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11-20-2013

### Statement by Denise Altvater on November 20, 2013

Denise Altvater

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### General Information

**Private or Public Statement?** - Public

**Statement Provider:** Denise Altvater

**Date:** November 20, 2013

**Location:** Sipayik, Maine

**Previous Statement?** No

**Statement Gatherer:** N/A

**Support Person:** Esther Attean and Jamie Bissonette-Lewey

**Additional Individuals Present:** Sandy White Hawk, Matt Dunlap, Carol Wishcamper, gkisedtanamoogk, Gail Werrbach. – Public circle

**Recording Format:** Video

**Length of Recording:** 10:58

### Recording

**DA:** I am just going to tell my story umm...the way it has happened in my memory, not particularly the way it happened as it happened, but as I remember it.

I was first asked to tell my story in 2000 for the Belonging video that we did for training DHHS workers and when I went in to tell my story I was not prepared for what was going to happen. I really didn't know what I was getting in to; I had never talked about it before, not with my sisters, not with my mother, not with anybody, not even with my husband.

And umm... I wasn't quite sure what I was going to tell, I just agreed, 'well yeah I was in foster care, and sure I'll tell my story.' And...I just... It's just starting coming out and I'm not sure where it all came from because I didn't even know that I had remembered it. It wasn't something that I ever really thought about in my life. I though my life was fine, I had a job, I had kids, I was married...

So... Umm... when I told my story, umm...we started training DHHS workers. Within one month we travelled all over the state and we took the video and I was part of the training. And as we went along, I um... I started having a more and more difficult time and I didn't tell anybody. And I really didn't know what was wrong with me anyway.

I had been depressed before, and so I knew what that was like. But this was different. I had never before felt like I did not want to be here on this earth. This was the first time that I felt that way. So...I didn't even tell my husband...I had health insurance... I worked for the

American Friends... I had good health insurance, so I made own arrangements to go into a mental lock down facility as soon as our last training ended.

I didn't even tell the group that I was doing that... and so that's what I did. I had my bags packed, and I went into... I think I went in for 10 days and got on medication, and um... I stayed with the group and umm... started telling my story when we talked about doing this truth and reconciliation.

Ummm... And I struggled, the whole time, in between, because I had already told the story, and I had already listened to it... and it was really hard and I wasn't quite sure what to make of it all. And umm... and my older sister had died around that time which was really hard for me because she was with my mother.

And then when we started this process my sister who was next to the oldest died. Which made that even harder for me.

But umm... I remember living here on the reservation. And ummm... My mother had 6 little girls, and we lived in a little shack that (inaudible) helped build with my grandfather. And, we had no electricity, no running water... umm... we had kerosene stove and I think we cooked on wood stove, I'm not sure. And then there was an attic with dirty clothes and mattresses and we slept on those mattresses. And we would have to lug water to bathe and do dishes and cook.

And ummm... I remember always being hungry and always being cold and always being scared. And umm... it was just really hard, but through all that living in poverty and being isolated and everything, I had no concept of what was beyond the road, because there was no road that I can remember. I don't know if it was a dirt road or what, but I don't ever remember seeing this road that went to Eastport and we lived over on the other side. And there was nothing built on this side. And I remember Canada and the water.

And so, one day I remember two cars coming, I believe they were station wagons, and they put all our clothes in garbage bags and put them in the cars and loaded us in the cars and started driving away. I don't remember anyone telling me what was happening. If they did, I don't remember it. And they just kept driving and driving and driving. And I kept getting scareder and scareder, and I don't remember that, but I remember that now, because I feel that fear now (inaudible)

They took us to Old Town, there's a great big house. There were other state foster kids there and... they left us there. And umm... I remember we all slept in one big room, we had bunk beds. I don't remember there being a door on bathroom and it was in their bedroom.

Umm... there was an old dirt cellar and they said the old nuns and priests were buried under there. And there was a door with a one light bulb at the top of the stairway...

And umm... if you wet the bed you had to stay in that bed for 24 hours, you couldn't get up. If you had to pee, you had to pee in the bed. And umm, if you stole food, you couldn't eat for 24 hours.



I remember one time, and I just apologized to my sister a few years ago, and I didn't think she remembered. I was so hungry that I went and stole a banana and I stuck the peel under her mattress and she wasn't allowed to eat for 24 hours. And I carried that guilt a long long time. I remember when she was living in the homeless shelter I went over and I apologized and told her what I did and she said she knew, she knew that I had done that. But... I was just trying to survive...

And umm...I remember one time when she ran away, because she always ran away... and they brought her back and ummm...at night they'd locked her in the dirt cellar and unscrew the light bulb and leave her there all night. And in the daytime she had to kneel on the handle of a broomstick between the kitchen and the dining room and we had to pull her hair every time we walked by her. And she couldn't eat with us. We had to save scraps for her to eat and we were hungry, but we would often leave scraps for her to eat. And then she would have to clean up and go back on the broomstick handle and then she'd have to go back in the cellar.

Well that was one of the punishments that the woman liked to do us was to put in the cellar and unscrew the light bulb and then lock us in...And I remember being crouched down... I never cried (inaudible). I never cried ... I don't know what's the matter with me.... *(long pause)*

I remember my older sister Cheryl... and she was a teenager, she was so ashamed because she had marks all over the bottom of her legs and her feet... 'cause they would make her take her shoes and socks off and make her stand in the hen house and have the chickens peck her feet until she bled. I remember that happening ... I remember it happening to her all the time...

And I think that the woman was like that because of what the man did to us... I think she took it out on us... And whenever... I think it was only one time that we told that state worker what happened. Because after she left... we got the worst beatings we've ever had and we never told again...

We spent 4 years there.... And every... every single day was torture. There wasn't one ... (inaudible)

And I don't... I don't feel sad for myself, I feel sad when I see the faces of my sisters... because my little sisters were babies, they were just little babies... oh god...*(long pause)* ... I think I need to do this in two parts... can we stop now...I don't know what's wrong with me...

**[END OF RECORDING]**