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Statement by Dena Joseph collected by Rachel George on October 16, 2014

Dena Joseph

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General Information

Private or Public Statement? - Private

Statement Provider: Dena Joseph

Date: October 16, 2014

Location: Presque Isle, Maine

Previous Statement? N/A

Statement Gatherer: Rachel George

Support Person: N/A

Additional Individuals Present: Heather Westleigh

Recording Format: Video

Length of Recording: 28:29

Recording

RG: Okay, it is October 16, 2014. We are here in Presque Isle, Maine at the Aroostook Band of Micmacs. My name is Rachel George. I'm here today with:

DJ: Dena Joseph.

RG: Fantastic.

HW: Heather Westleigh.

RG: Great. And the file number is A-201410-00108. Dena, have you been informed, understood and signed the consent form?

DJ: Yes.

RG: Great. And I have to let you know that, if at any point during this interview or, uh, Statement, you indicate that there's a child or an elder currently in need of protection or that there's an imminent risk of serious bodily harm or death to an identifiable person or group, including yourself, that that information may not be protected as confidential.

DJ: Okay.

RG: Okay. Is there anywhere that you want to start, or would you like me to just ask you some general questions?

DJ: You can ask me some general questions, 'cause I don't know. *(laughs)*

RG: Okay. What brought you to become involved with the TRC and REACH process?

DJ: My cousin, Krista. She is also the other organizer. She was doing it and I could tell she was really excited about her opportunity but she was alone and she was starting to get overwhelmed and I was a stay-at-home Mom, not currently working or in school, taking a break from school, so I decided to approach Esther, pretty — *(laughs)* I just kind of asked for the job. And she gave it to me.

RG: And what does your job encompass? What do you do as a community organizer?

DJ: We arrange the peace and healing circles every two weeks. We also help arrange community events, and right now we're doing a REACH, a youth group, twice a week with both age groups they have here. We're doing a lot of work with them. Like, if you look around the room, we have all these things they have been making, like the silhouette projects, like about self-identity and cultural identity. And they've also made Dream For Their Community colleges and stuff like that, trying to get in touch with, not just our community, but also about themselves and how they feel about themselves.

RG: Can you tell me about some of the things that are coming up in working with the youth?

DJ: Um, we have an art show at the end of the week — at the end of the month — about all the stuff they have made. And they're gonna do, we're going to have a slideshow of all the things they've done, and a raffle. And also, they're going to incorporate some suicide prevention work in with it. It's not our program, but it's kind of like they've been helping us a lot with what we're doing and donating some hours to help us out and whatnot with this project by lending a worker, so that's been really nice.

RG: That's great. Can you talk about the need for this kind of process in your community? A Truth and Reconciliation process?

DJ: I would say its been an extreme need but, unfortunately, it's hard to get people to talk and it's still hard, just being told flat out, 'No, don't want to talk,' 'Don't want anything to do with it,' 'This doesn't pertain to me,' 'This doesn't have anything to do with me.' 'I didn't grow up in foster care.' Or, 'I didn't grow up in here,' or, you know what I mean, but what I've noticed is a lot of us are descendants from people who were in residential schools and like, elders that have already passed on. I don't think, um, people are realizing yet how much that matters or how much that affects them.

RG: What would you say are some of the reasons for that hesitation to want to be involved in this process?



DJ: I think just not wanting to have to talk about past experiences and wanting to avoid bringing up uncomfortable subjects. That seems to be the biggest wall we're hitting. Or, people just honestly thinking it has nothing to do with them at all. Especially with our elders, that was — We've been to our elders so many times, and we're still just hitting a wall that we're having a hard time breaking. We finally got one elder to agree to do a statement, but she can't do it today. So. *(laughs)* But, I mean, that's kind of — It's just hard, and they don't want to talk. Like, even when we visit them they don't really talk back.

This past time, this last visit was actually our most successful, because we actually got two or three people talking. But yeah.

RG: What are some of the challenges that you're finding in organizing within your community?

DJ: The space. Trying to have a solid space that doesn't get over-, or pushed out due to some other meeting or commitments they have. And, the fact that we're scattered, we're not like one home base like the rest of the communities in Maine. We're here, we're in Littleton, we're in Connor, we're in Caribou, so it's really hard to gather people away. We're not as in touch with people in Littleton. There are people there who are interested in learning more about the TRC, but we haven't been able to get up to them yet and, uh, reach out to them.

And it's just difficult if you don't have the resources or whatnot to get around and about to everybody 'cause we're like, between Littleton and Connor, it's like a good, you know, almost two-hour drive. *(laughs)* So, we're really spaced out, and I'd say that is definitely trouble. And, we're new. We're really new. Well, like, not new, new, but in comparison, we got Federal recognition in '91 so it's still ... It's difficult. *(laughs)*

RG: What are some of the strengths about organizing in your community?

DJ: The strengths is the people that want to do it, really want to do it. And, the people that are ready, you can tell, they've been waiting. They have literally been waiting for something like this to happen. And, that feels good to see. Or, when we see someone have that moment, I guess, of realization — which I've seen in a few people — when they learn about the intergenerational trauma and historical trauma and realize that they're not 'screwed up,' I guess, you know what I mean? Like feeling like you're, um, so many times, we give the addicts and alcoholics in the community a hard time. We tend to push them out and ignore them. So, they take a lot of that in and think it's their fault, and what I've noticed a few of them that when they've seen various films or during our presentations and they have that moment, I guess it makes it worthwhile, realizing that it wasn't just something that came out of nowhere.

RG: Can you tell me more about various experiences that you've had in organizing over the past few months?

DJ: Um, one of the most powerful experiences was one of the first circles I've done. It was back toward the beginning of the year, and we had a circle of probably seven or eight women and one guy. And, out of that circle, only one of us had not been sexually abused. And, it wasn't the guy. And, I guess that statistic — that number of people — really was the first time I realized just how badly this it's needed and how badly people here — or Native people — have been mistreated.

Because, I feel like, in comparison to non-Natives, a lot more Natives have been sexually, physically and emotionally abused. And it was really powerful to see that and to have a girl in the group — There was a young woman who talked about her abuse for the first time. And she was like, 'I've never realized that I'm having the trouble I'm having because of what happened to me when I was a kid.' She had never put that connection together. Because she had been sexually abused as a child and did attempt to tell somebody, but nothing happened and now he's in the community. And she realized when she started seeing him again, that she ended up picking up her addiction again, but she never made the correlation that that may have been what triggered her into a relapse. And that was powerful to see that. You know, she had never in her whole life put that together, or, she had been in foster care, too, and she never thought it impacted her the way she did until she started, until she went to that circle. And I guess it's experiences like those that really keep me going. Especially on weeks when it can be discouraging; but then, it's always the little moments that really help keep you going. *(laughs)*

RG: Um, hmm. Can you tell me more about your community in general?

DJ: Um, I don't know. We're close, but not close, at the same time. Community events are seeing a decline, rapidly, here. Um, all across the board. Um, but I still think there is a resilience in this community of people who look out for one another. Like, even though we're not all close, when something bad happens to somebody they usually rally up and help that person. Like, once my sister was jumped by a man and two women, and she was pinned to the ground and punched and kicked and when it was — at the time, she was a teenager and they were adults — and at the time, the whole community banded around the house that the people were hiding in until the cops showed up, so they could take them away. Like the entire, everybody, there must have been like 30 or 40 people outside, just waiting. And that was, that's kind of, I think, is my community's biggest strength, is that willingness to support each other when there is nobody else. The cops probably never would have even tried, from my experience. And they did, they got a slap on the wrist, the people that did it. *(laughs)*

RG: Um, can you tell me a little bit about the dynamics that you see between your community and the community in Presque Isle, the non-Native community in Presque Isle?

DJ: It's interesting. Um, I think with certain populations, it is a very positive relationship. Like, um, in the artistic, art community — You know, there is a growing art community here. And you know, with, maybe UMPI — Maybe, sometimes, not all the time. *(laughs)* Because they're the ones that shut down the Native center. It's hard. It's troubled still. There's definitely a lot of

stigma. I got a lot of, um, I'd say if, when I was bullied in middle school and whatnot, I did hear a lot of racial comments and, um, teachers I notice, tend to not do anything about those comments here. It's often ignored or put to the side, and there is a stigma that came to being on base, too. If you were a kid from base you already had a label attached to you, and so that's kind of — And there is still a lot of ignorance. Like, just in my working and school and everything, there's just, it's really hard to handle, and it's there. And I don't think it's so much that this community is racist, it's just that they're still very uneducated.

RG: Have you seen a shift in that perspective?

DJ: Slow. I'd say that there is a slow shift.

RG: What would you say is the reasoning behind that shift?

DJ: I think, part of it is now people just know more. They're more educated on social media and whatnot. We're not really, you know, you can hear what we're saying a little bit more. And, I think, just as the time is advancing, it's getting a little better. 'Cause I don't, like I said, um, it's slowly ... like, from my experience in school, compared to my mother's experiences in school are drastically different. I did get bullied a little bit but not that much. I was mostly ignored or left to myself and were my friends. But, my mother was outright, like walking down the halls, she was called a 'squaw,' or all these awful things or bullied or pushed around, so it is getting better from then. It's not as direct — But now, they all do cyber bullying, and I don't know anything about that. (*laughs*) I don't know anything! No I don't know if that is a problem! That's something I wish I knew, but from the youth I work with I haven't heard much.

RG: What do you think is needed to help further a more beneficial relationship between communities? Here, specifically.

DJ: Between the non-Native community? Probably more events that include both sides. Trying to welcome non-Natives a little bit more to, like, our Pow Wows or gatherings. Or, having, I guess, feeling more welcomed at non-Native events, 'cause sometimes I feel like I don't fit in when I'm in a pure non-Native environment. It's a hard time, to feel a little comfortable. I know that's just from my own head, but at the same time it's still hard to ignore that really uncomfortable feeling.

RG: Yeah. Can you tell me about, um, how your identity has been impacted by growing up and living here? Identity and sense of belonging?

DJ: I would say it has impacted it, because I've never felt like I fully belonged here, I guess. Um, and it's something I've always struggled with, not really knowing where my home base is,

because we, like I said, we've moved around a lot. Before they established this area, we were constantly moving, moving, moving. And then now we've been here, but it's still like, since I haven't always been from here, I don't feel like I fully belong, but that's not just me, because all of us, we've never been from here, I guess, if that makes sense, because of how new we are. We weren't here before the year '99. Like, base was — I think they started moving us in in '99 or '98, or something like that, I forget. So, even though it's been over a decade, almost two decades, it's still not quite, I guess, it doesn't quite feel like home. 'Cause, the houses are in disrepair. It's just chaos all over the place. The drinking and drugs is getting worse, every year. So, it's hard to feel like home sometimes. But, then, all my family is here and that's what keeps me here. And my mom, my grandmother, my aunts and, you know, my cousins, they're all in that little section of area. *(points and laughs)*

RG: Can you tell me about how your sense of identity and belonging has been impacted by your ties to your community? And your culture.

DJ: Um, I would say my belonging to my culture is starting to get better. I would say, I've never before ... When I was growing up — I grew up in a non-Native area, I grew up in Lewiston Maine — for my young adulthood. That was um, interesting. You know, I would say, I definitely didn't feel like I belonged there. Because, I think, people are a little more vocal about their racism there, and even — I was young, too, too young to get it, but I felt it, in a way. My aunt on my father's side, who — he's white — you know, they definitely made it known they didn't like that I was Native. So, when I did come here — Even though it's broken and it needs, you know, it still feels better to be around people like you.

RG: Absolutely.

DJ: And I think also, as I'm getting older, I'm starting to realize how much my community needs help and how much I want to get back in touch with my culture and my people because it feels, I feel much more confident in this, and like, I belong to this more than I've ever belonged in a church or in the non-Native communities that I grew up in. It feels a little better. But, like I said, in our physical community, it doesn't. *(laughs)*

RG: Yeah. Um, there's two questions I want to ask you.

DJ: Okay.

RG: And I'm going to pose them both to you and you can tell me which one you feel more comfortable going in first?

DJ: Yeah.

RG: I would love to hear about your vision for your community, and I would also love to hear your perspective on the Child Welfare system. So, I'm going to ask you both but I want to know which one you want to talk about first.

DJ: Um, I guess I'll talk about the vision.



RG: Okay.

DJ: Um. I vision that we have better housing, not filled with mold and dirt and that are crumbling, and that my community starts to heal slowly, but maybe, surely. Where more services are made, more rehabilitation services. More, everything really. And trying to become self-sufficient. Like, learning about food sovereignty and all these new things coming to light. Those I feel like, could be the best possible thing that would ever happen here. Um, but I don't know how ready this community is. But that would be my dream, is to see us working together instead of against each other.

RG: What do you mean when you say you're not sure how ready your community is?

DJ: I don't know how welcome they would be to the idea of food sovereignty. Because I know we've had our Micmac farm up there, but the Micmac farm is struggling, and I know not everyone is utilizing it, and I'm guilty of that, too. So it's hard to see how that would happen here, I think. And also, the services are not there. Like, my sister is an alcoholic and wants, decided she wanted help, but was told she needed to wait six months. And a lot can happen in six months. Someone can die in six months. And, she's still drinking. She's still an alcoholic. Well, she'll always be an alcoholic but. Yeah.

RG: What would you say are some of the major needs for your community that you want to see happen, right now?

DJ: Right now? More services for addicted and the addicted and in trying to make them feel more welcome at ceremonies, and maybe they would go. Because, if you show up and you drink the night before and you smell like booze, then nobody wants you around. But people often forget those are the people that need it the most.

RG: And, when you think about those services, what do they look like? Are they community-run? Are they people coming in from outside the community to present or to provide a service?

DJ: I think a Native-based rehabilitation service, because like a lot of them go to the State ones, like in Bangor or friggin' Limestone, which is a joke, *(laughs)* and I don't know, I think there needs to be a more Native-based, spiritually and culturally and everything like that, and you know, run by Native people, so people going in there feel comfortable and not, you know, so they still feel at home, when they're gone. And I think that would be make huge difference.

RG: What else do you envision for your community? What do you want to see happen?

DJ: What do I want to see happen? I don't know, like new houses. Like I said before, new houses. More resources. More, well, they are working on more youth programs 'cause I know

the youth is a very vital age to be doing work, and they're working on a new building and whatnot and so that's been going, moving along, and also just more, um, more community members getting in touch more with their spirituality and culture and wanting to know and wanting to be a part of it. Especially with the youth; I think they're a little separated from it.

They're all like, Myspace. Not Myspace. Oh my God! I just dated myself! (*covers face and laughs*) Facebook! I don't know why I said MySpace, holy crap! And Twitter. They're just completely immersed in this culture, this modern culture. It's not a bad thing — They can probably find a way to help utilize that for the better. But, yeah. They're becoming a little disconnected I think, 'cause I did the same thing, I was very disconnected as a teenager. I wasn't sitting around smudging and praying, and, you know, I was out and being a teenager (*laughs*) which was nothing good, but yeah. I don't know what else.

RG: Can you tell me about your perspectives on the Child Welfare system?

DJ: I don't know. I know that it's... from the people that we've been talking to, it seems like it had done them more harm than good. And, I don't know, because, like I said, I've never been in foster care or in there, but I know we were always kind of on the radar, still. We were investigated a few times growing up and whatnot. Never anything took place, but like, my mom brought my sister once into a hospital — She had a dirty neck but was sick, but I guess she had some dirt on her neck, and it was late at night, I guess. But then, my mom was reported and made to take parenting classes for months, because her daughter had a dirty neck, which I don't think would have happened to a non-Native child. Maybe I'm wrong.

But I think they seen my mother and they seen my sister and just assumed the worst. And, um, I think that's why we were reported as much as we were growing up. My mother was never a drunk. She never physically abused us, and it wasn't perfect, it wasn't the greatest. I mean, some of her boyfriends were emotionally abusive and sometimes physically abusive, but it was never to the point, I felt, that ever warranted us being taken away. Which, I think, she was always deathly, she was always afraid of it, and I think the Child Welfare system is a little biased here. 'Cause a lot of people do get involvement and sometimes it is needed, like with severe drug use and neglect, but I do think a lot of time it's, um, smaller offenses tend to get bigger consequences, in comparison. 'Cause I knew a little, um, there's been people I've known, non-Native communities where their kids are just getting completely, completely need an intervention and they don't get it and then here, it's like a kid shows up and they look dirty and they've got DHS calling them, saying, 'Hey, what's going on here?'

I don't know. It just seems ridiculous. But, I think also, from what I've learned from my husband, who is an ICWA director, is that the relationship between the State and the Micmacs is improving. A lot. In the time that he's been working there. So, that's promising. And he says he can see an attitude shift from the workers. He says there's probably still one or two that are really hard to deal with, but he says that he sees a shift changing. Um, like, recently the Micmacs decided to drop, I forget what it's called, PTRs, or something like that? Something about termination of rights —

RG: Oh, TPRs.



DJ: They decided to not do that anymore, and he was so stressed out, thinking that it was going to cause a big upset with DHHS, and it didn't. They were like, 'Okay. That's okay.' And, he was shocked at how well it happened, (*laughs*) because he was really expecting a fight, and I guess in that sense, they're letting the Tribe take a little more control over what's happening. So that is the positive, in that it's starting to get better and not worse. (*laughs*)

RG: Is there anything else you want to add about your experience as a community organizer in the Micmac community?

DJ: Um, I think it's been very ... it's been a really incredible experience, and just when, when I first signed up for it, I don't think I realized how big this was and, sometimes it's overwhelming and sometimes it's incredibly rewarding and seeing, especially dealing with the people who've been waiting for it for so long. But it's also difficult, because you hear a lot of difficult things.

You hear a lot of people's pain and hurt, and that part is difficult. It's hard not to take that with you when you're done for the day and whatnot. Or, hearing people's stories triggered a lot of my own experiences growing up and it's hard to try to separate what happened to me and what happened to them and not, like I think, the first month I started working for REACH, I struggled, because I having a lot of triggers and flashbacks to a time when I was sexually abused, and because we'd been hearing a lot about sexual abuse. And now, I've realized that this process has probably helped me more than anything. It's made me able to be more comfortable. I can look somebody in the face and be like, 'I was sexually abused,' and, this time last year, you know, nobody knew. So I think, in that sense it's been a really incredible thing. Because I know if we can do it, and Krista can do it, then our people can, too. Slowly. Surely.

RG: Thank you so much for your time.

DJ: You're welcome. (*laughs*) I'm starting to feel a little awkward now.

RG: You shouldn't feel awkward. Do you want me to stop the recording?

DJ: Sure.

END OF RECORDING