

Statement by Gregory Andrews on Lateline Appearance

On 21 June 2006 I appeared on *Lateline's* program about child abuse and other social problems at Muṭitjulu community near Uluru. The ABC asked me to appear because they knew of my former work with the Muṭitjulu Working Together Project, especially from the evidence I had given at the NT Coronial Inquest in August 2005 into the deaths of two petrol sniffers.

During the time that I worked with the people of Muṭitjulu I witnessed human rights abuses and heard first-hand from the victims about the egregious harm they were enduring.

When *Lateline* approached me to appear on the program, I weighed my moral duty to speak out about serious human rights abuses against possible consequences for my family and my current employment. After much agonising, I decided to speak to *Lateline* about the neglect and abuse of children and violence against women in Central Australia because of my deep concern for the victims.

In February 2006 I had moved to Canberra to take up a new position with my current employer, the Office of Indigenous Policy Coordination in the Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs. I informed my current employer in advance that I was doing the *Lateline* interview. My appearance was not sought or prompted by the Minister responsible for my department.

I decided that I would only appear anonymously and I informed *Lateline* and my employer of this condition. *Lateline* accepted this condition and my employer agreed that it would be best if I remained anonymous in the interests of my safety.

I chose to remain anonymous for several reasons:

- Because of the personal costs incurred by me and my family when I spoke out during the NT Coronial Inquest. After my evidence to the Coroner, I was threatened with violence and intimidated on a number of occasions. This abuse extended to harassment of my wife and me when we were in hospital with our new-born son; and
- Importantly, so that the resulting media attention could focus on the issue of the egregious human rights abuses being suffered by Indigenous Australians in dysfunctional communities, not on me.

Most of the media have respected my privacy. But in some circles this has not occurred. As I feared, the release of information about me has put my safety and that of my family in danger. I have been threatened and have endured persistent harassing phone calls and emails. Offensive faxes have been sent to me containing defaced photographs of me. I have had to seek the assistance of the police for protection, have changed my telephone numbers, and have temporarily moved residence.

Some print media and others have sought to discredit my integrity and credibility. Such attacks are completely unjustified considering I have simply sought to stand up against abuse and call for something as fundamentally just as the protection of women's and children's rights. Child abuse, neglect and violence are intolerable issues that we all have a responsibility to address. In a civilised and enlightened society, those who speak out about child abuse should be supported and protected, not persecuted.

I was not alone in putting information to *Lateline* about child neglect and abuse. A range of highly credible people presented a consistent message about the human rights abuses occurring in Central Australia. These messages remain consistent with the statements of other brave people who have spoken out, such as the Crown Prosecutor for Central Australia, Nanette Rogers.

As I did in my submission to the NT Coroner and in other public statements and reports that I have written, I spoke to *Lateline* with the deepest hope of bringing to public attention the human rights abuses and suffering that I have seen and learned of.

The threats and character assassination which I have experienced have been difficult enough for me and my family. What is worse is the message that this sends to disempowered Indigenous Australians in some of the most marginalised communities in our nation about what might happen if they stand up for their and their children's basic human rights.

I encourage all Australians, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, to stand up against human rights abuses. I challenge those attacking the *Lateline* program to channel their energy into the protection of women and children rather than the vilification of those who have spoken out.

Gregory Andrews
Canberra
31 July 2006