National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls
Truth-Gathering Process
Part 1 Public Hearings
Sheraton Vancouver Airport Hotel
Elmbridge Room
Metro Vancouver, British Columbia

PUBLIC

Sunday April 8, 2018

Public Volume 113

Shelley Oppenheim Lacerte, Victor Lacerte, Ashley Stump, Vicki Lacerte & Kelli Lacerte,
In relation to Cherish Oppenheim

Heard by Chief Commissioner Marion Buller
Commission Counsel: Shelby Thomas

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Commission Counsel: Shelby Thomas
Grandmothers, Elders and Knowledge-keepers: Kathy Louis
Clerk: Bryana Bouchir
Registrar: Bryan Zandberg

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## IV

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Exhibits (code: P01P13P0102)

1. PowerPoint presentation “In Loving Memory of Cherish” prepared for the public testimony of the family, comprising 11 colour slides
Metro Vancouver, British Columbia

--- Upon commencing on Sunday April 8, 2018 at 12:17

--- OPENING PRAYER

MS. SHELBY THOMAS: Good afternoon, Chief Commissioner. Today we'll be hearing from Kelli Lacerte, Shelley Oppenheim Lacerte, Victor Lacerte, and Vicki Lacerte. They'll be sharing the story of their daughter and sister, Cherish Oppenheim.

They would all like to affirm on an eagle feather.

CHIEF COMMISSIONER BULLER: Good afternoon. Do you solemnly affirm to tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth?

MS. KELLI LACERTE: I do.

CHIEF COMMISSIONER BULLER: Thank you.

Do you solemnly affirm to tell the truth and nothing but the truth?

MS. SHELLEY OPPENHEIM LACERTE: I do.

CHIEF COMMISSIONER BULLER: Thank you.

Do you solemnly affirm to tell the truth and nothing but the truth?

MR. VICTOR LACERTE: I do.

CHIEF COMMISSIONER BULLER: Thank you.

Finally, thank you.

Do you solemnly to tell the truth and
nothing but the truth?

MS. VICKI LACERTE: I do.

CHIEF COMMISSIONER BULLER: Thank you very much. Thank you all.

MS. SHELBY THOMAS: If we could just start today by having you guys introduce yourselves and tell us a little bit where you're from.

MS. KELLI LACERTE: Hi. I am Kelli Lacerte. I am from the Nlaka'pamux Nation from Coldwater Band. I am the youngest sibling of Cherish Oppenheim.

MS. SHELLEY OPPENHEIM LACERTE: Hello. I'm Shelley Oppenheim the Third and I'm Nlaka'pamux from the Coldwater Band. And Cherish Oppenheim was my daughter. And thank you for having us here today.

MR. VICTOR LACERTE: Hi. My name is Victor Lacerte. I am Fort St. James, Carrier First Nations. I have transferred to the Coldwater Band so I reside on Coldwater Reserve.

MS. VICKI LACERTE: Hi. I am Vicki Lacerte. I am from Merritt, from Coldwater Reserve. And Cherish is my older sister.

MS. SHELLEY OPPENHEIM LACERTE: I just wanted to expand a little bit on our oldest daughter Ashley that was going to join us today. But she is really struggling and she is present here in the hotel and we
really wanted her to be here, you know, as part of the
family.

But you know, we also are sensitive to where
she's at. I know a couple of -- about a week ago I talked
to Ashley, and Cherish and Ashley were really close in age
and really close.

And she told me, "Mom, this is really
overwhelming. I don't know if I can do it."

And I said, "Well, it's important that we're
doing this for Cherish and we come together as a family and
be strong together."

But we understand where Ashley is at this
time and yeah, she can't be here. But we did encourage her
if she felt that she wanted to join us that we do have this
chair available if she decides that.

MS. SHELBY THOMAS: To start, can you guys
just share about who Cherish was?

MS. SHELLEY OPPENHEIM LACERTE: Okay.

Cherish Nicole Billy Oppenheim was 16 years old and has
three sisters who we just introduced. And Cherish attended
Merritt Secondary School where she was actively involved in
rugby and other sports. She talked about becoming a PE
teacher one day.

And one of the things that we wanted to
mention, just for you to get an idea who she was, is that
when she was a little girl -- I think she was only like, four or five years old -- we had a Oppenheim family reunion. And she always liked to sing and have fun. And so she performed and sang with my dad, her Poppa, at the family reunion. And our family was just so proud of her at that young age, stepping up and going on stage and being able to do that. So that's a big part of our memory of her.

And she always talked about how she loved pizza. That was one of her favourite things. She loved pizza.

And she was outgoing, really joyful, happy, and kind. And many people loved her. She was just a really kind spirit. She's not only beautiful on the outside but she had a very beautiful, calm spirit.

And so we look at Cherish and she was our daughter and a sister, a granddaughter, cousin, niece, friend, and would have been an auntie one day, and I'm sure a mother.

And so we think about Cherish and we look at -- it doesn’t seem that -- sometimes, it's just so hard to believe that she's not here with us. And as you can see, we have a picture of her here at the centre and we have a lot to say about Cherish, but -- and we'll continue on through our presentation of who Cherish was.
Okay. And we have pictures.

MS. SHELBY THOMAS: Yeah. If the technicians can just put up the photo.

MS. SHELLEY OPPENHEIM LACERTE: So we have a few pictures that we're providing and we'll briefly speak on some of the memories and talk about who -- to give you an idea of who Cherish was.

And first of all, if you look at the top left-hand corner there and you see Cherish and her older sister Ashley. And my husband here will just talk a little bit about that.

MR. VICTOR LACERTE: Yeah. This one particular day I was getting home from work and I seen Cherish running behind Ashley and her friend. They were riding their bikes and I pulled Cherish aside. I said, "What's going on? Why are you not riding your bike? Why are you running behind your friends?"

She said, "Well, you know, I've loaned my bike to my friend because she doesn't have one, so yeah, so I'm with them."

So she's, you know, she's running around behind them.

I said, "That's really something for you to do that, Cherish," you know. "It's good."

So and that's the kind of person she was.
She was giving and sharing and you know, she was a kind-hearted little girl.

So with Cherish, Shelley and I were in the living room talking and Cherish, you know, she comes walking into the room and she's playing with her hands, eh? She's waiting for us to finish talking. And I'm looking down at her and she's looking up at me with these big brown eyes.

And I asked her, I says, "Cherish, could you put your hands out for me?"

She had tiny little hands, eh, as you see in that one picture there.

I said, "Can you put your hands out for me?"

And she looks up at me, puts her hands behind her back and she said, "You're not looking at my hands," because she kind of thought I was king of bugging her a little bit about her small little hands, eh?

So anyway, those are a couple of my memories with Cherish.

**MS. SHELLEY OPPENHEIM LACERTE:** And again, looking at the picture, when I finished my schooling in the NITEP program, we had moved home to Fort St. James and we went to Tache Inlet. That's where I began my teaching career. And so we have a picture of Cherish when she was in Grade 4 and so that was one of her school pictures.
And on the left bottom there we have her Auntie Charlene and her son Charles, and then myself and Cherish there. And they were very close in age. Cherish was born in May and Charles was born in June.

And so coming together and just showing how important, you know, our immediate and extended family are and how close we were. And so she had her little cousin there that started their lives together.

And moving on to the next slide there, and this shows when she was in Grade 2 in Tache. That's another picture of her on the left and then Ashley and Cherish on the right, a picture of them being together and they were, again, just expressing how close they were in age and how close they were as sisters.

And moving on to the next slide, we have a picture on the right there of -- on the top, of her cousin Charles and then there's Kelli second, then her cousin Stanley, then Ashley at the end and Cherish, and all the different -- as you see, that was a picture at Christmas time.

And we look at the different holidays and celebrations and we still feel that today, you know, of not having Cherish with us and the importance of all of her cousins, like, her cousins that love her so much. We say they're cousins but they're like brothers and sisters, you
know, in how we all come together. And so such a huge loss for all of us.

And you see the school pictures below of again, giving you an example of who Cherish was. And on the left, we have the girls on the top there. There's Cherish and Ashley and then Vicki and Kelli. And so we have the four girls all dolled up and dressed up. That was at our wedding and so we have the four girls together there.

Yes, and looking at the next slide, family is everything and as we expressed, we wanted to show these family pictures and different memories that we have and things that we've done together as a family. And so on the right you see our family, my husband and I and the four girls. And so those are such precious and important memories that we hold dear.

And on the left again, we have Charles and Cherish again and how close they were as cousins. And on top we have Cherish.

So different examples of who Cherish was. Of course, there's so much more than we can share. We can go on and on with all the things about Cherish, the great memories of who she was.

And this picture we just love because this is what Cherish created herself. And she says, "I would
like to ride my bike in the sky when it is a bright, shiny
day."

And so Cherish created that picture. And of
course, you can see the teacher took a picture her and then
she drew around that. And so that was what she had
created.

Yes, Kelli.

**MS. KELLI LACERTE:** I'd like to share a
memory of my older sister that I had that I remembered.
When I was just a little girl-- I was probably only four
years old and my other older sister is just a year older
than me -- she was probably five -- you know, like, kids
like to ride the handlebars. We would always see our older
cousins riding on the handlebars and we wanted to do the
same.

And Ashley and Cherish had a great idea how
me and -- like, the younger siblings, me and Vicki would go
on the handlebars. And we were chubby little kids so
Ashley and Vicki, they were getting ready, getting on the
handlebars. And yeah, I was pretty chubby when I was
smaller and Cherish, I was going to go on her handlebars.

And she was skinny and in my mind at four
years old, she was too skinny to hold me up. So yeah. And
yeah, I kind of delayed it, and I was like, "No, I'll just
wait," and then waited for Ashley and Vicki to try it out.
And of course, Vicki hurt herself and fell over the handlebars on the bike, so yeah, at least I was a little smarter.

So I just wanted to share that with Cherish and us riding the handlebars. Well, I didn’t.

MS. SHELLEY OPPENHEIM LACERTE: Yes. And so we're going to move on. I just wanted to point out, we have kind of looked back. It's been after all these years since 2001 and we thought going back and bringing back these memories and looking at how we could organize ourselves, and in my mind, I broke it down into like, four parts that we will be going through in this session.

And the first part was when Cherish went missing and the search. So we're kind of laying out the groundwork like that. And then looking at when we found Cherish, and then the funeral. And then we're going to speak on the courts, and then our healing journey. And so we're kind of breaking it down into those areas.

And so we're going to start going into the search, and so when the search begins. And first, before we get started, Vicki has a few words to start us off.

MS. VICKI LACERTE: So the night that my sister went missing I was about eight years old.

But I recall my room; you could see the front entrance door and I randomly just woke up middle of
the night and I just seen her briefly. And I just assumed that she went to her room.

Then early in the morning I woke up hearing things downstairs and my parents were all down there wondering where Cherish was. So I assumed that she was in her room; like, I kept bringing up that she's in her room, she's in her room. So I went upstairs and checked and I just felt completely shocked that she wasn't in there. And just right then I just felt really heavy and I knew something was wrong right then, and so it happened that evening.

MS. SHELLEY OPPENHEIM LACERTE: Yes, I just learned about that. It was something last week and Vicki telling me this story, and I didn’t know that Vicki had seen Cherish at the door.

And so Cherish, I'll get into a little bit describing what had happened that evening.

So it was October 13th that Cherish was last seen and it was a Friday night after school. She wanted to visit her friend so I brought her uptown to visit and said, "Make sure you come home because we have to get rested up." And Kelli had started hockey and I wanted Vicki to -- or Cherish to help with her skates and help get her ready the next morning. It was early.

And so she goes, "Yes, I'll make sure I'm
home and I'll be there to help."

And so that evening, it was getting later and later and it was not like Cherish not to listen or you know, do -- you know, we always had that communication. And so through the night, I kept -- I waited in the living room and then I fell asleep. And it was about three o'clock in the morning and when I woke up. It was really -- I always think about the connection that a mother and daughter have. And so I woke up and I literally went, "Ah, Cherish." And I got up and got up from the couch and I went looked in her room.

Then I went and I jumped in my vehicle and I drove around Merritt looking for her because I knew different areas at Tache, and Cherish, you know, tended to go and visit. And I went out and I was driving all over Merritt.

And then I didn’t know where else to go but I remember looking up at the full moon and thinking, you know -- I said a prayer and I was -- I knew with my instincts that something was wrong. And so I just went home. My husband, I believe he was going hunting or he was getting ready for work so he wasn’t with me that evening.

And so the next morning, I couldn't believe that Cherish still wasn’t home. And so what I did is I got a hold of Ashley and I says, "Where's your sister?"
And she says, "I don't know where she is."
And I says, "Well, look everywhere. Contact whoever you can."
She says, "I have."
And I said, "Keep looking."
And we started looking for her and by that afternoon, I contacted the RCMP right away. I contacted them and reported that Cherish was gone. And so right then we knew that, you know, this was out of the ordinary for her to be away from our family that long.
And so we waited through Saturday and then families started arriving at the house and expressing that, you know, we were worried about Cherish. And so that was the beginning.
My mother came to the house and all I could do was pace the house. I didn’t know what to do with myself, with my body, myself. We had a pretty large house at that time where I just walked and walked on the bottom level of that home.
And then everybody is like, it just started to intensify from there and just really knowing that there was something wrong.
And I'll go into the steps that we took after that. But when we start pulling together as a family, one of the main people, key people that supported
our family was my cousin Robert Moses. And he really took
a lead on some of the work he did, which my husband will
speak on.

MR. VICTOR LACERTE: Yeah. So we put Robert
Moses in charge of the search. We had a map out. We asked
him to designate individuals to different areas. I said
we'd check the town first and then we would start looking
towards the Lower Nicola. He said okay.

So he said, "Okay. We'll look around the
Lower Nicola area and we'll get some ATVs out.

And we had people come in, Search and Rescue
come in from Kamloops, Kelowna, Chilliwack. The RCMP had
their helicopter near. They were searching areas. We
asked Robert how the search was going. There was a lot of
volunteers first couple, three days. There was a lot of
volunteers out there looking.

For some reason, we'd asked Robert, "Did you
get a chance to go up on the Coldwater Road? Did you go up
that way?"

And he said, "For some reason," he said,
"the RCMP are steering us away from that area."

And I said, "Well, what's going on? I don't
understand it." I said, "We have to look everywhere," I
said. "We can't leave any stone unturned."

And he said, "Well, they said for some
reason they've got a tip that somebody may have seen her
down in the Lower Nicola area."

So I said, "Well, you know, we have to go
back to the Coldwater Road, you know. Somehow, you know,
we cannot leave that area alone."

So he said, "Okay. Well, they want us to go
back to Lower Nicola and around those areas."

So we had the Upper Nicola First Nations
cowboys. They got on their horses and they said, "Okay.
We're going to help out on the search and we're going to
start, you know, doing a lot more search in the woods,
wooded areas on the outskirts of Merritt."

So yeah, so you know, Robert was
instrumental to the search and rescue and he pretty well
coordinated his efforts with the RCMP. So they kind of
worked hand in hand with that.

MS. SHELLEY OPPENHEIM LACERTE: Yes. And so
once on Sunday -- so that was Friday when she went missing
and reported on Saturday, and Sunday, we had not received
any response from the RCMP. We hadn't heard anything back.

And so we just moved forward as a family.
We started creating a poster and we went and met with a
friend to help us quickly create a poster and then we went
to Robert's wife Verna to help us print off the posters.

And we brought them -- and I'm not sure if
it was on that slide but we had our poster here that was created. And we brought it back to the house and of course, more and more family members and people were pouring into the house. And we just started distributing this.

And as my husband had mentioned, that's when Robert was there helping us organize, you know, where people are going. And we'd had people going to the Okanagan and down through the canyon and we were just distributing posters everywhere we could.

And for some reason, I don't know why, I guess we just needed to take action, so my husband and I drove up to the toll booth on the Coquihalla. That's when it existed there. And when we were going up there, it was quite late and I remember going -- when you go up the Coquihalla towards the toll booth, Coldwater Road, it runs parallel to the Coquihalla.

But I was so scared and I was -- to me, then, I was imagining, you know, what if Cherish is down below there, down the hill? And it felt like she was trying to get up, come up to the highway or come up towards us. Then at that time, I remember that but I thought, you know, like, you desperately want to find her and so I thought that that was something that, you know, I could be imagining.
However, as time went by and I think back, and again, looking at the night when I was searching for her, looking at the moon and praying for her and knowing then and also looking -- creating the posters and knowing that we had to move forward, and then going up the Coquihalla and thinking about Cherish trying to come up that mountainside to us, to me, it makes me wonder, you know, how things work in connection with a daughter and a mother. And when I went back to that, I still think about that. Like, I knew.

And with Robert, I went to him and I said -- asked him where the search was happening. And he pointed out.

And I says, "Why aren't we going over here?"
And he goes, "I don't know why we keep getting steered away from that."

But again, I was -- we were in the right area. Like, if, where we figured that Cherish would have been. Like, we just didn’t know but that's what kept coming up.

And through this part, through all of the work that we did, coming through with -- together as a family, I just really wanted to express everything that we did, as Ko'waintco had demonstrated with our prayers and the brushing off, we came together strong as a family.
We have a large family. And we're so fortunate to have strong leaders and family members within our family. And we always started off with -- we had smudges available. We did the prayers. We wanted everybody to be connected and safe and grounded.

And so we practised that through and we had drumming and singing and it was so important part of our day-to-day function to keep us going and to make sure that we were operating in a smart way to keep ourselves safe and keep ourselves connected and having that communication clear.

There was so much networking throughout B.C. Like, we have relatives down the island and in Vancouver, Chilliwack, way up north to Terrace, Burns Lake, Fort St. James, and Edmonton. And so we started that networking too because we have -- they were family and we really needed to make those connections and sending the posters out to them and communicating.

When we were at the house too, the phone calls started coming in and it was so overwhelming trying to fill people in about what was going on and because it was building fast. Everything was building really quick.

And I have another cousin that worked in the school. I phoned her and I said, "I need help." I said, "This is overwhelming."
She dropped everything from her work and she came and we really set up a -- like, a command centre, a centre where we were really well organized, again, the strength of different people and their family, you know, manning the phones, having the mapping, having Ko'waintco and Sister Esther and different people come and leading us and guiding us with the culture and the spiritual ways that, you know, to take care of ourselves.

And when we had people coming from different areas, they were really astonished at how well organized we were at the house and how powerful it was that we, you know, with our cultural practices and that.

And so that was, I think, what I remember and what I feel. I really believe in my heart that's what kept us moving, kept us going through that traumatic time, is our culture, how strong it was when we came together.

The search was approximately nine days and the RCMP finally pulled into our yard Monday morning. And so they started taking action after they saw the work that we had started up. And they started moving on things and you know, and in my mind, I thought there was some kind of policy or whatever, you have to wait. I don't know if that's just on TV shows or whatever, you have to wait a certain amount of time before they move on things. But we weren't going to wait for that. We needed to move now.
And we knew that.

And so again, the family pulling together. And we had involved a couple of medicine men to come and join our family and help us as well. And so it really became a focal point for the search team and pulling together.

And through this process, it felt like we really shook up the town of Merritt. Like, we had -- people had posters on their vehicles driving through. We were just searching everywhere, in buildings, everywhere we could think of. We just covered every area.

And it was kind of scary at times too because it felt -- like, we heard too that there could be a possible connect with the drug and sex trade. They feared that she may have been taken, you know, and drugged. And that was devastating to hear, you know, from people.

And so also we ended up searching homes that were abandoned, kind of like breaking into places to search, you know, and just out of desperation, searching everywhere.

And the media at first weren't -- we weren't hearing much so we set up a contact through, I believe it was Facebook, like, contact somebody, get it out to whoever you can and just send that message out.

And when the media did finally take it
seriously and come on board they were constantly at the door. They were there. And it became a place where we were just so overwhelmed.

And our family kind of protected us from the media and we assigned Ko'waitco to help speak for us and another couple of other family members to connect with the media and help us through that because it was just too much for us to take on. And so that was another part of the organizing.

And as I had mentioned, the strengths of the search was having a lot of volunteers. We have six bands in our area, five in the Merritt area and one in Spences Bridge. Everybody came together. We had leadership, we had friends that I went to school with, and connections throughout all the bands, and people came to our place and helped, you know, helped with our search and also donating food and money.

And so it was a really busy, busy household where I remember people were finding a place to sleep. We filled up our bedrooms and I think we had a five-bedroom house. And people were literally finding place on the floor to sleep, finding a spot, you know, to rest. And so that was really powerful with how the community and our people pulled together to help us.

And a big part of going through this day
after day after day is just having that hope, you know, and people would get tips. We'd get tips; the RCMP would get tips, and we heard that she was in the Cache Creek area. We had people go and search that area or the RCMP would follow up and then it would come to a dead end.

And so that was constant, everybody totally on their toes trying to find these tips and have another high hope and then getting let down after that would fall through.

And what I remember too is that it came to a point where it was reported to us that the man that took Cherish was Robert Dezwaan and he was from Merritt. And the police had told us, I don't know how many days into the search, that the night that Cherish went missing, they had stopped Dezwaan in front of the Coldwater Hotel and when the RCMP stopped him, they saw -- I believe it was tape and a knife in this van. And they gave him a 24-hour suspension.

MR. VICTOR LACERTE: Yes, so they gave him a 24-hour suspension. It wasn’t let out til probably about three or four days later, after he was pulled in or picked up.

Apparently when he was picked up, one of his friends came forward, the person that he was working with, and he said that Dezwaan was looking at the poster when he
was in Westbank. He said it was kind of odd, you know, that he would be standing there in front of this -- Cherish's poster and, you know, just staring at it with a blank look on his face.

So this came out in court and I said, "Well, you know, I mean, he knew that the law was coming and you know, there was -- so it was kind of, what do you do, you know? I mean, it was kind of a scenario where we were coming and he was going to get caught and that was all there was to it.

So anyway, want to say something?

**MS. VICKI LACERTE:** In high school, I was randomly looking through the internet about Cherish and I came across this video with the investigators and Dezwaan. I was shocked. I was surprised because I never seen this video. And I ended up calling my dad to check it out and it was showing the investigators and Dezwaan pointing to the area that Cherish's body was. And that was just the full clip of that.

And then I ended up trying to go back to it and I just can't find it any more. But I was just shocked that that was on the internet, like, about a good 10 years later.

**MS. SHELLEY OPPENHEIM LACERTE:** And that was something that I wasn’t aware of until recently either.
Like, we just -- things that we experienced, we continued with our lives and things that come up, and so that was another shocking thing that I heard, recently learned.

And the day that they found Cherish they had brought us, my husband and I, to Kelowna and the RCMP and they said that they have apprehended Dezwaan. They're trying to question him because of the incident with him being stopped. The RCMP finally stepped up and said, you know, this had happened. And so he was under surveillance, I guess, for a couple of days before they approached him.

And they tried to question him but he wasn’t speaking, so they brought us to Kelowna and put us in this room. They said that, "If he doesn’t speak, we're going to need you to go in and talk to him, you know, just really probe him and plead with him to let -- tell us where Cherish was."

But it didn’t come to that. He ended up telling the RCMP where she was.

And so they brought us back to the house and they said that we're not to tell anybody what happened, where we were, or what's going on. They are going to go check the site to see if that's where Cherish was and we'd have to wait for them to come.

And it felt like my body was just vibrating. All the people that we were connected to, trusted, confided
in, and we had to keep it to ourselves. We couldn't say where we went, what had happened. Now we're waiting for them to come back. And so they did go up to the site and we had to wait for all that to happen.

And then they came to the house and let us all know that it was Cherish and that she was gone. And so that was again, a house full of people just devastated.

And I remember that my biggest concern was my children, you know, and Ashley, that she was okay and that, you know, how she was going to handle this because through this time she was -- Ashley was connected to her friends and it felt like she was disappearing all the time.

And a counsellor told me later -- or, yeah, later, that that's how some of the youth deal with things. They need to be connected with their friends and that's her process.

And so -- but as a mother and a family, that was really hard and it still is hard because Ashley is still really struggling and to see her suffer, and there's a lot of healing that still has to happen after all of these years.

And another part that had happened was the next day there was a media release, I guess, and Ko'waintco and a couple of other family members went to the city hall and things again happened really fast where my other two
relatives were a part of talking to the media. And so Ko'waintco was trying to keep up to what was going on.

Next thing, they were all going up to the site and so they jumped in RCMP cars and they travelled up there. But of course, being up there they had to be careful of the evidence and the site and that, so Ko'waintco had mentioned that they had to stay back.

And so again, they created a circle and started doing prayers so that Cherish would be taken care of in the spiritual world and in the right way and in a good way. And so we weren't a part of going up there at that time but of course, people find out fast and it was quite a gathering up there.

And when Cherish was found, another part that I remember but I wasn’t a part of was when my husband had to go over and identify Cherish and decide whether it was an open or closed casket. And so that's another part that kind of haunts me because I can't bring myself to think of what she looked like or what she went through.

But maybe you can talk about having to go over there.

MR. VICTOR LACENTE: Yeah, went over.

Robert Moses, myself, Ko'waintco, I think was there with me and to identify her remains. So I looked at her and I said, "No, I mean, out of respect for Cherish," I said,
'"this does not look like Cherish," and because you know, we were going to determine whether or not we were going to have an open casket. So I said, "Out of respect to Cherish, I think we'll just have to keep the casket closed."

So I guess when the RCMP showed up to where Cherish's remains were at, there was a fawn laying down beside where she was at. So he thought -- he said, "You know, as First Nations people," he said, "you know, the totem of an animal being close to her, keeping her company until someone came along to recover her body."

So he thought that it would be great to let us know that this fawn was laying down beside where she was at. And I said, "That's just amazing."

So on her -- on the B.C. quilt of missing and murdered women we had a fawn put onto that quilt with Cherish's name underneath it, so that was one of the significant factors.

MS. SHELLEY OPPENHEIM LACERTE: So going through that process of identifying Cherish and seeing her, how she had passed away, that was -- that's one of the biggest nightmares that I faced as a mother, is thinking about the violence and thinking about what she experienced and the fear and what she experienced.

Like, I remember driving up Coldwater Road
and it felt like I could feel what she was feeling when she
was brought up Coldwater Road, and in my mind, over the
years, I have constantly pushed it away.

And it seems like the last couple of years
I've become stronger and stronger to be able to think about
things and process things more, because my focus and our
focus is what can we do, how can we do the best we can as a
family to do something for Cherish and all the families
that have experienced their losses for the missing and
murdered Indigenous women and girls?

How can we contribute? How can we support
in memory of Cherish, the work of -- and so thinking about
the violence, of course, I think that things that we
experience and think about will never go away.

It will never go away but we have to find a
way to make it through and find ways to deal with things
and cope with things. And a big part of that is Ko'waintco
and the work that she does with us and being involved in
ceremonies, being involved in the work that you've
witnessed Ko'waintco doing as she's been supporting us
through everything, right from the beginning and all these
years, and a few of our other family members, have stuck by
us with that.

And so it's amazing today that we can even
do what we're doing today after all these years. Like,
before, we would never even be able to speak, you know?
And so we need to speak. We need to bring this forward for
the sake of Cherish and all the people that have gone
missing. And so that's why we're here.

And I had just provided an outline for this
session and I had listed some media or newspaper articles.
And I couldn't believe how much there was there. And I
know that there's much, much more out there that we -- I
could have gathered.

But there is also television. Like, on the
news, there was television clips and things that were
happening. And what was amazing to me is that when you're
going through this pain too and watching this happen on the
news, it's something that how sensitive you are -- I was,
in watching the person that was reporting, how their
expression was.

And this one reporter, I think there was a
slight smile that really devastated me. And I was thinking
about these reporters that, you know, overall, they care
and they're working hard, but they didn't realize how that
affects us as well.

And so that's another memory that triggers
me talking about this, the media. But they were continuous
and our family, again, continued to protect us so that we
weren't out in front and centre. We planned and we
discussed how things would work.

And going into the lessons learned from the search, upon reflecting back, the members see that the RCMP could have worked more closely with Robert Moses and the family. And so Robert was really important and at the centre of the work that we were doing; however, we don’t know the policies and the processes.

But the connection, we found, wasn’t as clear or truthful as we would have liked to. Like, you know, here we are expressing and sharing all of our details and it wasn’t going both ways all the time. We felt that there could have been more of a connection. We don’t know if, with the coordinating and how they were handling the search. And we looked at that there was no Aboriginal or First Nations constable connected with that process as well, which we feel that could have made the difference in communication.

Like, the people that were involved with -- I don't want to downplay some of the work that had happened; we had become really close with some of them -- a couple of the RCMP members and investigators that really did fantastic work for us. And my husband was more connected to them so maybe you can speak on that.

MR. VICTOR LACERTE: Yeah, well, with working with Robert and the constables that were working
with us, the detectives, they kind of gave us an insight of basically where they were at and what their perspective was and their jobs. We tried to work hand in hand with them as much as we could. They weren't giving us all the information on what they had picked up. We were giving them everything that we had.

I questioned one of the detectives on the idea that we should maybe go up towards the Kingsville area and work around that area. I said, "That's a little bit more isolated."

And he said, "Oh, no, no. We've had a search team out there." Apparently, Merritt Search and Rescue was up in that area.

So we, you know, I mean, you can't really question what they're doing and they're not going to give you all the details on what they have found out or what they've discovered.

So I don't know, with Robert, like, he was really getting frustrated with it all. He said, "You know, like, we're giving the RCMP all the information that we've collected and you know, it seems like it's only a one-way street here. We're not having information in return."

So I sympathized with him. And he was really taking a lot of it to heart. So you know, pretty tough.
MS. SHELLEY OPPENHEIM LACERTE: Yeah. So we talked to Robert before we came up and we could really just see all of the thoughts and the feelings coming back and the memories of what he experienced, because he was putting all his heart and putting his best foot forward and doing the best work that he could. And so really, we can never forget how committed he was in the work that he was doing.

And through this process at that time, we found that there was such a lack of counselling, quality counselling. And with the Victim Impact Services Support, they had brought forward this nice lady that said that, you know, they're here to help the family, you know, that this is their position. And so this lady came to us; however, it seemed like again, she wasn't First Nations and it felt like there was such a disconnect of who we are as a people and our culture.

And again, she was a very nice person, but there was -- it just seemed like people in the Merritt -- in our area didn't have the background, training, or experience in trauma. And so this person just came and pretty well just sat there and was present. And so we recall that.

And as far as the counselling, I know that over the years there has been a lot of work and training that has happened and that's building up across Canada,
because sadly, look what is happening to so many of our families. And so again, having the cultural background, we feel is really helpful or would be helpful, and the training in trauma and to really understanding that. And so looking at also where we are today, we look at what's happening across Canada.

And myself, I'm an Aboriginal principal of a school district and so I think about the youth. I think about prevention and education and what can be provided in our school system and in society itself. You know, are people aware? It seems like -- are things out front or is some things being swept under the carpet?

How can we provide information or education, you know, around this so that -- because it's so powerful in that I was just really blown away by going up to Prince George to the conference for the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. And I was shocked to see how many families were there. That's just in BC. And looking at imagining across Canada all the families that are gathering and that.

And so we have families in isolation. It seems that some families are in isolation and if they don’t have the strength of leadership, you know, within their families or the cultural background or expertise to come forward, how are they managing? You know, are they by
themselves?

And so I think about how family members --
how fortunate we are that we have such strong family
members that have strengths in so many different areas to
help us through. Like, to me, they saved our lives, you
know, because it felt -- something I didn’t mention earlier
is that I had so much memory I lost. Like, it was just
huge and it took me years and years and I did sleep for a
long time at the beginning, probably about a year, just
slept and couldn't get myself up and going.

And so these things with -- and having our
family, immediate family and extended family a part of our
lives and supporting and helping us, I think is really
huge. And my heart goes out to other families that are
struggling through this.

And so the volunteers and support of the
family and the volunteers with a trained crisis
intervention team would have been very helpful in
addressing the trauma and the crisis on finding Cherish.
And so we think about that. If we had these types of
supports through that process, we believe that would have
been helpful because we did the best that we could with who
we had and what we knew, but over the years and
developments in trauma and processes, we believe that would
have been really helpful.
And the debriefing time -- so many people were impacted and are still impacted after all these years who have been talking to different relatives.

Ko'waintco talked to her sister and she is so upset. She is so still upset and still hurt. She's carrying a lot. And we've never had a debriefing after the search, you know?

And I think about Robert and then talking to him about this and seeing the hurt in his eyes and hearing the message from Ko'waintco's sister Esther and different family members. I think, look at all these years and they're still carrying a lot of those memories and that pain. And so maybe we should still do a debriefing on that.

And looking at moving on to Cherish's funeral, she had a huge funeral where there was -- we had it up at Coldwater School in the gym and there was like, 500 people. And what was amazing is we had so many youth that came. Like, she was in her rugby and different sports and they stepped forward, relatives from all over the place and they attended the funeral.

And the youth that were from MSS and her different sports, they came and they really stepped forward and were present and visible and wanted to be involved.

And when we carried Cherish from the school
to the gravesite, it was about a mile away, and they wanted
to take part in carrying her. And so they would trade off
and be a part of it and were drumming and singing and just
-- and again, there was just lots of people there.

And yes, and so we'll never forget the love
that they demonstrated throughout that process. And again,
we go back to the youth and helping them to feel strong and
confident enough to step forward and to do things like
this, again, going back to the education system of how can
we empower our youth, educate them?

And so that's a big part of looking at what
they experienced and looking at what kind of support was
provided or not provided for them.

And for the rugby team, when they went into
the gym, Cherish had a jersey with the number 13 and so
they hooked it onto this stick and they walked into the
gym. You know, again, this is them expressing what they
wanted to do for Cherish. And so I can imagine them with
that rugby jersey and them all coming in together for the
funeral services.

And so we really -- I don't think we ever
really got to express the importance of that and how they
really connected to our hearts. And so that's a huge
important piece.

Can you hold this?
For the funeral, we made a pamphlet as we do for our loved ones, and we created this pamphlet and we had a lot of large family involvement and people wanting to be a part of this whole process. And we had a youth do the eulogy and we had pictures of the family in here. And so again, that's a lot of family members and supports coming together to help us through this. And so again, I put up there that, "We still cannot believe you are gone, Cherish."

And you think about the number of years. People may think, well, look at how many years ago it was. To us, it doesn't feel that way in our heart because it's just still fresh in our minds. And my husband had mentioned that there's -- we have four daughters, and in our hearts, we know that Cherish is the missing link. And so we constantly feel that.

And so yeah, so the funeral, it was a huge community support that came in.

And moving on to the trial, many of our family and friends attended the trial that spread over several days in Kamloops. The family and friends really wanted to show Dezwaan how many lives he had impacted, which was many. And it was not easy for the family to sit and listen to the court evidence presented on how Cherish's life was taken.
And thank goodness again for the family pulling together each day in prayer and supporting one another emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. It was deeply devastating for all that were there because the emotions were so high with anxiety and grief and stress and anger, and so a family coming together and trying to go through the court process and stay grounded and balanced so that we were going through things in the right way.

I could not attend the trial, of course. It was just too big and too much. And so I stayed out in the lobby with some family members while people went in -- our family went into court.

And I know that I had to do the victim impact statement, which was something that I can't really remember. And I know that I did do that but I know just reading in the newspaper how that -- how what had happened and that and it was again, part of the memories that I just can't recall exactly.

And with Dezwaan, he was sentenced to second-degree murder and the family did not feel it was reflecting what he should have got after such a brutal murder. He should have received a first-degree sentence.

And we wanted him to be listed as a dangerous offender; however, through that process, they said that because, I guess, through negotiating, that they
lowered that. They didn’t put him on as a dangerous offender because a part of it was him telling them where Cherish was.

And so that was devastating to us because now when we look at -- I'm not sure how many years he got, if it was 15 years and no chance of parole at a certain amount of years. And we know in our minds that that's getting closer or it's arriving and it's really -- we wonder, you know, what's going to happen? Where is he going to go?

And will he be in Merritt or you know, when -- and so that fear, that underlying fear that we keep moving forward, time keeps moving, and when is this going to happen and what if it happens? How are we going to cope or deal with this as a family and as a community?

And so is there anything you wanted to say?

MR. VICTOR LACERTE: Yeah. Like Shelley says, you know, his time is just about up. I really wanted to have the dangerous offender attached to his release so that people could know his whereabouts after being released. For him to plead down from first degree to second degree and get pretty well everything his way; otherwise, he was going to give up the where he'd partially buried Cherish's body. And you know, I mean, the way he had brutally murdered her is another.
And for him to say in the courts that it was consensual, you know, I mean, this little girl that's only 16 years of age and you know, it just -- and for us to find out the way that he had killed her, you know, it's just unbelievable.

So I don't know if there's any way, you know -- I mean, things have already taken its toll as to him not being able to have that dangerous offender attached to his release. I don't know if there's any way that a person can go back and say, "Okay. Well, you know what? If we can reconsider this and have that attached, that would make our lives a lot more -- you know, we'd be able to live with it a little more so as opposed to him not receiving a first-degree sentence without a chance of parole", which in our eyes, you know, we thought that was the way things should have happened.

But I don't know. What can you say? I mean, we're just happy to have closure in that sense with getting Cherish back and to be able to lay her to rest.

But yeah.

**MS. SHELLEY OPPENHEIM LACERTE:** One thing that one of my relatives had mentioned is that during the court hearing they found that the seating arrangements could have been better structured in keeping the family separated from the offender's families and support. The
family members said that they weren't -- felt that that was really -- we were already going through a lot and the family to come in and be in close proximity to the other family, it was -- it really made things more difficult. So that was something that was expressed.

And again, we talked about the debriefing after the search and how huge that was, but also the debriefing after the trial that had never happened; again, that that's something that I think is really important, that we have that process looked at, you know, so that we're taking care of individuals and taking care of them and closure.

You look at the four areas, like, when you talk about a traumatic event, it was like, going through the search, how traumatizing that was. And then realizing that Cherish was gone, going through the funeral, and then right into the courts, like, it was trauma after trauma after trauma, just building. And how can we take care of ourselves and each other through that process? So we believe that's an important part to consider.

And moving on to something else that we wanted to share is in April 2011, there was -- Dezwaan's son had ended up killing and raping this young lady. I think she was -- I can't remember how old she was, 18. She was 18 years old. And so this was on the island and his
son has killed and raped and murdered this young girl.

And so from that happening, the media were right on to us again. They were searching for us in Merritt. And we didn’t know how to feel or react with that.

And then I heard that they were trying to track down my oldest daughter Ashley. So we came together again as a family. We said, "Okay. We need to approach the media. What is the purpose? What are we going to provide for the media so that they would not keep pursuing us?"

And so looking at that, we decided to provide a message to the victims, the family, and provide some sort of supportive message that you know, we wanted to somehow let them know of our love and our care of them and thinking about them. And so that helped with that process, the media approaching us.

But again, it opened everything up and it was so hard to realize that -- it just shook our worlds again. And I couldn't believe that it hit me where I went down again. And I remember feeling some of the same feelings of going through Cherish's loss again and I got scared. I thought, oh, no, I'm down again and I don’t want this to go on and on like it did before, because I was recognizing those feelings and that experience.
And so again, trying to pick myself up again and move forward. So that impact of that happening just shook our whole family again. And so that was something that had happened.

And moving on to another incident, that was in April 2017, where Dezwaan had escaped Mission Institution. He was in Mission and he had walked right out of the prison and had escaped. And so all of a sudden, this is all over the news and we're thinking, what's going on? And we were again shook because the RCMP or nobody had come to us and told us that this is happening. And so again, we felt that somebody could have come to us and let us know that this -- and that's not that far from Merritt either, like, from Merritt to Mission. And so you know, is he going to be in Merritt or is he going to be around?

And so going through that experience was again, another shakeup for our family, and again, the media tracking us down again and having to connect with them.

But we couldn't hide and run away and -- but again, coming together as a family and strategically planning what we needed to do to get through this and move forward. And again, Ko'waintco was a big part of this support and helping us get through that part.

And as I mentioned, us not being notified and being contacted of his escape, and through that
process, we had learned that there is some forms that you can fill out and learn about where he is or what's happening, because when he was -- and nobody had told us about that or again, with all the things that had happened, maybe we didn’t hear it or maybe we -- I don't know.

I don't think anybody told us though, but they've contacted Ko'waintco and we have to go through a process, you know, because when he was first sentenced, he was in B.C. and he was being attacked within the system from other inmates and that, so they sent him back east. And so far as we knew that he was back east somewhere. We never knew when he was transferred back to B.C. We didn’t know that that happened. We just knew he was far away, gone somewhere else.

And so again, that was another shocking detail that we had found out and very disturbing to find out that he was back in B.C. in a halfway house not far away from where we live. And so that's huge in itself.

Yeah, so that was a big piece of -- okay.

Looking at going into the healing journey, steps the family took to help with the healing journey, a year after Cherish had passed away we had a memorial. And in preparation for that we provided giveaway items and we prepared to thank the people that supported us, which was so many people. So my mother and myself and relatives came
together and we canned fish, we canned lots of different
berries and anything we could and made different things,
bought items to bring everybody together and show our
appreciation of the support that was provided.

And again, in memory of Cherish and
implementing our culture, the drumming and the information,
a PowerPoint on Cherish and having people speak and just
coming back together to have that was really important for
us. And there was so many people that were honoured with
the RCMP and investigators and volunteer people,
counsellors and professionals who had assisted the family.

And so that was again, really an important
part of our healing journey is just to organize that and do
that.

And also, through this healing, I ended up
going to Tsow-Tun Le Lum on the island for trauma treatment
which was really helpful to me. It felt like I was -- my
mind and my body was just frozen and going to the trauma
treatment, it helped open up some of those -- open things
up so that I could move forward because I could not
function, you know. I couldn't even take care of my girls.
I couldn't take care of my home and couldn't go to work.
And so that helped me take my first step in trying to move
forward with our life.

And through this process too I was very
suicidal at times where I remember planning to take my
life. I was rationalizing that my husband could take care
of Vicki and Kelli, that they would be fine. They would be
able to move on. My mother and my dad were okay and my
brothers, and thinking about different family members, of
how they could move on with their lives so that I could go
and join Cherish. And I thought about gathering all the
pills that I could and I would check into a motel and do
that.

But I thought about Ashley wandering with
her friends and afraid that she might commit suicide or
something could happen to her. And so that -- then I
started thinking about it. I cannot be selfish. I am sick
and I'm not well. Through this process I knew that I
wasn't well, with previous training, you know, and knowing
some of the process of grief and loss, and so needing to
pick myself up for my children, for my husband.

My husband, he was so hurt to hear that at
one point I said that maybe I should just -- we shouldn't
be together. Maybe I should just go on my own. And he was
so hurt with that, and I said because I was self-
destructing. You know, everything, my whole life was
falling apart, fell apart.

And I think that's just a part of the
process I went through and I came to a point where I had to
say, "Okay. I will live for my husband. I will live for my daughters. I will live for my family. And maybe someday I can live for me too." But I had to pick myself up to do that, to keep going.

And through this as well, we had Scw'exmx Family and Child and Family Services that were -- we were so relieved that they had stepped in and they connected with Vicki and Kelli. And they would take them out and do different activities, keep them occupied, do fun things with them and take them swimming and do arts and crafts, because they were just like, seven and eight years old.

And Scw'exmx Health had services as well that people came in to support our family during the search and through that; however, again, at that time, they didn’t have the background of trauma and that. But they were -- the organization wanted to support us.

Our band was an important part and the chiefs in the Valley that were stepping up as leadership to support us. And with our finances, that's a huge part in not being able to take care of our own finances, you know? And so the band had stepped in and helped us that one time to clear some of that away so that to ease some of the stress that we were going through.

And we had talked about -- earlier, I talked about attending the conference in Prince George and the
B.C. -- being a part of putting something on for Cherish on the B.C. quilt. And so that was huge. It was scary to have to decide to go there. And what we found was it wasn’t an easy process but I think that just going through the process really, really helped us and really again, has helped me understand how extensive it is in B.C. and across Canada, in looking at that.

And the things that we were impacted with as a family that for us is that I think of other families that for dental and taking care of ourselves, like, for our eye checkup and appointments and all that, when you're in the middle of all of this trauma and trying to heal and trying to live our lives and that that's forgotten. And I felt so bad as a mother that years later, here we go to the dentist and my poor girls and myself, we had lots of work that had to be done.

And I think about details like that that people may not think about, but families need support and you know, keeping up on stuff like that.

And the financial distress when I went on long-term disability, it was really stressful and demeaning to go through that process and that paperwork and the expectations they have of you, where I couldn't even see the paper. I couldn't understand it and they'd read it to me and I'd have to get somebody to sit there and listen to
understand it. And then not even being able to sign my own name. It was just a scribble.

And then them contacting us to ask questions and whether we qualify or continue to qualify to get funding. Like, we're already going through enough and going through that process, it's like they don't believe us, you know, what we're going through or what we're experiencing. And so that was a terrible memory that I have in trying to get through that because we had to survive, you know, and we needed those dollars to help support our family.

And treatment centres, I look at my oldest daughter and how she's suffering, still suffering today, and she had got all ready, prepared, and went to her counselling, went through her whole process, got signed up to go to treatment. She knew she was finally ready. She was finally, at this time, where she was going.

And then she says, "Well, I can't do it. I have to pay my rent. I have to pay my bills. I'm not able to go." And she goes, "Maybe we can work together and figure out how we can find a way to go."

And so today I think about how these barriers or these things that stop her from getting the help that she needs. And same with my husband. They just need some help.
It's just -- no, it's true. You look at all the years that go by and the supports that are needed and some of the barriers or the things that come in the way. And one thing that I felt was really important is easy access to information. There's no -- in my mind and how I felt as an individual is that I desperately wanted to know about grief and loss. I wanted to understand it and know. And like, I learned in past workshops or sessions but I wanted to see it and have that so that I could see where we were or I was in understanding trauma, how the mind and body works.

Like, at one time, I thought -- I was talking to a counsellor. It literally felt like I was going to go crazy. Can you go crazy from this? How does the mind work? My body is hurting all over the place. What's causing that or how long will this last? And how do the cells in your -- like, with memory work? And different things like that came to mind.

And to me, it was really important. It was important to me to learn and know and understand that. And I was kind of holding back, thinking this might sound crazy to be talking about, but I thought maybe if I talked about it, maybe there's other individuals that would like that or need that. I know there's many different needs and wants from different people. But I wanted to share that, that
that was important to me.

And Ko'waintco had kind of touched on looking at compensation for women or families that are affected by this. And so that was a point that was brought forward. And myself, as an educator, looking at the work that I am doing, it has really made a difference in looking at myself previously being a teacher and witnessing the pain and the hurt that my daughters have gone through.

And I worked in a band school where I asked my girls to come and join us in this school. I said, "You'll like it there. We do drumming, we do different activities. Come into this school."

And so they transferred from the school they were in and they came into our school. And I saw them blossom before my eyes, like, with the ceremonies, the drumming, the singing, the stick games, the different things that they were learning. I really believe how that gives us not only identity but the strength to empower themselves and to become more balanced and strong to move forward.

And so looking at the cultural piece and what I believe really helped us through this, I ended up becoming a principal at the band school, and then into the school district. And the work that we do is really to grow these programs and to learn who we are as a people, and to
learn our history and our local cultures and the history, and teaching that to our students, and the importance of providing information, as I had mentioned earlier, to educate and provide this.

I'm pursuing the PhD program next and looking at supports around that, like, trying to provide some insight or education to professionals, experts, to learn and to understand. And same with the youth and looking at, well, here we are today, you know.

Is there any supports that exist for something like that? So that's something that I wanted to bring forward as well because at this day and time, that's where we've progressed.

Okay. And looking at moving on, in closing, kind of looking at again, how grateful for the support we received and members, family members and people that stepped up and how important that is, and again, express that.

We looked at -- I never forget looking back at what we had as a family, like, for instance, my mother coming in. And it seemed like everybody naturally took on these different roles. My mother came in and she did the laundry. She was doing cleaning. My brother and sister-in-law took care of the yard. My cousin came in and helped with the girls. And well, a few of my cousins.
And then Ko'waintco with the spiritual and the cultural piece. And people coming in to cook. And that happened for months. It wasn’t just a short term. It had happened for over a year.

And it’s amazing that again, how well, we recognize that and we’re thankful. But again, looking what we had as a family, what do other families have and what do other families need, you know, that would help them through? And so I think that that's huge.

And I talked about us still going through some of our struggles with post-traumatic stress disorder, the memory loss, and thinking about going through life and still looking at birthdays and holidays and different things that it's so hard to celebrate when we know that Cherish isn't here to celebrate with us, that that's something that we continue to struggle with.

And feeling -- I remember going -- we came to a family gathering and they had a dance, and I felt so guilty for dancing and trying to have fun, you know? And it just didn’t seem right to do that. So things like that again, as a family, we recognize our individuals and finding a way to get through all of that.

And the nightmares of imagining the violence that Cherish experienced. That's still there, and trying to get through that, getting triggered of the terrifying
memories that Cherish experienced then. And driving by the site and when we come to the coast, we're on Coldwater Reserve. We have to drive through the site and sometimes we just -- we acknowledge and we do our prayers, but sometimes it's just too much, where we have to just block that away until we can deal with that.

And the thought of suicide, like, we need to -- that was in -- happened for years, those thoughts. But now, looking at how we need to live on as a family to be strong for our children, our grandchildren, our family, and for the future, so coming to that place where we want to be a strong family and continue walking in a good way in our lives for our future generations.

We're fortunate to have three grandchildren and so our time and our love and you know, we embrace our -- a family is so important and we're just so fortunate to spend time with them and make their lives happy and safe and want them to be successful, and that we know that someday we'll join Cherish and we'll all be together again with her and family and other relatives.

And looking at how the things that we went through and the things that we needed to do to heal ourselves and where we are today, that this evil man will not have the power to destroy us. And so that's what we look at.
There's so much more, I know, in this, but I think that's about it. Is there anything else?

MR. VICTOR LACERTE: Well, you going to tell them about your degree?

MS. SHELLEY OPPENHEIM LACERTE: Yeah, I did.

MR. VICTOR LACERTE: You did?

MS. SHELLEY OPPENHEIM LACERTE: Yeah.

MS. SHELBY THOMAS: Chief Commissioner, do you have any questions or comments at this time?

CHIEF COMMISSIONER BULLER: I have a couple of questions and I might have missed a few points here. You reported on the Saturday to the RCMP that Cherish was missing and you started your family search on Sunday; is that correct?

MS. SHELLEY OPPENHEIM LACERTE: That's right.

CHIEF COMMISSIONER BULLER: Yeah. When did the RCMP start their search; do you know?

MS. SHELLEY OPPENHEIM LACERTE: Monday, they came. They drove into our yard. They came and they listened to us. And then it started from there.

CHIEF COMMISSIONER BULLER: When the trial was happening and then there was the sentencing and what's called a plea bargain to -- well, I don't know if -- I
shouldn't say that that's what happened, but it sounds to me like there was a plea bargain of some sort for the dangerous offender issue. Did Crown counsel ever talk to you about what was going on with respect to sentencing and what was happening and why?

**MS. SHELLEY OPPENHEIM LACERTE:** During that time I wasn’t really -- like, my memory is really not -- it wasn’t a big part of it. I think Ko'waintco was more involved and other people.

**MR. VICTOR LACERTE:** The detective came up to me and said, well, you know, because Dezwaan is going to show us where the body is and he wants to plead his sentence down from first degree to second degree, and that he wanted to not have “dangerous offender” attached to it.

**CHIEF COMMISSIONER BULLER:** Okay, thank you. Now that makes sense. I misheard that. Okay. Thank you very much.

**MS. SHELLEY OPPENHEIM LACERTE:** I was just wondering. Ko'waintco had a few points. Did you still want to speak on anything or was it already covered?

**MS. KO'WAINTCO MICHEL:** Just the point about the day before when the RCMP were aware that Dezwaan was breaching his condition and was in the Merritt area and they had told him that he wasn’t to be in the vicinity, when they could have picked him up and charged him, but
they didn't. You know, they just let him go and that was just the day before. And I think that, you know, if the police had just followed up, then this all wouldn't have happened.

And I really think that the police, the RCMP need to be a little more assertive with people who are breaching their conditions. And that was just shared on the news the day before. And you know, I go back to that time and think about that time and it's really upsetting that they just let that slide. And I really feel that needs to be noted through this whole thing.

And you know, knowing that it's 2018 now, it's 15 years after, you know, and so it means this year, if they're giving him 15 years, it means he will be out this year. But we don’t know as a family if they extended his time when he escaped from the minimum-security prison. We don’t know if they gave him additional time. And hopefully they have.

And we don’t know as a family if we have a say. Would the legal system support us as a family to ensure that he gets additional time? And what is it as we, as a family, can do to make sure that he is looked at as a dangerous offender and not really minimize it, that he's not dangerous? Because if he is to go out there and he's released this year, which is 15 years now, I was looking at
the information, adding it -- and if he is, you know, where

is he going to live?

Is he going to be living in the vicinity of

Merritt? Will his family, himself, look at getting revenge

on the family for the time he's done? What will the system

do to ensure that we're safe as a people and as a family

and all the -- you know, anyone in society, how safe are

they going to be?

And how is it that the system can allow this

negotiation to take place without the family? That's

things that I think that really needs to be looked at.

And I'm sure that's the things that Shelley

and Amigo were looking at because we're looking at -- this

Inquiry is to look at recommendations of what can be done

better and how can we help all our people, anyone, not even

just talking about Aboriginal but non-Aboriginal as well,

you know, when you have dangerous offenders out there?

They shouldn't be able to be labelled and

say, "Just don't put me as a dangerous offender," when they

are a dangerous offender. That's really huge. I think

that needs to be really looked at. That's what I want to

add to this all. Thank you.

CHIEF COMMISSIONER BULLER: Great. Thank

you very much.

MR. VICTOR LACERTE: I was just going to add
that during the court process, Dezwaan apparently had seen
Cherish walking from school a couple of times and that she
had reminded him of an old girlfriend that he was seeing in
Westbank or Kelowna. So in that essence, I was kind of
looking at it and saying, "Well, you know, was this guy
stalking her and just by chance she was walking by the area
where he was at that evening?"

So who's to say that, you know, the first-degree murder charge should have applied at that? So
something like this came up in court and I was just
overwhelmed by -- from what I was hearing, so you know?

CHIEF COMMISSIONER BULLER: Well, thank you
all very much. I have to say, I've never given up hope in
the strength of families and what families can do for each
other. And you've just reconfirmed that belief again in
such a great way about how as a family and as a community
you've all stayed together and helped each other.

What you’ve said today is really important
to our work and is a big help to the work that we have to
do ahead of us. So I want to thank you for that. You’ve
made a difference already to the work that we're doing and
I'm very thankful.

I want to thank you personally because I
suppose it would be so easy to give up, to give up hope,
and you still haven't done that. And I think that's
wonderful. You've really inspired me. So I want to thank you personally for coming and lifting up my spirit too.

Because you’ve given us gifts of your experience, your advice, your recommendations, we have some gifts for you, and I hope you will accept them.

The first one is an eagle feather. And I've learned, doing this work now all across Canada, that as Indigenous people, we have similar stories and beliefs about eagle feathers, the truth. And that's that the eagle feathers will hold you up and lift you up when you need it. And they'll help you go even higher when you're ready.

Our second gift is some seeds. And I hope you have better luck than I did in my garden. When the Commissioners and I started this work, we hoped that one of the things that would be sort of an offshoot or a result of our work is that there would be healing and new growth. And so we decided to give all the families and survivors who come forward these seeds, which they're wild strawberry seeds.

Would you please plant them -- and better luck than me -- and if something grows, would you please take a picture and send it to us so we can see the new growth and keep the photographs in our legacy archive?

I have to tell you, we're already getting photographs so there's new life all across Canada, and
there's hope now all across Canada.

So my sincere thanks for coming, for sharing your truths with us. I wish you a safe trip home, or trips home. And I want you, when you go home please, to remember that you made a big difference by coming here. Thank you so much.

Okay. After either the -- whichever happens last, the feathers or the song, we will be adjourned.

--- CLOSING SONG

--- Exhibits (code: P01P15P0502)

--- Exhibit 1: PowerPoint presentation “In Loving Memory of Cherish” prepared for the public testimony of the family, comprising 11 colour slides

--- Upon adjourning at 14:22
LEGAL DICTA-TYPIST’S CERTIFICATE

I, Karen Noganosh, 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.

_______________________________
Karen Noganosh

Karen Noganosh TRANSCRIPTIONIST

INTERNATIONAL REPORTING INC

April 15, 2018