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Statement by Alivia Moore collected by Heather Westleigh on November 4, 2014

Alivia Moore

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General Information

Private or Public Statement? - Private

Statement Provider: Alivia Moore

Date: November 4, 2014

Location: Indian Island, Maine

Previous Statement? No

Statement Gatherer: Heather Westleigh

Support Person: N/A

Additional Individuals Present: N/A

Recording Format: Audio

Length of Recording: 59:24

Recording

HW: Great. My name is Heather Westleigh, and I am here with...

AM: Alivia Moore.

HW: It is, um, November 4th, 2014, and we, we are in-- on Indian Island. The file number is P-201411-00127. Um... have you, um, been informed, understood and signed the consent form?

AM: Yes, I have.

HW: If there is any information that-- disclosed that indicates that a child is in need of protection, or there is imminent risk of death, serious bodily harm to an identifiable person or group, including yourself, this may not be protected as confidential.

AM: Yeah.

HW: You and-- do you understand?

AM: Yes.

HW: Thank you.

HW: Um, ok, so. Here to talk a little bit about your experience. It sounds like you have a few different areas where you've been involved with, um, child welfare and ICWA's been involved so which area would you like to start with?

AM: Probably like the first that kind of informs and shapes the others--

HW: That makes sense.

AM: Yeah, um, so my -- so do you want me to share? [00:01:44.07] That I am a former youth in care. I, um -- again, so it's-- sometimes it can be tough to, like, linearly tell the story because um, some of the history isn't exactly clear in my memory or wasn't-- like I didn't understand what was going on at different points. So, but from my understanding, I was formally in the foster care system three different, um, times in my childhood and officially aged out of the system as well. And ICWA absolutely applied to, to my case and I'm very happy and fortunate that it did.

HW: Yeah, mmhmm. How old were you the first time you were in...

AM: I was a few months old, less than a year. I don't know exactly but I was a few months old I think.

HW: So, um, you may not have a lot of memories of what your life was like prior to...

AM: No, no memory of my own--of that. But, um, I was fortunate, it was a family that was right down the street from my, my parents and where I was. Like literally four houses down. So yeah, so I was able to stay connected to-- I actually, just until this morning, I just happened to ask my grandmother about it. And I thought it was always just an informal arrangement, that they just saw things weren't good and they just took me. Um, but I guess it was a, a formal intervention and I was formally placed there. Um, but I didn't realize that until this morning. *(Laughs.)*

HW: And did you maintain a connection with your biological parents as well?

AM: Um, again, I don't have any memories of that time but from what, the little bits, that I was told, um, again, it seemed like they had a tremendous amount of power? Oh, now I'm kind of wishing I had ju-- um, chosen a different box perhaps about this piece because they're still in the community and I'm not close to them but we, we, we stayed connected and I don't know -- this is just kind of what has been shared with me.

I don't actually know these things but it sounded like they had a lot of influence about whether I got to visit my father because I was told that my dad would come to, like, visit with me and they'd hide me in the back or say I was sleeping or just wouldn't let him visit with me. And that they were trying to -- this is what I've heard -- is that they kind of, that they really did care



about me, they cared about me tremendously, um, and that they wanted to adopt me so they kind of, not being as helpful with, with my mom or my dad being able to get me back. Um, so again, I have no idea. Um, they were always wonderful to me after I went back with my parents, so... I don't know. Again, not memories of my own.

HW: And was this family, um, was this a tri-- a family that was a member of the tribe as well?

AM: Yes, yep. Yeah. Um, they're both also Passamaquoddy. The father of the family, he's--I don't think he's Penobscot tribe, but he's Passamaquoddy, ah, tribe, but we're all-- I'm Passamaquoddy too, so we're all interconnected. Um, but yeah, so they're, yeah-- they're from this community.

HW: And what age were you when you were back with your parents?

AM: Um, so again, I'm not exactly sure. I'm assuming that was bef-- you know, I'm assuming it was just a few months but I've been assuming lots of different things and I'm not really sure. (*Laughs.*) So I think it was just a few months and then I was back with my parents. And, um, I think it wasn't too long after that that my parents were separated and then my, my younger sister was born. And then we stayed-- we were with our mom until our next formal child welfare intervention, was when I was eight. I just found that out this morning, I wasn't sure -- when I asked my grandma, so I was eight when we officially went into foster care. And it was the both of us at that point.

HW: And so your sister-- you have, um, ah, an older sister and a younger sister?

AM: Yes, that I grew up with.

HW: And you-- was your older sister involved, um, with the...

AM: She was, so she is... she's fourteen years older than I am, so she was involved in my care ever since I was born, so I think she really helped buffer things a lot. And, she took me and my younger sister in with her often, even though she -- my older sister -- she was nineteen and had her first baby. And then she had her two younger sisters with her. Um, oh yeah, she is a fierce um, advocate and protector of us. She considers us her first babies. (*Laughs.*)

Um, yeah I mean she was an-- is an incredible source of resilience for my sister and I, for our family, um, but there's also, I think... I think what happened, why... why child welfare formally had to get involved [00:07:03.21] was because there was only so much my sister could do. There was only so much that she could protect us from, and that, you know my mom, may have needed the-- okay, the children, they-- they're not gonna be in your care. Like, this is just not safe. You need to make serious changes. Um, so I think that's-- I, I think Reesy

advocated for formal intervention. And I have a feeling that in the past she had advocated for that not to happen and worked hard for it to not. But I feel like sh-- it may have got to a point where she realized, this, this might be necessary for mom to get things together, um, and for things to, to change for the better.

HW: What do you remember about that time period between being a few months and up until eight years that ...?

AM: Um, honestly, a lot of what I remember is really challenging. Um, and so recently in my life, I've worked really hard, um, to be mindful of more of the positive because there were really wonderful times too. And so re--really trying to be more conscious, in, in thinking of those times too. Um, but really things that kind of stand out more are feelings? Because again, I think my memory is not great -- partially, as often is -- as a protective mechanism so just feelings of, um, uncertainty, of fear... um, loneliness, of like having to be strong for my sister, my little sister but also, I had to take care of my mom a lot or protect her, from like some of the men that she would bring into the house. So, just like having to be strong but then also, like, always afraid and always really scared. (*Beginning to speak through tears.*) Um, but there's also really beautiful times when my mom-- usually when she was sober. Sorry, I didn't think--

HW: No, it's fine. I was just wishing we had tissues for you.

AM: Oh, no it-- that's ok. No, that's ok. Um, yeah, I mean my mom is a really beautiful person and so, um, I think she has a lot of her own... her own issues of not feeling worthy, and not feeling whole. And then when she can't do something like perfectly -- because poverty was a huge issue for us -- and so, like, um, if we couldn't eat well or we couldn't eat. Like, she, like to her, like the way she um, kind of dealt with that was in a way, that rather-- I don't know, she just let it be more of a negative thing than it needed to be and it led to her being, making poor other like poor dec-- like things she couldn't control, I think kind of manifested into her behaviors. So she was making really poor decisions that kind of amplified [00:10:04.11] the bad deci-- the bad situations or challenging situations we were in. And she absolutely has mental health and substance abuse issues. But I think they stem from a lot of these more core issues.

Um, so yeah, a lot of... a lot of fear and a lot of like-- and one thing I kind of wanted to share and I hope will-- like one of my things as I'm looking at it as an adult now and doing this work now, and I feel like I, if I see anything that doesn't feel right, like I am gonna say something! I'm like, I'm just kind of wondering, like, people must have known -- like neighbors must have known, like how did it take so many years? And that's where I'm kind of thinking but maybe Reese, my older sister, she buffered? Maybe she buffered some of those things like people would have concerns and, so she tried to step up but I still don't understand why so many things were able to happen, with neighbors so close and a community so close, um and teachers, like how do they not know. Like I-- you know, I was like this nervous little baby like always crying, you know? Like, how did they-- I was so skinny. Like how did they not know something was wrong? And in my, like, report cards they would have comments that like they were concerned, but... Like I'm not sure how it... you know, how it just took, like, things



getting so bad for there to be, um,
intervention, why there wasn't more of a focus
on prevention, of needing child welfare

involvement. So, yeah. *(Laughs a little.)*

HW: Um, thank you, by the way. And um, yeah, emotions are fine. It's totally okay. Um, you had said that you were thankful that ICWA was involved when the foster care intervention happened, were you thinking specifically around 8, or...?

AM: Yes, yeah. I mean, I guess since that first one was also formal. But I know for sure when I was 8, that was a formal intervention. And so, I was-- well, my sister and I, we were placed with a family-- a Native family here on the reservation. I knew them. Um, the father of the family, he was actually-- had been a counselor of mine. I don't know, maybe Bianca's too, I'm not sure -- my younger sister. Um, so he couldn't obviously be my counselor after, you know, after that, but yeah.

So I was able-- we were always here in our community, on the island, always familiar faces the home we went to, as scary as it-- like, and I don't want to, like, make it sound like it was not scary and it was not an awful time, um but as I got older and learned of other -- because I didn't really know it was foster care actually then -- but as I got older and met other foster youth, I realized, "Oh my god, they are being sent across the state." They had to go to completely new schools, all of their friends were gone. Any, any sense of stability that they had -- for so many youth, when it was crazy at home--they lost everything. That it wasn't just like their relationship with their parents or, or, you know, their-- their comfortable things in their home that they're familiar with. But it was, you know, the trees that they're familiar seeing, like, the river that they're used to seeing. Like everything changes. *[00:13:33.18]*

And I just realized how fortunate I was to always stay connected to my culture and everything that I knew. You know, my school, my peers, like my family was always there. Um and, and so, and so it's huge, it's so critical. And I absolutely understand the history for Native communities, and tribes, and nations, and the importance of that. But I think it really should be valued for-- and this probably isn't the place to get on that soapbox -- but for all children of any cultural background, from any community that, that you know, so much more could be done to maintain connections to anything familiar, um, and comforting--yeah, should really be more of a focus.

And so absolutely, there's more that needs to be done for Native children because I hear attorneys in California, who -- because that's where I live now -- who say "Don't check the box ever. That opens Pandora's box." They just have-- you know, it's still... as much as folks are supposed to be aware of the federal mandate and also the spirit of the law, um, it's not being implemented that it should everywhere. But for all children, connection to community, anything familiar, keeping them in their schools.

So for me, and I say everywhere -- the work that I do -- like ICWA, like changed changed my life and I'm so, so fortunate that that was the law of the land when I had contact with the system. Because I just think about, um -- because again -- I work a lot with youth who are in the foster care system, and they have so many identity issues, right? Like so-- and a lot of it comes from their... their close relationships.

And I definitely have issues around my relationship with my mother, with my fa-- those pieces, but there were some things that I never have any question about. Like I know-- ever since I was a child, I knew I was a Penobscot girl, I know I am a Penobscot woman. I know where I belong, this island is my home. There's no question about that. *[00:15:51.20]* I've never, I've never ever ever not known where I belong in this universe. I've never had a question of that. So even when, um, I wasn't sure how my mom was doing, right. I wasn't sure if she was alive or those types of things, I knew I was going to be okay. Like I always knew there was gonna be people, a community that loved me, where I belonged, where I was known, acknowledged, accepted. Yeah, and I just can't, like, fathom that there are children who don't have that experience, who don't have healthy relationships with their parents but then also have nothing outside of that, totally lost outside of that. It breaks my heart that that's a reality for so many children. So. I, um, I've had a relatively very positive experience with the child welfare system because I have-- my identity has been kept intact through, through all the instability and craziness of a home life -- which is gonna happen for some children.

HW: Right and it, it sounds like, um, for you, that happened-- did that happen right away? Um, like thinking about the day that things really changed for you...there must have been kind of a pivotal moment where people came in and said, um, "This isn't-- this is changing" um and was it right away that they said, "But you're staying in your community?"

AM: Well, for me, I guess it was never--I never, I never knew life anywhere else. I don't-- like it was crazy and scary to have to live in someone else's house. And that was as crazy as I could imagine it being at that point. That was as scary as I could imagine it being. And mostly the scariness, I think for me, was in not knowing how-- like not being there with my mom, not to make sure that she was safe and okay and alive and those things. Like I think that was really the scary. Um, I never fathomed that I could have been anywhere else or that that-- the decision could have ever been made. Yeah.

But my gram told me this morning -- because eventually we were placed with my grandparents -- that when we were teens, she felt like, you know, that now, we-- like, there was the possibility that we might be placed outside of the island. I don't know that she was ever told anything like that, but she just felt like she needed to make sure that we didn't go anywhere else, so my grandparents took us in when I think I was 12. So. But I never had any idea that I could-- I never felt like I could go anywhere else.

HW: Right, and was that the additional... you said you were-- you were in placement three times?

AM: Yes, yeah.



HW: Was that the third time?

AM: Yep, third time was, um, placed with my grandparents.

HW: Had you returned to your--

AM: Oh yeah. So I had been-- I honestly, so, the second time was when I was eight years old? And I'm not sure, I think that was only for a few months as well. Again, I have no, no clue but I think -- because I don't remember other major markers happening there at that house, so I think it was only a few months. And then with my mom until I was twelve. And then when I got-- after 8, you know, I got better at hiding things because I didn't want, the-- to go...I didn't want to be taken away again. So we got really good at-- well, I mean I think we were always pretty good at, like, not talking outright. But I would think, I see pictures of myself and I'm like how did people not know that-- like we're all greasy and, like, tiny? Like, how did people not know? And I was just so nervous. *(Laughs a little.)*

HW: Mmhmm. Scared.

AM: Yeah. *(Laughs a little more.)*

HW: Yeah, um. [00:20:01.23] This asks a little bit about what a typical day would look like, um, when you went into foster care. I guess you had those different environments. Um, so um, did you see a difference between, um, the daily routine at the community placement and between your grandparents?

AM: Um, yeah, I mean, definitely, definitely a difference like I didn't know. Yeah, I don't know. It definitely was um, I don't know. It was definitely different. How would I describe it being different though? *(Pauses.)* I feel like it-- like my experience in my second placement, the community placement, that...that that felt more like the, like a foster placement. Um, because I, I think maybe I did know a little bit -- or maybe it was a bit easier to distinguish, like, the process? Because the visits with my mom felt very structured, like much more structured, you know, because like the visits with her were either in a community setting or eventually at the house, back at our house. I don't remember. I'm trying to think if I remember visits at my gram-- my grandparents.

HW: Did you have visits with your dad as well?

AM: Um, yes, in the second placement yes, he would have been more present then. I think I was 11 or 12 and he had a serious, ah, brain injury. Um... so his, like, mobility and-- yeah he had to-- yeah, so that became a different thing. *(Laughs.)* He became a different kind of person and parent at that time. Um... so visits. I don't know. How would--? And I feel like, I feel like

because I was older when I went with my grandparents too -- because I was a teen -- I was able to be more autonomous and able to protect myself a little bit more. It wasn't as scary. I don't know, there are just so many differences. That it's hard to, I don't know, it's hard to kind of...yeah.

HW: That makes sense. [00:22:30.15] Were there, um, similarities between customs and adherence to Native traditions?

AM: Oh for sure, yeah, um, I mean I think. Well, so in my grandparents' house, they are more... Catholic and I was actually raised with my mom. My mom's more Catholic and Native spirituality, so like a blend of both which a lot of folks are. And my gram's more--even though she still, like, speaks some Passamaquoddy and she still like totally believes in a lot of our ways, like explicitly she's more Catholic. So, and then, with the community placement, I mean I feel like they...were wonderful and open to anything, that if there were community things going on, they would have, um, brought us along to them too. Again, I really don't remember much about that time there. I just, yeah, I remember. It was just kind of like I-- ah that time when I was eight.

HW: It's a very feelings age.

AM: Yes, yes, yeah. It is.

HW: And, and how did the--so it sounds like your, your involvement was with Indian Child Welfare. Do you-- I mean, and you of course probably don't remember the details, but it sounds like that was mostly tribal involvement--through Indian Child Welfare?

AM: Yee--es, it must have been because all of our workers were based here at DHS on the Island. Um, yeah. So they must have been. And I just kind of know these things by looking back and my work experience in the field now, I can kind of decipher my history. But that's another like big thing that I like always bring up is like informing kids, like even if you think they're too little because I feel like I had no idea what was going on. I had this nice person who I like gather now was a social worker from DHS that would come, like check in, or whatever-- not very often I will say. Um, from my memory, not very often. You know, but I really had no idea what was going on like why this person-- like I didn't know that I had anything to do with like where I was living. Like no, no idea. And I feel like I was-- I am like a really... like in tuned to my environment -- even though I can't recall it now, but I know that I am, like, really aware. So that if there had been...some important information that had been shared with me that I would have integrated that into my understanding and maybe felt more secure.

But um, I don't know, I just felt like -- and I know decisions are made very quickly in the child welfare system and so it's not always possible to give people a heads up or children a heads up -- but some of like, my really, like... like, you know, there's one type of trauma in my household, but I'm used to that. I'm used to that kind of trauma. You know, like, it's not as... disruptive. But the types of trauma from entering the system, or different points when the system kind of gets involved -- just so abrupt and abrasive.



You know like, ah, the way, the way that I learned about, I guess, entering the foster care system at age eight, was -- I don't know if it was when I was getting on the bus or some teacher at the school right before I got on the bus said, "You're gonna get off the bus at Dale and Leann's house." And I'm-- you know, I know them but I have no idea of like, what I-- I wouldn't get off the bus at their house. [00:26:32.25] There's no reason that I would ever go to their house. So I told the bus driver, "I'm not getting off-- like I, I don't know why they're asking me to go there, I'm not going there." So the bus driver dropped me off at my sister, Reesy's work, which is the day care here, and my sister Reesy had to tell me, "You are going to live there for a while and mom's going to try to get better so you can live there again." But just like, to try to get me to just hop off the bus at-- like, yes it is in my own community and I do know them but I had nobody who told me why. Nobody said anything about it.

You know, um, and so then I, you know, I was really upset and then I probably traumatized a few kids in the daycare by-- because I totally freaked out, you know, I'm like, I'm not going to their house. So, and then, how we had to get out things was--I think this happened a couple of different times. Like, um, I think the second time that we went into the foster care system too, the police escorted us to our mom's house which is scary enough-- because it's our mom, you know, why do we need police to like escort us there? And we just had, like, I feel like it's kind of an iconic thing-- like, a black trash bag and we literally just like had a couple minutes to throw in whatever we could in the black trash bag. And it just seemed like... and I get it because my mom can totally throw a scene or whatever, but she never would have like threatened our safety or anything like that. So I just feel like the element of like the police like to the level of uncertainty we're already having living with someone else, suddenly, was really weird. Like why do we need police to go to our house, to, to like where our mom is? You know. Um, so just like.

And having no idea things were happening until we were supposed to just...do something. We were just supposed to go wherever we were pointed to next. And didn't really-- I had no idea like, what was going on with my mom and 'cause for me, my whole life was taking care of my mom, and making sure she was-- she'd wake up and all like those things and to not know where she was (*speaking through tears*) or what the plan was or... [00:28:48.03] Yeah, so it's like, I understand you want to protect kids. You don't know what's gonna happen so you don't want to like get their hopes up or you don't know when things are suddenly going to change, but that's a different level of trauma on top of everything else that is going on. So, and usually, you know, us kids, like, we've already dealt with a lot? So, like, we can handle whatever your system needs to tell us. We can handle those things. Um, so yeah that's just one thing and I see it now too. The system really needs to-- like, and they take input from youth but a lot more can, can go to have youth shape and be really aware of what's going on for their present and how-- because it really impacts their futures too, so.

HW: Right. So what did you see as-- how, what was life like after child welfare intervention?

AM: Um, so like after the last time we were? So my sister, Bianca and I, we stayed in placement with my grandparents until we turned eighteen. So you mean, kind of, in that time? Or, or like after I turned eighteen?

HW: Right, good question. Really whatever you'd like to speak to. But it seems like along the way, there would be these, there would be a lot of-- it would be different. So you, you were in care and then you returned to your parents. You know, how do you see those stage-- different changes that may have occurred after each placement?

AM: Um, after each placement. I mean, my mom. There was, again, I don't remember exactly if it was 5 years or 3 years. But after one of those times, she had either 5 or 3 years of sobriety. And she was with a man that we consider like a very, very close, like, you know, not a father, but a loving male figure, and he considered us his children. You know, so that was-- I mean, it was not a perfect time. There was still other dr-- you know she was... there was still other drug use, and domestic violence but that was still a relatively-- we have some really great memories from then.

So, [00:31:29.04] I don't know, so we had some really good years with our mom then. So I know, some people were like, "why would they ever put children back, don't put children back" and, you know, just to have that all happen again. I would rather spend those years with that type of, um... I don't know. Those things that, I don't know, stuff I was used to. And it wasn't as bad and we had-- and I had those really wonderful memories and I did have time with my mom, you know. So, I don't know, I get it, I get it, but sometimes I just don't get it. Like, like, you know, I think people really underestimate the trauma of like being in foster placement. Even if they're wonderful people! Wonderful people, completely caring people, even in your community, you know.

So, so I mean, I'm really glad I went back with my mom but things did get really bad before we went back with our grandparents again. Um, and then the time-- so then we stayed with gram 12 to 18. Twelve years old to eighteen. Um, I think my mom-- so there were periods where my mom was okay and we had a good, pretty good relationship. And I think, I-- I know it just, it's something that my mom has tremendous guilt around, is that, you know, we had to spend so much of our childhood raised by other people and she feels like, you know, she failed as a mother.

Um, but I think it was important that we were not with her. Um... I think, yeah, she just-- just, yeah, I don't know. So I feel like we had-- and we, yeah, that we had-- I don't know there's so many different thoughts. But that we had good, we were able to have some good while we were placed stably with my grandparents. And she was able to have downs, but when she was good, we'd still be there with gram and grampy and, um, I don't know, I feel like she's in a better place now than she has been in a long time. So, I mean feel like it's all his-- I think it's all... absolutely the way that it needed to be, with the level of support that my mom has gotten, you know, as much as she could do, I think it's as much as she could have done. And I think it was as good of a turn out as it absolutely could have been with the circumstance. So I don't have any negative feelings anywhere against anyone whatsoever so. Yeah.



HW: Ok. Is there more you want to say about ICWA, and how that, maybe active efforts, or anything may have impacted your experience?

AM: Active efforts, how that would have impacted my experience... I mean, I had no idea at the time that I was in the foster care system. So I guess, which in-- in a way is a good thing because you can feel more normal. But then it's kind of feels like all of these things that are going on in the background, and that are actually impacting where you are and shaping things, um that you also weren't aware of that information. Um, but no, I mean, I didn't know what was going on. I didn't know about any active efforts. I didn't about ICWA. I didn't know. I didn't know these things.

HW: Is there anything more that you would like to see happen?

AM: In terms of ICWA? In terms of, like child welfare in general?

HW: Right, specifically for ICWA and for Indian children in child welfare. I'm sorry I was trying to ask that question but sort of dropped it off so I apologize for being confusing.

AM: So for Indian children and child... let me see my notes and if the.... Um, well I mean, I guess a lot of this can applied to anywhere in child welfare. But really focusing on prevention, on strengthening and empowering families as a unit, not just nuclear families, because there are going to be times when individual parents, sets of parents, when they, they can't do it, or they can't do it alone. I think, I mean I guess it's, I think it's a societal problem that we have, that we see child rearing as a nuclear-- you know, more so, rather than as more of a community focus which I think it should be to begin with. Um and that disperses the challenge of raising kids because it is not an easy thing. Um, but if there are ways that we can strengthen families as a whole and communities as a whole to be able to step up and care for, for kids when things aren't optimal in their, their home lives, so they don't ever even need to enter the system.

Um, (*exhales*) [00:36:49.27] I mean and so a piece around that is I know one of the, one of the things that-- so my gram was telling me about AA. So she would go to AA meetings to try to like, when she was caring for my older sister. And they would tell her in those meetings that she needed to stop caring for her grandchildren. She needed to stop taking in the grandchildren because she's enabling her children's addiction. She's enabling her children's bad decisions. Um, and she's taking on their responsibility. So this level of shaming around stepping up to care for children who, you know, you know, it's not the children's fault. The children shouldn't-- they, they are not able to care for themselves at the time. So that there's these strange and I feel like, not traditional currents, and I think Catholicism has some of that and I know AA is religious based, and I'm not all against religion but you know, but these ideas that shame us in stepping in and, and caring for kids, you know, like what? That is not-- I don't think that is traditional. I don't think that was our ancestors' way at all. Um, we lived in close knit villages,

like we all, we all cared for one another's kids. So if we can-- and we do that in some of our ways, you know, if we -- any of us -- if we see a kid who's not doing something they should be, you know, any of us have the right to tell them, "Hey, that's not okay." It's not just something parents can do.

Um, so, so I think, really being more intentional about growing and strengthening those-- those, um... I don't know, those tendencies that I think we have and those traditions that we have. And also very practical thing that I think could be helpful, is also, um, and I'm very biased because I'm doing this work now-- but um, free, legal aid for relatives and near-kin caregivers who want to obtain a guardianship for children who are informally with them.

[00:39:05.17] Right, so, this is--the children are just there informally. There has not been CPS involvement, but right now mom and dad can still come and go, take the kids whenever and grandparents -- or whoever -- can't make the decisions for their medical care, educational care, but those legal processes can feel daunting and they can be expensive if you feel like, like... So you just never go near the legal process, you don't even contemplate that. But if there was a non-profit or an agency that could assist them in achieving some form of legal permanence, you're not terminating the parental rights. The parents can get it together, and get the kids later, but for right now, the kids need safety and stability and legal guardianship is a way that that, that can do that for families. So, um, it's just an idea.

HW: That's good. Um, and uh so you've touched on this a little bit and I'm curious if you have anything else you want to say about your relationship with your parents now?

AM: Yeah, um, I think it's in a really good place. I just work really hard-- because again, a lot of the things that I saw my family do, like when my mom was drinking, what they would do is shame her for those decisions and turn away from her and you know, "You can't be a part of this family while you are acting like this. When you're in a good place, you can come back." Didn't work very well. I don't, I think it just kind of--my mom's really good at feeling shame, I don't-- and I think that's for a lot of people, that outcasting, the shaming... is, is not a helpful tool in their healing. I think they need to be around healthy people who will accept them. So I made a really intentional effort to, regardless of where, really it's my mother with the substance abuse issues. And it's a, it's an ongoing struggle for her. And my father--he just doesn't really know how to be like an engaged father. He's a very caring, very caring man, but, ah, never really been involved in like, the, the parenting side of things. Um, but a positive relationship with both of them. I work really hard to, "Let's focus on the now, when we don't need to--" You know, I have written letters, like "I forgive you." And I also, I'm really, like-- some of the families I'm working with, parents disappear. Right? Parents totally lose touch with the children. My, you know, my mom fought. She was never able to get us back, but she fought and she did show up. She disappeared sometimes, but she always came back. She always told us she loved us. You know, there was never a question of that. Um, so I'm just, you know, in the scheme of things, like I'm very, very-- I'm very fortunate. And so I recognize that and I recognize the multitude of, um, supports I have around me. So everything is, overall, is very good. Yeah. **[00:42:30.29]**

HW: Anything else you want to share about that experience?

AM: No.

HW: And by the way you're very articulate, you said you were going to be nervous. But you're--

AM: Oh, oh... sorry. Sometimes once I get... going...

HW: No, it's good! Don't apologize, it's wonderful! You're doing a-- I mean that's, I-- I just I'm impressed as to how are articulate you are and, um, able to describe these experiences, it's, you're very to the point, and um, yeah.

AM: Thank you. I spend a lot of time thinking about it and working with it in my, my, you know, daily work. So, trying to do things differently for other children. Yeah.

HW: Right. Do you want to talk about that a little bit? In terms of your, um, your work with it. Sounds like you are a, um, a state and federal child care-- uh, child, I'm sorry, child welfare policy...

AM: Yeah. Yeah, well so really, most of that work was done while I was a youth, like a teen in the foster care system. I got connected with YLAT-- Youth Leadership Advisory Team -- and, and then to a national body. Oh goodness. The KSSP Alliance, I'm sorry that I could not tell you what KSSP stands for now. Um, and that was a consortium of national partners including the Center for Social Policy, the, like, Annie E. Casey Foundation, Marguerite Casey Foundation-- whole, and so, and so that was doing the federal level policy. And a lot of my focus-- so on the national level, yeah, they really wanted my input as a, as a Native youth and my Native experience. And, um, strengthening tribal-- I think also looking at how a lot of tribal practices could be infused throughout all of the child welfare system to strengthen all the child welfare systems, so that was... But also a big focus of mine has been older youth and connecting resources as they age out of the foster care system -- supports and resources. And also siblings. I did some work on the Sibling Bill of Rights. Um...so it's wonderful we have that -- there's still so much more that can be done on the ground. You know, it's, it's just so challenging when there's wonderful policies in place, but then it's like, you know, once a month phone call? With your sibling? Like, that should not be considered a visit. You know, like that shouldn't meet a minimum for a mandate. Like, no. Like I'm-- I know social workers are way overworked, everyone's overworked. Figure it out, figure it out. That's-- you're paying... foster parents. Make sure they're getting' their visits. So yeah, I have all kinds of opinions, but, um...yeah. (*Laughs.*)

HW: That's gr-- that's great. And that is a question that I had forgotten to ask you, that I was really curious about was, how was your transition into adulthood? Did you feel supported and, um, well-resourced around that?

AM: Yeah, I, um...yes. I had wonderful, wonderful-- um, I mean wonderful family, really supportive family, always, you know, everyone, all of my-- my parents really wanted me to, to do whatever I wanted to do and to achieve that. Um, but someone who helped me with like the really practical skills of that-- her name should go in the record: Esther Attean. She's a saint, and a second mother, and... (*speaking through tears*) she shaped my life in ways she'll never realize, and I try to tell her, you know, how much I love her. Um, but yeah, she just really like fought for me in a lot of like really practical ways. You know, because, folks can tell you, yes they want you to go to college, um, but she will help you figure out the steps to do that -- like what does that look like? I don't know...I don't know how to do that. [00:46:50.26] You know and Esther will stay up far later than she should helping you figure that out. And she's just -- just having someone who will do the, the hard dirty work with you to like figure out how to be a healthy adult, and how to like, manifest those things that you-- positive things that you want for yourself, to like show you those steps and skills, and the... the condition-less love that she gives. Um, yeah, she's a really amazing individual, and so how can we really value those individuals in our communities, too? Because I see that she's not really valued in this community. And it just blows my mind. It's just really upsetting that this community actually sometimes outcasts some of the people who, who-- who are just doing the most selfless, wonderful work and I don't know what that--that, that is. And that's something that our community really needs to deal with, um... because it's, it's holding people down who are just - - are just loving people and making people healthier... like, why, what are-- yeah. Um, yeah so I feel like it was overall, a positive and healthy transition, and there's absolutely things that like -- personally -- like, I have to work on and always working on, and you know, but I feel like I'm in a good place and on a good track. So.

HW: That's great. It sounds like she may have been a bit of a role model for your current work?

AM: Oh for sure, oh absolutely. [00:48:31.05] Absolutely. Her and my older sister, Reesy, like really, um, are strong women who yeah, have absolutely like shaped who I am and, um... yeah, everything. All of the decisions I make are really based around what is going to improve the lives of, like, our communities and lives of children. Like that's-- like, and I really work hard at every decision to -- now kind of unconsciously, which I'm glad for, you know -- to check in to those, um, those beliefs. Yeah.

HW: And you said you work in California now?

AM: Yeah, I live in California. Been there for about two and a half years. But I'll be moving home either next year or the year following. I'll never be away from home forever. And I would love, love to do this, the work I'm doing in California, here locally. (*Laughs.*) But the work that I'm doing now is, um-- the agency that I work for is actually is a foster and adoption agency, but their program is to support informal relatives, so it's those who do not currently have child welfare involvement. It's a preventative program and my, my program was created within it. I got to start it up which is very exciting, is to do the le-- we're calling it legal permanence work and so again, it's around primarily legal guardianship. So obtaining legal guardianships for grandparents, aunts, uncles, other near kin so that they can safely care for



children that otherwise... don't have, don't have that safety and stability right now. So and we do some-- I do some support around independent adoptions, but that's more limited.

HW: So, were you working in the field prior to that as well? It sounds like you did some work as a teen and...?

AM: Yeah, yeah, um, so I've done work as a support counselor for teens in an intensive treatment foster care program. And so, yeah, just supporting them around a lot of, a lot of, um, emotional regulation of emotional awareness. And so teens who are currently in the system and who are jeopardizing their placement and so supporting them and their caregivers around some of those challenging issues that they are coming up against. Um, but it's like, yeah, the problem is not the-- the real problem cannot be fixed working one-on-one with a child--it's the system! (*Laughs.*) So, yeah, um, and then what other? And then I've done some other work in human services as a elder advocate here for the tribe and a few other things, but.. yeah.

[00:51:41.10]

HW: What are some ways that do you-- do you ever work with ICWA in those environments or in your current work?

AM: Right now, I encourage-- so, before it sounds like families were being told to not-- don't even, like, you don't even want to go there with ICWA. You don't even like, you just, you just check no. You just check the "no" box on that. And so now, like I'm working to raise the awareness with staff in my agency and with my supervisors and having discussions about what it is, why it's important. Okay, like and I'm asking the question, how many Native families do we work with? How many, you know, how many Native kids have we come in contact with? And they can't tell me. And I had someone higher up would tell me, "You know, I don't think we have." No, you're in California. There are hundreds of tribes in California alone. You have, you just, you don't know it. You haven't identified them. You haven't tracked them. You have, you absolutely have. So right now, it's just kind of an awareness place right now. And, and having those conversations with my families as we're going through the legal documents because they have questions about ICWA, and I explain, you know, the importance of, you know, reflecting on these questions and really thinking about them. Their primary question is, well, is this going to open up all kinds of benefits? And I'm like, that's not what this is about specifically, you know, um... So it's been, it's a little, it's a little interesting having discussions around ICWA.

HW: I bet, I bet. So you have families who self-identify but are not members of tribes? Is that where those conversations are happening?

AM: Yeah, well so far -- which -- so far, it's been folks who think that it is somewhere in their history. And as far as they know, not members of a tribe, or their, you know, grandparent was

not a relative of-- I mean, um, I'm sorry, a member of tribe. Um...so that's kind of-- there was one family, but ICWA had already been established and eligibility had already been established, so, and I am-- and honestly, as much as I love, and I profess, ICWA--I don't know what we're gonna do when we get a case.

(Interruption by TRC Research Coordinator.)

Research Coordinator: When she's ready to do a statement, she's gonna have a commissioner sit in. Thank you.

HW: Thank you.

AM: Um, so I'm not even su-- I'm not sure what it's gonna look-- I mean, because I know it can look like quite a few different things. *(Laughs.)* You know, if um-- whether a tribe takes jurisdiction, whether, you know, the child is determined to be eligible. So I'm not sure what that's going to look like and so that, yeah, is a little bit scary because you like to know how, you know, how to let families know what to anticipate. But I fee-- I heard an attorney, and like, they don't know what to anticipate, and so they're telling folks, "No." You know, it's-- so if there's some more education we can do, um. And I know we're trying to do it here in Maine, you know, but across the country, with informing people -- but maybe helping people have a better picture of what the different, you know, avenues might look like after, if ICWA is, is deemed to apply to the child. So I think that could be helpful. Because me, I'm like, I don't care, we're gonna figure it out, because if ICWA applies to this child, that's how it's going, you know? We're gonna-- you need to share that information, that needs to happen--um, I am invested in that. But a lot-- most people are not invested in that, and so they are not invested in the mystery and uncertainty of what ICWA looks like to them right now. And so they would much rather just check no. *[00:55:58.24]* And that's scary, pretty scary.

HW: You know, I was just thinking, sort of thinking how to frame a question but I'm having trouble getting my mind around how to ask it. I guess I'll just say that it seems like maybe there's some people missing the point about the huge cultural differences.

AM: I don't know if they care. Not everybody is gonna care. I-- yeah. I really don't, especially because I am not an attorney. Not an attorney. But, um, I am doing this legal work, and I am coming in contact with a lot of attorneys and a lot of attorneys are being really helpful in the work that I am doing. I'm not sure that... all of them care about that. So I'm not sure how the heck to get through to someone who is missing that little piece of their heart. *(Laughs.)* I don't know. But I don't think -- and I know, because a lot of times we frame it, it's about the spirit of the law -- and for some people, totally, like especially social workers, it's gonna get to them, it's gonna make sense to social workers, right? Attorneys as a group, I'm not sure that will get through to all of them. *(Laughs.)* Just in-- *[00:57:23.00]*

HW: I guess that's why they have a legal mandate because that's what does speak to them.

AM: Right. Right. And so again, they-- I think they like to know, okay if you check A/B then you're gonna get these op-- they want, they want it so maybe that information isn't there, it's, um... and then there's a way that that can be shared with other folks who are coming in contact



with these children, but aren't identifying them. Or even wanting -- actually averse to identifying them as Native children.

HW: Do you think that's because of the higher standards?

AM: Oh, I am sure. And, and the mystery. Higher standards and not exactly, because-- because I think, I think he's heard from other attorneys and because sometimes it is really complicated and drawn out, right? Like any potential legal process could be. But, so I think that it's not-- I don't think every attorney deals with it much, so I think with his experience, he's just heard of attorneys who've had negative experiences so he doesn't even want to go there, so he's not gonna even venture. Like he said, he doesn't want to open Pandora's box by checking yes. He told that to-- like in a public setting, a large group of caregivers. He said: "Don't even go there." Don't open Pandora's box.

HW: It will be interesting to see what your experience is like here in Maine in similar work when you come back.

AM: I know, I'm so hopeful that it's-- I'm so hopeful, because I know that intentional efforts around informing, you know, social workers, and judges, and guardians ad lit-- you know, about ICWA, has been happening here so I'm very hopeful that it's a much more positive environment here. (*Laughs.*)

HW: Anything else you would like to share?

AM: No, that's far more than I planned on. (*Laughs.*) I'm sorry.

HW: No, it's been great. Well, thank you very much.

AM: Yeah, thank you, Heather.

[END OF RECORDING.]