

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

English Transcript | Volume 25

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

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Recess

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: [Inquiry in process at start of recording] – told she's doing her own translation and healing services. Anything else you do?

P. RALPH: Her own technical council, I believe.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Knitting or anything like that?

Okay, Mary Jane, when you're ready.

Thank you.

M. J. EDMONDS: [Mushuau-aimun spoken.]

My name is Mary Jane Edmonds (inaudible). I'm from Natuashish. I was born in Davis Inlet – old Davis Inlet.

[Mushuau-aimun spoken.]

Yeah, I'm gonna tell you a story about my own experiences with the CSSD back then, and what I observe and experience today in my position as a prevention worker.

When I was 16 or 17 years old, I applied for a job at the Social Services in Davis Inlet. [Mushuau-aimun spoken.]

When I was 16 or 17, I applied for a job with the Social Services in Davis Inlet. I was really young and I went in for interview. I didn't get hired and I found out later, another woman who was going to – who was also in interview, she didn't get hired either. They said, I was too young and too inexperienced and too clean, they said.

And this other older woman, she said, she was experienced but she wasn't clean; she was too dirty. So, we didn't get hired and that was my first experience of the system, you know, posing a judgment on Innu from who they are and what they're like – what they look like. On physical appearance, they judged us right away. And that wasn't a good experience and, from that moment on, I didn't like them. I didn't like Social Services, the way they treated the Innu, based on their physical experience – physical appearance.

When I was growing up, my parents – my mom never drink; my dad drank, but I had the one parent that didn't drink. And we were – there was seven of us – seven – nine of us, and we experience alcohol abuse. We experience domestic violence. We experienced Dad hitting Mom. We saw it and I never understood it until I was older that Dad had to survive when he was – when his dad passed away when he was, like, five or six years old.

So when I – when we saw – observed the violence in our family growing up when you are kids, it wasn't until I was older that, you know, I tried to imagine my dad. My dad was alone at six years old; his father just passed away. His mom has other kids, there were older sister and older brother, and he was a middle child. The older brother looked after the youngest child and my dad was just left, you know, to move back and forth with aunties and uncles and Dad had to work for his food. They wouldn't feed my dad until he did his chores, so he had to really work for his food and work for his place to sleep and a place to stay.

And the aunties and the uncles weren't always welcoming to him because he was extra mouth to feed. And Dad used to say, this woman here, he used to pinch me when he was helping me get dressed. She used to make me cry; that's auntie – his auntie.

And he remembered all those things as a child when he was drunk. When he was under the influence, he – all those negative things as a child came back to him. That's when he lashed out at my mom and aunties and uncles, you know, got it too from him because the way they treated him when he was just a little boy.

But that wasn't just a bad thing. Because of the chores he did as a young boy and the hunting and the work he had to do, he grew up to be a good hunter and a good worker. But I always remember him so angry at my uncle – at his uncle and his aunties. He said: You threw rocks at my mom when we were in canoe. You throw rocks at us, to the uncle. He said: Do it again, you know, do that to me again and see how you'll feel. I'm adult now; you can't do those things anymore.

So, his childhood trauma really affected him when he was adult and that's why he was drinking and assaulting my mom and we grew up seeing that until we got older.

His childhood trauma, you know, really get to me sometimes because he was just a baby and he was not wanted because he had no dad. Growing up, my – growing up, child welfare was never involved in our family because of my mom.

So, every time there was a – there was an issue with my parents, the Social Services – my mom always send them away, the social workers. She said: Go away, go away; we don't need you here. I'm looking after my kids. You don't give us child welfare allowance. We don't need you. Go away. And they stayed away because he sent them away.

And, recently, you know, in my work, there was social workers going to this place here in Natuashish – going to someone's home. And there was a referral and these parents, they're very adamant to a social worker: You're not coming in my house. You're not welcome in my house. You go away, you go away; I can look after my kids. And the social worker stayed away and the family are okay because the family stood up against the social worker and said: Go away because we know who you are. We know what you stand for.

The social workers sometimes barging into people's homes, but it is the parents that need to stand up and tell them: Back off, go away. We don't need you. But they played the system, the social workers. They played a system because they're back to back with the RCMP and they're both federal province servants – public servants, and they are the law. They are the law and they'll use the law, you know, to support each other.

And I work as a Innu – with the Innu Round Table for six, seven years now and in this line of work, I seen what the people are experiencing. Why they're so frustrated, so angry, and always in tears.

Since I've worked with IRT for last seven years, I notice and observe how unfair they treat the Innu parents, the Innu people, the Innu children. And I understand what the parents are feeling and there's so many times there's – I can't do much or more to help them. I feel defeated also, as a worker. I feel defeated because sometimes my English is not good and I can't speak calmly when I'm – in English when I'm angry. I start saying stuff.

And I know how the Innu parents are feeling and I cry with them; I cry all the time. When a child is crying, wanting to come home, I cry with the parents and I cry with the grandparents, because it seems like even after seven years now, the system is still doing the same thing to the Innu families. They're not doing it behind closed doors so much, but they're still doing it and it's still destroying the families; it's still destroying the community; and they're still doing it.

And they will keep still doing it and doing it over and over until the Innu take control of this service, because this is a white system. We're not white; we're Innu. And this system has failed the Innu families, the Innu children, for generations.

The system – the CSSD system has succeeded in stripping the Innu children of their identity, their language, their grandparents, their parents, their siblings, their families. They're succeeded in breaking a family apart, and their culture. They say that they keep the children safe, but they destroy the children, and they're still doing it today.

The seven years we've been there, my staff and I could go on and on and on. There's two IRT social workers and there's three Innu reps – Innu representatives, and two prevention workers. So, there's seven of us there. We could – you could hear stories on how it's failing the children, how it's not bringing the children home. And they still treat us: We don't trust you because you Innu. We don't take your word for it because you Innu. We'll take his word because he's not Innu, he's not – he's white men, he'll take his word, but not you because you Innu.

And, to me, that's a racism because we're Innu and we're not trustworthy. There's a zone manager who has office in St. John's and he's making decisions for our children. He's only visited Natuashish once. So, this white woman in St. John's in a really nice office space, sitting there, never been to Natuashish, except once, making decisions for our children, our Innu children. She doesn't know anything. She's garbage. But the system put her there to make those decisions.

And that's what we deal with every day in our workplace working with the prevention. The prevention is – our services, the prevention services, we try to prevent kids from being removed from their families, from the community. That's what we do. And we bring children – we work to bring children home to – back to their families. That's what the IRT prevention services does.

And we do healthy, cultural things in there for families and women. I start with doing prevention.

I think that's it for today.

Thank you.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Now, you go.

COMMISSIONER QUPEE: [Sheshatshiu-aimun spoken.]

I just thank Mary Jane for speaking and speaking about her experience and also about the work that she does. It's important to hear more about that and I hope that in the next round that she'll come forward again and speak more about that.

Thank you.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Thank you also, Mary Jane, for your thoughts and reflections.

Certainly, what I'm hearing is that, you know, the intention of the Innu to take over child protection is one that's high on, I'm sure, your minds many days of the week and this is something that as an Inquiry – Commission of Inquiry – that we believe also we want to support that. And so, hopefully, that that will happen in not the too-distant future, because every day makes a difference for any and every child that's affected by that system.

So, thank you very much.

P. RALPH: So, I don't think we have anyone else lined up for today.

COMMISSIONER QUPEE: Mm-hmm.

P. RALPH: Unless there is anyone here that would like to speak, I guess, we'll call it a day.

COMMISSIONER QUPEE: The closing prayer.

P. RALPH: The prayer, yes.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: So, I think we'll have somebody shortly here.

COMMISSIONER QUPEE: Emma. Emma's doing the closing prayer.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Okay, someone to do the closing prayer.

Thank you.

M. J. EDMONDS: We're doing the closing prayer?

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Yes.

M. J. EDMONDS: Everybody get up.

E. ASHINI: [Mushuau-aimun spoken.]

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: Thank you.