

# Our People's Stories



Nobody Wants to Die. They Want the Pain to Stop  
THE PEOPLE'S INQUIRY INTO OUR SUICIDE PANDEMIC





**I**n 2013, directed by the Mushkegowuk people and Council, an Inquiry was conducted into the suicide pandemic that had been crippling the region. Hearings were held in each of the Mushkegowuk communities of Moose Factory, Missanabie Cree, Taykwa Tagamou, Fort Albany, Attawapiskat, Kashechewan, Chapleau Cree and the town of Moosonee. At the community hearings, the Commissioners who lead the discussions, heard from hundreds of courageous people. The people affected by this pandemic- mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, Elders - the people- came together to share their feelings, thoughts, experiences and solutions about the suicide crisis that took the lives of so many, including hundreds of youth.

The Commissioners felt the pain of the people and they compassionately express their sincere thankfulness to all those that participated.

These are OUR PEOPLE'S STORIES.

## **PRIVACY**

We have tried to remove as much identifying information as possible, but we live in small communities. Despite our best efforts, it may be possible for some people to identify some of the story-tellers. We ask you not to try and identify them. We ask those who heard the stories in public meetings to help keep the story-tellers' identities private. We ask you to respect the courage our people have taken in sharing their stories, so that we can learn. It's time for listening and for an ongoing dialogue.

The story-tellers have taken the first steps, breaking the silence about suicide, its causes and its devastating effects on the survivors and its long-lasting impacts in our communities.

As one speaker said, "This is the first time I have spoken freely about this. I tried to speak freely once before, only to find that my words were taken out of context and shared as gossip ... We need to talk about it. I hope this work doesn't stop. I'm glad we had this chance to share."

Please walk with the speakers. Please walk with us ... together.

*Based on OUR PEOPLE'S STORIES a report was compiled, title: "Nobody Wants to Die- They Want the pain to Stop- THE PEOPLE'S INQUIRY INTO OUR SUICIDE PANDEMIC" highlights the findings from the inquiry and proposes recommendations and possible solutions. Every community and the people have been tasked with the implementation.*



## 1. Nobody Wants To Die

I returned to my community, after being away for quite a while. I'm back home now for good. I had to take stress leave. I was feeling overwhelmed by crisis intervention and counselling. We're overworked, burning out. I started working as a counsellor because we need to do something to try and help. My passion is to keep helping, to try to save lives.

What I want to share is that almost every call has something to do with suicide. Talking about suicide, it's very heavy. You feel this overwhelming sense of despair. Being back here in the community, there's a lot of heaviness. I feel the weight since being back here. Suicide is always around us.

You never get over a suicide, every time someone takes their life. At the powwow, we did an honour song for her, but it still hurts. You never get over it.

The first time I experienced a suicide, it was a young man who was my friend. When he talked about committing suicide, people said he was crying wolf. After a while no one took him seriously. People say he was always talking about it. It sits on my heart so heavily, because I feel that I could have done something.

Another time a woman shot herself outside our house. I couldn't sleep after that. I don't understand what makes people stop trying. It also makes you wonder, why do we freeze when we should be trying to help?

My best friend froze to death on his way to see his girlfriend. When people drink and go out into the elements, it's a form of suicide. It left a hole in my heart for a long time.

When I started to do counselling, gas sniffing was a big issue. Every client had sexual abuse issues and was suicidal. One client expressed his thanks. He said what helped him was when I sang hand drum songs. It brought joy to his heart. I know what still hurts me. I don't know how long I will be on this road. They are supposed to be in treatment for a year, but the parents wanted them released. Out of the four who I befriended, three committed suicide. They were hearing voices, telling them to harm themselves. One young man said, "There's nothing you can do to help me." He said there was a demon leading him astray. Sometimes I think we're dealing with spiritual forces. When he tried to smudge and pray, the evil forces would defeat him. The only

time he felt safe was when I sang drum songs. This is what these young people must have been dealing with. I'm sharing thus so the kids will have faith and hope. It's good to have this forum.

There aren't enough workers to deal with all the pain in our community. The work is taking a toll because the workload is too much. That's why I am on medical leave. I needed time out. I'm working to get my energy back, working on my spirit.

When we hear that someone wants to commit suicide, sometimes people don't react. Maybe they feel numb, almost conditioned to it. Is it because they don't know what to do, or who to call? We need to teach everyone what to do when they hear this. Do did they know what to do? Do they feel overwhelmed? Are they afraid of those who are suicidal? I tell people to call the police or call the hospital - so we know that we tried.

One woman took her life after she lost her children. She never saw her children after they were apprehended, and then the Crown took them. There should be more support and training, so people know what they can do when people are suicidal.

I learned in a workshop that nobody wants to die. They just don't want to feel the pain any more - and that's so true.

My father taught me a lot. In the old days, there was no such thing as suicide. We had a strong connection to the Creator when we lived off the land. This is what provided balance in our lives. It's not like that for the young people today. They don't have that connection, that balance. They have more distractions today, and it's hard for them to live.

What happens to those who take their lives when they're drunk - do they go to heaven? The young people today don't have anything to guide them - the land or the Bible. It's the responsibility of elders and the whole community to create a good environment around our youth, to guide them.

In my younger days, the church said it was a sin to commit suicide. I talked to a priest who said those who commit suicide will suffer, but they will come out of it. In our traditional faith, if someone commits suicide, and their time on earth was supposed to be 60 years, they will go to heaven when they reach 60.

## 2. Today We're Talking About It

I come from a traditional family. I was raised on the land. My first steps were on branches. I was raised for six years on the land, and then I went to residential school. I'm a mother. I had a rough life, struggling with alcohol and drugs. Twenty years ago, I decided to change my life. Today, I am drug-free. I made a lot of changes in my life, but I still have struggles.

My youngest son died of suicide. In an 18-month period, I lost six members of my family, three of them to suicide. Because of my background in social work, I was able to help my family cope with these multiple losses.

Suicide is a complex grief. It's a roller coaster ride. I saw that we were lacking the resources to help people cope with grief. I saw that we needed a support group for survivors of suicide. I started looking into this. After I lost my son, there were five more suicides. When my daughter wanted to do something, we were in a community crisis. I felt unable to answer her. We decided to start a support group, and we reached out to resource people. I called the public health nurse, and we started the SOS group - Survivors of Suicide.

Our communities don't talk about suicide. The word suicide is not easily accepted. I've lived here all my life and I knew all those who completed suicide. I know all the survivors. In our first group meeting, there were 32 people. We used a facilitator, because it was so personal. There were elders who, for 30 or 40 years, had never talked about suicide in their family. They were told not to talk about it. They were just told to wear black. Today we're talking about it. That's how we're healing.

There was a cluster of suicides, a pandemic, and it scared everyone. We used a traditional approach, a sharing circle with the immediate family. It was very powerful. We have people in our community who can provide services. The grief from suicide is so complex - you feel crazy. You need a strong faith and belief in the Creator. He will help you. Our young people don't have that spirituality. They walk around unbalanced. The Alcoholics Anonymous program is active again, after being gone a long time. The people are afraid of confidentiality with AA. There are trust issues, even after 20 years. Without trust, people close up, put up walls.

I don't really know why my son took his life. I know one of the risk factors is bullying.

Another is peer pressure, especially when it comes to drinking. I explained to him why people walk around drunk. That's how our children speak today. Even kids in the hockey change room talk about people "passing out." This was only a novice team, but they were talking about what they see. Children learn at a very young age. They watch how we handle ourselves. Role modelling is very important.

Relationships are another risk factor. When a 14-year-old has a girlfriend, it needs to be a healthy relationship. We need to talk to our young people about healthy relationships.

Our young people seem to think they need alcohol in order to have fun. As a single mom I used to walk around looking for my son if he wasn't home by curfew. I used to walk around in the bush, looking for parties, calling other parents. My son didn't like it, it was embarrassing for him. It seems like many parents have given up, lost control of parenting.

There is a lot of bullying happening in the schools. They don't want to be known as snitches. There needs to be effective parenting, and bullying needs to stop when you call the school about it. It still happens, even if you call. Bullying also occurs in the community, especially after school. They forced him to drink. It was very hard for him to be alcohol-free and drug-free.

We also need to educate parents about being in a blended family - to accept each other, to treat all the children as their own. Some children struggle with that. We need support groups for families like that.

I'm glad we have grief recovery programs. Grief is many things, and every person is different. As a family we always talked about this. My son had a hard time expressing himself. It's important to help each other. Our families struggle.

In my family we live a traditional life. I speak my language. I intend to go back to the land. That's where I come from, and that's where I will retire. At camp, the stories are happy. There's lots of life at camp. The trees are life.

The elders have wisdom. We need to build that relationship, that bond between our youth and elders. There's a gap there. The relationship is not strong enough. In our culture, they say to use our elders - then let's do that. We have the resources.



I'm mother who lost her child. I'm in recovery. I'm a traditional person. I'm a residential school survivor.

That is all I have to say. Meegwetch.

### **3. We Need To Work Together**

I didn't want to speak, but my friends encouraged me to share my story. It's very important to speak. I speak to help others. It's very emotional. When I hear another person describing their experience, it feels almost like when my daughter committed suicide.

My daughter suffered mood swings and anguish, low self-esteem, hopelessness and depression. She shared her feelings with me before she took her life. She had experienced many problems including bullying, domestic abuse, alcohol, drugs and rape. Men abused her sexually. She told me about all those things, her torment and grief, and I tried my best to discourage her from committing suicide.

One night it happened, I felt the presence of someone alerting me, and I searched for her. In the morning, someone fetched me to go to the hospital. I knew what I might find. I felt everyone staring at me, just like I feel now. I saw the medical people working on her. I broke down and I disappeared into a safe spot in my mind. I just stood there feeling numb, unable to cry. When the doctor told me it was useless, I accepted what he said. Afterwards I felt the pain and grief wash over me, and I didn't know what to do. I couldn't react.

Somehow, she sent me a message, urging me to finish the sundance I had planned to attend.

When it came time to enter the church, I couldn't bring myself to do it. Something was preventing me. I was heavy with grief. My mother and sister were there, and I told them I couldn't bear it anymore. I noticed my mother was near her breaking point. She pushed me to enter the church, and I forced myself to do so. I had to support her. A humorous moment gave me the strength to continue.

I'm still carrying my grief at losing a child through suicide.

We need to work together to help those who are suffering from guilt and bad experiences. I have memories, photographs. When I looked them, I started to feel bitterness towards the frontline workers. Why couldn't they address these kinds of issues? Then I realized that all of us, including the workers themselves, carry burdens of fear, shame, humiliation and guilt.

As we speak, there is the constant presence, a reluctance to do anything. We deal with the effects of suicide, drugs and alcohol in different ways. Through my own personal experience and reflection, I now understand that we have all suffered the intergenerational impacts – my grandparents, parents, me, my daughter - of ruthless changes in our lives. We suffered and learned from the church and the clergy.

There is a lot of confusion. I finally understand that I need to look after myself, my mental health. I cried at the start. Life is hard, but we must continue. We cannot only talk about it. We need action. There is no action today.

I say to the frontline workers, let's start the journey. Let's put our words into action. Let's learn from our experience and move forward. We need to help our youth. We need to give them support.

I was asked to share my thoughts. I could say more. Thank you for listening. I thank my mother, my friends and relatives for their support.

#### **4. Stable Marriages Are The Building Blocks**

I haven't directly experienced the trauma of suicide, but I have a teenage granddaughter whose parents separated about 10 years ago. We always expressed our love, even though her parents were separated. In the back of my mind I wondered, "How is she going to cope with this?" She told her mother she wasn't happy, and she was going to hurt herself. She has so much to live for, so we don't understand why she would say this. It doesn't seem to be any specific problem. There are probably different factors. Our youth need to be able to communicate, to share information in a process that will help people.

When I was a young man, I was burdened with a lot of things, including the new role of husband and father. When I grew up as a teenager, there was lots of drinking and noise. Sometimes I was scared to sleep. I made a vow that I would not get caught up in that, but I did get caught up in drinking for a while. I did a lot of soul searching. I knew I needed to break free from it. I was in residential school for seven years, and those teachings stayed with me. I remembered an article about reaching out to the Bible.

I had seen my mother put the Bible under her pillow, but I didn't understand it. So I read it to help me understand. I asked for help. For two weeks straight I read the Bible, and I began to see different things in it. I saw God's love, his eternal love, forgiveness, a new beginning. I read about fulfillment, purpose, meaning and happiness. The Holy Spirit empowered me. It saved my life.

As parents we can influence our children but our children may still struggle. I am reading a book that says stable marriages are the building blocks of a society. If families crumble, so will society. Stable families provide comfort, emotional and social comfort, to our children.

Strong marriages enhance the community. Where are we as a community in the concept of marriage?

I see this with my granddaughter. I see the impact of divorce and how it impacted her. The traditional value of marriage was important. We need to revisit the value of marriage that we had before.

## 5. Each Community Has Secrets

For a long time now, we have faced tragedies in our community. When I came home from residential school, I didn't know my parents that well. There were times when I wanted to commit suicide, but I was caught in the act. My brother caught me putting a gun to my throat. I was sexually abused in residential school. I was molested.

I'm still drinking. I won't hide that. I'm angry about everything that's happening in our community. I stopped practicing my traditions.

A long time ago, our people were healthy. We grew up on the land.

After we experienced the first suicide in our community, it snowballed from there. It's getting worse and worse. The kids don't give a shit today. Sometimes they come to visit me. They don't like their lives the way it is today, the things that are happening in the community.

People don't want to come to meetings like this, in a building. It reminds them of residential school. They'll go to activities outdoors, away from any controlled setting.

Those who committed suicide, those who succeeded – they did this because there's no support. Sexual abuse is rampant within families. I started using alcohol because my uncles did certain things to my body. I still drink today because of it. I was molested by my aunts, sexual abused by my uncles and father. I know what it's like. I understand those who commit suicide. They don't want to talk to people. My own aunts and uncles have done these things.

Traditional activities and teachings have helped me become strong in my spirit. They have helped me to begin asking what's wrong in our community. Ceremony is a tool that is given to us. We were told not to be afraid to practice our ceremony, to pursue our traditions. Ceremonies have allowed me to understand the issues, become aware, accept them.

I remember when I could really appreciate activities on the land with my grandparents. I heard the birds singing. I was a free person. My grandfather used to put me on his back. I remember him on the trail. I remember seeing rabbits. That was a good life.

Today we have forgotten to be humble. In the past, our people were humble. Our elders were stern in their teachings. They taught us about the virtues of good living.

Today there is cancer and other sicknesses. People are angry. They are even angry with the leadership. We need to go back to the land. We get better when we go out on the land. You hear from someone who has diabetes - when they go back to the land, their sugar is good. When they come back, the sugar is high or low. We need to do things on the land, the way God gave us to live on that land.

Each community has secrets, lies, problems behind the door when people drink.

We need to protect our youth. They are suffering from ongoing sexual abuse. My own father did it to my children. The whole family was abused. I thought I was safe coming home, only to experience sexual abuse in my home.

I taught my children about good touching and bad touching when they were eight years old, because I went through it. You see our people walking around with their heads down all the time. There's suicide from alcohol and drugs as well. People don't say what really happened to their kids. They say they died of a heart attack, but really they died from cocaine. I don't do drugs. I drink though.

I'm not a Christian. I practice the customary way of prayers. I revitalize myself through prayer. I talk to the trees, the sun, the river, the grass. I give thanks to all living things. I give thanks when I take the life of an animal for food. That's my identity. That's what I was taught in the goose dance.

Suicide didn't happen before. It isn't part of our culture, our tradition.

Kids just can't commit suicide when they live the good life. I want to share a story. There were six young men in a basement one day, when I went looking for my son. I went into the basement, and these young men were making love in the basement. They were all stripped, naked. Why is that? It's because they hate their bodies. I was attracted to men when I was growing up. I wanted to be with men because I had been abused. That's why our kids commit suicide. Because of abuse, direct from their own relatives. After they do this, they sit together. That memory will stick in their mind, and they will try drinking. They will have a hard time speaking about it. Sometimes it's too late, and they would rather use a gun or hang themselves. That's why there is suicide.

I was drinking last night. I'm not going to hide it. I'm only human, but I have words to share. After I got married I said I would keep drinking until I have white hair, because of all the pain I carried. I've tried, but I can't stop.

Sometimes when you walk in the bush, you feel like someone is following you. It's your spirit wanting to go back to your body. When you drink, when you stagger, that spirit is not intact.

We have to work with each other. We have to share our stories and experiences. We have to share the truth. We have to help each other face the truth about ourselves. We have to go to people's homes. That's where the families are. We can't meet in buildings, in white areas like this. We need to share our stories with them now. We need to speak the truth to them. That's the only way to stop suicide.

Someone brought religion here. It's foreign to us - this man came down the mountain with the ten commandments. That wasn't our way. We say a prayer to our Creator. Our lands are grown over because we don't go back to look after them.

We need to get back to the ways of our people, respecting and honouring our children. People are suffering in silence because parents don't know how to say, "I love you." Each household cries because they can't say anything. They don't know how to be parents.

## **6. I've Been There Myself**

I'm glad to be here today to talk to the suicide inquiry. I've been there myself. I am glad to be here today.

I wasn't raised by my parents. They abandoned me, and I ended up in residential school. When I was unhappy, I was angry at my parents. It started when I was a child. This is when the anger inside me grew. I became bitter at a young age. The supervisor was mean to me. I was beaten.

Today, alcohol still interferes with my life. I battle my will and I abstain from alcohol. I fear, if I drink, I will take my anger out on my family. I am fortunate to have a good wife.

The people who have attempted suicide speak of the same life that I grew up in, the parents not being there. I lost my best friends to suicide. I know what it's like to lose your friends this way.

I can relate to anyone who thinks about taking their life. I have the scars to prove it. I tried to take my life. Somehow it didn't happen. I know the Creator created me. I prayed for him to help me.

When my wife became sick with cancer, my daughter was upset and wanted to commit suicide. I talked to her. I prayed for my wife, my daughter. I went back home and told my daughter that I didn't want to lose her, or my wife. I shared this with her. I hid my guns, sharp objects and medications, thinking that she was going to do it. I prayed at the same time and asked for help. I didn't want to lose anything. At the same time I was dealing with my wife and her doctors.

What helped me was thinking about my Creator, praying for guidance. I'm not here to offend anyone. No matter what belief you follow, there is only one Creator. I go and support people with traditional prayers.

I feel bad for anyone who talks about ending their life, because I understand their torment. There is one particular young man who I spoke with. I tried to talk with him. I asked him if it had anything to do with his upbringing, the upbringing that we shared. He answered, Yes. He hung himself a few weeks later.



I am struggling, myself, trying to deal with my issues. I went for treatment, but people began to ridicule me for trying to lead a good life. They said, "How come you don't drink any more?" When you have a bottle, you're not afraid any more. Your friends find ways to distract you.

I'm glad to be here to say that my marriage is good, and my kids are listening to me. Suicide is a painful thing to discuss. I try hard to cope, and I try to remember God's creation. I go for walks to help myself. If we pray, we will see the cure within ourselves.

## **7. Change Needs To Happen In The Home**

I worked in one of the communities that's dealing with the suicide pandemic. I worked there for 18 months. I saw a lot of children without direction. With suicide, it was not having hope. Alcohol and drugs are so prevalent. The youth can tell us about their situation, if we're willing to listen. They have no guidance. They don't have people to talk to.

Change needs to happen in the home. Someone, an adult, needs to take an hour of their time and provide for a place for a child to speak. It takes a community to raise a child. The youth say that they don't hear from their own family. I attended a suicide conference. there are simple solutions but we all need to be on board. There are simple solutions.

That's all I have to say about this.

## **8. You're Left With So Many Questions**

We need to create an awareness of the need to heal. People need help releasing the buried emotions that are bottled up inside. They might not even be aware of them.

Suicide is the hardest death to deal with. You don't know where to begin. You're left with so many questions.

The roots of suicide were passed down from parents who experienced abuse in residential school. A long time ago, we learned from our families. We learned on the land. We travelled. We were nomadic people, and we followed the animals. We lived in freedom before residential schools. Things are so different now.

I experienced suicide in my family. It's worse than a natural death. It's hard to deal with. With suicide, you feel blame, you feel helpless. You see the children suffer, the spouse suffer. Then after a suicide, there's no counselling for us. It took me 3 or 4 years before I was able to cope. After talking with an elder, I came to understand it was that person's choice.

The communities need to work together in creating awareness of suicide, and help the survivors. Each community should have an aftercare program. Impacted families should be given the opportunity to debrief. Frontline workers should establish community programs, like gardening and posters, to involve everyone. Even the young ones are affected when they lose a loved one. It's so sad to hear from a five-year-old say, "I wish I was dead." They don't know what death means. Suicide should be out in the open – maybe a radio talk show. We should talk about it in public. We need to express our feelings. We need to educate everyone about suicide. We need more traditional activities, like hunting. With addictions, we should work with families.

## **9. I'm Still Trying to Deal With It**

I lost my daughter. At first, I didn't know what to do, what to expect. I didn't understand the grieving process. I'm still trying to deal with it.

There are constant reminders. There's so much pain. It's hard to let go. It was really hard on her birthday. I made a cake, and I didn't want to blow out the candles. I wanted to keep her things, but my other kids wanted to give her things away.

When I saw my brother, who looks like her, I wanted to leave, to run away. I felt so much pain. My daughter was my rock when I separated from my husband. I long for her. I feel alone without her.

Sometimes we can't do anything to prevent suicide. I tried to talk with her, but she closed her self off. We all tried. She didn't know what grief was, she didn't know how to get help. She ran away from people who wanted to talk to her. Sometimes they plan to do it and won't tell anyone. That's when we can't do anything. I have to accept that and learn to live without her.

My other children have also had to learn to live with that knowledge, that they couldn't help her either. My children are still trying to get help. I run a girls group, but I need to get help for myself first. I hope to go to the Dialogue for Life suicide prevention conference in Montreal.

I wanted to share my story that there was nothing that I could do. I have moments when I long for her, that I want her back. I am on the journey of grief to heal. It's not easy when you lose a child to suicide. It's a different kind of grief. I wasn't ready for it. It happens in a blink of an eye. You're startled. With my daughter, I argued a lot. Our family fell apart with the separation. I reassured my other children that I am there for them. I was married for quite a few years and then, when the marriage was over, it devastated the family. My daughter wanted her dad back, but we had no control over that.

My daughter had a short life but she was a very caring person, especially to her nephew. I am seeking the help I need. My brother has helped me a lot through the journey of grief. Tears are a language, and it helps.

Thank you for letting me share.

---

## 10. I Pray for Strength

My husband and I have been separated for a while. He's been in and out of jail. When I was young, I had always hope that our life could change. I drank. It was a very abusive relationship – psychologically, physically, mentally – but it wasn't always bad. You always think it will get better, but it didn't. I took my marriage vows seriously. I supported his drug habit. He was very controlling. Most of his pay cheque went to drugs, affecting the family. I quit drinking but he kept drinking. Kids started partying in our home. I had no control. I started taking pills to get away from the situation. I had thoughts of suicide. I started to wonder what it would be like to just take all the pills. The feeling was so strong, that I should end it all. I was actually contemplating suicide. Fortunately, just at that moment, one of my daughters came in, wanting something. I saw how sad she was when I turned away from her.

I cried out to the Lord for help. The next day, things changed. My husband assaulted me and he got sent to jail. My life took a drastic change. I went to church with my children. I made a commitment to the Lord. I realized it was the Lord who saved me. There was a sense of peace in the home with my husband gone. It was serene. It had never been like that before. I started my journey of abstaining from addiction. It didn't happen all at once.

After his incarceration was over, the family home went back to the same situation. When we separated for the first time, quite a few years ago, I continued to support my husband if he was trying to make a positive change. I had to deal with manipulation, a co-dependent relationship, enabling him. It's been a battle to find balance.

My ex-husband struggles with depression. He had a rough upbringing, growing up in an alcoholic family where he had to fend for himself, dealing with his own demons. He was mistreated in the justice system. It was difficult to get help from community services. The girls struggle with father not being there.

I refuse to believe that nothing can be done. It will take time. I put most of my life into helping him. When he threatens suicide, I don't walk away. There is hope for me, so there is hope for him. My daughters don't want to accept that this is how their dad is. He has to want the help. I feel like someone who is trapped. I pray for strength. I turn to God and pray.

I do the best I can for him. I am always drawn back into the relationship. I want a good life but it's frustrating trying to find help.

I feel that a lot of families feel this is the way that are being affected. Mine is not the only situation like this. We are so bound by policies and procedures. The struggles have helped me to be the person I am today. I use this struggle to find strength.

## **11. I Never Thought My Father Would Say He Was Sorry**

I was very suicidal as a young man. Sexual abuse started when I was six years old, and lasted until I was 12. I started sniffing gas to relieve the pain. It helped to numb the pain. When you sniff, you hallucinate, you can be anything you want. I tried to reach out to people for help. When I told my mother, she said, “Shhhhh,” so I kept it quiet.

I lost friends from suicide. I also lost a friend through sniffing, in a house fire. There was no counselling. We just kept quiet.

The first time I heard of suicide was when my father said, “I’m going to kill myself.” He would often speak of taking his life. I didn’t know what suicide was. It was very confusing. My father was a good man when he was sober, but a different man when he drunk. He cried for his mom, even though he was a grown man. To me, he seemed like a little boy crying for his mom. It reminded me of myself, crying for my mom to protect from my abuser.

I became part of a pedophile victim ring. There was a certain man in our community who was respected and loved, considered a good man. There were a lot of us in that ring of sexual abuse victims. Everyone knew this was going on, but nobody said anything. When a friend confided, talked about sexual abuse, we immediately knew who the perpetrator was. I felt dirty. I wanted to die.

All my relationships failed. I didn’t know how to communicate with women. Because of my anger, I only knew how to manipulate them, lie to them, abuse them. I would say cruel things to them. Even though they were beautiful, I would tell them they were ugly and say things to hurt them. I couldn’t control my emotions.

The trauma of my friend screaming in that fire lingered forever. I could hear my friend dying, and I started seeing things. The next day I went home and started sniffing gas again.

My father’s anger also contributed to a build-up of fear in me. I missed school because of it. Many times we would be homeless. It was tiring, and I failed so many times in school. By the time I was in grade 8, I was 16 years old. I failed so many times, I couldn’t understand what they were teaching. I thought my brain must so small I’d probably feel it rattle when I shook my head.

I was abused by my father. He would hit me. He followed a routine. I knew when he was coming home. I knew whether he was in a good mood or not. Behind doors he was different than he was in front of people. My parents had a hard time telling us that they loved us. It was hard. I witnessed a lot of rape in our home. When there was a lot of drinking in the house, I would get up early. There wouldn't be any food, and the floor would be dirty. I was responsible for my younger siblings. When I think back, I was just a kid - but I felt like a man. Many times we went without food. Macaroni was a staple. Today I still like macaroni. If we had sauce, it was a bonus. Many times I saw my mom crying, although she tried to keep it a secret.

My favorite time was being in the bush. On the land, my father was a totally different person. We were never hungry, we always had goose. He taught me to hunt, he showed me how to be a good hunter. He was always kind. But back in the community, he was a drinker. My dad taught me how to play the guitar, took the time to teach me. These are the fond memories that I have.

Playing music was my therapy. My dad was the reason I quit sniffing. He bought me a guitar. It cost \$400, which was a lot of money for us. Music became my love. It replaced the sniffing. When I played, I came to life. When I saw people smiling, it made me happy.

Then I was introduced to alcohol, and I became an alcoholic. It became another problem. This is where my rage, my suppressed emotions came out. I started to hit my father and my uncles. When I came home angry, I would attack my father. We were a violent family.

I started losing my friends to suicide, the friends I grew up with – more than I can count on both hands. I started taking pills, and I tried to take my own life. They pumped all those pills out of me. I drove so fast on a snowmobile, that I almost killed myself. I thought about killing myself, and I crashed that snowmobile. I ended up in the hospital.

When I started having kids, I told myself I would never ever do what was done to me. I would be a better parent. But I blew up in anger at every little thing they did. I started to hit my kids. I became enraged. I asked myself, why do I do that? Why does my old thinking come back? I was powerless to control my feelings. I started to beat up my ex-wife. I would hit her, and say things like, you'll never ever find another guy. It was only



about sex. That's all it was in that relationship. I didn't know how to talk or listen. I felt irritated, uncomfortable. I would say, "Why are you crying? It's no big deal." Even my kids, I would tell my kids to shut up and be quiet. I wasn't even talking to them anymore. I would just yell at them. I didn't know how to console them.

I remember busting the window because there were no bottles in the house. That's all I thought about. I didn't think about my kids, my house. I remember one day I drank a bunch of mickeys. I took some pills that night and something amazing happened. When I woke up, I didn't feel any side effects. I felt normal. So I started doing that, taking pills before bed. I thought it was a cure.

Then I lost everything. I lost my kids, my wife, my home. I hit rock bottom and I said to myself, I'm going to die here. I am going to kill myself. I told my mother this. I hated the feeling of loneliness, emptiness. I had nothing to look forward to the next day. I just sat there and thought. I didn't know that I was moving from one room to another. My mom asked me, who are you talking to? I didn't even know that I was talking to myself. I was drifting out of control, unaware of my thoughts and actions.

The alcohol wore off, and I felt depressed. That morning I said, this is it. I'm going to do it. I talked to God, the Creator or something. I asked, where are you? If you're there, move something, show me. There was this guy there laughing at me, laughing. And something happened to me - it was spiritual. Something came and woke me up, came and lifted me off the ground. I didn't feel any more pain. The friend who was laughing, that was the devil - but I felt really good. I remember the exact day.

I ran home to my mom and told her. She believed me. She told me, you look alive. I told her, this is the last time you'll see me drunk or high on drugs. I knew I needed treatment, I needed to work on stuff. I had no idea what it was like, but I went to treatment and I heard other people talk about their lives. I thought they were crazy. Why would talk about things like that?

It took me two weeks, after writing in a journal. It hit me hard when I remembered the time I was forced to have sex with my brother. I slept with him, not sexually, until I was 14 because we felt safe together. I ran to my worker. I wanted to call my brother. I was scared.

When I left treatment I was afraid of my family. No one talked. I went to a recovery

---

home and I felt safe there. I stayed there for months and months. I have been clean since then. The rest of my family, almost all of them are clean today. My father, my mother, my brothers and sisters. My father apologized for how he raised us. He apologized to me for the first time. He was crying so hard, I thought my mom had died. He was literally crying. I'm sorry for how I raised you. And right there, something was lifted. I never thought my father would say he was sorry. But it's like that dysfunctional life was washed away. He's a changed man. He's a loving, affectionate man. He said, I know I lost time with you, but I have my grandchildren to love. Now he always hugs his grandchildren. When I went for healing, I stopped expecting my parents to apologize.

I'm very content today on my healing journey. I'm a very happy sober man, not a miserable sober man. I'm happy. With my family I see hope. My kids are not afraid to share with me. They talk with me. My son was just talking to me about girls. I try not to shame him, just say, 'Wow. Wow.' He's proud of being able to share his emotions. My youngest says, I love you, every day. And I hear my nephews and nieces say it a lot.

It doesn't matter where you pray. My mom goes to church, it helps her. She goes to sweat, it helps her too. When she talked about residential school, it was like opening a dam. She suffered immensely in residential school. She cried for two days. After that she quit drinking.

Treatment is a challenging journey. It takes a long time. There are emotions that need to awaken, thoughts that need to be used in a good way. It actually took me a long time to forgive my father. He wrote me a forgiveness letter. When I started to read it, the forgiveness part, I ripped it up. I felt like a failure after that. But my counsellor told me, you're the only honest person in the group. It takes a while to forgive someone. You have to go through that process. It isn't easy, but once you begin to apply forgiveness, there's no turning back.

When I went home, I said to myself, my parents never hugged me - so why don't you hug them. So I hugged my dad, and he froze. I said to myself, holy cow he's never been hugged. I told him, I love you Dad. I did the same thing with my mom. She was just shaking. I kept doing it. Then one day, I didn't do it, but my father got up and hugged me. These acts of kindness become contagious in the family.

When I heard that apology, it was hard day. Don't wait for that to happen - do it. When

you start to do it, you feel a change. Some people take five years, ten years. The action part is good, then there's the saying part. I knew I forgave my father, when I didn't get mad. I didn't feel angry. Then I asked him, what's wrong? I knew it wasn't about me any more. It took me a long time to love my father.

Today I love my parents so much. I can honestly say that. I did a lot of research into what they went through in residential school. They missed out on parenting skills. I started to understand what happened to them. A lot of my cousins are sober now, and we talk about what happened. A lot of my aunties have started to change. I had no idea that my mother went to residential school. My father did his best to raise us. He's a good hunter. He taught us to survive. Now he relaxes in the bush. His old Elan still runs. He still cuts wood.

My grandmother never drank. She was the heart of the family, our safe haven. She kept the family together. Now my mom has that role. She has the same heart.

It's very difficult when you're impacted by suicide. When I lost my cousin to suicide, it was like losing a brother. I also lost one of my sisters to suicide. My dad struggled with her loss for many years. Then he told me one day, your sister came to see me in a dream. She said, "Dad, forgive yourself. If you want to know where I am, I'll show you. Then she turned into a light and she went into my heart." When my dad woke up, he started to cry, "My danis is right here." He started to change after that.

## **12. We Need To Be Beacons of Light**

Yesterday was difficult. When I went home, I talked to my wife about the hearings. Today we are both here.

My father was a hunter and trapper for most of his life. Your parents leave you with values and principles. We went to residential school. That experience wasn't so good, but I remember we won a hockey tournament one time. In my teen years, in high school, I started playing the guitar. Those were some of the best years of my school life. The Beatles influenced me to play. The '60s and '70s were a good time in my family. Then, in the 80s, people started dying in my family.

It is a challenge to raise children today the way you were taught, and what you learned from your grandparents. They were humble. They lived through lots of hard times, times when they went without.

Today the concept of family, and family values, is changing, because of the changes in the world. It's amazing what you see in your family today, and you wonder if it's good or not. I have a three-year-old grandchild who has an iPad, and he's really good on it. I don't know if that's a good thing or not. I don't even know how to turn it on. All my grandchildren have one.

The way we were raised was so different. We had rules to obey, structure. If the police came looking for you, watch out. If your name was called by your parent, you had to answer. There was corporal punishment and the broom was the enemy. It wasn't my friend. You can ask my brothers.

I have four children, and growing up in my house they heard "No" a lot. But today, when my grandchildren come, it became the house of "Yes."

It's hard for families raising kids today, when alcohol and drugs are rampant. Today's generation is confronted by an epidemic. It's not only in this community, it's everywhere, but it plagues our community. When we try to address it, sometimes we encounter roadblocks, and the ones who try to deal with it, get punished. It's reversed. Why?

With health there are no boundaries. We work with every community in the region. We

need to work on ideas for things to be done in our area. We know what happens when someone goes to the hospital. Suicidal ideation is usually related to drugs and alcohol use, or sometimes rape or abuse has happened to the individual. They're trying to numb their misery and pain. Sometimes they don't know what drugs they are taking.

The community is devastated, and the workers are too, when a suicide happens. It was heavy in 2008, 2009, 2010. We lost a lot of members. It was hard for the frontline workers, it was really tough. Sometimes they don't know who to turn to.

I used to play at funerals and watch the families grieve at funerals. Eventually, it got to be too hard. Just the question of where the soul goes after suicide causes great stress. If the person don't know the Lord, I don't know where they went. My uncle was taught that it's not good to take your own life, that only God can take your life.

A young boy committed suicide at a tournament recently. My sister's family was so hurt, they knew the family. I didn't know what to say to the family. The players wore arm bands, but it was too hard to see them. It was devastating for the family, the community, the tournament.

A few years ago, we went in the bush to cut wood. We were gone all afternoon. When we got back, my wife told me, your friend committed suicide. I sat down and asked myself, "Why would he do that?" I started to carry in billets of wood, and I kept asking myself, "Why?" I told my son what had happened and he broke down.

When my daughter-in-law lost her cousin, she came to my house. All she did was cry. It's hard on a family. It's hard on the frontline workers. We need debriefing each time it happens. I thank the response team. They left a spirit plate for him at the feast. It showed respect. We need to respect each other's beliefs. We need to embrace our beliefs. Today, despite all the losses from suicide, I am faithful and full of confidence in my beliefs. I have walked with the Lord for many years and I am thankful for this.

I wanted to share with you how difficult it is for the workers. We need to take care of each other. The Bible says we should love one another.

There's a song that talks about how we need to join together, so every soul that's suffering will know they're not alone. We need to be beacons of light.

Drugs and alcohol are an epidemic here. Families aren't buying food. Kids are going hungry. Drugs are rampant. This is the truth. It's an epidemic and we need to do something about it, or it's not going to get better.

That's all I have to share.

Meegwetch.

### **13. How Will Life Be For Him?**

Yesterday evening, I was holding my grandson. He's just learning to speak, and I was wondering, "How will life be for him?" I'm concerned not just for him, but for all the children in our community.

The community influenced my upbringing. There's a lot of good history in our community, and also a negative side. This is the part that is hard. I grew up in a violent environment. I fought a lot. I swore. I drank a lot. I was abusive. For a long time. But I addressed those things. I changed in the past 20 years.

For quite a long time, I've been thinking about and trying to understand why people take their lives. I remember coming home one time after hearing about a youth who taken his life. I cried and I wondered what to do. At that time, there was a series of suicides, and it affected the whole community.

I was on a healing journey in spirituality at that time. When I was in recovery, I was introduced to self-help groups, and I started to learn about a higher power. I started to pray, and wondered if I was in a spiritual crisis. I wondered if others were doing the same. I looked at the churches, and wondered why I was hurt and felt confused. At the time there were five active churches and three other spiritual groups. I had enough courage to approach a minister and tell him my story and how I started my prayer. He told me I was doing it right. I also went to see a traditional person, and he told me, "You're okay." No matter how we do it, we're praying to the same God.

It makes you wonder about the religious and spiritual differences in the community. Some people are concerned about the differences, but it's all good. It helps our community. We should be able to pray in a safe way without being judged.

Our women need to be acknowledged. It's our women and our wives who hold everything together. Reflecting on my own journey, I acknowledge how strong my wife has been throughout our marriage. I put her through a lot in the beginning. I cannot see our family existing today, without her. I see a lot of this in our community. We need to always acknowledge and respect the roles and responsibilities of the woman.

In our community, I see the alcohol and drug use, the lateral violence among us. I have

heard people say, "I don't talk. I don't trust. I don't feel." There's fear. There's shame. Every day I see people going to buy drugs. I share my concerns with the police and it's a great concern. We really need to address this issue together, as a community.

Another area is family. It starts from the home, but how do we define "family" and "home"? My father went to residential school. The original definition of family is extended family, a big family, where uncles, aunts and siblings were part of family life. I lost my parents when I was young. I've been able to come this far in life because of the support of my extended family. I like to hunt. I like being out on the land. It brings back a lot of fond memories. I would rather be out on the land than be here. Today there are a lot of people being pulled out on the land for more hunting, for the spiritual connection - because that's who we are. The land is who we are, not living in the community. We've come a long ways.

We need to really be good to each other, to help each other. We need to pray together. Prayers keep us strong, brings us together. It breaks down barriers. I pray. I'm thankful for the elders and the things I've learned from them. They can teach us a lot.

I would like to end the way I started, with my grandson. He's happy. He's full of energy. He picks things up easily from you, copies you, follows your example, likes to mimic you. It is important to determine what we teach him today. What is his future? Will he be able to hunt and smile about what he has been done? We really need to work together as a people.



## 14. We Can Make This Happen

I want to thank those who showed up and shared their stories. I'm inspired by what I'm hearing. And yet, many young people are in crisis, walking in life's hardships. All our community members need our care and attention – the parents, for example. We cannot neglect anyone who needs our help. When you drop a rock in the water, it makes a wave. It's the same in our community – it's a wave that carries on. Talk of suicide may trigger those who are affected, so we need to be cautious when speaking of it. Some people are not well enough to deal with it. Still, we cannot ignore it.

I just wanted to share a few things. I've heard a lot of good things today.

Our front line workers need to be debriefed, to help them release their grief. There is only so much that an individual can take. The workers can only do so much. It's important that we all work together.

There is one thing that I see, not only here but in other places. When children are belittled in sports or at school, told they are not good enough - I don't think it should be like that. When my mom says something, she doesn't say much – doesn't use a lot of words – but when she speaks it covers a lot of teachings. My mom taught me to respect my partner, to protect my partner – and I do.

When I using the drum, maybe 20 years ago now, my dad taught me that I was no good. Today my dad is different. He opened his mind to the traditional teachings. We had a discussion. I asked my dad why Jesus sat with twelve disciples. I tried to test my dad, but he told me to go first. I told him I don't really read the Bible, but this is what I told him. After Jesus was crucified, they were told to go out and preach their faiths. That's when Peter made the Catholic faith and the other disciples made the other religions. The devil – Judas - even sat among them. He was already sitting there among them, and Jesus knew this. I told my dad this. He looked at me, very surprised, but I kept on talking.

I'm really happy about what people have spoken about. It was good. I heard people say we should go back to the land, and that's true. We need to go back to the land, the teachings of the land.

I'm not saying to walk away from the church. We need to be honest with ourselves. We

need to practice whatever belief brings us joy and fulfillment. It's up to us. I see people misusing their faith, misleading the youth. The way I see things, we are the church. We are the walking church. It would be good to have a camp to go out on the land.

I was told there's no money for such a camp. I find that hard to believe today. At the community level, we need to step up and start volunteering our time. Too often the excuse is a lack of money. Everyone wants to get paid. We don't need to volunteer full-time - just here and there.

Suicide happens when we neglect our people too much, when we don't say hello to them, or speak with them. When the youth do something wrong, we jump all over them. It shouldn't be like that. It's up to the parents and grandparents to step up, as well. We need to walk our talk. Our youth deserve better. They won't be able to do it by themselves. We need to empower them by our own actions.

We can work together, put something together. We can make this happen for our people. I hear someone talk about the internet, that it's good, but it's not always good for our young people. It's good for education, and there are sites with Bible teachings, but we need to minimize it for them. It's not healthy sometimes. If a computer shows a bite from an apple, that reminds us where sin started. The priest and elders tell us to pray. We need to take the time to take our young people out on the land.

My dad told me the best medicine is to drink only water, and then you can eat all you want. You will see the results, he told me. I told him that I can't skip coffee.

## **15. God Wants Us To Be In This World, And To Have A Good Life**

I always seek guidance from the Creator. It's quite a few years since I moved away from the trapline, to make a home in the community and find a job. Living in the bush was a good way of life. It was very harmonious, as all the elders will agree. We used to take care of each other, keep the families together. We were able to demonstrate love and respect for each other. We were taught how to pray, to have a good way of life. I think about those teachings. It's very important to understand what someone is saying to us, to try and understand. Communication is very important. Being a friend is very important. We should always speak the truth about each other.

As elders, we hear about the strife in our community today. In my youth, we never had to go through this. We had a good life. Today, when I'm sitting here in my community and hear about suicide, it's hard to understand. It brings hurt to the community, to the good life. No person should turn to suicide. Things have gone in a wrong direction, from the teachings we learned about what life is, and who gives life. We are not supposed to take life for granted. Life is a very serious thing.

I get phone calls from youth who want help. I try my best to help them. I let them know the teachings, that God wants us to be in this world, and to have a good life. When a youth asks me to come and talk to him, they don't want to talk to someone in public. They want to trust someone. I go with the youth to a quiet place, a safe place outside, and we talk. It's usually about the loss of a loved one – a mother, brother, sister or grandfather. I understand that they want to talk to someone about the loss. I talk to many youth. The most troubled ones are using alcohol and drugs, and it has taken over their lives. That's when they lose hope and feel like suicide. We, the elders and the whole community, we need to keep a close eye on them. We need to abstain. We need to keep them safe, so they don't hurt themselves. I always talk to them about the Bible, and the life God has given us. And let them know this. They appreciate it. They like how I talk to them and they accept me.

Judas, the disciple who betrayed Jesus, took his own life. He knew he did wrong. He was ashamed. He thought he had no way out, and he hung himself on a tree. I think about my community and the other communities. I think about our people who are confused and think they have no way out. This must be how our youth feel.

When we hear the news of a suicide, of someone taking their life, it's very hard for the

community. There's so much sadness when a youth has taken his life. We need to think about Jesus and his teachings. We need to find a way to go in the right direction for all of us. I know that it's hard, what the youth deal with today. My dear friends, let's try and find something. God says if we look, we will find it. Let's try and find a way the right pathway, a cure for them to go on the right path. Let us find a way to do our best.

## **16. It Has To Be Community-Driven**

My aunt was like a mother to me. She talked about her life, how she was raised. She taught me about life, how to respect people, to be caring and not judgmental. She told me not take revenge, not hurt anybody, not to think about it. She said the Creator will take care of those things. He will deal with whoever wants to hurt you.

I feel many emotions. I experienced many things. I went to residential school from the age of six to ten. I saw a lot of abuse. I witnessed so many bad things. The children abused each other. I was physically and sexually abused by other kids. I was always alone. I was told that I didn't belong there. They picked on me because of my fair complexion. It caused me to feel insecure. That feeling is still with me to this day. I still feel lonely. I still feel the impact of residential school. Even to this day, I get scared, like I was afraid in residential school. I feel like someone is going to hit me. Sometimes I feel like that when I'm in a community meeting. I feel anxiety. Even in government meetings, I feel like someone is going to slap me while I'm sitting in my chair. I went to counselling, but it's still there, every day. I do my best to separate it.

When I think of what's happening in our community, the high rate of suicide, we know the root cause, to some extent, is all the pain from residential school. Our people are going through great suffering and it won't stop. They're trying to take the pain away by using drugs and alcohol. It's sad. They're carrying that pain because our community is silent. No one wants to talk about it. They want the pain to stop. The reason for suicide is that the pain becomes too much, way too much. Pain and anger the reasons that people take their life.

I remember when my friend committed suicide, while she was intoxicated. My aunt saw us feeling sad. She told us to not to blame our friend or be angry with her. When she committed suicide, she explained, she was not in the right state of mind. She never let go of her pain. She kept it all to herself. She couldn't deal with it. She suppressed her pain until it took over. Accept the truth about pain. Try not to be sad about it. This is part of life. Just pray for her in the other world.

It really affects us when we hear about someone who has taken their life, or is thinking of doing it. There are times when our members come to our office to talk about suicide. Sometimes we manage to calm them down. They often open up about the pain they are experiencing. They cry in our office. We worry that we might say the wrong

thing. I would welcome training, so we could say the right things. I get scared when someone talks about suicide. My hands get shaky. It's scary to see someone like this. We're afraid of causing anger or even triggering suicide.

It's important for our community to let go all the pain that we carry in our lives. We need the programs and expertise to get this done. It's important to let go of the pain. It's impacting everybody. The silence is too strong. It's time to let go.

Now that we know the cause of suicide, we should think about having a community meeting to address the issues of alcohol, drug abuse, domestic violence and sexual abuse.

We need to educate ourselves about suicide, and it's important to educate our youth about life. We have a lot of work to do. It has to be a community-based. How do we keep our community healthy and safe? We need to stop relying on the non-native legal system, especially in the court system. The perpetrator is punished, but there's nothing in place for the victims. We need to take charge, take ownership of our justice system. The current system of incarceration and CAS policies don't work. We need our own institutions, if we're going to take ownership of the social crises we see. The western way of doing things doesn't work. We need our own people to look after our own matters.

We also need to address the lack of principles and values in our community. There's a lack of spiritual growth and awareness.

We need our own judicial facility. We need to communicate, and heal from our past.

My own daughter tried to commit suicide. She had pills in her hand and I told her to give them to me. She cried when I confronted her. We talked for a long time, and she felt better, then she went out for more counselling.

We need the facilities and the ability to heal from what we have gone through because of the colonial invasion. We need aftercare. We need the expertise to educate our people about the need to heal, to move forward instead of suppressing the pain. There's a lot of work to do, to create the awareness. It has to be community-driven. We need our own institutions to collaborate on judicial matters and keep our people in the community.

The residential school experience will not be easy to deal with. It will be with us for a long time.

Our children need to be taught the traditional ways of respecting and caring for each other. We need to celebrate life, focus less on tragic events. We need to focus more on love and kindness towards one another.

Meegwetch to the commission for coming to our community and listening to our people share their stories of pain. We are still carrying pain, even people in their 70s and 80s. I still carry it, but I hope to some day let go the pain of my past, the pain of residential school.

I pray every day for the wellbeing of our people. Prayer helps. Hopefully one day we will all pray together.

Meegwetch for listening.

## **17. Only Time Will Allow Me To Heal**

I'm filled with heaviness at seeing all my children spilt up from their relationships. They were all married at one point, then they started separating.

I feel anger towards them for separating. My grief causes me to be angry. The anger is so powerful, it makes me want to throw things. Sometimes I can't speak to anyone. I close the door. I close myself off. I feel the heaviness. There's no one to talk to, no one to confide in.

I lost a teenage son to suicide. My daughter also lost a child. My oldest son experienced difficulties. It's very sad to see your children in this situation. I never knew how hard it would be to lose a child to suicide. It's hard when families separate, but it's harder when you experience suicide.

When I think about the teachings we learned, I wonder about my grandchildren who took their lives. I wonder how they are, and where they will be in the afterlife. This is the kind of counselling I look for, counselling about spiritual matters.

When I lost my grandchild, I was able to cope. I felt the impact, but I felt supported by the people I talked with. Then I lost another one and I felt overwhelmed. She went back and forth between her mother and father. I get emotional when I think about her. She was victimized by the situation. It caused her a lot of harm.

I feel overwhelmed by the situation with my family. Sometimes I pace back and forth in my house, talking to myself. I try to understand why this happened. I'm trying to trust in the grace of God and accept it. This is what happened to me. I feel these emotions.

I have two friends who phone me and try to distract me, change my frame of mind. They try to cheer me up, help me to experience some humour, speak with me so I can cope. Sometimes I'm not eager to visit others or go outside. I prefer to stay home, or just go to the store. Sometimes I don't mind. This is the first time I've spoken about it publicly.

Initially I didn't like to discuss suicide or hear it mentioned – because I'd experienced it, felt it. Now I feel comfortable hearing it discussed, and talking about how to improve things.



I'm grateful for God to helping me get through these times, helping me to cope. I don't think these feelings or emotions will ever leave me. I will be able to live with them. Only time will allow me to heal. I will have the strength of my religious beliefs. They will support me through these ordeals.

Sometimes I feel a lot of anger towards my grandchildren because of their drinking. They don't listen when they drink.

Whenever I hear of a family losing their child through suicide, it causes a lot of stress. Everything comes back. Watching the coffin being closed reminds me of my own grief.

I'm happy to be here. It's uplifting. I take great satisfaction when I hear the elders talk about everything they have endured.

One of the little girls I look after looks at family photos sometimes, and asks me the names of her uncles or her cousins. She looks and says, "She was too young to die." She's aware that the people in the picture are now gone. She asked how they died, but I didn't tell her. Then one day she shocked me. Maybe someone told her how, and she told me, and I was shocked. She wanted to know why she did that. The little girl asked, "Why did she do that?" I told her, never mind - just forget about it for now. Everything came back to me. I felt overwhelmed again. I went to my room and I cried. Maybe she was just trying to find out why it happened.

The reason why I'm talking about suicide is because we should try and help these young people in every way. Maybe there is no help. There are a lot of drugs and alcohol. It's a huge problem in our community, but people are divided about how to deal with drug and alcohol abuse. When something goes wrong, they blame the drug pushers. We should gather together collectively and try to find solutions.

We need to return to spirituality. This was useful in the old days. Our elders prayed a lot. That's where they found support and strength.

When I have more strength, I will participate more in what we can do for our communities.

I was in Kingston when I heard that my nephew had taken his life. I burst into tears. I am grateful to God and that's what I want to say. God gives us strength. We all know there is one God.

My grandson participates in drumming. He wanted to do this, and I accepted it. Sometimes he drummed on anything. The young ones bring us joy and laughter.

We need to work on things gradually. It doesn't happen quickly. Some community people don't attend events like this. They think it won't happen to them.

I will participate in the future, to help the young people, to support them. We need to be role models for the youth.

That's it. Thank you very much.

## **18. I Was Angry At Everyone**

I want to talk a little about suicide, about my own experience, what I've been through. I started drinking quite a bit from the age of 13. I went through a lot as a young person. By the time I was 20, I drank heavily. One time, I even went to Moosonee by boat. I left at midnight, arrived at 8 a.m. and went straight to the LCBO. I spent \$3,000 and drank for three months straight. This was a common occurrence.

There was a reason why I drank. I was angry at everyone - friends, family, community members. I had suffered sexual abuse, and this drove me to drink out of anger. I thought I wasn't properly cared for. Because of my anger, I became destructive to myself. I thought I had nothing to live for. One time I put a gun to my mouth, but for some reason it didn't go off. I squeezed the trigger, and there was only a click. When I checked why the gun didn't work, it fired. Then I blacked out.

I remember a couple of times I was in handcuffs. I don't know why. Another time, I was beat up by the police. I was angry at everyone, for years. I was told that suicide is not the answer.

After I had tried, maybe 20 times, I started thinking about what to do with my life. I realized that I had been hurting a lot of people all those years when I was trying to harm myself, hurting my family.

My mother told me to pray, to ask for what I want, and keep praying. This is what I did.

I went to counselling. After I came back from treatment, I still drank. There was something I didn't know. I started drinking again.

Then one day, an elder spoke to me. We were sitting by the river when we talked. She told me something had happened to me when I was young, and my body was feeling the impacts of this childhood trauma. I started to understand. Your body tells you. My leg and hand, that's where the abuse happened. I had a lot of anger and things came crashing in.

My mom and elders in the community told me to destroy my enemy, not myself. I said, "Do you want me to shoot someone?" "No," they said, "you need to get your strength

back. To destroy the anger you have towards those people, you have to confront them, the people who hurt you, abuse you.” They asked me to forgive the people who abused me. I confronted them. It was hard. When I finally confronted them, I was able to forgive. I didn’t see them in my mind any more – this is the power of forgiveness. As I confronted each person, I got stronger. I prayed and asked the Creator for help. If you forgive someone, things are going to change. For years I have heard a lot about residential school, but no one talks about forgiveness. I felt mad at the church, the priest, the bishop.

In the old days, you would see camps all along the river. Today you don’t see that. As a community we’ve forgotten our connection to the land. How can we heal if we cannot come to terms with our past? Forgiveness is the way.

I went to my dad, in his final days, and told him about the things I had in my head. I asked him to forgive me for being angry with him, giving him such a tough time. He forgave me. In his dying hour, he told me to live as free as possible. What’s the point of being angry all your life? I felt happy when I told him. I had peace with him.

The people who I was angry with, I dealt with. I felt like my body was in pieces when I was angry. I started to go to everybody who I was mad at, and I got them back. Today I feel strong.

No one talks about forgiveness when they talk about residential school. What kind of message do we impart to the youth if we keep blaming the school? I knew so many friends who died because of their bitterness towards residential school. There’s not enough money to make us happy. What’s the point of living and being mad? You’re going to pass it on. We need to forgive each other. It’s because of money that we don’t hear about forgiveness. All the money in the world won’t make you happy.

I think we have to stop and make a decision. I made a decision to be happy, and not let the people I was mad at own me. I started to find out about my life. We need to go back, find our way. I used to do that as a kid, go out in the bay.

I listen to the land, the noises. I feel the wind and hear the water. I know how closely the elders were connected to the land. Today, I have a better appreciation for our elders. They lived humbly off the land. That’s why we hear, “Respect the elders.” They helped me a lot, in so many ways. This is what I understand now, living and harvesting off

the land. Last year I killed a moose, and I used everything. I made moccasins. When I walk on the land, I wear those moccasins.

You have to love yourself in order to love your people. The hardest thing for me was forgiving myself and loving myself.

I go to sweats. If you show the young people. I tell them to forgive and love themselves, and things will change. It worked for me. I'm glad I am here to share my story. I would have been dead. You will see good things once you forgive.

If we want to hurt, we will hurt. People who are hurt are going to hurt people. We need to forgive and treat each other like a family. Why do we do things when they're dead, when we can do things when they're here.

When I was drinking, I thought I had good friends. When I stopped drinking I lost 20 friends, but God gave me 200 more.

I just wanted to share my experience with forgiveness. Residential school has been here for a long time now. We should move on now. We just can't focus on one thing on life. There's a reason why it happened. If you can switch the pain around, you're untouchable. All we hear are negative things, like residential schools, abuse. When I was growing up, all I heard was residential school. Maybe that's the problem today - our kids are hearing this all the time. Our kids need to hear positive things, so they can have a better outlook on life.

If we can say, "I forgive you," we will go far. If we forgive, good things will happen.

## **19. We're Just Waiting For The Next Call**

It's an important and sad topic that bring us together today. It's been on my mind for quite a while.

It used to only happen periodically. One would commit suicide, and then another one. We always believed, "It won't happen here." There are a few other communities where this has been going on for years. We should have paid attention, but we didn't.

At one time, it was older people. When the youth started, it was so unexpected. The first one was a child. It was hard to understand. Then the next one happened. It started to become really difficult, a problem that didn't seem to have any solutions.

As first responders, people came to see us after the first one. Then, after a while, they stopped. Nobody came to show their support. Nobody wanted to be part of it. We kind of felt it was our problem. We all got caught off guard. This wasn't supposed to happen.

When we started responding to calls, it was usually alcohol-related. It was easy to understand.

Then this one boy did it. You think that a child doesn't know how to do it, isn't capable of it. It's hard for us because they're still a child, a child taking their own life. It makes it harder for us to understand it. We were unprepared. Maybe we can't, so we stop trying to understand it. We think we're just going to do this and go home. We went into shock and became robots for a while.

One of first things we're trained to look at is the condition of the home, whether there was drinking. And we noticed that his home was really neat and tidy. The cupboards were full. There was food in the house. The body was there, but it wasn't the usual. We felt comfortable in this home. It felt like a good home. There was a laptop. We weren't used to this. It wasn't the usual cluttered home from alcohol. I began to ask myself, "Am I being too insensitive?"

So that's when we began to see a difference in the kids. As the deaths went on, the homes were not a factor. They were coming from good homes. It became really scary. We became frightened, afraid to answer the next call. It became harder to understand.

It came to a point where we prepared for it. We came home and took turns appointing each other as the lead for the next one.

My kids used to ask me where my work took me. All of a sudden, our community became known as a place where we were only responding to suicide. The more it happened, the more it raised a lot of questions outside of the community. They asked repeatedly. And then people stopped asking.

We've been dealing with this now for a long time. We get a call for a suicide attempt at least once a day in one of our communities. Today, we had two calls already. It makes you afraid. It makes you wonder what is going on. Is the ball in our court? Everyone in the community feels it. It makes you want to pray that it's over, but we know it isn't.

It's become almost routine. We sober them up and take them to the clinic, and they send them home five minutes later. They treat them too lightly. Even us, the first responders, have almost come to treat it as routine. "Here we go again." When will the next one be? We don't want this to be a routine.

Most of the time now, the ones who take their lives weren't drinking. Also, they leave messages on social media. Most of the calls we get are tips from worried friends reporting their friends' posts. This has saved lives.

We have an arena that was supposed to be for the youth, but it's never used because of the cost of running it. Even the youth centre has been turned into offices. We've tried to give as much as we can to the youth, but they don't use the facilities. Tonight, when this inquiry is happening, something really important, there's a dance in the community.

Too often we hear at funerals, "They're in a better place." What's the message when youth hear these words? You begin to wonder. You begin to question yourself. Are we going in the right direction? Because the ball is also in our court. We need our youth to know that the better place is with their family.

Some of these kids just went and did it. There was no warning. They were sober. It's frustrating when you draw blanks, and when the youth don't show up to events such as this. They know what we know. They know this is going on. Maybe one or two have tried it before, but don't want to talk about it. The ones who succeeded, they're the ones

who just did it.

In many of the families today, there's no parenting. A lot of parents have let their kids do whatever they want, and the kids are out late at night.

It's only recently that responders have had a support group. Police are stubborn. They find ways to park their emotions, to put them out of their mind. There's also an ego thing – officers are supposed to be tough. They keep an eye on each other, check in on each other. One or two officers have committed suicide. Police are offered the support, but most times they say no.

Most days, we're just waiting for the next call. I really appreciate that this inquiry's happening. And I hope it will help our people.



## **20. When People Started Talking, It Gave Me Strength**

I never heard of suicide when I was a young boy. Now, as an elder, I think, “Where did suicide come from?” As a survivor of residential school, I know that we carry issues. There’s so much that we experienced, so much trauma, and we pass it on to the young people. When I attended a residential school gathering, an elder told me that I was troubled. He told me to be strong and not to let them win.

I had thoughts of suicide when I grew up. Even yesterday I had them. People see me as a happy and outgoing person - and yet I struggle with suicide. Every time this happens, I can’t help but think of the young people. It’s so hard to think of the way people can treat each other, how they can treat young people. When I think about my grandchildren, that’s what gives me the strength to carry on.

The supervisors in residential school inflicted so much pain on students. Fort George wasn’t as bad as Fort Albany. The school in Fort Albany was absolutely hell. There was so much sexual abuse. There were two sections in the dormitory. I woke up one night and saw a worker waking someone up, and taking that little boy to her room. He was gone for a long time. Over the years I figured out what was going on. Our people entrusted them to educate us and give us the good life. But I saw things done. I didn’t talk about it for a long time. We weren’t treated very well. It’s no wonder so people drank and were abusive. There was a lot of sexual abuse in residential school, but nobody wanted to talk about it. It’s only in the last 10-15 years that people started to talk about it. When people started talking, it gave me strength. It helped to get more people talking about it. I tried to talk to my parents, the adults from the any denomination, the old generation. I tried to tell my dad, but he told me not to talk about religious people like that. We should be able to talk about all these things. We need to fight back, have a better understanding.

Suicide is not the solution to a long-term problem. The experience of sexual abuse doesn’t go away. It’s there. It never leaves you. I personally experienced it. When they compensate us with money, money can’t repair the damage of sexual abuse. It’s nice to have money, but the damage from residential school will always be there.

The Truth and Reconciliation hearings don’t have a full grasp of what happened, especially the legal counsel. They assume that we were taken care of. They were shocked to hear the stories. I talked to a lawyer about my issues, and she was in tears.

There were quite a few who attended residential school by choice, but some were forced to go there.

The memories are still vivid today. I remember the train being full of kids going to residential school. When the train stopped, we went into the bush to hide, but we peeked out and saw a lot of kids. It was a special train, just for rounding up children. In Moosonee they gathered us and put us on the mission boat.

People wonder why suicide happens. It's the experience of residential school that caused people to lead hopeless lives. As adults there was structure to life, no self-discipline to handle money.

We have a lot of young people with lots of drinking. I shared my story with the young people, how residential school made me a drunk, an abusive person. Someone asked me, "Do you want to talk about residential school?" "Sure," I said. One time I got mad at a speaker who said, "Residential school was the best thing that happened." I put my hand up, but she ignored me. So I stood up and asked her, "Did you go to residential school?" "No," she said. So I told them. It was hard to talk about it. Memories of the trauma can be easily triggered, especially when ignorant people make public statements, like residential school being a good thing. These kind of people have no idea of the damage they cause when they talk about something they don't know about. My friends came and apologized for this person's ignorance.

Where do we go from here? What will happen after this inquiry? I don't know how much difference it will make. How will we implement all the recommendations? How do we make them into an action plan?

Some people say they understand residential school. When I talk about residential school, I understand. But do you understand?

I vowed that I would never treat a kid the way I saw kids being treated there. When I spoke Cree there, I got slapped across the mouth. We lost a lot. They took away a lot from us. We were given a number, not a name. Then, when we went home and they called us by name, we didn't answer. I couldn't remember my name. We still remember the number we were given.

So let me ask again, how do we solve it? It's going to take a long time. We need to be strong and work together. We need to help one another and not be afraid to talk.

## **21. We Need to Walk the Talk**

I was in living in the south when the suicide pandemic happened. I felt the grief, even though I was away. I stop counting at 14. My uncle died and my great grandfather died of suicide. There's too much silence about things like addiction and abuse. It affects our lives, especially our children. There's so much violence in our community, and we accept it as normal, but it isn't. So much anger comes from the historical trauma in our relationship of our people with the government of Canada. We need to learn the true history of our people. Most of our people don't know how colonialism impacted us and created anger in us. It can empower people once they understand where we have been. The lack of historical awareness is the biggest contributing factor in our people's suffering and demise. Suicide is a symptom of bigger issues.

I used to want to hurt myself. There is too much violence and sexual abuse. We need to understand what happened to our people, and stop blaming each other, putting people down. What's missing is our true identity. It's our responsibility to educate. Forgiveness is huge. We need to start talking about it. It's not good to feel like we are alone. Our community is fortunate but our people don't see it. They don't see it because they are hurting. Once I understood where the hurt comes from, I stopped blaming.

It is our inherent right to know who we are, not to sit around and wait. This knowledge that is ours is slipping away. Our people experience trauma after trauma. If we don't deal with it, it festers.

We live in a system of distrust. The Indian Act created divisions. I am optimistic that things will change. We need to focus on our young people. My own son was harming himself - as a parent that's hard to hear. We need to start forgiving, we need to honour our kids.

We have more children in care than ever before. We need to bring back spirituality, or whatever it is. We need to stop bashing each other, stop the lateral violence.

I brought my baby back home to learn about his identity. The land-based program is good, it instills a sense of pride. As adults we need to walk the talk. We are taught to be silent, but we need to feel the gifts from the Creator. We give these gifts to the children.

We need to disconnect our kids from technology and reconnect them to the land, give them a sense of who they are. We need to teach them to walk in both worlds. The media portrays too much negativity and stereotypes. We need to honour our youth to avoid the pandemic again. We need to help them reconnect, and find their identity. This will help them understand the meaning of the world.

Thank you for listening.

## **22. Sharing Circles Would Be Good**

I lost my brother to suicide. I miss him very much and I wonder why he did it.

I had the same feelings when I was a teenager, but my mother talked to me about it. After my brother's suicide, I had no one to talk to. I didn't speak to anyone. I still have thoughts of doing it, but then I think of my children.

This is the first time I've spoken about this in public. There was a grief session, but I didn't attend.

I'm not too sure what to say. I lost another sibling to natural causes. I knew others who took their lives. It would be nice to continue this type of meeting. Sharing circles would be good. Perhaps that is all I can say for now.

I was aware that other people would be here. I feel okay with this process, being listened to. I've never done this type of thing before.

### **23. We Need To Walk A Good Path**

I had a nephew who committed suicide, and I always think about him. We should make resources available for those who are suffering.

The legacy of residential school continues to linger and it infects local politics. I see this in our community.

I am inspired by the other speakers. We need to overcome our own insecurities. We need to walk a good path. The youth look to us as role models.

When I think back, my strength came from the elders who shared their knowledge with me.

We can't blame the government all the time. You can live on \$500 per month if you don't gamble. If you learn how to grow food, save money, budget.

There is a deep disconnection from the land and this affects our identity. We need to protect our land, our water. We need to avoid corporate greed.

## 24. It Can Take Up to Seven Years

Dr. Joe Jolly told the Inquiry that there are two kinds of grief – normal grief, and traumatic grief. With traumatic grief, like suicide, the grieving process is complicated. It can take up to seven years.

There's no way to rush the grieving process. We can't expect people to just let go of their grief.

It's really hard on the survivors of suicide. The immediate family feels the stigma of suicide - even though they are not to blame. It was that individual's decision.

The only cure for grief ... is grieving. We have to go through the grieving process. It's important to understand the grieving process.

We have to be sensitive to the grieving survivor. Anger, shock, depression and guilt are all symptoms of grieving. We have to learn how to grieve so that it doesn't impact our overall health and wellbeing.

You have to accept our loss from suicide as soon as you can. Failing to deal with grief can be very detrimental to your health. It's good to join a group with others who are grieving.

We must be determined to live again. People have to start putting the stars back in the sky.

Meegwetch for listening.

Joe and his wife Sheila grew up in Moose Factory. They have written books about grief, from both biblical and Cree perspectives:

Going and Growing Through Grief: Understanding the Grieving Process.

and

My Grief Journey from Mourning to Dancing: How I Recovered from Multiple Losses.

## **25. We Need To Have This Dialogue**

I want to thank the commissioners. Your work is important. I often think about this and I know how heavy the burden can be, how devastating it is to lose someone from suicide.

It's very hard to address the topic of suicide. Everyone is involved – elders, youth, adults and children. I've been working in this field for several years, and I feel honoured to have been able to do so. It must have been the Creator's wish for me.

I want to share my story. I lost a son to suicide.

When I heard the news, I was truly devastated. I didn't know how to react. I didn't know what was happening. I was in shock. I was numb.

I held on to my religious beliefs, acknowledging the Creator, maintaining my composure and my own mental health. This is how I was taught by my parents – to expect the unexpected. This is what helped me to pull through.

It was hard when evening came. I drove to the outskirts of town to be alone. To mourn and to grieve. To cry. To pray, asking for support and strength. Dusk settled as I prayed, and I watched the stars appear. I felt a sense of comfort, and I regained my balance as I watched the stars, thinking that my son was one of the stars blinking at me, understanding that my son was on the other side of life. I thought to myself, as I looked at the stars, "I hope he's happy." It was a soothing feeling that enveloped my whole being, just thinking of him up there. It brought me great comfort and I came back to the community feeling stronger, in a happier mood.

But it's hard each time I witness others going through the same thing. Some people who share this experience come to offer me their support. Others blame me for my son taking his life, for starting the epidemic in our community. When this happens, I say my prayers. I hold my anger and grief, and I pray for them. "Yes," I say, "I hear you. I accept your words." I let the person know that I pray for them. I also tell them that perhaps they don't fully comprehend their actions and words in their time of grief.

I acknowledge my own failure at not being able to fully care for my son. I give thanks to the woman who helped me realize that I need to acknowledge and recognize my failures.



We need to be open, and begin to take ownership of our shortcomings. We need to use our strengths, to rely on ourselves, and not the toxins we use to mask our pain. This is our work, that we need to do on our own. We know that alcohol and drugs don't help us. We mustn't look for solutions through drugs or alcohol. We mustn't give up on life or trying to express our feelings.

We need to support one another. We need to have this dialogue, talking with one another and sharing. We need to release the pain we have suppressed, and find the healing path.

It's much better to support one another, rather than put down or ridicule one another in our grief. We're given a soul so we can feel emotions. We're all the same. We need to embrace one another, to remind ourselves that God gave us gifts. We shouldn't be caught up in our own jealousies.

When I attend events, I'm trying to help. We may be afraid to share because of shame and low self-esteem, but we need to get past this.

Elders play a role, and their teachings are helpful. I'm happy when I'm with our elders. But sometimes our elders put down the youth. We need to sit together.

At least we have The Seven Grandfather teachings as a start, but we need more. There should be more gatherings like powwows and feasts. People are happy when they get together.

People are leery about coming to this public inquiry. I know many who are suffering, and reluctant to come out, because of the put downs and lack of respect. The elders say we would always give thanks to the Creator. This is lacking today – the teachings of the elders about life, love and respect. I see signs of hope in our community, the dwellings erected for our youth, the gatherings at our old site, the drumming. These gatherings will heal us.

Perhaps the commissioners should visit the reluctant ones in the privacy of their homes. It would be a good idea also to invite people to a pot luck, to share some of these thoughts and ideas about how to begin talking about suicide.

These are my thoughts about suicide. Thank you.

## **26. I'll Share This, Hoping It Will Leave Me**

I'm very emotional today. I'll try my best. I'll talk about residential school. My parents sent me there.

There were a lot of good things. We learned to read in Cree. We learned about the Bible. These were the good things.

What I'm going to talk about - it came back to me, especially since I lost my husband. I'll share this, hoping it will leave me.

One day the nun took a couple of girls out, to get things from a storage room. We saw three brothers who worked for the mission. Suddenly one of the brothers began fondling himself in front of us. All we could do was yell out in fear. The other girl and I had never seen this before, not at home when we were looked after by our parents. We didn't want to talk about it. We took off from the building and ran toward the residence. When we yelled out, the nun asked us what was wrong, why we were screaming. We didn't say anything to her. We couldn't explain it to her. So the nun punished us: no supper and no outdoor activities.

The next morning, we went to go eat in the cafeteria. I witnessed things happening there. When I think about it, it hurts me. I have my own grandchildren today. When they come to my house to eat, the memories come back to me, about when I was in residential school, and I recall what happened when children were denied proper care and food.

One morning, when we were eating in the cafeteria, my friend couldn't eat. She was only a little girl. When she tried to eat, she threw up her porridge into her bowl. The nun came over and told her to eat her porridge. She stuck my friend's face into the bowl and made her eat it. She forced her. This is the saddest memory of my life for me. It still haunts me today.

My grandchildren love porridge. When I feed them porridge, I can't help but remember that dreadful morning back at the school. I picture this little girl and what the nun did to her. It reminds me, each time I make porridge. My grandchildren don't know that I'm trying not to think about this. Sometimes they see me in tears, and they ask me what's wrong. I make up a story, not telling them what's really bothering me. These

things still come back to me, no matter how hard I try to forget.

There were other, worse events that happened to our friends at school, when we there. This caused me to be insecure in life. There are other stories, but I will leave it there.

I lived with my parents until the age of 20. They were living off the land in the old days. We learned everything from our parents, and we kept their teachings. They showed us how to be safe, how to protect the environment, how to pray. At our camp, we were the guardians for that area. We only took what we needed.

When it was time to return to school, I ran off. I was determined not to go back. I cried and said, "No. I don't want to go back." My dad understood and he agreed, but my sisters had to go. My experience always comes back to hit me, although I try not to think about it. I never spoke about this before. This is the first time. Perhaps this is why I am emotional. I tried to share, and maybe here is good place to share what has transpired over my life. I will stop talking about that for now.

I got married. We had a good marriage, a good family. When my children reached their teenage years, that's when the problems started. The use of alcohol and substances became the way of life for our community, just as my kids were going their separate ways as adults.

Late one night a young woman phoned. I had known her since she was a girl. I thought something had happened. She said she wanted to talk to someone she trusted. I asked her what was wrong. The voice said, "It's me. You know me." I listened and the voice said, "Can you help me? I need your help." She started to cry. Again I asked her what was wrong. She said, "Someone did something to me that I can't forget." She kept on saying, "I can't forget what happened to me. I feel like committing suicide because I can't forget." As we were exchanging words, I told her not to do that to herself. "God has given you life," I told her. "You're a good girl. You did no wrong. "Whoever did that to you, he committed the wrong." I started to pray for her, and told her not to do it. As she listened, I heard her baby crying. I knew she had a baby. "Do you know something?" I told her, "that's a precious angel crying to you, telling you to stay." I tried to counsel her over the phone, and before she hung up she promised to call me back. I waited for her call.

A little while later, I saw her at an event. She came over to see me, and she had her

baby. She held me tight and she thanked me for helping her. She told me, "What I talked about, suicide, I haven't thought of it again." Her love of life had returned.

There's also another girl who I have talked with and helped. She called me, distraught as well over sexual abuse. She promised she would never think about that again. She promised to get help. "Don't worry about me," she said, "I have a responsibility to my family." She hung on after I encouraged her to live life to the fullest.

I went to the hospital for a check- up and was sent out to Kingston. I was reluctant to leave, because my husband was ill. As I flew, I prayed for my family's safekeeping. I didn't know anyone on the flight and I was feeling lonesome. As I sat there, trying to make myself comfortable, I saw something out the window, something like a flame. It came over me, enveloped me. It took over my entire body and I felt its heat inside me. I heard a voice telling me, "You're not alone. You're traveling with your brothers and sisters." After that, the flame was gone. We landed in Kingston and I stayed for three days. The doctors examined me. They said there was nothing wrong with me, nothing wrong with my heart. When I told the doctor about the flame I had seen, he said to me, "Jesus has healed you." I wanted to share that with you.

Our young people face challenges today, especially my own family members, even though we try to talk to them. There are problems with drugs and alcohol. It's a very big problem in our community. It has taken over our community. It's a problem when the parents don't buy food, when they use their money for drugs. It seems that the youth have nothing to do. They need things to do, to keep them more active.

We need to create something to keep them away from the drugs. I listened when other speakers suggested a youth camp where they go and learn. I have seen how they enjoy the bush, snaring rabbits and cutting wood. When they snare something, they are so excited. Our youth like to go out on the land. They enjoy duck hunting, learning how to prepare and take care of their kill. It's good when people take their families out on the land, they have a good time. Our elders enjoy that, as well. A trip on the land heals you. It's good for the youth to learn from the elders. It's good to mix the generations. The elders who are shut in yearn for the land.

Thank you for listening.

## **27. True Healing Lies Within Our Culture**

I attended Ste. Anne's residential school. My parents are also residential school survivors. It was after leaving residential school that I realized the intergenerational impacts in our home, even among older family members. Dysfunction was a normal state of affairs. No one ever said this isn't normal, it's not supposed to be like this. I thought it was normal to have a party in your house. I thought it was part of being aboriginal.

I am glad that I received an education, glad to have received help going forward. It was hard to pursue a higher education, hard to get away from the dysfunction. I didn't get any help from my band. There was no support for education for off-reserve members. Our communities need to support us, the ones waiting for our home communities to provide funding. I can only imagine what other youth are going through.

Support came from Quebec, where my mother is connected. Education is the key to improving our lives. I don't know what kind of education our kids are getting. The community and families need to get involved in education. It fosters wellbeing. It gives the youth hope, and a dream to change. Right now, our youth are hopeless and helpless. Education is the tool to get them focused, we need to work together to feel better.

We need to start doing things ourselves. Our dependency on government has to change. We did it a thousand years ago. We need to do something, we are losing our future. We as a people should not be afraid. We're at the bottom of the barrel and our kids are the ones who are paying for it. In the past 10-12 years, so many of our youth have taken their lives. This is a huge indicator that something isn't right. Even our leadership has been affected by residential school syndrome. Healing has to happen for our communities. There are many dedicated workers who are willing to help.

My daughter was almost sexually abused, but she was able to escape and lock herself in the washroom. I immediately called the police and a worker came over, and took a statement. We never heard from her again. My complaint went nowhere. There was no formal charge, not enough evidence. She was offered no help by the agency. We took her to the hospital, and she was seen by a doctor. She disclosed, in one session, that she wanted to take her life as a result of what happened to her. I was surprised that she had those thoughts. Luckily there was good mental health support and training. Otherwise, she wouldn't have been taken seriously.

Trauma impacts the individual differently. Depending on the age, it has a bigger impact. Trauma faced in residential school is called complex trauma. Addictions and violence are coping skills for dealing with trauma. My family learned about ceremonies. I should of done this long time ago. It brought so much healing to my family. It is an effective way of healing, of seeking your true identity as an Aboriginal. It offsets negative experiences, and offsets unhealthy coping skills.

My daughter was a victim of bullying. She was physically shoved at school. I talked to the principal, but the bullying did not stop. I had to go to the police, because my wife felt intimidated, reluctant to make a report. Cyber-bullying leads to suicide. We read about it in the news. It's no different in our communities. We need a venue where a person can go and tell their story with confidence and feel validated. We need to act upon these issues, otherwise they will fester and get worse. True healing lies within our culture, it's always been there.

We're working to integrate services within the region. I'm learning a lot, discovering our strengths, as well as what we're lacking within our communities and ourselves. Our youth are lacking spirituality. They don't know who the Creator is. The youth are looking for cultural knowledge. They want a traditional worker. We need to educate our children in the classroom about our ceremonies, so their spirituality will come naturally. Our spirituality is key to helping our youth, to bringing awareness of who we are, our identity.

My grandmother tells stories about when she was a child. She says they were so content, living in harmony with nature. She had a happy childhood. People shared and talked with one another. We need to go full circle. We have to adapt to today's life, without living too comfortable in the western lifestyle. We need to somehow balance modern living with how we lived before, the traditional lifestyle in harmony with the land. Our traditional values and worldview need to be resurrected among our people. There was a doctor who had a nice house, nice things, a good education. But he felt that he was missing something. Then he went to a sweat lodge and learned who he was.

Thank you for listening.

## 28. The Cycle Never Ended

I pray for strength to share this. My story begins in the bush, where I was living with my parents. My father brought all his children to residential school by boat. It was a long trip. All my siblings went to residential school. My father married twice, that's why we were many.

Most of my older siblings died. Two sisters died in the school hospital from pneumonia or tuberculosis. One brother ran away from school and was never seen again. Our relatives did not witness this, they only heard stories. They didn't actually see bodies or burials. It was hard for my father.

My father didn't send the youngest kids to residential school for a while, because of the deaths of these older children, but finally he consented and the Catholic missionaries came to pick us up by sailboat. All the children were crying in the hold of this boat as we sailed away. We were gone for two years.

We had hard times in the residential school. We were bullied by the other children, because our parents were so far away. During our two years we never went back home. We were told we had relatives at Fort Albany, and we visited them on Sundays. During summer break, the other kids went home. My sisters and I were stuck in Albany. We were happy when a new school year began, marking the second year, after which we would be home. After two years we finally went home.

I came back after that, not to go to school, but to work. I was expected to provide free labour force to the RC mission. They made us work hard, with no compensation. One time I was sent to Moosonee and given \$20. Then it was back to Fort Albany and working for free. We were constantly punished for minor infractions. Once, we were reprimanded for being late. The priest was hard on the children. The beatings continued. We rebelled, we flirted with the local boys and visited with them in the community. The priest heard about this and said if we didn't stop doing this he would make arrangements for us to be married. The other girls left, but I agreed to be married, just to get out of school.

After I was married, I worked in the residential school for money. I thought life would be better. I thought my life would change. But it was the opposite. I experienced a new type of abuse, domestic violence in marriage.

My husband was addicted to alcohol. He lost his mother on the trapline, when he was a baby, and his step-mother was very hard on him. He suffered great abuse at her hands. Sometimes he would run away into the bush, and wake up under a tree. When he went home afterwards, she would repeat the process all over again. This is problem with broken marriages. Sometimes the new spouse is not kind to the children.

The cycle never ended. My husband continued to abuse me. I stayed with my husband throughout our married life. I would hide from the community, hide from everyone.

It got worse as we raised our kids. I started drinking, and things got even worse. The violence increased. He was very jealous and possessive. Once he got mad, and I ran away. He caught me near some rocks and he beat my head against the rocks. Luckily one of our children intervened, took off with the knife, and he gave chase. I got away and ran to my house, very much in pain, gathered my kids and hid outside. We hid in a nearby neighbour's house until he sobered up.

I endured the violence in my marriage. I continued to work every day, raising my kids. He continued to drink. Recently, he started caring for me.

Today, in dysfunctional families, where drugs and alcohol are involved, the children are neglected and abandoned. They move into their grandparents' home, but aren't happy there, and move back with their parents. The parents fail their children. The children struggle, trying to fit in, going back and forth.

One of my grandchildren tried to commit suicide, because the parents were neglecting them, but we were lucky and they were saved. The parents eventually sought help, got sober, and established a balanced home life. They finished raising their kids, and there were no more suicide attempts.

I think the constant presence of alcohol abuse, and the unsettled atmosphere in such a home, is the root of the problem.

That's all.



## **29. We Need To Start A Movement In Our Communities**

My late grandfather said one day the youth would take their lives, and the government would start reducing the help we are given. All the things he spoke about are coming true today.

He said that we were going to be very lost with our children. This is what my grandfather told me, along with a lot of other things. With the children killing themselves, it's happening. I think he was talking about welfare being reduced, the child tax being blended in with welfare.

What I hear today is unreal, how overwhelming it is in each community. There's a lot of sexual abuse, it's so huge, and it's unreal.

We don't teach children how to deal with their pain, that's why there is suicide. The majority of us, here in this room, have gone through sexual abuse. All of my children disclosed they had been sexually abused or experienced incest. I thanked them for sharing. I told them they had to forgive the perpetrator, in order to be free of anger and resentment.

Many people live in anger, trying to suppress their pain. They become overwhelmed with pain and hurt, and don't know what to do with it. Being unable to do anything, they take their lives. It's the pain and helplessness they want to get through, and we need to understand that.

We need to start a movement in our communities, create an awareness of this problem. We are losing our children left and right. One evening my son almost took his life. Every time we lose our young people, no one wants to talk about it. Not only with suicide, but with anything. They are still in the dark. They are suffering as well, they are living with pain.

There aren't enough workers. We have workers, but they have a life after 5 pm. People need help after 5 pm.

One time I was listening to a young man who struggled for 20 years He used drugs and alcohol to numb his pain. He started to hear about residential schools and religion, and he took it the wrong way. He started to have something against religion, against

the priest. Fortunately, he didn't succeed with suicide, and he is still with us today. He said in all the conferences he went to, he never heard about forgiveness. I heard him say that forgiveness will set you free. And it's very true. It will set you free.

Living with my late husband, I was a very angry person, but I realized that he was only human. He wasn't born the way he was. He learned that behavior. He was a residential school survivor. I explained this to my children too. The main thing, I told them, is that I have you. I have my children. Whatever else happened, I told them, whatever else he did to me, your dad taught me the language. He taught me how to live out on the land, how to skin animals, what to do in the bush. I carry that with me today. Those are the positive things that I still speak about. Whatever negatives I had with him, I let them go. That young man was right – forgiveness will set you free.

People say we should do this, and we should do that. For the sake of our children and grandchildren, we need to practice what we preach.

Meegwetch for listening.

### **30. Each Community Has Its Own Perspective**

In the past, support was limited. There were no counselling services. Everyone did the best they could. If a crisis happened, like someone got killed in the mine, you would bring the body up and production would resume. The person would have to wait for the OPP to come. Or if there was a brawl in the bar, the cops came in and that was it. There was no accountability. We never heard the result of any police investigation.

Today there are services available, especially in the urban areas. It's available only if you chose to deal with it. It's no different than in the community. We call in the trauma teams, there's a crisis response. The one thing I wonder about is care for the caregivers. Our frontline workers need care. Do we just pay them and let them leave to rebuild themselves? We need to prevent burnout, so they can continue to like their job. When people are dealing with suicides constantly, we have to be sure to remember they're humans and these issues really impact them. I know money is an issue. We also need to be sensitive, as leaders, to the limits of what service providers can do.

The major issues in the community is drugs. DeBeers came in and started to produce diamonds. Then the biker gangs came to supply the drugs and recruit sellers, pushers in the community. We should banish any band members who do this. The other members have rights. The children know what's going on in the community. They know who does what. Drugs are hooked in with the suicide. We need to charge and banish the dealers until they're healthy. This plays a big role in the suicide pandemic.

Our kids need attention. Today though, everyone is too busy to do that. It makes things worse. As adults, we need to take the time.

The elders are concerned about addictions. They express their concern. They need to be good role models too. It's essential. If you say you don't drink, then don't drink. The youth need to see adults walking their talk. They see things and it makes them wonder, then trust is broken. There are so many issues in the community: drugs, alcohol, and solvent abuse. Some people don't want to take part in the inquiry. It hits too close to home.

Inquiries have been held before, but the truth seems to get left out. There needs to be full disclosure about what the issues are, and what the obstacles are that prevent full implementation of the programs our kids need.

When it comes to therapy, the question often asked is, "What are people afraid of?" Trust is lacking. People need to feel comfortable. You need to build trust first. It takes a lot of courage to seek help, if parents are products of residential school then talking is a no-no.

We need to close the gap between the leaders and the community. For example, if the youth want something, then fundraise for it, don't deny it. That breaks trust. It hurts them. There are arenas that don't get utilized as much by the youth. It's important for our youth to be assertive. Rather than accept it when the band says, "No," find ways to do things on your own.

The potential for suicide is high among those with eating disorders. It's a hard job to try and change someone's thinking - their image of themselves, how they see themselves. It's really important for our youth to have a positive self-image. When they enter into relationships, and they fail, it can be very devastating, especially in small, remote locations. As adults, we need to be cognizant and respectful of this.

As you go through the inquiry, look at the connections of the circle - the family, the community, services, leadership, and so on. Helping the community can make a difference. Respect each story.

The ways are changing, kids spend too much time with technology. How do they actually communicate with each other? Our society is advancing, but we still need to make the connection to the past. How can we do this? Back in our day, chores mattered and were appreciated. Today, our kids are caught up in games and the internet.

How will the recommendations be compiled? How will they be implemented?

This Mushkegowuk initiative is quite a feat and I admire that.

Reserve mentality affects our growth. One elder called our reserves the killing fields. Are the services available, or should we create our own? Are the recommendations going to work? Perhaps that one key word will be found. Our current living conditions on-reserve are a result of history, not our traditions.

Our traditions, our connections with our land and animals - we need to reclaim them,

not constantly interact with technology. Each family, each community has its own perspective about spirituality. We need to remember that, respect that. Some elders feel the pipe and ceremony are the work of the devil. But it's all about having choices, and it's important the people not condemn these things. Times are changing and we need to adapt.

### **31. We're Never Going To Be Okay If We Don't Talk Like This**

I'm very glad to see the commission here. I just wanted to say a little bit about suicide. Whether they're teenagers or old or a kid, we need to find solutions, ways to help these people.

I work with those who are attempt suicide. How do we help someone who is in a really chaotic situation, how do we reach that person? Who is suicidal? It seems to happen so spontaneously, so fast. Sometimes they'll talk about it, mention it. Then, by the time someone tries to reach out for help, it's too late for them.

Who do we call? Sometimes NAPS doesn't even answer when you try to call them. It's stuff like that that makes it difficult. Then there are those who don't say anything. Maybe we should get a crisis line or an outreach line or a forum like this, someone to answer those calls because someone needs help. We have toll free lines I give them that information. I tell them, call this number because they can help you.

I lost my niece to suicide, so it's a difficult topic to talk about.

How are we going to work together as a regional community? How do we work together to put that education and awareness out there?

The thing that's so prevalent in our communities, that's so hard to talk about, is sexual abuse. We spoke about this at NAN. How do we say sexual abuse in our language? This is the leading reason why we're losing so many to suicide.

Another thing is domestic violence. Children see it in the home, it has an effect on them, then when they reach a certain age they take their lives. Too many kids witness domestic violence.

Another thing is the gay people and the lesbians. They commit suicide because we don't take the time to understand them, to get to know them. Many people think it's a taboo right now.

Those three subjects ... people don't even want to discuss them.

I cry when there's a completed suicide in my community. I'm crying now. As a worker

it's hard when there's a completed suicide in my community. I can't even function at work. I don't work for a week after a suicide.

We need to talk at functions like this, we're never going to be okay if we don't talk like this. It's only going to continue and continue. We have to reach out. We have to be honest now. The kids want these issues dealt with.

We need to respect those kids too. We need to respect whether they're gay or lesbian, they get depressed too. A lot of kids see a lot of domestic violence in their homes - how do they cope? By the time they reach nine, they're going to do suicide. Underneath there's a lot of pain - in an elder, adult and young kid.

Even an elder committed suicide. It's not easy for them. All the pain they endured at residential school, all those years they didn't tell anybody.

We have to address this in our families. Our kids want us to listen. We're tired sometimes and parents just get mad, but we have to think about the kids too. I get mad too, but we have to practice. I'm trying to get good at it. I have kids in their 30s and sometimes I sit on the couch and snap at something. They say, what's wrong, why did you do that? How come you're mad? It's me that did that, not them. Sometimes I don't even know why I'm mad. I don't know even know why. I have to practice, practice, so I don't hurt my kids. When you went to residential school and all the things you have gone through, you have to practice.

I know these things. I experienced them. That's why I'm talking about them. I'm tired of lying to my family.

Mental, physical, spiritual, emotional – we have those four things in life. Those are what we have to balance out. If you don't balance those, you're chaotic. It's not balanced. It's not there.

I pray every day - when I go to bed, at work, even when I wake up at three in the morning I pray. You can do it yourself. You have to get help from your Creator.

I will end it there. Meegwetch.

### **32. The Ones Who Are Left Behind Are Left With The Suffering**

Suicide isn't openly discussed in the community, but some of my clients have talked about it. I reach out when I'm overwhelmed.

Further north, it was really hard. There were 9 or 10 attempts in a month. It was hard on my children. They lost one friend, then another.

My son-in-law's sister took her life. I had a hard time comforting him when he got back from burying his sister, and my daughter is struggling to cope. I still don't know how to comfort someone.

It's hard carrying the shame, thinking you're alone. Nobody knows why they took their life, and the ones who are left behind are left with the suffering.

On the reserve, I'm sure there are more who will think about it, but we don't always hear about it. I know that the youth question why they have been born, placed on this earth. Trust is a big issue for the youth.



### **33. It Never Used To Happen Before**

Suicide is something very recent. It never used to happen before. The way I see it, when there's a marriage break-up the children suffer the most. There's no support, and eventually they will take their lives or hurt themselves. I've thought about it many times. There's no support for these young people when they feel hurt. It's important for them to tell their story. It's like no one listens or take cares of them. It's like they're orphans.

Young people come to my house to talk about their pain and suffering. I always speak with them – also when they call me from out of town, to help them or relay a message to their families. I always try to be kind. I can't ignore them. I always try to help them out.

I used to be a band councillor. There wasn't much pay. It was more like volunteer work. We did a lot of marriage counselling, visiting people in their homes. Many times we were thanked. The leaders today should also do that.

A lot of young people are indulging in negative things. Drugs are huge in this community. Chief and council should be doing what they can to keep negative things out of our community. Some people get mad when they go through their luggage, but I told them to keep doing it. This is what they should be doing. It's their job.

It has impacts on the elders. I get frightened when there's drinking. Some people will go after the elders for money when they are drinking. If the elders don't give them money, it can lead to violence. I often think about this.

We need a spiritual awakening. One day, we will feel the wrath of the Creator if we continue to ignore the spiritual path.

A lot of the kids don't speak Cree these days. When I was in residential school, I didn't know the minister was behind me. He heard me speak Cree, and he hit me. I almost passed out. He said, I never want to hear you speak your language. When I remember this, I wonder what they were thinking. The government did a lot of harm when they took the kids to go to school. I didn't see my parents from August until June, never heard what was going on with them.

We should gather the youth periodically, do things with them and talk with them. That doesn't happen enough in our community. The elders should be advising the chief and council to meet with the young people. It would be a benefit to work together and come up with an event.

I won't stop talking until I die. I don't want to get angry. That's all I have to say for now.

### **34. We Need To Take Control As A Nation**

I'm glad to have the inquiry here today, and to make a presentation. I've attended a lot of meetings in my life. I've gone through a lot of grief as well. There's so much trauma and grief in our community. I'm grateful that I was able to go out on the land, to be close to the land, looking at God's creation. It's true what the elders say. Even the water talks to you, brings you peace of mind. Once we were strong people, and we communicated with the land.

I don't know what we need to do about suicide, but I know one thing we need to stop doing. We need to take control, instead of blaming all the time. We need to stop pointing fingers. We need to take control as a nation, like we did in the past.

The government made a public apology for residential schools, but I question its sincerity. If the government was serious, we would not be in this room, talking like this.

There are a lot of problems - infrastructure, no jobs, no housing. We are in a new era. We need to teach ourselves now. I feel sometimes that this is a struggle we have to go through, that there is a way. There has to be a way. There have been broken promises in the past. My people don't have houses, don't have a healthy way of life. There's a boil water advisory, and we're poor right now.

As a people we need to go back and reconnect ourselves with our land. I'm not saying everything from the white man is bad. There are some things we can use, but the root of the problem needs to be resolved. The foundation is right there. The land is not far, only a mile away. When I go for a walk, I feel good. I look at creation. When you have diabetes it makes you drowsy, not feeling good.

Today we need money to do anything. We used to get bannock for free. Today I need ten dollars for bannock. We accept the assimilation of our people. The foundation is out there, we just have to get it. Some say, "I don't have a snowmobile" - but I used to walk for miles.

What's our plan of action for tomorrow, for when this commission comes to a close? Our obstacle is we can't work together.

Nobody wants to do anything for free today. Too often we think of money before we do something.

As a people, we just need to do things together. The government won't help us. They forget about us when they leave. No one should have to live in a shack today. We need to do more for our community. Only then can we make a difference.

This inquiry is not the end of it. Let's cope with suicide. Let's get a healthy life.

I am afraid about what will happen when the commissioners leave this table. What will we do as a community to combat suicide? What will happen when the commission leaves? Do we have a plan? I haven't heard what our community will do. I would be happy to see a community complex. Are we going to wait another five years? I am not against the youth centre, but I prefer to have a cultural centre that includes everyone.

Thank you for listening. Meegwetch.

### **35. I Didn't Remember**

As a residential school survivor, I can say there was a lot of abuse, including sexual abuse. Even our friends abused us. This created emotional and spiritual turmoil. They told our parents and grandparents that we would receive a good education in residential school. Today our young people are suffering, trying to cope. It's the inter-generational effects and damage from sexual abuse. It's a long process.

When I went out to high school, used drugs and alcohol. One day, when they hit the drum, I woke up. That drumbeat ended four years of covering up the pain. Because of the shame and guilt, you use alcohol. You don't know what you are doing when you abuse alcohol. One morning, when I woke up from a drunken stupor, my friend told me that I had tried to kill myself. I was not even aware that I did this. I didn't remember.

Someone told a lie about my daughter. She was so embarrassed that she took pills, three days later, attempting to commit suicide. After that happened, we took her to the hospital, and we had to watch her. She was on suicide watch for 24 hours. That's how it is here.

There's a crisis response team here at the hospital – crisis response. Each team member has a cell phone. We're always called upon to get help when something happens, to keep tabs on a situation and hold debriefing sessions for those who are known to be at risk.

As leaders, we need to keep reminding our youth about the teachings of life, use the medicine wheel, use the ceremonies. They have to discover who they are. They have to wake from their sleep.

### **36. We See It, But How Do We Deal With It?**

Suicides affect the entire community, including the frontline staff, and it's really hard on the individual's family. Some people don't know where to go for support. Others won't go because the trust isn't there, or they don't know how to talk about how they feel. It's hard to work together. There aren't too many elders left, and the language is almost gone. There is no debriefing for our frontline staff when suicide happens, and then it's done. There's so much alcohol and drug abuse - we see it, but how do we deal with it?

How do we provide programs and services in a small community? There isn't very much money. We don't have enough resources to confront the everyday challenges, let alone a crisis like suicide. I suppose the issues are the same, no matter what size the community is.

Everything stems from residential school. The intergenerational effects impact you, even if you didn't attend. My parents went to residential school, but they never talked about it. We need to deal with it. Everyone has a spirit. Everyone needs an identity. If we don't have an identity, we don't have anything. Some of us are lucky to still speak the language. We need to work with our young people.

### **37. We Need to Walk in Balance**

I grew up in foster care. My parents were alcoholics. My mom had mental health issues. There was sexual abuse within the family, and outside of the family. Back then, we didn't talk about it. We didn't trust. We didn't feel. As a result, parents didn't care. There was lots of anger. I had to go to court when I was in foster care. In court, they didn't talk about the process. I had my first drink in foster care. This was in a group home. I was taken from the group home to foster a home where I wasn't treated well. This was the '60s scoop. Growing up was confusing.

My grandfather was my best friend. He taught me traditional skills like fishing, setting nets. I worked with my hands in a good way. These are the roots I hung on to. I learned a lot from him.

People who cared for me encouraged me to change my life, but first I had to hit rock bottom.

I didn't grow up in a community. The other kids teased me. My father even made fun of me. There was a lack of communication, not a solid relationship with my family. There was a lot of learning to go through, once I decided to walk a good life. I had to learn to forgive. I had to learn to ask for help. It was scary to ask for help. It's not easy to ask strangers for help.

An elder told me to be patient. I had to learn who I was, even though it was painful. I had to understand that I didn't deserve the life I was given – but I deserved life.

I felt undeserving. I was too harsh on myself. I didn't love myself. I had to learn to forgive, and love, to trust, to talk. I had to learn it was okay to cry. I was told to just get over it, even though my mother took her life. I didn't know what to do with my feelings, so I harmed myself. But I've learned from my mistakes. I don't punish myself for them any more.

Since I changed my life, a lot of good things have happened to me. I have a good husband. We have a daughter. I want to share my gifts, talk to my children.

We need to create a community for our youth. Some of the things they identified are: No bullying. Accept me for who I am. No judging me. Confidentially. Love me.

Respect me. Help me. Walk with me.

We have to be honest with the youth. They yearn for a healthier community. We need to sit down and talk, without finger pointing. We need to take responsibility. We need to walk in balance today, walk in tradition. Learning from our past is empowering. We need to respect individuals, understand that it's okay to have different beliefs. We need to accept one another.

Thank you, that's all I have to share.



### **38. I Am What I Am**

I was in trouble with the law, addicted to alcohol and drugs. It all built up. Once I was on an eight-day drunk. I drank and drank, didn't know what was happening, felt the turmoil in my life. I started getting chest pains, and cried out for help. An ambulance took me to the hospital. I sort of came to my senses. It was like something came, something was with me, telling me there was still hope for me to do something with my life. I had hope to make a change in my life. I remember the exact date. That was the start of my journey, and I'm still on my journey today. It will take the rest of my life to make amends.

I went to treatment centres, detox centres to help myself. I went there on my own. I used to laugh at them, because I thought they were crazy - but I was the crazy one. I found a lot of answers. I'm so thankful for it. At AA meetings I had a hard time with people in authority, telling me how to run my life. I went through it for a year, then I couldn't handle it anymore.

Then I met a guy who took me to a sweat lodge and that's where my journey really began. I watched a video on residential school. I watched it straight through. I watched it and felt released from all my pain and suffering. My friend told me, I could have shown this to you the year after you sobered up, but you weren't strong enough. You needed five years to become strong enough to watch it, he told me, to feel the turmoil.

It gave me a better understanding of what people feel when they commit suicide. I know what it's like. I share that with people now. I don't have to be afraid any more. I share with professional people, anyone who's willing to listen. I know I'm doing something with myself. That's how I learned about suicide. I wanted a short way out. I wanted to find a way to ease the pain - with drugs and alcohol.

Today, I don't even smoke. I'm on medication. I have medication that I use to help myself - but I also use traditional medicine. I have to be strong to listen to people. I try to let them know that I understand what it feels like.

That's what transpired in my life. I've been through it. I still go through it, something pops up when somebody says something. I get attuned with myself, I know anything can trigger it. Nobody knows when it's going to happen, but you can help yourself.

I didn't do it alone. I thought, nobody's going to help me. But that didn't work. I surround myself with people every day. I love being out in the bush. I go out on my ATV. I am not afraid out there. Nothing's going to hurt me.

I'm learning about my emotions. I'm still a young man, emotionally. That's how I feel since I turned my life around. I share with people. I quit doing it the other way. Now I do it the Creator's way, or whatever you believe in. Everybody has to believe in something. I talk to my Creator throughout the day, thanking him for all the blessings that have come into my life.

I have a lot of respect for other people when they share. If you give respect, it will come back, if you share things honestly and truthfully. That's why I have the drum sitting here. I made my mind up over 20 years ago. I know now to deal with it. I'm not afraid to ask for help. I'm willing to ask for help to help me be strong.

A lot of young people come and talk with me. I tell them stories and talk about how to make a change in their lives. They say I'm a storyteller. They say I'm an elder. I am what I am.

I have sense of humour today, if I didn't have a sense of humor, I don't know where I would be today. We were like that a long, long, long time ago. I remember those old stories, living of the land. We all lived in one house, with aunties and uncles, and we knew what to do. If we needed wood or water, somebody got it. It was a good life. There was always something to do. I'm used to that life. It takes me back to when I was free.

I have the will to live today. I didn't have it before, when I was younger, but now it's come back. I want to go as far as I can. I want to share with old people, young people, with anyone who wants to listen. I learned a lot of things, to find balance, to help myself, to find other people.

I speak the universal language. The trees have it, the fires, the animals, the earth has it. That is the universal language. We all have it. It keeps us strong, keeps us together. Everything I have today is a spiritual feeling.

I know about the pandemic. It's not only with native people. It's moving very fast. We have to learn to educate people, get ideas from one another. We're all human beings.

We have to learn to accept another - if they're gay, they're gay. We need to learn to accept them all. It's their choice how they want to live.

There's a lot of things. I'm still learning. I don't know everything. I need to know what I will do for today. I live on a daily basis. What the future holds, I don't know I hope it just gets better. It won't happen overnight. There's a lot of work to be done in learning about the pandemic of suicide. Lots of work to be done with the young men, young women. We need to get them a better life, a better education. There's good teachings out there.

It's normal. There is no "perfect." I made mistakes. I paid for those mistakes. I have a will to help. If I helped you today, I thank you. I'm glad to share my knowledge and wisdom. I thank you for listening.

### **39. She Just Needed To Someone To Talk To**

I had a friend who committed suicide in high school. We had a grieving ceremony. It was the only suicide that personally affected me.

I've had clients who had thoughts of suicide. There are a lot of trust issues, not only with mainstream but within our own communities. At AA meetings, confidentiality is not respected. They go to a meeting and then their story is shared in the community. They don't know who to trust.

One of my clients lost her father. She got very drunk and she walked out onto the street, wanting a car to hit her. They picked her up, kept her under observation. They brought her to the hospital. She felt she didn't need that service. She just needed to someone to talk to.

Perhaps we need a specially-designed home, open 24 hours a day, with staff trained in crisis intervention. A place where people can go to feel safe, just to get over their period of crisis. Not everyone needs the hospital. There's traditional teaching. My client doesn't like going to the hospital. She's afraid of getting shipped out. She just wants to debrief. She needs a traditional worker on staff, not a crisis worker who wants to lock you up.

Setting up grandfather/grandmother committees would be helpful - some youth don't have grandparents. Clients don't want to go an institution where they just stare, and don't give you feedback. It's too adversarial. Institutions need First Nation healers with the knowledge to complement medical services. That would encourage people to reach out even more. Within the school system, there should be sensitivity training for all the staff – about smudging before school, for example. A student used smudging before school and it was misunderstood. They thought he'd been smoking up. That could have been prevented, if there had been education in the school about First Nation traditions.

## 40. Our People Pull Together During Hardship

I know how it feels to experience suicide in your family. I can speak to that in emotion, feeling, spirit. My brother committed suicide. It was a difficult time. I was out of the community. I prayed and I got a lot of support. My family pulled me through.

And when he took his own life, I don't believe that it was God who took his life, the life that he was meant to live. The Creator is a kind Creator. I firmly believe that God won't turn anyone away, that he'll have a place for my brother. I was told that if you commit suicide at the age of 34 years old and you were supposed to live until you were 78, you will meet the Creator when you would have at the age of 78.

We had a rough life, when I was young. We lived up the river. We lived off the land. I learned to hunt and fish and cut wood. It was a beautiful life. I didn't worry about the cable bill. I still go up there. It's changed somewhat but it's still the same.

I remember running next door to get flour and sugar. And it was the sharing. We're still surviving through sharing. The problems are there, they're bigger now. With the incidents here, we have to stand up and make sure our children have a beautiful life with water, air and fire. It's difficult to survive suicide but our people pull together during hardship.

I went to residential school. The government trying to do away us through their assimilation policy. Today it's still going on.

The youth have lost their way. Our traditional way is a good way to live. Both ways are good. As difficult as life can be, there are answers. We need to recognize the symptoms when they struggle in life, need to look at things holistically. We need to educate our helpers, we need to educate the spirit too.

They scared us with their ways, called us pagans or heathens. They tried to give us something we already had.

My son has taught me about love. It's coming back to me now. We have to love one another, help one another. It took me a long time to hug my brother, but we need to do that more often. It's about coming back as a community. Our community uses a lot of drugs and alcohol.

I didn't know how to set a net, but I learned. I built my own home. I didn't want to be a burden to the band. I didn't want to get blinded by greed and money. I saw my parents not being able to afford anything, being on a fixed income. I didn't want to be like that when I get old. I'm proud to say that I use a wood stove. Today, the stove was lit at home. It brought back memories of home, the warmth we felt. That's what I want to bring back and keep.

## 41. My World Was Blown Apart

My mother took her life. It feels like yesterday. I sometimes wish I could turn back the clock. I wasn't raised by her. I never had the chance to call out to her, "Mom." This is never easy for me. It causes great emotional turmoil. I always wonder, "Would I be a different man today if suicide hadn't taken my mom?" It also caused great turmoil for my siblings. Suicide broke up our family. The siblings were separated, and only had rare visits. We were in homes in the south. We lost our relationship as siblings, and that continues today. We're strangers to each other. It's hard to live like this, to endure the everlasting anguish. I can't bring myself to help them. Our mother's suicide drove us further apart. I came close to taking my own life.

I didn't learn or listen to all the teachings I was given. My mother went to residential school. My father was born and raised on the trapline, and kept hidden there. He never went to residential school. Today, when I hear the stories about residential school, I know that my mother carried those scars. I know this drove her to suicide. When she took her life, there were very few support systems. There were no resources when the residential school closed. The lasting impacts of residential school were not known at that time. Slowly residential school issues surfaced, long before the resources for healing became available. I asked my father, "What happened to my mother?" He didn't have the words to answer me fully, and I finally stopped asking him.

It's been quite a while since I moved back, but it seems a short time. I often reflect on my father and my siblings, and I still carry the burden of knowing what they still carry, stuck somewhere. I'm on my healing journey, working on my personal life and family life. I find it hard to express affection. I don't understand how or when to show love. When people need intimacy, I try what I think is proper show of affection and love. I often help out in the community.

If my mother was still alive, I think I would know and appreciate love. It's your mother who instills in it in you. She taught me the meaning of love during the nine months she carried me. During that time, I would have known her feelings. But for me and my siblings, that bond with our mother was severed. I remember, one Christmas, I was with my grandfather. My grandmother had passed away. In the wee hours of the morning, I saw a skidoo coming across the river, approaching our house. It was my father, my mother and my other siblings coming to visit. This was the last time I felt love. I always remember that day, hearing them call out to me affectionately.

I don't recall other times. I know there are more memories, but they don't want to surface. I just remember that one day so vividly.

The next time I heard of my mom, I was eight years old and I was told that she was gone. My world crumpled on that day. My life fell apart. I became a bitter child. Anything I did, growing up, was negative, all the wrong things a misguided child does. My world was blown apart, debris flying everywhere. My emotions were clouded, and I latched on to different things to numb my pain. It seems like everything just stopped. I put up barriers around myself, to block everyone out.

At 17 my life changed and I started the healing process. I already shared my stories about this period in my life, and I can't bring myself to tell them again. I know I'm dealing with them.

This is how suicide impacted me, my siblings and my family life. I know it's different for each person. I also know that the impacts of suicide can fester.

Today, I feel better, knowing that support is available, that people are there when suicide happens in the community. I pray for my unborn grandchildren, hoping that they don't experience what happened to me. If it doesn't stop, at least I know my children will have supports when they need them. I want my children to know to keep life sacred. My children are growing. The oldest are teenagers. Children need to understand that when we travel, we do it for them. The demands of family and community life require us to bring home the bacon, and volunteer for civic duty. When family time is available, make it quality time, spend time with the kids, frolic with them.

We all lead different lives and I respect that. We have knowledge, skills, attitudes to making a living.

I wanted to unload. I feel better now, after sharing my story. My wife understands my turmoil. She knows I need to share and listen at gatherings such as this. I learned how to go through the healing process. It's too bad there aren't more people here today to hear my story.

I thank the Creator for giving me strength, for allowing me to walk humbly today.

Thank you.



## **42. The Dysfunction Needs To Be Reversed**

Working in crisis intervention, I'm affected by my work. I've lost friends. There's a language barrier between an elder and a young person, between a grandfather and a grandson. They can't communicate openly. They can't say what needs to be said.

The main problem is a lack of resources. We need a youth centre or a camp, a place for holding events, a facility where counsellors can work, where community members can go to receive services. There are agencies who are willing to help. If we do this together, we can make it happen. Look at what Reg Louittit did, fundraising for an arena. We can do that too for the youth.

Our youth need to build their self-esteem and confidence. They need something to get them away from the television and internet. They need to rebuild their spirituality and learn the medicine wheel teachings.

We need to help the community to heal from the intergenerational impacts of residential school. We need to do something. The dysfunction needs to be reversed. This is our community, and we need to stand together. We need the resources to build programs such as life skills, enhance self-esteem.

When the youth are grieving, they feel angry. They lose hope and faith. This is why this is happening, especially with single-parent families. If we can get resources at this youth centre, there can be activities for the youth. This can work.

### **43. There Was a Little Voice in My Head**

I have a thyroid problem. I got sick one time when I was hunting. My heart almost stopped. My snowmobile went under the ice when I was travelling on this creek. I was going to my camp to get guns and shells. I almost blacked out after I pulled out my snowmobile. I had a two-way radio. I called, but no one answered. Then someone heard me, and I just lay down until the ambulance came. Two doctors saw me, and they blamed the thyroid pills I was on. I took part of it, I had to take it, but I got sick after that. I had to ride around. I couldn't sit still. I tried to lie down in my room, but I couldn't sleep. There as something bothering me. I had a shotgun in my room, in my closet, and there was a little voice in my head telling me to end it all: "There's a shotgun in your closet."

I got up again and went for another bike ride. I rode around until I felt tired and then came home to fall asleep. I went to the doctor and told him I still wasn't feeling well. All he did was write everything down. I don't know how long it was but I finally got sent out to Kingston. I was seen by a specialist. I didn't talk to her but I did talk to a student doctor. After telling her what happened, she told her boss, who put me back on my regular prescription. I felt normal after that, 2-3 days after that. It was very frightening when they kept playing with the dosage, but it continued. Medication can really mess up your mind.

Then I saw another doctor who decreased my pills again. I got sick again after that. I wanted to commit suicide. It felt too awful, I didn't want to live. I went back to the hospital, and they put the dosage up again. The second doctor did. Then another doctor changed my pill again. He put back down, and I felt bad again. Again I felt suicidal. Then I realized the doses weren't full again. They keep changing my medications and it's not good.

The next day I went to the store. I was standing around outside. This guy came outside and said, 'It's a nice day, mister. How do you feel today?' So I told him what was going on. I didn't know I was talking to a doctor. Then he asked me to come see him, so I went, and he increased my pill again.

A lot of things go through your mind. It's like something is telling you to do it. I didn't listen to that small voice. To this day, I make sure I get the same dosage. I had to stay in the hospital. The thyroid pill they gave me in the hospital comes in a different

colour. I asked her about the dosage and she came back with a bottle of pills. The doctors never tell you when they change your dosage or change your pills.

The reason I share this with people need to know this. I know there are all kinds of spirits. There's a good spirit, God. And there are some who can destroy you. That's why you have joy when you walk with the Lord. When I was sick, I didn't think about God. I didn't think about anyone and I couldn't share how I was feeling with anyone.

The youth don't want to hear about the past. How can they learn if they don't want to listen? I know a lot of kids are unhappy and you can tell. I see teenagers hanging out and talking to each other. For three years I've tried to get a space for elders, an area with table and chairs where elders can sit around, but they won't give us a space. It could be a space where kids who are having problems can come and talk to us elders. But nobody helped me.

It's hard for kids to talk. I know this because a guy shared a story with me about what happened where he was working. He said he worked with a kid who didn't talk to anyone. So he asked that kid to help him. Then, when he became comfortable, he started to talk to him. That kid broke down and shared with him. Some kids aren't comfortable with very many people. They want someone they can feel comfortable with. You can't just tell a kid when they are doing something wrong, they get mad.

I know a lot of kids are hurting, my granddaughter tried to hang herself. That hurt me. She tried in my house and in my daughter's house. We prayed, and she was saved. Today she's happy. She had a baby. She tells me, "Grandpa I love you." She knew that we were praying for her.

I know it's bad with suicide. If you kill yourself, in the word of God, it says not to do that. Whatever God has made, it goes back into dust. The spirit leaves the body. I thank God for the people who served the Lord, but not all people do. I want to share the story about Noah. For 120 years he tried, but nobody listened to him. Then the water came. Noah had to close the door and God destroyed them because of sin.

There were these two elders who called my Bible a comic book. I've been reading the Bible for a long time, maybe 30 years. It gives me encouragement. We need to watch what's going on, in our homes, with doctors, and watch our kids.

We'll continue to help, even though finances can be hard, especially for elders. The youth need to understand this. I always say to myself, why didn't I save money? I see people buying drugs and spending money foolishly when they should be saving.

I learned to hunt with my parents. We were always doing something. There was no community here, a long time ago. We needed to keep busy. We spent a lot of time outdoors in those days, not like today when people just watch television.

I hope, one day, that nobody commits suicide. I know it's hard when you lose someone you love.

I lost my son due to drinking and liver problems. He got sick and never woke up. The doctor said, if he doesn't wake in 72 hours, there is nothing we can do for him. We prayed hard. And in 72 hours, he opened his eyes. He came back home, but then he started to drink again. I tried to talk to him to stop, but he wouldn't listen. He went to Kingston again and they told him that his liver was gone. My wife and I went to Kingston. We got lost. We were supposed to be there at 7:30, but we got lost. Even though we had a GPS, we were lost for two hours. But God waited for his mother, sisters, brothers and nieces to be in the room with my son. We had 15 minutes with him, then my son died. Before my son died, he cried and apologized. He was crying. He said, "I'm sorry, Mom". He accepted the Lord, and I knew his soul was gone to Heaven. We rejoiced knowing that he had left the world. The Old Testament warns of calamities once the flock begins to lose sight of the teachings.

That's enough. That is all I have to say. Meegwetch.

#### **44. Do They Go to Heaven?**

This inquiry reminds me of a meeting I went to one time. The master of ceremonies said he dreamed he was a muffler. He said he felt exhausted. (humour)

I've counselled a lot of people who've lost a loved one to suicide. I always hear the question, "Do they go to Heaven?" Sometimes Christians will say things from the pulpit that can hurt people. For example, many are taught that when a person dies by suicide, they don't go to heaven.

If the person is genuinely saved, I believe they do go to Heaven.

It's very important that survivors of suicide are provided with words of hope.

Some will agree with me, and some won't.

I believe that if you're genuine believer, you will go to heaven. If you aren't, you won't.

There are other Christians who have a different belief about this question.

I'm not saying that it's okay to commit suicide. I'm saying that you must have faith to go to Heaven.

## **45. Whatever's Going On In The Family Will Affect Them**

I learned that when people are talking suicide, about harming themselves, we have a responsibility to report it. That's hard to do. It's also hard to find support, either through mental health or the hospital. There's a gap in service for our youth. It's also tough referring kids to our social service agencies.

When I was younger, I went through a lot of emotional turmoil. I witnessed a lot of family violence and I even attempted suicide. I was so confused. I felt so much pain and I didn't know how to deal with it. I had no one to talk to in my teens. When I didn't find help, I turned to alcohol and drugs. I didn't stay too long in this way of life. I kept looking for something and I found it in my culture, following the traditional path. I found a lot of healing for myself in my culture. Even though I found a lot of healing this way, I still didn't understand depression. I felt suicidal again and I even looked at a gun. I was wondering where my help would come from and I questioned why no one was helping me. I was a mother to young children at this time.

Fortunately, I found a support person, a healer, who grounded me about life and our teachings. He taught me about the Creator and how much he loves me. I had a lot of fear about God, but he taught me that the Creator is kind. Since then, I've learned to deal with problems and face the challenges in my life, and it's been good. I've been drug-free for about 30 years, and alcohol-free for almost as long.

After my life changed, on my road to recovery, I became a counsellor to help people - to do the teachings about the culture, to work with children, the youth and families.

Suicide is so hard to deal with when it's in your family. My father committed suicide when I was very young, so I know what it's like. It left a big hole in my heart. It caused me a lot of challenges, a lot of pain growing up. It made life a very trying journey. It took a long time until I found any closure. I attempted suicide myself in my teens, and again in my thirties. It's been a long journey, but I try to help people who are dealing with suicide.

My youngest child told me, "Mom I want to kill myself." That was so scary. It really made me wonder what was troubling her. What I did with my daughter was talk to her, be honest with her. I didn't really know how to reach her. I told her how much I loved her, and how much I would miss her if she took her life. But I focused on her - I

made it about her and not about me. I wanted to know what was going on with her. She finally talked to me. It was good to have the communication, to be able to reach my child. She agreed to talk with a therapist, and I told the counsellor. "She can talk about me – anything, good or bad. There are times when I let her down, times when I wasn't a good mother."

She had dark thoughts for a year, but today my daughter is doing really well. The separation of her parents is what was bothering her. It was causing her great anxiety and sadness. So as parents, we talked to her about the separation. We told her it wasn't her fault. It wasn't her doing, it was us as parents. We told my daughter, "We love you. Even though our separation is hurting you, we're responsible for the separation and it doesn't mean that we don't love you." She's grown into a woman, and she feels good now. Communication is important to children. Whatever's going on in the family will affect them. That's why it's very important to talk with our children, let them know what's going on – that even if we're experiencing turmoil, it's not their fault. Children need to know what's going on.

Today, when I hear about suicide, it saddens me that the person had to feel like there was way out – even though I can understand. It's sad to hear when people take their own life, or when they are considering suicide. What I share with the young people is this - think about all the pain you will cause those you leave behind. It will be very hurtful.

That is all that I am going to share.

## **46. How You Are Raised Has An Impact On You, Later In Life**

My mother was accidently killed when I was eight years old. I remember the day it happened. I became an orphan that day.

After that, my siblings and I were sent to residential school. I had three younger siblings and an older brother. My little sister was just an infant when this happened. She was looked after by a nun in the nursery. We stayed there for most of our childhood. I was there for six and half years and I saw a lot, maybe more than other people have seen. When they want to abuse you, they won't do it in public. They don't want to be seen.

I learned, later in life, how to raise a family properly. I learned about nurturing, and understanding the stages of development. As I listened to my instructor, I learned how much I lost out on in residential school. How you are raised has an impact on you, later in life. If you put an animal in a cage, and you poke it every day, if you're mean to it - eventually that animal will fight back. That is what I learned about the negative experiences in my life journey. I learned the hard way about this. Hard lessons.

Now that I know better, I see all the negative things happening in my community. I think about the days when our people lived freely on our lands, back before the white man came. How healthy and strong we were, our animals were plentiful. We were strong people, we were healthy people. With all the things that we went through, we lost our strength. We lost our health when the white man came, because of the diseases that were introduced to our people.

These things still impact us today. They wanted the land all for themselves. They barely gave us anything. They wanted to strip us of our title to our land. We never had a chance to prosper from our land. The policy was to take us away.

How you raise a child will make a difference. We need to raise stronger people again, mentally and physically. If certain nutrients are missing from our body, we don't function properly. I never ate vegetables. Now I eat them. There's medicine in food. Our elders used to move with the seasons to give the land time to heal. We need move our garden, every so often, to let Mother Earth heal and have nutrients.

I heard some people criticizing doctors for prescribing drugs. Some people call them



drug dealers. They make money with prescriptions. We cannot continue to depend on pharmaceuticals. We need to use our traditional medicines.

There are people who couldn't fulfill their commitments to the Creator. The Roman Catholics priests practice celibacy, but some don't do that. They go with women or children. The United Nations just released a report on the rights of a child to be safe. The report mentions the church's history of abusing children.

I never did counselling. All I learned about was religion and church. It's going to take a lot of work.

There is no such thing as confidentiality, when you attend an event like an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting. I went to one meeting and later I heard what I said in the meeting was all over town.

I believe that God is watching us. He knows our heart. I was thinking about the people who commit suicide. If the dead could talk, we would know why they did it. We don't know why. We can only say there were situations that contributed to suicide.

We have long way to go as native people. It's going to take a long time to heal. I am personally going through an assessment in the residential school process. It's reopening the wounds again. I decided to do a declaration, to tell my stories. If someone wants to abuse you, they isolate you from the crowd and then they abuse you, without witnesses. It leaves you to fend for yourself. When I made my statement, promised to be truthful about what I experienced in residential school. It's impossible to prove, and you are labeled a liar. This is the kind of society we have built. We have to start with ourselves, each one of us.

In the Bible, Peter's name was not Peter at first. His name was Saul. He killed all the Christians. When he changed his life, he was not readily accepted. It's the same for us. When we change, people will remember our past.

We need to persuade our young people that there are good things in life. We need healthy diets.

Fetal alcohol syndrome also needs to be addressed. These children have special needs.

Thank you.

## **47. There Are A Lot Of Things We're In Denial About**

I listened to what my friend said, especially what she said about sexual abuse. I was abused from an early age, by someone who raised me. I always kept this inside. I've been carrying this throughout my life.

Sometimes we discuss things openly, but mostly we keep quiet. There are a lot of things we're in denial about.

When I was married at 18, I lost my teenager life. I didn't have that life any more. When my husband drank a bit, I didn't chase him out. I'm still with him today. When I experienced family violence, I stayed there. Two of my children were sexually abused by their dad. I couldn't do anything. My parents died when I was young.

When it comes to family violence, we need to be compassionate and tolerant. I thought about suicide. I tried to do it when my children were young, because I had problems in my marriage. I was depressed when my son left and when my grandson left. I was looked after by the doctor. I was able to cope with it one day at a time.

It takes patience to deal with mental health. Just watch, one day you'll experience it. Take it easy - you'll recover from it.

Today I feel lonely. I miss my mother. Once I got married, my life changed. I'm grateful to have my husband, despite the hard times we had. Sometimes people come to me for advice about marriage. Sometimes it's easy to give advice, but it can also be very complicated, difficult. You don't always have all the information. I have a hard time understanding, because I'm still in my marriage. I try my best to help.

It's so easy to judge people when you don't understand what they're going through.

I lost a good friend to suicide. I cried so hard. I cry today when I hear about suicide.

When I was young, I had a near-death experience. I don't know if it was a dream. I saw a vision, someone approaching me with a child on each hand. I didn't recognize them until they were close. One was a boy, one was a girl. I thought about my daughter, who lost two children to miscarriage - the first one was a girl, the second one a boy. I wonder if these were the children who she lost. Maybe it was the creator who brought

those children to me. We can't know. Only God knows everything, before we see things in the future.

I'm just talking about my own experience. We don't understand life. Sometimes life is too fast. We don't understand anybody's situation. The doctors have looked after me. My life has been difficult. I still walk and think about the future. I give my trust to God.

This is all I have to say. And if there is another inquiry I will participate in it.

## **48. I've Never Spoken About These Things**

My brother took his life when he was only a young man. It was in the fall, and we were out on the land. The police delivered the news to us. There was no one to provide support. Still today, we do not understand why he took his life. He had a good upbringing by our parents. There was no warning, no indication. We never stopped wondering why he took his life. I still grieve this loss today.

People can come and talk to the police if they have a problem. Sometimes we can help. Even though we're busy as police officers, we try to help. We did what we could, even though we had no help. People talk to me, even when I'm off-duty. There were no youth programs when I started. We used to visit the schools and speak with the youth. Many times we were lenient with them. Today there are a lot of programs, but they don't work. We don't work together, there's no cohesion, that's the problem. I'm not trying to put down the other organizations. This is just my opinion.

One of our grandchildren tried to commit suicide recently. Fortunately, we were able to intervene. As soon as we were able to speak with her, I told her she could always talk with me. Over the years, I have lost many friends, and I have learned from those experiences. I used those experiences. My grandson is grateful for my intervention.

Some experiences continue to haunt me, wishing people hadn't taken their lives. I kept to myself for too long, because nothing was in place for me. This is why I'm sharing with you, hoping it will help. I know it will help. I've lost so many friends from suicide, those who attended residential school. I tried to talk to them, when they said they couldn't continue. Even one of our former leaders suffered humiliation in residential school. This's why they abused alcohol so much. I witnessed so much as a constable. I now understand why people abused so much alcohol.

I've never spoken about these things. I give thanks to the commission for holding this inquiry. This is the first time I have spoken freely about this. I tried to speak freely once before, only to find that my words were taken out of context and shared as gossip.

When I'm out on the land, the weight is lifted and I feel free. I remember one time I saw an elder, a former chief, with tears in his eyes. He was caribou hunting. We thought maybe he'd received some bad news. "No," he said. "It's not because of bad news. It just that I don't want to go back to the community. I'd rather die here. There

are no problems or worries in the bush. Every time I go to the community, I cry.” Now I know what he means. I feel the same way today. I get tears in my eyes when I remember how he felt. It’s good to get away from here for a while. The problems will be here all the time, but it’s good to take a break sometimes. We need to go out on the land, despite our health limitations.

As a police officer, sometimes I had to take kids away. I used to wonder, at the end of my shift, how the parents felt. I know what it’s like to be taken away. I was taken away to residential school. We need to help young parents.

We need to help our young people, when they start talking about it. We need to ask questions. I did this with my granddaughter. Even though we think we don’t have problems, there are problems everywhere.

We need to talk about it. I hope this work doesn’t stop. I’m glad we had this chance to share.

## **49. The Light Will Not Be There**

I was hoping to see young people here, to hear these presentations. We need to learn from our past. We need to learn so we can teach our children, prepare them. Residential school has left deep impacts. The stories vary. It helps the person who shares a story, knowing that someone has heard it. We should have a witness program, a place where we can record and share our stories.

As a child in residential school, I became sick and vomited on my plate. I was sent upstairs and it took three days before I felt better. On the fourth day, I felt happy, and I looked forward to eating again. It was then I learned that the nun had saved my plate from four days ago. I was made to eat my own vomit.

After that, I blanked out. I could not remember anything. The abuse was unrelenting. The Hudson's Bay Company manager tricked me into moving to Montreal. I was a teenager at that time. I had no one to turn to, no one to back me up.

When I went to high school, I had a bad case of acne. The taunting almost drove me to commit suicide.

The elders helped me when they shared their life experiences. When a child is born, a parent is forever obligated to care for that child.

It's like that also in death. When you leave the physical world, there is a light that attracts you. When we grieve too much, we cause the departed one to look back, and they lose sight of the light. This can cause them to become lost.

We are given a timeframe for our life. When it's not our time, the light will not be there. If you cut your time short, the light will not be there.

When the elders are not given time to tell their stories and when children don't spend time with their elders, it causes a void in the teachings. It's only through the elders that we can learn the teachings.

Let's encourage and support one another, and embrace these new things for today and tomorrow. Let's learn from the past and put this experience into action.

Our young people need to hear and learn from our stories. Let's educate our youth about the lessons we've learned from substance abuse. Turn off the television and internet when they visit. Make your home inviting. Make them feel welcome.

Thank you.

## **50. Alcohol Had Devastating Effects On Our Families**

I heard about the meeting and thought I would come to show my support. Then, when I heard the other speakers, and I wanted to say something to help other people. I'm a mother. My family spilt up two years ago and I'm going through a personal crisis. I have my daughters and the boys are with their father. It's hard to be strong when you're being attacked. It's hard to find support when no one is there. My daughter doesn't feel good about who she is, because she was put down just like I was. I'm trying to deal with the separation and not having my boys, and the kids not understanding why, not knowing what's going on. If the family structure lacks a leader or parent, the home falls apart. Separation has put our family into a vulnerable state.

In my home I felt attacked by my husband, even though I'm educated. It was a daily thing with him. I became depressed. I can understand what the other speaker meant when he said, "No one was there for them."

The commission is opening old scars, shining light on dark parts of our past that we have been silent about. I don't live on the reserve. I grew up in town. Alcohol was in our home. It was full of alcohol abuse, and we ended up going from home to home. My parents are the product of residential school, and didn't know the importance of family. When you live off-reserve, you don't have enough contact with extended family. With a reserve, you have that sense of having your relations around, a feeling of unity. Without a reserve, it's hard to keep the family together. There aren't enough people to help the children cope.

We may not be that far up north, but we are still a community. We know each other. Because we don't have that permanent home or community, some of us struggle. There's a struggle when you don't have a place, a community to raise your children in.

The drinking impacts the children. Once they're in it, it's hard to have a conversation with them. How do we be there for someone who hates their life?

Traditional methods are what helped me along my journey of self-help. The prayers and medicines helped me. That's what gave me the strength to let my boys go, without being overwhelmed by the negativity. When you're raised in town, you don't want to tell anyone, you don't want to be a burden. The worst impact of not having a community is not having support, no one to care for you. It effects your self-worth.



How do you move forward when your self-worth is being attacked? We need to look at the children's family, the effects of drinking or separation. What is life like for them? Alcohol played a factor. It was always the alcohol, it's part of our childhood memories. Alcohol had devastating effects on our families. Today it's the drugs in the home.

You don't put someone down just because of the alcohol. Some people do that to each other, judge them. One person said the happiest times were when she was with her mother, when they were together. It didn't matter that she was addicted to alcohol. It was those memories of cherished moments, feeling the love and compassion. You can still be a good person even, if you're struggling. It's not having that love that's a big factor. We need a leader in the home, if you don't have that, children will struggle.

## **51. I Don't Know What To Do**

After my daughter's close friend committed suicide, she took part in a grief recovery program. She wrote a letter to the community, suggesting recreational activities for the youth who have nothing to do.

A few months later, she became discouraged when nothing happened. During the past year, she struggled with depression. I looked for help everywhere. My daughter went from writing a great letter to sleeping all day and not wanting to eat or bathe. I've tried to talk to my her, but she refuses. She refuses to build a relationship with any counsellors. She started to sneak out to be with her friends, saying they understand her better. She wants to be with them, but all they do is dwell on problems.

She walked out of class. She started saying that she would be better off dead. It was a constant struggle to get her to eat, sleep, get out of bed. She went a week without any sleep. I had to force her to shower, get mad at her to eat. I felt like she was giving up. I felt like she was not getting the help she needed.

I found a letter she had written, apologizing for being negative. She said she focused on the negative stuff because she felt she was always being put down. She stated that she would be better off dead, that we would have a better life without her. She said she had never been allowed the chance to prove herself. She talked about the friend she lost, how close they were. She told her mom to start over again with her baby sister,

saying life would be better without her. She wrote about being tired of grieving, feeling misunderstood and hopelessness.

My daughter got a medevac to Timmins, where they pumped her full of drugs. She wrote about her feelings. Upon discharge they had a videoconference, developed a safety plan, and arranged family counselling. She was supposed to have follow-up care, but this hasn't happened. Hospitals are not equipped to deal with mental and emotional distress. The counselling sessions are limited.

After her release, my daughter started visiting a Facebook site. I found the content on this site extremely upsetting. There was name calling, using words like "whore," "dirty ho'," "f\*\*\* you," "hope you kill yourself," "fat ass b\*\*\*" and "slut." This was an open site on bullying where they were uttering threats and using explicit language. Over a couple of months there were over a thousand comments. People kept telling her, over and over, "I hope you kill yourself." There were sexually explicit questions. My daughter is barely a teenager. The police said they couldn't do anything. I made her deactivate her account, but since then I found out that she's back on. I sent an email to the site.

There's so much going on in their lives. We work so hard to be there for her, helping with things like school fundraising. We're fighting so hard to keep her alive, constantly searching for help for her. I still struggle for her. She's failing at school. We thought things were getting better, but she's failing. She still has suicidal thoughts. I have made a lot of phone calls. I even told Payukotayno to take her. I'm tired now. My daughter has just requested another counsellor. I don't know what to do.

## **52. They Crave Understanding**

I want to share a little about my experience as a parent. My daughter wanted to end her life, but I was there and able to help.

People who attempt suicide are crying for help and attention. They think that they're alone, that nobody cares or loves them - even if there are people sitting beside them. They crave affection. They crave understanding. They are delicate and sensitive, and words can easily hurt them. Name-calling leaves scars. Residential school has left many parents unable to open up emotionally and communicate openly with their children.

My daughter was dying from cancer. She said she didn't want to die in the hospital, she wanted to die at home. So I brought her home and we cried together for one whole day. Then her suicidal thoughts passed and she fought her cancer. She fought for her life. She told me about the hurtful words she had heard. She was tormented by them. We were able to talk about it, and I was able to understand what she was going through. My daughter died, feeling a lot better, knowing that her mom understood and accepted her.

I understand young people who attempt or commit suicide. I empathize with them. One of my friends took her life. I still miss her and how she used to make me laugh. I see people who have lost a loved one from suicide and I share their grief.

My daughter's death helped me to understand suicidal tendencies. It enabled me to help people deal in similar situations.

There should be more counselling sessions and circles, teaching parents how to communicate with their children.

### **53. We Need To Talk Openly**

I've been a recovering alcoholic for over 40 years.

I had family members who committed suicide. You have people fighting, then running to the aspirin bottle. This is a tool they've learned about suicide.

I was sexually abused from the age of 13. I had no identity as a sexual abuse victim. I felt only shame and guilt. At school, nobody asked what was wrong. I tried looking for help, but didn't know the kind of help I needed. So I started using alcohol to mask the shame.

When I was 18, I had a baby, and I gave it up. I signed the papers for Crown wardship and then I went on a big drunk. I attempted suicide and ended up in a coma. I didn't want to die. I just wanted to stop the pain, the trauma. Between the ages of 14 and 18, I was raped and beaten up by strangers. I put myself in a lot of unsafe situations. When I look at it today, I was unable to verbalize my trauma. I was unable to deal with it, unable to say what was going on with me. The shame and guilt, starting taking its toll. With trauma, we often blame ourselves. We assume it's something we did. When I was 18, I started to question the way I was living.

My mother went to alcoholics anonymous when I was 21, and I went for myself a year later. I needed to be self-reflective. I had a good counsellor who really helped me, someone who had been through the same experience and could take me through it. Once I was able to look at myself, I went to college and worked on a psychology degree. This started me on a journey to begin learning about our past as a nation. I wanted to find out what happened to our people. We need to talk openly about our history, and be open about our issues, especially sexual abuse.

We had a youth forum in our community, to teach the youth how to cope with emotions. We did role playing. We talked about everything. It really opened everyone's eyes to the need for healthy attitudes about dating, sex.

Our youth don't understand the full concept of death. They can act on impulse, to get rid of the pain. When they're under the influence, they don't really want to die. But they don't want to live in that particular moment or they don't want to deal with the pain. The trauma is so huge, they don't want to live through it, don't know how to get

out of it. There's no real understanding of the concept of suicide.

In order to build trust with the youth, when they role play, we have to let them say what they want, without judging them. Without excuses, without apologies, without defending the parents.

We need to teach them how to reach out, how to embrace, what healthy touching is. That it's okay to hug, to be honest, without being obscene.

There's nothing wrong with confronting someone who has suicidal ideation. We need to be open and honest, and ask about it. Sometimes you have to do it, you have to ask even if the person gets angry. It's better to be wrong than not to try. Sometimes workers are afraid to address it, because it's so personal.

Debriefing is very important after role-playing. It's also very important for the worker to have boundaries. Self-care is important, because otherwise it can fester, and then lateral violence steps in. Workers have to be strong spiritually, mentally, emotionally and physically.

The abusers may not have known what they were doing. Once you forgive, it fills the void within you. When you talk about sexual abuse, it helps. When you apologize in a sharing circle, deal with the anger, shame and pain, it's all gone. Once I let go, the healing began. The people talking in the circle are affirming that it's not your guilt.

My abuser was raised in a residential school from the age of 18 months, so he had issues as well. He may have been abused as a child. Maybe that was all he knew. We've all been in residential school, and we've all suffered.

We need to be open and honest, especially with younger ones. Then we need to deal it through the police and child welfare authorities.

I want to say that the role playing with the youth was very successful. We really got to know them. They were anxious. We did the circle a few times, to increase their comfort. The scenarios were successful. They had to pick a topic about any potential experience the youth go through, and then switch roles – boys playing the role of girls, daughters playing the role of mothers, and so on.

The kids need a place to verbalize what they see. Make sure you have someone to debrief with, and make sure you don't take on anyone's bad journey. When you tell yourself something, your body and your brain pick up on it.

When you are busy writing down what you are hearing, all those hurts and pains that you are noting will hit you at some point. Don't fight it. Accept it, and let the tears roll if they will.

Thank you for listening.

## **54. We Need To Make Every Effort To Help Them**

When suicide happens, it comes as a shock. It's very difficult when this happens. I have seen this many times, stood beside the coffin. I become very emotional just thinking about each incident. It feels like something has been erased, and I am impacted greatly. I can't feel anything. Later, I'm able to release the emotions that I feel. I feel very sorry to the people who experience this in their family.

It's truly complicated when one's grandchild attempts to take her life, or cuts herself. One of my grandchildren tried slashing her wrists, and another was admitted for mental health reasons. I was there to support them. They lost their mom. So many family members were affected by the loss.

When couples live common-law, it affects the children. One of my grandchildren attempted suicide. His parents were living this way. Another abuses drugs. We shouldn't blame people. When my son's marriage failed, I kept in touch with my daughter-in-law.

When my daughter passed away, it reminded me of the loss of my own mother when I was very young, and how it impacted my younger siblings. I understand what my grandchildren are going through, even though they don't discuss their emotions. They miss their mother, and the things they used to do together. I encourage them to get out of the house. One of them keeps to herself. She stays to herself in her room, doesn't open the door. I know she is dealing with hardship, sitting in the room. As much as I can, I try to help her. Sometimes I feel what she feels, because I experienced those feelings. I wonder who could come to help?

I understand what it's like to lose a parent. My experience in residential school compounded my grief.

My dad talked to me about marriage. He told me there would be hardships, difficult emotions. Everything I was told about marriage is true. I persevered through the years. I never fought back.

There are many nights when I can't sleep. I asked a friend about this, and she explained that my body was still processing the grief from my loss. After I spoke with my friend, it helped. Sometimes this sleep problem continues, despite this support.

I support others who are grieving. I do what I can to help them.

I lost three children. Two were babies. The recent loss of my daughter has been the most difficult. It was in the morning when we got the news of her death. I didn't know what to think, what to feel. It was hard to explain to my grandchildren. With support, I was slowly able to accept her suicide.

It must be difficult working in the mental health field, trying to help our people. We need to do what we can to support the workers.

My husband's drinking impacted the whole family, including the children. They pick up on this, and use it to justify what they do. We were always afraid when he drank.

Sometimes I sit at home and read the Bible. Sometimes the stress leaves me, and this helps me with my grief. I do this with my grandchildren, as well. I always find the time to help young people who are grieving. We need to show compassion. It's very difficult to understand. It's hard for the youth to understand. As much as we can, we need to make every effort to help them.

This is all I have to say today.



## **55. He Didn't Say Goodbye**

I feel very emotional right now. Several years ago I lost my son through suicide. He was sick from a young age, an ailment that caused him to have seizures, to the point where he had them twice a day.

He was frustrated by the seizures. He didn't say, "I will commit suicide," but for several years he said, "I will die." It took many years before he actually did it. We figured he was just talking – not really meaning it. Still, we kept watch, worried that he would. He spoke mainly to his mother, but I kept an eye out for him.

We did our best in raising him. He helped out a lot around the house, doing chores. He helped around the house when we were at work. He gave us great comfort. I fondly remember that he would be extra nice when it was payday. As a dad, I would give him money, and then he would go his mom and collect more from her. This was his nature. We had our challenges as parents, dealing with alcohol. We had other family members on the side, helping to raise the kids.

He only had two friends. They always hung out together, doing everything together. These two friends died in a house fire. Our son had been there with them, but decided to leave. It took a very long time before he got through his grief.

He talked about hearing the voice of one of those who had died in a fire, asking him to come to them, where they were in the afterlife. They said they were waiting for him to be with them. My other son had a similar dream, but they told him they weren't ready for him, that he didn't need to be with them and he should stay behind. They sent him back.

It was midnight when we heard a knock on the door. It was NAPS. Right away I said, "Was it the seizures?" Over the police radio I heard a nurse saying, "Can they come over right away?" We didn't cry at first, for fear of causing his soul to hang around, remain behind. We stood there in silence, waiting to be certain about what had happened.

I lost my mother when I was quite young. It was difficult losing parents, going to residential school. I was an orphan. I didn't have a childhood because of residential school. I had to grow up at an early age. I like to make jokes and laugh.

One time I had a dream. There were children behind me, and one went a separate way. There was a light straight ahead. When I told my father about this dream, he said I was seeing my life journey. We are given a life and we have a timeline for that life.

I go to ceremony once in a while to talk to my son, because he didn't say goodbye. He committed suicide without saying goodbye. Suicide is really hard. I'm telling you this so you will understand what happens to the survivors. We grieve. I cry when I remember my son.

After my son died, I picked up the bottle and used alcohol to cope with this burden, hoping to see my son. I often go and visit his grave. I think about him and wonder whether God showed him mercy. Suicide is an illness, and people do die from illness.

I didn't look for support to share my grief. I don't speak to people about it. My wife and I talk to each other, but we don't open up to others.

This is our story. As we see it, this was his predetermined time. His seizures started when he was five-months-old. The hardest part was not saying goodbye.

We should all try to listen to our youth. Life is precious and short. We should show them our love, embrace them. This is my wish for everyone, to always show affection to your children and grandchildren. We should always show our love to our kids.

My wife and I both grew up in residential school. I didn't know my mother. I never had the chance. She died when I was a baby. My dad didn't really show affection. I thought of him more as my brother.

There was an old man who I enjoyed being with. I shared my story about my mother with him. He told me that God had chosen her. This brought me comfort.

We take joy in seeing our children and grandchildren. I take pride in expressing my affection to them. One of our granddaughters died from substance abuse. I'm even a great-grandfather.

If I was to share my complete story, you would be old before I finished. (Laughs)

Meegwetch.

## **56. Early Intervention Works**

There's no the community mental health program in the community for youth under the age of 16, but there are a lot who need such services. They need someone they can talk to in Cree. The hardest thing about dealing with suicide is they have the intent and method, it takes all day to assess and it's a challenge to medevac them out of the community. We have to fight with medical personnel to get the help that is needed. It happens almost every weekend, especially the weekend after social assistance is paid.

The common factor is sexual abuse. If they were sexual abused as a child, it will hit them in their teenage years. Then it comes back in the early 30s, and the doctor asks, 'Why do you bring them here?' When they start dealing with adult things like money or finances, it's hits them, triggering the trauma of sexual abuse. Family and relationship break-ups affect them also.

There's no program for youth under 16. A grandmother came to see workers about her grandchild who was seven years old. Out of concern, they went to see him. When they spoke with child, he wanted to kill himself.

People need more training to help suicidal clients, specialized training like crisis intervention. We used to be afraid of it, avoid it, thinking it might make them suicidal if we talk about it. But we need to know how to deal with people like that. The training is worth it. We need help in the community. Our young people need good role models. Help should come from the grassroots level, from our own. Funding will be a challenge. The government won't help our efforts, because of assimilation.

We need to take a stand, take programs like parenting. The school curriculum needs to include family courses. If we get busy, we could hire someone to do this, find the funding, the programming. We need to work on this full-time.

The potlucks are good. They help us to get together as a community. We should encourage more alcohol-free social events. My son had to attend a sober dance, and it was fun. People need to come together to share ideas, set aside their differences and work together. The age restriction needs to be lifted. Front-line workers should be allowed to work on programs as they see fit.

Substance abuse triggers mental disorders.

Sexual abuse needs to be discussed openly, not kept silent or hidden.

Early intervention works. We need more awareness on drug prevention and sexual abuse. Nobody wants to talk about it. People think, "If I talk to him about suicide, he will do it." This is not true - that's why we need more awareness.

People who have schizophrenia hear voices telling them to take their life. They need help. Parents go into denial first, then it gets hard for them. It's very time-consuming looking after someone who suffers from schizophrenia. Parents require respite care, support. It's a 24/7 job for caregivers.

We need to keep talking about it. Sometimes it's hard especially when a client re-attempts. Self-care for the frontline workers is important, too. Prayer helps for everyone, prayer that the client will not succeed. Workers need debriefing. We need to share. We have a lot to say. Debriefing would be beneficial.

That's all I have to say. Thank you.

## **57. Life Has Changed So Much**

I didn't go to school, but when I started work I didn't have difficulty. Through individual effort you can accomplish a lot. I say this to encourage the youth who are going to school. They have the opportunity to go out for training. It's important for them to get their training and education.

Many of my children's marriages have failed. I tried to get them back together, but they said it was too difficult. The younger ones pick up on this, and they see too many living common-law. Alcohol is the biggest contributor. When I speak of failed marriages, it's alcohol that did it. It causes them to give up. Even the elders tried alcohol at one time, and now our youth are going through it. It's just like Adam in the Bible, when he bit the apple.

The work you are doing with the commission is different from other events that we have held in the community. Life has changed so much since our days in the bush. A lot of changes have happened in the community.

I hear people quoting from the Bible and talking about life on the land. When you live off the land, you limit yourself. It's the same with alcohol, you should limit yourself. It's the same with medicine.

If we misuse the assistance that is offered, we will encounter problems. It's like when you open a window – the air that comes in is like the words we use with each other. When someone gets angry, whatever you open will come through. That's what happens when bad things happen to you. The bad news follows you and is heard throughout the community.

There's a sense of love in our community. When someone loses a family member, even a handshake can mean a lot. Say hello to them, to show you care.

Meegwetch.

## **58. Every Night I Fear The Worst**

I lost three grandchildren to suicide. I'm not really strong enough to talk about it. because of this experience. Their parents had separated, drifted apart. The children suffered in silence and abused alcohol. I never thought they would do this – suicide. I never heard them talk about it. They didn't reveal what they would do. When children are not cared for, it's probably one of the main causes of suicide.

I know that others have been impacted too. They don't know how severe the impact is on parents and grandparents. It's very terrible to face something like this in your family.

I talk to the youth about respecting themselves and their lives. Every night I fear the worst for my other grandchildren. Every night I get calls. Most calls happen at night, it's rare that someone calls me a day. I keep thinking it will happen again.

We should talk to the youth about respect for life and the spiritual side of things. Substance abuse causes them to lose hope. We need to remind them that God gave them a life and they need to care take care of themselves, not to mess around with stuff that can hurt them. A lot of the hurt and emotions they have comes to surface when they start using that stuff.

I haven't heard why kids take their lives. I only hear that they're gone.

Parents need to be mindful and respectful of their children. I keep an eye out for one of my grandchildren who was close to one that I lost. I fear she may think of doing the same thing.

I spoke to one girl who lost her partner. I told her not take her own life, to live and complete her life while she is on earth, to look for people to help her and support her. I saw her and advised her to do this. Some kids are repeating what they see their peers doing. They want to do the things they are doing.

It still affects me today. This is first time I have spoken about it. I pray to the Creator for strength. I was never asked if I wanted counselling.

I think we should all speak to the youth. We need to do what we can. Even the younger

ones are starting to talk like this, like my great-grandchild. Her parent angered her, and then my great-grandchild said this. I spoke to her about life. It felt like someone slapped my face, when I heard that from a young child. Do you understand what you are saying, I asked her. I told her not to do that. You're quite small and your life is just beginning.

I often think of the youths we have lost. There are a lot of things we could do to keep them busy, so they don't dwell on their upbringing or turn to negative things, to keep their minds focused. We need to speak with them in a genuine way, encourage them to live a good life. They are smart and intelligent. That is what I wanted to say.

Thank you.

## **59. Something Happened That Changed My Life**

I grew up the traditional way. I learned it from my father, but he was always away. As a young man, I lost my mother, and I got mad at my dad. I was mad and I cursed at God for taking someone so beautiful. My father told me that I gained 9 mothers by having 9 sisters. My dad and I actually became closer after losing my mother. My sisters and I became closer.

Back then I didn't believe in the traditional way. I didn't believe that a root could save me. I didn't believe in prayers. Then I had to do a ceremony to find burial sites. The river had eroded the local cemetery and washed out some graves. I had to send for birch bark baskets and make an offering to them in the water. It was snowing hard, but it still needed to be done. And it worked, there was something happening. Something happened that changed my life.

I stopped drinking. I went to school. When I drank I lived in fear, always wondering what I had done the night before. I've been sober for quite a while now. I cleaned up my life, and now I live harmoniously. Today I'm not afraid. My experience with the baskets saved my life. I've also learned not to judge.

My father told me, "We can do more in the spirit world." After I graduated from college, I was going to save the world. The first year I almost quit. I felt like a failure. My father asked me, "Do you have a magic wand?" He reminded me to live the simple life. People need to make the choice to change. We can encourage, but it's up to them.

Today I see society, and I see beauty. I see how Creation works. Every baby is born with a bundle. In that bundle, the baby has love, laughter and joy. We need to remember how precious life is. It's life that teaches them to be hateful or angry. If they learn to be greedy and swear, they learn from their parents. It's the parents who teach kids what they grow up to be. We need to give them back their identity, their spirit name, their clan. Identity is important to a person. We're given the most important thing - life. We can't buy life at Walmart. With life, we're only given one chance. Too many people don't like life. People don't appreciate who they are or what they see. It's easy to be happy for the sunny days, but we have to be happy for the cloudy days too. We have to learn to appreciate life, respect it, no matter what it throws at you.

One time a husband died, then his 12-year-old son killed himself. The family called a



circle. There's greed when people take their lives. They leave so much pain and grief behind for their family because of their greed. People in that family were scared, because that one person had taken his life. We don't have to be afraid of suicide. We need to teach and learn from it. We need to re-teach the value of life. In today's society we are so spilt. We need to get back to when people respected and loved one another - the circle, the women, the mothers. Through ceremony we can overcome suicide.

When a relationship ends these days, the first thing someone wants to do is end their life. Let's get rid of that thinking, instead of accepting it. When we lose the ability to speak to one another about love and respect and all the things that are necessary to cast a light on our life, the young people begin to lose faith in life.

We need to go back to the fires. We aren't poor people, we're rich people. We have to get the culture back. We need to show love and respect. Our culture will help. Our culture is important. It will help us.

## **60. Our Youth Need to Become Proud**

I follow the traditional way. That's where my strength comes from. Our young people need to feel a strong sense of self-esteem as Cree people.

So many of our people were born into the intergeneration impacts of things like residential school, without being aware of it. When you don't know about this part of our past, you dwell in a dark place. We have to teach our youth about their true history and identity. It's not taught in school. It's barely even introduced in university.

It can be a distressing moment when you begin to learn about your true past, but we can teach our youth about our resiliency as a people. If we do it in a positive way, our youth will be more empowered. Their self-esteem would be much stronger if they learned this from an early age.

Our children need to know who we are as Cree people. The first time I learned about our history was in high school. You go through all these emotions when you learn about our history – like anger, sadness. We need to help them deal with the anger, need to balance it by celebrating our gifts.

We're still here, despite everything that was done to us. That's an awesome thing, and we need to share that with our children, so they learn the true history. There's good history too in our Indian names, ceremonies, clan names, myths and legends. Share them with the children, in the schools. It will help them with self-image and self-esteem. It helps when you know who you are. When you know your Indian name, you grow into that name and become it. They need to learn about the different clans, and the responsibilities, and fulfill them. They need to know our language, the syllabics. It's our history. Our nation has an oral history, and we need to tell those stories.

Our youth need to become proud of who we are. If they know the connections, they will feel strong and feel that they belong. We've done our ceremonies up the river. We don't know who's coming. Whoever comes, gets help. A sense of community is developed. Everyone who's there is important and appreciated. One time some high-risk girls came and right away they wanted to go home. But 4 or 5 days later they were talking to the elders, helping at camp - and at the end they didn't want to go back. There's no agenda, no objectives when you naturally bring people together. We need to do this, create smaller communities and enhance our sense of belonging.

There's a dark place where alcohol, drugs and violence lurk. The vulnerable and high-risk don't see that for what it is. They might think it's a good time and like to party. We need to shine that light for those people who are in the dark place, not judge them.

A community provides love and support, unconditional love and a sense of belonging. Focus on this and it will do a lot. For those in the dark place, this can be the light of hope.

## **61. I Know What It's Like In There**

There's a young man in prison, a father with children. He's having problems there, being bullied, afraid to take showers. There's no safe place in prison, and anyone who's mentally ill shouldn't be there. They don't want this person there. They don't like him because he talks to himself. When he was taken from our community, he was already hearing voices. They pick on him. He already tried to take his life. In prison, you share a small room with ten people. I know what it's like because I was there. I think about him and his kids. I worry about him.

There are a lot of people in our community who need help. We need a facility here to help them. I think about the people who were walking to Ottawa to create awareness. We could do the same thing, for those who need a facility. There are many things we can do together. We need a place for our people who require special care and attention. Ask the workers. If this building happens, they're going to feel better as workers.

There's a lot of grief in the community. It brings me sadness to see what 's not done here in the community, and more so when I think about the person in prison. He has no help. There are no resources for him there, no counselling, no program. What can we do? We should do something. They're just picking on him and he's going to get worse. He's going to succeed at suicide. I feel like stepping up. He has nobody in there. He probably can't make phone calls. He almost committed suicide and now he has nobody there. He has children – what will become of them?

I wanted to speak about this guy. It causes me great concern. I feel for this individual. It bothers me that no one can help him. I know what it's like in there. There's nobody to offer help. You can't even make phone calls. Those places are filthy and unkempt. He belongs in a treatment centre, or something. We should offer the alternative of going out on the land. I've heard many good things about the land.

I was reluctant to mention this. I feel better now. That's all I have to say. Thank you.

## **62. There's A Higher Power**

The first suicide in our community was a young man. He had abused drugs, and tried numerous times to quit. He used to hunt with his father. His father was devastated when he took his life.

Another time, a young person who had severely abused alcohol took his life. He did this after his father told him in anger that he didn't deserve to live. He took his life after that.

Young people are taking their lives after frustration, pain, yearning, feeling alone, wanting to belong. Even at these moments, God somehow intervenes to save the soul of the person. It's up to us to offer our prayers, and not judge their actions. We can't condemn someone who has taken his own life. There's a higher power, greater than us, who is very forgiving. God will acknowledge them. This is what we need to understand. We need to support them with understanding.

### **63. I Was So Angry**

My granddaughter committed suicide a few years ago. I was living somewhere else when it happened. I was travelling when I received the news from my daughter. She had tried twice before, and she was successful the third time. I was shocked. I had mixed feelings. I couldn't believe it. When I got to my daughter's place, I didn't know what to think. I didn't know what to tell my daughter. I wanted to get out of the house. I wanted to blame everyone. I was supposed to pick up my granddaughter, but it never happened. I had talked to her in the past, about her parent's marriage, their separation. My granddaughter wanted them back together.

At the funeral, I felt angry. But I went to the funeral for my girls. I didn't want to go. I felt like I was dreaming, floating in the air. I told my sister that I wanted to leave to my family behind. I was so angry at God, angry at everyone.

The anger started to go away after I spoke with an old missionary couple. I went to grief seminars and that helped me, but inside I still carry that load. Then more shocking news - my nephew committed suicide. By the grace of God I'm going through it, getting help. He is what gives me the strength to go on, also my friends, the people at my church and my family.

At times I want to give up, then I pray, go for a walk, visit her gravesite.

After my nephew committed suicide, I went to stay with my sister to support her. Two or three months later, we went to pick up his clothes and we could still smell his scent.

Still today I'm grieving. Altogether in my family there have been seven tragedies. When people die from an illness, it's easier to handle. It's normal grief, I guess, that we're used to.

I thank the Lord for strength. I read my Bible, it helps me a lot.

It's only been a few years. I'm still grieving. Only last year I started putting her stuff up. I think about good memories. It's hard when I go to the arena. I can almost hear her calling my name when I go to the arena.

It helps me a lot when I talk about it. It gets easier and easier.

Megwetch. That's all I have to say.

---

## **64. Where Do We Go When This Inquiry Is Finished?**

On the topic of suicide, I keep hearing that we should take back our traditional practices. The last inquiry was the NAN suicide forum. The issues we're talking about here were discussed back then. The NAN forum was in response to the suicide pandemic in northwestern Ontario. There was a report, but it wasn't made available. There was some follow-up, but not entirely.

Here we are again, having the same kind of inquiry. I'm trying to understand why. Aren't we part of NAN?

How do we take back our spirituality when there are so many other beliefs being taken up. There are groups that don't like native spirituality.

The atrocities committed in residential school are not news. Pedophilia began back in the days of the Hudson's Bay Company. All our ancestors suffered great turmoil, triggering anxiety in our people. Anxiety comes in many different forms. Anxious feelings were passed down because of the traumas suffered and experienced by our older generations.

I want to know what the next steps will be from this inquiry. How do we help those who are currently in grief from losing a loved one?

We hear people talking about what they heard someone say about suicide. Why is it we can't intervene? What is the commission going to do after these hearings?

I don't want to see another group running our programs. We should do this ourselves, because we understand the trauma of our past.

We should acknowledge and pray for those who suffered trauma. We should keep these stories to ourselves.

When we lose someone to suicide, we should respond quickly. We do this in our community. We go to the affected families. We should do the same for anyone impacted by suicide.

I can speak about anxiety, all the symptoms. I personally felt all these emotions. When

my parents separated, I felt separation anxiety. I felt the free-falling from confusion. I felt the chronic anxiety of learning that I have cancer.

Our children pick up on these anxieties that we suffer from.

I don't have anything against the dominant society. I just feel we need to take ownership of our issues. The counselling units will be the only ones who benefit financially. Nobody in the community will benefit.

I know the family of the young woman who died recently. We cannot pretend to know why it happened.

We know our past, and this can be our guide to move forward. Many of us are caught between our religion and tradition. We need to sort these things out. I go to church, but I also acknowledge our traditional spirituality. There is a reason why the church is here. Our traditions were lost back in the past, but we have our elders who witnessed the traditions being used. Our children are caught. We teach them here, but when they leave they turn away from tradition. How do we address this?

Where do we go when this inquiry is finished?



## 65. Every Tree Whispers Something

I've been impacted by suicide in my family. When I listened to the other speakers yesterday, I was inspired to share my story.

I believe that the land helps. I long for the land. I want to be there. I like to listen to the birds, to hear the trees. Every tree whispers something. There's healing in the peacefulness of God's creation. I like the idea of programs for the youth on the land. This will be a start for our young people in their healing journey.

One of my sons shot himself. The doctor said it wasn't known whether he would make it. It was very difficult awaiting the outcome. When we went to the hospital, my son was unconscious. The doctor told us to go and rest. He said he would call us if there was any change. We left. We were lying in bed when the phone rang at 2 am. The doctor told my husband, "All I can hear from your son is, 'I'm sorry. I'm sorry.'" His first words were how sorry he was. We went to the hospital and saw my son. I asked him, "Why did you do this? Do you know you almost lost your life?" I told my son, "You have one life, and only one person controls your life."

Today I'm here, and I'm fortunate that my son is still alive. When I asked him why he did that, he told me he was worried about his sister, who was very sick with cancer. He was afraid of losing his sister and that was hurting him. "The doctor said we almost lost you," I told my son. "I want you to never attempt suicide again."

Yesterday, when I was sitting here, I was thinking of that day. My husband asked me to offer the opening prayer. "You're very strong when you talk to the Creator," he told me. Today when I see my son, I thank the Creator for sparing his life. I know the community has problems with drugs and alcohol that affect the youth in our community.

Youth in our community talk with me, they phone me for counselling about their battles with issues. I consider all the youth in our community my grandchildren, I call them my grandchildren to show my affection. One grandchild told me he was feeling depressed and wanted to take his life. "I don't belong here," he said. He had lost a loved one. I told him if he did this, he might never see his loved ones again. I shared a quote from the Bible about Judas with him – about what was said, how he would have been better off not being born. That's how serious suicide is.

I have had six youth call me for help, and three of them came to thank me afterwards. This is what needs to be done for our youth – teach them the spiritual way. Our church is empty today, despite the number of people living in our community. Our community needs to be taught about spirituality. It will guide them.

I walk around the community. One time I came across a youth who said, “Gokom, let’s sit down here first.” We sat there and talked. I asked him what he wanted. He said, “I’m afraid to talk about this. My girlfriend wants to get married and I’m afraid.” I told him there’s nothing wrong with marriage. It’s a blessing, a sacrament. I told him it’s not good to live common-law. I talked to him about adultery. He had two kids already, so I said, “Just go and get married. Your kids will be there when you take your place in holy matrimony.” I told him he would set a good example. I told him about my own children, how they didn’t listen to what we taught them. He thanked me, and we went our separate ways.

I am happy to be here to talk. It’s hard to talk about suicide with our youth. I encourage you to continue on with this journey, this inquiry. We need to find solutions for them. I usually stay home and don’t attend meetings. That’s just how I am, but whenever I get a chance to talk, I’m glad to share.

Meegwetch for listening.

## **66. A Story I Heard As A Child**

First of all, I want to say hello to everyone. I will only speak for a short time. I will share what I have heard about suicide. I will begin with a story I heard as a child.

Once, long ago, a woman killed a five-year-old child but didn't tell anyone about it until she was old and sick. It was only then that she confessed. She said she had heard a voice, telling her that if she killed that child, her two daughters would be spared.

On her deathbed, this woman felt remorse for what she had done. She feared that she would burn forever. She was even tormented by images of burning in her bed, and every day she would try to extinguish the fire, but there was no fire. This is one story.

Father Lavoie predicted what is happened today, with people taking their lives. He said that, where he came from, some people killed themselves. Sometimes, he said, a man killed himself when his wife was unfaithful with another man. A boy sometimes killed himself when he saw his father with another woman. At other times, a woman might kill herself. These are the things he predicted.

Now today we see some young people are doing the same thing, taking their lives because of relationship problems. Sometimes they are confused when their parents separate, feeling shame or guilt, not knowing who they should be loyal to.

It is also drugs and alcohol that contribute to suicide. When men and women use these things, sometimes they hear voices, telling them to take their lives, and they do it. They hear voices. Maybe it is the devil telling them to do that.

I don't know if they are responsible when the devil is telling them to do that. If the devil is involved, maybe it's not their fault. Maybe they will be saved.

I do not condemn the youth who take their lives. I feel compassion for them and I pray for them. We must pray for the souls of those who take their lives. We must only feel sympathy and compassion. It is not up to us to pass judgment.

That's all I have to say.

## **67. I'm Still Looking For My Identity**

I grew not really knowing my identity. I enjoyed the times we went out on the land. I think my dad was also confused about his identity. I didn't learn my language. I was uncomfortable with my identity. I had to find my own identity. I'm still looking for my identity. I also experienced sexual abuse as a child.

I love the sense of community. So many things are missing in our community, but still it has such strengths. The suicides are a puzzle. For me, growing up, the issue was identity. As a parent today, how do I help the youth? How do I help the children who come to my home? I see in them the same struggle - identity.

We need to find balance, confidence and we need to respect ourselves. We need to be good to our family and friends. Living here as a woman, a single parent, help is hard to find. There are not enough programs. What we have is good, but we need more. It's a constant struggle to be in balance. Being a wife and mother is a struggle, but there are benefits too.

We need to get to the root of the problem and build self-confidence. We need to encourage the teachings that will build a stronger community. People want to help, and give their time.

We need to start talking more openly about suicide. We need to be more comfortable with this issue. We need to talk about sexual abuse and physical abuse, the underlying issues. People need to be out at camp, enjoying a meal in the bush. These customary outings will promote healing.

What happens if your child is struggling at 12:30 a.m.? If the therapist only comes in once a month, then what? The first response team needs support, those who see the trauma. Why aren't we there for them?

We need to reclaim our identity, our connections with the land. If there is willingness, there is hope. We need a strong outdoor education program in the school, recognizing the rich culture and our kinship with the environment. We also need our history taught in the school, even though it's a hard history. And we need to reclaim our language.

There are different reasons why we don't speak our language, why our kids need to

relearn the traditions, how to make snowshoes, more of the culture. If the children don't have it, do their parents feel comfortable in the bush or environment? Why are so few families active on the land?

There's a lot happening in health care. We need to be aware of this, too. The services need to work together more. When people ask for help, we need to provide it. We need to work together as a community.

## **68. I Finally Have Hope**

My mom was a very angry person, and she took her anger out on her children. If I didn't eat, she would shove my face in the plate. Sometimes she would take the light bulb from my room - that was scary. The house would stink – there were always drunks there. Her voice was angry, especially when she was drunk.

I was molested by maybe men. Some were family members. My uncle ruined my life. It happened in the daytime. That's when he came to the house, because he knew no one else was around. He made me feel insecure. I was unable to appreciate myself. I kept hearing the voices of the men who sexual abused me. I thought would never feel beautiful. I felt ugly.

I was unable to have a relationship, but unable to be alone. I felt sick every time I had a boyfriend. If he touched me in certain places, I would start to cry, and turn into a little girl again.

I used to tell my mom, don't leave me alone with him. My sisters would tell her that also, but she never believed us. We would go to my granny's and lock the door with a butter knife. I used to wake up with someone touching me. My uncle did this to everyone.

Sexual abuse is so hard to let go. I don't know how to live with it. Many times I tried to end my life. My life is filled with anger because the sexual abuse and taunts were constant.

Why am I the one who feels ashamed? I'm not the bad person.

Today I'm learning to please myself, to love myself. I was tortured growing up. I have fear. That fear gets in the way. That's why I am going to do my sun dance. I want to truly heal. Sexual abuse is the hardest thing to let go of.

Today I live a positive lifestyle. I see the good things. I'm not paranoid anymore. I forgave almost everyone. I'm learning to love myself more and more. There are still certain things I'm trying to fix.

I encourage my peers, that's how I help people. We all have a story. We have a strength

and resilience in us. It's there, we just have to find a way to get through it. I want to instill hope.

You can explore the world. Nobody goes outside the community. I remember when I was 6 years old. My mom took off on the plane, and I thought that she went to another planet. I used to go to the dump and try to make a plane. When I first went to the city, it was busy, so big, lots of white people. I felt shame as an Indian. I used to tell people, that I was metis.

When I was 15, my mom fell off the wagon. When she broke up with my dad, she blamed me for it. I got so sick of it, I told her I don't want to live with you any more. I went from one community to another, one relationship to another. I used to be insecure, thinking I deserved better. I was jealous. Used to see rich kids with parents and I used to think, how come I don't have that?

I was a gypsy for a long time, then I went to college, had my baby. I started to cry more. I was stressed out. I asked myself, why am I crying, when I have my son and I'm passing? I started drinking, then I tried coke. It was the best high. I didn't feel like shit anymore. I started talking to elders, and I knew that I wanted to stop partying. The parties only numbed the pain. You know when you're ready, you just never know when.

I started searching for my dad and found him. I told myself, it's time to quit. I've been sober for almost a year, and I finally have hope. I know why I am here.

I'm on my journey of recovery. I understand why my mom was like that – she went to residential school.

I'm on my journey of recovery. I participate in sweat lodges. It's really hard here when Christians put you down. I was told, you're going to hell. I learned to let it go. If we keep fighting, we won't heal.

I'm happy now. There are still little triggers that I have to deal with. I go to a lot of ceremonies, and I feel recharged.

I feel like I 'm on a mission now. I understand why all those things happened to me. Now when people talk to me, I know what to say. Lots of kids message me, contemplating suicide, and I always answer them. Now I know why I am here. I heal

when I speak. I write letters to my nine-year-old self. I start to cry and feel better. I need to keep to doing that to stay on that path. A lot of youth are looking up to me, so I have to stay on the right path. So far it's working.

I'm not afraid of the darkness any more. I know where I am now. I'm happy now. I'm committed to helping my peers.



## 69. It's Not Easy

Many years ago, I lost a good friend to suicide. At that time there was no support group, aside from band counsellors and elders. What the others say about suicide - if you take your life, you will go right to hell - that hurt me more. The condemnation and judging really hurt me. I numbed my feelings with alcohol and drugs. I went as far away as I could, found a job and a place to stay. I was gone for several years. To this day, what helps me to understand is when I go to prayers, my faith. I still wonder about condemnation of the soul. I always know that God is there to take care of my friend.

We have lost a lot of people during my life. Over the weekend, after the tournament in Moosonee. I was thinking about my friend. He would have been there at the tournament. We used to go out in the land, we used to travel together, and he was the only friend who came to my graduation. He helped me to celebrate my achievement. I still miss my friend. When I go out in the land, I miss him. It still affects me. It's not easy.

I think about people who go through suicide. It's hard to explain to young people. It's not easy. They have a hard time understanding what it is.

When I hear the people speak here today, at this hearing, it brings insight to the subject of suicide. I heard the speakers talk about the land, spirituality and having a relationship with the land. This is what my grandmother used to say - go back to the land. My grandmother and my uncle helped me a lot.

We need to establish a youth camp. We need to get away from the televisions, and technology. Kids are so preoccupied with this. We need to go back on the land. We can learn a lot if we go there. Our grandmother said if they need treatment, don't go to the city, where there's alcohol. Go out on the land, where there's no alcohol. Reconnect ourselves with the land, our family, our Creator.

In the last three years we've lost a lot of people to suicide. The numbers are staggering, when you think about it.

I thought about suicide when I lost my friend, but an elder helped me at that time. He just picked me up on the road to talk with me. I thought about suicide again when I lost my daughter, because the pain was so unbearable. I wondered if I would see her again

if I did that, if we would be in the same place. Then I looked at my son crying, and I told myself not to think like that. I told myself there was a reason why this happened, a reason that I have to go through this. In the end, I accepted my loss and continued my life journey.

Like the other speakers said, they want to live but something makes them feel so hopeless, and they just can't bear the pain. I have saved lives in the past. Someone has called me to pick them up. Just being there is sometimes all that they need. We can change people's mind about taking their lives.

It is only through communication that we can overcome our grief. It's up to us to help each other. The land is there for us, to reconnect. As one elders said, when he was questioned about his participation in the church and also in traditional events, "I go wherever the Creator is respected."

## 70. We Need To Find A Way

There are only a few of us left who can recall how peaceful it was living off the land. In the morning, our parents would always acknowledge the Creator through prayer. Everyone in the camp would participate. You didn't have to worry so much. We used all the gifts bestowed on us, harvesting within our lands. Everything was put to use. Nothing was wasted. There are still a few of us left who live off the land.

Every evening we would also say a prayer. It was a good life that we had when we lived off the land. We learned from our ancestors, all the things they had taught us. We learned from our parents. Still today, when we live in a community, a different environment, we still try to live the teachings of our ancestors. In the early days after we started having a community, there was no substance abuse, not like there is today. There was not much happening when we first started living here.

Now today, life is very problematic in every way. If you go back and think about the way it was in the bush, there were no worries. You lived the way your parents used to live, not how the youth are today.

I personally think we need to look within ourselves. We need to find a way to reach into the inner self, to know how to respond to crisis, to find a way to help one another.

When we hear in the news that someone has taken their life, everyone is impacted and we try the best we can. We always about the spiritual question: what's going to happen to their soul? We all think this, when this happens in our home. When Judas went out to hang himself, the other people said it would have been a lot better for him to not have been born. When we think about this, it saddens us. We question ourselves. Those who are thinking about it should pick up the Bible and read it to ease their mind. When you read the Bible it tells you a lot of things. It will guide you. God has the power. We are all blessed, even though our lives are filled with challenges.

I had a good life when I was living off the land. When I came to make my home in a community, I began to abuse alcohol. I forgot the teachings of my mother and father. I had a family at that time. I had children. One morning, when I awoke feeling the effects of alcohol, I thought about the things I had before me. I had taken something that made me sick the next morning. It wasn't given to me. I took it upon myself. That morning I got up and went to the river bank. It was a nice day. The sun was out,

shining on me. A few clouds rolled in, creating a beautiful image. When I looked at the river, I was in awe. I thought about my life. I thought about my community. I thought God was asking me to stop using alcohol that morning. As I sat there longer and looked at God's creation, it made me think about the river, the good things I had, and the good life I had lived. I started to think about it and I started to cry, thinking, "What did I do to myself?"

While I was sitting there, I thought, "What am I going to do?" Starting from that day, I took the Bible and read it. I started to learn from it. I did that. Yes, I read that Bible so many times. The more I studied it, the stronger I felt. I thought less about alcohol. When I went home, I was tired and went to bed. I had three dreams. My dreams were guiding me to take the right path. The more I read, the more I wanted to do more to help my community, to help in the church. When I think about this now, I feel good about myself for having had the courage to change. I always pray for the people. When I pray, I think about all of God's creation.

When I look at God's creation, tears come down. When I think of those who have taken their lives, I pray to God for their salvation.

We have a duty here to help one another. Thank you commissioners for being here. Thank you for opening this path to allow us to share our stories.

Life's challenges are, indeed, overwhelming. This is why we lose the ones who are overcome by these challenges. We lack the faith to be strong, to win this battle with the demon who takes our youth.

It's good to be here. We need to do more, work together, and act on it. We need to find a way to combat this serious problem in our community. We need to work together and find a way to live the good life.

## **71. It's Up to Each of Us to Help Make It Better**

I grew up in the bush, in a small community. Families supported each other. We had no electricity or water, so each person had a role in the home. Everyone had responsibilities. My task was to keep the water hole open in the river, during the winter, and cut to wood in the bush. I learned a lot in the bush from my dad.

We learned a lot from the stories our mom and dad told us. Family values were strong: love, respect, caring. My mother took care of all of us. There was discipline, compassion. If there was a crisis, it was mom who was called to handle it. Dad was there for support. They worked together.

There was a fear of authority, because native people weren't allowed to drink. Dad drank wine, and I remember seeing him hide it when a Mountie came around.

As I grew up, I learned that working together helps the family. There was no complaining, no belly aching, just working together. You really appreciated all the work that had to be done to keep the family warm, clothed and fed. We were taught that if we were faced with challenges, one way to deal with them was just to walk it off.

When we have elders day, the kids don't understand the way the elders speak. The way they spoke wasn't straightforward like today. A lot of our spirituality has become forgotten. People have lost the old ways. Laughter was important. These lighter moments helped people to get through. Family togetherness, a cup of tea together, the sound of laughter - these are Creator's gifts. People's faces light up and their spirits shine.

Thirty-five years ago, I lived a life ruled by alcohol. I was a fallen-down drunk. Things seemed so hopeless and sometimes I wanted to end it all, to take my life. I wanted to use a knife, but after I sobered up, I so glad I had chickened out. (Laughs). In the back of my mind, I knew someone was out there who I could talk to. Eventually, after working in industry for a while, I decided to work worked in social services, helping my people.

Personal trauma can also make us want to give. Like waking up to find that my son had died of crib death. It still hurts today when I think about it. His short life really

affected me. In those days there was no help, no counselling. It was just an individual trauma that we were expected to get through. I went back to work, and put in 12-15 hour shifts. I learned all I could about crib death. I learned that crib death happens when babies forget to breathe. We remind them to breathe when we touch them.

We need to give our children the credit they deserve today, recognize how smart they are. I 've worked with people who are suicidal. All they want is someone to listen. I learned that listening is a great skill. Things have changed in the world, it moves faster. We used to listen to the radio, then we watched television. Now our children know so much more about technology.

I have experience as a frontline worker. I have training in addiction, grief counselling and recovery. I've always wondered why kids wanted to kill themselves. Solvent sniffers are volatile. When I went to help in one community, a 14-year-old's father followed me around the community and said, "You have to take my son with you." His son had made attempts. I went to the home and asked him, but his son refused. I explained to his father that I couldn't forcibly take him away. It was hard to explain. The council became involved. I had no choice. I had to leave him.

We have to make choices. We have to know when it's time to turn around and help your child. It's important to know that we have choices today, not like before when we didn't have any. Parents need to be involved with our children constantly. It's up to families to make the choice on spirituality. I spoke with one adult and encouraged him to use his voice with grandfather fire. At the age of 14 or 15, he had harmed an adult. Thirty years later he went to that person's home and asked for forgiveness.

There was another community I worked in, where the children broke into the bingo hall and burned the bingo balls so the parents would stay home. Their parents had gone from being substance abuse addicts to being bingo addicts. They still weren't giving their kids any attention. People need to recognize the importance of parenting, take the time to listen to anyone who needs to be heard. Time shouldn't matter when it comes to helping. Being a role model is also something that shouldn't be taken lightly. Setting an example is hard to do. Our grandparents taught us so many skills.

With this suicide inquiry, how will the information be used? Everyone has a journey in their life. What is that magic answer to suicide? We start the healing with the first step, then move on to the next one. The process will be slow and will not happen overnight.

There is so much sadness and trauma, but the strength of the family needs to be revitalized. Sitting and listening needs to come back, where we don't offer suggestions but we empower them. With suicide, just sitting down and listening provides caring and support. Combining the old ways with the new ways will help. Talking circles help.

There's concern that our young people don't care about the land. So what do you do, bring the electronics when you go camping? It's hard to set an example today. It can be difficult with the expectations of the children today. Things have changed from the days when I was a water carrier. It's the responsibility of the older generation to make changes as well. People have a choice, whether we're going to learn this or not. When you work with different agencies, you realize we have to be accountable.

Things are different today. People need to know who's there to help. It's the fundamentals of life that help anyone make it through. We don't know the magic answer. Aboriginals took better care of the community, there were better homes in the past. We need to change things to make life better for our people. It can get better. It's up to each of us to help make it better. The government also needs to step up, to help us make things better at the community level. It's important for leaders in the communities to keep their promises if they say something. They can't go back on their word or fail to deliver.

Kids need the attention of the parent. One solution is just to talk to each other and give one another strength to keep it going, to brainstorm. If we keep at it, something will come together.

There are a lot of good things happening. People need to know this, and point things out. This commission is a strength for all the communities. It will help the people.

Meegwetch for listening.

## 72. Suicide Is Not the Will of God

My first experience with suicide was when my uncle took his life. Sometimes you can see the warning signs when you look back. He had visited the family and said goodbye to my dad. He covered all the mirrors in the home.

You can see the signs when you're there, working in other communities. There are no resources, but you try to help them, refer them out.

There's no simple definition of a suicidal person, no real way of categorizing from mild to high-risk behaviour. The boy who took his life had plans for coming over to our place, but he took his life. It was so close to home for me and my children, a huge loss for me.

A friend of mine made an attempt on her life. She was tired of hurting, tired of her addictions. I told God, "Don't take her." Then I realized that God doesn't take people. Suicide is not the will of God, it's a decision made by a person to end it all. My friend couldn't cope. She said something snapped, a thought came over her. The healing is in us. Our bodies are made to heal. For a while, she was on my mind. I don't want to blame her. She needed my support. I told her, I will love you no matter what, you're still here. You're still surviving.

This summer I got a call that my teenage daughter had taken a lot of Tylenol pills. Her dad and I don't drink, don't do drugs. We moved here to be closer to our roots. It helped us to be more stable. Our daughter wasn't here with us, she was in another community. She didn't want to die. As parents, we get mad or judge them – it's an instant reaction. When people try to commit suicide, they can really hurt themselves, damage their organs and have long-lasting effects.

Her father was so mad at her. He was mad, swearing. Her granny was crying. Her uncle was mad too. It's hard when you think it won't happen in your home. We had people praying for her, lots of support and comments on Facebook. It makes you humble.

My daughter got a medevac to another hospital. When she got there, her father's friends were there for her. I'm so thankful for that. Then there was the task of getting her home. I had to calm granny down and talk to her about the situation. She had a bunch of tests and the outcome was good.



The band helped us to bring her home. Family helped. Without road access, the cost of transportation is high. When she came home, we felt such relief. Waiting for her was really hard. We went by chartered aircraft, and during the ride I wondered what she would look like. When I saw her, it was surreal. "It doesn't matter what you did," I told her, "I still love you."

When she was home, though, I set some ground rules with her. I didn't want her to think that she deserved special treatment because of what she did. I wanted her to apologize, to realize it's important to take responsibility for her actions. It's also important to validation our feelings, the pain that's inflicted on the survivors.

After we came home, I made some calls for referrals. Three months later, I'm still waiting. Now I call twice a week to make sure she has help.

She has self-harm marks on her arms. I saw 20 cuts on her arm. Not deep, but enough to feel pain. I remember seeing this behaviour with her friends. I'm not sure if it's a social thing. It numbs the pain they carry, gives them control over their pain.

Her granny shared a story with her, to create a stronger bond. Self-esteem is a big issue in our community. When you have low self-esteem, you have no conflict resolution skills, and it's hard to make friends.

We've been dealing with suicide for a long time now, more than 20 years. A lot of it has to do with our history.

I've learned a lot this year. I've learned a lot to help my community. I'm not ashamed to deal with this. I don't care about the negativity, shame and judgment. Instead, I'm positive, loving, sharing and caring.

Those things aren't shared enough in the home. Love and acceptance are very important and homes are broken if they don't have it. When adults gossip, have cliques in organizations, lateral violence – the kids hear that. They think why even bother getting a job? Why bother, when all you do is judge or complain, and act like a grumpy adult.

Our daughter needs help for her mental illness. She needs to balance the four aspects

of physical, mental, emotional and spiritual. There's a battle going on in her mind.

It's very frustrating trying to get help at the hospital. I've called everyone.

The community comes together to react, instead of taking a proactive approach. Our biggest fear is that my daughter will be the one to make the community resources work together. When the Coroner investigates and makes recommendations after a suicide, it shouldn't be influenced by boundaries like on-reserve and off-reserve. My daughter has been waiting for months to get help from the hospital.

It's been quiet for a while now. That's good, but there's still a lot of suicidal ideation and attempts. When your child dies by suicide, you go into survival mode.

I wrote a letter to the Ministry of Health to assess the services in our community. Our kids are attempting suicide every month. Regional services did show up and met with me.

We need to find a long-term program for our youth. There are more services for urban Indians than for those who live on-reserve.

We need to engage our youth, run a focus group and let them be with their friends.

### **73. The Person Needs to Make the Decision to Change**

I have taken the time today to speak about the suicide issue, about children taking their lives. We need to talk about this, explore this. We need to be responsible for dealing with it. We use too many non-native people to help with suicide. We should help ourselves. Our elders taught us in the past, how to have a healthy life, how to live together happily for the benefit of our families.

Throughout my life, I was taught to always respect my fellow people, to treat them properly, never to think ill will towards anyone, to be good to them. This was before I went to school, when I lived with my parents and my siblings. Everyone treated me well. This was when I felt peaceful and well.

Then, things changed when I went to residential school. At first, we embraced the idea, thinking it would be a good thing to receive a good education. Initially we felt happy and content. Our parents felt the same way. I attended Catholic school and I attended church. I still go to church today. I first learned the teachings from my parents. I understood the teachings contained in the Bible.

I attended residential school for seven years. The lack of love shown by the priest and nuns was troubling. Although they spoke in faithful tones, once the service was over they would turn and beat the child, sometimes only half an hour after service. This was a very confusing experience. Still today I try to understand.

First, they taught about love and respect, then they turned around completely and hurt the child. I tried to talk about these things, seeing children physically abused by the priest and nuns. I didn't realize these things were supposed to be kept quiet. They were looking out for themselves.

My plan was to complete grade eight and go to high school, but the RC mission wouldn't let me continue on. The priest and the nuns wouldn't let me go south for high school. I couldn't understand why. All the other students were allowed to go. I came to the conclusion that maybe it was to keep me from telling the truth about residential school. I was prevented from getting a higher education. Despite this, I eventually went back to school on my own. I realized I had the skills, and once again I was happy and content.

I didn't always feel tormented when I was in residential school. We need to control our thoughts and feelings, our emotions, what we think and say and do. If we speak badly of someone, the person feels badly. But if we speak in praise, the person will feel good about himself. I was a normal, rambunctious child. I endured the suffering that was inflicted on me. One day I decided to leave the faith of the church, and I wandered about for the next 40 years.

The things we hear about today, the suicide pandemic, I started having the same idea. I drank a lot. I was controlled by alcohol. It took control of my life. I had a lot of friends who supported my drinking, and I started to lose everything. I lost my wife. I lost my children. I started to feel worthless. Whatever I tried to do, I was unsuccessful. At times I felt desperate. But I kept remembering, whenever I thought about taking my life, the words of the priest came back to me, about going to hell. After years of spiritual torment, I started to find comfort in acknowledging the spiritual teachings I had learned as a child. In my agony, I asked to be relieved of my physical pain, to take me, but the Creator instead reconnected me with the beliefs I had learned as a child. Three days later I felt something. I was overwhelmed and I wanted to go into the bush. Today I speak about this, about what helped me get out of the desperate moments when I wanted to end my life. Children, adults and elders – we all have teachings, but sometimes we give those responsibilities to someone else. It is not our right to do so. As a young man I didn't listen. I thought I knew everything, and I lost my way. At this point in my life I am happy and content. As a child it is easy to learn. It becomes more difficult as an adult, with the suffering we go through.

After that experience, after one year of working in different places, I thought of going back to school. I did receive sponsorship, but my addiction to alcohol stopped me from succeeding. I knew I had to quit drinking. It wasn't until I totally abstained from alcohol that things started to change for the better. It took more than a year of total abstinence before I began to learn and realize my full potential. After learning to connect with my emotions, and knowing the different emotions, I began to appreciate the teachings of the elders. I wanted to talk with people, help people. I looked for a program where I could learn about emotions. I obtained a diploma in social services, in alcohol and addictions.

Sometimes, when we try to help people, excuses come up and our attitudes stop us from helping. We experience boredom. I sat there, feeling that something was leading me to interact and share with others, the way the elders taught me - to support each

other, work together and have fun. When I started to see things this way, things began working better for me. On my journey of recovery, while making a good living, I had a kind of awakening. I realized the selfishness of amassing money from my earnings. I questioned the principles I was living by, and became uncomfortable with not sharing my wealth. I learned that money can control one's thoughts and attitudes.

I believe that I learned on my own, inspired by the teachings I had received from the elders. Elders understand the full spectrum. Only someone who has walked a full life can be an effective helper. We can't get this from someone who is only starting out in life. We also need someone who understands our background, understands the teachings. We also need someone who is available to help their people after hours, when they come home from work. People can feel boxed into a corner, thinking we can't help them. We work with people who have different problems or feelings. Some people have similar problems, but a different way of healing. We need to understand our feelings. We need to know that we don't have the power to change people, we can only provide them with information.

As a young child, I saw the elders supporting each other in a way that is not present today. I remember my mother going to the graveyard when we were new to the community. It was a way to get to know one another. When a person lost someone, they would receive support. They might just sit around and not say anything, support the person who was suffering, showing them unconditional love. Today, when people are suffering, we stay away from them, thinking it's too much pain and the pain might transfer to us. It is time to go back to the teachings that were helpful. We need strong people, healthy people, spiritual people.

When I look back, it was better in those days. People need to know that those teachings can move our feelings, make us feel alive. If you don't feel them, then you will commit suicide. The elders were strong in their spiritual beliefs. Our spirit has feelings, it is there to guide us. It lets us know about feelings.

I thought I wanted to change people, but that's not the way. The person needs to make the decision to change. We can provide information. The basic principles, the fundamentals of how we were taught as a people need, like the unconditional acceptance and love for our fellow human beings, to be reinstated. These things are not taught in school today. Our youth need to learn these things from an early age. This will instill identity and unity

If children are taught in this manner, the youth will not be into alcohol and drugs. The youth will know how to activate their minds. We can set examples by the way we live. The mind does not separate from the body, and vice versa. Our spirit is affected by our actions, our feelings.

Today there are obstacles all over the place. We need to try and start support programs. We need to volunteer. It brings back good energy. It makes the spirit happy. We need to find ways to reconnect the people, to let them know that we are not defeated. Our communities need to adopt and implement our own ways.

Slowly we are coming out of our blindness.

That is all I have to say. Meegwetch.

## **74. They Didn't Learn Parenting Skills**

I'm happy that the suicide inquiry is here. I want to tell about our struggle, about what happened when my brother took his life.

Grief is a very long process. It's very difficult to suddenly experience a loss through suicide and it's very difficult to find support.

I've been to three treatment sessions for alcohol abuse. The last session was very hard, but it was worth it. I stay away from alcohol now. I'm no longer reluctant to speak about suicide. I have the confidence to express myself. I've also contemplated suicide, but I couldn't do it – knowing what our family went through.

The person who commits suicide might think he's only affecting himself, but everyone is affected. Everyone grieves. Survivors feel guilty, and blame themselves.

Suicide can't be reversed. There are no workable solutions after the fact. We can only accept it and move forward with life.

It's so sad to hear about others going through the same pain. It's difficult to visit one other, because we can't talk about it. We can't express our feelings. We lost our parenting skills because of residential school. Even my parents were in residential school and were impacted by it. They learned some formal education, but they experienced hardships in residential school. They didn't learn parenting skills.

They married and raised their children without skills in parenting. I hear what parents are supposed to do when their children are sick, and how they are supposed to encourage their children to achieve in school. But we witnessed our mother crying when one of our siblings was sick, and our father didn't fully understand his role. They didn't view school as being very important.

It's sad to know the impacts of residential school. I empathize with my parents, what they went through during adulthood. They didn't learn the teachings, they had gaps in their life. We didn't learn from our parents. They didn't know.

In my youth, I used to blame my parents. Now, after counselling, I understand, and I'm sorry I blamed my parents. I learned it wasn't their fault. Now I feel sorry for them,

and I know they really love their grandchildren. They're learning parenting skills, and blossoming into really good grandparents. I'm happy now. I'm learning to forgive them.

Initiatives like this inquiry are good. There's an awakening.

Many people are reluctant to go through the healing process. They won't leave their homes to seek help or resources. More resources are needed, more home visits, more individual counselling to ask each person what sort of help they need. I know from experience that I was afraid to go and ask for help. I know it would be good to do home visits and provide information about support services.

Life is hard, even for those who abstain and try to follow the straight and narrow. There aren't enough supports in place. We need a suicide counsellor from our own community to provide workshops and counselling. People are trying to commit suicide in our community almost every day, and a local person who empathizes with the community would make it easier to discuss mental health issues. Lots of people in the community are affected by suicide.

I was greatly affected by my brother's suicide. When I heard he had committed suicide, I blamed myself. I drank every day to cope with my guilt, but eventually I sought help. I had to quit drinking to regain a positive life. It's been a long journey, getting to where I am today.

I know that our traditional methods work. Last Christmas season, there was less drinking. People are abstaining, trying to improve their lives. I'm happy to see this improvement. The children must have been very happy, being with their parents at home. I'm trying to help people turn their lives around, but it's still hard to be part of the healing effort. We still have to balance our responsibilities. We can't always be available to help. There's always something getting in the way.

There are people selling drugs, not realizing the damage they cause. I used to sell. I kept selling to this one person. With my own eyes, I saw this person coming to my house to buy booze. I didn't care. I loved money. It didn't bother me until I saw CAS going to this house and taking his children away. I learned from this, and I quit being a bootlegger. When we quit, my wife and I felt the impact of not having enough money.



I've seen too many of our people suffering, walking without hope. I have seen people experiencing dysfunction in the home. The spirit is gone from their home life. I went through this. After I quit alcohol, things picked up, became positive. The spirit is back.

I hear lately that my own daughter has talked about taking her life. It's sad to hear. It's an eye opener to hear our own child speak of the loneliness she feels when we get too busy trying to work for the community. I talked with her, and explained that sometimes we're not available because of the volunteer work we do. When parents aren't available to care for their kids, it creates a boomerang effect.

My daughter said she isn't comfortable talking directly with her parents. She wants outside counselling. I said I would encourage outside counselling for her, but it's very difficult to set things in motion.

It's difficult to find the time to help people. I don't know why. Since abstaining, it seems four times more challenging trying to live a clean life. I don't want to go back to drinking, I know what will happen if I do.

I want to help those who experienced residential school, our parents who suffered the silent shame and guilt in their day. I want to unload their burden of residential school pain. I will help. Their lives were hard, I think they must have been scared most of their days in residential school. They lived in constant fear. Their lives were threatened. I see my mother saying the rosary every day. It's hard, knowing there are survivors who continue to suffer in silence. Their loads must be unbearable. They don't share their packsack of residential school experience pain. They can't even carry that packsack. They drag it behind them. I would like their suppressed pain to be released, unloaded.

I for one will offer to help, for the sake of the children. The children must also be helped, not only their mental state, but whatever they carry in their heart.

Let's not blame the church. It's the pedophiles who brought shame to the church.

My daughter is only 13 years old, and she's already thinking of suicide. I pray for an intervention. I pray that they are helped. That's all I want to share. Thank you.

## **75. I Kept It To Myself**

I'm a mother and grandmother. My parents are still alive and I'm grateful for this.

I once thought about suicide. When I was 13, I took pills. My parents didn't even know. I was sexually abused, and I didn't know who to approach. I knew it was wrong for an adult to do that, but I couldn't bring myself to tell the truth. I was afraid that I would be punished, so I kept it to myself. The shame lingered, and I had very low self-esteem. I never had the chance to deal with this, and it caused me great turmoil. I didn't know of any programs in place to help me.

I think people are filled with turmoil when they choose to end their lives. We have so many who have survived residential school. Our older generation of survivors never had closure from the loss loved ones. This is why so many of our people don't have the good virtues of being parents. I've come to appreciate this.

In residential school, I lost a sibling whose body was never recovered. I never understood the coldness of that grief. It's important to know the residential school history, so we'll have a better understanding.

Our young people need our support and guidance, so they can make good choices. One of my sons is into drugs and alcohol, and I see what it's doing to my children. I share my experiences with them, so they see what's happening in the community and are able to make choices.

Prescription drugs contribute to suicide and young people are addicted to them. When they're impacted by this, you try to address it, but you don't know who to call. You don't know where to go for help. When there was a drug raid, lots of marijuana was found growing. Today there are all kinds of drugs coming from the urban areas.

NAN had a peer counselling program for high risk persons, back in 1987. We need to bring this back. Look at the NAN report and its recommendations, and see what was implemented. Don't reinvent the wheel.

I spoke with an elder from Alberta, who had a near-death experience. She said the youth need to go back to our traditions and ceremonies. This is what she learned from her near-death experience. Our traditions and ceremonies are important. They are

essential for our identity. They give us a place, a sense of belonging. Today the drum and smudge are not questioned, but we need more. There is a disconnection between youth and elders, a gap in communication. Language loss has created a barrier. Suicide is one of the residential school effects. The love and compassion were missing. Our language needs to be in the school. It needs to be brought back so we can reconnect across the generations. We cannot teach tradition without our language.

Thank you.

## **76. The More We Hide, The Sicker We Get**

I was raised in residential school from the age of six to 15. I only spent 18 months with my parents during that time. I never understood this until I took a course in social work, where you have to learn who you are. I was stripped of my identity, stripped of my parents, by residential school. Once I learned about this inner conflict, I realized why we are the way we are. We missed out on the teachings. Part of us was missing. We can regain the identity that was stripped from us. We seem to be waiting for permission. Why do we have to ask? We no longer have to wait for permission to do things. We have grown apart because of the system we were raised in, the system that was imposed on us.

The youth need to experience the land, reconnect with the land. There should be a camp built to foster this. In residential school we were told lies about our identity. Suicide is not just a youth problem, or an aboriginal problem, or a small community problem. There needs to be a place where children and youth can learn and appreciate who they are. It's hard to grow up today, there are so many things they have to deal with. Our culture can be taught in the classroom, but we need to experience the land first. There should be a course where we can learn this - but where?

As a young person, I had secrets. I didn't tell anyone. I didn't trust anyone. Kids today are experiencing bad things, sexual abuse, oppression, and then they hide the pain from everyone. There are all kinds of things affecting them. Sexual abuse is so well hidden. Family breakdown is a risk factor. We need to look at the signs and indicators. If we take the time, we can see the indicators that someone's going through a difficult time. I have two granddaughters who cut their skin. This is another indicator that you will hurt yourself. This is harder for aboriginal youth, because they don't know who they are. It's especially hard for residential school survivors, with intergenerational impacts. Kids today even have a choking game, where you choke yourself until you black out.

Suicide is something that no one wants to talk about, because no one knows the answer. We can only imagine what the person was going through when they decided to end it – the feelings of despair and desperation. Depression causes people to feel negative about themselves, to the point that they can drive themselves head-on into a tree. The ones who succeed somehow managed to overcome the fear of actually doing it. We need to learn how to validate people's feelings, understand our emotions, why we feel the way we do.

Every time a suicide happens, I think of my brother. There's so much pain when you live in a small community. I experienced suicide when I was 13 years old. When my brother committed suicide, he broke my heart. I was overwhelmed with grief. He took his life three weeks after our mother died. He wasn't well. It must have been so bad for someone like him to do it. He must have been tired, had enough to deal with this in this world. My brother was the baby of the family. Sometimes I re-live my brother's suicide. It's hard to live, when we don't understand. We looked for answers to the "Why?" We searched the house, looking for clues. We looked for a letter. We couldn't find one. We were heart-broken. We were angry. We were so devastated. It was unbelievable. It was shocking. It felt so unfair. He had so much going for him. But after our mother died, he locked himself in the house. He was accusing his family. He was angry at my brothers. We didn't know why. When a family loses someone to suicide, we always want to know why? You question and wonder, "Why? What broke us?" You go into emotional turmoil. "What could have I done to stop this?" It's been more than 10 years since my brother's suicide. The grief is always there. The questions are always there. How did we break? Why couldn't we have shared? When you suffer like this, you eventually start to shut out your feelings. You become numb. The pain never leaves.

One time I was depressed, and confused. I wanted to live, but I didn't want to live. I felt worthless and helpless. I had a plan to jump off the roof of an office building, but it too cold that day. Then I thought of ramming my vehicle into a transport truck, but thoughts of my grandchildren are what kept me going. Those who commit suicide must feel despair and fear. I was there, but I didn't want to tell anyone. The more we hide, the sicker we get. We need to be validated and believed.

## **77. It Was So Difficult to Lose Her**

I lost my younger sister to suicide. When we got the phone call that morning, I was at loss for words. I didn't want to believe it. The hospital tried to revive her, but they didn't know how long her heart had stopped. They resuscitated her and tried to get her to Kingston, but she didn't survive.

That whole week, I felt so numb, so weak, out of my body. It was so difficult to lose her, because I practically raised her. It was the hardest time of our lives. I lost hope. I felt lost, not knowing where she went.

We were raised by my grandparents. I lived with them all of my life. There was a lot of drinking going on in the house. The one thing she got mad about was the drinking.

After my sister died, I went into a deep depression. I drank heavily every day, to deal with the pain. My grandparents looked after my son. Eventually, I couldn't take it anymore and I decided to seek help through treatment. I've been on a long road. I got heavy into cocaine. Every time I drank, I wanted to kill myself. Today I've been clean and sober for a year and a half. It's given me the time to grieve.

I wanted a better life for my kids, without the influences that I grew up with. I'm dealing with my problems and issues. The children are happy. Now I take my kids to ceremonies. This is what helps me, the ceremonies. I want my children to have the life I never had, the opportunities I never had. My older son wanted to play hockey. He kept trying to skate until he learned. He never gave up. My son said he learned this attitude from me, to never give up.

This past summer we went to our first sundance. The buffalo dance was done, to help those who took their lives. We had to think about a loved one who had died by suicide.

I thought of my sister, and wondered whether it worked, whether it helped her. I sat down the bank, and a big butterfly flew around me. I knew right away that it was her, and this put my mind at ease. Every time I go home, I'm greeted by the same butterfly. I know it's her. My youngest one has never seen his auntie, except in a picture.

Suicide has impacted our family a lot. I hope our youth will get the attention they

need. Our community has been dealing with it for a long time. When one passes away, the whole community deals with it. I hope my children will never have to deal with it. I hope we can all heal in our community.

Thank you for listening.





## **INDEX:**

### **Stories that mention residential school:**

2. Today We're Talking About It;
4. Stable Marriages Are The Building Blocks;
5. Each Community Has Secrets;
6. I've Been There Myself;
8. You're Left With So Many Questions;
11. I Never Thought My Father Would Say He Was Sorry;
12. We Need To Be Beacons of Light;
13. How Will Life Be For Him?;
16. It Has To Be Community-Driven;
18. I Was Angry at Everyone;
20. When People Started Talking, It Gave Me Strength;
23. We Need To Walk A Good Path;
26. I'll Share This, Hoping It Will Leave Me;
27. True Healing Lies Within Our Culture;
28. The Cycle Never Ended;
29. We Need To Start A Movement In Our Communities;
30. Each Community Has Its Own Perspective;
31. We're Never Going To Be Okay If We Don't Talk Like This;
33. It Never Used To Happen Before;
34. We Need To Take Control As A Nation;
35. I Didn't Remember;
36. We See It, But How Do We Deal With It?;
38. I Am What I Am;
40. Our People Pull Together During Hardship;
41. My World Was Blown Apart;
42. The Dysfunction Needs To Be Reversed;
46. How You Are Raised Has An Impact On You, Later In Life;
48. I've Never Spoken About These Things;
49. The Light Will Not Be There;
50. Alcohol Had Devastating Effects On Our Families;
52. They Crave Understanding;
53. We Need To Talk Openly;
54. We Need To Make Every Effort To Help Them;

- 55. He Didn't Say Goodbye;
- 60. Our Youth Need To Become Proud;
- 68. I Finally Have Hope;
- 73. The Person Needs To Make The Decision To Change;
- 74. They Didn't Learn Parenting Skills;
- 75. I Kept It To Myself;
- 76. The More We Hide, The Sicker We Get

**Stories that mention sexual abuse:**

- 1. Nobody Wants To Die;
- 3. We Need To Work Together;
- 5. Each Community Has Secrets;
- 11. I Never Thought My Father Would Say He Was Sorry;
- 16. It Has To Be Community-Driven;
- 18. I Was Angry At Everyone;
- 20. When People Started Talking, It Gave Me Strength;
- 21. We Need To Walk The Talk;
- 26. I'll Share This, Hoping It Will Leave Me;
- 27. True Healing Lies Within Our Culture;
- 29. We Need To Start A Movement In Our Communities;
- 31. We're Never Going To Be Okay If We Don't Talk Like This;
- 35. I Didn't Remember;
- 37. We Need To Walk In Balance;
- 47. There Are A Lot Of Things We're In Denial About;
- 51. I Don't Know What To Do;
- 53. We Need To Talk Openly;
- 56. Early Intervention Works;
- 67. I'm Still Looking For My Identity;
- 68. I Finally Have Hope;
- 75. I Kept It To Myself;
- 76. The More We Hide, The Sicker We Get

**Stories that talk about substance abuse:**

- 1. Nobody Wants To Die;
- 2. Today We're Talking About It;

3. We Need To Work Together;
4. Stable Marriages Are The Building Blocks;
5. Each Community Has Secrets;
6. I've Been There Myself;
7. Change Needs To Happen In The Home;
10. I Pray For Strength;
11. I Never Thought My Father Would Say He Was Sorry;
12. We Need To Be Beacons Of Light;
13. How Will Life Be For Him?;
15. God Wants Us To Be In This World, And To Have A Good Life;
16. It Has To Be Community-Driven;
17. Only Time Will Allow Me To Heal;
18. I Was Angry At Everyone;
19. We're Just Waiting For The Next Call;
20. When People Started Talking, It Gave Me Strength;
25. We Need To Have This Dialogue;
26. I'll Share This, Hoping It Will Leave Me;
28. The Cycle Never Ended;
29. We Need To Start A Movement In Our Communities;
30. Each Community Has Its Own Perspective;
33. It Never Used To Happen Before;
35. I Didn't Remember;
36. We See It, But How Do We Deal With It?;
37. We Need To Walk In Balance;
38. I Am What I Am;
40. Our People Pull Together During Hardship;
43. There Was A Little Voice In My Head;
45. Whatever's Going On In The Family Will Affect Them;
46. How You Are Raised Has An Impact On You, Later In Life;
49. The Light Will Not Be There;
50. Alcohol Had Devastating Effects On Our Families;
51. I Don't Know What To Do;
54. We Need To Make Every Effort To Help Them;
55. He Didn't Say Goodbye;
56. Early Intervention Works;
58. Every Night I Fear The Worst;
59. Something Happened That Changed My Life;

- 60. Our Youth Need To Become Proud;
- 62. There's A Higher Power;
- 65. Every Tree Whispers Something;
- 66. A Story I Heard As A Child;
- 68. I Finally Have Hope;
- 69. It's Not Easy;
- 70. We Need To Find A Way;
- 71. It's Up To Each of Us To Help Make It Better;
- 72. Suicide Is Not The Will Of God;
- 73. The Person Needs To Make The Decision To Change;
- 74. They Didn't Learn Parenting Skills;
- 75. I Kept It To Myself;
- 77. It Was So Difficult To Lose Her

**Stories that mention parenting:**

- 1. Nobody Wants To Die;
- 2. Today We're Talking About It;
- 3. We Need To Work Together;
- 4. Stable Marriages Are The Building Blocks;
- 5. Each Community Has Secrets;
- 6. I've Been There Myself;
- 8. You're Left With So Many Questions;
- 11. I Never Thought My Father Would Say He Was Sorry;
- 12. We Need To Be Beacons Of Light;
- 13. How Will Life Be For Him;
- 14. We Can Make This Happen;
- 19. We're Just Waiting For The Next Call;
- 20. When People Started Talking, It Gave Me Strength;
- 21. We Need To Walk The Talk;
- 25. We Need To Have This Dialogue;
- 26. I'll Share This, Hoping It Will Leave Me;
- 27. True Healing Lies Within Our Culture;
- 28. The Cycle Never Ended;
- 30. Each Community Has Its Own Perspective;
- 31. We're Never Going To Be Okay If We Don't Talk Like This;
- 33. It Never Used To Happen Before;

35. I Didn't Remember;
36. We See It, But How Do We Deal With It?;
37. We Need To Walk In Balance;
39. She Just Needed Someone To Talk To;
40. Our People Pull Together During Hardship;
42. The Dysfunction Needs To Be Reversed;
43. There Was A Little Voice In My Head;
45. Whatever's Going On In The Family Will Affect Them;
47. There Are A Lot of Things We're In Denial About;
48. I've Never Spoken About These Things;
49. The Light Will Not Be There;
50. Alcohol Had Devastating Effects On Our Families;
52. They Crave Understanding;
53. We Need To Talk Openly;
54. We Need To Make Every Effort To Help Them;
55. He Didn't Say Goodbye;
56. Early Intervention Works;
58. Every Night I Fear The Worst;
59. Something Happened That Changed My Life;
63. I Was So Angry;
64. Where Do We Go When This Inquiry Is Finished?;
66. A Story I Heard As A Child;
67. I'm Still Looking For My Identity;
68. I Finally Have Hope;
70. We Need To Find A Way;
71. It's Up To Each Of Us To Make It Better;
72. Suicide Is Not The Will Of God;
73. The Person Needs To Make The Decision To Change;
74. They Didn't Learn Parenting Skills;
75. I Kept It To Myself;
76. The More We Hide, The Sicker We Get;
77. It Was So Difficult To Lose Her

**Stories that mention identity and culture:**

1. Nobody Wants To Die;
  2. Today We're Talking About It;
-

5. Each Community Has Secrets;
12. We Need To Be Beacons of Light;
13. How Will Life Be For Him?;
16. It Has To Be Community-Driven;
17. Only Time Will Allow Me To Heal;
21. We Need To Walk The Talk;
23. We Need To Walk A Good Path;
27. True Healing Lies Within Our Culture;
29. We Need To Start A Movement In Our Communities;
30. Each Community Has Its Own Perspective;
31. We're Never Going To Be Okay If We Don't Talk Like This;
33. It Never Used To Happen Before;
34. We Need To Take Control As A Nation;
36. We See It, But How Do We Deal With It?;
38. I Am What I Am;
40. Our People Pull Together During Hardship;
42. The Dysfunction Needs To Be Reversed;
45. Whatever's Going On In The Family Will Affect Them;
53. We Need To Talk Openly;
58. Every Night I Fear The Worst;
59. Something Happened That Changed My Life;
60. Our Youth Need To Become Proud;
64. Where Do We Go When This Inquiry Is Finished?;
65. Every Tree Whispers Something;
67. I'm Still Looking For My Identity;
69. It's Not Easy;
70. We Need To Find A Way;
71. It's Up To Each Of Us To Help Make It Better;
72. Suicide Is Not The Will Of God;
73. The Person Needs To Make The Decision To Change;
74. They Didn't Learn Parenting Skills;
75. I Kept It To Myself;
76. The More We Hide, The Sicker We Get

**Stories that mention lateral violence:**

13. How Will Life Be For Him?;

- 16. It Has To Be Community-Driven;
- 21. We Need To Walk The Talk;
- 27. True Healing Lies Within Our Culture;
- 28. The Cycle Never Ended;
- 31. We're Never Going To Be Okay If We Don't Talk Like This;
- 33. It Never Used To Happen Before;
- 34. We Need To Take Control As A Nation;
- 45. Whatever's Going On In The Family Will Affect Them;
- 47. There Are A Lot Of Things We're In Denial About;
- 53. We Need To Talk Openly;
- 60. Our Youth Need To Become Proud;
- 72. Suicide Is Not The Will Of God

**Stories that talk about communication:**

- 4. Stable Marriages Are The Building Blocks;
- 11. I Never Thought My Father Would Say He Was Sorry;
- 15. God Wants Us To Be In This World, And To Have A Good Life;
- 16. It Has To Be Community-Driven;
- 30. Each Community Has Its Own Perspective;
- 34. We Need To Take Control As A Nation;
- 37. We Need To Walk In Balance;
- 42. The Dysfunction Needs To Be Reversed;
- 43. There Was A Little Voice In My Head;
- 45. Whatever's Going On In The Family Will Affect Them;
- 49. The Light Will Not Be There;
- 52. They Crave Understanding;
- 53. We Need To Talk Openly;
- 69. It's Not Easy;
- 75. I Kept It To Myself

**Stories that mention resources and funding:**

- 1. Nobody Wants To Die;
- 14. We Can Make This Happen;
- 19. We're Just Waiting For The Next Call;
- 27. True Healing Lies Within Our Culture;

- 30. Each Community Has Its Own Perspective;
- 34. We Need To Take Control As A Nation;
- 36. We See It, But How Do We Deal With It?;
- 42. The Dysfunction Needs To Be Reversed;
- 45. Whatever's Going On In The Family Will Affect Them;
- 56. Early Intervention Works;
- 61. I Know What It's Like In There
- 67. I'm Still Looking For My Identity;
- 73. The Person Needs To Make The Decision To Change

**Stories that mention bullying:**

- 2. Today We're Talking About It;
- 3. We Need To Work Together;
- 27. True Healing Lies Within Our Culture;
- 37. We Need To Walk In Balance;
- 51. I Don't Know What To Do

**Stories that mention mental health:**

- 1. Nobody Wants To Die;
- 3. We Need To Work Together;
- 10. I Pray For Strength;
- 12. We Need To Be Beacons of Light;
- 14. We Can Make This Happen;
- 25. We Need To Have This Dialogue;
- 27. True Healing Lies Within Our Culture;
- 29. We Need To Start A Movement In Our Communities;
- 30. Each Community Has Its Own Perspective;
- 31. We're Never Going To Be Okay If We Don't Talk Like This;
- 37. We Need To Walk In Balance;
- 43. There Was A Little Voice In My Head;
- 45. Whatever's Going On In The Family Will Affect Them;
- 46. How You Are Raised Has An Impact On You, Later In Life;
- 47. There Are A Lot Of Things We're In Denial About;
- 51. I Don't Know What To Do;
- 53. We Need To Talk Openly;



- 54. We Need To Make Every Effort To Help Them;
- 55. He Didn't Say Goodbye;
- 56. Early Intervention Works;
- 61. I Know What It's Like In There;
- 66. A Story I Heard As A Child;
- 72. Suicide Is Not The Will Of God;
- 74. They Didn't Learn Parenting Skills

**Stories that talk about the gay or two-spirited community:**

- 31. We're Never Going To Be Okay If We Don't Talk Like This;
- 38. I Am What I am

**Stories that mention family violence:**

- 11. I Never Thought My Father Would Say He Was Sorry;
- 28. The Cycle Never Ended;
- 29. We Need To Start A Movement In Our Communities;
- 31. We're Never Going To Be Okay If We Don't Talk Like This;
- 33. It Never Used To Happen Before;
- 34. We Need To Take Control As A Nation;
- 45. Whatever's Going On In The Family Will Affect Them;
- 47. There Are A Lot Of Things We're In Denial About;
- 50. Alcohol Had Devastating Effects On Our Families;
- 53. We Need To Talk Openly;
- 54. We Need To Make Every Effort To Help Them;
- 60. Our Youth Need To Become Proud;
- 72. Suicide Is Not The Will Of God

**Stories that mention housing:**

- 11. I Never Thought My Father Would Say He Was Sorry;
- 27. True Healing Lies Within Our Culture;
- 34. We Need To Take Control As A Nation;
- 40. Our People Pull Together During Hardship;
- 71. It's Up To Each Of Us To Help Make It Better

**Stories that mention education:**

- 11. I Never Thought My Father Would Say He Was Sorry;
- 27. True Healing Lies Within Our Culture;
- 38. I Am What I Am;
- 51. I Don't Know What To Do;
- 57. Life Has Changed So Much;
- 73. The Person Needs To Make The Decision To Change

**Stories that mention the land:**

- 1. Nobody Wants To Die;
- 2. Today We're Talking About It;
- 5. Each Community Has Secrets;
- 8. You're Left With So Many Questions;
- 11. I Never Thought My Father Would Say He Was Sorry;
- 13. How Will Life Be For Him?;
- 14. We Can Make This Happen;
- 18. I Was Angry At Everyone;
- 21. We Need To Walk The Talk;
- 23. We Need To Walk A Good Path;
- 26. I'll Share This, Hoping It Will Leave Me;
- 27. True Healing Lies Within Our Culture;
- 29. We Need To Start A Movement In Our Communities;
- 30. Each Community Has Its Own Perspectives;
- 34. We Need To Take Control As A Nation;
- 38. I Am What I Am;
- 40. Our People Pull Together During Hardship;
- 46. How You Are Raised Has An Impact On You, Later In Life;
- 48. I've Never Spoken About These Things;
- 61. I Know What It's Like In There;
- 65. Every Tree Whispers Something;
- 67. I'm Still Looking For My Identity;
- 69. It's Not Easy;
- 70. We Need To Find A Way;
- 71. It's Up To Each of Us To Make It Better;
- 76. The More We Hide, The Sicker We Get

**Stories that mention grief:**

2. Today We're Talking About it;
3. We Need To Work Together;
9. I'm Still Trying To Deal With It;
14. We Can Make This Happen;
17. Only Time Will Allow Me To Heal;
21. We Need To Walk The Talk;
22. Sharing Circles Would Be Good;
24. It Can Take Up To Seven Years;
25. We Need To Have This Dialogue;
26. I'll Share This, Hoping It Will Leave Me;
34. We Need To Take Control As A Nation;
48. I've Never Spoken About These Things
51. I Don't Know What To Do;
52. They Crave Understanding;
54. We Need To Make Every Effort To Help Them;
55. He Didn't Say Goodbye;
59. Something Happened That Changed My Life;
61. I Know What It's Like In There;
63. I Was So Angry;
64. Where Do We Go When This Inquiry Is Finished?;
69. It's Not Easy;
74. They Didn't Learn Parenting Skills;
75. I Kept It To Myself;
76. The More We Hide, The Sicker We Get

# Our People's Stories

Nobody Wants to Die. They Want the Pain to Stop  
THE PEOPLE'S INQUIRY INTO OUR SUICIDE PANDEMIC

