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Statement by Tyneshia Wright collected by Rachel George on March 27, 2014

Tyneshia Wright

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General Information

Private or Public Statement? Private

Statement Provider: Tyneshia Wright

Date: March 27, 2014

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Previous Statement: No

Statement Gatherer: Rachel George

Support Person: N/A

Additional Individuals Present: Amie Howard, Therese Cahill Low

Recording Format: Video

Length of Recording: 00:41:08

Recording

RG: So My name is Rachel George. I'm here today with... do you mind all stating your names please?

TW: Tyneshia Wright.

AW: Amie Howard

TCL: Therese Cahill Low

RG: Perfect. And the file number is W-201403-00025. Tyneshia, you've been informed, understood and signed the consent form?

TW: Yes.

RG: Perfect. Um, there's one more question that I have to ask you, and I'm very conscious of the fact that I also forgot to say the date and where we are. So we are at Wabanaki Health and Wellness today on March 27th, 2014 in Bangor, Maine. So the last thing I have to let you know is that if in your statement you indicate that there is a child or an elder in need of protection, or

that there is an identifiable person or group including yourself that is imminent risk of serious bodily harm or death, that that information may not be protected as confidential. Do you understand?

TW: Yes.

RG: Do you feel okay to go forward?

TW: Yes.

RG: Perfect. Um, so you can feel free to start wherever you feel most comfortable. Do you want me to ask you a general question?

TW: Yeah, that would help (*laughs*).

RG: Okay. Um, Where do I want to start?

TW: That's what I'm saying.

RG: That is the question of the hour. Can you tell me a little bit about what your experiences were like as a child?

TW: As a child... um... I remember quite a bit actually with my childhood. It was really rocky. I remember um, the first time I went into foster care. I was in kindergarten and my mom, before I left for school said that she'd make me macaroni and cheese before I got home. And I was called down into the office at the end of school along with my brother and there was two DHS workers and one took my brother and one took me and we left. So that basically was my childhood several times. In the end I usually got to go home after like a couple weeks. Um, the last time I wasn't able to go home and that was in like 1st grade and the same thing happened. They came and got me from school so that I didn't go home. Um, and... I was put in foster care for the last time. Yeah...

RG: What was it like when you were at home with your mom? What was...

TW: It was crazy. Um, it was pretty crazy. A lot of times, 'cause my mom worked three jobs. Um so, a lot of the time it was really crazy. My two brothers lived with us, including my older brother. Um, two of my older brothers actually, and a lot of the times we would just come and go. Just 'cause no one was at home, cause she was at work. So it was pretty much we were to do our own thing.

RG: What did the DHHS worker say to you when they picked you up from school?

TW: Actually, that was actually the worst part cause they didn't say anything other than the fact that you need to come with us. We're going to go to the office and that was like it. They just didn't say anything, I just sat in the back seat screaming and crying because I saw my brother go in one direction and me go in the other.

RG: And what happened after that?

TW: After that I went to the office. I got a teddy bear and a duffel bag and I sat there for like 6 hours when they were trying to find me a foster home. They found one that night. And I was brought there that night and they just basically explained that this was where I was going to be staying. They were going to start me in school the following week because it was a Friday. Um, and that they would come and check in once and a while, and that these people I was going to be staying with and that they were going to take care of me.

RG: What did the foster parents say to you?

TW: Um, they didn't really say anything. They were kind of just like, welcome, this is... 'cause they had four kids of their own. (00:05:00) Um, so they were just like, this is so and so, you'll be staying in this room... they kind of just gave you a tour of the place and were like um.... if you need anything you can play with this and do whatever. So they really didn't say much.

RG: How long were you with this family for?

TW: I was with them for three months. Which is actually the longest time I've actually stayed in one home.

RG: Did you have any opportunities to see your brothers or your mom?

TW: In the very beginning I did. Um, we'd go for like visits at like my therapist's office at the time, and they'd be like an hour or so. And then my brothers would be there, and my mom, and then we'd all leave at the end. That was probably for about two weeks, and then all of them... like I never saw my brothers or my mother.

RG: Just so its clear for me, how many siblings do you have?

TW: All together I have 10 brothers. But I only talk to three of them. Four. I talk to four. And three of them live in the Waterville area where I live so I see them more frequently.

RG: What was your.... what is your understanding of why the state got involved?

TW: The simplest reason, 'cause my mother couldn't take care of me. It's plain and simple. Like even I knew that.

RG: Can you tell me about what happened after you left your first foster home?

TW: I went into another one for three weeks. Then I was moved again to another one. I only

stayed there for about a week and a half cause then she realized that she wasn't able to bring me to Waterville to see my therapist constantly, or as much as I needed. Um, so then I had to leave there. And I went to another one and then they decided they didn't want to be foster parents anymore, just because they had been doing it for so long. So then I went to another one... and I stayed there for probably about a month... and then I was adopted.

RG: When you were moving between foster homes, were you going back home to see your mom in between? Or were you just moved?

TW: Nope, I was just moved. And actually in one of my foster homes I had moved within the foster home, like we were living in Waterville and we had to move to like Benton because I lived a block away from my mother, and they were like, that's not okay. So instead of my foster parents saying that they were gonna just have me go back to DHS and find me a foster home, they were willing to move to Benton, so.

RG: What were the conversations like surrounding you moving between foster homes?

TW: Not a lot of conversation. Um, never really is. Um, I know with my first foster family, nothing, absolutely nothing was ever said. And the only reason I actually left that foster home is because my school called DHS and as like we need to have her moved. They were just like... she needs to leave.

RG: While you were in foster care, what were your relationships like with your family? I know we talked about what it was like at your first placement... but throughout your experience in foster care specifically.

TW: Um, with my first foster family everything was great. Like the first week maybe um, they bought me like a whole bunch of stuff, like they bought me new clothes. They got, like—I remember my favorite thing about the whole time I was there was this Light Bright they bought me and I'd play with it like a hundred times, cause you can make your own pattern, you turn the light on and it glows. Um... and I always thought that was like the coolest thing. But for like Thanksgiving, um they would all... they would like give their kids a glass of wine... just for like Thanksgiving apparently. Um and I had never liked the smell of it cause my mother drank. So I didn't like the smell of it but they were like you either have to drink it or you don't get dinner. So then I would do that and then like for breakfast I was forced to eat cottage cheese. And I hate cottage cheese. I despise it now. (00:10:00)

And that was just like the little things in the beginning. And I was... it was fine in the beginning, I was like okay I'll eat my cottage cheese, whatever. And then like after a few weeks, I dropped like... the youngest daughter was my age and she was a brat. And she tripped me in the kitchen and I dropped my soup. And the father went to hit me, and then he just laughed and just told me to clean it. And to go away. So, I cleaned it and went away. But, yeah. it was legit hell. I remember like during the night, they would actually like lock my bedroom door and, like, tie it to another door so I wouldn't leave, and I never... that was always my fear, 'cause I'm terrified... I burned my house down when I was like two. Played with candles. And so I was always terrified that I wouldn't get out. So that scared me.



RG: Can you tell me a little bit more about what it was like growing up in a foster home? While you were there?

TW: Um, which one? *(laughs)* Um...

RG: Is there one in particular that stands out to you?

TW: They all do in their own ways. Um, because my first foster home was hell on earth. I mean I went from a family who couldn't take care of me in general anyways to having like... my mom was never home, we had to do things for myself, my brother always took okay care of me. And then I went into a foster family who just... it was worse than my home. And it was really hard for me to see why I was there. Like, to me it was like, didn't I go through enough at home? And I thought like... 'cause I was told when I got there, like, "these guys are going to keep you safe, they're going to protect you." And that wasn't the case at all. And I was... at a very young age I was questioning my own life, and I would always pray that I would get wings and I would never have to deal with any of it ever again. Um, but as time went on, like—in my other foster homes, like one of them put me in Karate. And I stuck with that even after I left her place, I stuck with it and I've been doing it for my whole life now. Another one, the ones who moved to Benton, they threw me in their family like I was just a family member. They would buy movies that I liked just because I liked it, and no one else liked it, I got it. Um, and then my last foster family, I actually cried at my last foster family cause I didn't want to be adopted cause I wanted to stay with them, but that couldn't happen. And they were great. We did everything as a family. And it was three other kids plus theirs, so it got better. I mean not all of them were bad. But it wasn't the best start.

RG: I had a question specifically, thank god it's written on this paper cause it escaped me. Was there a caseworker that was available to you in your placements?

TW: Um, I've been through so many of them, um... I think I've had like five from when I first entered foster care until I got adopted I had like... it seemed like it was changing every month. So, I did—like some of them would take me out to Denny's. That's just... I love Denny's. But there was someone always there, not necessarily, 'cause I was so young, that I could pick up the phone and call them myself. Um, I would usually have to go through my foster parents and be like, "Can you call so and so?" Um, or they also scheduled a time so that, like, "Oh I'll see you this time." Or "I'll pick you up from school, we can go do this." Um, but even as a child I didn't talk every much. Um, they're like, "So is everything going okay?" I'd automatically just be like, "Yeah. Sure." *(Laughs)* Just because I didn't want to have to move again, even though I knew I'd end up moving anyways. Um, I just wanted to prolong the time.

RG: Were there ever site visits? At the homes you were at?

TW: Yes, there were. Um, with my first foster home we had I think we had like seven.

(00:15:00). I mean, it's easy to just walk in and be like, "Okay, everything looks good, everything's in order, everything is great." But then its like when you leave it's a whole new world. And I was always told to like, "Be on your best behavior. Say this and this and this." So I'd do that. But a lot of times they would just be like okay, so you want to go out and do this? They wouldn't actually stay. So yeah.

RG: Can you tell me about the adoption process?

TW: Oh geez (*laughing*). I was actually asked. Actually it's kind of funny because one of my caseworkers, my last caseworker asked me what I wanted, what my ideal adoption would look like and nothing on that list had never been answered, besides the cats. I did get the cats. But I remember I was sitting in my therapist's office with my foster mom, and she says—she looks at me and goes, "You're going to be adopted." And I was like, "Um, no I'm not." Not going to happen cause my idea was to stay with them forever. She was like, yeah you are. And she played a video that my adopted mother made, and the second I saw that video I stormed out of the office and just said, "I'm not being adopted, you're not going to make me." But I was eight, so I was going to be adopted whether I liked it or not (*laughs*). It was quite the process, like the next three months, um, we'd see each other on weekends. We'd go do things. She bought me this giant Winnie the Pooh, and I think that was supposed to make me feel better but it didn't (*laughs*). Although I did pretend. And then I moved in with her after those three months and then we just, I went to school, I just did other things while she worked like I'd go the YMCA. And then a year later we went to court and they asked me like a whole bunch of questions, like, "Do you like her? Do you get this, this and this?" and, "Do you want to be adopted?" And I said no, but it didn't happen the way....(*door knocks, person interrupts*).

TW: But yeah.

RG: I'm really sorry.

TW: No, that's fine. It happens all the time here. You're gonna have to get used to it if you're going to be here all day. But yeah. The adoption went by fast. Although I did get to change my middle name. Yeah (*nodding and smiling*).

RG: Was your mom involved at all?

TW: Which one? (*Laughs*)

RG: Was your biological mom involved at all?

TW: Yeah, no.

RG: Do you have a relationship with her now?

TW: Um, I do. Um, I called her yesterday when I was trying to figure out what to wear (*laughs*). Um, it's not very close, um... I had a different role with her. In her eyes, we're friends. And she sometimes wonders cause I talk to my brothers more than her, like I'll tell my



brothers anything that's wrong. And she'll just like call or she'll hear and be like, "Why didn't you call me, I'm your mother?" And I have to constantly remind her that I didn't grow up with you as a mother. I didn't know you. I still have to learn to let you be a mother. Um, but she's still immature herself. So, it's kind of hard to have a good relationship in general. A lot of times we'll stop talking for a while just because it's really hard to talk to her.

RG: Um, can you tell me about what it was like living with your adopted family?

TW: Lack of family is a term (*laughs*). It was just her and four cats. It was—the first—I would say the first three years were pretty good. The first five years, I can't count. They were pretty good. I mean I did, I went to the YMCA, I did like every sport that you could possibly think of. (00:20:00) I indulged in everything that I couldn't do moving around. Um, and things seemed like, awesome. And when I was 11 my adopted mother asked me if I wanted to meet my father. She had been talking with him for several months and she saw him a couple times and was like I guess this is okay. Um, and so I saw him a few times. We'd meet for like dinner or something. Then he had asked if I would be willing to be in his wedding. He was getting remarried. And I was. And a year later he died. So that was kind of a short-lived relationship, but she was willing to let me talk to my family, or certain people in my family, which I really appreciated. After about 12, things with her got a little rocky, and I ended up moving out when I was 14.

RG: Okay, I have two questions.

TW: Go for it.

RG: Well I have a lot of questions.

TW: (*Laughs*) Go for it.

RG: Um, I would love to hear more about what that was like for you. Um, once it got rocky. I'm wondering if you could explain a little bit about what you mean by letting you speak to certain members of your family.

TW: Um, okay, so when I was younger my parents... my mother's rights were terminated. My dad willingly gave up his rights because he knew he couldn't take care of me. He was like, "I have no shot," so... So at that point, I'm not allowed to see my family members, either until I turn 18, or unless my adopted mother says I can. And she felt that my dad's side of the family was well enough and were stable enough that I could see them. So I'd go down there for like Christmas and like 4th of July and whatnot. Um, so she was willing to let me see them. Um, partly now I know is due to my older bother, fighting through his whole life and mine to see me and make sure I was okay, and where I was. He knew, 'cause he got to stay with my dad's side of the family, so he wanted me to stay with the family as much as possible. Sadly it didn't

happen until I was 8. Well, eight and a half.

RG: Do you only have one younger brother?

TW: I do.

RG: And he was the one that, you guys went in different directions, is that right?

TW: Yes, he's got to live with my mom.

RG: Can you tell me about what that was like for you?

TW: It was—actually, now that I think about it, I don't think I ever thought about that when I was younger. Like, 'cause he was only, when I left he was only one. Um, so It wasn't really something I thought very much of. Although I do remember, like, when we were doing the visits in the very beginning, when we were leaving he would always run and hide in a closet, just because he didn't want us to leave. He kind of got scared that we were leaving and we'd never come back and he'd never see us. Which did end up happening. But I don't really remember much with him, just because he was so young and I was older. We never really did anything together.

RG: Do you have a relationship with him now?

TW: Oh yeah. Um yeah (*laughing*), we're actually, me and him are the closest between any of us. My two older brothers are pretty close, they talk constantly. But, um most people swear that me and my younger brother are twins, if we weren't four years apart. So, we're very close, yeah.

RG: Did he stay with your biological mom the entire time?

TW: As of four months ago, no. He left 'cause she's crazy. (*Laughing*) He knows that now. But yeah he lived with her... he left for a little while cause we all did. But the court decided that she could take care of him better than all of us together. And he was young enough that he wouldn't really remember much, so they gladly gave him back to her.

RG: How did being in foster care affect your sense of belonging?

TW: Oh geez. I actually just figured that our recently. I really didn't feel like I belonged anywhere. And it's still hard for me, just to feel like I belong anywhere in general. (00:25:00). Its really hard cause you move so much and you're never in once place long. That you don't, you don't build that relationship with anyone, so you don't end up belonging anywhere. Like when I'm asked where do I live, I'll either say my current town, or I'll be like, everywhere. I'll be like, "Everywhere," 'cause you don't have that place that you belong.

RG: Can you tell me about what it was like when you left and the circumstances surrounding why you left your adoptive mom?



TW: Um, I was having my own problems after my dad died. Because I took that personally. Because he had killed himself and I had just got to see him and I was rally mad and I was like, okay why would you do this? And so, I was in my own funk too. And I started drinking and just going out all night. And she doesn't know, she didn't know what to do with that. She just kind of let it go and was like, "Do whatever you want." And I knew it wasn't right, and I kinda was like, okay you need to stop me or its not going to stop. And it didn't stop. And she... I left. when I was 14 and moved into a group home and I was there for my freshman year of high school. And then at the end of the year they were like okay, you can go back with your mother, you're good. Everything is good.

So I spent the summer with her. I went to three different camps that summer. I went to science camp, Girl Scout camp and space camp. And at the end of the summer when I got back, I took one look at her and everything just went in opposite direction. I ended up going into a crisis home for youth. And I told them I wasn't going to go back to my adopted mother. Things just... it was not good. I mean she wasn't well herself. I could tell. I could just tell she couldn't deal with anything. Um, and they called a team meeting, and she walked in and the fist thing she said was, "She's not coming home. Because I can't take care of her, and I've been taking her meds, I've been doing this," um... and I was kind of like, "Yay, thank you! Finally I don't have to go home." And then I was also like, *great*. Now I also don't have a family again. But really at that time was more like, "Okay I don't have to go back. I can get my life together myself." Which didn't happen either (*laughs*). But it was—yeah I left officially when I was turning 15.

RG: Can you tell me a little bit more about what you mean by, "and that didn't happen ether?"

TW: (*Laughs*) Um, that didn't happen either what?

RG: What do you mean by—that you didn't get your life together?

TW: Um, when I moved out I moved into a group home, being 15 and a sophomore in high school. I was quite the person who would just leave in the middle of the night and just go to friends' houses. I would constantly run away. Um, and I remember like my friends like, "Hey I'm going to the lake this summer with my parents, do you want to come?" And I knew that I was like... oh but I have to ask, my DHS worker is going to have to do all this... and I was like, "So here's the plan. I'm going to go to school, we're going to get on the bus, and on our way home we're just going to get off at your place and go." Um. Once they realized that I didn't get off at home, at the group home, they called the police, and I was already halfway gone. So I was pretty destructive. I kind of, went with my own flow which probably wasn't the best idea, speaking with drugs and alcohol and just wanting to do my own thing.

RG: What was it like in the group home? When you were there?

TW: Six girls, all fourteen to sixteen (*laughs*), under one roof. Um, yeah. It was crazy at times. But it was also really fun. I mean we did things together, like we went camping during the summer. We went to Fun Town. (00:30:00) We did a whole bunch of different things but also it was about working on myself and what I wanted and I didn't want that because I was... I had to do that my whole life, and at that time I was just like, I want to do whatever I want to do. I'm only going to be 16 once, so let me do whatever the heck I want. And growing up, I always had this fear, because I never knew if I was going to be in a place or if I was gonna even to live. I mean when I was three I was like questioning whether I was going to stay alive throughout the night.

So I never really expected to be 16. So I kind of just wanted to live it out and do whatever and take my chances. And the group home tried their hardest. When I turned 17 it was like, "You need to make choices. You're almost 18. You can stay here another year, but other than that we can't really help you." And at that time I started talking to my biological mother and I was like, "So I kind of need a place to live cause I'm being thrown out cause I'm almost 18." So I kind of ran away. My DHS worker was kind of like, "You can't go 'cause I'm not going to approve it. But if you go, I'll write you as a runaway." And I was like, "Gotcha. So see ya." And I kind of ran away from that and went home.

RG: How do you feel ICWA applies to you?

TW: Um, It should have. Um, but it wasn't. Just because no one asked that question, whether I was native or not. It wasn't—I mean, when I look at my files from like everywhere, um I'm either Asian, Mexican or white. So, it's really, it's not—it wasn't applied because I wasn't written as a Native American. It was just, whatever is easiest for them to go with.

RG: Did you have any connection with your culture? In your foster homes or in your adoptive home?

TW: I didn't. It was everything other than that. Like, I remember learning French, 'cause one of my foster parents would go to Canada every other weekend, 'cause she did ballet there. So she'd come back and she'd teach us all these French things. And if she was talking about one of us in front of us to her husband, they'd speak French so that we didn't understand what was going on, but you'd hear your name and then you'd hear a bunch of French things and you're like... well I know you're talking about me, but... So we learned a little French. At another family I learned Spanish. So it was other cultures, other than mine.

RG: How do you feel that affected you?

TW: It affected my belonging. Cause I knew I looked different. Especially than everybody else. It was hard, because the first few years that I was living with my mom when I was little, we were learning our language. And just—we really didn't speak English at home. So, when I went into foster care, I lost all that. I lost every part of my culture when I left. And, like, I can remember some of it. I can remember going to Powwows and dancing and stuff. But I never really could get that feeling back.



RG: So, I have known you... for eight, almost nine months, and I know you to be a very strong woman that is connected to her culture. Can you tell me about what that journey was like for you?

TW: That was a scary journey. Um, I had turned 18. And was living in a group home in Bangor for adults. And I needed a case manager because I needed to get my act together. I needed to stop drinking and a whole bunch of other things. And they had—they were the first people to actually ask. They were like, “What are you? You're not white obviously, so”... and I told them I was Native American, they were just like, “Oh... well, there's a place where you can get case management that's specially just for you.” And it was here, at Wabanaki. (00:35:00) And as soon as I came here, I was like, “I don't belong here either.” (Laughing) Um, just because I feel like everybody else knew things about each other and about their culture and I had no idea. But when I got here, everyone was so nice. Um, within like two weeks, they were like, “Oh, we have a beading group on Fridays, do you want to learn to do this?” And do this, and I was like, “Sure!” And the social was coming up in like three months and they were like, “So we're going to be dancing and drumming, do you want to learn that too?” So it was like all these little things. They would just include me in all these things. And I think that helped a lot. Just knowing and being around everybody here has tremendously helped. I still feel like... I belong a little now (*laughing*). Just a little.

RG: I would say you belong more than just a little. Um, is there anything that you want to add that I didn't ask about?

TW: No (*laughing*). Probably later.

RG: Um, I have two questions. Two last questions.

TW: One at a time?

RG: One at a time. Thinking back to your experiences in foster care, and your experiences being adopted. What would you have needed or wanted to make you feel like you belonged, and to make you feel like, I don't know, that there were people there that cared about you? What would you have needed to make it better for you?

TW: First and foremost I would probably say that—any cultural awareness at all. Even if it was just, like, the family learning too. Would have helped so much. And as far as feeling like people cared and were there... um I would just say, telling me that would have been better, instead of just being like, “Okay, yep we'll talk to you later.” Like okay, “We're here, but we're going to be way over here and you're going to just stay here.” There was a huge disconnect there. It was like, “Okay, here's your new place. If you need anything they have my number. See ya.” So there wasn't really that, “We care about you, we want to help you,” it was just...

“This is what we gotta do and we're going to do it.”

RG: Is there anything else that you would say that you needed to have improved things for you? Or wanted? It doesn't even have to be a need, it can be a want.

TW: Um, I think just staying in the same school would have been better. I mean for me it was... I'm a social person. I have to be with people. Especially in school. Like, school was my outlet. Um, if things were horrible at home, or if I wasn't getting along with anybody at home, I always had school. I stayed in school for as long as possible (*laughing*) just so I didn't have to go home and deal with people. And it's really hard when you're moving all the time. You start a new school, you have new friends, you have new teachers, and then you have to do it all over again. Especially for somebody who loves school, it's just really hard.

RG: Okay, one last question.

TW: Haha, you keep saying that.

RG: This is my actual last question. Um, why did you make the choice to engage in this process? Why do you think its important to be involved in this Truth and Reconciliation Commission?

TW: Because, I don't know—it's just something I've always done. I mean, not necessarily with the native community, my own community. But in general—with other foster youth throughout the state, is—I guess for me its a feeling that it's the one place I belong, that I can do and that I can really feel good about. Because I know so much, and I do it so often, that it really is something I'm comfortable doing, and something I love doing.

RG: I really appreciate that you felt comfortable enough to sit with me today. And I think you have tremendous courage and strength, not only to share, but to be where you are. And it breaks my heart that you feel like you don't belong, because I have never met someone who is so strong and who has such a sense of place here. So I really want to thank you for sharing with me today. For being okay with letting me be the statement gatherer. Um, yeah. Thank you. Before I stop the recording, is there anything else you want to add.

TW: You should cut that last part out. (Laughs).

RG: Okay, I can do that.

TW: Um, no.

RG: Okay, I'm going to press stop.

TW: Okay.

[END OF RECORDING]