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Statement by Wendy Newell Dyer collected by Rachel George on January 12, 2015

Wendy Newell Dyer

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General Information

Private or Public Statement? - Private

Statement Provider: Wendy Newell Dyer

Date: January 12, 2015

Location: Little Deer Isle, Maine

Previous Statement? N/A

Statement Gatherer: Rachel George

Support Person: N/A

Additional Individuals Present: N/A

Recording Format: Audio

Length of Recording: 40:10

Recording

RG: All right, it is January 12, 2015. We are here in Little Deer Isle, ME. My name is Rachel George and I am here today with?

WND: Wendy Newell Dyer.

RG: Perfect. And the File Number is M-201407-00076. Wendy, have you been informed, understood and signed the consent form?

WND: Yes.

RG: Perfect. And I have to let you know that if at any point during this recording you indicate that there's a child or an elder currently in need of protection or that there is 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. Do you understand?

WND: Okay. Yes.

RG: All right. I will open it up to you, to start wherever you feel most comfortable.

WND: Well, from the beginning I guess.

RG: Okay.

WND: I have known since as long as I can remember that I was adopted. I don't exactly remember when I was told or how I was told, I just always knew. I was actually adopted seventeen days after my birth through the Good Samaritan Agency in Bangor. My biological mother was white, and my father was Passamaquoddy, is Passamaquoddy. At the time, my mother's parents, my grandparents, wanted nothing to do with the black bastard's baby so they sent her away when she was fifteen to have me and to give me away. And, even in my adoption record, there was question from the beginning who my father was because they didn't want to acknowledge that their daughter had been with a Passamaquoddy man. They even tried to say that a man in Eastport, a white man in Eastport was my father, and he said there was no possible way that he could be my father, but my father was actually never told, never contacted, never knew anything about me.

I was adopted and brought to this island, Little Deer Isle, which back in the early 60's was 98% white with an occasional non-white person that would come in the summer. My mother, my adopted mother, has lived on this island her entire life and had really not travelled that much or been exposed to people from other cultures and other races, and because of the time that it was, at that – in my young years, my mother held a lot of stereotypes towards anyone that wasn't white Christian. So I grew up having these unfair stereotypes in my mind of Native American people – who they were, what they were, as well as every other racial group out there.

Luckily, in my mother's life, as she progressed into the 90's and 2000's, she no longer held those stereotypes and generalizations that she did back in the 60's and 70's, but that's what I grew up with. I knew from my earliest – knowing that I was adopted that I was probably part Native American/part Indian, and there were whisperings about that through my entire childhood. People always whispering, "Is she adopted?" "Is she part Indian?" But, I didn't really know, and I don't – I don't know that my adoptive parents knew. My mother – my adoptive mother, as far as she was concerned was my mother. I was adopted, but that was something that I didn't talk about. I didn't – it wasn't acknowledged. I was her child regardless of the fact that I had this whole other biological family somewhere else.

So, you know, from the earliest age, I was questioning who I was and where did I come from. I was so different from the family I was raised in in that I was drawn to the woods. I would spend hours in these woods around my home, by myself, just in my own world. And, my mother would often complain and, you know, ask me why I would want to go out there and be alone, and why – you know, why do you want to do that? And, I couldn't really explain it. It's just where I felt most at peace and at home was in these woods surrounding my home. When I was eight, my adopted father left one day. He had been having an affair with my adopted mother's best friend, and one day he just left, and basically left my life. In retrospect, I have reason to believe that I was probably sexually molested by him. My sister, my adopted sister, was who was his stepchild. I don't have any clear recollection of it, but there are enough bits and pieces and with what my sister has shared, there probably was some things that happened



to me that either I've chosen to forget or I just was so young that it didn't leave a memory. But, at the time when he left, it was devastating. It was – being adopted and knowing that someone gave you away is hard enough to deal with, but then... *(pause)* when it happens a second time... *(pause)* it's very difficult to deal with. Even though now I can look back on it and realize it was probably the best thing that he did leave. I just had to deal with all those feelings, emotions and thoughts about being deserted a second time. And, it left my mother very bitter and angry and she had a lot of unresolved grief, not only from my father leaving but from the fact before she adopted me – five years before she had adopted me, she lost her 15-year-old brother and then four months later lost her husband from complications from back surgery and left with two small children. And also during that time, she had carried two babies full-term for nine months only to have them die within a day. So I was adopted by her and her second husband because she couldn't allow herself to go through that again; it was too painful so that's why they chose to adopt me... *(pause)*

I spent so much of my early life just trying to figure out who I was, not knowing where I came from, trying to make sense of this world and my life and my situation and my place in this world, along with all the things that happened within my family. I always wanted to know who my parents were and where I came from. It just was a burning desire, but it was not something that I could verbalize especially to my parents. I knew that my mother would feel a sense of betrayal, that she wouldn't understand why I longed to know where I came from because in her mind she was my mother, and later on when I did actually find my birth parents, she took it as that she wasn't good enough, that she didn't do enough, and I had to go look for someone else, but it wasn't that; it was something so much deeper. I mean we all have a yearning and a desire to know where we came from.

I always had this vision in my head of, you know, who my parents were. You kind of blow them up in your mind that they're rock stars or actresses or famous. Something, you know, extravagant...

And, but then as I settled in my teen years, I got really involved with sports, which really kept me going through school. And, in my early days of school, I got teased and tormented, especially in the summer – spring and summer months when I was, you know, two or three shades darker than I am right now with my long straight black hair. You know, people called me Squaw. It was my nickname. People would do the little woo, woo, woo, woo whenever they were around me. They were just – they had a whole list of names that they called me. And, even when I tried to talk to the teachers and say, you know, this really hurts me, being called a Squaw, I was just told to stop being so sensitive and to, you know, to get over it and just deal with it, and so there was never a feeling that it was wrong, that they were calling me those names, and I didn't know at that time – in my adult life, I realize how wrong it was and how wrong it was for my teachers to dismiss those cries.

After high school, I became an unwed mother at 19, and I think once I had my first child was really when I had this strong yearning to find out who my parents were. And, my son, my older son, is a lot like me. He's extremely dark. Even when he was born, he was very dark, and people commented on the color of his skin. He's actually probably the darkest family member I have on my father's side. And, because I had him, I really began to think about, you know, he's the only human being that I know that I am genetically connected to. He's the first person in 19 years, and I just started at that time to just want to know but not having any idea of how I would ever begin the process. I then got married, not to his father but to someone else, and I've had two more children. And it was after I had my third son that I knew I had to do something. I knew that I needed to at least try to find out who I was and where I came from. And, I happened to be watching Oprah Winfrey, and the whole show was about adoption, and it was about adoptees finding their parents, and the key thing that I took from the show was that she said you needed to contact whatever agency it was that you were adopted through. And that that would be the first step, and I got through watching the show, and because of my adoption, and it's such a taboo subject, I didn't even know where I was adopted from. I didn't even know my birth weight or what time I was born; I mean, I just didn't know any of it. So the hardest thing for me to do was to ask my adopted mom, who had been through so much, and whom all I had ever tried to do was make happy and to take away her pain and sorrow, to have to ask her, you know, that key piece of information was really difficult. And, as I expected, she took it very – it was very hard for her to hear that I wanted to go find them. She really questioned herself and her parenting, and I tried to reassure her.

Once I knew I was adopted through the Good Samaritan Agency, I was able to meet with someone from there, and they gave me all of the non-identifying information that they could, and they gave me the options how I could find the name of my biological mother, which would have been to gain consent from her and my adoptive parents for me to know her name or I could ask my adoptive parents what her name was because it was on my adoption certificate, which I didn't even know I had one. So then I had to come back a second time and ask her that name. From there – the story how I found them I guess isn't all that important. I was able to track my mother down eventually in North Carolina. She gave me the name of my father, and I contacted him once I knew his name. My first conversation with him – I asked if he knew my mother, and I said I think I might be your daughter. And, he said, "No, no, that's not possible". And, so I just hung up the phone. With my own experience of being an unwed mother and the father not wanting to be involved in my son's life, I just chalked it up that he was another typical man not wanting to own up. I didn't tell him my name or where I was from so as soon as I hung up the phone, and he had a couple of minutes to really think about it, he realized in his mind when I was conceived, and he would have been home on Christmas break from college, and that I very well indeed could be his daughter, but he didn't know my name, and he didn't know where I was, and so he was really frantic for a few days. But, in the meantime, I had written him a letter, and in the letter I had told him a little bit about who I was and what I was looking for and that if he wasn't my father perhaps he knew who my mother might have been hanging out with at that time. And, he said when he received my letter, it was a great sense of relief because he had been frantically trying to figure out how he was going to find out who I was and where I came from.



But, still, for about four months, he kept me a secret from his family. He said that he didn't want to tell them about me until he had a paternity test, but yet he wouldn't schedule one or make time for one so it dragged on for about four months, and eventually we did have the paternity test, and we did find out that he was my biological father. It was 98.9% conclusive, which is as high as they go.

In my mind, I had never thought about what happens after you find them. In my mind I thought that would be, you know, it. And I didn't realize until I began the process that the work that I had to do once I knew who I was and where I came from was far more difficult than I had ever imagined. The very first thing was the sense of relief knowing that I was part Indian, knowing that I was Passamaquoddy, and I wanted to know so much about what it meant to be Passamaquoddy, but I felt like a stranger, not just amongst my family, but even amongst the Tribe. I didn't know anyone. I didn't know anything about the culture or the traditions, the history. I didn't know any of it, but I wanted to know all of it. But, at first I was kind of on a high just to have found them and to finally know my racial heritage. But, after a short time, I began to feel really broken and disfrag... well, I don't know what the word is. I felt broken, and I felt I didn't know my place. I was a little timid about asking different questions about the traditions. I basically -- what I learned in the beginning was from what I observed or experienced, but I didn't really ever have anyone to sit down with and to talk about, you know, what does it mean to be Passamaquoddy? What is our history?

Right from the very beginning, my first most painful realizations was that I didn't know the language, and, that was such an important part of the culture to know – to at least be able to understand the language even if I couldn't speak it. My three siblings can all understand the language; they can't speak it, but my father's – most of my father's entire life has been about trying to preserve the language, and he's known throughout the State and in the Native world for his work, and here I was his oldest child, and I don't – I still don't know the language. I pick up words here and there, but I – if I'm in a room full of people, and someone's speaking in Passamaquoddy, everyone else will laugh at the end, and I just kind of sit there because I have no idea of what's being said. And as I learn more and more about the traditions, and as I've had my own experiences, I realize that the loss of language is something that will leave a void within me for the rest of my life, and I don't know at this point in my life if I have the ability to learn much more than bits and pieces of the language...

I've thought a lot about how my life would be if I had been raised within the culture, not just necessarily by my Passamaquoddy parent but within the culture, if I had been born after 1978, if I had been allowed to be raised by someone, and I can't let my mind go there very often because it's not reality, but I do think about it from time to time. But, maybe if I had been raised within the culture, I wouldn't have taken some of the things for granted that has become very important in my life. I remember the first time I heard the drum, I went up on Cadillac Mountain for a sunrise service on Earth Day, and the four representatives from the four Tribes

of Maine had come together for the service, and I heard the drum, and it was as if – it was as if I had finally come home. And even though I had never heard the drum, I felt as if I had always had heard it. And even though I wasn't raised within the culture, because of my DNA, because of my genetics, so much of who I am is native, is Passamaquoddy, even though I wasn't raised in the culture. To this day, I find the most peace in the woods and by the shore and by myself, and I live a fairly solitude life by my own choosing...

But now, twenty-five years after connecting, I realize that my spiritual foundation, though I didn't know for twenty-five years about that, for the last twenty-five years I have, and I – many tribal members that know me now think of me as a very spiritual person within the tribe. It's been hard within my own family to feel part – completely a part of my biological father especially on the Passamaquoddy side. I know that they love me and that I have a place in their life, but a lot of times I just feel like a friend of the family...

And, that's been a hard thing for me to come to accept because I think of them all as my flesh and blood, but it's obvious through their actions and words that I'm welcome to come and be with them, but I'm not truly 100% family. I just turned 50, and it marked the time when I knew them for as long as I didn't know them, and in my mind, I guess I had magical thinking imagining that they would have a party for me like they do for everyone else in the family, but my birthday came and went, and no one acknowledged it... And, it made me realize that the life of an adoptee is a lifelong struggle. It's not something that you ever get over. It's not something that you ever completely accept because there are things along the way that come up that remind you – that remind you of the path that you travelled...

One of the things that I hope will come out of all of this is that some of the recommendations that people make will follow through. And, one of the biggest things that I would like, I would like to be able to look at a birth certificate that says my father's name and my mother's name and that my father is Passamaquoddy and that my mother is Caucasian because the one I have right now says that I'm Caucasian, says that my adoptive mother is Caucasian, my adoptive father is Caucasian, but that's not who I am. I'm half Passamaquoddy, and I live more as a Passamaquoddy than I do as a white person. And, to look at my birth certificate and not be able to have a birth certificate that tells who I really am, I would give anything to be able to do that. Adoptees are treated like second-class citizens. You know, we're the only people that have to live in secrecy or can't fully acknowledge who we are and where we came from...

For me, I had to put myself out there to be able to learn about the traditions. I knew that much of that information wasn't going to come from my family and that I need to go outside of that, so luckily along the way I've met and developed relationships with other tribal members so I was able to do my first sweat probably about twenty years ago. It was an incredible experience. I can't even put into words, and I felt as though the first time I went in the sweat so much healing took place in my mind, body and spirit. I felt as if I was sweating out all the poisons and toxins in my body that had built up from the time I was conceived until then. I tried to find people along the way that I knew were good teachers that could teach me, and when I had questions, I would find different people, seek out to ask them questions about the culture, and there's still so much that I don't know and I don't understand, but I'm still trying to learn...

on that I'm interested in, I go to the Reservation, but I've made strong connections with other people within the Tribe that have experienced some of the things that I've experienced, and it's been really helpful to be with other people and to talk some of these things out with people who know exactly what I have experienced and how I feel...

Looking back on my own experience, I actually went to a therapist for six years at Pleasant Point, but I think one of the things that was not helpful was the fact that my therapist really had no prior training with the adoption issues – the issues of Native children being taken away and trying to find their way back, and he had – he didn't have a lot of knowledge about the specifics of the Passamaquoddy culture so there was a disconnect, even though I worked with him for a long time. I often thought that there needs to be gatherings or retreats or whatever you want to call it for people like me who are disconnected and find their way back – a place where we can come together and to share our experiences, to have opportunities to learn about the traditions and the history, to learn how to drum in a drum group. When you're the only person that doesn't know how to do it, and there's a whole group of other people doing it, most times I just don't feel comfortable joining in because it's just something that I haven't done my entire life or been taught, and most drumming that I do is by myself, but I envision in my mind a place where people like me can come together and learn how to do things like drum and learn how to sing, learn how to dance so that you feel comfortable doing it because I still don't, even though I've been exposed to it for twenty-five years...(pause) And some type of ongoing support for those that are finding their way back...Finding your way back is the easy part. The real work begins once you find your way back...

I realize that had I not struggled how I've struggled through my lifetime I would not have the spiritual life that I have. In the last couple of years, I've really gotten into mountain climbing. It's a big part of my life, and I was able to go to Katahdin twice this summer, the second time climbing the knives edge. I have a pouch of tobacco with me. When I went, and I thought about it for weeks before I went, I wanted to lay down all of the pain and sorrow and the grief and the feelings of loss, I wanted to leave it all on the mountain. And I think for the most part I did. It was probably one of the most profound spiritual experiences I've ever had in my life and probably will ever have, and luckily I was able to do it with a couple of people within the Tribe...(pause) And, I really felt within the core of my being that there was no doubt that I was Passamaquoddy, and at fifty years old, I had to acknowledge that and to celebrate that and left all the bad stuff on the mountain...

But, I often think about other people like me that are struggling. I think about what could I do to help someone because for so long I felt I was on my own trying to sort this all out, so I personally want to do whatever I can do to help other people once they find their way back and to share my story. I'm grateful to be Passamaquoddy, and I'm grateful to know who I am and where I came from because that's – you know, that's all any of us want. That's all any of us want.

RG: Absolutely.



WND: I think that's it.

RG: I don't have any follow up questions for you, but I want to thank you so much for sharing. You are incredibly strong, and I can see the progressive change that's happened for you. So, I'm very grateful that you decided to sit down with me today. Thank you.

WND: Thank you for coming.

RG: Of course.

[END OF RECORDING]