

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

English Transcript | Volume 26

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

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COMMISSIONER QUPEE: [Sheshatshiu-aimun spoken.]

Recess

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Okay, good afternoon, everybody.

So, before we start with our first speaker, I just want to go through a few things. And the first thing is to just remind people from this morning we still have healing support services here. So if anybody feels need to have that service, you can just contact Louise here and she can guide you to somebody.

INTERPRETER BYRNE: [Mushuau-aimun spoken.]

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Also, the tent is outside. So, I think that's fully functional now, Peter, is it?

P. RALPH: I think so, yeah.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Okay, so the tent is there.

There's also some food in the kitchen there. And I want to add that we have a special on this afternoon, compliments of the camp – and Cordell is there in the back – of some soup.

Okay, so we're ready to start now. So, Jo, if you can –

J. SELMA: (Inaudible.)

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Oh, I'll explain to Anastasia.

J. SELMA: (Inaudible.)

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Yes.

We – as we mentioned, I think, before, we have public and private sessions. So Anastasia is currently doing a private session. So it'll just be myself here at the table for this time.

Okay, so –

P. RALPH: And it's gonna be Jim – maybe perhaps explain as well (inaudible).

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Oh, I should also add, Jim had mentioned it yesterday, but for any people who are not here today, he had to leave. He got a call regarding a medical appointment that he's been waiting on for some time, so he had to leave yesterday afternoon.

Okay, so, welcome here this afternoon, Jo. And so, anything you want to tell us about your experiences, it's quite broad and open. And take your time; there's no rush here. And if you don't feel like you can finish today, you're certainly welcome back at another time also.

J. SELMA: Yeah.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Thank you.

J. SELMA: I wrote down what I wanted to say on paper so I wouldn't forget. Last night, actually. It's all crumpled up now.

Hello, everybody. Hello, Commissioners. My name is Joachim Selma. I'm from Sheshatshiu. My story goes back in the '70s, because it is from my brother, because he cannot speak for himself. He is not here anymore.

INTERPRETER BYRNE: [Mushuau-aimun spoken.]

J. SELMA: [Mushuau-aimun spoken.]

INTERPRETER BYRNE: [Mushuau-aimun spoken.]

J. SELMA: In my family, I had three sisters. The oldest died when she was just a baby. I had one little brother, Peter.

This is the story about my brother, Peter. I have very little memory of my little brother. When he was a child, the memory I have, when he was crawling and a chubby little boy. He was taken to St. Anthony hospital for medical reasons, I was told. No escorts were used back then, but never brought back in the community.

As far as I know, the priest came with papers for my mother to sign. My mother didn't know what she was signing. It's believed she signed the adoption papers. This all happened right after my father passed away. My mother raised us, on her own. She struggled most of the time.

As time passed and I got older, I went to the Social Services lady and asked her where my brother was. The lady told me it will be your brother that will be looking for you guys. Twice I went and got the same answer. I kept asking myself: Is my brother okay? Is he treated all right?

Years went by, I moved to the Quebec side, then one day I got a call. They told me they located my brother. The lady that raised my brother shared her side of the story. As I said in the beginning, my brother was chubby, but she told me when they first got him, he was so thin, malnourished.

In between, when they took him, and the time his parents first got him, where was he?

[Dialogue between J. Selma and Interpreter Byrne in Mushuau-aimun.]

J. SELMA: Was he abused? How did he became chubby to real thin? That's a really big question mark.

The trip we took to meet our brother for the first time was provided by the Innu Nation. We didn't know what he looked like. My mother was overjoyed. She had tears in her eyes. You can tell what she was thinking. I know she was thinking: I'm not losing my son again.

As we spent time with him, I noticed she was into drinking and drugs. But I know he was also trying to impress our mother. We translated with our mother and Peter – my sisters and I. When we spoke to each other, mother – my mother, sisters and I, in our Innu language, he kept saying: What are you guys saying? He had a lot of questions and so did we.

Then he told me that he – he told me a story, when he tried to find us, he was told it's your family that will try to find you first. I guess that's how they played the system.

After a while Peter, moved to Sheshatshiu; he had his – he had a little family of his own.

[Dialogue between J. Selma and Interpreter Byrne in Mushuau-aimun.]

J. SELMA: But the drinking didn't stop and doing stuff as well. I know for the fact this is why he didn't stop, because of what to his life. He didn't speak Innu. He wasn't raised with us and he didn't understand our culture. He didn't feel Innu. What hurt him the most is that he could not communicate with our mother.

I used to call my mother when I was still in Quebec and ask her: Has Peter ever come over to visit you? She said: Yes, and the only word your brother knows is nishiueń: I'm hungry.

One day I got a call from one of my sisters saying: Peter will be flown to St. John's. That he's not gonna make it. Nothing any doctors can do for him, but my brother kept saying to my mother and my sisters: Don't worry, I'm coming back.

When I got to St. John's myself, he was already gone. I went to my mother, she was crying so hard and said to me: I lost your brother years ago and found him, but only to lose him again forever. I held my mother so tight and told her we are still here, your children you raised.

This is what the system did to my family. The system broke my family apart. The system broke my mother heart twice. The system stole my brother from me. The system took my brother's language and culture.

Brothers should have a bond, we didn't; the system made sure we didn't.

On the day of his funeral, I wanted to do one last thing for my brother. I kissed my brother and closed the lid on his casket and put in the screws, never to see him again.

[Dialogue between J. Selma and Interpreter Byrne in Mushuau-aimun.]

INTERPRETER BYRNE: And what he did also, he says he nailed the casket for his brother, too. And that's what he did.

The man I only met less than 10 times in my life, I didn't share a tear for him because I didn't feel I knew him.

The system succeeded what they wanted to do. It broke this family of mine and sent my brother to his grave. My brother lost, he's gone.

It says here: Every child matters. Did my brother matter back then?

Why didn't the system take us all, my other two sisters, me, why just my brother? Did we do anything wrong to the system? No.

That's all I have to say.

Thank you very much.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Thank you for sharing your story. You know, what you talked about was injustice and how many ways that your injustices done to you, your brother, your family, and not even knowing what happened, why it happened and, as you just said at the end, why just your brother and not the others.

So when you hear – when I hear, at least, these kinds of injustices, it really – I can't begin to, I guess, feel what you're feeling because I haven't experienced that, but it – just hearing it, makes me feel angry about what has been done.

And I think that what you talk about is that – but it's happened, time and time again, and I think it continues to happen where children are outside of the community and losing their language, losing their culture. And for me to say that hopefully there will be changes is not – may not be what you want to hear today. But I just wanted to say that, for me, I'm so sorry to hear that you had to go through that and that your family had to go through that. And that's all I'll say.

Thank you very much.

J. SELMA: So, also one more thing I like to say. I'm 54 years old, I was raised by my mother and lived in the country, maybe, lots of times. I learned from my grandparents. I learned from the people I spent time with, my other families. I learned how to survive in the woods, in the country. I learned how to hunt, how to take care of the animals; never mistreat them.

My brother should have known the same thing I know, but he's – didn't have a clue whatsoever in the country.

His adopted parents told me story when he was a little boy – there were two other children in that family, both white – he was taking a bath one time and he was scrubbing his skin so hard, trying to wash off the brown. He thought he was dirty, but his adopted mother explained to him he was Indigenous.

Thank you very much.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Thank you very much, again.

INTERPRETER BYRNE: I just want to thank Joachim. When Joachim – I read his

story, he gave me a copy of his story to submit to the Inquiry and I read it and it's very emotional and I – I'm glad that he changed his mind to say that I want to speak. So I'm very grateful that he came here today to speak.

Tshenashkumitin, Joachim.

J. SELMA: Thank you.

P. RALPH: Ten-minute break?

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Okay we'll break for 10 minutes.

Thank you.

Recess



