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

Transcript | Interview | Private Session 2

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

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UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: Do you have water or tea or –

J. N.: Yeah, I'll have water.

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: Okay.

Make yourself comfortable there, J. N.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Wherever's most comfortable for you.

I should introduce myself. Your name is?

J. N.: J. N.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: J, pleased to meet you, I'm Mike Devine.

J. N.: Mike, okay.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: I'm one of the Commissioners. I'll just tell you a little bit about me, because I'm a complete stranger to you, I know.

J. N.: Yeah.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: So where I come from, I grew up on the Island.

J. N.: Newfoundland.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Newfoundland, and I grew up about an hour and a half from St. John's –

J. N.: Yeah.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: – up in kind of an Irish part of the Island.

J. N.: Oh, okay.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: So if you hear this way that I talk, apparently, I still have some of that.

J. N.: Oh.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Apparently, I do speak quickly sometimes. So if I ask you a question or say anything you don't understand, you let me know, okay?
so
J. N.: I'm worried about if my story is relevant. I mean, I hear a lot of the –

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Well, we've been very open about: You tell your story. Don't feel like you can't say anything or can't tell anything. So whatever you want to say, we've said that to everybody who has come to speak. So I think that – you know.

J. N.: Yeah.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Don't worry about that part, you tell your story and –

J. N.: I worry about it.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Don't worry.

J. N.: No matter how many times you say: Don't worry. I still worry.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Okay I'll say: Try not to worry. How's that?

J. N.: Okay.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: I'm involved 'cause in my work, I worked with child welfare and child protection.

J. N.: Okay. That's what I want to speak about, child welfare.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Yeah, I did front-line work and then I was manager for a lot of time, then I went to the university to teach social work. So I taught different courses but mostly in kind of the management side of it and child welfare side of it.

J. N.: Okay.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: I retired in 2018, then I came back out of retirement to do this, when I was asked.

J. N.: Okay.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: So I was very interested in if I can do something to help the Innu, then I was very interested in doing it.

J. N.: Okay.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: So that's a little briefing.

I'm a grandfather, by the way.

J. N.: Oh, I'm not a grandmother.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Of six.

J. N.: My children are all grown.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Yeah.

So, yeah, okay.

J. N.: Okay.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: So now, are you fine for me to sit here or would you rather me sit here? Is this okay?

J. N.: It don't matter. Yeah, that's okay.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Okay.

I may take some notes but I'm gonna try not to take too many because I really want to make sure that I hear what you're saying – be a good listening.

So J what's your last name, please?

J. N.: Nuna, N-U-N-A.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: N., yeah.

C. URQUHART: And J is Ruby's sister.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Oh, okay.

C. URQUHART: Ruby is the Inquiry co-ordinator, so we've spent a whole few days doing training with her last year.

J. N.: Okay.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Oh, okay.

J. N.: Yeah, okay.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Very good.

J. N.: Will I start?

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: I think we're ready to go. I'm just going to let you speak – there's – I was in here this morning, too, and there was a fly.

C. URQUHART: Oh yeah, there was some –

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: The small ones.

C. URQUHART: Yeah, the fruit flies.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Yeah.

But, yeah, so I'm just going to let you speak and I'm going to try not to ask any questions until the end, or I'll just make a few comments at the end.

J. N.: Okay.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: It's not like an interview. You're just telling your story here today, okay?

J. N.: Yeah.

I feel like my story is not important enough. Like, I hear other speakers being –

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Yes, but everybody's story is important.

J. N.: Okay.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Okay.

J. N.: Okay.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: All right.

J. N.: I'm just gonna read off my notes.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Whenever you're ready, and if you need to take a pause or, you know, stop for a little while, that's fine. If you need a break, just let us know. So this is your time.

J. N.: Okay.

This is hard. My story is very hard. Well, to me.

My name is J. N., I live in Sheshatshiu. I want to type out the CSSD in Sheshatshiu. I have two foster children, [redacted] I want to talk about the foster parent point of view. I'm a foster parent.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: That's good. Thank you.

J. N.: Back in 2017 one of my foster sons went back to his mother. He was four years old, and he went for a short time, like, visitations with his mother. But he thought those visits were, like, a treat. They put him in a room, a small room in Social Services office, to interact with his mother. But there were toys there, and he was, like, playing. He thought it was a treat, to go play with the toys there.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Mm-hmm. Yes.

J. N.: So every time he went there, I think he thought it was a treat to go there, but he didn't really interact with his mother. He just played with the toys that were there. Anyway, after a few visits like that, the CSSD told me he's going to his mother's house for a visitation, to visit her.

Little did we know that was the last we would see him. Hours went by, we called to see what time are we expecting him to be home. They told us that the mother has custody of him now. They didn't call to tell us about it, nor did they – didn't ask us for his toys or his clothes. They just – they yanked him out of our arms. That's what I feel.

We were devastated. I mean, they never told us he was gonna go that day –

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Yeah, yeah. (Inaudible.)

J. N.: – and for the eight months I have cried over him. My other son, foster son, was clinging to me but – I guess that's what he's – I don't know what you call it. Anyway, I have cried maybe three times a day. I couldn't eat or sleep well. My marriage was suffering. I couldn't function. Numerous times I would run to my mom, told her I can't handle this.

She would say: Utausassimu – that means my child – let's pray. Because my mother was very religious; we prayed to give me strength, and then I went home after.

This happened a few times; I would go to my mom. But my mom died in 2019. After I would receive messages or people would tell me – I called my foster son [redacted] That's when I went home. They would tell me he was crying, wanting to go home, and his mom would yell at him: I'm your mom. That hurt me a lot. Me and my foster son, [redacted] I think we were both traumatized by that. He would constantly cry – cry for me. That's what the people said that had visited his mother. It broke me.

So like I said, after eight months, my husband told me, with my other foster son beside me, [redacted] he said I can't no longer be strong for you. I didn't realize that he was

also suffering, struggling, too. He became depressed. He went to the doctor and they gave him pills for his depression. It affected us so much (inaudible).

But by and by, day by day, we learned to breath again, to continue with our lives. We had [redacted] In the years he had been with his mother – this is [redacted] That's his – I gave him a nickname, [redacted] would come by to our house just for a short visit. After school, he would run to my house and he would just open the pantry and just take whatever he needed and go on, all the snacks. Sometimes he would stay and play with [redacted] Then his mother would come and just drag him away crying, screaming. He didn't want to go back to his mother. I could not do anything. It broke my heart.

Then one day in November – two years after – he came. He was six years old. He came to my house. When – the usual, he would go to my pantry and just look for stuff, and he stayed. November went and then December went, and January, he stayed. His mother never called to say: Is my son there? She never called. Then February came and the Social Services came and said: He's under their care now, it's kinship – kinship agreement between his mother and Social Services.

So we were happy that they told us that he can stay, I don't know, maybe six months? Those months, probably in January, he asked me, he said: Why was I taken? He didn't understand, he was only six years old then. He said: Why was I taken? Was I drinking a lot? He asked me. I said: No. I couldn't explain to him, like he's just a baby, six years old. Why was he gone back to his mother. He looked at me as I'm the mother. He didn't look at his real mother as mom.

I didn't know how to explain to him, so I just hugged him, and our life went back to normal. So he was taken at four, came back two years later, just on his own, came back to my house.

Then around that time, he was probably in Grade 2, I said: Your mom went to treatment, he's probably gonna finish soon and that means you're gonna go home. I don't want you to go home, but it's not up to me. Then things happened in school, he started being bad in school. He was a bully to his classmates. He would rip up pages from textbooks. He would grab worksheets from them and tore them apart.

He was sent to the principal's office every day. That was when he was seven. He was acting out because he didn't wanna go back to his mother. So I had to step in, went to his teachers, principal, and then IRT and asked them, like, what can I do to this boy? He doesn't want to go home and I don't want him going home. So they suggested he's gonna be in counselling. I mean, seven years old, a boy going to counselling. That's unheard of for me.

He was a sad boy. I had to reassure him that I was not gonna give up or let him go. So we had to reassure to do for him to stop being a bully.

It took a long time for us to not feel afraid that he might go back home again. Foster parenting is hard. We love our foster children as our own.

Today, my son, [redacted] – that's his nickname – is happy, thriving, a very well-adjusted boy. He has stability. He has a very strong support system through my home, my friends and my extended family, and most of all, our church. We have come a long way. Dealing with Social Services has been like hell. They would lie to us to our faces and sometimes we felt like we was threatened, that they take away our boys.

My husband and I are not manipulating the boys in any way. We love them, we care about them, about their well-being. We tell them constantly that we love them. They are happy boys. We are not a perfect family. We have our ups and downs, just like any family. This is our story. It's very short.

Dealing with Social Services from my point of view, foster parenting, it's hard.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Mm-hmm.

So the two children are still with you?

J. N.: Yeah, they're almost 10.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: So right now, do you know if they will stay with you?

J. N.: One of them, [redacted] they had a permanent –

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Wardship.

J. N.: – custody.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Yeah.

J. N.: So he's ours. But the other one, [redacted] he's still in kinship.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Okay.

J. N.: So I don't know. Maybe he will go home or his mother will be in agreement for him to stay longer?

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Mm-hmm.

J. N.: Well, that's my story.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Okay.

J. N.: I don't know –

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Well, first of all –

J. N.: – if this is –

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: – let me say first and foremost that your story is quite relevant –

J. N.: Yeah.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: – it's the kind we want to hear, so you can put that aside, and know that the foster care system is a very important part of the child protection –

J. N.: Yeah.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: – system. Right? So you know, there has to be that sort of, connection, between CSSD and the foster parents, and it sounds like you had some pretty big challenges –

J. N.: Yeah.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: – with that. So that's what I heard from what you had to say.

J. N.: Today, I don't like dealing with Social Services. I send my husband there. I don't wanna talk to them. They outright lied to me one time.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Mm-hmm.

J. N.: So now I don't like dealing with them.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Yeah. That's hard, because as being a foster parent, you have to deal with them, so, yeah.

J. N.: Yeah. My husband deals with them.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: It's not easy for you guys (inaudible).

J. N.: Yeah.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: There's nothing else I have to ask. Is there anything, Caitlin, that you …?

C. URQUHART: No, I guess just, to absolutely echo what Mike was saying, it's a really relevant story, and your experience is really helpful to shed light. Because we haven't heard from a lot of people in that situation, so it's really –

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Mm-hmm.

C. URQUHART: – you know, I think hearing the challenges that you've had –

J. N.: Sort of my foster parent point of view.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Right, exactly.

J. N.: I don't want my children taken away, you know.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Mm-hmm.

C. URQUHART: Mm-hmm.

J. N.: They've been with me since they were two months old.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Yeah.

And when kids go into foster care, the ideal plan is for that to be temporary, and then go back with the parents –

J. N.: Yeah.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: – when they can.

J. N.: But I do love them.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: When they can. So it's very difficult on foster parents at times, you know when the parents are in a position where they are able to care for their children. But I can certainly appreciate –

J. N.: That's why I tell –

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: – that it's very difficult as a foster parent –

J. N.: – I tell people –

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: – to become so attached.

J. N.: – don't go into foster parent because it's hard.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Mm-hmm.

C. URQUHART: Yeah.

J. N.: When you love them, they get taken away.

C. URQUHART: Well and I think too, it sounds to me like the part about not being told, the communication, and what's gonna happen –

J. N.: Yeah, but just the took –

C. URQUHART: – the plan, to take him and not have a –

J. N.: – yeah, they didn't ask for his toys, his favourite toys –

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: You should know the plan. You should know the plan from the beginning.

C. URQUHART: Yeah.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: From first contact and updates on what's happening.

C. URQUHART: It's very hard.

J. N.: It is.

C. URQUHART: Yeah.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: J. N. thank you again, it's very nice to meet you –

J. N.: You too.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: – and I'm really happy that you came in to tell your story.

J. N.: Okay.

C. URQUHART: Thank you for your patience. I'm so sorry. We had a bit of a miscommunication. I thought – because I saw Anne going out. I said: Okay, so we're just gonna have a little break. J. N.'s gonna say something and I said: Sure, Mike, why don't you go take a seat for a minute and we'll – and then we got right into the next

speaker. So it was not intended, and I don't know if you heard what he was saying but certainly there was a lot of emotion in the room and it didn't feel right to try and pull Mike away.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: That's right, yeah.

J. N.: That's why I thought my story, it's not relevant.

C. URQUHART: No, it is. It is relevant.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Oh yeah, no, no.

J. N.: Okay.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Okay, thank you. It was very nice to meet you, J. N.

J. N.: You too.

C. URQUHART: Yes, and I hope you're able to catch up with your sister and get some good hugs from your sister as well. I'm sorry that she had to leave.

J. N.: Yeah.