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2-6-2015

Statement by Elizabeth Neptune collected by Rachel George on February 6, 2015

Elizabeth Neptune

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General Information

Private or Public Statement? - Private
Statement Provider: Elizabeth Neptune
Date: February 6, 2015
Location: Motahkomikuk, Maine
Previous Statement? N/A
Statement Gatherer: Rachel George
Support Person: N/A
Additional Individuals Present: N/A
Recording Format: Audio
Length of Recording: 59:51

Recording

RG: Alright, it is February 6th, 2015. We're here in Motahkomikuk, Maine. My name is Rachel George. And I'm here today with...

EN: Elizabeth Neptune.

RG: Fantastic. And the file number is M-201502-00159. Elizabeth, have you been informed, understood and signed the consent form?

EN: I have, yes.

RG: Ok. And I have to let you know that if at any point during this recording you indicate that there is a child or an elder currently in need of protection or that there is 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.

EN: Ok. That's fine.

RG: Ok, do you want to tell me a little bit about your time as a foster parent?

EN: Sure. Um, I served as a foster parent, actually at the encouragement of my daughter

Molly. She was in kindergarten, so she was about five years old, so it was about, well, she's twenty years old now... so about fifteen years ago. Um, and she came home and said Mom, um, can... one of her classmates come live with her, and live here? And I said why? And she said well she can't live with her mom and she needs a place to live. Can she come live here? Um, and I didn't know about the situation at that point, but I went and checked, and that in fact was true. She... they did need a foster home for her.

Um, so we took her in, and she came to live here for um, I know it was over a year. And, um, it was um... It was an interesting process. She ended up leaving um... I think at the encouragement of her biological mom. She was always loyal to her mom, even though there were issues around neglect and things like that. And I left it for a long time even after she moved out and she moved into another foster home. Eventually she moved back with her mom, and I left it open, that you know, when she needed a safe place she didn't have to ask, she should just come here. And it was um, and that was just our arrangement. So even if I wasn't home, you know... she had a key, she could get in the house, she could you know, have a place, a safe place to come.

It was, I guess a reaffirming experience in the sense that um, she had very little opportunity. I mean she had rarely had gone places off the reservation before she came to live here. She, you know, one of the early memories... I remember going to Calais and, we went to Dunkin Donuts and she and Molly had ordered a Strawberry Coolata or some slushy drink like that. She ordered one and she thought it was the absolute favorite thing. You know, it was just the most amazing thing to go to Dunkin Donuts and get one of those. So it was her favorite kind of outing place.

So she didn't have the same opportunities that you know, I try to give my kids as many opportunities as they can. So she, you know, Dunkin Donuts was foreign to her. Going to the movies. She'd never been to the movies. And um, you know things like that. One day I had to pick her up. She had an appointment at the health center, so I had to pick her up from school and I didn't take her back because it was near the end of the day, and we went to the grocery store and um, and I said, well you know, you're here so you can pick what we have for supper tonight. And um, I said it can be... She said it can be whatever I want? And I said yea. You know, whatever you want, you know, I'll cook it when we get home.

And she was just... she was... so surprised that she could do those kinds of things. And you know her role with her mother was... her mother went primarily once a month to get groceries, her role was to unpack them and put them away. And it was so... and she was very little, she was five years old, but she had already been conditioned to, you know... she knew when I got groceries, she would start unloading. It was that... I had to tell her, I said, you know, I can do this, you can go play. You know, I can put the groceries away. This is... um, you know, you don't have to do this. She said oh, I always do this it's ok. So she would do that. And you know, at five years old she also knew how to do laundry.

I mean, so.. it was... um... It was enlightening for me. It was sad for her. And now, you know, she still stays in contact. She lives out of state now, but she still stays in contact and she's always telling Molly, you know I wish I had stayed there. I wish I had stayed with you and um,



it's, it was a hard process. Yep.

[00:05:00.28] RG: Was it done officially through tribal child welfare?

EN: It was. It was done officially.

RG: What was that process like for you?

EN: Um, it was pretty easily. I mean I filled out a foster care application. They came and did an assessment and approved, you know, approved the home. That process was Ok. You know towards the end of it, you know when her mother started making complaints, um, you know about... living conditions here. I mean she said that there were ants everywhere and Ruby was kept in a room where there were a bunch of ants... and which was a little true, but that summer everybody had ants. They were just everywhere. And there were ants in her room like there were in many others, but primarily because she had left a bag of chips on the floor, so... *(laughs)*. You know. They gravitated there. So it wasn't a big deal.

So those kinds of things. And they didn't bother to you know... really look into those kinds of things. So, you know... so but that was.... So finally it ended up, I said you know if you really don't want to be here I'm not going to force you to stay here. And so we started making for her, for her transition to another foster home which ended up being not a good thing for her.

RG: How was the transition in general?

EN: The transition was very quick. It went... It was... It was like have her ready at such and such a time, pack her things up. It was pretty quick. No transition. No getting used to... So it was a bit harder. And I think her mom had thought that um, you know, if she moved someplace else they would be more apt to let her come home — I think was the thought process. Of course it didn't work that way. Um, and so she ended up kind of running away and going into hiding. And I think... my thought, and I don't know this for sure, but I think she went to live with her mom and just didn't venture out anywhere at some point. But luckily she's doing better now.

RG: That's great.

EN: Yea.

RG: Um, what... was the caseworker available to you and to Ruby at the time that she was with you?

EN: They would do some periodic check-ins, but not always you know regularly. I think they figured she was Ok. They would check in. They would ask her how things were going. But it

wasn't... you know we didn't have regular meetings with the caseworker at that point. But, you know, they figured I guess she was in a safe place, I made sure she got to all her appointments. You know I just took over kind of the major role of making sure she got her care. So, it was fine. Um, so you know it wasn't as um, you know... as... probably not as close as it probably should have been, but I don't think it was an issue. Yea.

RG: Mmhmm. That's great.

EN: And I tried to make sure that her brother and her sister came to visit and could spend time with her, and they'd spend the night. At least her brother would spend the night. Her little sister didn't spend the night, but her brother did. And um so they had that, some of that sibling time, and things like that.

RG: Were her siblings still in the care of her mother?

EN: They were in different foster homes. So all three of them got split up. And um, yea. Eventually they all got split up. I think for a while they kept, they kept the youngest with her, I think her dad. Yea, so they were all split up, different homes. I wasn't asked to take more than one, I was just asked... you know it was always just the one.

RG: Mmhmm. Um, thinking back on your time as a foster parent, is there anything that you would have wanted or would have needed to have made the situation better for you? Or, are there any things that you wish could have been different?

EN: Probably um, you know, knowing a little bit more of the history and um.... You know I knew that there were issues around neglect. Um, but there was never any kind of history given of you know, what I could encounter. Luckily enough, you know, it was um, eventually Ruby got to talk about it a little bit. But, um, you know, it would have helped to have more information. You know? Just for background information. Um, so I didn't have to struggle through that.

RG: Um, do you want to add anything else to that experience?

[00:09:30.12] EN: No, well not that one specifically. I can add a little bit more. I'm kind of an informal foster parent at this point. I'm... *(phone starts ringing)*. And um... *(phone beeps)*. Census bureau?

RG: Do you need to take that?

EN: No. I don't know what they're calling for. It's not the census time. It's too early for that. But, that's fine.

So I have uh, actually one of my cousin's, extended cousin's boys. It actually is... *(background noise)*... I'm sorry, *(laughs)* cats running everywhere. So he's... the yellow one is new to our house in the last couple of months. So, he keeps trying to determine his dominance. It's not working *(laughs)*. But anyway, so...

RG: No, that's ok.

[00:14:08.07] EN: So she would take them in, and it came to be known. You know, the police in the middle of the night would bring in kids that needed um a place to stay. That needed a safe place, or women that were in abusive relationships that didn't have any place to go. They would knock on the door, and my mother would always take them in. And so that's kind of... I think she learned that growing up. I think she would do that today. She's adopted several children after we were all grown. She's seventy-six years old and she's raising her great grandson, and he's twelve. So, you know, it's just.... and that's what I've tried to relate in my kids. You know? This is what we do. This is what we've been taught. This is how we... it's one of the ways we give back.

RG: Wow. Yea. Um, what was that like for you growing up in that kind of environment where, having community members there....

EN: Um, it was...

RG: I guess I'm asking were there any difficulties for you?

EN: Um, you know I think when it got in terms of sometimes personal space... you were always, you really want your own room, and if they weren't all there I could have my own room. So there were some of the issues around there, but, you know... I didn't see it, or I don't recall being ever put out by it. There were times when my mother talked about later, where um, when we didn't have a lot of food. But I didn't know that we didn't have a lot of food. So, um, you know she would make due with what we got. And she was amazing at spreading food so that it would last. So, but I don't remember any major hardships over taking in people. Um, and um, you know, her belief was, you're going to get what you need when you need it. Um, and um... and as long as you're willing to help people, then that's going to really hold true. And it really did.

RG: Absolutely. The only reason I ask is because I had a foster sister and a foster brother for a while, and I just remember the... there were some kind of interesting dynamics, but we were also kids, so that kind of comes with the territory I guess. And that's really honorable, to continue that kind of mentality of having... being a safe place for people to come to. That's great.

EN: I think that that's... I think that's really important, and I try. My kids have a hard time... Donald will get a little territorial when his friend is here. And say why doesn't he just go home. I may go off to high school next year, why doesn't he just go home. And I said, you know... he'd rather be here than home. That's pretty clear. So we'll talk about it, and talk it through. And in a little while you know, they work it through. When I had my other foster child, the official one, Molly would get tired of sharing her room and having her space, and things like that. We'd have to... you know, normal kid things. But I don't remember that. I had that more probably with my older sister than I did with any of the others that came. So.

RG: Yea. Yep.

was really hard um, dealing with the upset parents... of you know, why their kids couldn't be at home.

Um, and from the community perspective? I think that the child welfare system is seen as rather than protecting children, it's seen as people who take your children away. And those are two very different things. Um, and you know, I would um... you know, my hope is that some day when I'm you know... old and grey, you know... kids are going to come back and say thank you for what you did. Both in terms of child welfare at that time, or in terms of helping them outside of the system. And that's what I would hope that most adults want. That you do your best to protect children, and um, I don't think the child welfare system is viewed that way. And that's a problem. I think. Um...

You know I've had to have some dealings outside of um, you know, outside of the tribal child welfare system with the state. And you know, challenges in dealing with that is you know, they have high turnover rates too, so you know you get to work, a working relationship with DHHS off the reservation and the next thing you know, they're gone. And so you have to start over. Um, and you know, we had challenges with making sure that the Indian Child Welfare Act was followed. [00:22:30.23] And um, and you know that they made contact when they were supposed to make contact. And I think there's been some improvements in that realm, but its not always been easy. Yep.

RG: What were some of the major challenges in making sure that ICWA was being followed?

EN: For one, being made sure that the tribe was notified that there was potentially a case. I think that was the biggest, um, issue. Some of the judges were really good with following up with that, and some of them weren't. So, and then, you know when they said you know, have you made efforts to contact the tribe and, they would say yes we did. But yea, they may have called the wrong office. So they didn't you know, have a definite procedure of who they're supposed to call, what office they're supposed to verify that with, and you know, things of that sort.

RG: Yea.

EN: Yea, so they would just you know, try to call and ask whoever was on the phone. It could be a receptionist, it could have been the janitor. I mean there really was no process for that. So that was probably one of the biggest challenges.

RG: Could you describe a situation or multiple situations where you or your staff felt very positive about your work with or on behalf of a Passamaquoddy child or family that involved working with the state?

EN: Um, yea. I can share one particular story where there was a Passamaquoddy family um that lived up north in Aroostook county and I got a call that the state DHS worker had received several calls about children not going to school and making it to medical appointments. And they had originally tried to establish a safety plan for the family, and one of the harder parts was the mother that they were trying to work with was actually in the system when she was

from the tribal process that it's an incredible disservice. And there's a whole different cultural kind of view of that process. So the state's goal, and I guess it's an Ok goal, is to find permanency for the children very quickly, as quickly as possible. So you have that 18-month window to, to kind of get through that process, otherwise your rights are terminated as a parent.

The tribe's view has always been, you know only in rare instances are we going to terminate parental rights. Because the reality is regardless of that piece of paper, they are a part of the community. These kids know that they don't stop being their parent. So we tend more to use guardianship and permanency placement and things like that, as an alternative. So we've lost a lot of descendants into that state system and I guess the biggest challenge is there isn't enough coordination between the two systems, so once it's in the state system, they're almost lost to the tribe, and they're lost to those parents. And it doesn't feel like we can advocate enough for them.

Um and you know, for a lot of tribal families you know, 18 months you're just finally getting to know whoever worker you're getting with. And it's true, it's not the best situation for kids but given the amount of trauma that families have faced in the community, building that trust is so hard to do. And um, and that is never given enough consideration in the state system for anything. For anything.

RG: That's incredibly difficult.

EN: It is. It is. Um, and you know when you see some of these parents that have survived you know, survived what they've survived— they've survived child abuse, they've survived sexual abuse, they've survived you know, being homeless and you know, not having enough food, you know, remembering going to bed hungry and...you know? None of us are perfect. But they do love their kids and... but so, it amazes me sometimes that they're even able to walk and talk let alone raise children. You know? Just given some of their histories.

RG: Yea, absolutely. Um, throughout your time overseeing child welfare, do you recall any moments where the tribe declined to intervene in a child custody case that was covered by ICWA?

EN: At that particular point, no. I've known of some since. Um, so you know, um, in the last ten or fifteen years, yea it's about ten years probably, in the last ten years I've known of cases where they've chosen not to intercede. Um, and one was um— and it was because the child had so many needs, so many special needs that the tribe felt that they couldn't, that they couldn't because of the distance from a lot of the specialty care, that they couldn't get the resources to provide the care.

RG: Yea.

EN: And that was the primary reason. Um, that was a rare case that I would consider a rare case. I could see where they were coming from. But when I oversaw child welfare, I really felt like it was our responsibility to care for kids from that cultural perspective, from that Passamaquoddy perspective. Um, so...

providing services to young children, to Indian children, I think need to have that knowledge. It's hard when you have... It's hard to get tribal members who want to do that work. I know that's a challenge. And of course people complain all the time that we don't have tribal members in those roles, but the reality is most of the time you can't get a tribal member to take on that role. But I think that's incredibly important to know them, to know how the community has survived. Again that trauma has had huge implications.

I knew of this one family where a grandmother was raising... she had a bunch... she had grandchildren, she had granddaughters, grandsons... she had other kids and adults living in her house. It was multiple families under one roof. And you know, she again... took people in, didn't turn people away... and then at night she and whatever young girls that were living in her home would lock themselves in her bedroom at night, and that's where they all slept. You know, she protected her granddaughters and herself as much as she possibly could. I mean that was what she thought was the right thing to do. And so... you know rather than let people go homeless, that was how she lived for a long time in her house. You know, and people do a lot of times the best that they can. But the amount of trauma that they've survived is huge. You know?

Um we had a whole bunch of, a number of young men that had been sexually abused by a priest that had come on the reservation, and you know, so there were issues around that, and just trying to figure out how that was... how they could survive with all of that trauma.

But it even... it wasn't even just around child welfare issues. There were people who you know, when it came to basic dental care... when my sisters and my brother grew up... um fortunately I was one of the younger kids and I didn't have to experience this, but... You know they just had military dentists come and practice their extraction skills. So you know kids would... and so my brother for a long time had really, really bad teeth. And my sisters hated to go to the dentist because their memory was, you know you would stand outside of this mobile van... the kids would disappear inside. They would close the door. They would tie them down and they would pull their teeth. And, you know... and so when I became health director, we had state of the art, at that particular point, dental clinic, and we couldn't get anyone to use it. Well, no wonder! You know, people would walk into that door and they'd break out in a sweat because of the, you know, the amount of trauma that they exposed, and you know, for years my brother had really, really bad teeth. And he finally... we made arrangements for him to go and get sedated so he could go and get his teeth pulled. He had to have all of his top teeth removed, and um... but it took a long time before we could get him to do that. And he had to be sure that he wasn't going to feel that pain because it was too much for him.

And, you know, my mom... similar experience. When she was younger, her teeth started to go bad, as many of them did back then. And so she had a couple of bad teeth, but then they ended up pulling all of them. Just because the rest of them were bad. So those kinds of issues...

So when I became health director, how do you get people to see the importance of dental health care? So for a long time we'd refer people out, the ones that were really traumatic, so they could get sedated like my brother did. And um, made sure that they had access that way. But that wasn't going to help us to make sure the younger generation... because they couldn't

remember that piece.

You know, my uncle was you know, denied a haircut at a local barbershop when he was growing up. You know, all of that amount of racism and prejudice that's still... you know... it's still alive. People still get mistreated. And um, and people don't understand that. Um... you know... Or people... Just because they came from one of the reservations when we had a local... I don't know if it was Mammoth Mart, or whatever, but tribal kids were always followed around, followed around because they thought they were going to steal. You know, and things... just because of who they were. They were followed around and watched, and you know, those kinds of things. People still remember. So...

You know, and then you have... you know, today in the last few years, where... you know for years and years we've had our own ambulance service. It's kind of a community mandate. And uh, when the economic (*phone ringing*) turn down, when the economics went bad, the tribe said we're going to have to start charging you know, for some of these services. Because we definitely weren't recouping, even with private insurance, what it was costing us. So we went... and some of the really small towns in the local area would automatically send a check every year. It was just a modest amount. But still it was the intent that they would contribute something. And they're still doing that today. And so, you know, another one of the local towns, um decided.... and we were offering... we figured out what the other local ambulance were charging, like Calais, Down East Ambulance Service, and reduce the rate, and came up with our own formula, and said this is what it's going to cost. We're sorry but we're going to have to start charging for ambulance service. And rather than give the money to Indian Township to provide that service, they contracted for more money from Calais. And so, so, there are still things like that that happen. Even though we're closer, and could be there in five or ten minutes, they'd rather wait a half an hour and pay more money.

So, you know, so there are pieces of that that still happen, here in 2015. They're still happening. [00:45:04.26] And um, people don't realize that. Um, you know, I know a young girl. She's not a tribal member but she lives here with a family who moved from the Southwest here, and has a pretty... has had a job pretty much the whole time she's been here. And then you have the same people that are from here that apply for same jobs in the same places and they don't get hired. And so there's lots of, lots of experiences like that that still happen.

And so... you know... talking with the teachers at the school, or case managers. I spend a lot of time doing that educational piece. You know, people don't realize. They average age of death for Indian Township is about 49 years of age. You know it's only about 49. That's the average. You know we have people that live older. We also have people that live a lot younger. So they die a lot younger. And people don't know that. People don't know about the level of disparities that people face. And you know, the level of adverse childhood experiences, and you take a look at the research. That amount of trauma has taken its toll on the life span of the Passamaquoddy.

So case managers need to know that. Teachers need to know that. Anyone providing care to our community needs to know that.

strength. Um... I think that, at least in Washington County, it seems as though the child protective system is looking at the impact of trauma a little more closely. And I think that has a lot to do with some of the um... the work of Project Launch and the Community Caring Collaborative, and kind of spreading that message. So I think they're hearing it.

Um, and then on the tribal side, um, you know I think that, um... I think on the tribal side, um... you know... Tribal leaders are pushing more vocally about making sure that ICWA gets implemented the way it needs to. When I hear about the stories, especially about the Houlton band of Maliseets, it just breaks your heart. And in 2015, we shouldn't be losing kids to a system like that.

RG: Yea.

EN: You know. We just shouldn't.

RG: No. Absolutely. Um, do you think ICWA does enough to protect the rights of native kids and families and tribes?

EN: Um, no, I don't think that it does enough. If you end up with issues, you know, like Baby Veronica, and those types of instances, where a native father's rights were not even considered in that rule, and you know... the... his tribe tried to intercede on his behalf and still the judge decided that he wasn't going to adhere to that, and there was no evidence of him needing to... So and there was really no way to get around that process. And so I think that it isn't enough. When you have stuff like that happen, it isn't enough.

RG: What would you like to see change? What do you think is needed?

EN: I think, well of course always you know, more resources for training, and required training. And I guess we need some teeth so make sure that it gets enforced. You know? What happens when it doesn't get enforced? What are the rami— you know, what can be done to help remediate that? And I think there has to be some teeth in that as part of it. And it should be um, you know... It should be... if a court is going to refuse for the tribe to intervene, there has to be extremely, extremely um, extenuating circumstances before that's not allowed.

Because you know, when you think about that culture, it's historically, we took care of children. People forget even with the Passamaquoddy tribe, you know, my grandmother talks about how when she remembers that there were kids just dropped off on the reservation. You know? Non tribal kids. Just dropped off. And parents just figured they were done, and they were just left there, and um, you know... of course... probably according to history books, that was... they probably portrayed that a little differently. But the reality was, you know, the tribe took them in and raised them as if they were their own. And, um, you know, that's who we are.

[00:52:58.17] And because of that willingness to take care of each other, that's how we've survived. And when that stops. When people try to not allow that to happen, we're in trouble. We're in trouble, as a native people, we're in trouble.

EN: I don't.

RG: That's ok.

EN: Yea, I don't remember what the year was.

[00:56:35.25] RG: Are there, is there anything else you want to add to um... or any thoughts you have on the collaborative work with the state in those years?

EN: Um... no. I don't think so. No. It seems like we always make some progress. We take two steps forward and then we take three steps backwards, it seems like all the time. And um, the process is slow.

RG: Is there anything else you want to add? Anything else you think the TRC should know?

EN: Um, I think, you know one of the big things that I touched upon... I think it's, you know... it's good that people are telling their stories about their involvement in the system. I hope as much, you know when this report is complete, that there are enough um... that there is even more effort that goes into protecting children moving forward. Whether they be tribal members or they are you know, descendants, Passamaquoddy descendants. Because I don't think enough attention is given to that issue. And you know, those are our kids too. You know, regardless of what you know, the federal government has said membership requirements are going to be, and the tribe is going to have to address that as well. But, there has to be work around that issue. And that's where I hope a lot of the focus will be.

RG: I want to thank you so much for sitting with me and answering my questions.

EN: Well I hope it's helpful. You know, I hope that it's helpful. It is um, you know, it's... it's a lot of sadness. There's a lot of things that, you know when I said that before... when you think about what people have survived, it's amazing that they're walking and talking.

RG: Yea, I'm just making a note about blood quantum. I think it's something that's an issue across the country. It's an issue all throughout Canada as well.

EN: It is. Yea. And you know, it's such a... such a disservice. It was such a disservice to even kind of throw that out to the tribes. And um... yea... it was such a disservice, because of the people didn't know what implications it was going to have later on. And how could they? You know, and it's um... It's you know, a system that was forced on us, not one that we were... it's not who we are. You know? That piece is very hard. So it needs to be addressed.

RG: Absolutely. I absolutely agree. Any last comments?

EN: I don't think so.

RG: Ok, thank you so much.

EN: You're welcome.

RG: I really, really appreciate it. And it is very, very helpful.

EN: Oh good. I'm so glad.

RG: Are you ready for me to stop the recording?

EN: Yep.

RG: Ok.

[END OF RECORDING]