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

English Transcript | Volume 15

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

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ELDER ANDREW: [Sheshatshiu-aimun spoken.]

First of all, I call out to our Creator to help us make it through another day. And I was telling my sister this morning, I said, like, it's a miracle that people still walk around with the heaviness of the – what they've been through all those years. And one Elder in the back said 74 years I've been still carrying around the pain, what had happened. And I would like to say to all the workers: You, too, need to take care of yourself.

Thank you.

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: Do you want to start with housekeeping?

C. URQUHART: Sure.

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: Yeah.

C. URQUHART: Well, actually, do you want to start by just acknowledging the Elders and –

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: Hmm?

C. URQUHART: Did you want to start with acknowledging the Elders and I'll do the housekeeping at the end? I just feel bad doing – starting with that.

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: Do what?

C. URQUHART: Did you want to start with –

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: Mânîmat, tshenashkumitin.

Also, to Tshaukuesh and Penote, all Elders who are present, we cherish and appreciate your presence and you are such a important and vital part of this community, but also for us as Commissioners.

I want you to understand that as Commissioners, myself and Anastasia and Mike, as well as our team of all the people in the Inquiry are aware of one very important fact. And that is even though, as Mânîmat has pointed out people talk about very heavy things, as she says, we agree with her that it is a miracle and we're very happy that the community is still so strong, that your language is so strong.

So we do share the anguish and the hurt that speakers have suffered but we also know that there are many strong people in this community. Everyone who spoke is an example of that.

So as Commissioners, we know that and we will not forget it.

Before we start with our next presenter, I'll ask Caitlin to give us an overview of what is remaining for this trip, what's happening today.

C. URQUHART: So we are, this morning, in the rather difficult position of having more people who want to speak than we have time. So we are gonna ask everyone to try to focus their remarks so that we can get as – get through as many speakers as possible.

We have heard time and again that it is important and essential l– and we felt this as well – that we end the week with something hopeful and joyful, and so we have a hard stop as we are hosting a community lunch here, with entertainment, this afternoon.

And I'll pass it to Anastasia, who's gonna speak about healing services briefly.

COMMISSIONER QUPEE: Good morning.

[Sheshatshiu-aimun spoken.]

I just said that – introduced – welcomed the Elders that have come to join us again and everybody here. And I've introduced the IRT support workers, which is Edward Nuna, Debra, Tommy Penashue, Nanshi, Jenni-Rose and Louise and Sean Allen that are here with us. And also mention to people that if they're talking and if they have a support person that they want to have sit with them, either they ask a family member or friend, that's also welcome as well.

Thank you.

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: One more comment about how the Inquiry is working and it is something that is very important for speakers to understand, and that is when you let Paula know that you wish to speak, then you can also let her know if you want to be assisted by one of the health workers, support workers, or if you think you're strong enough to continue on your own.

Louise and Edward and support staff either have spoken to most speakers before they come up, so they know who – who has said I think I can get by on my own, and they know who is asking for a hug or support while they're up here.

So to speakers who are coming up today or in the future when we come back again, you can – you can tell us to stop, you can tell us you need a break, and anytime Sean wants to come up and give me a kiss, he can do that if he wants to.

So be comfortable. Understand that we are here to listen to you. Understand that we respect and believe what you are saying and that it's so important when you do come up to speak.

Okay, I'll ask Ms. Milley now to step forward with Anne.

INTERPRETER NUNA: I – I'd just like to thank Elder Elizabeth Penashue for bringing – making donuts this morning – early this morning, and that's very kind of her. And that she'll – she brought her batter and she said she'll make some more in the tent that's out there. So we do have a tent that's outside. Anybody's welcome to – to come there.

Mm-hmm. Thank you.

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: And welcome, Florence.

F. MILLEY: Yes.

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: You're – you're quite free to let us know whatever's on your mind.

F. MILLEY: Where do you begin? I asked one of my coworkers, Roxanne, to come sit with me for support, as I just came down from another meeting this morning with the Grand Chief so I'm a little bit tired this morning, but bear with me.

I want to take the time to look at the success of the Inquiry is been – doing for the Innu people and how I know the – a lot of the hurt, the pain, the intergenerational trauma that the Innu people is actually enduring, even today has – has made a huge impact, not only for the Innu, but for the people of Labrador.

And the ongoing issues that we have are children that are still currently being shipped out to the Island, if not elsewhere, to seek refuge, I guess, is the only words I can really describe, because I know I have my nephews – are still currently in the system. One just got back yesterday. I'm very, very happy about that. That's one that's returning. Well, we still got one left to go.

He spoke to me briefly yesterday and he said he's so happy to be home. And I said what do you call home? He said with my Innu family. He said but I don't speak Innu, Auntie. I said I know. So this is what the system is actually taking away from our children, is the language and the culture. So now my – my nephew is almost – same age as my son, 15, – he will have to start from scratch, of trying to reconnect with his family here, my sister, as – my sister right now, she still struggles with PTSD, post-traumatic stress.

We lived in a home of alcoholism. My mother is here today, and I'm here to support my mother because she gave me life. Regardless of the pain and suffering that my mother has endured in her own journey. And her suffering was passed down to us. Then we became no different, becoming alcoholics, drug users, parental neglect, neglecting our children. How do you cope and understand when you don't

have the resources in your community? How do you seek help? Where do you find trust when the system has failed you as a child?

I am one of those people. I am 46 years old. I have four children. My aunt – she's here – she adopted my daughter. I am so proud that she did because I wasn't capable financially. I didn't have a home; I didn't have a job. And now my daughter has two of her own children and she's doing really good, but you know, she has her own struggles, too, right? But I'm here to talk about my story, what happened to me at a very young age in a system that broke me.

I know I have to give an opportunity for Anne to translate and can I – can – can I break so she can? Or do I continue?

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: You decide that, you and Anne. (Inaudible.)

[Dialogue between F. Milley and Interpreter Nuna in Sheshatshiu-aimun.]

F. MILLEY: Okay.

INTERPRETER NUNA: [Sheshatshiu-aimun spoken.]

F. MILLEY: So I'll start from – for what I remember and recollected as a child. I probably was about three or four. I remember walking below my – where my grandmother resides, up by – where my Uncle Joseph lives today. So we lived there.

My mother, I guess she must have been drinking, and my father was working with the linerboard. He was away from what I remember. There was a – a vehicle. There was a vehicle, for what I remember, and they offered me some candy.

I don't know if I can do it. Just a second.

[Sheshatshiu-aimun spoken.]

I'm sorry, Your Honour. It's very – my mother is here and it's really hard that I can see my mother because I was asking for my mother. They didn't have to take me away from those – from my own mother. I didn't even know where she – she was to, because my grandmother was watching me and my grandfather was watching me. And they took me away on a plane, not knowing where my mother was.

I was crying, screaming, and they told me to shut up. We're almost there, they said. And I kept screaming and screaming. I remember 'cause I was holding on to my brother Kenny and I told him to be quiet because we're not allowed to do anything. And I didn't even know where I was going.

And you talk about where the healing comes from. I never healed from what happened because I was put in a system that sexually abused me at the age of four. Who in the hell notices as a child at the age of four what a penis is, what a vagina is, when you're being touched constantly. My brother was being poked with needles on his neck. I remember that. I was being undressed, being played with by my foster parents.

And you talk about, oh, I was in a good home, they said. I was never in a good home. With the trauma that I had to endure over those years, I never healed. As you can see right in front of you, I am still crying because I'm in pain. I didn't know how to be a mother, even 'til this – I'm only learning now how to be a mom because the help that I'm receiving from mental health.

I have good family support. I miss my mother. I look at her. I see her pain. I know what she went through. I remember the time my mother, she came and got us in Newfoundland, and I held her so tightly. And I told her: Mom, they hurt us, Mom. She said it's gonna be okay now, you're coming home.

And then the constant nightmares that I endured. Until this day I still have them. I can't be in around a lot of people to this day. I'm afraid of people.

I have severe anxiety. I take medication every day – every day – for the rest of my life, to control the emotions, the trauma. My

mother doesn't know about that. Taking pills for what? To block out – to block out the monsters that – what they did to me.

We were raped on a daily basis. I remember that. They never even took us to the hospital when we were bleeding. Same as my brother. And my brother – and I know my brother Kenny suffers his own addictions and his failures, because of the system didn't wanna listen to us. I remember a social worker coming to the house, and they said: Are you okay, Florence? And I said: No, they're hurting us. Oh, you'll be all right tomorrow.

Am I all right? Nine months I had to endure that. Like, there was times I remember, I looked out the window – I remembered looking out the window. It was a two-story building in the foster parents. I almost jumped out because I wanted to end my life.

At the age of four, thinking about suicide. Is that normal?

I knew this was gonna be an emotional journey for me, and I had some time to think about in the last couple months from the last time I spoke. And I kept saying you need to just be honest. So here I am. I'm talking. My mother probably never heard this story and I know it's gonna hurt her. I don't wanna hurt my mother. And I know what she did 'cause she was on her own path because of where she was going with the priest. I love my mother so much, I'd do – do anything for her. And I know she's an alcoholic but that's okay, Mom, right?

It's – you become confused after – when – as you get older. Where do you actually belong? Even 'til this day when I sit here, do I actually really belong here? Yes, I know I'm from this community. I'm proud of this community, because they're the kind of people when they – when you come together, you find healing somewhere. You find that you fit in somewhere. You know, there – there's people that I do reach out, that I trust. And that – I don't use that word very lightly, trust, because I didn't have it as a child.

I know it's hard for me to show love. It is hard for me to say I love you. And when – over the years I've learned, being a mom to my sons is when I learned to be a mom. I put my children personally, too, heartache 'cause I had – 'cause I had a mental breakdown. I wasn't mentally capable of caring for my children at the time so I put them into a system, until I got the proper help, for two years.

Then I come to realize what was happening with my children, with their father, who was fighting his own addiction with cocaine. So my reach – my mother was the one that called me – and I was living in Newfoundland, and I was working in Muskrat Falls at the time. She said you need to come home to your children. She said they're very skinny, they're being neglected, their father is drinking every day.

So what I did, I got on the plane. I left Muskrat Falls for many reasons, which my employer did understand. And my mother, I knew my mother, she is my guide regardless of – she drinks, yeah, but she – she loves her grandchildren, too, and I know she's trying to do the – what's in the best interest. So – so after I flew home, I went in. I didn't even care about what the social workers were gonna do to me or say to me because I was at the point where I wasn't afraid anymore.

So I went in, I contacted the social worker here. I said I don't care if I'm not allowed to take my children, I am going to take them anyway. Because it seems like you are failing my children. So if you want to arrest me, arrest me. If you wanna take my children, I'm not gonna go alone. So I did. I packed up one change of clothes belonging to my children, and I took them back in my care and they've been in my care ever since.

And I don't tell my children about what has happened in my past because they don't need to really know that. This is my journey, not theirs. How do I fix a system that has been broken? Unite the Innu people together, tell their story to the country. The government is failing the Innu. There is not

enough money you can put on the table to fix the hurts, the pains, the sufferings, the suicidal attempts, the suicides that are happening. The drugs that are in my community is astounding. It's crazy. We don't have a proper detox facility here, or a proper mental health to deal with – like, a – a proper psychologist in our community to handle post-traumatic stress like me.

I have to go to St. John's to see a psychologist, a proper one, that can – that had to diagnose me with PTSD. And I suffer from sever anxiety. And how I dealt with it over the last couple months since this Inquiry has happened, it was been an awakening. I opened up fears that I've – I knew I had to face, which was . . . I'm tired of crying. I am tired of running. I'm tired of being that four-year-old child that's sitting in front of you. And that's exactly how I'm feeling. I feel like a four-year-old child and I'm gonna be taken away any second, out that door. And you think that's not fear? I should not have to have that fear at the age of 46, but I do.

Do I feel sorry of telling the truth about my foster parents and what they did? I could care less what – how these people have lived because they were doing it to not only just me, but other Inuit children that were from Nain and they committed suicide. I am a survivor of their pains.

It's sad. These two young men could've been good men, good fathers, good hunters, good traditional people. But no, they're six feet under. It's me and my brother that are survived of the hands of these two monsters. We were just – we were just, like, sexual toys to them from morning 'til night. So you can imagine what it was like, how traumatize – okay, maybe today is gonna be a different day, maybe tomorrow's gonna be better. Maybe my mother's gonna come and get me soon.

I prayed every day, prayed for it to stop. It was like an eternity for me and it was traumatizing. I don't ever, ever wanna see a child in the system of what we're going through. God only knows what these children will bring back when they get a little older.

Do you honestly think the system is clean? Do you honestly think the system is okay where the children are to today? I don't think so. Because they're gonna be just like me, age 46, telling the same story in 20 years. And I can guarantee that. And it's the sad truth of how the system does not work for the Innu, for the Inuit, for any Labradorian for that matter.

Do I have the answers of how to change the system? No. Do I have the answers of how we can structure of helping our own people? Yes. 'Cause we do have the right mentality of how to help. We have certain people that know traditional healing. We have our Elders. There's not very many people left, but they're here. How do we teach our children that it's okay to tell the truth?

That's all I have to say, today. I'm – I'm exhausted mentally. I'm gonna be honest, like, it takes a huge toll on me of dealing with everything, and I know I have other commitments and I know my mother, she's gonna speak, and it's – it's gonna be hard for her but I'm here to support her, too. Because, you know, if it wasn't for her, I would not be here today.

Thank you.

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE:
Tshenashkumitin, Florence. Thank you so much for that.

As Commissioners, we're here to listen and not draw conclusions at this point. But I think it is still important for us as Commissioners to acknowledge what you are saying, and the strength it takes for each person to come up here and speak. You said that people are on a journey, and even though it may not feel like a healing journey at this stage, you are part of moving this community on a healing journey.

Your words and others like yours, your community members are shining a light into a dark room. When you speak, abusers are getting nervous. When you speak, so many

women and men who've experienced what you have experienced know that they're not alone. So you are doing what the Commissioners would like to do, and that is to encourage others to have your strength as well. And we're grateful for that.

So let's go ahead with Allister, and you mentioned that your mom is on the list; is that right, Paula?

CLERK: (Inaudible.)

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: Emma?

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: (Inaudible.)

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: Good. You want a break?

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: Yeah, five minutes (inaudible).

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: Ten minutes, please. The boss has told me.

Recess