

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

English Transcript Volume 44

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

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[redacted]

Recess

[Inquiry in progress at start of recording.]

COMMISSIONER QUPEE: – in a few minutes. Just waiting for an Elder.

Good afternoon. So we will go ahead with our speaker for this afternoon, which is Florence Milley. Mike is in a private session, so whenever he's done, he will join us.

[Sheshatshiu-aimun spoken.]

When you're ready.

F. MILLEY: Good afternoon, everyone.

My name is Florence Milley. I'm an Innu First Nations member for Sheshatshiu. I am 47 years old, and I have four children. And I'm one of the survivors of the broken system that the province has developed for the Innu, that has never worked out for our people.

I can start my journey when I was a child, being taken into the system; I guess at the time was Social Services, from the province.

And I'll get Anne to translate.

INTERPRETER NUNA: [Sheshatshiu-aimun spoken.]

F. MILLEY: This morning you probably heard my brother speaking. It was pretty hard for me to hear my brother speaking about the – when we were taken to Baie Verte. And it was the most traumatizing foster home we have ever experienced.

It haunts us 'til this day, and it haunts my brother, because we were both together in the same place. But we were not the only people – or the only children – that were there. There was other children that were First Nations, too, that were staying there, but from other communities.

We were treated like animals. We were butchered. We were basically thrown into a home; we thought it was supposed to save us, but not to destroy us. I find it very difficult when I look at the children in the system today.

It's not working, and it's never going to work unless you give it back to our people, because I think the Innu people know how to raise our own children.

And I'm a huge, huge advocate when it comes to seeing our children grow up in our own communities, in our own homes with our parents, with our grandparents, to learn the language, to preserve it. If you take our children into a system, how is that white family gonna teach an Innu child to speak Innu, to understand our culture? Because that was stolen from me as a child, too.

[Sheshatshiu-aimun spoken.]

INTERPRETER NUNA: [Sheshatshiu-aimun spoken.]

F. MILLEY: I have spoken at this Inquiry, and I found it a lot easier to speak today. I've given myself a long time to process it, with the help of seeing a therapist at the same time. That's what the system has caused me to do, is to seek help. Because I couldn't do it on own, mentally, because I suffer from PTSD.

There's a lot of other things that comes with it; I do have severe anxiety with society, and if I see violence or drinking – and I, too, was a – I drank a lot too, after, for so many years, but I'm clean and sober now. I've

been sober from drugs probably 16 years, alcohol will be a year in a couple weeks, which I'm pretty proud of. I think that's a huge accomplishment, as a female coming from a very disruptive home, 'cause my mother is a chronic alcoholic, and she still is 'til this day. But she's still my mother.

I'm very proud of my mother because she came from a residential school, so you can imagine the intergenerational trauma that has caused, and the suffering for my mother, 'cause she went through the same thing, what the – being taken out into St. John's in – I think it was the Sisters, I think it was called Holy Heart at the time? And my uncle Maurice, late uncle Maurice was next door, I guess, at Mount Cashel.

So they all went through – basically the majority of my family are alcoholics. I think there's only about one or two of them, or maybe three now, that are sober. My grandmother is still alive today, she's 96 years old and I'm very proud of her because she's like my mum. 'Cause she raised me, and if it wasn't for her, I wouldn't be speaking my language today. So I thank her for that, and I thank my community for that. For bringing me back home.

There was a challenge in that system, being in that foster home, because there was a lot of sexual abuse, a lot of – I can't even describe. The images is too complicating because it was an every-day-abusing thing, but it was always something new. But to me it wasn't new because I knew the pain was always gonna be severe.

When my brother was talking about the smoke – being doused with cigarette burns, because it was a man that used to do it. He used to put cigarette burns on his stomach and on his back and I used to hear the – I actually used to see him and there's nothing I could have done. I just sat on the couch and watched him. So I suffer from that.

You could never erase an image of trauma, no matter what age you are, no matter how much therapy you get, but you learn to forgive – trust me, you do. I forgive those people that hurt me, 'cause it's the only way I find closure. And it took me probably – how many years? – to find that. Not very many people can say that and sit at this table to forgive anyone.

Do I forgive the government? No, because they failed me. 'Cause I feel sitting here, I'm a seven-year-old child, and I struggle. I'm sorry, but I do. This is what trauma looks like. This is trauma. This is PTSD. I hate the government. I hate [Sheshatshiu-aimun spoken.] I hate them when I see them.

How can anybody wake up in the morning and not feel no guilt in what they done to people like me? I'm human. I have feelings. I wouldn't be sitting here today crying, if I didn't feel pain, if I didn't suffer. How is the government gonna pay me back my life? How are they gonna give me back that? You know how I reward the government? Sitting in front of here, to speak about it because I'm not afraid to challenge the government.

I am not afraid to challenge CSSD at any table. Because I'm not afraid. I'm 47 years old. I am 10 times stronger today than I was when I was either four, five, six, seven, eight years old. That's how long they abused me. That's how long they sexually abused me. But I'll be damned they'll be doing that to my children, trust me. I'm protective.

I will teach my child, not to go through what I went through. Trust me, I won't. You gotta stop taking those children out of that system, it doesn't work.

Why not work with the Innu? We're not that stupid. Trust me, we're not. I'm not angry at anyone, but I'm angry at the system itself. When I look at people that have come so far from being nomadic, from walking these lands – these are our lands, this is our language.

Imagine if I put a white person into our system. We wouldn't abuse you. We would teach you – to be humble, to be caring, to be loving; and it's not that hard to do as a foster parent, because that took every ounce of love as a child, 'cause I forgot what it means, like, to me.

I have a hard time saying I love you. I really do. I struggle. But I do say it to my children. But I do say it to my grandmother, because I love her. That's love. I struggle to say I love you to my mother, because she doesn't know how to show it to me, because coming from a residential school, they steal that love, that compassion from you. They break you. They colonize you. But they didn't colonize me. I may wear white man's clothes, but I speak the language proudly, and I write it, and I read it.

And that's one thing I have. I did so many accomplishments in my life and I'm so proud. I still go to meetings from time to time, to Brentwood meetings, just to be around people that I know that are struggling in the same – not in the same situation, but we all have the same feelings of pain, suffering.

There's not a day that goes by when I see those images of that house, that foster home in Baie Verte. I tried to escape them many, many times, with my brother in the middle of winter. I remember it. I was dressing my brother up. I said let's go, let's run home. We didn't know we were on the Island. We didn't know. We thought if I went down the road, that's where I would see my mom and dad. I had no clue where I was.

I was stolen from this community, just because my mom was gone for a couple of days drinking and then they took me and they took my brother and they took my sister and they separated us. I didn't know what was going on. I was, probably, four or five. But you don't forget the people that took you. You don't forget the lies that they put in your head and say: Oh, you're gonna go to a good home. You're gonna have a room. They gave me candy and I got in the car with my brother.

I regret going into that car because as soon as we got to the foster home, not even two days, we were pushed downstairs in the basement. There's a cage that's in the basement, like a dog cage. That's where they put me if I didn't listen. Imagine that. Like a little crate; like a dog crate. So I was an animal to the foster parents. I wonder what kind of pet name they gave me. The screams that I kept crying for my mother night after night.

I forgot about that, she was supposed to translate. I keep forgetting about it. I'm sorry. I'll get her to translate.

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: (Inaudible.)

F. MILLEY: I know, I could write a Bible you know.

INTERPRETER NUNA: [Sheshatshiu-aimun spoken.]

F. MILLEY: It's almost like you wake up from a really bad dream as you sometimes look at government officials sitting in front of you, listening to your story, but they don't experience the feelings of that story. You hear me, you see me crying, but that's not the 47-year-old that's crying, that's the child that's inside that's crying.

When is it gonna end? Like, I worry about my nieces and nephews that are in the system now. They call me. They always say: Auntie, can you come and get us? Can you take care of us? 'Cause we wanna come home. I know my sister is not able and functional to take care of her own children because my sister was in the same system, and she was in Robert's Arm. And my sister went through no different than what we went through. She was beaten, sexually abused. The stories don't change. We were just a bunch of toys for the foster parents. That's all I felt like. I felt like I was a sexual toy to that god damn people that are in that system.

It's almost like we knew every morning whose turn it was going to be, when your clothes were gonna be ripped off and you were gonna get thrown in that bedroom. It was all – there was always – somebody was taking their turn. It was like nothing, like I was nothing. I felt so dirty. As I got older when I became 16, 17, I couldn't bear a guy even touching me or even – even asking me out on a date. But if everybody knew my father, we weren't allowed to date, if

everybody knew my father. I wasn't allowed outside the door, basically. I had to be inside the house by 8:30 – well, back then it was if the street lights came on, we had to be home. That's what it was like.

My father's been gone for eight years now. It's sad. My dad didn't get a chance to hear my story. I didn't want to burden my father of what I experienced, because my dad was so protective, and he felt sorry when we got in – he fought so hard to get us back. And my mother and father separated when we got taken away. Just for about a year or two, I think, if I could recall.

There was two people that fought to help my mother try to get us back into the community. And that was late Rose Gregoire and Mary May Osmond. I commend them to this day, 'cause they were fighters. They fought to get children back to their mothers, the Innu mothers. I thank them for that, 'cause God only knows where I'd be if I was still in the system. Sometimes I wonder; I probably would've committed suicide.

I thought about it a long time ago when I came back into my community. I was probably about seven and my mother stayed over for about, maybe about nine months, and due to her depression and the trauma and the alcoholism that she battled, she fell back and slipped into the bottle again. And we were taken again. I don't blame my mother, I really don't. My mother is still my mother. It's sad.

INTERPRETER NUNA: [Sheshatshiu-aimun spoken.]

F. MILLEY: I try to imagine where do I see myself, and what this Inquiry is going to provide to the government. I don't have those answers, but I'm damn well sure you should be able to get something out of it. Stop taking the children, would be one.

Maybe provide more services for my community. Have some more social workers, more plans for our families to stay together. Maybe have a detox centre here because we have a high rate of cocaine addiction in my community and that's the reason why you're seeing a lot of families break down. I see it first-hand because I see my own nieces. I see my own family falling apart because of cocaine addiction.

There's so much alcohol, bootlegging in my community for a small town, but you do have a lot of strong sober people in this community that are willing to fight back and I'm one of 'em. I am not afraid to stand up for my people and I'm not gonna sit back and watch the government ruin my people. I'm smart enough and understand you. I'm well-educated.

I'm still well-educated. I work for Innu Nation as an office administrator for eight years. Before that I worked with Nalcor. Before that I worked with Astaldi. Like, this is not something – those are like really good accomplishments, especially from a person who came from a system that almost killed me; and I'm being serious about that, because it kills your soul. But I had so much help, of building of who the person I am today and there's a lot of people in this room that helped me get there.

I always reach out. I'm the kind of person I will open my door in my office and allow you, just even if you wanna cry. There's people that come to my office asking, pleading, for us to help them with their children and I would have to direct them to IRT. I would have to direct them to somewhere I know I can trust and that's an Innu person.

I won't trust – I have nothing against any non-Indigenous people that are in this room, but I am gonna just be honest because the white people didn't – they betrayed the Innu and I'm gonna be honest about that. I'm not saying all of you did it, but I'm saying the government did it.

The Innu people have a hard time trusting anything that is non-Innu. The Innu know their own ways. We know our own path. You're sitting in a room that was created by the Innu – that's a huge accomplishment – which is the CYN. We have a school that's expanding at a rapid rate. We have high

school graduates graduating at a rapid rate. So we do have future-coming children that are still here. There's oh, probably about 600 or 700 youth in our school, but we still have a lot of youth that are not in our communities, that are outside – not with their own people.

You could almost write a book about Innu, of trauma. You can write a book about it in this community. There's every person in Sheshatshiu and in Natuashish is affected by a system that never worked. How many more children are gonna have to die? Because we have a high rate of suicides. We have so many young children that were going into a system, and just recently we just lost another young 18-year-old that could have been prevented, because he was in the system. The system didn't reach out to that young boy, I think.

I think more could be done with our children today. We could look at – maybe looking at better programs of, you know, recognizing the high rates of seeing their parents being high. So where does a child go if their parents are high? This community can only provide so much, and so much assistance to our people and with our – like, I know we have – like –

[Dialogue between F. Milley and Unidentified Speaker in Sheshatshiu-aimun.]

F. MILLEY: – EPH. We have that there, but I think we need something a little bit more advanced than that, that have more qualified people to have to be in that system. You can't just hire people from our community that are actually struggling with addiction too. Because I'm gonna be honest – I'm not afraid to be honest – I will open up this floor: We need better-qualified people to teach our people to be not drinking and not to be high when they're at work, raising our children, and that's honesty.

It happens in all organizations. We see our organizations like that too, because I know some of my staff have struggled with addiction and I have helped them. I've reached out, and they're sober because of that.

You have to step up. I know our people can do the same thing. I know, you know, Anastasia is a prime example. She's a Commissioner. That's a huge accomplishment for the Innu and I look at her as a mentor too, right? Everybody looks at somebody in a higher place.

I'm not looking for a pat on the back but if somebody reaches out to me for help, I will help them no matter what. I will look for resources of somehow; how to reach out. I know Sean Allen is there. He is my go-to person if something happens. IRT is there. I know who to contact for that too. We do have the resources, but I think we don't have enough money to train enough people at a fast rate.

We need more social workers. We need more Innu teachers. We need our own detox centre. I don't know if it will work here, maybe off-reserve, so we can help our families.

But drugs is another different question. But when you go to treatment, you're going to treatment to deal with trauma. Where is the root cause of your trauma? It comes from your childhood, of seeing the fighting, the violence, the rapes, the beatings, and then when you hear – when I heard about this Inquiry, because I work for Innu Nation, we knew it was gonna be very, very tough for our people. And I knew I was ready to speak at this table, because I'm a very outspoken person, and I'm not afraid to challenge the government.

So if you wanna take my child, I hope you can't. Because it's gonna take a community to take my child, because I will protect my child at all cost. My child will always remain in me – in my life, and I will teach him what he needs to learn. Because I teach my children what is right and what is wrong. And I can see a prime example of being a parent, a single parent, and I've always told my sons: No matter what, you can come to mom at any time if you're in trouble.

My children don't do drugs, and they don't drink, and they don't walk around at night. They're very disciplined. Because I'm afraid. I don't want them to go through what I went through, because I don't know – if my child got taken away now, from me – I don't know if I could survive. And I'm gonna be honest with you, I don't think I could, mentally. Because my children are my driving force in life.

I wake up every morning at 6 a.m., get my children ready at 7 o'clock in the morning so they can be ready for school. And I'm at home after work and I sit down, and I make sure that they have – all their needs are met. Not every mother can do that. And I'm going to school next year, and I'm gonna be studying, you know, project management. Not very many females can do that. That's a success story. I've completed all my advance programs too. It took me 18 certificates, and I completed every one of them. That's a success story.

I'm not saying my community is gonna fall. I think we're in the right direction because we have social workers that are training in my office right now that – I'm not charging them anything, but they're going to school in our culture room. I rented it out to them so they can – we can have successful social workers. That's an accomplishment.

So I don't look at the failures of my community, I look at the positive things that we can achieve together as a team. And I think the Inquiry is gonna open up doors and let the province – not so much as the province, but the federal government see too, where they failed. And they should apologize to our community, both communities. They should be apologizing to me for the system that broke, because I'm the one that actually reached out to them and said: How can you help me, when I was 16 and I was turned away at the door? So your system doesn't work.

I don't wanna take up too much of your time, but I'd like to point out, maybe, some of the recommendations I'd like to give to the Government.

We look at some – the number one thing that I'd like to recommend is to make sure that our people understand that our culture is pure. We have an Innu language that is 10,000 years old, if not older. I wanna preserve that. I want my sons to always understand that they are Innu, and they will always be Innu, and the system will never take my children. That's one of my recommendations; that you'll never take my children, as long as I'm alive.

I know that I'm strong enough today that I can fight back the demons that are inside me too, because I feel dirty from the foster system. When you talk about integration, culturalism, especially trying to find a curriculum that would work for our system, my recommendation is to make sure that we put more money into Nutshimit. Taking our children into Nutshimit because we know – and especially with these children that are in the system, bring them home.

They don't need to be out there anymore because Roddickton – I've seen it first-hand. You could see that some of these parents – even when I lived in Deer Lake, I've seen a lot of the children that were there. They don't even speak a word of Innu, but they recognized me, they said: Hi Flo, and I spoke Innu to them. I said: Oh. We don't speak that language anymore, they said. I said: Why? How can a white person speak my language?

Maybe we should teach the foster parents to speak Innu? Maybe that's another recommendation. Come to our community, learn it. It's not hard to really pick up a book. We do have an Innu dictionary. I'm sure you can figure it out how to use the Apple products for that. Maybe we can do some sort of program online. We do have YouTube. We could use other programs for that too. Utilize free technology, right?

And I think every person that has suffered should be compensated. I think I should be compensated for the pain and suffering that this system has broken me, because I have never asked for it, but I think I'm gonna be demanding it. I don't think the foster parents should get away with any more people that

they can hurt because I'm not the only person that was in that foster system. I wasn't alone.

When you talk about community engagement and collaboration with our people, try to introduce to some sort of Indigenous programs; start here. Don't start on the Island, start here, because it comes from here. We could have cultural events, consultations that will work. And I think having more homes, better and bigger homes, so our foster parents here in our community can take care of these children.

Let's say CSSD gets a call – I've gotten calls, but I can't take a child right now 'cause I don't have a home. I'm just still waiting, right. But if I did have a home, I'd gladly take a child, because that would mean I'm saving some child that's not gonna be sent out to – on the Island, or God only knows, on this planet.

We need to have student support programs that works, and mentorship programs in our school systems to discuss real issues. What if you do drink, what if you do fall into this when you become an adult? Prepare them. Prevention is key. Prepare our children to never to be taken again. So prepare them in our schools. Don't hide the truth, right. Don't sugar-coat it. Be honest and be open; I think our children will understand it better.

Language revitalization, that's a big word, right? I offered – to offer courses and resources to promote Indigenous languages, like in Innu, to CSSD. Get our social workers to speak Innu too. So that should be an asset, but it should be mandatory too, to speak it, if you wanna work with the Innu.

Create better policies and protection policies and practices for our people. I know I've seen so many policies in this community being created, being shunned, some don't work, some don't work but, you know, it's gonna take a while to get a policy that's going to work because we're not – Innu are not used to policies. We're used to listening to our Elders; and our Elders are our storytellers, our Elders are our teachers. So, I guess, the other generations aren't like – I'm gonna probably be a teacher, to my children.

And to always had feedback. We need to have an action plan that's going to work into our systems and have good, positive feedback. Where do we go from here with this Inquiry? Because I know the next generation, we're gonna have another inquiry, and I can guarantee it. This is not gonna be the only inquiry, because we still have children in the system

Anyways, I wanna thank you for your time.

Thank you.

COMMISSIONER QUPEE: [Sheshatshiu-aimun spoken.]

F. MILLEY: I'm just gonna speak in my language, because I'm pretty good at speaking that too.

[Sheshatshiu-aimun spoken.]

I'm going to translate for what I said there.

I was just mentioning to Commissioner Anastasia Qupee about having child psychologists more in our community because we need that. We need it more in our school systems too, really good therapists to have on the ground all the time because I know there's – we have counsellors, we have people that are working in Brentwood, but we need qualified therapists here to deal with trauma, because there's so much coming.

And for addictions. We need addictions counsellors on the ground now, actually. Not tomorrow, but we need them now. We need social workers, we need teachers, we need something that's going to work from our community and that's what I wanted to add to my last comments. And I wanna thank you for that.

Tshinashkumitin.

COMMISSIONER QUPEE: And I was just saying to Florence, just thinking back when

she first came to speak, it was very difficult for her to speak, and today it's totally different. I see a lot of strength in her, and for her to come and not just talk about what the problems are, but also in thinking about what would work and some of the things that we need in our community – I think that that really shows that you're – we're thinking. We're thinking about what we want for our community.

So I really appreciate her coming and sharing her experience and as strong as she is, that she continue to be on her healing journey. And I'm proud of her.

Thank you. Tshinashkumitin.

So it's 2:30.

[Sheshatshiu-aimun spoken.]

We're gonna finish up for the day. We have a person – somebody that's coming in 3 o'clock for a private session. So we'll continue on tomorrow morning 9:30 for a public speaker.

So Elizabeth will do the closing prayer.

ELDER PENASHUE: [Sheshatshiu-aimun spoken.]