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12-18-2014

### Statement by Mikhu Paul collected by Rachel George on December 18, 2014

Mikhu Paul

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## General Information

**Private or Public Statement?** Private

**Statement Provider:** Mikhu Paul

**Date:** December 18, 2014

**Location:** Portland, Maine

**Previous Statement?** No

**Statement Gatherer:** Rachel George

**Support Person:** N/A

**Additional Individuals Present:** None

**Format of Recording:** Audio

**Recording Length:** 33:45

## Recording

**RG:** All right, it's December 18, 2014. We're here in Portland, Maine. My name is Rachel George and I'm here today with:

**MP:** Mikhu Paul.

**RG:** Fantastic. And the file number is H-201412-00155. Mikhu, have you been informed, understood and signed the consent form?

**MP:** Yes.

**RG:** Fantastic. And I have to let you know that if at any point during this recording you indicate that there's a child or an elder currently in need of protection or that there's imminent risk of serious bodily harm or death to an identifiable person or group, including yourself, that that information may not be protected as confidential.

**MP:** I understand.

**RG:** Okay. You can start wherever you feel comfortable.

**MP:** Okay. Um, I don't have direct experience with the foster care system, um, or residential schools in the sense that I was never removed from my home by the State. Um, but, I was raised by my mother and my grandfather, and I know for a fact that his experiences — He came from Kingsclear New Brunswick First Nations, and he told me when I was young that he had been sent to residential school. And his experiences there very much affected him and then in turn our family, because I was raised by him and by my mom. Um, I know that he died in 1993, and in the, you know, the 35 years or so that I knew him, um, when he walked here, he only talked about his experiences at the residential school a handful of times. He was 81 when he died. He just didn't talk about it. Um, and so as a grown woman later, I realized it was because he must have been very affected by it. Um, so, one thing is, my granddad also served in World War II, two terms, and I know he was very damaged from that, as many men were as well. And those two things, the residential school and his time in World War II, were things that he never liked to talk about. And it was clear, uh, on reflection to me, that it was because it was so very difficult for him. Um, he was an alcoholic. He sobered up when I was very young, um, probably first grade, so primary. But my mother was also an alcoholic. And she sobered up around the same time he did.

Um, and my eldest brother... (*crying*) ... he is now dying, and he is an alcoholic as well. So, really, my granddad had several good decades after he sobered up. But I know that part of this legacy of alcoholism was in part resulted from, in large part from the terrible experiences he had, being taken.

I grew up without my language, only little phrases. You know, I learned to say things, 'I need to go to the bathroom. Do you love me? Hello. Goodbye.' And I wondered, why we didn't say more. And my mother said it's because in her household, they — Her mom just practically forbid my grandfather from speaking his own dialect. Because they had learned that it would be a terrible burden instead of like a cultural treasure for her to speak her language. My gramp didn't speak English when they sent him away. He spoke French and he spoke two different Native dialects. **[00:05:00]** And I know one was Maliseet, Passamaquoddy dialect. I don't know what the other one was, it might have been Micmac. There's the things he told me. And I, and he said, 'I learned English quick enough.' Because they would beat him, obviously, for speaking. And, uh, he said they locked him up, you know, in a closet, which I know was typical.

My granddad was one of the ones who just couldn't and wouldn't accept it. So he told me he kept running away. And he ran away from the residential school in Canada four or five times and they kept bringing him back. By the time he was 15, he learned not to go home, and he went to Woodstock and stayed with his cousins. And once he was 15 or so, he said they stopped coming after him. Now my gramp was an intelligent man. Um, and he, he never graduated from high school. Um, he was brilliant in his way, but I think that generationally, he didn't have a chance to fulfill his potential because of what happened to him. And so, you can see how quickly the effects of his being taken from his family then shaped the succeeding generations. You know, the kind of despair and isolation, um, that happened.

And then of course, he went off to the war. He did a tour, he said, for Canada. And he came back and encountered a CO on this side of the line and they said, 'Well what are you doing here?' And he said, 'Well I've done my tour.' And they said, 'No, you're not.' And he was



signed up again. So, uh, I'm very proud of the fact that his name is on the Memorial in Indian Island as a veteran, and he was very proud of that, too, and it's on his headstone. So, there was a thing where my mom, I didn't grow up on Indian Island. My mom did not want to live there. And I really do think it's because — and she told me this at one point — she literally thought we were safer off the island. But, um, because of the struggles that her own parents had, and my granddad and his alcoholism, she grew up without a father in her life. He came back into our life. As I say, I was her last child, her fourth child. And he was sobering up. And he came back into her life when she was more or less an adult. So, she literally missed being parented by a very good man, because of, you know, what he had been through. And, um, he came to live with us. Which I thought was wonderful. And he would take care of me so she could work. 'Cause my brothers were in school, and I was the littlest one. Um, I think because of the fact that my granddad's marriage failed, which is very much has to do with the despair and isolation and the racism that he suffered and his time in the war, um. It, you know, affected my mom.

And so, she became an alcoholic, and she had four children by the age of 21. Four babies to care for. And she lost one almost right away because we all have different dads. And she lost my sister to my sister's natural father. He came and took her and brought her to New York. And I didn't meet her until I was 16 years old. So, in that brief overview, you know, you can see — I'm third generation — how those experiences can lead to a family just disintegrating. (*cries*) And I feel so bad. I feel so bad for my brother, my elder brother who is dying now.

**[00:10:00]** And you know, I tell people, our families — or not our families — but I mean, we just don't live as long. A lot of non-Native people don't get it. But I'm 56, and I lost so many of my family. And a lot of it is due to a hard lifestyle and alcoholism. And I just think that the substance abuse wouldn't have been so large in their lives if the family relationships hadn't been so damaged by these early experiences.

I was really happy that my granddad sobered up, because he helped raise me from early childhood on. And I was the only one of four that was taught by him. So, I am now, uh, he died in '93. It's 2014. I'm the last person in my family to have any sense of a traditional upbringing, have any knowledge, to have a strong, uh, cultural identity. You know? That I have fully internalized. And it's sad to me to think that, um, my siblings and their children only know of their cultural identity indirectly as a sort of a fact. They don't have the living experience of it. And I just realize that, that ... a lot of that when I'm gone is going to be lost. I don't have any children. I grew up eating out of the river, which is very polluted. And when I was born, my mother was an alcoholic when she carried me, and she had copper poisoning from drinking bad moonshine, and we didn't know at the time when I married, but I am not able to have children at all, my eggs are no good. So this is another effect I think, however indirect, but very powerful, of what happened to my gramp.

Because when you start damaging the family relationships, then people don't have the kind of, um, support network that they should have and so I think it makes you easier to, um, to succumb to things like substance abuse because people give up. You know, the despair is so powerful. And then, once you introduce a substance abuse, then you're adding another layer of problems onto the family structure. Uh, and so here we are. I am the grandchild. And I don't have substance abuse problems, but all three of my siblings do. Um, and I've one sister who I don't really speak with. Um, and she's very interested in her cultural identity, but she was taken when she was two and I wasn't born yet, and she never had the benefit as I did of being raised with a sense of who she was.

Now, here's the thing about the foster system. My mom didn't graduate high school until she was 36. She was very proud of it, and she put that GED on the living room wall and I always hated it. I was — I wouldn't be now — but back then, I found it very embarrassing. But she was proud that she had finally done that for herself. But, she was not able to take care of all of her children when we were growing up at any given time. And, so what she would do is farm us out. And, I think she did that because she knew that often times we were on Welfare, we got government food, she knew that they'd be coming to check on us. And the neighbors sometimes said, 'Oh those kids are wild,' or whatever — but it was because she was gone all the time working. So we half raised ourselves. And, so she would pay someone — you know, back then it was plenty of money — like \$35 a week, and we would be going and we'd go to live there for a few months. And it gave her a kind of a break. Um, because she couldn't handle supporting the kids. And she didn't get any support from these different men.

But, when the social workers would come, I remember this very clearly, and they did, because neighbors would report us at times. Um, and you know, we were cared for. Let me make that clear. But we were very free and very independent. I learned to be independent from a really young age because it was necessary. But when they came, she would send us to play for the day. And I can remember thinking it was funny. And both my brother and I — and there were actually times when we had this little house at the bottom of a hill, a dead end street, where we would lock the door. Mom said, 'Turn off all the lights,' and we'd sit against the bottom of the door in the dark, and we'd wait. 'Cause they'd be knocking (*makes knocking sound*) and we could see, you know, the car would be parked there. Uh, and, uh, mom just wouldn't answer the door. And I know that it was because she didn't want us present when they were there because she was concerned that they might just take us into custody. So she got around it that way. Um, but she was very aware, um, and concerned about it. That was a regular routine when I was growing up, up until I was maybe about 11 or so, and then it was less of an issue. And I think it's because we, you know, she had a steady job and things were a little more kind of routine and stable at our home. Um, yeah.

So my gramp used to take me on the river. He babysat me when she was at work. He came to live with us, especially when he was getting sober because he had been in at a halfway house down in Bangor, and then he was released from the halfway house, and he got to live with us before he remarried and moved over to Indian Island. And so, we got to spend a lot of time together. My mom ensured that. And I always thought that that was a very wise thing. She used to literally take me right out of school during the weekday and send me back to school with a note if I was gone two or three days, and I'd hand that note in. And she'd say, 'She's been with her grandfather.' And that was her excuse. It wasn't an illness or whatever. But it was because



she felt it was very important. Yeah. So we were — I didn't know anything at the time about census matters and so forth. I can remember my granddad as we were growing up saying things to me like, you know, 'Indians couldn't even vote,' or, 'We only got to vote like, I don't know, in the 60s' or something. Which flabbergasted me. I had, you know, as a child you don't always think about these things, and then when you're older, you realize the kind of scope and depth of the damage that was done.

Um, so oh, yeah. I was saying about the census stuff. I remember when I was a certain age, like probably middle school. And the Central Maine Indian Association was formed upstate, and gramps said, 'You know, we need to get the kids on the census.' And I was fishing and everything then. I grew up learning how to hunt, trap, fish, all of that. And gramps said, 'Well we can get her a combination license,' which we did. But there was one year, we went down — it was some place in Orono — and it was a Polchies. I don't know which one it was but they were reluctant to give the combination license. *[00:20:00]*

And you know, I had been conceived in a rape. And, but everybody knew who my mom was, 'cause she was well loved. And everybody in the community also knew gramp. So gramp took me down there, and he wanted to know why I couldn't get a license as his grandchild. And then, while I was standing there, I remember him just starting to speak to this person, uh, in dialect, which back then we didn't call it dialect, we just called it speaking Indian. Um, and I was amazed. You know, because I hadn't really heard a lot of it before. Once and a while if I was with gramp and he was with someone that spoke, you know, they might talk. Older people would talk together. Um, I'm trying to think it was Paul Francis. There were other people on the Island. And then they spoke together, Mr. Polchies and my gramp, and then they gave me the license. And later on I said, I asked grandpa, 'What did you say?' He said, 'I was talking Indian to him.' And I said, 'This is my grandchild, what are you, are you a snob now?' And which I thought was kind of funny. But gramp didn't always use, even then, I think in his later life, his use of his own language had diminished. He was still fluent, but of course, you know, he didn't, everyone was talking English and he didn't have much occasion to use it. Although when we were together sometimes, he would just say something to me in dialect, and then he might tell me what he had just said. Um, I think he wanted me to hear it, you know? I'm trying to think if there's anything else really. *(pause)*

Oh, this is important. Um, so I always loved to write in school. I uh, I started writing some poetry actually in high school, and I continued while I was in college and then later on, after my marriage, I decided to go to graduate school for writing. And I, um, I used a lot of my experiences and my family history as sources, um, and it was very healing for me to write about the struggle, because, *(crying)* I can't believe that, literally, let's see, '93, yeah, 100 years it's been. You know, my grandpa's born and, um, in 1912, and that in that span of time, how much is lost. And I know that there's, it's important for us to work, and to regain things. But when I think about how short a period that is, roughly three generations or something, right?

And that's where we've come from. We've moved from a man, whose own father, Peter Paul, was a brilliant man and one of the first Ph.Ds on the continent; I guess he held a Juris Doctor. Peter Paul was my great granddad. Um, to me, a 56-year-old woman who grew up with severe substance abuse issues in her family, fragmented family, not speaking her language, and having real struggles over identity and being the last person in my central family unit to have any notion at all of the life ways and cultural practices of my own Tribe. So, there are times when I just think, God, this is how it happens. This is how it just disappears. And I know that there are people who have probably even had it worse. But when I tell people sometimes the way that I grew up, that it's a miracle literally that I'm still here and alive even, they are amazed. But that's the truth. And I know that that is also the legacy of what happened to him. *[00:25:30]*

My great-grandfather was a Tribal leader, Peter Paul. And he, there's a collection, an archive on him at the University of New Brunswick, which I didn't know until later in life. Although as a child, my gramp would say to me, you know, 'You come from good people,' or whatever. But he never spoke that much about his own dad. I did know my, on my mom's side, my great-grandmother, who we called Grammy Paul, who was a brilliant woman and a healer, and very strict and very correct and mannerly and tidy and so forth. We used to go to her house to take baths because we didn't have a regular full bathroom at our house. But I never knew much about my great granddad until I got older and started writing. And, um, then I realized the extraordinary, uh, legacy that I have, in a good sense. You know. And then, of course, what we came from: the degradation of that cultural legacy, because of gramp being sent off and having the family just so disintegrated like that.

Um, so I also found out that I was, um, born on the very same day as Peter Paul. I found that as an adult. When I started working with Kingsclear and Joe Sabattus to get my C-31 status. Because of all the changes that had occurred in Maine regarding census and autonomy for the communities, some census criteria in different communities had been altered, and when my granddad was officially adopted by Penobscots, his line ended there. So, our Band Number 61 went away, and so I was, as an off-reservation Indian, adrift, which I think a lot of people are, that are in my situation. So I went back through Canada, um, and found this out and Joe Sebattus helped me. *(phone rings, interrupts)* Sorry about that. Can you stop that?

**RG:** Mm-hmm.

**MP:** Yeah, so I found this out, that Peter Paul and I had the very same birthday, which I thought was amazingly cool. And then, when I was invited, after the release of my first book of poetry, to come and read at the Atlantic Studies Conference in New Brunswick at UNB, I met a wonderful lady who is working toward, um, a language preservation, a Maliseet woman and her husband, who is about to release a book on my Tribe. And it had always been my dream — I said someday, I'm going to write a book about Maliseet people. And she told me that she didn't know a whole lot about Peter Paul, that it was hard finding data, 'course you're talking about going way back in time, but that he had died the year I was born. *(cries)* So, I just thought that's very important. And I know that every time I sit down to write, every time I look in the mirror, that I can remind myself of those connections.



And so, even though it's hard, doing this is hard, and as painful as it is, I know it's important. And I don't want to, I don't want to stop just because of that pain. Um, I think that it's just important to keep going. Um, my mother told me when I was born that she tried to hand me back. She had, you know, back in the '50s, you weren't always fully awake when the baby came, and they bring the baby later. And I am also, I never knew my natural father. She told me when I was 15 how she was assaulted by someone from the non-commissioned officers' club, and knocked unconscious, and, uh, the back of a car. (*cries*) And then, I, you know, she conceived me.

But because of the mixing that goes on, also, I have what's known as a recessive phenotype. So what that means is that I totally am, I'm light, I have my bone structure, but I also don't look like a Walt Disney Indian, or a full-blooded Indian or what have you. Even though I have blood quantum and so forth. And so, that also ends up being part of this whole matrix of struggle for a lot of Native people these days. Yeah, and I really think that if my gramp had had a better chance, and hadn't gotten so, uh, ripped away from his family and his culture, that it probably would have meant that then his children — he had three — would have had a more stable life. And as his daughter was my mom, then that, the legacy that I am living would be very different. I'm certain that it would be very different. Um. Yeah. And I think, I guess that's really everything. My hope now is to go back up to Canada in the coming year, and do some more research on my great-grandfather, Peter Paul. And that's really — It's a healing thing for me. And I also realize that the work is necessary. So I wasn't ready to do it when I was 20, but I am ready now. So I'm hoping I have a couple of good decades left to write and do that work. And that's pretty much my story.

**RG:** Thank you so much for sitting and sharing with me. You are incredibly strong. And very articulate. You come from a very strong family. So, I hope you never lose sight of that, as I'm sure you won't. Thank you so much.

**MP:** You're welcome.

**RG:** Would you like me to stop the recording?

**MP:** Yeah, I'm good.

**END OF RECORDING**