

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

English Transcript | Volume 39

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

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[redacted]

Recess

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: [Inquiry in progress at start of recording.]

It's s Nympha, Nympha Byrne.

Go ahead, Ma'am.

N. BYRNE: I just want to talk about the past, when growing up.

Growing up I remember we were mostly out in Nutshimit, out in the country. And I remember having a dog team. My dad has a dog team. And I remember me and my sister being wrapped up in the komatik, on the sleigh, and my dad would be walking with the dogs and my mom sometimes sits on the komatik while the dogs are pulling our sled.

That's what I wanted to talk about.

[Mushuau-aimun spoken.]

Yeah, me and my sister used to be wrapped up in that – tied on to the komatik so we don't get cold. I remember travelling out in the bush and all we had is – we don't have any candies. I remember we have some caribou meat and tea, flour, baking powder. That's what my mom used to have.

And my grandmother used to live with us. Sometimes my grandma, we would walk with her when we were out in the bush walking. And my mom and dad will go on ahead and we would just follow them. And sometimes they go far but we kept walking and sometimes they will put the fire some place and then they'll make tea and they'll cook food, like caribou meat and bannock. And this is winter I'm talking about.

And sometimes we eat together when we get to their camp – not their camp – where they start the fire. And we eat some food over the fire, tea – that's all we drink was tea and water when we were growing up. We don't have any juices. No juices or any Cokes or anything like that or no candy either.

What we eat was the dried meat. Sometimes we eat it with butter. And a lot of

times we drink broth from the animals when we were kids. That's what they used to give us. And I remember sometimes when my mom used to nurse a baby, to help with the baby, you know?

I see a lot of things today, like how they use – the people. They have to drink some water and stuff like that. Like they are drinking pop and stuff like that when they are breastfeeding. But my mom used to drink a lot of broth from the animals. The one that usually was really good, it helps her breast milk, is the fish broth.

That's what they give to the women. I remember my grandmother telling my mom she had to drink that and they can't be dehydrated when they're walking. They have to have that when we stop, and they used to make that broth from the partridges too and the rabbits and the caribou meat.

I never see Pepsi or drinks, juices and stuff, because we have water. We have tea. You know, that's all we drink. And the broth also from the animals when we were growing up. There was never really sickness back then when we were kids, because we were all eating all the natural food. There was no chicken, no beef or anything. We only have caribou, which is lean meat.

My parents were really looking after us, taking care of us when we were kids. My mom used to make our own dresses. She used to make our own socks. She'd learn how to knit. She knitted long time. My mom used to always knit. And she also learn how to treat the hides and the summer clothing and our moccasins.

And that's what I went through a long time ago. Like just to see how our parents really took care of us. There were no social workers. There was a priest but we didn't really stay, you know? Like we don't really stay in the community, we were mostly out in the bush.

And in the 1960s I remember when we moved to Davis Inlet. I was only young then, too, when we moved to Davis Inlet. I remember when the houses were built, also. I remember my father working with the priest; he was building the church, he was building the teachers' residence. And sometimes he used to work in the summertime, he does fishing.

And in the summertime, too, we used to live a lot out in the bush. So only my dad used to come back to the community and sell his fish and get them weighed and everything. He didn't have a lot of money, just a little bit of money but I can't remember. I cannot tell you how much money he made but I know it was not a lot.

He worked hard. I remember how much he does take care of his nets and also slice the fish. You know, clean them and bring them up to get weighed to Davis Inlet. Because I remember that a long time when all that stuff was happening.

The reason what I said: because I don't know how much my dad make when he used to work with the priest also, because there is a video out some people were interviewed. One of them was my uncle, William Katshinak.

He was interviewed and I remember him saying in there like we didn't get paid much. We just have maybe – I don't know how much he got paid. It wasn't much at all. But if you find that video, that would be good so you can understand what our people went through a long time ago.

In the 1960s when they moved to that community in Davis Inlet, the men had to clear the land. And I remember my uncle going off on his little boat to clear the land in Davis. And, also, when I listened to him on the video, what the priest had said to them – 'cause there's no chainsaws. There was the saw, the big one. That's what they use.

They didn't pay us much, he said. But he said the priest used to tell them God will take care of you, 'cause all the hard work they were doing. It was a lot of work, you know? There was a lot of clearing on that island where we were moved. He told how much money he makes when he was

clearing up that place. They use axes also for that – when they were clearing.

And I remember as I got older – I don't know how old I was. But anyway, I remember when we moved in our house, there was nothing in our house. It was bare. There was just stove; no chairs, no bathtub, no running water.

I've heard it in the past that somebody said we're going to have running water over here. And we waited and waited and waited for that water to run in our house.

And the houses was so cold. The houses weren't really insulated. And I remember the ladies that were our neighbours. My mom and the ladies used to always borrow stuff from each other. They used to because there's a guy named (inaudible) from Hopedale.

He was in Hopedale. I don't know if his name was (inaudible), but I remember a guy coming in once in a while but I don't know how long. Maybe a month; monthly maybe. I can't remember. He used to come from Hopedale and check the houses to see if they're clean.

And I remember the women borrowing stuff from each other, you know? Like to clean the house, to wash the floors. And I sometimes think it today, how stupid that was. You know, stupid person will do that. Like we don't have any running water and they're expecting our moms to clean the whole house.

And that's what they had to do. And we don't have money to buy stuff. People were not working. Like, there is not much work back then. And sometimes I think about all that stuff, what we went through – 'cause like I said, we don't have any furniture in our house. We don't have beds in ours. We have to sleep on the floor. We're not used to sleeping on a hard floor. We're used to sleeping in our tent which is more comfortable. It's not comfortable to sleep on the floor like that, eh?

And I remember my grandma have her own room and some of us sleep with our grandma. My mom and dad had their own room. And my little brothers and sisters and us girls, we had our room. There was three rooms altogether, but it was very crowded.

There's eight of us kids in the family, plus our grandma was with us. Sometimes people will move in with us just to be with us. Like sometimes it's hard to – place to stay. People need a place to stay.

They have to clean the walls with the rags. Whenever they know this guy is coming, they have to rush around and to clean up the houses. We don't have washers. My mother had to borrow somebody's washer. And sometimes, when she have her own washer, she'll lend it to her friend next door. And that's what they used to do a long time ago 'cause we didn't have any money. When we don't have money.

Later on, I don't know where it came from, some stuff came on the boat and we have a table and really uncomfortable beds. Uncomfortable beds bought for us kids to jump around on. It was very springy. Like, you know, you can just jump around and that's where we used to play on that bed. But those beds were very ugly and very uncomfortable.

He was a fisherman too, my father was. Later on, I see a lot of people start partying, like started drinking. And it's just like we were – I heard a long time ago that there was a family allowance, and that's how my mom used to get some food for us, from the family allowance.

Later on, I heard that's what the priest was using against people. If they take their children out in the country, out in the bush, they won't receive that anymore because they want the kids to be in school. That's what I heard. That's what happened.

And then, you know, 'cause we were so close to the family – my family was very close towards my mom. They would have a hard time leaving us in Davis Inlet and not be out there with them.

We were also learning a lot of stuff out in the bush: learning how to treat hides, learning how to sew and make moccasins and help our mom do the chores. Like we were woodcutters; we cut wood for our family.

My dad was a hunter. He goes off all day hunting. He comes in the nighttime. He leaves early in the morning and he comes in at night to bring food for us to eat. And my mom was the one looking after the house and we had to help my mom with the wood. We have to get boughs for the tent and make it comfortable for her. And carry water – we carry water.

When we were living out in the bush, I remember I feel like I was very rich when I was out in the bush 'cause we had food. We didn't have to buy any food here in the store. The only things that we used to have was bread, flour, baking powder, tea and butter and whatever. Like, the stuff that we needed. That's the only things we have when we're out in the bush.

And we used to help my mom wash laundry in the basin – and that's what we used to do. And help my grandmother too. Just like when I said we feel rich 'cause we have a clean water to drink, we have the air that is very good, we have partridges – we eat partridges. We have porcupine, we have rabbits and everything, whatever – the beaver, also.

We eat bears also. And, today, we can't really eat bears because they're always at the dump. The only time that we can get bears is if we fly out in the bush or go somewhere out in the country. That's what I noticed 'cause they're eating the garbage now, the bears. I notice the hunters now. That's where they go is out in the bush to get bears, hunting.

And I also forget what I said: my dad was helping the priest building the church. And also the nurses and the school, he was helping out with the school, also. I don't know how much income that was.

And also, there used to be a fish camp in the '70s. That's where my dad used to go. It's called Flowers Bay, Flowers River. That's where he used to camp. He used to go there with – this guy used to come in and they used to work with him building a house up there. They used to work with that guy.

And I remember every time he comes in he'll bring a lot of food, the white guy that he was helping. He was always giving them food to bring to the families. And the other person was Katie Rich's dad, was Philip Rich. He was another guy that – that was both guys went in there. My dad and Philip Rich used to go in to that Flowers Bay camp.

I remember they used to bring booze also. They used to give him liquor. They used to come in and drink with the friends. And this went on, so I remember this when all the drinking started happening too, because it's free for them to bring that liquor. It was given to them.

In 1970s that's when I noticed a lot of people were drinking. A lot of people were just like – I thought first that the guys were the only ones that are drinking, but the women started drinking too. And I notice a lot of things were happening.

My dad, I remember hearing him saying when they're in Flowers River, they used to drink after they finish work for the day. And I noticed later on in the 1970s, that's when all the drinking started happening. At first when I was a kid I thought that just men to be drinking, men are only drinkers but then I see a lot of the women were drinking too.

And when my mom was pregnant she was drinking – one of my brothers is FASD – because there was no education on when you're pregnant, you can't drink. Like, your child is going to be sick. There was nothing like that back then. There was no pamphlets. There was nothing that I remember seeing.

But in the '80s, that's when I start seeing that there's small pamphlets, but also, it's all in English. There's no Innu language and

they didn't know that's what happened – that would hurt the child when you're drinking.

And those were the stuff that I've seen happen when I was a kid. And then there is violence start happening. There was a lot of drinking. My dad start fighting with my mom. My mom fighting with my dad. There was a lot of the violence happening around our family, you know?

Like, I remember seeing them when they used to fight as a child, and sometimes people will come in – the drunks – and there will be fighting in our house. I used to find it very traumatizing because I used to see all these hits and bleeding nose and cuts and I used to get really scared when I used to see when that happened and somebody knocked out, like on the floor.

See, the reason why I'm saying I feel like I was traumatized with all that fighting that I see when people were drinking in the past, like in the '70s there's a lot of drinking, because I never saw that in the country when I'm with my parents. There was no fighting. There was nobody bleeding. There's no drinking in there. This is when I was younger, and to see that, it really scared me. I used to be so scared to see the blood. Like, somebody get bad cut.

I remember how beautiful that was to live out in the bush, be out on the land. Out on the land, you know, you don't hear anything. You don't hear music. You just hear the birds singing. You hear the wind. You hear the river flowing. Those things, like that's the life I liked when I was growing up 'cause there was nothing that would make you unhappy.

And your parents will tell you how much they love you. I heard that a lot too. And then your dad and your mom grabbing you and holding you, it used to be so nice to feel that. But to see what's going on after, I know where that come from. People were not happy because they were here, stuck on the island in one place. It's hard on people.

And then that's when all the violence start happening, even in school. I was going through a lot, too, in school. I couldn't read. I couldn't understand what the priest was trying to teach us. The priest was our teacher and he used to – if I don't understand what he's trying to teach me, he can grab my desk and put it upside down. And he'll say: If you don't want to learn, there you go. You know, put my desk upside down.

It wasn't just me. There were other kids that were in my class. And that used to frighten me 'cause, like I said, I didn't feel that out in the bush. I was with my parents. I didn't feel that hurt, that scary – feeling scared all the time and traumatized. That's what I was saying, like it came from there, from the school. You know, like stuff that happened.

So when we don't know what the priest was trying to tell us to learn – we can't learn it because I can't read and write, because I was out in the bush. There's no papers. There's no pens. There's no pencils. I'm just learning from my parents and also observing. Observe what they do things: they way they treat the animals, how they cut it and the way you cut it and everything like that.

You just observe as a kid and the instructions are in your head. Like, you remember those things. When I said the instructions are in your head – 'cause not too long ago, maybe three years ago when the COVID was hitting the community, I said, I can't remember how to do the moccasins. Then I sat there for a while. And then when I cut up the moccasin to trace it and cut it up and I said, where am I going to start?

So I sat there with a needle in my hand and I said, how am I going to do this? And then it brings back to me I used to sit down with my mother, and I remember exactly where she put her needle. How many times she went like this and then make them. That's how I remember. It's still here. You don't forget those things.

So I make moccasins. At that time, in COVID, I made about 10 moccasins. I was just so busy. It was good. Like I said, you never forget that. It sticks in here with you.. 'Cause that was important to me 'cause I'm watching my mom. I was only a young girl then. I remember all that.

That's the teachings, you know, that I think that are so important to remember. It's very hard sometimes when you talk about that trauma because the trauma, it just like eats you inside. When you start talking about it you're opening a can of worms again. Those were the scary stuff that happened in the past.

Yeah, everything like where my mom used to – like, how to treat the hides and everything, you will never forget that because it's in here. I still remember the stuff that she did and the way she cooks. The food that she cooks is really good. The way she cooked for us. I can never forget those ones.

But it's very hard sometimes when you go back in there thinking, you know, all that trauma you had to go through, especially in school. It was very hard to be hit with a ruler and to be hit with the things from the priest. And the nuns grabbing your ear. And those things really hurt when I think about that, the stuff that we went through. It was not just me, 'cause I have schoolmates that the priest went too far, I think, with the other ones sometimes. And it really traumatized – traumatizing when I think about it.

I've always told my dad, I said, let's go out to the country. I don't want to be here because of the priest; I was afraid of the priest. I don't want to be in school and I loved to learn, but I was too afraid of that teacher we have, it's the priest.

They can't do anything to the priest – our parents can't do anything to the priest because he's the government. It's the government who brought them here. That's what I noticed, like they're all government workers: social workers, the priest, RCMP, the teachers.

Nobody's going to listen to the Innu, even if they complain, 'cause we're just like – they wouldn't hear us. And a lot of times I think that's when all that stuff is happening, because of all the anger and everything that happened.

I worked with Health Canada before and I went through the very same thing. They didn't listen to me but I was telling them what's happening. They believed the other – 'cause she's a white lady, they believe her. And I was, like I said, okay, I'm only Innu person. I'm only Innu. They're not going to hear me, what I'm trying to tell them. And they will not believe me and I would look like I was the bad guy.

Just like in the movies – you know, when you watch the movies. I remember that, too, when we used to watch movies like cowboys and Indians. The priest used to put them on in the hall – there used to be a hall in there – and then we used to watch them. The ones that are always losing are the Indians in the movie. So I said to myself, I know I'm not going to be able to say anything because they're not going to believe me.

That's what reminded me of is that cowboys and Indians. You're going to lose; you're not going to win, you know? We're Innu people. It's those movies that I remember that they used to show so many times. And that's how I felt, you know, going to lose anyway.

So like I said, when I was working with Health Canada, it wasn't just me later on that they were bullying. We have a co-worker, she was a big girl – a big woman. And I remember the same people, they used to make fun of her and really giving her a hard time. And then she was telling me she wants to take her life, she want a suicide.

Then I got scared when she said that. I said you can't do that. I told her, you know, and I'll be going over there to check on her. She's a white lady, the big girl. She was thinking of taking her own life because she was not believed also what she was saying and she was bullied.

I've heard people bullying her, calling her names, because she was a big girl. And that's when she used to say, I want to take my life. She wants to commit suicide. And nobody talks about that. It wasn't just me that she told. There was another co-worker that she had told that she wants to do that. Nobody likes to be bullied.

There was a lot of things going on with Health Canada when I was working with them. Like, you can't even breathe. And one time I got suspended because of something that happened: There was an incident that happened with one of the workers and I was told to leave for a while 'cause I didn't really believe what they were doing to our people when they were still here.

I didn't like what they were doing because I think they make a lot of money, and I think that's what it was, is the money that they make. And they didn't really care about our people here in the community, here in Natuashish. They didn't really doing what they're supposed to do. Like, the things that they said sometimes, you know, I had to disagree to some people. That's when I got suspended with the disagreement that I said something.

Like, they don't want us to say anything about what they're doing. They're just like, it's okay; but it's not okay, the things that they were doing. They don't listen to the people.

My job was to be a counselling and mental health worker, and this one incident – what happened one time, I'm told I cannot talk to people. I cannot bring people in my house. I have to keep my doors locked.

And then one time this guy came in and I bring him into my house. He was ready to take his life. I'm not allowed to touch anything; I'm not allowed to help those people who are trying to take their lives also. They said: That's not your job.

I said, I'm a mental health worker and my job is to help my people, and they didn't like that. And they said I was – what was it he said – there was a word for it. I can't remember what the word they were saying now – like, that I was breaking the rules. That's what they were saying to me. I was breaking the rules because I saw someone was trying to commit suicide and I wanted to help him.

The guy that I was talking about, he said: I'm going to kill myself and I'm going to do it now when I get out of here. And I just have to keep talking to him 'cause I don't want him to be killing himself.

'Cause there's a lot of things that happened in there too. And then one time I came here to do family violence – doing presentations at the shelter up here. And in the middle of my sessions – like talking – and the women were crying in what they went through, my boss called me and she said: You have to come back to Goose Bay.

I said, what's going on? What's wrong? And he said, you have to come back, somebody said you're doing a protest. And I said: What protest? I'm here at the shelter doing my presentations. He said, drop everything. You come up to Goose Bay. You go on the next flight coming in. So I dropped everything and I went back.

And I said: What is it? Why do I have to come back? And he said, I want to make sure you're telling the truth. I have to see you. I have to look at you to see if you're telling the truth.

So I went back there and I was sitting there and I said: Why is it that you have to get me out of my presentation? I have women in there and I said I was not protesting. I said: Where did that come from? I'm there to help the women in the shelter and do my presentation.

I went back and then I had to sit down with him and he had to look at me to see if I'm lying or telling the truth. Like it's unbelievable the things that happened in there. And then he looked at me and he said: Okay, you can go back tomorrow. This is what happened to me. I have to go on the next flight in the morning.

So these were the things that I went through, you know? And I don't know, I just had the feeling that, what we were going through, maybe there is other people that might be speaking to you saying the same thing. And the things that happened, it was unreal.

I think you guys know Bob Simms from – yeah, him. He was my boss. He didn't believe me. He's the one who said, come here. I want to make sure and I want to look at you to make sure you're telling the truth.

So I dropped everything. My presentation was still there when I came in the next morning. All my papers were everywhere that I had to do my presentation – all the stuff that I had, piles put in there. And then I finished my presentation and it was so embarrassing. It was embarrassing, it was shameful for someone to do that when you're trying to help your people. Like, when there's so much violence in – sometimes here, you know, like with the women. That's what happened with me.

And I think sometimes what happened is just – like, I'm bilingual. I can speak English; I can speak my own language. And a lot of times I have that feeling that one of the women who was always saying stuff – that I did this and I did that – she would make up stuff sometime. That I put through a lot of pain in there.

One time I started losing my hair. That's all that stress. I started losing my hair and I start getting sick. And I used to go back and forth to the hospital, and they would give me a paper saying you're going to have to take some time off work. They even do the stress test. They did all that stuff with me and then one time when I went in there, they told me I had high cholesterol and that I need to look after myself.

But I didn't know anything, you know? It was all that stress that I went through. And every time I go to the clinic – and then one time, another boss that I have told me to come over in his office. He wants to talk to me so I went in there. And then he said, you're exhausting your sick leave. I almost said I'm so exhausted being working here with you guys. They got me really exhausted because I can't breathe because this is what they're doing to me. They put me through all that stuff.

And when I have work to do I couldn't touch my work because I'm so stressed out. I didn't know where do I start, because they said you can't do this, you can't do that, you can't do this one and just all this stuff.

So even talking about it I'm exhausted. But I think I'll give up here because I'll do more maybe this week? There's a lot of stuff that I want to say about the country, about what happened, the years that I remember, what I saw. And I worked with the Social Services too in the past, so I'll share all the stuff that I forgot to share the last time I came through here talking to you guys, okay?

Thank you.

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: Yeah. No, thank you very much.

I recall speaking with your husband in maybe 1982 or '86 in Utshimassit. And he talked about Nutshimit and how in very cold winters, the family, when they're staying in a tent, to stay warm – it's minus 30, minus 40 – the Innu would put a blanket level like this over the family so the warm air would not escape from the tent. And he was amazed at how resourceful people were, living in the country.

And so when you talk about the joy you had, many people who've spoken to us talk about the same thing of even though it was very difficult, it was a still a lovely place to be.

So I hope we haven't stressed you out even though you're exhausted. I hope it's good exhausted, not a bad exhausted.

N. BYRNE: Thank you.

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: Okay, I think we're good for the day.

P. RALPH: Yes.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Closing prayer?

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: Yes, thank you very much.

COMMISSIONER QUPEE: [Sheshatshiu-aimun spoken.]

N. BYRNE: [Mushuau-aimun spoken.]

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: Thank you.

N. BYRNE: Thank you.

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: Please stand.

COMMISSIONER QUPEE: Tshenashkumitin.

N. BYRNE: I'm going to sing a song that –

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: Please.

N. BYRNE: The Elders told me I have to start singing songs because I'll be running sweats now. And one of these songs is about thanking the Creator.

Okay, I'll sing it. It's going to be our closing.

P. RALPH: Oh, put your microphone on.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Can you turn on –?

P. RALPH: Turn your mic on.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Please.

N. BYRNE: Oh.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: We don't want to miss any words.

N. BYRNE: That's the song that the Elder told me to sing in the sweats. I have a rattle, but I left it at my house. That's the one I supposed to be using.

Okay, I'll sing a song. It's thanking the Creator.

[Song performed.]

N. BYRNE: That the song. It's about thanking the Creator that give us life. That's the song so I just wanted to share. This is the first time I'm singing it.

P. RALPH: Nice.

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: Thank you.

P. RALPH: Very lovely.

COMMISSIONER QUPEE: Yes, it is.

COMMISSIONER IGLOLIORTE: We're very happy.

Thank you very much.

COMMISSIONER QUPEE: Tshenashkumitin.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Thank you.