

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

English Transcript Volume 43

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

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[redacted]

Recess

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Okay, people, so we're ready to resume and our speaker this afternoon is Mary-Charlotte Michel. We've spoken already that she can tell her story in her way and in her time, and what she has to say this afternoon, she's going to say all in English first and then Innu or vice versa, whichever you prefer.

M. MICHEL: Thank you.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Okay. So when you're ready, just turn on the mic.

M. MICHEL: I'm gonna introduce myself first. I'm Mary-Charlotte Michel. I am a member of the community of Sheshatshiu. I'm 36 years old and my mother is Joanna Michel. I think she had shared her story here before as well. She was one of the children that got taken away in the Sixties Scoop, I believe. Her and her two other siblings were taken in front of my house, where I live today, and where my mother lived in that area; so has my children.

But my mother is a residential school survivor, and I came here to share my story because I think it needs to be heard. I wanna voice my concerns and I wanna tell my story of how systems has neglected us as Innu, or even Aboriginals all over Canada.

I'm gonna start by sharing from the beginning of my childhood. I've never had a good childhood. My mother – I'm gonna go back to my grandmother. My grandmother lost her children in care. Three of them were brought to residential school. My mom was eight years old; until she was 16, is when she was out of the residential school. I've never really focused on her story until this year or how intergenerational trauma has affected us, the systems.

My mom grew up really angry. She went through a lot. I didn't understand that before. I didn't like growing up in my home. I didn't like the kind of mother I had as a child. I do love my mother, but in the beginning I didn't. I hated her. I hated her, thinking that she was the issue. She hurt us. She hurt me, and then I became a mother that was similar to her and I hurt my own children.

She was a chronic alcoholic. She went to treatment, and I've taken the same path. At a young age, I had a daughter, at a really young age; I was 14 years old. I didn't have a mother that could be there for me. She had no self-worth and then I became one of those people that had no self-worth, because the Innu were constantly being shamed and that's how we grew up. My mom was being shamed, my grandmother, my mother and then me.

At a very young age – I was four years old – my mother had me, but she didn't stay with my father and then she went into another relationship, and I have two younger siblings. When I was four years old, her significant other sexually abused me, when I was in her care. CSSD took me from my family, my mom. I was afraid of my mom,

and I remember being taken away. I remember being through court and never wanting to be around my mom 'cause I was really afraid of her.

When I got taken away, I lived with my aunt for a long time. But I don't remember how many years later, they wanted me to go back to my mother, and I didn't want to. I was afraid of my mother, and I was really devastated when CSSD told me that I had to go back to my mother, and I didn't want to. I felt that I was betrayed by CSSD and I thought I was in a good place, that I could trust them. So at a very young age, I stopped trusting CSSD.

After I went, they put me back in my home where my mother was. She still abused me. Well, I was already being abused by my mother prior to the sexual abuse as well. She was really, really abusive towards us. And I guess I knew, as a child, that going back there – I had a lot of fear when CSSD put me back there when I didn't want to. I didn't wanna go back to my mother, but I was forced to go back to them.

I never wanted to go back there. So that's the time I stopped trusting CSSD. But I had to go back, and I grew up in the home where she started drinking again, heavily, and the abuse continued. After a few years later, the man that – I testified in court, and he went to jail for, like, I can't remember how long, but after he got out, my mom got back with him, and then I had to stay with them. I had to stay with my abusers.

I don't think that was fair for me, when I didn't wanna be there, but I was forced to go back to a family that I didn't wanna be in. I was forced back to staying with the abusers, and the learned behaviour I had was to address things in anger. That's the kind of parenting I've seen, and how to deal with issues was, okay, flip out. And, you know, I remember them saying they wanted to commit suicide – and these are the things that were normal to me as a child: My mom enraged, constantly fighting with her boyfriend – significant other.

And I had to stay with that for years, and I grew up with no self-worth, no self-esteem, not knowing why we were the way we were. Nobody educated me about intergenerational trauma. Nobody educated me about what my mother went through, and also my abuser. They both were sexually abused as children. I had to figure this out along the way of the 10 treatment centres I've been to.

And during this very long journey, has been horrific. I don't ever recall being happy much as a child, as a teenager and as an adult because of the intergenerational trauma. I used to be angry at my parents. I used to be angry at my mom. I used to be angry at my grandmother. But then I realized, it wasn't their fault. It was the systems. It was CSSD that broken us and I feel like now I have to be the one to stop the cycle, and that's not easy. That's not easy while my children are still going through care as well and I'm still – we're still trying to fix everything.

My mother, she's been trying; I've been trying. But there's blocks. The system is flawed, and I don't think a lot of the things that are going on right now are working. Even though you may think it is, it's not. It's not working for a lot of reasons. You're not educating people enough about the intergenerational trauma. You scoop these children up, take them to other communities and outside – even outside of the community.

That's what happened to my daughter last year. I went to have a child – I went to have my baby in St. John's and, on the way back, she was taken away. She was already on another flight to Newfoundland, and I thought, why is this happening to me? Aren't these children supposed to stay in the community like you promised? And it didn't happen. Now she has been there over a year. When is my child coming home? When is it gonna stop? When are you gonna stop taking our children, and start building programs for the people here in the community?

There's other provinces that have housing to take the whole family, not just a child.

You know, I kept thinking that and – I wouldn't have even thought about it. If there was a program like that last year when they took my child, I would have went with her if they had a program like that. I wouldn't even thought about it, not for a second; I would have left with her right away.

These are the kind of programs we need for people now. What happened was, for five months, they took my child and then they've never given me an update of how she was doing, what was going on with her. The psychological damage that we had to endure, both of us, both my younger child and me, not getting an update of how your child is doing – how wrong is that? That's not okay.

I feel like we have been through enough and taking a child away from their family is just creating more chaos, creating more hurt and more psychological damage. I feel there's a lot of negligence to our people, to the Natives. Not just the Innu people, the Inuit people as well, all over Canada, how the systems think they're above us and they know what we need, but in fact you guys don't. You don't know what we need.

The people without a title is people you don't wanna listen to, like me. Like, how do we provide these programs? How do we help these people? How would you help me and my child today, the ones that are being affected now?

While in care for that five months, my daughter was abused by two workers in EPH. That was one of the worst things, knowing that was happening to my child. Two different EPHs – she's autistic. She shouldn't be going around to different EPHs, ILAs.

Psychological damage is what she's enduring right now. She's flying back today, to Gander. Imagine what she's going through today. She's not okay. I'm not okay. Our children need to be home, every single one of them, the Inuit children and the Innu children. You've caused enough damage. You have the ability to change a lot of things, very fast. These programs can happen very soon, but it just isn't happening. Why? I don't understand.

A lot of the time, it's like things need to happen, something very bad needs to happen before anything needs to get done, and I don't think that's fair for our children. I don't think that's fair for me. Right now, she's living in ILA with three different workers, three different parenting styles. A child with autism doesn't need to go through that. She needs to come home. They all need to come home.

You need to build better programs and educate the people of what intergenerational trauma is and admit your faults. There's a lot of fault but if you don't admit your faults, how would they ever know? How can a social worker go to the people when there's a call or an incident? Why don't you go and educate them about – why I say this is because this is what I would have wanted.

Why don't you go there when you get a call and tell them, okay, you have a lot of complex trauma; it's complex. You'll never understand that complex trauma 'cause you don't have it. I do; I understand it. I can educate you about what the Innu are going through, what the children are going through, 'cause we have first-hand experience of what's going on right now.

I'm not talking about years ago. I'm not talking about 10 years ago. I'm talking about today, things we are going through today.

I've been doing a lot of my own research or acknowledging everything that has happened and trying to understand or trying to help people understand what's happening. A lot of people don't understand, and they will never. This is where our people need the compassion. They need to be heard; there needs to be dignity.

I feel like CSSD has betrayed me so many times. They had put things in my file that weren't even true: things that I would have done, that I didn't do – and they're permanently on that file. Assuming things and then lying and then saying – one thing, I

remember they said I was pregnant when I wasn't. They had it in their system that I was pregnant. I was never pregnant. And then another time is when I said I had given verbal consent for a safety plan, and I never even done that. Another worker was there to witness it, an IRT worker.

So how can I work with CSSD when they're constantly lying and saying all these things? How can we work as a team when they're constantly lying to me? When the social workers are making up lies. It's not fair. Because of course they will take their word against mine. They have a title, I don't. I'm just another number, another parent that's lost their children in their care. How can you listen to me? Why would you? You would always think you're better because you have a title, you have an education. But I'm not gonna allow that kind of thing, to not share my story and be heard. I wanna be heard.

I have the experience. My daughter is the fourth generation that's been affected by intergenerational trauma.

There are so many things that had happened since then, the wrongs that CSSD has done to us. They show up at my front door, take my child away while I'm on my way to St. John's and doesn't even give me a chance to tell my autistic child that I'm going to see you again soon. And then for five months not giving me any contact with her, and then two of the EPHs abuse her. And then for 10 months I've been having supervised visits – 10 months. Why am I being bullied by your system? Why isn't my child home yet, when I've been doing everything I can?

This year has been a really hard year for me. Five months not getting any – that's a trauma for me, right there. That five months, not being able to talk to my daughter and know how she's doing. That's more trauma you have put onto my life this year. Not when I was a child – you have done a lot in my childhood as well, the effects – putting me back to my abusers and then not being able to be there for me. So I have no trusting relationship with CSSD.

CSSD workers lying to me, and then taking my child away and then my daughter being abused in care. That's a lot. How can we trust your system? I have a really hard time trusting any social worker these days, because of the lies, the betrayal, and the negligence. Neglecting my autistic child being abused – she's being abused, and now she has three different parents while she's in care? She's going home – well, home, I guess, for now. She's going back to three different parenting styles. An autistic child, seven years old.

She doesn't deserve that; I don't deserve that.

Your systems are destroying our children's psychological development. Especially the ones that are outside the community. Last year I was teaching my daughter Innu and she's learning really well – she was learning really well. She was catching a lot of it while we were just having conversation, and she started using them. But after CSSD took her away, she was like, what's that?

Today she's trying to learn. Each time we have a visit, she's trying to re-learn her language, but she can't. She only stays for a week, three days. How can she learn any of – how can she learn her identity, because that's where our healing is, our identity. You know, unlearning behaviours and finding self-worth where there is generations of shame, and that can't just be brushed off. It's not as easy as you think. My grandmother, shamed; my mother, shamed; me, myself, I've been shamed; and now my daughter is in a white community saying she knows the difference. She's saying: Oh, they're looking at us differently because we're Innu. She's only seven years old.

Sometimes I don't understand – what I don't understand, you send them to ILAs and pay three different workers, six different workers at a time for each child, but you can't take a family and put them in a home where one worker can observe and watch this family, heal this family, help them grow, have compassion, you know, help them unlearn some of these behaviours we've learned for decades, generations.

And where are the professionals that need to be educating the people? The psychological damage you have done to me, my family, where is the psychologist that should be working on us? Where's the child psychologist that can help my daughter go through these things? Everything is being neglected. There's a lot of negligence.

And a lot of these people keep hanging on. Even though their children are in care, even though they're devastated and going through intergenerational trauma, they fall into drugs and drinking, like I have, to numb the pain of all the intergenerational trauma and the effects of it. The only hope they have is their children.

The Innu, I find – the only thing that ever kept me alive for a long time is because I became a parent and I had a responsibility. Even though I had so much trauma, complex trauma that I didn't even know, some of these things I just figured out this year, that my brain had blocked out; I had to process that stuff and it wasn't easy. None of it was easy. This past year has been really hard for me and my whole family.

I had to figure it out, a lot of it on my own, for the last 20 years. Since I became a mother at 14 years old, 21 years, since I became a mother, I had to figure everything out. Nobody educated me. No system educated me about the things that I was going through. I had to figure everything out by learning.

I went to school earlier this year, but I quit because my trauma was triggered. I have a lot of complex trauma, and I needed to deal with that before I even go to school. I've dealt with a lot of it this year and I didn't understand what I was running from, why I kept relapsing, why I kept drinking and going back to that, because I was escaping reality. Escaping the reality of the betrayal, the sexual abuse, the abusers, neglect, no compassion, constantly being shamed, and that's what you hear from CSSD. They come to your door and shame you. It's not – that's practically what they do, but they don't educate you.

Some people out there still don't understand why they're using, why they're still picking up the booze and the drugs even when they have their children in care. This is intergenerational trauma. Why don't you educate the people? This is what I keep thinking in my head. It's a lack of compassion.

I have a lot of titles, I guess. At 11 years old, I lost my brother, so I'm a firefighter of the community. I've been a counsellor of the community. I have held a lot of occupations in this community, even as an Innu interpreter. The Commissioner asked me where I have been, and I've been stuck in my trauma, reliving my trauma every year and then reliving my trauma today. Even during Halloween when CSSD showed up at my house.

We're just reliving everything again, over and over, and our trauma is constantly being triggered. So I've been living a life stuck in trauma, when I thought what's wrong with me? Why can't I get this? Why can't I stay sober? Then I found out it was complex trauma. It was my brain blocking out a lot of the trauma as a child that I needed to process.

CSSD never educated me about that when they should have; they could have. They go to school. They take psychology in school. It's almost like you're guessing everything. It's a guessing game. They don't educate you. They don't educate anybody. When they go, they just take the child and put him out of the community or put him somewhere else.

I don't think that's okay. I think that you have a responsibility to educate the people if it involves an Indigenous child. Because my daughter was two years old when CSSD started getting involved with me. It was a call – my daughter's grandmother made a call and lied that I tried to hurt my daughter, when I didn't. I didn't try to hurt my daughter, but when they came, it was like, okay, we're gonna take your daughter away. Then I've had CSSD in my life since I was a child still up until today.

They have always been in my life, and I've been looking at the effects; and I want to educate my people about the intergenerational trauma, why we are the way we are. There's a lot of psychological damage and you cannot just heal the population by big groups; you have to heal them one by one. That's how this is gonna work. So where is the psychologist? Where are the help that we need?

I feel like the Innu people are the ones that has to save themselves when you have a big part to play in that. Our own people trying to figure out and save our own people, when you have the education, you have all the funds to do these kind of stuff.

I think I want a break. Can I have a break?

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: Yeah, she wants to have a break.

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: (Inaudible.)

M. MICHEL: Okay.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Okay. We'll take five minutes or so – until you're ready.

Thank you.

M. MICHEL: Thank you.

Recess

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Okay, then we'll start again.

So Mary-Charlotte, when you're ready.

M. MICHEL: I'd like to thank everyone for listening. I won't be much longer. I just wanna share a few other things. It's been really overwhelming, experiencing all the things that happened to me as a child, then as a teenager, as an adult. Like I said, CSSD has been involved in my life since I was three or four years old, up until today; my children are in care. There are many, many, many, many times that I've wanted to give up and the only thing that kept me going was knowing that I had children that needed me.

I've lived in chaos for a very, very long time. I'm a recovering drug addict, alcoholic; I suffer from complex trauma, but that hasn't stopped me in wanting to be a mom to my children. I never wanted to hurt my children, but I was the one that had to figure out everything. It felt a lot of it I had to do on my own.

I want to speak up about my situation because I don't think it's fair for our people to go through stuff like this, when it shouldn't even happen anymore. My daughter should have never got taken away to another place away from home. Only seeing my daughter once a month, to try to educate her about her identity as an Innu child – and she's very proud to be Innu. That's the difference from when I was a child.

As an Innu person, I was shamed; as a white person, I was shamed. My father is from Newfoundland, my mother is from Labrador; an Innu woman and a Newfoundlander. So I was being shamed for being white and I was shamed for being Innu. So my life growing up didn't make sense, but for Lilly, she's trying to find her identity, my child that is in care.

She's trying to find her identity and she's really proud to be Innu. She wears an Innu hat proudly. She's really proud to be in a tent and this past week, I set up a tent behind my house to show her that this is part of her culture. I didn't have much time, but I do the best I can when she's here to educate her about her culture which is being taken away from her.

Ten months of her travelling back and forth and a lot of time it's every two months that she comes to the community, not every month, and it's only for a couple of days. So her identity is being taken away as we speak because she's flying back out today. I don't think that's fair for us and not fair for my daughter.

She needs to keep relearning Innu words when, before they took her, she was already learning a lot of it at age five. Now she's coming back wondering what we're talking about in conversations in Innu: So what are you saying mom? And she catches on really quick. She's so smart that she catches on the Innu words really quick, and she starts using them. So for the past year, she could have learned a lot of her language if she had stayed in the community. You took something really big, a big part of her identity as an Innu child.

Last week, my mother went to pick up Lilly in Gander and what the workers had told her is that they want to increase her medication 'cause she has ADHD as well. Why do they want to increase her medication? She's going through a process of coming back to the community, going back there, and they just wanna numb her feelings. People are numbing their feelings enough in the community, drinking and drugging, now you want to medicate my child and drugging her, so you don't have to deal with the issues of her behaviours, the behaviours that you are causing because she is outside the community. You have a big responsibility there.

Workers are wanting to increase her medication, and they didn't even ask me. That's not okay. It's not okay to numb my child while she's going through a process that you're putting her through. She could be in the community. And for months I've been asking about the investigation of the two workers that hurt my child in the two different EPHs and nothing. CSSD hasn't come to me about anything and they're trying to deny that it even happened, when I have proof.

Another child in an EPH said that Lilly hit her, and then Lilly told me over FaceTime, because that's where my visit started, over FaceTime. She was hit by another worker and when I asked her who it was, she stood up right away and pointed at the worker – the worker I couldn't see through FaceTime, because the phone was directed at her.

And then another time I was FaceTiming her I seen a mark on her arm. And I told her to show me, and I started screenshotting it. And it was marks, visible finger marks that someone was pulling on her arm and hurting my child. This is abuse.

And when they took my daughter away from me, I said now I know how my grandmother felt when they took her children away, when my mom got taken away at seven years old. I was reliving that – reliving that trauma my grandmother had – only last year. And then my child gets taken away, she gets abused. I couldn't even talk about this at first, but I had to go through a lot of treatment, a lot of healing to get to where I am right now. To be able to sit here and share my story and fight for my children, fight for my community. It's not just for me, it's for the Innu people.

We're not being heard. The systems are flawed. They're not working for us. So we need to be heard. You have to give us compassion, dignity, understanding. You may never love us as a people, but we love our children.

I only hope and pray that we will be heard, and systems will be put in for us, not how you would want them, how would we want them, how it needs to happen. There's a family program, Charles J. treatment centre, and the list is so long that you can't get people in there quick enough.

You know, they lose their families and, in the process of losing their children, they lose themselves in alcohol and addictions, other addictions. I almost fell into that trap as well. Wanting to give up, wanting to commit suicide because I thought I was never enough, that I was never capable of being a mother, that I wasn't capable. And I believed that for a really long time, that my children deserved better. But they do deserve better. The systems need to help us – make us better parents.

I still never heard about any investigation. It almost seems like when you're caught, when CSSD is – just give me a minute. It seems like CSSD don't wanna admit their faults. You come to us, and we admit our

faults of how wrong we are doing as parents and we go to treatments centres, we try to fix our families, but stuff like this is trying to be hidden. Incidents like this that are trying to be hidden so you don't have to own it.

Now I haven't heard anything – it's been months. There's no investigation about the person who hit my child, and the other person that bruised my child's arm. I never heard anything. But when there's an incident, they say that I'm doing something wrong, they come running to my house and investigate right away. But when my child was in your care, where was the investigation? Where were you when she needed you?

Workers try and lie to me, even at the EPHs, ILAs, workers lying to me, just recently saying that there's always been two workers for my child, but there wasn't. There was only one worker for her for a while now. I asked the ILA worker, where's the other worker? She said: Oh, she's doing her supervisor duties. And then we went out to the mall with Lilly, and her supervisor was there with her children.

At the end of the night, she came back to me and said, oh, I'm sorry, Lilly only has one worker. I don't know why she felt the need to lie to me. That wasn't fair. It feels like I can't trust CSSD anymore. How can I? I've been lied to. They're hurting my children when they say they're trying to protect my child, but she's been abused in these homes.

None of this is right. I'm tired of being put through trauma. I want my family to heal, and I would really like to ask for your help, but when I ask for your help, it's not there. It's been given to us wrong.

So yeah, I haven't had a trusting relationship with CSSD for a really long time. I couldn't come to you when I felt like I needed help with my drug addictions or my issues with my kids because of your flawed system. I was honest with my doctors in Public Health, with my counsellors, but I would never be honest with CSSD because I lack the trust, because of the situations that had happened or the lies and the incidents. You know, I couldn't trust the system. I cannot. It's hard to trust the system when it just keeps breaking you.

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: (Inaudible.)

M. MICHEL: Mm-hmm.

I can say it all.

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: Whatever you want, it's up to you.

M. MICHEL: So I'm gonna interpret most of what I said in Innu, the things that I've been through.

[Sheshatshiu-aimun spoken.]

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Well, Mary-Charlotte, thank you for coming here today. It certainly showed great strength and courage, and speaks to the resilience that we've seen often from Innu like yourself and many others, so we thank you for that.

First of all, just with regard to trauma – intergenerational trauma, complex trauma, vicarious trauma – many different kinds, and I'd like to wrap around a sort of a community trauma that's happened in both Sheshatshiu and Natuashish. And I just want to assure you that these concepts and notions of trauma and intergenerational trauma is very much on our minds and that it's something that I'm quite confident will be in our final report that we'll write and some recommendations on how to deal with that.

Also, in terms of the – what I heard from you is some major changes are needed in the way the approach is to child protection. And we talked, I think even yesterday, about the idea that it should be child well-being as opposed to protection. There are some changes that the Innu are making in terms of the child welfare for the Innu law, so there are some things happening there.

I really like the fact that you said, you know, things can and should change more quickly, and things are very slow to change oftentimes, which can be most frustrating.

When we're talking about the lives of children, every day is an important day in the life of a child.

I think one of my last comments is, it was also encouraging in terms of how you talked about making your child more aware of the Innu culture: teaching her the language and different aspects of the culture.

I really wish you well with regard to your child, and that she'll be with you very soon.

Thank you.

COMMISSIONER QUPEE: [Sheshatshiu-aimun spoken.]

M. MICHEL: Thank you.

COMMISSIONER DEVINE: Okay, that concludes today. We will be back tomorrow morning at 9:30 and we do have somebody scheduled to speak publicly at 9:30.

Thank you.