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& Part II)*

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Kokum's House (Part I)

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Kokum's House

APRIL ISADORE

Kyptah gapeeksquan, Kiipapahick meeqwatch igoocheeyaan ta nah heeyowweeyaan*

Translation:

Wait I will speak, don't laugh I am learning to speak my language.

Tansi Indootemuk, niya kaapmehaataskiskew
Nihtatkikaw Sipy Oohchi neeya
Nanaskomon anooch utta kii yii yaan

Translation:

Hello Everyone, My name is Flying Earth Woman, I am from Driftpile River, I am thankful to be here today.

I. HISTORY OF MY LIFE IN THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM

I was born on my reserve of Driftpile, Alberta. I was about the age of four or five years, when child welfare removed me from my Reserve & my family unit due to alcoholism and lack of food. (I remember eating out of a garbage can behind the school.) The Principal called Social Services. We got tricked into getting in the car by SW. I grew up in many homes (mainly non-Aboriginal) during my time in the child welfare system and have come to realize that things have not changed much in the last forty years.

I realize now how the effects of the residential school system has impacted myself, my family, and many other First Nations people, but most importantly our current structure of the Child Welfare system. We have grown into a business of dissecting the family unit rather than focusing on keeping the families together as they go through struggles or transitions such as: addictions, grief & loss, family violence, parenting, accessing employment, educational and or counselling needs.

I decided to be part of the solution in some way and I opened up my own group home & called it "Kokum's House" in honour of my Mother who had been raised in the Mission as a young girl.

My siblings and I were removed from my mother's care and I know firsthand the trauma of being removed from my home and community and subsequently being placed in mostly non-Aboriginal homes.

I understand about the erosion of culture, identity, and language while in care and have made it my priority to ensure that children in the care of Kokum's House will retain their cultural identity.

I have a two-year diploma in Addictions Services & am certified as a Childcare Supervisor with the province of Alberta.

* Please note the Cree wording is not spelled correctly, but it is in a way I can pronounce it easier.

I am a strong advocate for siblings to remain together. I was removed from my home as a child due to issues of alcoholism, family violence, and poverty. I was placed originally back on my reserve with a police officer and a teacher where not too long after I was sexually abused from the age of seven to fourteen years of age. When I finally got enough courage to tell someone who I thought was in a position of authority to do anything nothing happened.

I struggled with addictions, became clean and charged the abuser who was now a police commissioner & (the Chief's brother) at the time and won in Queen's Bench after thirty-three years. So I know what living in fear feels like. My Journey was one of Justice & Forgiveness. Weighing the odds in terms of apprehensions (ponder the question).

For me the saddest part of growing up in the system is being separated as children and now I grow up not really knowing my mother, my siblings and I'm fifty years old and I'm still finding out who I'm related too. And only now am I starting to learn to speak my Cree language. This is what I believe led me to the path of opening my group home. I always felt that I shouldn't have ever left. I never should have been taken away from my reserve, my culture, my family connections. Because at the time my parents weren't well, but it didn't mean I had to leave my reserve.

Now I have space at my house. Where children who were apprehended can stay there, they don't have to leave their community. They're still close to their aunts and uncles and kokums ... as opposed to being taken from their communities. It was actually the home I was living in, and I turned it into a group home. It's a three bedroom, just a normal house.

The reason why I opened up a group home on my Nation was so that children & youth can stay on the Reserve—for example, I never should have to leave my reserve, my family, my language & cultural way of life simply because my parents weren't well at the time.

I also support that we have our control of our First Nation Child Services—however it has been my observation that some DFNA Directors misuse their power to financially benefit their close family members *i.e.*, ensuring they become licensed foster homes or group homes. To add to that comment, I am now an Elected Leader for my Nation & my goal is to ensure the Government recognizes that our existing child welfare structure must change, not only with Jurisdictional funding discrepancies but to focus on Treating & Healing the Family as a whole & in their own communities. We as Indigenous people have to take back the control of our own children rather than allowing the Provincial governments to dictate who and how long our children remain in care. WE NEED TO GO BACK TO OUR INHERENT & TREATY RIGHTS.



Kokum's House

I had a vision of what I wanted my logo to look like, so I approached my cousin Leni Isadore and gifted him with some tobacco and the drawing was sideways and why I specifically wanted my logo to be only in Black & White (for positives & negatives in life).

What my Kokum's House logo represents:
My Indian name is, Kaapmehaataskiskew

Flying Earth Woman represents the Eagle
The Bear is to honour the male ancestors
The Wolf is to honour the Woman ancestors
And each Eagle feather represents each one of my children
And Kokum's House is in Honour of my Mother who was forced into a residential school from the age of nine because her mom died of TB.

II. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CHILD WELFARE STRUCTURE CHANGE PERTAINING TO CHILDREN & FAMILIES

While children are in care the Agency must ensure that constant family contact is there *i.e.*: daily, weekly or bi weekly, with monthly family visits.

Follow up with families after discharge to ensure the family has a solid support network and assist with accessing resources for educational, employment and/ or counselling services.

Get medical appointments done with a medical doctor within three months after discharging a family from the child welfare system

Recommendations for Child Welfare structure change pertaining to DFNAS / and other Child enhancement program:

When a Director / CFSW is related to a child /family they need to step aside so proper protocols of the Family Enhancement Act can be properly addressed rather than placing the child(ren) more at risk.

Clothing, recreational & educational needs of a child are often never given – within the expected time line or not at all.

Have to be more supportive rather than implementing fear tactics to set up parents/families to fail and in some cases may not get their children back, thus keeping the Aboriginal family unit divided until the children grow up not knowing their cultural identity, language, or their place or role in the family unit. In such cases this situation is no better than the Residential School Era.

I observed that directors of our DFNAS a lot of times have close family members open up foster homes and group homes and place kids in there because they have that authority. And I don't think that's right at all.

I know on some level We as First Nations people have learned to discriminate against each other.

Kaamatchee kinoweemiaqwow tooteam nawuk

Translation:

We gotta start keeping our families together.

In closing, I would like to share a poem I had written in 1978 which is more than forty years ago now. I was twelve or thirteen years of age and transitioning to yet another foster home. I feel the words in this poem still rings true today for many children in care.

FOSTER CHILD

Can you tell me where my real home is? I'd really like to know,
All my life I been a foster child with no place in mind to go
I was raised in many places, I was treated all the same, I was treated like a teddy bear than put
out in the cold.
Can you tell me where my real home is? I'd really like to know,
All my life I been a foster child with no place in mind to go
People ask the same old question, "Are you still living there with them?"
I turn my head with no mention and bow my head to pray,
Can you tell me where my real home is? I'd really like to know,
All my life I been a foster child with no place in mind to go....