INQUIRY RESPECTING THE TREATMENT, EXPERIENCES AND OUTCOMES OF INNU IN THE CHILD PROTECTION SYSTEM

English Transcript | Volume 6

Commissioners: Retired Judge James Igloliorte, Dr. Mike Devine and Anastasia Qupee

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COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: Thank you very much.

We're gonna welcome [redacted] as our next witness. We're very grateful, [redacted], that you're here. Please feel free to tell us anything you wanted to appear before the Commission. Anything that's on your mind, any experience you have, we're quite happy to hear anything you have to say.

[redacted] Okay. Thank you.

I just want to share some stories about – 'cause I worked with Social Services for 10 years in Davis Inlet.

I started in ’80 – ’81 and then we left in ’94 to move to Goose Bay. So that was when I finished that work there.

When I first started working with Social Services, I didn’t – I have seen a lot of things and heard a lot of things, what happened to our people. This was in Davis Inlet. I was only in my 20s when I – when I was working with them. I have no experience; I didn’t have any education, like – like a social work education. I don’t – I don’t have that. And plus we didn’t really have anything in our community for support. Like, later on we had the Health Commission, where people – people can go in and get help.

I’ve seen social workers coming in and out. There are different social workers that come through our community, and a lot of them, they just come out of the university and they have a – they haven’t got a clue about our community, our people, our way of life.

And to them – when I – when I – when I remember seeing them coming in, to them it just – like these people – like – you know – the way I feel it sometimes, when I’m translating, you’re just like – like we don’t have anything. We don’t – we – we can’t really speak English and it’s – it’s hard on – on – hard on them, eh? Plus I was also – wasn’t very good in English but I can translate.

I remember in 1983 – starting in ’81 working with Social Services – in ’83, that’s when the suicides happened. A young mother committed suicide, and after that I see suicides constantly going, like – it’s just like, almost every month, these things was happening in the ’80s.

I was – I was so scared, ’cause I don’t know how to – I don’t have any experience, like I said, like counselling and stuff like that. But the social workers that came, they haven’t got a clue what we’re going through in our community. They – they see us, but I don’t think they understand what’s happening.

But they do things in their way. Like they come from university and they try to change – like you know – like we don’t have running water and it’s very hard for our – for the mothers to look after their children, because there’s no running water. People doesn’t have money to, really, buy anything like washers and stuff like that.

And a lot of times when they go in the home visits, it’s just like – you know – this house is messy. Of course it’s gonna be messy, ’cause we don’t have running water. We don’t have – really, don’t have money to really get things in the store.

And one time I remember, when the social worker came in – came into Natuashish. A young social worker just coming out of the university. I went – ’cause a lot of times she was – she’ll be in the office for a long time and then – like, in after-hours? I remember when I – when I went into her office and I see a big pile of papers in – in her office.

And then I asked her: What are these – what are these papers?

He’s filling up the forms and he said: These are the people that are not really looking after their children.

And I said: Let me see. I wanna see what she – what – who are the people, like I – ’cause I was – it surprises me, because it’s a big pile of papers. And I remember I picked it up and see whose names are in there. And when I looked at it, it was the whole community – the people.

I said: Where did you get this information? All you do is sit in your office. I don’t see you go and visit people.

So he said: I got it from the school.

I said: Who gave it to you?

He said: The principal gave it to me.

I said: The principal doesn't visit people. She stays in school. How would she know?

But back then, it just makes me mad when I think about it now, 'cause how – how dare she do that, you know, for making us look really bad – the whole community. Even the – even the people that are not having problems with their children, you know, like, it's them in there, too.

I took those papers; I throw them in the fire. I burnt them. We used to have a barrel outside. I throw them in there and burnt them.

'Cause I told her: You have to go visit people first, to really see what's going on in the home. You just don't write reports like that.

I have asked her, too: What are you gonna do with them? And he said: I'm gonna send them to St. John's in social – social workers – Social Services office.

But those were the experiences I see and the other thing that really affected – still affected me today – is when I saw, you know, when they start taking the kids out. There was a grandmother who have two girls, and she was very close to them. Even though she was drinking, she often – they often take their grand-girls out to the country.

I remember when she came in to – to my office one time, after the girls were taken away. She said: Can – can you bring my girls back? I really miss my grandkids.

And every time I call Social Services, they – they won't – they said: No, we can't bring them back. But these family – these grandparents been taking care of them, and raised those girls themselves. And I remember when she came, she was sick; she ended up in the hospital.

I thought I worked on this one the last time I was talking to somebody.

She said: I really want my kids – my grandkids back, he said. They ended up in a group home in Sheshatshiu.

So when they – when she came in again she was sent to the hospital. She was very sick. She ended up in St. John's in the Health Science, and she passed away over there.

Her cancers spread and because I – I believe, myself, like, today, like, when kids are taken away from their grandkid – from their grandparents or their parents, it's affecting their bodies – it's – it's hurting. I have four kids. I wouldn't want anybody to do that to my kids – take them away.

And – and I really believe that – how – why she got so sick is because of loneliness. She was really missing the kids and I could hear it every time she comes in, 'cause she's plead to bring those kids back. But every time I call Social Services, I – I couldn't do it, because they said: No, we can't – we can't send them home.

And the grandfather, too – also the Elder that – the grandmother died, and then not long after that the grandfather died too. And it was very heartbreaking to see the two Elders gone, because I believe it was from missing their kids – their grandkids, really lonely for them and then – and I believe it affects their – their whole – their health also.

That one, I cannot forget that one because, you know, like these things were happening.

And then another Elder came in one time, too, and the same thing – same thing. I was – she asked me to find her son, her son been taken away. And – and he told me his name, and she said: I really want to see my son. And she said: Try really hard to find him.

I called all over the place, tried to find that kid – the – the guy – I think – I dunno, he got older, right? But he said: I really want to see my son. 'Cause I heard later on he was

taken away from the old Davis Inlet. Not the island one, but the other one. She – they – they told him somebody said that's where he was taken away from.

And – and I remember when the last time she came, eh? She said: I really wanna see my son. And not long after that she passed away. She died too. She got sick and she passed away.

So it – it's very hard what I've – what I've seen and what I've heard.

What went on – being work – working with Social Services, which they don't really understand our people, and then it was hard work. I was the one making checks. I didn't do child welfare, but I was only a translator 'cause I don't have the experience.

And – and the other thing was, after that like, for myself – like, you know, like – like I really didn't really look after myself either, because it was very hard also when you – when I have to see people because – because of all the suicide. I told you about what happened, it just kept going like this. Like it – it goes so fast, like every month, maybe two – two a month passed away from suicide.

And – and they didn't – they never really offered anything for me to – to help people, you know, to learn how to work with people. I – it just like, I'm doing it alone. And it was also really affecting me because I felt like – I – I'm just hanging people when they talk to me. It's just like you don't – you don't know if there's – if it's okay – like, you know, like – if it's okay for them to go, when they come in to talk to me. Are they okay? What's happening? Like, you know, like, even the kids that were removed, I'm just always wondering is it – are they okay tonight? Are they sleeping, you know? Is everything okay? That's all the stuff that I was – like, you know, putting in here. Like, thinking too much and worried.

And – and I find the Social Services they – when they do home visits, I find it very hard because the people don't really want to see them, to come in and visit them. And then it always worries me when they're saying we're gonna move this kid, we're gonna take them out of the community. And it just, like – to me back then, it just like a cop coming in and taking your child away. That's how I interpret it, like, it's – it's the social workers that are taking the kids away.

And it – I know how struggle – how the family members were struggling, and when I see them go through that, it also affected me 'cause they're my people. I'm from the community, just like their – we're all family.

And – and it's – and it's very hard when I talk about – when I talk about it and even when I think about it 'cause I know. As I was listening to the other lady when she was talking, everything came to me.

Okay. I also want to talk about – a little bit about the – when we were growing up in the country. We don't have any storybooks like you guys have storybooks; we have our parents telling us stories, the legends.

And in the country, I find it so beautiful up there, and it's healthier 'cause we're doing things together. And we are also learning and – by just observing with our family what they're doing and also taught how to do stuff like working on the caribou hides, you know, like, those things were the ones that I – I loved it when we were in the country growing up.

We don't have very much stuff, like, many clothing. We don't have many – many stuff like that. And when we go off in the country all we take is the flour and the butter and sugar and little bit of stuff we need. That's all my parents used to take.

And growing up out there we don't wear – we don't really have boots, we wear moccasins mostly, and knitted socks my mom used to make. And we don't have any

fancy clothes, we have dresses made by our – my grandmother and my – my – my mom.

And we don't hardly eat anything like junk food, like chocolates and candy. We usually have mostly traditional food; that's how we grew up.

And a lot of things, that's what we do, we used to hang out more outside, just sliding and doing things. Learning how to, like, picking boughs and cutting wood. Those things we used to do, and also carry water.

I thought I'd share a little bit of that 'cause not all – not all growing up is bad. Like, there's a lot of good things that happened when we were growing up. But as we got older, things starting – you know – like starting to happen. 'Cause we don't stay in our community; in the community when we were younger, we were out in the bush mostly by foot, walking and dog teams. That's what we – we – I grew up like that.

And – and when we were – when we were out in Davis – this is when I was younger, I'm talking about 'cause – 'cause when – we don't usually go back, also on Christmas. Sometimes we spend Christmas out in the bush and later on, we had to come to Davis Inlet to – to go to Christmas times and the priest was – was running everything back then.

And I remember there is stuff that I wasn't really happy about the priest, when we were growing up. 'Cause he used to – I remember him beating up my father outside the hall in Davis Inlet. And – 'cause we were always told to go to the church, and when we go to church you see the guy standing there saying, you know, be good to your neighbour, don't hurt each other, don't hit each other, and here I was seeing the priest hitting my father.

That's when I said: He's telling us about all these good things, why is he hurting my father?

And it – those things started to happen, you know, like violence start happening because it's also – it's not just the Innu people that have a violent temper. The priest was the same way. He was doing that to the people. It was not just my father; it was other people that they did that to – that they beat up.

And – and those things what – that's what happened in the past. I've – I've seen stuff when we were younger, and it – I used to be so scared of the priest because when we were in school he used to just grab our tables and then just flip them on the – in front of us. And he would be hitting the wall – like the – the blackboard, and I used to be so scared. And I used to tell my father not to be here anymore, not to be in – in Davis Inlet. Go out in the country, where I feel safe.

And because we were not allowed to – to say anything bad. If we do – if we say anything bad, we'll – we'll be burned in Hell. Or something will happen to you. That's what they used to say. I used to be so scared to say anything or even to think anything, because this is what happened in the past.

I wanna say some more, but I wanna stop here for now.

Thank you.

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: [redacted], we really appreciate your insights, just as we do from any person who attends the Inquiry.

We continue to invite you as you think about things, as people speak and they remind you about something that you want to say. Always feel free to come back.

Thank you for reminding us of a responsibility; that if we recommend Innu laws, they should be done in language that Innu people create or understand – not what lawyers create, so that the whole community realizes that it's – it's their law.

Thank you for reminding us about the strength of Innu people, even though they have been treated so badly and have felt so much pain.

So we invite you to come back anytime and speak like you have done today, just as we do for anybody else who'd like to present.

[redacted]**:** Thank you.

[Mushuau-aimun spoken.]

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Just to echo what the – Commissioner Igloliorte has said, thank you for your words today, and we really take heed to some of the very important things that we need to consider as we move forward, so thank you.

[redacted] Thank you.