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Statement by Sandra McDonald collected by Marcie Lister on August 6, 2014

Sandra McDonald

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General Information

Private or Public Statement? Private
Statement Provider: Sandra McDonald
Date: August 6, 2014
Location: Presque Isle, Maine
Previous Statement? No
Statement Gatherer: Marcie Lister
Support Person: Ben Burton, Sandra's son (via off-camera audio)
Additional Individuals Present: Gail Werrbach
Recording Format: Video
Length of Recording: 22:44

Recording

(discussion of camera set-up)

ML: Um, my name is Marcie Lister, and I am the statement gatherer with the, ah, TRC, and I am here with:

SM: Sandra McDonald.

ML: And, Sandra's son:

BB: Ben Burton, yeah.

ML: — who is here as her Community Support Person, and:

GW: And Gail Werrbach, Commissioner.

ML: The File Number, ah, is A-201408 ... 00080-003. Wow! *(laughs)* That's a lotta numbers! Um, today is, ah, August 6, 2014, and we are in Presque Isle, at, what do you? What the? What do you call this building? The, just, Tribal Community Center —?

SM: *(overlapping)* This is the Administrative Building.

ML: – The Administrative Building –

SM: Mm-hm.

SM: — for the Micmacs.

ML: (*softly*) Okay.

SM: And this is the Council Chambers. (*smiles*)

ML: This is the Council Chambers, yes.

SM: Mm-hm.

ML: Have you been informed and understood and signed the consent form?

SM: Yes, I did.

ML: Okay. I just need to advise this for the recording that any information disclosed in your Statement that indicates that a child is in need of protection or if there is imminent risk of death or serious bodily injury to an identifiable person or group, including yourself, that may not be protected as confidential.

SM: Yes.

ML: You understand that.

SM: Um hmm.

ML: Okay. Then, um, whatever you ... would like to ... tell us about, please.

SM: Okay. Um, it was back in around '67, 1967, when we were taken away from my mom. She had eight children, two that didn't live with us, and one that I didn't even — One of those children that didn't live with us, I didn't even know about her, until later years.

But, um, back in that time, they had no, um, TANF or food stamps. They actually gave out surplus food —

ML: Mmm. Mm-hm.

SM: But those, that food didn't last that long. So, being a single parent with eight children, it was kind of hard for her. She had no other income. And, um, I remember her going to the Presque Isle Town Office for assistance, like for food, and, I remember this, um, (*pause, looking down, deep inhale*) this older lady behind the desk and, ah, she, she, I remember her being *very rude.* And, I remember thinking – I was only like about eight (*distant sound of a*



small child talking) – but I remember thinking, um, (*sound of tissue box being slid across the table toward her*) that ... she didn't *know* what it was like to be hungry, you know?

She, so, it still bothers me today to think about that. Um, 'cause I remember, at times, we had to, like, just to fill our stomach with somethin' — We'd find lard and we'd cover it with a piece of bread, and add salt to it, and eat that, just to stop the hunger pains. But those, those are the times that we had, and those were troubling times, um. (*pause, looks down*)

So I 'member her giving my mom, like, an attitude, and, um, and I think that's what led to, um, the city getting involved and them at a point to take the children away. 'Cause, they didn't have — Like, my mom had a bad back, so she couldn't work, but they didn't have any disability then. They didn't have a lot of, um, support for her.

And she did this, she gave us up because she wanted a better life for us. She didn't want us to suffer like we were. But, at the same time, um, being taken away at such a young age, I *lost* my language, things that, where I was just starting to pick up on our language. Um, me and my brother used to sit there and listen to my aunt and her talk, and then we'd kind of decipher what they were talking about —

GW: Mmm.

ML: Mm-hm.

SM: — which was kind of fun. Um, my older brother, at the time that lived with us, he stayed with my mom, but the State took the rest of us. And they first put us in the same home. And I remember getting there — it was in Ashland — and the, the couple that took us — She was big in beans and homemade bread, and — she was talking with my mom. And us kids went outside to play and, um, my older brother John and I, s- ... we didn't want to stay. We wanted to stay with our mom, so, so we ran away, while they were still at the house.

ML: (*very softly*) Mmm.

SM: I remember my brother Roger wanted to come with us, and I told him, no, he had to stay with the younger ones.

Um. So anyways, to-, they, they took us. Actually, the lady, she ran, she came down the road, and they found us, and, um. My mom came and got us, and brought us in the car and, at the time, the lady was tellin', tellin' us things that she actually shouldn't've. She was saying that my mom, putting my mom down for losing us children, and saying things that, um, wasn't her right to say. And, and she ended up losing her job because of that.

But they decided to put us in a separate home, so they took my brother John and I, and the rest of the children stayed at that farm, farmhouse. And I found out years later that they were abused there. Um, my brother Roger talks about being ... beaten with a belt, um, and I'm sure there's other stories that they're not sharing with me.

Meanwhile, um, they found another home for my brother John and I, and we went to a Maliseet home in Houlton. And in that home, we were provided with clothes and food ... but I remember thinking that I didn't want those things. I just wanted my family back. ... And, I never felt loved there. There was no, there was no hugging. Not 'I love you.' We were given chores to do ... and, and go to school.

And, and that was my life there, until I ran away from there ... which was, like, I was around 14 then, um, and at that time, I, after, after we were caught, so — or we actually gave ourselves up — we were placed in another home, which was with my aunt, and I stayed there until I became, until I went on my own.

But, I remember, my mom, thinking that — There was one time we were traveling, and I wanted to stop in the house that we lived, where I lived in Houlton, and, um, just to see the place again. So, we had stopped and, um, the, it was a different home owner, but they let me go through the house, and I just wanted to see the place where, where there was a lot of pain, and, um, because I think that was like a, a part of a process that I had to go through, that ... so I could leave it behind.

Um. And, when I left there, and I got back in the car and, my mom was kind of hurt because, I don't know what she had thought, but I told her that I, that I just needed to see that place. It wasn't because it was a happy place, and it was good memories. But, and also I reassured her that I was the person I am today because *of her.* Because all of the things that she did, up until I was taken from the State, she already had implanted in me, and that was — This lady had a lot of strength, and she had a lot of love, and I think that, um, she should've gotten more support — (*nodding*)

ML: (*very softly*) Mm-hm.

SM: — than she did. (*nodding*) And ... I became a single parent when I got older, and I fought hard, that, and I made things work. There was no way that I was going to lose my children. They weren't going to go through the pain that I did (*distant sounds of children*) and the hurt that I went through.

ML: (*sniff*)

SM: (*softly*) And that's all I'd like to say. (*looks toward her son*)

GW: (*softly*) Thank you.

SM: Yeah. Do you have any questions?



ML: (*softly*) Um, I, I might, um, have a couple of questions. To be —

SM: (*nodding*)

GW: So you were about, you were about eight?

SM: I was about eight. (*nodding*)

GW: Eight, and then, till 14?

SM: And then I —

GW: — And then you were with your —

SM: — with—

GW: — with your aunt?

SM: Right. (*nodding*)

GW: When you, when you were a teenager?

SM: Yep. (*nodding*)

GW: Um-hmm. Can you tell us a little bit about, um, what you might remember from the, about the social workers that came from the State? What they were like? What they — ?

SM: Um, well —

GW: — when, what —

SM: I, I do remember them saying, when they took us to Houlton that, um, they'd ... come back again and check in —

GW: Mm-hm.

ML: — to see how we were doin', and if we were happy. Or basically just to see how we were. I don't remember that ever happening —

GW: Um-hm.

SM: — because, if they had ever came back and asked me, I would've been truthful.

GW: Yeah.

SM: And ... and they're ... that, I felt like they *lied* to me. And, I was stuck where I was.

GW: Mm-hm.

ML: Did you ever see ... you said you and one of your brothers were moved to the —

SM: Mm-hm. (*nodding*)

ML: — um, house in Houlton, but your other siblings stayed back —

SM: Right. (*nodding*)

ML: — in the original — Did you see them at all over the years?

SM: No. No, I didn't. Not until I got older. And when I went to my aunt's, I think, believe they visited me there once —

GW: Mm-hm.

SM: — but, um. No, that was another hurtful thing.

ML: So there were, there were no provisions —

SM: Th- (*shaking her head no*)

ML: — to have you see each other —

SM: No.

ML: — during the time —

SM: No.

ML: — that you were all in foster, foster care.

SM: Right.

GW: What about in terms of seeing your mom? Did you get to see your mom when you were in foster care?

SM: She, she came once and, um ... I, I made such a fuss —



GW: Mm-hm.

SM: — that, uh, when, when it was time for her to leave — The house had like, one, you could go up one stairs, down the other, and out the other door. And, uh, when she was leaving' — I had gone up toward the bedroom, but I ran through the house, and out the other door. And I remember chasing the car, because I, I wanted to go with her.

GW: Mmm.

SM: And I think that, really, actually hurt her too much, that she couldn't come back —

GW: Mmm.

SM: — And, and have me go through that again with her. And, um, I think because of the State, when they took us away — My mom, I never saw her drink — I saw like my aunts or uncles drinking — but my mom never drank when she had us. But when she lost us, she, she did drink for a, a certain time. I mean, she did get the, she did stop, eventually, but there was a time period where ... that's what she did.

GW: That's how she coped.

SM: Yep.

GW: Yeah.

ML: *(softly)* Mm-hm.

GW: And did you grow up in this area? Where, where did you grow up, when you were with your mom?

SM: *(overlapping)* Yes, I grew up in Aroostook County.

GW: Okay. Here around Presque Isle?

SM: Uh, Houlton —

GW: Houlton —

SM: — Presque Isle.

GW: Okay.

SM: Yep. And my mom moved to Boston, after she lost us. (*nodding, pause*)

GW: Mmm.

ML: And th-, the, the home that your, you first went to?

SM: Mm-hm.

ML: — Um, that was **not** a Native home?

SM: No, it **wasn't** a Native home. And, um ... (*pause*) I don't know much about ... that, except —

ML: Mm-hm.

SM: — ah, it was a big farm, and I knew that they needed ... help. So, I don't know if they were looking just for child labor, or —

GW: Mm-hm.

SM: — I don't believe they did it ... for all the good —

GW: Mm-mm.

SM: — you know?

GW: Mm-hm.

SM: So. I don't-, and I also think that, back then, they didn't do enough research in the homes that they put the children in. And they just basically put the children in the homes, and left them. (*nodding*)

ML: Mm-hm.

SM: And, well, I know a lot of terrible things happened to some of those children. (*pause*)

GW: Have your si-, have your, um, any of your, um, brothers or sisters talked about their experiences?

SM: A little bit, and that was about being whipped with the belt in the barn. But, I think ... they're holding back ... from telling me more things that happened.

GW: Mm-hm.

ML: That certainly is, um, is pretty typical, that people don't like to talk about it.

SM: Yeah. Yeah. (*distant sounds of children's voices*)

ML: It's painful.

SM: Yeah.

GW: And were you able to connect with your brothers and sisters after you moved to your, to your aunt's house?

SM: Um, very little. I really didn't, um, start connecting till I got older and I, after I had my own children —

GW: Mm-hm.

SM: — and then started connecting back with my brothers and sisters.

GW: Mm-hm.

SM: Um. Yeah.

GW: Was there any, when you first went into care, were there any ... relatives that you think you and your sisters and brothers could've lived with, that the State didn't think about? Or didn't — ?

SM: Well, yeah, my aunt —

GW: Your aunt?

SM: — Yvonne.

GW: So they didn't, so that wasn't a —

SM: (*overlapping*) Well, I don't know if she could've taken all of us, either.

GW: Yeah.

SM: I think they're, they wanted to try to keep us all together. (*nodding*) Maybe at the time, it would've been ideal if, if they would've supplied the home —

GW: Mm-hm.

SM: — you know ... for foster families, like if there were taking a large group of children —

GW: Yep.

SM: If they supplied, if they supplied a home for them as well, it would've been ideal.

GW: Yeah. What do you think, um — Thinking back on your experiences, what, what do you think is important for the — One of the things the Commission's, we're, an important part of what were doing is to make recommendations to, to change things —

SM: Mm-hm.

GW: — to make things better. If you could ... what do you think would be important for us to, um, to ask to change or to make sure happens, or?

SM: Um, well, one, one thing I *really* regret is not knowing my language.

GW: Mmm.

SM: I really regret that, um, because that's something I lost that I can't pass on to my kids —

GW: Mmm.

SM: — or grandkids. So. ... I would, somehow, I would have the State be able to have the person keep their culture?

GW: Mm-hm.

SM: I think that's important. And, also, continue to check up on the children. And *don't warn* the families that they're coming for a visit, 'cause I think that was another problem in the past —

GW: Mm-hm.

SM: — that they were told when they were gonna come and visit, so they can either spruce up the house or change their attitudes, and, so they're not really seeing what's happening.

GW: Yep. Yep. Yeah. And, do you have any, um, the, the current, right now in this time period, do you, um. I don't know if you have any experience or any knowledge, in terms of how things have been working since — The Indian Child Welfare Act came in 1978. Do you have any sense of how things are working now?

SM: Um, not like personally involved —

GW: Yeah.



SM: — with those cases, but, um, I do see that as a good thing. I think that it's great that Native children are being put with families in Natives' homes —

GW: Mm-hm.

SM: — first, as opposed to being put elsewhere. I think that's a good thing.

ML: Well, it sounds, you, in your case, after the first placement, you were put in a Native home, but it wasn't your, it wasn't a Micmac home.

SM: Right.

ML: It was a Maliseet home.

SM: Right.

ML: — And, um —

SM: Yeah. They're —

ML: — and the languages are not —

SM: — The language was different. And, um, and I think, the same thing. I don't think she did it for love, or —

ML: Mm-hm.

SM: — her honestly caring, because I felt I was taken in to help with the home chores, and —

ML: Mm-hm.

SM: — and maybe an income for her —

ML: Mmm.

SM: — as well.

ML: Mm-hm. Mmm.

SM: So, yeah, with their own — Like if it's a Micmac child, they should go in —

ML: Mm-hm.

SM: — they should go into a Micmac home.

ML: Mmm.

GW: Mm-hm.

SM: Yep. Maliseet should go with a Maliseet family —

ML: Mm-hm. Mm-hm.

SM: — because that way — Because the cultures **are** different —

GW: Mm-hm.

SM: — when they're Native. They are still different ... to some extent. *(long pause)*

ML: Do you have any questions for us, Sandy, or any other comments that you want to make?

SM: Um, not at this time.

ML: Okay.

SM: Yeah.

ML: Okay.

SM: But, um, thank you for doing this, because this is **way** overdue. *(nodding)*

ML: Mm-hm.

SM: It's, I'm glad someone took the time to think about these issues and, um, I think it's really good for people like, for myself, they have someone to talk to, that they can look back and, what ways can they make it better for their children or so on —

ML: Mm-hm. Mm-hm.

GW: Yep.

SM: — and better relationship with the State and the Native families.

GW: Mm-hm.

ML: Well, it's, feels like a privilege to me to be, to hear some of your stories and your willingness to share them. I really appreciate you *(inhale)* being part of this process.



GW: Right. Yeah.

SM: Yeah. Thank you.

GW: For opening up to the process.

ML: Mm-hm. Yeah.

GW: Not easy.

SM: No, it isn't. (*nodding*) Right.

ML: And should you find, this happens sometimes, that, you know, just because you're thinking more about it, and you're talking to us —

BB: (*clears throat*)

ML: — and maybe other people about it more, that you start to feel more things. As you were saying, on the way here, you —

SM: — Yeah, on the way here, I was like, 'What am I going to say?' because I didn't have a chance to write anything last night —

GW: Mm-hm.

SM: — um, and then just thinking about things in my mind, it's like, I was starting to cry, by myself, driving —

ML: Um-hm.

GW: Sure.

SM: — and I'm like, ah, I'm going to have my son here today, so, I feel stronger —

ML: And you may find that you might *want* to talk about these things more. You might want to do some writing, just for yourself, or just —

SM: — Yeah, yeah, I think that's a good idea. Writing. (*pause*)

ML: Well, thank you.

SM: Thank you.

GW: And, here, we have ...

ML: Oh, yes! And this is a thank you of some ceremonial tobacco.

SM: Oh, thank you.

ML: Um.

SM: Thanks.

ML: It's our ...

[END OF RECORDING]