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

English Transcript | Volume 23

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

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COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: [Inquiry in progress at start of recording] to you, Michel, for wishing to speak. We welcome you.

I think you have heard other people come to the Commission and tell us about their experiences, their lives, their opinions. We ask you, whatever you wish to say, we're happy to hear it.

M. PASTITSHI: [Sheshatshiu-aimun spoken.]

INTERPRETER NUNA (providing English translation): While I am sitting here, I'm looking at the microphone that's in front of me, and to me, I sound like my late dad. He was featured on the documentary done by *Land and Sea* regarding the low-level flying. And my dad was speaking there and I

picture him and I sound like him, as I sit here.

And, he said: My grandkids were apprehended while they were in our care, with me and my late wife. When they were apprehended, it hurt. It hurt when they – whenever we visited them. They cried. They fought so hard to go with us whenever we left. And my late wife used to say – used to tell me that she would commit suicide if we didn't get our grandchildren back.

And I did the same thing. I told the same thing to my foster daughter and my other daughter. I told them the same thing that I will commit suicide if they are not in our care.

There's a story that I heard regarding CSSD apprehending one of the kids in the community. He was two years old when he was apprehended, and when he grew to be a young man, he went into drinking. And when I heard that he had passed away – I heard he had ulcers, at that age – young – questioned myself, how could he have ulcers? He was too young to have ulcers.

I guess CSSD thinks of us as bad parents. And is that why they took that kid from the family?

I am emotional when I talk about my grandkids that were apprehended, and also losing my wife. When we were young, when I was still with – living with my family, my mom and dad, we were, too, apprehended because of my parents' drinking.

When CSSD took my grandkids, one time my late wife went to visit. She told me they put our grandson in a basement room. But in that basement, there was no door, and she said: What if there was fire? What would have happened?

I think every grandparent, even if they're Innu, Inuit, non-Innu, want to help their grandkids. And I still do this today until my last breath, helping my grandkids.

I also think that we all want to make this work for the best interest of the child – Innu child. Then, we should work together, because I do not want to see any child lose their culture, nor their language. They do this. They lose it when they are in non-Innu care.

I really miss that, regarding their culture, the teachings of the hunting, the trapping, and whatnot, being Innu. And those are the things that we have – Innu value that I miss, that I think of when the kids are taken away from Sheshatshiu and other Innu community in Natuashish.

Yes, I get emotional because it still hurts whenever I think about what my late wife had said about suicide. And it still hurts that my – what happened to my grandchildren when they were apprehended. Today, that's still very emotional for me as I sit here, and I don't understand why this is happening to me.

I come here and tell you my story. I decided to come and talk because a worker from the Inquiry approached me, but I knew I would get emotional.

When we were apprehended, we were placed in a dormitory. And my – I remember, I think I was 10 years old when my father visited us. And when he left, I cried and felt lonely when he was gone. And I bet that the same thing happened to my grandkids after we had visited them. I bet they had the same feeling as I did when I was younger.

I have never spoke in public before, but I did speak when my wife was laid to rest, in eulogy. And I did not cry; I was not emotional. But here, today, it is very emotional for me because I think about my grandchildren.

I'm glad I came here to tell my own story. I'm glad that my grandchildren are back to their mother. But I still support them. I support them with their basic needs, nurturing and loving, even though my wife is no longer here with us. I feel it is my job to do that and I'm glad I am doing it for them until, like I said, to my last breath.

I always was afraid of Igloliorte when he was a judge back then, and I told him today that: I like what you are doing here today at the Inquiry.

Thank you for listening to my story, and I thank all the people that are in here today and to the Commissioners, but I am sorry that I got emotional, and thank you.

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: Thank you, Sir.

I'll ask the Commissioners to respond to your statement, starting with Mike.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Well, first of all, thank you for coming here today. Indeed, it takes great strength to do that and come to speak like this.

I am so very sorry, though, what you've had to go through with regard to your grandkids and certainly in your own life, also, as a young person.

With regard to being emotional today, I think that's fine. I think all of us are fine here with it. And the fact that you had that, to tell such a personal story but still came here, because I think that you believe this can make some difference, because I certainly do, and thank you for sharing that today. It certainly will help us in the work that we're doing. And we're also hopeful that this will make a difference for the child welfare system and for all of the children in the communities.

Thank you.

M. PASTITSHI: [Sheshatshiu-aimun spoken.]

INTERPRETER NUNA: Thank you.

COMMISSIONER QUPEE: [Sheshatshiu-aimun spoken.]

I thank Michel for coming forward to speak, and to never apologize because that's his story. It's his own experience and we can feel that love for his grandchildren, and I thank him for that.

M. PASTITSHI: [Sheshatshiu-aimun spoken.]

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: Thank you, Michel. Tshenashkumitin for your words and thank you very much for thinking about your grandchildren, your family and your wife, and letting us know that Innu are good parents, they're good grandparents.

And what has been happening over many years has made people look at this community and other Indigenous communities, Inuit communities, and say: What is wrong? If there are so many children in care, what is the matter with the parents?

But when you speak to us, and when many, many others – dozens of people have spoken to us – we understand what the underlying problem is. The underlying problem is that Innu people have not been given a proper chance to demonstrate, as you have shown to us, that you are caring, loving parents and caring and loving grandparents.

So what we are learning is that there is much prejudice out there against Innu – Indigenous people. There is much ignorance about Innu culture. But every person who speaks, teaches us a little more about how we're going to let governments know that what we are doing will eventually be in the best interests of children, and what is happening and has happened in the past, as you explained, has not been in the best interest of the children.

So thank you for putting aside your fear of speaking in public, speaking to a scary, old man like me and telling the truth. We appreciate it.

M. PASTITSHI: [Sheshatshiu-aimun spoken.]

INTERPRETER NUNA: And I thank the Commissioners for listening to me and I know others will come forward. And I do hope others will come forward, all the – and others will come in having private sessions with the Commissioners.

Thank you.

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: Thank you very much.

ELDER PENASHUE: [Sheshatshiu-aimun spoken.]