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

English Transcript | Volume 28

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

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P. RALPH: (Inaudible) do the prayer this morning.

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: (Inaudible.)

P. RALPH: Are you doing the prayer or –?

E. ASHINI: Yup.

P. RALPH: Yes? Okay.

E. ASHINI: [Mushuau-aimun spoken.]

P. RALPH: So, we've got Munik Penashue this morning; she's the only one scheduled this morning. And we've got a busy afternoon, so there's someone who's anxious to speak this week. This morning might be their last opportunity.

If we can accommodate them this afternoon, we will. We already have two people we're focusing on this afternoon.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Okay, thank you, and thank everybody for being here this morning.

First thing I wanted to say was just how having the smudge first thing in the morning and the prayer, I think it really, certainly for me, it puts me in a good place to start the day. 'Cause we know there's gonna be much we'll hear today and so, I think that time is really important as part of what we do.

Did you wanna translate?

INTERPRETER BYRNE: I was (inaudible) –

P. RALPH: Why is he looking at me, right?

INTERPRETER BYRNE: Yeah.

[Mushuau-aimun spoken.]

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: So, the other thing I wanted to mention this morning, first of all, there's people who haven't been here earlier the week, I think, and so, just acknowledge that there's three Commissioners and Commissioner Igloliorte, he was here on Monday morning, he got a call for a medical appointment that he'd been waiting on for some time and he had to leave.

The other thing I wanted to mention is, of course, our healing support services we have here. So today, we have Ivy is – as in every day, and Mary Jane, George is also here and –

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: Elaine?

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Elaine?

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: Emma.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Emma, okay.

So, thank you all.

Also, I wanted to acknowledge Elder Mary Catherine Gregoire is here this morning.

Two other items, quickly. There's food and drink in the kitchen, so people can go there any time to have a snack and coffee or water.

And finally, there's a – as people may seen coming in, there's a tent outside and that's kept heated all day so if people want to go there to take a rest or a break, then that's available to anybody who wishes to go there.

Anything else?

COMMISSIONER QUPEE: No, that's good.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Okay, so Munik, whenever you're ready to speak to the Inquiry, go ahead. I just wanted to let you know that to take your time, there's no rush and if you need a break at any time, then just let us know.

And so, are you are going to speak in your – in English or in your Innu-aimun this morning?

M. PENASHUE: I can do it in English.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: In English?

So Nympha will do the translation. So, whenever you're ready.

M. PENASHUE: Okay, I'm Munik Penashue and I'm from Natuashish, Labrador and my father is from Sheshatshiu, Labrador, another community an hour away from here.

INTERPRETER BYRNE: [Mushuau-aimun spoken.]

M. PENASHUE: My parents married in September in 1989, shortly after my sisters and I were born.

INTERPRETER BYRNE: [Mushuau-aimun spoken.]

M. PENASHUE: Shortly after.

INTERPRETER BYRNE: [Mushuau-aimun spoken.]

M. PENASHUE: CSSD were a part of my life since I was a child. It started with my parents. I remember over time, in Sheshatshiu and Davis Inlet, my parents' marriage weren't doing so well. That's when CSSD come into our lives and take us back and forth to my parents or Sheshatshiu and Davis Inlet, back and forth or different places with different families and different people. Sometimes they would be our relatives.

We got older and we were teenagers, my older sister and I, she had already had a child then, my nephew, and she was only a teenager. I had already began to make my decisions to start acting up, to huff gas, to hang out with crowds that were doing stuff, weird things and bad stuff pretty much.

My mother only focused on my sister and the baby, so she never really had the time for me or my little sister.

I got taken away when – it was September 5, 2005. I was 13; school was just starting. I thought CSSD would help my mom try to get me back or – they just took me away and they didn't help my mom.

I asked – when I got to Ontario, we landed in Ottawa, we drove for a few hours to the place where I was going to stay. When we got to the foster-mother's house, there was a dog. I wasn't comfortable around dogs, so I just smacked the dog in his face and automatically I was sent to the room, automatically to listen to her rules.

And the people that dropped me off, they didn't do anything about it. I just – when I was in the room, I just thought of back home and when I'm gonna see my people or when I'm gonna see my friends; when I'm gonna see – when am I gonna talk Innu. And I was alone. I felt alone for many years. There was no comfort or friend or brother or grandma. There was no one. There was only white people. I was alone for many years.

I don't know who to blame. I don't know. I didn't want to be here. I don't want to be here to remember anything.

I remember calling my grandma sometimes. She would always say: Don't ever forget us. Don't forget me, don't forget your brother, don't forget Nutshimit, don't forget who you are and don't forget your language. She would always worry every time I call if I still speak Innu or not.

When I got to the Ontario, I asked the worker – she must have been the boss of the system – and I asked her: How far am I? I wondered that if I run away, would I make it home? And they showed me the map and Labrador, home, and Ontario was so far away.

I really missed home. I missed everyone. I missed everything, but then automatically it changed so fast. Everything changed. The schools, there was – I didn't go to school by myself; there would be a worker following me everywhere – everywhere, and anything I did, there'd be different workers every week.

They didn't care. They didn't love you. They wouldn't care about you like your mother would care about you. There was no care; there was no love for a long time. I had every of that – I had everything when I was home before they took me.

I just feel really grateful to be home right now. Like, there's so much disconnection, it's hard for me to really open up to people. It's intergenerational trauma. It started with my mom, myself, and now it's my little boy that's in Red Bay, who's living with non-native people. It's just continuing, and it's exhausting.

It's so difficult. Everything is difficult. I have no house of my own in Natuashish either. I'm 31 years old with four kids, but two I've given up for adoption to give them a good home and family. One of them is with their father; he's doing great and he's in school, my oldest. And then my youngest one, he's in Red Bay. I don't know where that is.

I'm just fighting to go home, to come home, bring my kids home. I've been to too many treatment facilities that I just wanna come home. I don't want treatment. I just want to come home and work and have a home of my own and get my kids back.

That's my current situation.

I just remember stuff about Ontario and I just keep coming back, even though I try to forget.

I first tried to commit suicide in Ontario, and my late cousin committed suicide while I was there. His name was Matthew. And I told my foster mom, I'm going for a walk and I cut my arms at a playground.

A few months later, my grandfather from Sheshatshiu passed away, my father's dad.

There's so many people that passed away while I was there. My late brother committed suicide when I was 16 and I – that was the first time I came home from Ontario. I had never had a visit before that. I felt scared to come home after three or four years in the system.

And I grow up with my late brother in Nutshimit, on and off, when my grandparents were alive. When I was in – when I would be in Natuashish or Davis Inlet, I would be with family members or cousins.

When I was in Ontario, they diagnosed me with mental illness. I take pills for it to this day.

I don't know who is going to help me. I don't know what healing this will bring me, this Inquiry. I don't know what's going to help, whether it's Chief and council, whether it's the hospital, whether it's – I don't know anything.

I don't know what's going to heal or if my talking is just going to bring trouble for the kids in care right now and I feel bad that I'm here talking. I don't want their privileges to be taken away, that's who I think of is the kids in the system.

Will it help anybody? Will it help me? Will it help the kids in care?

I'm in the middle of working on a Housing request letter and I have a huge support system, and I'm not gonna give up. That's no answer.

My father is an alcoholic. He walks around Goose Bay; he never really healed from us when we got taken away. He still talks to us like we're little kids. I feel so much

abandonment from the leaders, for my father and myself, every department: CSSD, Chief and council, IRT. When are they gonna really help us?

I know the easy answer for anyone to say is you can help yourself. You have to help yourself; you gotta do it yourself. That's easy for anybody to say, but that's no support. Where is it – where is my story gonna take me? What healing is it gonna bring?

Sometimes, in Ontario, when I call home, first few years – or the first year, sometimes they would tell me to speak English to my mom or my grandma – my foster mom – and I would just never call home.

Sometimes, we would see other kids from home, and they would really watch us – the workers. We would never really have fun. We would never be really free. We would never be ourselves.

A year after I was there, my little sister was brought there, too. We didn't live together. They kept us apart. Every time I wanted to see her, I would have to act properly and be good for a week before I could see her and act – or live like the white man's way in order to see my little sister. I had to prove that I was good.

I noticed that we were growing apart, me and my little sister. She was happy there; I wasn't.

When they told us my brother had committed suicide and it was time to come home for the funeral, my sister didn't wanna come home. She came – we came home and then she left a few days later, after the funeral. I stayed for a couple weeks.

I was so angry at her. I didn't – I was angry at her for no reason. It wasn't her. It wasn't her at all. I don't – I didn't know who – I never knew who to be angry at or who to blame about all these changes.

Eventually, I stopped seeing her, I asked – I stopped asking for her. I stopped asking for kids that were from here. I stopped asking for anything that was from home. I stopped keeping in contact, I just – I was so angry about everything that I just wanted to forget about home when I was there. But now, coming back, I just want to forget everything over there. Like, it's just never ending.

Even though I try to forget, I'm never gonna forget. I'm never really gonna heal completely.

Coming back from Ontario, I was 21. That was 10 years ago. Coming home, I spent a lot of time with my late boyfriend who also committed suicide. I didn't want to live at that time when he committed suicide. I didn't see the future; I didn't care.

His mother was there for me for a year when he committed suicide. She asked me to move in with her and I just stayed working, continued. She just – she would just push me to live and work. She was very comforting, very loving. She always worried about me, too. She still does.

Eventually, I moved to my late grandmother's. She was still alive at the time. She got too sick from diabetes and I moved in with her and her other grandchildren and her daughters. I would live with them and then if it – like I would have my own kids. In 2016, I was pregnant, and then I had my baby in 2017.

I felt too elderly when I was pregnant at 25 with my first child. I was really happy when I saw my baby. He's an amazing kid today. He's six today. He really keeps me together when I'm down. I FaceTimed him last night. I was feeling down and it all just went away when I saw him.

I just have my first and last. My first one, I split custody. The other one I'm trying to get back in my care. I know it's a long process. Just be faster if I had a home, I believe, if I had a home in Natuashish.

I'm still very hopeful and I'm not going to fall in despair. I'm not. I'm not gonna feel sorry for myself. I'm not gonna be a victim. I'm one of these people and I deserve everything they have, too.

And I just don't like remembering Ontario.

I feel really proud to be from here. Everywhere I look, everything that people do here, I'm happy to be from here. Sometimes I wonder if my life would be any different if I was never taken away.

I don't want the Inquiry to miss anything I wanted to say, that's why I'm speaking English. I'm fluent in Innu as well.

[Mushuau-aimun spoken.]

INTERPRETER BYRNE: She wants to take a break.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Okay, 10-minute break, please.

Recess

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Munik, whenever you're ready.

M. PENASHUE: It's hard for me to recall any good experience that happened in Ontario. It's a blur.

It's – the system I was brought into was called Broken Arrow Residential Treatment Services. When I moved out of the foster care system in Ontario, I lived in North Bay, Ontario, and I went to school in a Native-based school. There's Native people, Native learning, Native prayers. There was no "O Canada" in the mornings; there was Native stuff.

The culture I followed while I was there was Ojibwa. It was the closest thing to home. My time in CSSD care, foster care systems, they never really took us to powwows or Indian Friendship Centres they have in Ontario. They wouldn't let us practice culture.

I was in eight different foster homes, eight different schools. I was moved because I was violent and against all the workers.

I remember I tried to commit suicide and tried to jump off a bridge because of one worker. She would report me to my foster mom on paper. I would be there and she would have paper and she would write about me and my attitude and if I was acting right and proper. I got out of her car while it was still moving and I ran away from her and I went to a bridge and tried to jump in a river.

I will never forget that worker. Her name was Lori Wood and she was very naggy and always try to get me to do everything properly. And eventually I had enough of it. I just ran away and kept running away. And then I got moved to another foster home and another foster home after that because I wasn't gonna listen to any of their rules or be family with them. I wasn't going to; I was never going to listen to them.

I didn't – it's like my way or the highway. I was never gonna listen to anyone. It's like this is what's gonna happen and this is what I want it to look like and that's what I got every time. I never listened to workers. I never wanted to be family with them. I never wanted to be close with any of them. I was just there.

I got older and I moved out of the system and I stayed in North Bay by myself. And I went to high school and college at the same time. When I went to school in North Bay, I learned a lot about the residential school system from the Native school I went to – attended. It's when my – I found out that my father had gone to one of the schools around Newfoundland.

I realized while I was going to school learning this system, residential school, I told my teacher, I said – and he told me the

last residential school was in 1995, somewhere in Ontario and that they shut it down. And I said: No, they haven't. Residential school is not over. We have residential foster homes now, I said. And I told him everything about where I was living before North Bay.

When I saw videos of the residential schools, they would cut hair – they would cut the Native people's hair, the Native boys and girls. They would stop them from speaking English [read: Innu] and dress them up in white clothing, and I found that very similar to the system I grew up in from when I was 13 until I was 21. There was no difference. It had the same impact on me emotionally, mentally.

The physical abuse and the sexual abuse was not there, but the mental abuse was there. There is no difference between the residential schools and the foster care systems. The kids in the videos in the residential schools, they would be smacked and be sent to the room or sexually abused to make them shut up and speak English and be proper. There's no difference with the foster care because they just left you in the room with no love, no care, no making you understand why you did what you did. You're just there, punished. Make you feel like nothing, no love.

They would take care of your immunization, your teeth, your glasses, your ears, all of that. They would never take care of your heart or your mind. As a child, they wouldn't – there was no care, no love, absolutely none of that in foster care. I felt alone for such a long, long time.

To this day, I know I don't belong in Ontario, I know I'm from here, and I should feel like I belong here, but it's gonna take a while to feel completely home. This is where I want my kids to be. This is where I want to be. My worry – I worry what's going to happen to the kids? What's going to happen to my kids? What change will this bring? What healing will it bring?

I have numerous journals of mine when I was in Ontario. I don't know what I'm going to do with them. It says a lot of me being alone. I miss my mom. I miss my dad. I wanna run away. I hate these workers. I wanna go home. Where will those journals go?

Everything takes time, but why did they move so fast to take me? These kids that are in the system now, there's no love or care. There's just appointments, paperwork; paycheque to paycheque. And I know I cannot blame anyone for my situation, that I have to find my way to get my children back, that I'm at fault here, too, with that.

I'm gonna have a visit with my little one on December 11th to the 13th. CSSD says that they'll pay for my ticket and hotel, but anything CSSD says to parents is never really true or right.

I'm well aware that I need help. I'm aware of where the supports are; I'm aware of – well aware of it, well aware. I'm already making steps. They may seem small like I'm not going anywhere, but I'm a lot further than I was yesterday.

I don't have a grudge or hold anything against anyone. What happened, happened. I don't hate anyone, I don't hate myself, I don't – I just hope that this story, it helps children to have better placements, especially people of their kind.

It feels like it's far too – I've become a woman in the system, that it's far too – it's gone too far and that they're comfortable with changing a Native kid's life, just like that. They're far too comfortable anymore, that I feel like it's gonna take a long time for any change to happen.

Who's gonna benefit from this, the CSSD, or me, or the kids in the system? Who is gonna benefit from this Inquiry? Is this the first Inquiry or is it a – I don't know how many there is before this one, but this is the

first one I've ever known about; the first one I attended.

I refuse to meet the foster parents of my child. I refuse because I know they're just gonna talk about him like they belong to him. They're gonna talk like they own my child.

[Dialogue between M. Penashue and Interpreter Byrne in Mushuau-aimun.]

M. PENASHUE: I'm happy with knowing that I'm his mother and I'm gonna get him back. I like that thought, and that he belongs to me.

I've heard they wanted to meet me, but I refused. Foster parents – I never really liked my own foster parents; why would I want to meet my kid's foster parents?

I can't wait to see him now. I'm coming home and I'm going to stay. I'm going to stay here because I belong here. My kids and I deserve a home just like anybody here, too.

It's amazing to look back, like being a 13-year-old, being ripped from everything you know to start a new life out there. It's – I'm grateful to sit here to share. It feels nice to be heard. It feels good to be alive and to be here. I just feel really sad for the kids in care today, especially for my son.

I didn't even know those kids in residential schools, but I just remember them today. The similarities between how I grew up and the residential school systems is very, very hard, is very sad and heartbreaking. It makes you wonder, when is it going to stop?

That's all I have to say.

Thank you guys for listening.

[Dialogue between M. Penashue and Interpreter Byrne in Mushuau-aimun.]

INTERPRETER BYRNE: She just wanna go – she wants to go home now.

[Dialogue between M. Penashue and Interpreter Byrne in Mushuau-aimun.]

COMMISSIONER QUPEE: [Sheshatshiu-aimun spoken.]

So I'll translate for myself that I want to thank Munik for coming. It's a really tough story and her experience and it feels like you're travelling with her, with her story. And it's a story I won't forget and I'll hold it close in my heart.

And I'm glad – I am grateful that she's here sitting with us to be able to tell her story. I'm very grateful for that.

Thank you.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: I just want to add a few words from what Anastasia said and say it was a very powerful story that you've told us this morning, one where you've, you know, endured many, many hardships that I could never understand or be able to because I've never experienced it. And the fact that you are here today to tell that story in such a clear way to us, to help us to have some understanding of what it might be like.

And there's so many things I'd like to say about some of the good things that you've said, but I'll just stick to a few 'cause I think one of the first things you said – and I know this will stick with me for a long time because, as you said it, I pictured the 13-year-old child being taken away like that and just to a completely different place that you had no idea of and not understanding why you were put there. And you said: I really missed everybody; I missed everything. So it was all taken away.

And so, you know, it's – I mean, here you are in a white culture, nobody you knew, different rules, different ways that were – created significant trauma in your life. And

you talked about intergenerational trauma and how, like, understanding of that, how it – you talked about your parents and their struggles.

And with all of these challenges you say: I will never give up; I'll continue to take the small steps. And it's so inspiring to hear that from you, that with all these challenges you're still able to move forward. And I really, really hope and pray that things will work out and you'll have your child back soon.

Thank you very much.

M. PENASHUE: Thank you.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: So we will adjourn now for the morning and come back at 1:30.

INTERPRETER BYRNE: [Mushuau-aimun spoken.]

Recess