

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

English Transcript | Volume 7

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

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COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: Thank you very much, Bernadette, for being here. Emma, thank you for your assistance.

Bernadette, we're inviting everyone who wants to speak to the Commission about the community, about Innu life, about child protection, to please come by and let us know what you're thinking.

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: (Inaudible.)

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: Turn on your machine.

B. NUI: First of all, I never really had much experience with Social Services. When I was growing up with my late parents, there – there used to be eight of us. Well, there should have been eight of us, but, ah – my little brother died. And I'm the second oldest in the family.

As far – as far as I could remember, I remember my late parents both drinking

heavy and – and I've become a mother to my small brothers and sisters because my mom and my dad were always out the door, early mornings, drinking.

And sometimes we do not have food to eat or wood to burn and I would always find something to burn in – in – in our house to keep my brothers warm. And lots of times I would take them to my aunts or to my uncles to have them eat, or fed.

When I was probably eight, my – my younger sisters were placed, like, in traditional adoption to my uncle – to my uncles and to other families. So, in a – in – in a way, that was the first time I felt that I lost my brothers and my sisters. But I had this other – my other two brothers with me, which – which I took care of until I became a teenager, when the drinking got so bad.

Because, like I said, that there was hardly anything to eat. And lots of times I would just sneak away to my uncle's house and to my aunt's, so I can go have a place somewhere – place safe to sleep, and food to eat.

My uncle and – and his – and my aunt never turned me away when I came to their house. And so that's – that – that's where I would go when I feel unsafe in my own parent's house because of the drinking, the fighting. And I've witnessed many violent fights between my auntie's – between my aunt and my uncle – and her husband. I don't know if he's my uncle. I don't want to be her – her uncle, because he's too violent. (Inaudible) sometimes, although it was kept hush-hush things. I don't know how many children my aunt lost because of the fighting.

When I was probably 10, my dad took me to the clinic here and he told me: Do you want to see your little brother? And I said yes, I want to see him. But they didn't mention to me that he had died in the belly; and they showed me this little box, like a – a shoebox. And that's where – that's where I seen my little brother.

And that's when I made a promise to myself that I will never put my child in that state; that – that I will always care for my children, that I will not them go – that I will not let them feel unsafe or go hungry.

And throughout – throughout – through my growing up, like, I went from uncle to uncle to my aunt's because with all the drinking that happened. And sometimes my late uncle would just fetch me from the town and take me out to the country with his family, because he knew that there would be drinking and I would be left alone with my brothers.

There was two boys – there are two boys, two brothers and me, left alone with our parents who were drinking so much. And my brother – I became a young mom at 16 because I didn't know nothing about birth control or anything like that. My mom never said anything to me or teach me. So I did the best I could with my son.

And then there were – they – my uncle and my aunt, they helped me with my son; and his grandparents also helped me. So I tried to stay – I tried to stay true to my promise for when I had children. I made a promise and I tried to stay true to that.

And during that time, my brother, one of my brothers, went into – went into Social Services. By then, I couldn't do nothing because I was busy with my own son. And, of course, my parents were still drinking and my two brothers were – at that time – were living with them. But I knew my brothers were taking care of each other.

When my – when my brother – my – my – when my brother returned, he seemed like a different person. I tried to talk to him, what went on, but he would not tell me nothing. But then my older – my other brother, something happened to him that time. I don't know what it is. He would not tell me what was wrong.

It's only a few years later, whenever he's drinking, then I would know. He will tell me what was – what was troubling him before. And he was not – he was not brave enough

to tell me when he's sober. But when he's drinking, he will tell me – he will tell me what happened. That he was abused, sexually abused, by a priest

So there are times – there are times when I think about what – what happened to him, that I feel angry enough to want to hurt someone, to make them feel like they made my brother feel; what my brother felt and what his story made me feel.

I know that many of the priests are not the same. And he was afraid to tell somebody. And I feel guilty that he waited so long to tell me, that I wasn't there to protect – that I wasn't there to protect him; that I wasn't there when he needed me. That I wasn't there when he needed someone.

And he grew up with our parents drinking, all the time. That's what was – what – that's what he always know, about our parents drinking.

My – my other brother came back and he got into the same cycle. Drinking, until he started a family on his own. He had three – three girls – raised them. He didn't drink for several years, until his girls were grown. And my – my late brother, he had – he had troubles. Troubles. He died of a heart attack late one night with only his daughter.

So I never really had much experience with Social Services, except that one time when my brother got sent out. By then I was glad. Then I was glad that he was out, out of the community, away from the drinking where he could be kept safe, where he can have meals. And like I said, I was always with my – my late uncle and his wife. There, I was kept safe and fed. And my parents know where I was, when I was not with them.

So I – so me and my husband, we have four kids – four kids together, and we have two left. Our second son was born sick. He was sick when he was first born, and they couldn't – the doctors could not find anything, what was making him sick. So he was in and out of hospital all the time.

So it was a long time before we decided to have another child. So it was seven years before we did have another baby boy, by then we had three baby – three boys. And he turn out fine when he was born; he was okay, everything. And I kept my promise to keep my children safe and fed, and to do all the things that were – that were good for my children, for my kids.

By then, my second son, like I said, he was always sick, in and out of hospitals. Because I – because I made a decision, a promise to keep my child safe, I went – I went to his – every appointment with him, stayed out in hospitals for two weeks or longer. I didn't have a job then. My husband was providing for us. And our fourth baby came and – she was all right, too.

But then I had to leave. I had to leave them whenever my second son was sick. I had to leave them in the care of their grandmothers, in their aunt's care, because I didn't feel I had a choice, because I could not leave my son alone, in the hospital in a strange place, where he doesn't know anybody.

I learned to speak English quite well in a hospital, because we had no one there to interpret for us and I had to learn. Because sometimes I don't understand what they are saying to me when they use big words. I have to ask them to say something in simpler terms, until I could understand. Sometimes I feel like I annoyed them when I kept asking many questions when I don't understand.

And because my late son could not put – could not speak very well – well, he does not speak the words, so I have to be his words. I can understand what he's trying to tell me with his hands and other things. I can understand what he's telling me. So I, in turn, have to explain it to the doctors and whoever.

And because my son was later diagnosed having Willi-Prader [sic] syndrome, which – which made him eat more than he should and he was big – big, big. And I felt if I am

not there to protect him, they will abuse my son when he cannot clearly speak.

And I sometimes feel like they are laughing at him, making – making fun of him, and I get angry. Because my son cannot speak; he cannot tell me what he – what these other people are making him feel. But I can feel. And what – and what – and I believe that he can feel when I feel something, because he would stay quiet and just looks at me.

So – and I tried my best. I've tried my best but I have – but my children have never been in the system. There were – they were sick, but we managed to take care of them.

So my son passed away when his sister was probably seven. By then, I had other – I had foster children. Because these are – are my nieces, and I kept them. And I kept them because I know their mom was struggling, and often she put them in unsafe situations. And I know that I counted on my late brother to take them in or look after them when I'm not there.

That is – that is when the Social Services approached me to care for children. And that's when I decided as well to work in that department. So I've been there since 2005, and I'm still with them. People have come and go. New faces every year; they don't stay the same. And every one of them do the same thing. I know they mean well, yet they have to follow the book.

And when I try to advise them of what would be a better situation or a better outcome for the family, they can't do it. They have to follow the book, even when they know that it won't work. And I've tried. I tried when they asked for my advice, and I tell them. And they agree it was a sound advice. But then they had to go through another step, another letter, and that's where sometimes it stops.

The moms – the moms, I find, are good. But they make mistakes; they are humans. Nobody is perfect in this world, and moms should be given first, second and third chances, because the babies are not gonna stay babies forever. They will grow up and they will – when they grow up and know what is happening, they will resent the mother – the mother or – or the – their parents because I have seen it happen with my two foster girls. They resent their mom for not taking care of them. I know they – they know they have a safe place with us, but sometimes they take out the anger at me.

The mother tries very hard to do the right thing, to – to go on a straight path, but along the way, her struggles overcome her and she goes right back to where she's trying to get out of – from. And I know many mothers that are like that. I know them personally, and I don't – and I know they try hard, but it's – the system is making them – making them give up, because they put all these pressures, all these expectations on them. And on top of all – on top of all their struggles, they can't do all this.

And sometimes I don't know. I don't know what to do. I don't know. I don't know. It's – all the women – it's too much for me sometimes to think – to think about the children. Where are they going? Are they going to be safe? I don't sleep 'til I know that everyone in my house is in bed and sleeping.

Because these two foster girls, which I had a long time ago, I told them: You can go back to your mom since you're now 18. So far, they never tried to go back to their mom. So I did my best for the children and for the moms.

Sometimes they make me angry. They make me so angry that – that I know they can do what is – what is expected of them for their children to return. But their addictions and their struggles, that's what makes it hard for them. And because we put them – we gave them a lot of expectations to meet, and we advise them to go to this treatment, to that treatment, to healing services, see whoever.

I mean, it has to come from a person to seek help. We cannot tell – we cannot tell anybody to go to this treatment. It has to

come from themselves, to seek the help that they need. And in order for them to get the kids, which the system – which the workers have to be satisfied – the workers have to be satisfied that the parents are doing what they are told to do in order for their kids, their children, to go back to them.

I feel – I believe that children should stay with their parents; give them chances. Like I said, the babies won't stay babies forever. They are growing up.

I didn't think – I didn't think I would be able to do this, because I know how it works in our office.

And sometimes I do get upset at parents, too, because they call us names, like "baby-snatchers." My office does not take – just take kids out of the home without something happening. They know – or we get calls, when the child is not being taken care of. Then they have to go out and see and sometimes we can't find the parents, so they got no choice but to take the child because you do not want to leave a child in a home alone by himself, herself.

You never know what's going to happen because this new generation is on to tougher drugs, lethal drugs, than the other generation. You never know what's going to happen to children left alone. And like – like I said, the parents, they need to step up to their plates and try to – try to find the help they need, because nobody is gonna do it for them.

And we recently took in another foster child. He's only two. I tried to take both children but I couldn't do it. I can't do it. I could only do with one child. And I try to do good with him, but – but it's the parents themselves that need to step up and be a mom and dad to their children.

And I feel like parents who lose their children to the system lose the bond with their kids, with the children. Like, they don't know how to talk to them when they come back. They don't know who they are; they have to know them again. And I think that's the hard part, is getting to know your child again after many years away from family.

And I think things would be different if there was changes in the system so the parents can have the second chance or first chance to correct their mistakes and make a better life for their kids.

And I think that's it for me.

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: Bernadette – Mrs. Nui, you are a remarkable person. You're a wise person. We're so lucky that you decided to present to us and I will ask Anastasia and Mike to speak with you or ask you some questions first.

COMMISSIONER QUPEE: [Sheshatshiu-aimun spoken.]

B. NUI: Two.

COMMISSIONER QUPEE: Two.

[Sheshatshiu-aimun spoken.]

B. NUI: [Sheshatshiu-aimun spoken.]

COMMISSIONER QUPEE: [Sheshatshiu-aimun spoken.]

B. NUI: Mm-hmm.

COMMISSIONER QUPEE: I was – just asked, the – the current foster child that she has, the small child, and she said that it's a – a little boy that's two years old.

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: Right. Thank you.

Michael?

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Thank you very much for speaking to us today. You've made some very profound statements, and you've talked in a number of different ways about how the system needs to change.

And I'm just wondering if you have anything to add to that from what you've already said,

or other ways you might be thinking of how the system needs to change.

I know it's a big question, but if you can try it …

B. NUI: I feel that parents should be given a chance – a chance. Because where we are now, they are not given chances. They are – they are advised: You're on probation, three months. Once the three months are up and during that time, the parents slipped. The parents slip, they go back to whatever, to drinking, to whatever. And they lost that three months' time because they are given – they are given lots of time; lots of time to themselves to do what they want instead of trying to make it better for their children.

Once the three months are up, then there's another three months added again and it goes on and it goes on. And in that – during that time, they are given options to attend treatment – attend treatment, family treatment. Sometimes the children – no, I correct that. Children are not allowed to attend with their parents because the department insisted on getting the parents treated first for their addictions.

And I believe that in order for the parent to be successful, the children must go with the parents because – because if the child does not go with the parents to the treatment, they might not be able to regain the bond that they had with their parents. And I think the bond is very important with child and the parents.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Thank you very much.

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: Bernadette, and also Emma, thank you for being a support here today.

What you have told us is a continuation of what many people have already suggested we should be thinking about when we tell government of what we heard. And it is clear that if we listen more to what people have to say, to what Innu have to say, to what experienced people like you have to say, then there will be less hardship on families and children.

So we're very grateful that you had the strength to do this, even though you didn't think you could or you would. But it's obvious to us when we hear you speak that you're saying exactly the same as everybody else has said. Families are your best friends and families are your worst enemies, but we have to give everyone a chance, and we have to let Innu – the Innu community decide what is the right way to do this.

So we will – we will think about what you've said. We will make sure that we pass on what you have said. Again, like everyone else, as we come back to your community and you want to say more, now that you're comfortable, feel free to give us some more of your ideas.

Tshenashkumitin.

B. NUI: Thank you.

P. RALPH: That's it for the day.

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: Okay, we're finished for the day, but thank you so much, everyone.

And will we have a private session?

P. RALPH: (Inaudible.)

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: All good?

P. RALPH: Yeah.

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: Thank you very much for being here. We really appreciate it. See you tomorrow morning at –

P. RALPH: 9:30.

C. URQUHART: 9:30.

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: 9:30.

P. RALPH: Yes.