



General Information

Private or Public Statement? Private

Statement Provider: Anonymous

Date: June 27, 2014

Location: Bangor, ME

Previous Statement? N/A

Statement Gatherer: Rachel George

Support Person: N/A

Additional Individuals Present: Matt Dunlap and Heather Westleigh

Recording Format: Audio

Length of Recording: 23:31

TRANSCRIBER'S NOTE: The ambient noise of this recording is such that a choice was made to not include the narrative of every sound. Traffic is constantly ebbing and flowing, occasional voices of pedestrians and/or public workers filter in and the sensitivity of the microphone is such that it appears to record every slight knock. The Statement Provider appears to tap the table regularly for emphasis and/or enumeration. This also is not narrated in the transcription as it was often difficult to discern its actual source and was so frequent, this writer was concerned for the disruption of the impact to the narrative and content. Any portions of this statement that are redacted have been done so at the request of the statement provider to protect his/her identity.

Recording

RG: All right. So, my name is Rachel George. It is June 27, 2014. We're here in Bangor, Maine. Would you mind stating your name?

A: Yep. [00:00:08] [REDACTED]

MD: Matt Dunlap, Commissioner.

RG: [00:00:18] [REDACTED] Have you been informed, understood and signed the consent form?

A: I have.

RG: Fantastic. And I have to let you know that at any point today, you indicate that there's a child or an elder in need of protection or that they're is imminent risk of seriously bodily harm or death to an identifiable person or group, that that information may not be protected as confidential. Do you understand?

A: I do understand.

RG: Fantastic. So feel free to start wherever you feel most comfortable.

A: So, um, [00:00:41] [REDACTED]. In 2003 I saw a picture of 3 sisters that were in the foster care system, and long story short, my family decided that they were meant for us and we went through the home study process and they came to live with us in January of 2004.

And in that process, I learned that the children have parents from a number of different ethnic and racial backgrounds, including a grandmother that, I am told, is, has, some Micmac blood and I don't know, I don't know um, all the particulars. And as well as a grandfather who is Creole.

So the girls have a significant mixed race, um, heritage. And, for me as a Child Welfare professional, someone who's taught Child Welfare for many years, who tries to be culturally sensitive, and having actually when I adopted um, I was working, um, in Old Town, working with the Native community. And, recognized the value of honoring, you know, and respecting people's heritage, and celebrating that.

And trying to figure that out for me as a parent to my daughters who weren't raised in the Native culture, but have that certainly, as I'm told, in, their heritage that I wanted to try and figure out the right way to do that. And at the same time, there was a part of me frankly that was concerned, that perhaps, and I didn't have any basis other than my many years of experience working in the system, that all the appropriate, safeguards, um, protecting people's rights were honored, including my ch-, my daughter's rights. Um, and I was assured that that was the case, and so, for me as a parent, trying to figure all that out, to be the best dad I can be to my girls and not forcing anything on them, giving them opportunities, um, they, that, umm, in a way that's comfortable for them has been a real challenge.

And frankly, I haven't had any good places to turn to, to do that. It wasn't being done by the State, and um, you know, as an adoptive parent, I didn't, I didn't live through, they, the girls, lived in care for three years. I didn't live through that experience or know the thought processes that went into the placements. They were separated um, in foster care and uh, and um, (*paper shuffling*) I don't believe that they, the State, did well by them, during that time in care.

Um, so, as, I look at you know, sort of, my professional experience and, and more importantly, my experience as a parent, in wanting to do best, um, you know, I found that incredibly lacking. Um, and you know, I do have, I do have people in the Native Community, that I



sought advice from, uh, to be the best parent that I can be and to help my girls. Um, at whatever comfort level they have on their, their culture and expose them, and answer their questions.

But, um, you know, in the context of the work that you're doing, I'm not sure if this is valuable, but it's my experience, that I don't know what to do. And I don't know really where to turn, and, and I think it's, at least for me it's a small piece of the bigger picture that you folks are exploring. Um, because it is certainly part of it. So. I just wanted to have, put that on there.

RG: Hm. Thank you. Um, can you tell me a little bit about what that adoption process was like for you?

A: Yeah, I mean, um, like I said, I saw a flier and it basically, hunh! *(laugh)* you know, said, what they typically say, you know, 'Wanted: Home for three girls' and 'who have certain needs,' and uh, and I certainly have the experience that I knew what was written in a 15-line synopsis was written *(table scraping)* *(paper shuffling noise begins, lasts briefly)* in a very deliberate, calculated way and that I, might read something into 'behaviorally challenged' or 'needs a strong family,' I could read lots of things into that.

RG: Um, hm.

A: I happen to know the caseworker from 20 years previous, so I know, I was able to call and say, 'You know, my wife and I, our family's, a little bit interested, um, but I need to know more obviously and I see what you're writing,' and um, and the caseworker shared some with me appropriately and then um, it was enough that encouraged us to keep going in the process. Um, um, I don't think, um, I think they emphasized biracial, because. um, at least with one of my daughters, it, it's not to most people, it it's more, mo-obvious, I guess, that she may not be Caucasian. *(bird song)*

RG: Um, hm.

A: Although that hasn't kind of played that way. And so, we did the typical, home study, um, home study process. I knew how to speed it up so I actually hired someone to do it privately. And then, was treated like everybody else. In fact, we drove, um, the, the soonest the adoption/foster training was being held was in Biddeford, and um, again, once we made the decision, they were our children and I didn't want them in foster care any longer, so we drove to Biddeford every Saturday for adoptive foster training that I helped write the curriculum — *(laughing)*

RG: *(exhalation of humor)*

A: — when I was at the Department, which is uh, was interesting. Um, and as it turned out we were in the training, with some other people that had interest in one of the girls, but, not all three. Um, which was kind of an interesting situation. Um, and, and um, we, we expedited things. We went for visits, um, we sat in on a treatment team process that was your worst nightmare. Twenty, 20 professionals, basically saying, or 15 anyways, saying, um, ‘We really want to medicate the girls before they come.’ And I said, ‘No, we're not gonna do that.’ And uh, I was trying very hard to be, a parent and not a professional. ‘Cause they didn't, other than a couple of them, they didn't know who I was. I really worked hard at, I'd been away from the Department, I really tried hard to be, just average Joe Blow. Number one, I didn't want anyone to suggest there was preferential treatment because of my history and my relationships. Um, but I also wanted to make sure I used everything I could to make it the best for these three girls who now, emotionally were mine and they were outside of my home. Um, you know, the foster parent took me aside and said, ‘Now make sure,’ uh, ‘you know, that you can have them go to summer camps all summers so they don't have to be in the house,’ um.

RG: *(exhalation)*

A: And, um, ‘You can get child care after school,’ and ‘Make sure you take advantage of all these opportunities,’ basically to abdicate your responsibility. Um, that was an education. Um, the uh, Guardian ad Litem never met us before um, before they were placed. Came and spent 15 minutes after they were placed with us, so he could check off his box that he had been there. I never met him. I never saw him. Ah, he, I wasn't home when he came. Um, the therapist who was part of the therapeutic foster care system, so the therapist was attached to the foster home, insisted on coming a month after the girls were with us, to do a home visit. After we had said, ‘Well, we've already got our own therapist.’ ‘Well, I, I need to come.’ Well, they're still in Department custody so I ha-had no, uh, I didn't have any choice, and the therapist walked in, and the girls, two of the girls immediately froze. Because they assumed, this guy was, this woman, was connected to the foster parent. So, the placement was threatened. And the therapist said, ‘Well, truth be known, I'm really here more for me than for the, for the girls. I just needed, I wanted to see for myself.’ And I thought, ‘You rotten son of a ...’ you know, to do that to the girls.

MD: Hmm.

A: Um, the, they, it was an, you know, an enmeshed, financial situation. One of the foster parents tried to delay the placement, holding the kids hostage, until she got a replacement child, ‘cause she counted on the income. I knew, I mean, the, what she did, what they didn't know, the foster parents, what they didn't know, was, who I was. And so when they'd say these things, you know, um, they uh, they insisted that the girls not be placed in the same bedroom together, and I said, ‘Well, you know, we'll, we'll do what we think is right.’ All the while my wife's kicking me under the table to, so, I don't say anything that rocks the boat. Um, and uh, so I, it really gave me a glimpse of what people go through.

RG: Um, hm.

A: Um, ‘cause I knew it all. I mean, I knew. And even, even the training, I mean, the trainer



at the end of the training, the one criticism she had of us, she was concerned that we might be too religious because we went to church on Sunday and, we said Grace and, 'What if the girls don't share your ...' 'cause the girls were four, five, and eight, 'share your religious beliefs?' I said, 'That's fine.' But that was the one, the one negative mark, that we were too religious and, you know, my wife and I, you know, are religious, but we're not, too religious. I mean, not-, I don't know what that means. But.

MD: *(laughter)*

SY: But, you know, um. We're not. We don't ascribe to a certain dress code, and thing-, you know what I mean. So, it was really striking. So I, I had this tendency of sort of taking everything as a classroom, even when it's personal and tryin' to reflect on it and what have I learned and what have I seen and um, um, you know, and with, with, I knew with foster parents, one of the things that would happen is, if, if there was a situation where a child played with matches, which is not an uncommon thing for kids to do, intrigued by fire, then when you're doing a foster care repla- or a foster home or adoptive placement, you gotta share with, that there might be some fire-setting behavior. So all of a sudden you conjure up an, image of a pyromaniac. Or if there's normal sexual exploration, all of a sudden it's, sexually deviant behavior. And so the kids get labeled with these things as we're trying to find a home because if you don't tell, then you're accused of holding, with-, uh, again, risk aversion!

MD: Yah.

A: But the risk aversion that you, the risk you create by averting the risk, is worse than — and so, that was part of what I was sorting through. But I knew some, I knew some of the people involved and I could ask them the hard question and they could give me the hard answer and know that it was gonna be understood and in context and all of that. Um, you know, when, I've tried to find the background information on the extended family so we would have a sense of who and where they came from. And wha-, and, and what the relationship was with those people. Um, it was really, really difficult. It was really difficult. Um, you know, and part of it was the whole, trying to protect the privacy of that family, in this process. Um, we have since met with the biological mom, um, and were able to have a lot of the conversations that didn't work, going through a caseworker. Um, which, which was really, really helpful. Um, and the girls know that they have Micmac and who that is and, what that means. They know they have Creole background, um, you know, we're open to that, we're, we're pretty um, just up front and conversational about a lot of it. You know, and try to expose them, give them opportunities. But again, I don't, there really isn't any place that I felt comfy-, that I, I don't mean feel comfortable, that I feel appropriate that it would be worth sort of going through to say, 'Hey, can you help me? Can ya tell me how to do it better?' You know. So.

MD: If you were, instead of, you know, having your professional history, you're the produce

manager at a grocery store, how does that process look?

A: *(draws breath in)* Yeah, I mean, again, you, you don't know what you don't know.

MD: Hmm.

A: And so I, *(paper shuffling begins, lasts briefly)* I mean, I think, if I'm a produce manager, hopefully, I know I don't know a lot and I'm tryin' to ask the right people. I have a lot more access to the right people, I think.

MD: Yeah.

A: Um, and um, and that, and that has been a life saver with the special needs the girls have. I've been able to call people and say, 'I need this.' Whether it's the school or the, you know, the Commissioner.

MD: Yeah.

A: And uh, you know I think about who doesn't have it. But even that! I didn't know, I didn't know we were entitled to a subsidy, when we first entered this process. Even, I didn't know, that there was some post-adoption services that we could get, Um, for the girls. They were with us for three or four years before I knew that. Um, I didn't know those things. I didn't know I didn't know 'em, so I didn't know to ask for 'em. And, I'm the [REDACTED]. Um, so, if I don't know those things, I mean, yeah, ok, I could be stupid, but I-I'm guessing, if I don't know 'em —

MD: The produce managers don't.

A: The produce manager sure doesn't.

MD: Yeah.

A: And, uh, and, and what I do know that, it's okay to ask for help. And I bet the produce manager doesn't know that.

MD: Yeah.

A: And so —

MD: And maybe the system doesn't, uh, exactly engender that —

A: Right.

MD: — that feeling.

A: So, when I've taken my daughter to, to therapy or to the emergency room, or to the school



and have been totally honest and candid, and seeking help, I haven't worried about, 'What will they think?' Not in the same way as produce manager would.

MD: Yeah.

A: 'Cause I've got a pedigree and a reputation and four kids that at least show some indication that I might have done something right along the way. And, I'm okay with admitting that I need help. And, that's something that always, I think, again the cultural thing that we don't do very well. And we sort of, well, if you make it hard for people to do it, when they already have a hard time asking for the help, then —

RG: Yeah. (*whispered*)

A: — it's a double whammy. Um, and so, um, and, and it's cultural. So I don't know, the best way, from within the Native community, I mean, that's a good thing to explore. But knowing how hard it is to navigate systems and, uh, you know. I had a conversation with someone higher up in the Department, who I don't know, who I was referred to by someone who I do know. And he said, 'Well, you know, um, we don't,' you know, 'we might not be able to ...' you know, whatever. And I said, 'No, you don't understand. I'm gonna do this with or without your help and, I'm gonna make it happen.' And I said, 'So, the only question that I've got for you is, are you willing to help? Cause if you're not, that's okay. But we're gonna do this.' And um, he said, 'Oh yeah, but this takes months and just because you've completed the application, most people, you know, don't complete it accurately. We need to spend a lot of time gettin' more information.' I said, 'No, no, I understand that, I just take in that as a challenge. You will have all your information on your desk to make a decision by Friday.' And um, I said, 'I get what you're sayin', but, you don't know who I am, and you will have all the information.'

MD: Yah.

A: Yah. An, they had all the information. Um, but I had to, I had to jump through hoops that were just absolutely crazy. And uh, and spend money, both mine and the State's that was just totally unnecessary. (*bird song*) And, harmful to my daughter. And I had no choice, I had to go through, the steps.

MD: Um hm.

A: And um, and uh, to the Department's credit, I've had several conversations with people, about my experience, hopin' that they can use that to learn from. We spent 70, the State spent \$75,000 for something everybody involved said my daughter didn't need, that harmed her. And I had no choice to do it. In this time of economic difficulties, to misuse, appropriate \$75,000 in

a harmful way to my daughter, and I couldn't stop it. I couldn't stop, I mean, I had to check that box off before we could get to the next step.

MD: Hm.

A: And uh, and, and you know. So.

MD: (*inhales, about to speak*)

A: That's not related to her Native heritage but I think it's, it's a shared experience for people that, I think giving, I guess the last think I'll say that I think is really important. Um, I have a voice. I've had the opportunity to have a voice and I had all I could to have my voice heard for my, for my children. And to think about the people, the average people, that have never been given a voice, or don't feel like they have a voice, there's no, they don't have a chance. They don't have a chance. And as a professional, I always tried to look out for people that, were being victimized by the system. And, uh, I'm really proud of, um, almost all the people (*bird song*) where I've gone to termination of parental rights. Even when I haven't needed to be there, I've been there, at their request, to have them go through it with me beside 'em. And if I see 'em on the street today, I don't have very many people that I like would, turn the other way or cross the street to avoid, that I've worked with. Um, and I'm really proud of that, that I've got positive relationships with people that I've done some pretty impactful things to.

RG: Um, hm.

A: You know, removed their children permanently from their care? And, uh, you know, I think, it can be done. And I think, it, just, there's a humanity to it that sometimes gets lost in doing the job. And so hopefully with the work that you guys are doing, you can make sure that doesn't get lost and that people have ways to have a voice. Um, that's gonna be helpful to them. So. Thanks for listenin'.

MD: Thank you for telling the story.

RG: Thank you. Anything else you want to add?

A: No, I think that's it!

RG: Thank you so much.

END OF RECORDING