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Statement by Roger Bernard collected by Erika Bjorum on October 25, 2018

Roger Bernard

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General Information

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Statement Gatherer(s): Erika Bjorum

Support Person: N/A

Additional Individuals Present: N/A

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Recording

EB: My name is Erika Bjorum and it is October 25, 2018. Here at Wabanaki Health and Wellness in Bangor, Maine. And I'm here with Roger Bernard. The file number is 20181000002. And, Roger, I've to ask you, have you read, understood, and signed the informed consent document?

RB: Yes.

EB: And I need to make sure you know I'm a mandated reporter, which means that if a child or an elder is in need of protection, or if there is imminent risk of serious bodily harm, or death, to you or others, that this information may not be protected as confidential. Do you understand?

RB: Mm-hmm.

EB:OK. Um, So my first question, although you can speak about whatever you feel like is pertinent and relevant, but my first question is what is your relationship to Maine state child welfare? And please feel free to tell us as much or as little about what you know as a result of your experiences.

RB: What do you mean, Maine state?

EB: Maine state child welfare.

RB: Oh, I mean, I don't know anything about this state, state of Maine, but when I was growing up in Lynn Massachusetts it's--

EB: Right, sure.

RB: --there's a similarity. Back in 60s there was different from, elaborate on what's up here nowadays. Because, you know, I live in two different worlds, I live in Canada, Micmac Family Service. And then, growing up [*unintelligible*] world, in Boston, it was very devastating to understand that-- who was my identity, I didn't know who I was.

EB: Right.

RB: Growing up, I thought I was Mexican or Spanish. Here I am, all my life speaking Spanish until I got a little older, this Native family told me, you're not Spanish, you're Native American. I said, "Who are they?" They said, "That's your tribe." And I go, "What tribe? There's so many of them out there, I don't know who they are." And so, joke around, I said, "Are they wagon burners? Indians that kill people or something?" They said, "No, if you put it that way, yes and no," for their survival back in the day.

But from my understanding, I grew up with that hatred. Living in foster homes, in Lynn. And they brainwashed me by, by doing all what they asked me to do: clean every day, do chores every day, rake the yard every day, and getting paid, what? Two dollars an hour? From your own foster care?

You know, so, I thought that was good for a little kid. You know what I mean? Oh, I'm getting money from-- you know, what's my allowance and my work pay? I thought it was pretty cool, but and months and years went down the road, they began to start to be neglected. You know, because, you know, each year, foster care money gets either less or it gets high. So then, from



my observation, as I grew up and understood my life back when I was a kid, with a lot of hatred and a lot of anger, I realized then you know, then they... they were only doing it for the money. For, to-- foster care of, if you're Native American or whatever race you are, but in my culture, for myself it was all about sexual abuse, or mentally abuse, you know, or physical abuse.

Mine was mental, physical and labor. Not the sexual part, but it was mentally, physically, and labor in my foster care. It really hurt. It really went through-- I went through hurt. So, my second year's of being in foster home, it was okay, I was in Mansfield, Massachusetts, they were raising me right, making sure I knew who I was, who I identified. This I broke down, I thought I realized, they captured me by-- with love and compassion, finding you know, this is who you really are, this is your people in Canada, this is where you need to belong. It kind of clicked: so I got family in Canada? I want to do some research for myself.

As the years gone by, you know, me realizing, ok, alright, Roger's a, you know, Micmac, well I got family up there. My sister was somewhere in Lynn, you know, didn't realize what I was doing. I figured things out, um, so I got really agitated, again, living in a foster home, because I really started to realize: Wow, I'm a Micmac, I'm a Native American, I'm supposed to be part of this, not no, you know, Mexican, you know, how I grew up learning Spanish in school and all that. You know, grade five, you know, grade four, as a kid, growing up, learning Spanish, it's the second language here in this so-called country.

But anyway, I learned over the years that, you know, going through what I was trying to find was identity. Because I already knew-- I lost my mother at age five, and what that said to me, I remembered my mother getting physically abused. Because she was an alcoholic. God forgive her, I mean, that was her choice in her lifetime, it doesn't affect me now because that's her life -- "I've chosen." But it did hurt me as a child. So going through therapy all those years, I had to bring my adulthood back to that child and tell that child, it's okay, you gotta move on. And rest that child inside you so that child can no longer live that past. It works. Going to powwows, Native American drumming, and all, sweat lodging-- it did help. You know.

So when I grew up out of that, now I went home to Canada after my dad found me when I was thirteen years old, I went to Canada, you know. So I grew up with a stepmother, and all this and that. She was an alright woman, she kept me in line, she was strict, but I kind of hold back because I'm living in another white man's world but she's living on my reservation. You know, I mean that's a whole different complex-- complexity where, you know, my dad loves this

woman and so I had to get used to that. Which, it bring me, well this is, well-- I kind of got offended by it. I mean, I thought this was supposed to be a Native American community. You know what I mean? So I'm like alright. It took me awhile to get used to her. There was a love and hate situation.

But then we got used to that, me and my stepmother, so I kinda-- we kinda like that you know, because it kept me-- it kept me up to level with life. It kept me to understand about this humanity, of diversity. I think my mother-- my stepmother liked that: you have a good mind, use it. Diversity is, you're teaching me how to living righteously. Stop living in your past. And she put me on my spot that way.

So. I said, alright. So I went to school in sociology study and I understood what she meant. I went, "whoa!" So this is not only happens with Native Americans but it happens to whites, blacks, and Hispanics, their own cultures. There was a name given -- abused by the government, by slavery, foster care, or any fruit that was given to the government to the poor to slave us for their own production. And this is how it came out. And you can look that up. Why worldwide government is slaving all cultures for their, for their richness. It's why a lot of people are in foster cares, and why people are who they are today. Especially with Native Americans, we're the last frontier of-- of ignorance, that they given us.

You know, killing us with the land that was not theirs. This, this is a Native American land but it wasn't ours. It was ours to not only protect but sovereign the land by we... nurture it, as we travel. We borrow the land because this is what was given to us. And we shared it among other neighbor Native American tribes back, way back in the day. But there was still battles among other tribes.

But given said, who know's if it's, that's the truth or not because the truth becomes the white man's historical history. It's all lies, regardless, so whatever happened 'til the 1400s it could be all totally different. It was the white man's world lying to our Native American culture by, "this is what you need to know." And it's not. This is why Native Americans in Canada or possibly in the United States, have their own schooling. They have their own school on the reservations or college on their own reservations because you know, a lot of Micmacs, a lot of Native American tribes in Canada, are like, hey we are tired of being socially abused, not only with foster care, but with society too. It's a lot you see in life.

But we'll go back to where, I was in Mansfield, growing up at a certain age, you know, learning all this new stuff with technology that I need to know, through books they'd been giving to me.



And they, they loved Native Americans because I wasn't the only Native American in that foster care. So.

EB: You weren't the only?

RB: I weren't the only one. So. I was blessed, and I'm only crying because it was that family that gave me growth, it gave me hope. And the other foster home, nothing, just fuckin... you know, ignorant. You know what I mean, so.

As I grew older, after I left the Cooney's, I went to Canada, that's where my father found me. When I was with the Cooney's because I was asking questions, who is my real family? Who is my real dad? I knew my mum's dead now. Because when I was with Cooney, my mother died, so I had to dealt with that, so I was asking more and more questions, and when I did, I asked the Cooney's, "Can I go to see my sister?" "Yeah." So I went to go see her and I told her what I'd been going through and all this and that. She was like, "Wow, you did all that?" I said, "Yeah, because I wanted to find my own identity, I have my own identity." You know what I mean? So when that was said, she "Wow, I never thought of that."

So I took her out of her own environment that she's so used of, we went to Canada for awhile and-- well, in between that gap, we had a livelihood in Boston to survive, to get out of Boston to go to Canada and that didn't work out, right? I think that was after, we were younger.

But when I told Julie about that, so I went up there first. For a lot of years, until I was nineteen. I went to school up there, I educated myself. Then my sister came up after. There's a lot of-- lot of anger towards her, she said, "why did you leave me?" I said, "I didn't leave you, I couldn't find you. I tried to but you weren't available." What I wanted to share with you. So. I left another Native American child behind me. My sister. And, it hurt me a lot but I had to be selfish in my own reasons because I was fighting for this for a long time, my identity, I didn't know what her mind was that, all she was saying all her life, "I was protecting you. I was protecting you." No, you weren't, you were just protecting something that's very... shameful of you. And I knew what that is, and I ain't gonna go further than that.

EB: Sure.

RB: Because it's, it goes deeper with her emotions, with her empathies. And, I understood, well, you do what you're doing in life, and I'm going back home to Mansfield and I'm gonna figure this out. So when I did, next thing you know, I had to leave Man-- I went to my other foster home in Lynn. I went back to the Tuckers, the ones who abused me. Why there? I guess, the Mansfield family, their time was gone. Being the foster parents. So I went back to neglect. Oh, boy, was I fuckin mad.

EB: What age were you when you went back?

RB: I'm gonna say twelve. And I was, I was on a football team. And-- in Mansfield. And I was in karate. And a hockey player. You know? Those are the sports I like. And I especially like baseball. It's one of my best sports. You know, so. [*Laughs.*] And, I had all of those qualities, I had life, in there. In Mansfield. And a community that loved me. You know what I mean? And I loved them, and I finally found a family. That showed me my identity, you know.

I'm saying it. Some foster cares in the white man's world that's good, and some are bad, but sometimes, you're going to have to make your own choice by self-healing. And what that is, is how we grew up in today's generation, was not fall back to what happened to these residential schools where our parents-- let's learn from our parents and move on from our neglect. And go forward, like sharing this-- what we are now today.

But what, when I went back to Lynn, to this other family, I was expecting to get beat up, abused. So I said, no. So one day, me and Dave were playing hockey, and I shot a goal, a lot of times because I was good at hockey, and he was a hockey player too. "Oh, you think you're better than me?" "No, I just learn quicker, I mean, I got educated, I smartened up." "You fuckin dumb Indian." Oh, I dropped the stick, and I took the gloves off and beat the living fuck out of him so bad. Broken jaw, like this. This was because I identified myself as a Native American. For all that anger finally came out. And then, their parent-- their family jumped on me, holding me back.

And I said, the next night, I said, I was done. I didn't care. And I was pretty much fighting the whole family that same night. I only got one broken nose at age, you know, twelve. I didn't care. And then, these kids are a lot older than me. I was identified who I really was but yet, I was hatred inside, I got this anger inside, by the way they treated me.

EB: Yeah.



RB: So that was my identity. How we grew up in the foster care. And, but as I was getting better at healing, I found my sister, I found-- found my sister, said, "What's going on?"-- so we took off for awhile. They caught us, so they had to separate us again, so I went back to Mansfield. I told the Massachusetts Family Services that I have to go back to Mansfield or I'm gonna end up hurting them again because they're the ones physically, and neglecting me, is why I interact with that. So they believe me. I said, "It's about time you guys fuckin woke up." I'm not gonna have you, your governments or any of your foster cares neglecting a person who I, I finally identify who I really am. So they, "Whoa, now, we can't touch this now because he's starting to identify who he is." Hey, I'm a Native American Micmac from Canada, dual citizenship, who was raised in a fuckin white society. You know. I don't need that shit.

So I went back to Mansfield, to this white family, where I was in love of, of their humanity, their caring. You know. They believe in something that I felt that was important. Identification. But through love. That just made me more happier. So they, I told them you know that I got neglected again with the Tuckers in Lynn, and I need to go back home, I need to... go home. "Where's home?" "Canada, where my dad's there. He's been looking for me." I got this real gut feeling, because once you got that hate, hate feeling about how you've been neglected. But something came over me. It's time to head up north to, to where, where your family's from.

So when I did that, all my family and relatives are, "Oh, I got a cousin up here, or a brother and sister, up there," waiting for me to come home. And when I came home, I was like, [*makes explosion sound*] a culture shock. My identity went from, when I was here in Man-- I was all overwhelmed but when I went up there, I was in culture shock. Because you're living in white society and going into Native American society. I was like, "Whoa."

So when I went to school there, you know, they thought I was a Me-- you know, some kind of poor Native American until I started speaking Spanish, they're like, "Whoa." You know like, "Oh, this guy's different." So I start learning French, in some ways, you know. And I kind of grew up with that language, so I didn't let my past diverse me of how I grew up, as growing up in [*unintelligible*]-- in Canada, I wouldn't let them hurt me. Because I'm not gonna to let that child get hurt no more. So I was protecting my pain, and not get hurt.

So, I do have bad dreams or memories of it today. But, it's only to learn the process to heal and teach others. I mean, my children and my grandchildren that, there's no, there's no more neglect, what I went through that you're not going through. Their dad and your mother ain't

gonna go through this. And my grandkids, “Why?” Because you got lovable parents. I never had -- that. You’re lucky you’ve got two parents that love you, and I support that. A hundred percent. You know?

So. And someday when, I, you know, I will-- when I get my sociology major done, I’m going after something that’s gonna help this kind of thing that, you know, what you’re doing. Then I’m going for something better. Like, you know, the sovereignty of, of all emotions, all the empathies that they-- government needs to be paid back, from the United States and Canada because you know, I’m gonna diverse on both sides.

And needs-- it needs to be done. I got people in Canada that wants that too because later to Native American foster care to off the reserve, in United States, it’s all the same. We can all work together and have it connected. And I believe that because, if I can travel back and forth, then-- and we have Native Americans that have family the same way, and the ones down here they-- because they ran away from their neglect and pain is why. And they want to come back home where they’re originally from. If you’re off the reserve or on the reserve, it’s all amounts the same.

But me, living in white society down here [*shakes head*]? I already forgave them. Because it wasn’t me that had the pain and the hurt and hatred. There was just me, being in the wrong place at the wrong time, you know? Realizing that I was living in Mansfield, I grew with that knowledge that there’s always hope. And with that knowledge, you know, is forgiveness. And that we cannot have that hatred no more.

And this, where I’m at right now, I forgave them. And I move on. But I still have moments. And when I got moments, I’ll go get a punching bag, I’ll go to the gym and work it out. And then I’ll feel better. And then, you know, and then... I just go on from there in life and just... And when I hear people talk like I’m talking to what you’re-- and when we’ve seen that thing at the theater.

EB: The film, yeah.

RB: The film. I broke down. [*Voice breaks.*] --the family services put us through that way and then you see the residential kids -- our parents. That’s what killed me the most. I told her, I said, I knew this was gonna happen. Because it’s an epidemic. It’s an epidemic in Ireland too. Like the English destroyed Ireland to be slaves, and put them in foster care, this was why they came to New England and grew up in their culture the way they are.



So if I am so diversified with culture because that's my major too, because I-- and not just for non-Native Americans, but there is good people out in this world and there is ignorance. You gotta balance it out and figure out your own self, the preservation of healing. Without that there's-- you don't have hope. With the healing process. And this is how I was brought by elders and the Native American cultures, you know it's, the shaman, and all. They taught me all that, as I was getting older, so. I had to leave my Christianity aside, and figure out what they're about and I came out okay. You know what I mean? That's pretty much all I have to say.

EB: Ok. I have a few more questions, but we can also just be done if you would like to be done.

RB: Alright, one more question, I guess.

EB: One more question? What is it you would-- and you may have answered this already but this is just one of the questions we have. Um, oh we'll do this one. If you could change one thing to improve Wabanaki children's experience now with state child welfare today, what would it be?

RB: I would have trained Native Americans on this subject to be in that kind of environments. To where they give a Native American family a fair chance to go through and process like we do back home in Canada, where they help you to... how would you say, um, go through a, a parenting program. The children stays in one area, and they go into a little secure Native American child protection services with families who are dedicated into that environment, who already know what they went through. And they use this product for, for children like ourselves to heal, but not in my generation, but into a new generation gap, where, where it can be like, you know, only on the reservation, it can only happen. They cannot go into white man's society because it's just gonna fall back to what we went through and if today's world doesn't succeed, well, we're gonna fall backand-- their generation's gonna fall back into that.

Which I already see happening. I see Native American children, kids in white foster homes. But we need to follow up quickly and where the improvement needs to be written out. We can't have it no more, because I'm-- apparently, I'm all done seeing my children getting hurt. Our children of today, you know, not just mine but everybody else's, you know?

But my kids are already grown up, living with their mother. So they never had to see that. They got-- they're well-educated, they're on their way. And I got three sons in the military. Two

graduated and one, well he's still doing it. And my other kids, still going to college, high school, whatever. They're doing ok for themselves. You know what I mean?

But, and this is because I didn't let this, this anger inside me of my past, get to me in foster care. I wouldn't let the white man's system get, get over-- come over me. I kind of beat their system by acknowledging my, what I know, within myself.

And with that said, you know, when you bring all this together and you data this all together, and listen to what we're saying. Especially the new family services of Maine, or in the States, is that we gotta put our shit together and let our children not get hurt. Because I'm tired of seeing our Native American children get hurt.

Because my, my grandchildren see this. So that makes me proud. By not letting the Native American family services-- because they act on government services too because it's kind of connected. In a way. Same as down here.

But this is why we choose not-- my family, and my kids, they choose not to let their kids go through that. And I'm a proud grandparent. My kid-- my grandchildren are happy. Because they don't see that abuse. That is it, that was the goal I wanted. They don't see it. They're not gonna go through it. And I will, and I'll protect that. You know?

You know, and someday I'll when I graduate, I'll sign that paperwork and in the government office for family protecting service for Native Americans or on the rez in that factor to see the youth grow stronger, instead of violence. Because there shouldn't be any. You know what I mean?

And that's what we need to do, I mean, that's pretty much-- I need to see the family service of Native Americans stop focusing on putting them in foster care and I'll say it again, in a Native American foster care, because if I hear or know of these Native children are going to white man's society, I already know it's weakening, it's already been-- you're already dropped the feather of our culture on the floor of like it's disrespect. And I'll say that to my own Native American people today, if they don't take care of their children now, then, what do you have to live for now? You know what I mean?

From my example, my grandchildren are happy because they don't see that in their environment no more. Because we choose to live off the reserve, and move forward, because I taught my children diversity. Because I went through it in the States. Now I lived in Canada and the



reserve, so I diverse my life with two different cultures, the French, the English, and Native Americans, and the Hispanics, whoever came into my life. I was a happy guy because I wanted to show that even though I had a lot of pain, what I went through, as a kid? I showed my happiness, by not letting them see my pain, and I still have that. You know what I mean? So, yeah, pretty much it.

EB: Ok, well thank you.

RB: Thank you.

END OF RECORDING