the advice of someone we thought could help us with experience and knowledge about what to do. It has been a very difficult time for all of us, coming to terms with what has happened in the past and the pain that survivors have felt all the way to now, and are now expressing. I can't accurately describe the despair that we have felt over what to do and how to proceed.

Mangrove Yaga Ashram's 40th celebration.

34. The celebration was designed to recognise and help people overcome the difficulties they faced during the early years of the Ashram. It was an opportunity for everyone involved with the Ashram to raise any of their grievances.

35. For this event, we invited anyone who had ever been a part of the Ashram to come and spend a day or up to a weekend at the Ashram. It was my role to invite people involved with the Ashram through the webpage and Facebook.

36. I believe we also encouraged the survivors to come. We did this in because we believed it would help survivors overcome the problems that they were facing.

37. I think it was around this time that Suryamitra arranged for a Mr Terry O'Connell to come to the Ashram and provide assistance specifically about the child abuse issues. I did not speak to him. I didn't have to speak to him because my staff were the ones who invited him. I believe his role was to manage the difficulties that people were facing at the time. He ran a

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number of sessions where he allowed people to stand up and raise problems and any grievances.

Additional Comments

38. I would like to know how we can help the survivors. Maybe the Ashram can't, but if we can help them, and they wish for our help, then we will do whatever we possibly can. We can never know nor understand the full depth of pain and torment they have been confronted by in their lives. It should never have happened. That it did has meant deep sadness, shame and horror for us. We hope to listen to the Royal Commission, to receive its wisdom and experience, and take the right steps forward.

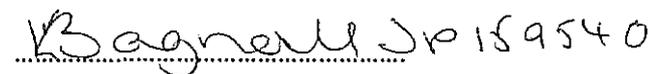
Signed:



Date:

21st November 2014

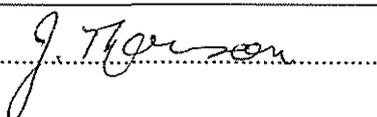
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