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

English Transcript | Volume 19

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

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COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: [Audio recording loss due to technical issue.] And we have another person coming at 5 o’clock.

We’re very happy to receive Chelsea, and you’re here with support?

C. PENASHUE: Yeah, my sister.

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: Your sister.

And what’s her name?

C. PENASHUE: Tiffany.

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: Thank you.

Chelsea and Tiffany, well, thank you very much for being here. As you understand,

this is an Inquiry primarily looking at the impacts and the treatment of Innu, Innu families, and the outcomes, as well, when it comes to the child protection system.

But really, we would not limit a person coming in here about what they want to say. So you can tell us about your life; you can tell us about your experiences; you can even tell us your opinions about Innu life and Innu experiences.

So. please, feel free to go ahead and talk to us.

C. PENASHUE: Hi, good afternoon.

My name is Chelsea Penashue. I'm kind of nervous.

I remember when I was eight years old, when the CSSD came over. I was at my friend's house and there was two of them and one of them was a Innu worker, and they told me that I had to go and stay at the hotel for two days and I was gonna be sent out to – they didn't tell me where I was going. And I didn't even see my family.

I didn't even see my mom or my dad or my grandparents. I was really close with my grandparents growing up. My parents were alcoholic and so I was taken from CSSD when I was really young and my grandfather was – he was, like, always my person to go to when I was taken away. He would always take me in.

And then I started sniffing gas when I was eight years old, or seven. I was seven years old, sniffing gas when my parents were drinking. And because all of my sisters were sniffing gas, I wanted to be around them and be with them because I had no parents. But I had my grandparents, but I wanted my parents.

And I think it got to be, like, too much for my grandfather, where I would always run away and because at the house where they picked me up and they didn't even tell my grandparents that they were gonna send me to North Bay, Ontario. And I stayed at the Lab Inn for two nights and I remember it was in wintertime.

And someone from Sheshatshiu – she's not around anymore, but she passed away – she took me to North Bay and it took, like, the whole day for us to get there. And then when we got to North Bay, I remember the worker, like, picked us up at North Bay airport and we went to the foster home that I was gonna stay at and I was not in the town of North Bay, but it was in another small – really small town that I stayed. And it was, really, in the bush and it was right at the end of the road.

And I remember we were – we got in the house around 12 o'clock midnight and they told me – they showed me around the house and where I was gonna sleep and they were, like, my – I remember my foster parents were really excited to have me, but I was so scared. I didn't know where I was. I didn't even know them and the lady that brought me there, she was gonna leave me.

And I remember crying and crying, all night, and I asked her to stay and if I can go with her. And they let me sleep at the hotel with her. I didn't sleep at my foster parents that night. But the next day she had to bring me back and I never seen my parents or my grandparents for the next two years.

I remember feeling – I was wondering all the time, every time I would go to bed, if my parents knew where I was. I was really close with my grandfather growing up and – like, I just lost my grandfather about two years ago and that was really hard for me. And after, when I was at my foster home, I remember I was there for two years, I had to go to school. Like, when I went to school, I had to have a worker with me and she would always sit in the class with me.

I was Grade 6 and I went there, we were – I lived in a town called Corbeil, Ontario. And the worker just made me feel like I was, kind of like those exchange students. That's how I always felt with a worker coming to class with me. A lot of kids would always stare at me and ask me questions: Who is she and

why is she with you? And I didn't know what to say.

And then, I graduated from Grade 6 and then went to another junior high in Grades 7 and 8, and I always had a worker there, too, with me. Then I graduated Grade 8 and then I went to high school and I had a worker there with me all the time, too.

I was there for 5½ years. I think I was, like, eight or nine when they took me, because I remember it was winter and that summer I turned 10. I think it was after two years of being there, that's when I came home for a visit. My grandmother was still alive then and I remember –

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: I'm going to interrupt you for a second. I forgot about Anne. Now she's been trying to write all this down.

I'm very sorry, Anne.

INTERPRETER NUNA: That's okay.

[Sheshatshiu-aimun spoken.]

C. PENASHUE: And when I came back home for a visit, I was only here for three days, I think, or two days, and it just felt like I didn't belong here. And I remember my grandma, she didn't wanna let me go when it was time for me to go back. I remember she took me to the clinic over there and the worker over there, like, saying it was time to go. But my grandma locked the door on the worker and she was looking for help so she can keep me back here. And they – I don't remember if they helped her or not but I remember I had – I went back to North Bay and I stayed there for another two years, I think.

And I think it was in my third year that I was there that there was another girl from Sheshatshiu. She stayed with us. I was really happy to have someone from Sheshatshiu stay with me. But we had a lot of rules and, like, when we would eat at the dinner table, we weren't allowed to speak Innu. And I never spoke to her at dinner because it just felt so uncomfortable to speak English to her. So I would always wait after dinner to speak to her.

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: Thank you.

Go ahead, Anne.

INTERPRETER NUNA: [Sheshatshiu-aimun spoken.]

C. PENASHUE: And I remember a lot when I was in North Bay because everything just feels like it always happened yesterday. Today, I'm 31 and I'm still trying to work on that trauma that I was in. Like, when I was younger, I still have trouble letting go of what happened. And I always blamed my parents. I really hated my parents when I got back.

I remember when I was in North Bay, I would always cry myself to sleep, just wishing I had new parents that cared and that would always look for me or try and get me back home. But no one ever came.

And I had to grow up without my parents. Like, I knew they were alcoholics but I didn't understand it back then. Today I understand why they couldn't be parents and go – like, I've been going to treatment and today I'm in recovery. I just graduated from family treatment last week on Thursday and then – like, I struggled a lot with alcohol abuse and drug abuse. And I think it was back in 2012 before I first started my own recovery. I was – I went to Brentwood. I graduated there. I was there for 90 days.

When I had my daughter, she – I had my daughter when I was 19. And when I got back from North Bay, I think I was 15. I think I was 15 when I got back and actually stayed. That's when I started drinking really heavily. And then I got pregnant when I was 18, then I had my daughter turning 19 that summer, like, and then fall.

And I only had her for a couple months because I was already struggling with alcohol. And then I really wanted a drink and I couldn't find a babysitter so I called

the CSSD on myself just to take them – take my daughter.

And ever since then – like, my daughter, she's going to be 14 now in November and I do have – I'm not close with my daughter but I still see her around. But I remember when I was a kid and saying, if I was – if I ever became a mother, I would – I will never be like my mom. But I feel like I'm twice as bad as she was.

Like, I have four kids today and I understand it's the intergenerational trauma that I was in and it's just passed on to my kids. And sometimes I kind of wonder why – why me? Why did they have to take me?

I was – I would always cry myself to sleep. I just wanted my grandpa. That was it. I was really close with my grandpa and, today, I feel like I have no one. But I know, I do have my sister and my brother that are sober. But I just wanted my grandpa and my grandma.

And when I was in North Bay, my foster mom, she was in her garden and I used the phone behind her back and that's when I found out my grandma was sick, and then I just dropped the phone. And I hadn't seen my grandma, I think, for two years. And it was two days before Christmas that she passed away, and I only got to see her for two days.

And I forget – like, sometimes, I forget what she looks like and what she sounds like. They were always there for me when my parents weren't. And I remember when I walked into the hospital, my grandma was already very sick – she had TB; she died of TB – and she cried when she saw me. She was really happy. But I only got to see her for two days out of the four or three years when I was in there, North Bay. I lost all that time with my grandma.

And I had – like, I struggle a lot to this day with drugs and alcohol. But I'm trying to be the best mom that I can to my son. I have a son. His name is Nolan. He's two, and out of all my four kids, he's the only one that's in my care. He was born at 23 weeks. He was one pound and 11 ounces. Today he's two. He – I felt like all my other three kids, I didn't really wanna be a parent. I wasn't ready. I didn't know how to be a parent, because I felt like no one had taught me or no one was – and it was really hard for me. Like, I always think of my grandma. If she was still around, she would've been there and helped me through and helped me with my kids and teaching me how to be a mom.

And I feel like it's been really hard since I lost my grandfather.

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: I'm going to stop you once again.

INTERPRETER NUNA: Mm-hmm. [Sheshatshiu-aimun spoken.]

C. PENASHUE: I remember when I was still in North Bay. I think it was my first or second year, 'cause our – there was a kind of, like, basement – not basement, first and second floor in my foster house and my room was upstairs.

They would have an alarm on the door. Every time I would get up in the middle of the night to go use the washroom and the alarm would always go off. And I just felt so – I felt like something I did was wrong. Like, how I lived. And they always – every time I would get up in the middle of the night like, when the alarm would go off, they would always come up and wait for me to go back into my room. And they would always keep, like, a daily log of my day.

And it's just, today, I always feel like – I always wonder, what if I never left Sheshatshiu when I was young? Like, what would have happened? I always have what-if's. And if I never came back, if I would have stayed – I had to choice to stay in North Bay like, finish my high school. But I chose to come back home.

Because I felt like I was just – and it was really hard for me when I came back. Like, to actually come back and live here because I was just so used to living in North Bay. Where – when I first came back and all the kids that I used to hang around with would treat me different. And they would

always say: You're trying to act white and dress white. Because I had nice clothes and I would talk to them English, I guess. (Inaudible) because I didn't really know how to speak English when I first came back.

And when I went back to North Bay, going – like, I only had two visits from here and then I had to go back to North Bay. And it felt like I didn't belong in North Bay because I felt like, you know, I was just an exchange student where people would always ask me where I was from and what I – how big – how come I had a worker and – like, had these – all kinds of questions about me.

And then coming here, it was just like – I felt like I didn't belong anywhere. And to this day, I still try to figure out who I am. Like, I have a hard time and I'm – like, a lot of people like – when I went to Charles J. – when I just graduated from there, they do smudging and like, kind of cultural: like sewing and all that. I had no interest because I was never really taught that growing up and I felt like I kind of lost my culture when I was in North Bay because I didn't really do any of that kind of stuff. But they would always take us to Friendship Centre and all, but it was just really weird because there was different Natives.

One of my sons, he's been in care since he's been born. His – he's 12, I think, now. When I had my son, I was by myself at the hospital; no one was there when I gave birth. I understand why they took him, because I was drinking when I had him and doing drugs – I understand why. And before, I didn't really understand why. But now, I do understand why they took him. Like, for his safety and all.

And the way they took him is – I was at the hospital by myself. My parents were already left and I thought I was gonna take him home because they never told me the CSSD was coming to get him. And I went out for a smoke and I came back and the nurse told me that there's people here to see you. And when I got into the room – and the nurse was feeding my son, and she's like: They're in the other room. You can go on and go see them. That's when I knew they were gonna take my son 'cause they had papers in – ready.

And there was another Innu worker there. She told me: They're gonna take him but – and then, like, I just didn't even listen to them. Then I went back out of that room; I was gonna go get my son, but he was already gone.

I would've been okay with them taking him if it was me, like, handing them over to – myself, I understand why they had to take him. But for them to take him like that? I was by myself. I had no one.

They left his little sweater and his pacifier and the car seat there. And I remember, like, I'm waiting for my parents to come pick me up and that's when it happened. I felt like that's when I kind of closed up again. My heart was just – I was so numb. I remember crying all the way from Goose Bay to Sheshatshiu, and then I would just – went straight into the room. And then I was laying down on the bed.

I know my parents don't know how to be parents because I was still drinking and using with them and I was crying like, laying out on the bed and my dad handed me drugs. Because I know today he doesn't know how to be a parent, that was his way of showing.

Today, I understand my parents were sick and alcoholic and they had abuse, too, growing up. I really hated my parents growing up. I always wanted a new set of parents; like, better ones that are sober and clean. But since I've been in recovery, I forgave them. I understand why they couldn't be parents back then. I forgave my mom. I told my mom: I forgive you for not being there and not being able to be a mom. Today I love my mom so much. I call her every day.

I seen a lot growing up. But sometimes – always – today, I'm not mad anymore, but it still kind of hurts. And I'm – I've been so broken and lost and I didn't know who I was, and for me today, I still don't know who I am and what's my purpose. And today, I

understand my purpose is to be a mom. But a couple of years ago, I was really into drinking, but within the last couple of years – and like, I was doing really hard drugs.

And the last year, I was doing drugs almost every day after I had my son, because he had complications after his birth. And it's been – it was really hard because it was just my son and my partner and I always – and we – like, he stayed in the NICU for five months after he was born and I didn't know, like, I was gonna – because of when he was still in my belly, I was gonna give him up for an adoption. Because I didn't believe in myself, that I could be a mom. I didn't know – I was thinking, how am I gonna raise him? I had nothing and I felt like I was a nobody.

But today, I love my son so much and I feel like he is my reason. He's my everything. The things that I do and getting help and getting clean today, it's all for him. And I spend – I know it's not gonna be easy but I'm willing to do the work that I have to for my son, to be a mom. I feel like the CSSD, what they put me through when I was – since I've been – when I was taken away that young.

At first, for all the things that I've been through in my life and the things that I've seen and witnessing everything, I had to grow up really young. And it was just – really hurt. I was really hurt and I just wanted to numb all that pain and I didn't wanna think about it. I know why today I drink and why I use drugs.

Like today, I'm almost two months clean and I feel really happy, and I'm not mad at them anymore. Today I'm trying to work with them, like getting visits with my son. I have no resentments towards them anymore. I understand why CSSD has to be there sometimes. Like, I know it's for the safety of the kids but I feel like sometimes they go way overboard of what they do.

And, for me, if I didn't know where one of my kids was, at eight years old, I would always try to fight for them and try to get help, and I felt like no one cared and no one ever came for me. And I had like – I just felt like I was a nobody when I was in North Bay. Like, I was just here, I had – I felt so empty inside.

And today I feel for the – all my trauma and the alcohol abuse and the drug abuse that I had going on with my life and with all my kids, I'm still working on it and I know it's gonna take probably a really, really long time for me to heal from all the trauma that I've been through.

And I will forgive the CSSD what they done, but I will never forget the pain that I have. They took all my teenage years from me. Like, all that time, I could've spent time with my grandparents. And I couldn't – the time that I – the years that were taken from me, I could've spent that time with my grandmother before she passed away.

Today, I always still wonder if she ever fought for me. I know she did but I just wanna hear it from her. And I swore, I really miss my grandma so much. I feel like I just have this big hole in me that were – I have a hard time filling that hole, that's just wanting my grandparents and, like, I had to fill that hole with drugs and alcohol and the things that I did growing up. I will – I never want to see my children go through what I went through and to have the hurt that I have – like, I still have. I never want my other kids to have that.

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: I'm gonna ask Anne (inaudible).

INTERPRETER NUNA: [Sheshatshiu-aimun spoken.]

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: I'm sorry to interrupt you.

It's 4 o'clock, and we're coming back here at 5. Louise has just asked me to invite you, if you want to, with a counsellor, to go out to the tent. But we will take a break. We have one person coming in at 5. If you want to continue, you may come back in the – this evening or Paula, at the red table over there, can help you find a new date.

If you want to say a few more words, please go ahead right now. But this would be a good time for us to have a break.

C. PENASHUE: Yeah.

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: You're okay with that?

C. PENASHUE: I just – yeah, I'm okay.

I think I'm kind of finished and I just wanna thank everybody for listening.

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: We thank you.

We thank you for your strength and your bravery and congratulate you for what you've accomplished.

Nastash?

COMMISSIONER QUPEE: Tshenashkumitin, Chelsea.

[Sheshatshiu-aimun spoken.]

Tshenashkumitin.

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: Mike, please.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: I also wanna say thank you for being here today. You've been through a lot in your many young years – 31 years. And what I hear from you as you're at this stage in your life, there's a lot of resilience in you and a lot of strength. And I think that's – you know, continue with the – what you've been saying, it's looking at the path forward. You've certainly gained some insights in some of the issues that you've had to deal with.

So, all the best to you.

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