National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls
Truth-Gathering Process
Part 1 Public Hearings
Riverlodge Place
Thompson, Manitoba

Tuesday March 20, 2018

Public Volume 74
Rita Thomas & Mark Thomas,
In Relation to Marina Spence

Heard by Commissioner Michèle Audette
Commission Counsel: Christa Big Canoe

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MS. CHRISTA BIG CANOE: Good afternoon [sic]. Commissioner Audette, I would like to introduce you to the next family. Sitting right beside me is Mark Thomas and beside him is his wife, Rita Thomas. Today Rita and Mark will be sharing the story of Rita’s sister, Marina Spence. Marina at the age of 17 went missing back in August 1990 from the foster care system.

And so before we get started, I’d ask that the Registrar swear in the witness.

MR. REGISTRAR: Good afternoon, Mark, I see you’re holding the Bible already, so I’ll begin with you.

MARK THOMAS, Sworn:

MR. REGISTRAR: Thank you. And if you could just pass the Bible to Rita.

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: (Indiscernible) here.

MR. REGISTRAR: Oh, you’ve got -- both of you? Okay, all right, they’re multiplying.

RITA THOMAS, Sworn:

MR. REGISTRAR: Okay. Thank you.

MS. CHRISTA BIG CANOE: And, Commissioner Audette, before we actually start hearing the truth from this family, we -- we kindly ask that Debra Merasty start with a prayer.
--- OPENING PRAYER

**MS. CHRISTA BIG CANOE:** So, Rita, I understand that you really today want to speak about Marina, but before we start talking about her strengths and your fond memories, can I ask you a couple of questions about your background and where you’re from? So where are you from?

**MS. RITA THOMAS:** I am from South Indian Lake.

**MS. CHRISTA BIG CANOE:** Whereabouts is South Indian Lake? From here, how far is that?

**MS. RITA THOMAS:** A three-hour drive.

**MS. CHRISTA BIG CANOE:** Okay. And does the community always have a year-round road? Is it accessible? Is it fly-in?

**MS. RITA THOMAS:** Yeah, we have a 24-hour ferry.

**MS. CHRISTA BIG CANOE:** A 24-hour ferry? And is South Indian Lake large? Does it have, like, more than one store in it?

**MS. RITA THOMAS:** No, it’s a very small community and, yeah, we do have a store.

**MS. CHRISTA BIG CANOE:** Okay. So I understand that when you were growing up, you -- you have a number of siblings. You have five siblings, right?
MS. RITA THOMAS: Yeah.

MS. CHRISTA BIG CANOE: How many brothers and sisters do you have?

MS. RITA THOMAS: I have one brother and I have four sisters living plus my deceased sister.

MS. CHRISTA BIG CANOE: And so can you tell me a little bit about your childhood growing up in South Indian Lake?

MS. RITA THOMAS: Growing up was hard.

MS. CHRISTA BIG CANOE: It’s okay. Take your time.

MS. RITA THOMAS: I lived in a home where there was a lot of alcohol and drugs and violence.

MS. CHRISTA BIG CANOE: I understand that you’re one of the older siblings; is that true?

MS. RITA THOMAS: Yes, I’m one of the oldest. My sister, Marina was the oldest.

MS. CHRISTA BIG CANOE: Did you and Marina spend a lot of time helping raise and take care of your younger siblings?

MS. RITA THOMAS: Yeah, we were the main caregivers for our -- for our siblings.

MS. CHRISTA BIG CANOE: And that’s -- that’s because you were touching on the fact that there was a lot of alcohol in the home. So did you often find yourself
being the caregiver for the other four siblings?

MS. RITA THOMAS: Yes, when my -- my granny wasn’t around, me and my older sisters -- my older sister would be the ones to look after the kids, but mainly it was my grandmother that raised us.

MS. CHRISTA BIG CANOE: Did either of your parents attend Indian Residential School or have any impacts in their life?

MS. RITA THOMAS: Yeah, my mom told me stories about being in residential school.

MS. CHRISTA BIG CANOE: I’m going to guess those stories weren’t great stories. Were they stories of abuse?

MS. RITA THOMAS: Yes.

MS. CHRISTA BIG CANOE: So your mother had a hard time coping with some of the pain she was dealing with from her school experience?

MS. RITA THOMAS: Yeah.

MS. CHRISTA BIG CANOE: And you mentioned your granny, so when you said your -- when your granny was around, did your granny live in South Indian Lake too?

MS. RITA THOMAS: She lived in the same house as us.

MS. CHRISTA BIG CANOE: So when she was there, she was really the person that helped provide
guidance and care?

MS. RITA THOMAS: Yes.

MS. CHRISTA BIG CANOE: Would she have to go away from time to time to visit other family?

MS. RITA THOMAS: Yeah, she used to leave every summer to go to Nelson House and look after her brother.

MS. CHRISTA BIG CANOE: Would she take all the kids with her?

MS. RITA THOMAS: No, she would always take my sister, Marina, the oldest. That was her -- her girl then. She always looked after Marina.

MS. CHRISTA BIG CANOE: I understand that you lost your mom too, that your mom passed away when you were about 15. Can you just tell us a little bit about that?

MS. RITA THOMAS: Yeah, my mom passed away when I was 15 years old and from there, my granny and my dad looked after us.

MS. CHRISTA BIG CANOE: I understand around the time you were 15, a bunch of things happened all at once. So first you lost your mom and then what happened?

MS. RITA THOMAS: Well, first I lost my mom and then after my mom passed away, CFS apprehended all of us, even though my granny was there to look after us. And
she was the one that always looked after us. And I don’t know why CFS had to take us away from her because she was always our mother. She’s the one that looked out for us and did everything for us.

**MS. CHRISTA BIG CANOE:** So when you guys were apprehended by the -- when you say, “CFS”, that’s the Child and Family Services here in Manitoba?

**MS. RITA THOMAS:** Yes.

**MS. CHRISTA BIG CANOE:** Okay. So when he CFS took you all away, did they take you all at once?

**MS. RITA THOMAS:** No, my dad was at home with the other kids and my granny -- my granny and I went to Nelson House to go visit her brother. And while we were in Nelson House, my siblings got apprehended from CFS.

And we came -- me and my granny came to Thompson to come and see my siblings and when we got here, they took me and they paid my granny’s way home. And my granny was heartbroken there too.

**MS. CHRISTA BIG CANOE:** So you then found yourself here in Thompson with your siblings. Where were you guys all staying?

**MS. RITA THOMAS:** I was put in the Marymound and my two sisters were taken to Wabowden and my older sister was put -- put in the YWCA to stay by herself because she was 17 years old. And she told CFS that she
Rita Thomas & Mark Thomas
(Marina Spence)

didn’t want to be in care anymore because she was 17 and she was turning 18 that next month. In September she was going to be 18, but the social worker insisted that she stay at the Y and learn to live on her own. She told them she wanted to live on her own, but not here. She wanted to go home, back to South Indian, but they wouldn’t get -- they wouldn’t let her.

MS. CHRISTA BIG CANOE: Were you still at the Y or were you somewhere else at that time -- sorry, were you also at the Y, and the “Y” being YMCA [sic]? Is that what it was?

MS. RITA THOMAS: No, I was -- I was placed at the Marymound.

MS. CHRISTA BIG CANOE: So you guys weren’t even actually at the same spot, even though you both in Thompson?

MS. RITA THOMAS: No, we were all separated.

MS. CHRISTA BIG CANOE: Okay. So before we get into when Marina went missing, can you tell us a little bit about some of her strengths? Some of the things that you want everybody to know about who your sister was?

MS. RITA THOMAS: My sister was -- my sister was a beautiful, loving person. She did anything for us because she was the oldest. She guided us and she made sure that we were okay. Both me and her looked after the
kids, but she was -- she was the one that kept us together. She was always there for us and she had a lot of friends. She had a lot of good friends. And she was a good -- she was good. She didn’t, you know, go out and party and all that.

It was when we came to Thompson, just meeting new people and, they -- we started drinking with them and stuff.

Yeah, but we had a hard time losing my mom and we were trying to -- we were trying to go back to South Indian and asking, Why, why can’t we go to South Indian? Why do we have to be in Thompson? And the social worker told us that nobody wanted us over there and my granny was still over there, she wanted us, but they said that she as too old to look after us. But she was more -- more than capable of -- of still looking after us, but they never gave -- gave us that choice to stay in South Indian and be with our granny.

**MS. CHRISTA BIG CANOE:** So you guys were actually not -- you were the two oldest, but you were close in age, right? You’re only -- how -- how old apart are you?

**MS. RITA THOMAS:** She is a year apart. Me and her were a year apart. She was the oldest.

**MS. CHRISTA BIG CANOE:** And so when you
found yourself here in Thompson, your sister is at the Y, you’re at another house, did you ever get a chance to still see each other?

**MS. RITA THOMAS:** Every day, every chance we had. As soon as I get up, she’d get up, we’d go look for each other right away. We -- we always looked after each other and wanted to be together and -- because we were close, we were always together, all our lives and all of a sudden, we weren’t.

**MS. CHRISTA BIG CANOE:** Did you want to share with the Commissioner about when your sister actually went missing in August 1990?

**MS. RITA THOMAS:** Well, on -- we went out drinking and we got drunk and then the next morning I got up, I was in jail. I was in jail. I got up. I could barely move, I was just weak. My body was sore. And right away, the first person that came to mind was my sister, Marina. I was, like, Where’s my sister? Is she here or is she a different cell? He said, No, you’re the only one here.

And then CFS came and picked me up, but I knew that something was wrong because my heart just hurt. I knew that something was wrong. I asked them, I said -- I said, You have to find my sister. She’s at the Y, can somebody go see if she’s there? Because they wouldn’t let
me go out when I got back to the Marymound.

And they kept me in the Marymound for five days, not letting me go out to go look for her or at least go ask around for her. They didn’t allow me. And I just got so tired of nobody listening to me, so I fought my way out of the Marymound, I fought those workers.

And I ran straight to the -- I ran straight to the police station and I was just buzzing and buzzing and there’s no answer. All of a sudden I heard a voice coming from the wall, asking me what I wanted and I told them about my sister. My sister -- I haven’t seen my sister in -- I don’t know where she is, but I know that something is wrong and I need somebody to help me.

And then he says, Press the button when you’re talking to me because I was just talking to a wall, to a speaker. And I said, Well, are you going to do something? I said, are you going to look for my sister? And he says, Yeah, well, we’ll get back to you.

About a week or two, a police officer came and -- a police officer came and talked to me and took a statement and that was it. That was it. I did never hear from the cops again or -- and I kept telling he social worker, I kept telling him too, I said, Where’s my sister? I said, You know, Marina is missing, I said, And I already told the cops and he was just so upset with me. He says,
Why did you go to the cops? Why are you making things up?
I said, I’m not making anything up, I said, I know something is wrong with my sister or she’s somewhere missing. I said, You need to find her. And he -- he told me, he says, You don’t say -- go tell the cops that your sister is missing. Your sister is in Leaf Rapids and she’s going to be at the Family Court on Wednesday.

And then I felt better -- I felt better for a while. I was just so happy that he said that she was in Leaf Rapids. And right away my plan was to run away to Leaf Rapids and go see her.

And then Wednesday came, I was sitting at the Family Court, every time that door opened, I’d look -- looking for my sister. No, the court is almost ending and it’s, like, Where’s my sister? I said that real loud. You said, She was going to be here. And he says, Settle down, why are you making a big deal out of your sister? She’s somewhere. She said she was going to make it and she didn’t. I was, like, Is that what she said? She said she was going to be here? No, she had a subpoena to come to Family Court. And I said, Well, you said he wasn’t -- you said that she was in Leaf Rapids, is she still over there? And then he didn’t say nothing to me because he lied to me.
He lied that he said that Marina was in Leaf Rapids and Marina wasn’t even over there. He had no clue where Marina
was, but yet he lied to me, trying to -- I don’t know.

I don’t even know why she had to be in care, she’s -- she was going to be of age the next month. And he says, No, I want her to live independently. My sister said, I can live independently at home. I can go live with my granny. But he said, No, this is what’s best for you. There’s nothing in South Indian. There’s more to do around here.

**MS. CHRISTA BIG CANOE:** Okay. I’m going to take a step back to -- I just want to -- to ask a couple of questions, when you were talking about when you went to report to the police your sister was missing, you said you were talking to a wall and that you had to talk to a button. So when you got to the detachment, that was here in Thompson, did they let you in?

**MS. RITA THOMAS:** No, they didn’t let me in. I just spoke to them through their speaker. That’s how I made my statement, my report for a missing -- a missing --

**MS. CHRISTA BIG CANOE:** So you’re standing outside, looking at a brick wall, a little speaker with a button. You press the button to talk and then the officer asks you questions. What were the types of questions the police officer asked you?

**MS. RITA THOMAS:** They asked me when the last I was with her and does she usually take off with not
letting anybody know or did -- was she a runaway? And I was, like, No, no, she wasn’t.

MS. CHRISTA BIG CANOE: Can -- can I ask you a question, Mark?

MR. MARK THOMAS: M’hm.

MS. CHRISTA BIG CANOE: Because when you first told me this, I was like, What do you mean you were standing outside the police detachment? How long was the police detachment like that, where you had to walk up and press a button here in Thompson; do you know?

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: No.

MR. MARK THOMAS: No, I wouldn’t know.

MS. CHRISTA BIG CANOE: No? Are you aware if they’ve recently made changes though?

MR. MARK THOMAS: Yeah, they have a glass there now and you can walk in and then you still have to wait for the cops to talk to.

MS. CHRISTA BIG CANOE: But now you can actually walk into a space more recently?

MR. MARK THOMAS: Yeah.

MS. CHRISTA BIG CANOE: And you can actually physically see a police officer?

MR. MARK THOMAS: Yeah.

MS. CHRISTA BIG CANOE: Okay. If a Native person was going to press that button, would they stand
outside? And do you know if they were non-Native, would they be let in?

MR. MARK THOMAS: Yeah. Yeah, they’d probably be let in right away, if they were non-Native. It’s just the appearance of a Native person that always -- like, you know, makes the cops go -- I don’t know, just make their hair stand up, I guess you can say.

MS. CHRISTA BIG CANOE: So was that like a -- a really bad assumption, that every Native person might be a safety risk or what do you think is working there?

MR. MARK THOMAS: Well, I don’t know.

MS. CHRISTA BIG CANOE: Fair enough. So I also understand that you guys first got together, you’re husband and wife now, but it’s around the same time frame, maybe after Marina goes missing that you guys get together, but, you know, each other, right, before? It was before?

MR. MARK THOMAS: Before, yeah.

MS. CHRISTA BIG CANOE: So you guys have been together since the ‘90s?

MR. MARK THOMAS: Yeah.

MS. CHRISTA BIG CANOE: Yeah? So what were some of the things once she was able to finally get out of the house, what were the ways that you or your family were able to, kind of, help provide some support, so that Rita
had some other help?

MR. MARK THOMAS: Well, my auntie had, like, a search party going on, on the -- in Thompson here. Like, getting volunteers to come and help her to search for her sister.

MS. CHRISTA BIG CANOE: And when you say your auntie helped set up a search, what does that look like? Is that, like, he working with the police or is it working -- her working with only the community? Who was doing the searching?

MR. MARK THOMAS: It was her and just the volunteers that were searching. The police weren’t even helping. They said they were too busy. They were too busy to look for a Native girl, I guess.

MS. CHRISTA BIG CANOE: Was there ever a -- a -- did they just assume she as runaway maybe?

MR. MARK THOMAS: I guess so, yeah, for sure. That’s all they assumed is a runaway.

MS. CHRISTA BIG CANOE: And your aunt, why did she decide to help?

MR. MARK THOMAS: Well, the -- because nobody was -- nobody was doing nothing about it, so she stepped up and started looking for her.

MS. CHRISTA BIG CANOE: Wow, good aunt. A good aunt to help that way. And there was other community
members too that were helping to search?

MR. MARK THOMAS: Yeah.

MS. CHRISTA BIG CANOE: Okay. Rita, after -- after you made the report, you told the Commissioner just now that the C -- CFS was upset with you about telling the police and for saying things. Like, Don’t make up stories. How did that make you feel?

MS. RITA THOMAS: It made me angry. I was really upset with him. I was so upset with him that I attacked him and I told him that he didn’t care and why did he have to take us away from South Indian and then bring us here and start lying to us and giving me heck for making up stories.

And I didn’t even make up any stories, all I said was, My sister is missing. And he thought that -- he says, You know, you can’t -- you don’t -- you’re going to get me into trouble for this. He never ever gave me any straight answers. And I kept bugging him, I said, Please, just get somebody to look for Marina. He says, Why do you keep saying that she’s missing? I was, like, Well, if she wasn’t -- if she wasn’t missing, she’d be here with me, she’s always with me. We’re always together and this is not her, not to come and find me or to go. And, if anything, if she was going to leave Thompson, she would go home. She would go home and be with my granny.
She never -- he never listened to anything that I said. I just kept begging him. I just kept begging, Please, just try and find Marina. No.

I ran -- ran away home to South Indian just going everywhere, asking people, Did you see Marina? Do you -- no? Asking people that knew her, Did Marina come here? Did Marina call you? Nobody knew where she was, nobody seen her. Then I had to go back the next day. I was only there one day and the RCMP came to look for me to go back to -- to come back here to Thompson. And they put me on a bus in Leaf Rapids to come here.

And Klaus (ph), the social worker -- his name was Klaus Buhler (ph) was at the bus depot waiting for me and then he looked at me, What a waste of a trip, right? Did you find her over there? I said, Leaf Rapids. I was, like, What would my sister be doing in Leaf Rapids, there’s nobody there for her. And I just kept telling him, I was, like, Why can’t you help me find Marina? You’re the one that brought her here. You’re the one that brought her here, why can’t you do anything about it? And he says, I can’t -- that’s not my job, my job is to look after you. I was, like, Well, why didn’t you look after my sister? And why is it so hard for you to get the RCMP or somebody to look -- look for her. But he just kept -- he just kept lying. I never believed anything he said after that.
MS. CHRISTA BIG CANOE: It’s interesting too because they managed to send somebody to find you to bring you back, so do you find it frustrating that they couldn’t send someone to look for your sister?

MS. RITA THOMAS: Yeah, that’s what I mean, it was fast for them to come and get me because I got there that day and I went walking around, asking around for my sister. And that night -- that night, the RCMP came and look for me. They took me to Leaf to go on the bus back here.

That’s what I told Klaus, I said, You got the RCMP to come and look for me and someone is missing, my sister is missing, how come you’re not getting the RCMP to go look for her? It’s, like, you knew where I was, you didn’t need the RCMP to come and look for me. You should have looked for my sister, she’s the one that’s missing. I was only going there to go try and find her.

MS. CHRISTA BIG CANOE: I understand at one point, there was some information on the radio about your sister. Can you tell us a little bit about that, the Commissioner a little bit about that?

MS. RITA THOMAS: It was my husband’s auntie that put something on the radio, just asking to see if anybody seen Marina or know her whereabouts. Nobody -- nobody knew nothing.
MS. CHRISTA BIG CANOE: Was there -- at the time, was there talk that maybe she was a runaway?

MS. RITA THOMAS: Yeah, they labelled -- labelled her as a runaway, but that wasn’t my sister. My sister didn’t run away. She -- she was the responsible one. She was the one that stayed home and looked after everything.

Me, I was -- I was different from my sister. I -- I ran away. I used to run away from home. I got tired of being the parent. I got tired of the violence. I got tired of the alcohol. I got tired of everything, so I -- I used to run away, but not -- not my sister. She would be so scared to leave my siblings. She had to stay and look after them.

MS. CHRISTA BIG CANOE: So I understand, you know, years pass, about ten years pass and you don’t have any luck in finding Marina, but eventually her remains were discovered. Can you tell us a little bit about that, please?

MS. RITA THOMAS: I don’t know -- I don’t really know much about it, all I know is that somebody was fishing at the Burntwood Bridge, pulled up some remains, but they didn’t let anybody know until three months later when they identified her through her dental records.

And then I was at work and my husband came
and looked for me and told me that my sister’s remains were
-- were found. I was -- I was happy at this. I was happy
that we found her remains, but I was hurt because I didn’t
have my sister no more. And I was happy to be able to bury
my sister properly.

**MS. CHRISTA BIG CANOE:** So Mark came to tell
you, does that mean the police didn’t actually notify you,
the next of kin?

**MS. RITA THOMAS:** No, the constables, the
community constables were the ones that come to tell me and
Mark was with them.

We had a funeral -- we had a funeral for her
and my dad had a hard time. My dad never talks about it.
He never -- he never -- he doesn’t express his feelings and
he never talks about it and he still drinks every day to
this day. Not at -- I don’t think he’s accepting it. I
don’t know, he just doesn’t show no feelings, no nothing,
which can just -- the sadness is in his eyes because my dad
is a quiet guy. He’s hurt, he just doesn’t -- he doesn’t
express his feelings.

**MS. CHRISTA BIG CANOE:** How about your
grandma?

**MS. RITA THOMAS:** My granny? My granny
passed away -- my granny passed away before they even found
my sister’s remains. She died a year after that -- after
my sister went missing. My granny went into a big
depression and she died of a broken heart because her baby
was gone. Nobody knew where she was.

**MS. CHRISTA BIG CANOE:** Is it okay if we
talk about some of the impacts this has all had on your
life and in your relationship?

**MS. RITA THOMAS:** (No audible response).

**MS. CHRISTA BIG CANOE:** Yeah? How were you
coping with the pain when your sister went missing?

**MS. RITA THOMAS:** My sister went missing, I
gave up on everything. I drank. I drank every day of my
life since I was 17. I did drugs. I had two -- two of my
own children that I didn’t look after. My mother-in-law
raised my children, my two kids. I neglected my kids
because all I did was drink and do drugs. I didn’t want to
live. I tried so hard so many times to end my life. I
could never succeed and I’d always get up and I was like,
Ah, why do I still have to be alive?

Practically everybody that I loved so much
was gone. My mom was gone, my sister was gone, my granny
was gone. I was in a foster home, but I got out of the
system on my own. I went to court when I was 16 and then
they let me go on my own. I was no longer with CFS because
I told the courts I didn’t want to be in CFS and I didn’t
want to be in Thompson.
I had a rough life. I never really wanted to be -- to have a life. It took me so long to sober up. I’m 43 right now. I quit drinking when I was 31. And then when I quit drinking, my kids come to live with me and I started drinking again and that’s all I did is drink and it destroyed my children.

My son is in -- in jail right now. He -- he also was struggling with alcohol and drugs. And that’s when I finally realized who the Lord was because I had nobody to turn to. And this woman here introduced me to the Lord, so now I don’t try and turn to the bottle or to drugs, I give it all to God. I put it all in God’s hands.

I have a -- I have four beautiful granddaughters. My son had two daughters and my daughter had two daughters, a set of twins. And my daughter named one of her twin after her Auntie Marina. And my son-in-law named the other twin after his Auntie Dawn, Dawn Anderson that was mentioned this morning.

She -- Dawn was one of Marina’s good friends. She was also my friend too. We lived in the same street. And that’s somewhere we would run to too when there was something happening at the house.

I thought I put this in my past, I thought I just let it -- I let it go. I used to always try and share my story with people or -- but when I was drinking, I
guess, like, all these years, I would always -- tried to talk about my sister and I just, you know, I realized that some people don’t care. They don’t want to hear. It’s, like, That’s okay, that’s the past, forget about it. People kept telling me that. Just forget about it, it’s the past. How are you going to bring her back? And I did, I forgot about it, I left it behind me.

Sometimes I’ll tell stories about her, people would -- didn’t even know I had a sister, Marina. They’d say, Marina, what -- what happened to her? And I would tell them. That’s how forgotten my sister was and still is because nobody was there to voice for her. I wasn’t there to voice for her because I was busy drinking, not caring about anything, not caring about myself, my children, but I know for a fact that CFS failed my family and the RCMP.

MS. CHRISTA BIG CANOE: Once you learned -- sorry, once you learned about the remains -- and I don’t mean to step backwards in this story, but I just want to understand. Mark is the one that tells you because he’s learned from the community constable. Was there any investigation in terms of what happened with the remains? Were you ever provided information or given communication about anything other than the fact that they found remains?

MS. RITA THOMAS: Nothing. They didn’t tell
me nothing. I asked about -- I asked about it once and they told me they were going to look into -- well, after they found her -- probably about a couple of years after they found her, I asked one of the RCMP about, Did they -- are they doing anything for my sister, Marina? And he’s, like, Oh, I have no clue. I was, like, Well, who would know? He says, I’ll get that information to you as soon as I can get it, and I’m still waiting.

**MS. CHRISTA BIG CANOE:** That was, what, 2000ish?

**MS. RITA THOMAS:** Yeah, about there.

**MS. CHRISTA BIG CANOE:** Some of the other impacts, is it okay if I ask some questions about that, both you and Mark?

**MS. RITA THOMAS:** What’s that?

**MS. CHRISTA BIG CANOE:** Can I ask some more questions about the impacts of both you and Mark?

**MS. RITA THOMAS:** (No audible response).

**MS. CHRISTA BIG CANOE:** Mark, I know that you guys have been together now for a number of years, well over 25, hey? How was the -- her coping and -- with the means that she was coping by, how was that working in your relationship? Were you both in a good place? Were you both struggling? Can you tell me a little -- can you tell the Commissioner a little bit about that? Mark, are you
comfortable answering that?

MR. MARK THOMAS: What was that?

MS. CHRISTA BIG CANOE: When you guys -- you guys have been together for years. Like, over 25 now, right?

MR. MARK THOMAS: M'hm.

MS. CHRISTA BIG CANOE: How was life together while she was having her issues around drinking? Were you both coping well together? Were there other issues in your life as a couple?

MR. MARK THOMAS: Yeah, we went through lots, me and my wife. You know, it’s -- and we are still always -- we’re still struggling. Like, you know, we’re just going day by day.

MS. CHRISTA BIG CANOE: I understand -- Rita was just telling us, you know, when she first got sober, you guys had a period where you were both abstaining from alcohol for a number of years. Can you tell us a little bit about that? I guess it’s yours.

MR. MARK THOMAS: Yeah, I ended up really -- we managed to quit for six years of drinking and then this -- we had an accident at the ferry landing where I worked. Two of our co-workers got shot and killed over there and the -- I ended up going to see a mental health worker in Winnipeg. Then they ended up, like, you know, asking me to
start drinking. Like, you know, and I already quit drinking for six years and then this mental health worker started telling me, like, you know, Have a shot here and there and stuff like that and then that’s where we started drinking from.

**MS. CHRISTA BIG CANOE:** Oh, so as you were trying to cope with a new traumatic event, you were experiencing some post-traumatic stress?

**MR. MARK THOMAS:** Yeah. Yeah, PTSD. I was diagnosed with PTSD and I -- like, until this -- this day, like, I’m still -- you know, I’m still not in my right mind all the time. And, like, you know, I still struggle lots and, like, the government can only help you so much and then they kick you out the door. You know, just when you still need help, they practically push you out the door and tell you that you don’t need no more help. Because it’s probably costing them too much money for me to go over there.

**MS. CHRISTA BIG CANOE:** Because you were going all the way down to Winnipeg for that help, hey?

**MR. MARK THOMAS:** Yeah.

**MS. CHRISTA BIG CANOE:** Is that because there weren’t the resources here for you?

**MR. MARK THOMAS:** No, I didn’t -- I don’t know why they sent me to Winnipeg when it was at Winnipeg
anyways.

**MS. CHRISTA BIG CANOE:** So if I could just take a step back. Is it fair to say that during your guys’ relationship, you both have had some drinking problems?

**MR. MARK THOMAS:** Yeah.

**MS. CHRISTA BIG CANOE:** Yeah? Yes, alcohol and drug misuse, is that a better way to characterize it?

**MS. RITA THOMAS:** M’hm.

**MR. MARK THOMAS:** Yeah.

**MS. CHRISTA BIG CANOE:** But you’ve found years where you’ve had opportunities to, kind of, heal and work together, but you continue to struggle from time to time?

**MR. MARK THOMAS:** Yeah.

**MS. CHRISTA BIG CANOE:** What has the impact? Obviously, I can see your caring husband here, doting on her and making sure she has Kleenex, but what is the impact of her losing her sister been on you throughout the years too?

**MR. MARK THOMAS:** Well, she always mentions her sister. Like, you know, she often wonders what happened to her and, like, you know, is there -- if there is anything going to be done about her sister being missing, like, you know, all those years? And, like, you know, nothing was done. And, I guess, to this day, nothing
is done right now too.

**MS. CHRISTA BIG CANOE:** But you’ve managed
to keep supporting her throughout these years given your
ups and downs, and obviously your family has cared too
because they’ve helped where it seems other services
haven’t helped, your family has, kind of, stepped in?

**MR. MARK THOMAS:** Yeah.

**MS. CHRISTA BIG CANOE:** Is that fairly
common up here? Are you aware that it’s the community that
has to be -- come together to mobilize, to help search and
look for Indigenous women or girls when they’re missing?

**MR. MARK THOMAS:** Yeah.

**MS. CHRISTA BIG CANOE:** I wanted to talk to
you guys a little bit about recommendations, if that’s
okay, because you’ve raised a number of issues. You’ve
raised some resource issues obviously. And I know that you
have a very strong opinion on how the CFS has failed your
family. So is it okay if I ask a couple of questions?

**MS. RITA THOMAS:** (No audible response).

**MS. CHRISTA BIG CANOE:** Yeah? So what do
you think -- well, I think, you’ve already, kind of,
articulated that your sister was old enough. She could
have been at home with your granny. Would it be fair to
say that one of your recommendations -- and I know there’s
been movements towards this with CFS more recently, but
would you think that someone who’s close to reaching an age, like 18, should try to always be placed with family and that things like age or what community they come from shouldn’t be as big of a factor?

**MS. RITA THOMAS:** Yeah, I think that children that are remote from their homes should be put in a safe place where people know that -- know the child.

And, you know, my siblings and I went through a lot -- went through hell with CFS. A lot of bad things happened to my siblings, not only my sister missing, but my siblings were treated bad. They were sexually abused.

**MS. CHRISTA BIG CANOE:** You were lucky -- lucky enough to -- or strong enough to emancipate or gain your own independence by going to court. Did your younger siblings also try and do that when they were 16?

**MS. RITA THOMAS:** No, they -- no, they didn’t. They -- they were brought back to the community and placed in with our families, family members. And sometimes it’s -- family members don’t treat you the way you’re supposed to be treated as a child. They don’t give you that love that you need because they have their own kids and they focus their -- their parenting on them.

**MS. CHRISTA BIG CANOE:** Mark, you’ve made a comment about the system -- to me, made a comment about the
system is set up to make sure people get money for apprehending kids. That’s one of the problems that you see with the CFS?

    MR. MARK THOMAS: Well, yeah, it’s just what I think of the -- the CFS. For some people, it’s just for dollar signs for kids. Just to -- just to get the extra money for their -- for their finances, but they really don’t take care of the kids they’re supposed to be taking care of.

    Like, for instance, my wife’s sister had two of her nieces apprehended and they’re still apprehended and they went to their mom for -- for a while. And when they got out of the CFS care, they didn’t have nothing. They didn’t have no clothes. And one older sister was telling us too, like, all they ate was Kraft Dinner. They never -- never -- nothing else, just Kraft Dinner straight Kraft Dinner.

    MS. CHRISTA BIG CANOE: So you say --

    MR. MARK THOMAS: And they --

    MS. CHRISTA BIG CANOE: Sorry.

    MR. MARK THOMAS: And they were wishing they died instead of being in care.

    MS. CHRISTA BIG CANOE: And you said when they left care, so is that like when they age out when they’re no longer in the system? Like, what are ways the
services could be better when a kid no longer is in foster
care? Once they’re too old, they leave without clothes or
anything else, without supports. What type of supports do
they need? Either one of you?

**MS. RITA THOMAS:** They need -- they need to
look after these -- these children that they apprehend and
find resources -- resources for them and life skills. And
-- and not only the children that are apprehended, even the
parents. There’s obviously something wrong what -- the
reason why they can’t parent and they keep these kids away
from their parents and parents want to visit.

Like, for instance, my sister wants to visit
her kids for -- for Christmas. Right away, they say no to
her. Those are her children and why does -- why can’t she
have them for a couple of days?

And my nieces are -- my nieces have been
going through hell. You know, they’ve been -- the stories
they told us when they first came out of CFS and how are
they -- how they were locked in a room and how the little
girl they lived with, showed them all these awful things.
Because they were doing them -- when they came to visit,
they were doing all these things and I was, like, Why are
you doing that? And they always say, Well, this kid showed
me how to do this and that.

And, like, I don’t know, but I -- I believe
there should be better services for kids that are apprehended and give the families a chance, give the parents a chance. Yeah, you can send them to AFM, Anger Management Parenting Program, but they -- they don’t -- they need to be -- somebody needs to lead them, to lead them to go to AFM and to go to all these things, but they don’t. Because it -- there is one CFS worker, I told the CFS worker, I was, like, Well, why don’t you send Aggie to this place and she can -- she can go there? Because she knows she needs help and she’s asking for help, but they can’t send her back to AFM because she already went there once. And she’s, like, Well, that’s her problem, if she wants her kids back, she needs to do this and that. And I was, like, Listen, my sister has no money, she has no job, she has no home, I said, Why can’t somebody help her? I said, I can help her, she can live in my house with her children.

And that’s what happened, because they couldn’t give me a straight answer why they couldn’t help her and I took my sister in and her daughters and they lived with me for a year. And then my sister couldn’t handle it because her daughters were abusing her and threatening to kill her while she’s sleeping. And to do all these awful things to their mom.
My sister is not a very big woman. She’s a tiny, little lady. Her daughters are bigger than her and she was getting scared of her kids, so she -- so she decided to give them to CFS voluntarily until she can find her own place and get a job.

And so she did all that, she got a job. She got a place. She went to go live with my dad and then CFS said, Oh, no, you got to wait another six months. Why wait another six months when she’s done what she wanted to do, to help her children and find a home? So that broke my sister. She gave up, came to Thompson.

And my -- I have an adopted son from my sister. It’s the one I’m talking about. She was in an abusive relationship and she was carrying her baby and the father threatened to kill the baby when the baby was born. Like, he had it all set up. He’s, like, I’m going to give the baby a bath and drown it and I’ll just say I left the baby there and I came back and he drowned.

Like, I was, like, What are you going to do? And she said, Well, I’m not even two months’ pregnant, I’ll just have an abortion because I don’t want him to do that to the baby. I was, like, No. I was, like, No, that’s not going to happen. I was, like, you’re not going to get rid of that baby. I was, like, I’ll -- I’ll take that baby. I’ll look after the baby. I said, All you have to do is
just carry her or him for nine months and I’ll -- I’ll get
the (indiscernible).

Sure enough, I went and got the baby out of
the hospital and CFS wanted me to put my son under CFS. I
was, like, No, this is my baby. It’s my baby. I’m not
putting him under CFS. He says, Well, you -- he’ll still
be your son, but you’ll get cheques every month for him. I
was, like, Well, I don’t want a cheque, all I want is him.
I said, I can provide for him. I don’t need cheques from
CFS. They gave me a few options and I was, like, No, I’m
not putting my son under CFS.

And then the girls didn’t know. That was
part of their anger towards their mom is for giving --
giving up the baby to us and asking, Why, why didn’t you
take Regan (ph)? How come you don’t want Regan? It’s,
like, because that’s auntie’s baby.

**MS. CHRISTA BIG CANOE:** It’s a custom
adoption, you didn’t need the paperwork. Yeah, I’m
understanding. Can we have a little conversation about
that? Because, I think, there’s a difference between, sort
of, Aboriginally aware or Indigenous aware type of
programming versus cultural programming. Do you think it
would be helpful if there was more Indigenous workers or
people providing the supports within either the Child and
Family Services if there is understanding around things
like custom adoption, around kinship, understanding
Indigenous practices? Would that be helpful?

   MS. RITA THOMAS: Yeah, that would be
   helpful.

   MS. CHRISTA BIG CANOE: But I know you guys
also have an opinion on this, and so I want to talk a
little bit about this. You don’t actually identify as a
traditionalist, you’re both Christian. So is it important
to also make sure that there’s programming and support that
recognize that -- that an Indigenous Program can be
Indigenous, with Indigenous people, but not necessarily
classically based? So it can be Christian based or
non-faith based.

   MS. RITA THOMAS: Yeah.

   MS. CHRISTA BIG CANOE: Would that be
helpful?

   MS. RITA THOMAS: Yeah, I think, that would
be helpful. It’s --

   MS. CHRISTA BIG CANOE: I just want to make
sure before I ask the Commissioner if she has any
questions, if there is any recommendations, suggestions or
ideas that you have around, you know, anything that you’ve
experienced? Whether it’s been about policing or things
that should be done. Are there any recommendations you’d
like to share?
MS. RITA THOMAS: Yeah, I think it would be helpful if the RCMP would at least go to the family and let them know, Okay, we did this, we’re doing this and notify the families on the ongoing investigation, if they ever do investigate on any of the cases.

It seems like everybody is always kept in the dark. Like, I don’t know nothing. Like, even I asked the RCMP and he told me he was going to come back -- get back to me. That was like 15 years ago, I’m still waiting. And my sister had some belongings -- belongings at the Y and I asked, I was, like, Can I get my sister’s belongings? And then they told me, Yeah, they’re -- they should be at archives or whatever and we’ll get -- we’ll get them to you. We just need your address. I gave them my address and I was, like, the same time, 15 years ago, I still never received my sister’s belongings. I don’t know what they did to them.

Or -- and I believe that children that are apprehended from CFS, they should just leave them in the community where they belong. You know, like, we go out into -- out in the world and anything can happen. Women get murdered almost every day.

And, like, they have Marymound here in Thompson, why can’t every community get a Marymound, so the kids can go stay there. There’s no foster parents
available.

**MS. CHRISTA BIG CANOE:** Just a clarification question, Marymound, that’s the foster house here that you had to go to, so having something like a foster house or some type of community hub where you could have kids, is that what you’re suggesting?

**MS. RITA THOMAS:** Yeah, that’s what I’m suggestion [sic] and it would be better the children stay in the community. And that was promised to South Indian when my sister went missing. That’s what they said, that -- the mayor and council made a resolution or something and they said that there wouldn’t be anymore children taken out of the community. That the children would stay in the community and the community would look after them. And -- but that’s not -- that’s not what’s happening. Children are still getting taken away from the community. They’re still at the Marymound. Because I know two of my nieces are at the Marymound right now.

And maybe the government or anybody can build those kind of places in the reserves and keep our children in our community.

**MS. CHRISTA BIG CANOE:** Is there anything else you wanted to add, even though (indiscernible). So this will be my last question, what is a way to remember your sister or memorialize her? What would you do if you
could, so that everyone knew exactly who Marina was?

**MS. RITA THOMAS:** I don’t know, it’s been so hard for me to -- well, first of all, it’s so hard for me to come here and do this. I didn’t think I’d make it because for me, my sister was forgotten and just hearing people telling me to get over it and all that. And I did that, I blocked it out of my life, out of my mind, and I still feel so guilty for that.

But I never had the strength to do anything for her, at least put a cross at the Burntwood Bridge where she was found, where her remains were found, but I want to do that for my sister. I want to do something for her too at home.

I’m a CHR in my community for the last -- last four years I’ve been having Missing and Murdered Women Walk on October 4th. I’ve done it four years in a row, so that’s what I do for my sister. But, I think, I’m going to do more for her because I don’t want her to be forgotten and I want to let people know who she really was.

**MS. CHRISTA BIG CANOE:** You were strong for coming today and sharing about her. It was very important you did and thank you very much for doing so.

I imagine that the Commissioner will have some questions or comments for you.

**COMMISSIONER MICHELLE AUDETTE:** Merci
Beaucoup. Merci Beaucoup, Maitre Big Canoe.

**MS. CHRISTA BIG CANOE:** Mon --

I was going to speak French, I’m so sorry. Maybe I didn’t understand, my questions is -- and, sorry, if I have -- I’m making you repeating. When you told CSF [sic] and RCMP that your sister was missing, how long it took for them, the police to start the investigation or the search about --

**MS. RITA THOMAS:** They didn’t do an investigation and they didn’t do a search.

**COMMISSIONER MICHÈLE AUDETTE:** Never?

**MS. RITA THOMAS:** Never. They -- the search was done by my husband’s auntie, Annie Thomas. She did the search. Got some volunteers to do the search. And the only time I ever spoke with the RCMP about my sister was through the speaker and they came and got a statement off me once and that was it. I never heard from them again.

**COMMISSIONER MICHÈLE AUDETTE:** Did they explain to you why they didn’t want to do a -- that search and investigate?

**MS. RITA THOMAS:** Well, Mark’s -- Mark’s auntie, the one that organized the search, asked the cops -- the RCMP to -- if they would be able to help with the search and they said, they were too busy.

**COMMISSIONER MICHÈLE AUDETTE:** Well, I hope
Canada is listening. Well, I did, I listen and I know my colleagues are also listening from --

So did you -- you and your family met with ULIF [sic]? Is it ULIF in English? UCLIF [sic], the family liaison.

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: Oh, FILU
COMMISSIONER MICHÈLE AUDETTE: FILU?
UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: Yeah, (indiscernible).
COMMISSIONER MICHÈLE AUDETTE: French again.

Did you meet with FILU, the family liaison?

MS. CHRISTA BIG CANOE: It’s Hilda.
COMMISSIONER MICHÈLE AUDETTE: Hilda, there she is. Okay.

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: Just more recently.
UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: (Indiscernible).
COMMISSIONER MICHÈLE AUDETTE: Okay.
UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: The more recently.
UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: Yeah.
COMMISSIONER MICHÈLE AUDETTE: Why? Oh, okay, it’s good to know it’s her. Very good.

I have one of your recommendation. When we were in Yellowknife, two families in private and one in public said that they had a good relationship with the police. Why I remember, it’s because when it’s rare,
it’s -- you know, it struck, so it -- and they said that when that relationship and trust is there, the trauma is less or the stress or the reaction.

So when you say notify the families, that the police should notify, it’s something we hear across Canada, everywhere. Everywhere. And more and more also with the Indigenous police. Some province, Quebec, Ontario and other places, we have Indigenous police and families are telling us that trust need to be built also with every police force.

So I totally am -- I say that I receive very well your -- that recommendation. The institutions and the police needs to make sure that they share the information that they’re able to share, of course, to the -- the families and the people affected by somebody who disappeared or got killed.

We have also in this mandate, a place where we have to recommend how do we commemorate our stolen sisters, our missing loved one. And you mention about the cross over there and also in your community, so I don’t know when and how you’re going to do that, but if you can let us know or let me know and if we can be there that day or walk beside you that day or light a candle from my community when you do it, it would be important for me, very important.
And we -- we have also the -- the responsibility to make sure that what you share to us, it’s to make sure that your sister is not forgotten. It’s not forgot. So I say, thank you.

And it’s unbelievable we didn’t -- that they didn’t do an investigation or a search, so, of course, I’ll be questioning. I’ll ask Maitre Big Canoe to help me to understand what happened there because our women matter. Your sister matter [sic], so merci beaucoup.

And thank you for your patient [sic]. I saw you early this morning and every people who came here, we said to them, Take the time you need and -- knowing that other families will come or will be waiting to come and share their truth, so but I was always making sure that you were okay, even if I didn’t know your truth, but I cared, so I apologize, but you understand that it was very important for all the families to take their time and same for you. It was very important for us to respect the way you want to share it and how much time you needed. So thank you so much.

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: (Speaking in Anishinaabe). Thank you for your story. I know it’s very hard. Your story is very special, your story is very sacred. And we’ll keep your story in our hearts and we will think of you.
And when you were talking about being taken away, you know, you were robbed and you were just a little girl and that’s not right. And it’s still happening today in our society. CFS robbing our children and our grandchildren and that’s not right. You were robbed with your sister and your mom and your granny and your siblings and I hope, you know, there will be a day that you’ll be together with your siblings, so you could express to each other. You know, you’ll miss that togetherness when you were a little girls and little boys.

But there was always somebody taking care of you and that’s our higher power, our Creator was always there. And that you’re thankful for -- for your spiritual helper that’s sitting with you when your husband is always there supporting you. And I just want to say, thank you very much for your story and I love you.

MS. CHRISTA BIG CANOE: That just reminded me of one thing because we didn’t introduce the -- everyone who’s sitting here in support and I know it’s important for Rita to introduce and thank them. So do you want me to introduce them or do you want to introduce them?

MS. RITA THOMAS: (Indiscernible).

MS. CHRISTA BIG CANOE: Okay. So obviously, we already heard from Debra, as she did the opening prayer, but sitting beside Debra is Annie Soolyer (ph) who’s Rita’s
cousin, and she was sitting in support. And we also have
Grandmother Elma (ph) behind us, as well as Carol Wood
(ph). And earlier Hilda was sitting -- and I know that you
just want to take a chance to quickly thank them.

**MS. RITA THOMAS:** Yeah, I just want to thank
you, Debbie, for coming. And my sister, Annie, taking the
time to come here with me. Thank you, Carol. And thank
God for Carol. She’s always there even -- even -- I don’t
even have to ask her, she’s always there. And I thank
Dorothy for coming.

And Hilda, I just really, really want to
thank Hilda. Sometimes I just want to forget about missing
and murdered, but if it weren’t for Hilda, I wouldn’t be
here. She’s been working on this for a long time and I’m
just so grateful that somebody in my community is working
for our women and our girls. Thank you, Hilda.

**MS. CHRISTA BIG CANOE:** That’s wonderful.

**UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER:** (Speaking in
Anishinaabe). Okay, I’ll -- I’ll talk English. I am of
the N dialect and you’re the TH dialect. I’m forgetting.
It’s -- I thank you for sharing your story.

And -- and my work is in the Indian
Residential School Programming. As you were telling your
story, it reminded me of -- it almost -- it reminds me of
Indian Residential School all over again. And that’s what
a lot of people say that when they take away their
children, and it’s an honour to hear you say the children
should remain in the community. It’s so true.

And -- and, then, also and what you had said
about that they needed to have -- the parents need to have
skills. I thank you for the knowledge that you carry and
you’re sharing with others.

Maybe the government -- you know, this will
go back. They’ll hear, everybody will hear. I thank you.
(Speaking in Anishinaabe).

COMMISSIONER MICHÈLE AUDETTE: Merci, Maitre
Big Canoe. Pouvez-vous expliquer les plumes s’il-vous
plait? Merci.

MS. CHRISTA BIG CANOE: So the Commissioner
would like to give you a gift, if you would like to accept
it. What she has is actually eagle feathers and the eagle
feathers -- the eagle feathers come -- it originally
started with some Matriarchs in Haida Gwaii and so some of
these grandmothers came together and thought, We’ll collect
eagle feathers for anyone who is using their courage to
tell their story and what ended up happening is it, kind
of, spread almost like wildfire across the country. Other
communities started making donations as well.

Even people sometimes would even take apart
some of their regalia. Like, in Thunder Bay there was one
story where a young man took apart his bustle, so that they
could give feathers to any of the family members.

    The -- really behind it is this -- you know,
a gift from one community reaching out to support other
people and so from human to human. And, you know, from
cultural perspective, eagles are important to us, but they
come from creation. They come from Creator, Jesus, God,
whoever you’re -- you’re thinking of there. One of the
Creators amazing animals and so it would be an honour if
you let us gift you one of those each.

    And, I believe, there’s also some seeds.
The seeds, the idea is -- behind the seeds is to plant
something new, some new growth, some new life and it’s just
a small gift, so that you have an opportunity to try to
grow something new. And I know that if you end up doing it
and you grow something, if you send us a picture, we’d
really like that.

    COMMISSIONER MICHÈLE AUDETTE: I’m adding
Labrador tea.

    MS. CHRISTA BIG CANOE: Ah, Labradoran tea.

    COMMISSIONER MICHÈLE AUDETTE: Yes, Labrador
tea.

    MS. CHRISTA BIG CANOE: So Michèle, as she
just explained, was born in Labrador, so she wants to give
you some Labradoran tea as well.
COMMISSIONER MICHÈLE AUDETTE: I don’t have green running shoes on, but --

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: (Speaking in Native language).

--- Upon adjourning at 7:33 p.m.
LEGAL DICTA-TYPIST’S CERTIFICATE

I, Connie Sturtz, Court Transcriber, hereby certify that I have transcribed the foregoing and it is a true and accurate transcript of the digital audio provided in this matter.

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Connie Sturtz

May 11, 2018