Monday October 30, 2017

Statement - Volume 60

Paula McDonald,
In relation to Loretta Saunders

Statement gathered by Marie-Audrey Girard

Coast Reporting Services Inc.
II

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Statement gatherer: Marie-Audrey Girard

Documents submitted with testimony: None
(October 30th, 2017, 7:10 p.m.)

MARIE-AUDREY GIRARD: This is Marie-Audrey Girard with the National Inquiry. We are in Membertou. This is Monday, October 30th and I am in the room with?

PAULA MACDONALD: Paula MacDonald.

[K.S.]: [K.S.].

MARIE-AUDREY GIRARD: Thank you so much for being with us tonight. It is 7:10 p.m. and we are starting the interview.

So, again, thank you very much for being with us tonight. And then as I said at the beginning, we would like to know what -- my first question will be what would you like the Commission and the Commissioners to know, what story you would like to share with us.

PAULA MACDONALD: I have a few different stories I would like to share. The first would be about my sister-in-law, Loretta Saunders. I am Loretta Saunder's brother's ex-wife. And I was one of the people on scene searching for Loretta when she went missing.

And I want to add to what Delilah said in her testimony earlier about the way the reporting happened. In the beginning Loretta was reported as being a white woman from Saint John's and the media were all over that. Um, and it seemed like
the more people learned about Loretta and the more
it came out, you know, about her history and the
fact that she was an Inuk woman and from Labrador
rather than -- you know Goose Bay, Labrador rather
than Saint John's, Newfoundland I noticed the
changes in the help we got. Not so much -- you
know, we still had lots of support, but we had
less community support, um, and less media
coverage and it didn't seem to be as important
when people realized that she wasn't white. I
noticed that for one. And I don't understand
that. Like I don't understand.

I remember us talking about it and planning
like how we were going to release the news,
because we -- we tried in the beginning like not
to let anyone know because we were afraid she
would get lost or slip between the cracks because
we thought we wouldn't have any help, because, you
know, her family was -- had gone through so much
discrimination and stuff.

Um, sorry, I forgot where I was going with
this for a second.

MARIE-AUDREY GIRARD: That's okay.

PAULA MACDONALD: Also, I wanted to add to what the family
mentioned earlier about the way things were
released to us as a family. Um, I experienced the same thing Miriam experienced with talking to police officers. Um, I -- it seemed to get a lot more difficult to get a hold of someone or to find someone willing to talk once it was released that Loretta was Inuk. Um, oh, goodness, I am forgetting again. Sorry.

MARIE-AUDREY GIRARD: It's all right. Yeah. And if you want, I can jump in and maybe ask some questions and --

PAULA MACDONALD: I was about to say something and I am forgetting it. Oh, my goodness I can't believe.

KARINA SMILEY: It is okay. Just take some deep breaths.

PAULA MACDONALD: I think when I talk about Loretta and her being missing it brings me right back to looking for her. And that's extremely difficult.

I remember being on the New Brunswick Highway and that day we felt exceptionally well. We thought it was going to be the day, myself and [Ex-Husband] and [Ex-Brother-in-Law] it was going to be the day we were going to find her. We were driving up the highway and we saw all these inukshuks in various spots. We were convinced that somebody had Loretta and she was managing to get them to pull over long enough just so she could run up that mountain and
build an inukshuk just to let her know -- to let us know we were on the right track. And I am not sure why we thought that, but those inukshuks kept the hope in our minds and kept us searching and kept us looking.

And that last day that we searched we were just headed to the New Brunswick Highway, that was our next -- our next thing we were going to check was -- was the sides of the road on the highway. And I can't remember if it was [Ex-Husband] or his brother, but one of them needed to stop for a pack of cigarettes and we were going to revamp and, you know, give ourselves a minute before we took the next journey. And we stopped in the store and [Ex-Husband] was going through his phone and he saw something on his phone about a body being found. And before he had the words completely out of his mouth we were heard it on the radio that a body was found and that they were -- and that it -- you know, it was Loretta. And, um, it -- um, it nearly destroyed my ex-husband.

Um, and myself and [Ex-Husband] have a very shady past. You know, our marriage wasn't a good marriage. You know, he was once an abusive man. I won't talk about details of him or what happened
in our marriage, because I truly believe he is no longer that man. And I don't think it is fair of me to talk about things that -- that describe a person that he isn't anymore.

But at that time I saw him and his brother fall apart and I think I had -- [Ex-Brother-in-Law] actually fell to his knees and -- I don't know, but I lost a piece of myself on that highway and -- that I don't think I would ever get back. And after that it was, you know, just going straight back to the hotel and -- and we had to -- we had to call our children. And we knew it was released on the news it was only a matter of time before it was going to be on Facebook. And I had to tell my daughter and my son over the phone that their aunt was murdered and that never should have happened. It never should have been released, the family should have known. And I don't understand how.

It near destroyed my daughter. She hasn't been able to go in to a public place since any of this happened. She is -- slowly she is doing well now, thank god. But we have been -- myself and her have been through three years -- almost three years of counselling now. And we do equine therapy, which I want to commend Nova Scotia
Victim Services for, because Newfoundland completely turned their back on me and wanted to stick me on a two-year waiting list as well as my daughter. But --

MARIE-AUDREY GIRARD: And how old is your daughter?

PAULA MACDONALD: But [Victim Services Worker] of Nova Scotia has been very -- extremely helpful and I want to -- I do want to say that my experience with victim services is unlike the rest of the family, because once I got the right contact in Nova Scotia we did get the help. And not only did we get a private counsellor, but you know once our counsellor wrote a letter they agreed to give equine therapy. So we were able to have non -- you know, non-traditional counselling --

MARIE-AUDREY GIRARD: M'hm.

PAULA MACDONALD: -- and horse therapy which is just something myself and [Daughter] connect to more anyway, because animals are kind of our thing. Um, ...

MARIE-AUDREY GIRARD: And how old is your daughter? Sorry.

PAULA MACDONALD: She is now 21 years old.

MARIE-AUDREY GIRARD: Twenty-one. So she was 18 years old when --

PAULA MACDONALD: She was in her last year of high school, 17.
MARIE-AUDREY GIRARD: Seventeen years old.

PAULA MACDONALD: She was 17 when Loretta was killed and my son was 14. Yes, he had just turned 14.

Um, I don't think it is acceptable the families hear about things like this on the news or on the radio or on Facebook. I don't think it is acceptable the way the legal system handles things, the way the police handle things. The family should be the first people called. There should be nothing released to the media until the family knows what happened.

I mean, recently a woman went missing in Newfoundland and it wasn't that way for her. Her family knew before it was released, because she is not Aboriginal.

And me being someone that, you know, is -- although I have recently discovered I have Indigenous ancestry I am -- both sides of my family I still grew up with a white privileged life, you know, 100 percent. So I experienced the difference between having that white privileged life and coming back after Loretta was found, after having my face plastered on the news now all of a sudden people see me as maybe she is Aboriginal.

MARIE-AUDREY GIRARD: M'hm.
PAULA MACDONALD: And I noticed a difference in how I was treated in my own community where I was born and raised. You know, many, many people have walked out of my life just because I stand by this inquiry or just because I stand by Indigenous rights. And why? I am still the same person I was 20 years ago. But if they knew 20 years ago who I was they wouldn't have been in my life I guess.

MARIE-AUDREY GIRARD: So when --

PAULA MACDONALD: When I came back from Nova Scotia after Loretta was killed I met my boyfriend at the time, I met him and my mother at the airport. It was only a matter of couple of days, you know, before he started complaining about the news and what he was seeing on the news and what he was reading on the news. And his favorite words became Indian bitch and Indian whore. And that's what he used to describe me the minute he saw there was Indigenous ancestry.

And one night he was making negative comments. I can't remember the exact context of his negative comments, but he was talking about the Indigenous people and saying a lot of terrible things about them. And it was really hurtful to
me and I couldn't handle hearing him say that and
I was defending it and asking him to stop. And
for asking him to stop I got beat in the head with
a golf club and thrown on the floor and then he
stomped on my chest. And then threw my clothes
out the door and told me to go back to the other
Indian bitches if I love them that much.

And, you know, my mom -- my own mother came
to collect me off his step and even she wasn't a
hundred percent sure that I didn't do something
wrong, because I guess my mental health was fading
at the time in a sense because of what happened
and because of the trauma. And I didn't -- I
didn't report that he had -- he did anything like
that. It hadn't been the first time. I have been
abused by 14 different people in my life
actually.

And the only one that changed, the only one
that made any changes at all is [Ex-Husband]. And the
only reason that happened is because he had a
swarm of support from Indigenous communities, you
know. He had a wrap around support. He had
counselling, he had healing circles, he had
smudging bud. Nobody else that entered my life
had any of that. And, um, I forget where I am
Paula MacDonald
Loretta Saunders

If, um, if those support -- supportive services were provided to us in our marriage it wouldn't have failed, it would have had the help we needed. But instead of help and support we had -- I don't know -- I believe I had one counsellor that flirted with me. I had another one who did drugs with my ex-husband. I guess it wasn't -- it wasn't taken seriously. It wasn't seen as a problem. It was always, what are you doing now to get him going, Paula? It was never, you know, let's punish him or let's heal you. It was never about that.

MARIE-AUDREY GIRARD: And can you tell us more a little bit about the investigation, Loretta's investigation, the police investigation? It is my understanding that you were doing your own investigation, but the police as well was doing it at the same time.

PAULA MACDONALD: Yeah.

MARIE-AUDREY GIRARD: So if you could describe a little bit about the police investigation in this case. I know you talk a little bit about it, but if you have more details about it.

PAULA MACDONALD: I felt like we were lied to. I was told by a police officer that they didn't see the need for
a ground search at this time. And when he told me
he didn't see the need for a ground search at this
time, I took that as she not dead, they have no
evidence that she is dead. She is alive, we are
still looking for her alive. And that gave me the
hope that I needed to keep searching, but at the
same time they had already looked through her
apartment. They knew already. How could they let
us believe that we could find her? How could they
put us through all those days of looking for her
when they already knew she was dead? They had to
knew. They at least knew she was hurt.

MARIE-AUDREY GIRARD: And what did they found exactly? I
know many of the information that was disclosed
today, but I will still be asking them because --

PAULA MACDONALD: I don't know what they found, but I -- they
had to find something. And she was ... It was a
struggle involved in her death, you know. They
tried to smother her with a couple of plastic bags
that failed. And if there was that big of a
struggle -- their skin was under her fingernails.
She had taken chunks out of the girl's face.
There had to be some kind of evidence. Her head
was smashed. There had to be blood in the
apartment. I know there was blood in the
apartment, because family members cleaned it afterwards. So the police knew that, they knew all that and they didn't tell us.

MARIE-AUDREY GIRARD: So you --

PAULA MACDONALD: How can they be so cruel? Like myself and [Ex-Husband] and his brother went to the building where Loretta lived and we pried the manhole in the back of the parking lot opened and, um, looked, looked in there for her. We walked -- walked through woods, we climbed in to dumpsters. I mean, who should ever have to do that? All we knew is what she was wearing when she went missing. And we found coats that we thought were hers in the woods, we found boots that we thought were hers. We found evidence of people hurt that we thought was about her. We found a broken rail by her apartment that we thought, okay, she had a struggle out here, maybe she fell, maybe something happened to her. And there was no need of us to have to go through any of that.

MARIE-AUDREY GIRARD: M'hm.

PAULA MACDONALD: All those days of searching, all those climbing in to garbage cans and looking in to manholes none of that had to happen. They could have saved Loretta's family all that pain by telling
them the truth at the beginning. And I understand they couldn't release much, because they -- because it would effect the investigation. That I understand. I understand the law and I understand the way it works, because I took criminology. I studied, you know, different aspects of the law most of my life so I know what they had to hold back. But they could have gave us enough.

MARIE-AUDREY GIRARD: M'hm.

PAULA MACDONALD: They could have told us right from the beginning that they thought there was a possibility she was dead. They could have told us that, because I know they knew it.

MARIE-AUDREY GIRARD: And how exactly -- you mentioned that when you were on this highway that your life totally changed. What exactly were the consequences that Loretta's death had on your life? How did you -- like maybe the next months, what happened in your life in the next months --

PAULA MACDONALD: It is almost four years later and I can't drive on the highway. I have to get someone else to do the driving if I am on certain highways now, because I get panic attacks if it resembles that highway.

I have been back to New Brunswick three times
looking for her memorial and I had a meltdown on
the New Brunswick Highway with my children with me
that near destroyed my daughter. I upset her so
much, because I couldn't find Loretta's memorial. I
got so upset that she got out of my car and took
off running with no phone and no nothing. And I
spent hours looking for my daughter in New
Brunswick as a result of how upset I got looking
for that memorial because I couldn't let it go. I
have let it go now, because I have been back twice
since looking for it and I have come -- I have
come to accept the fact that Loretta was never
there. There was a lifeless body found in that
place and that wasn't her. And that's not the
place that I want to remember her.

And, um, this past summer I drove the New
Brunswick highway and I was the driver for the
first time and I know I can do it now. And I am
starting to heal and get over it. Um, but I will
never be the same again. I have always -- I mean,
[K.S.] has known me for a lot of years, she has
known me for a lot of years and I have always been
an outgoing person. I have always been able to go
out and have fun. And now my life is hiding and
going in the woods and just be away from people,
because I am afraid of people for the most part.

It's -- I am able to put on a happy face at work and I have always been able to pick myself up when other people need me. You know, I have always had that ability. So I am able to do that for clients. But, you know, when midnight comes and my day at work is over I sit in my car for hours or I drive for hours. And I haven't had a good night's sleep in years. My health has gone downhill, because I haven't slept or eaten properly. I am unable to walk in to a crowded room anymore. I am -- because it is similar reactions of family members after Loretta was killed. I am unable to be in a room with anyone drinking, it scares me. And, um, I have always been one of these people that trusted the police and trusted the justice system. I wanted to be a correctional officer and I wanted to be a person that made a change, you know. But I -- I can't trust them anymore.

I can't remember the officer's name, but one of the officers I spoke to when we were looking for Loretta I recently seen him on a news report on Facebook on something unrelated. And it was something he himself -- I don't want to mention
the officer's name, but I will mention the situation. It was a sexual assault or sexual harassment that this officer was being charged with. And when I saw that and I saw that face and I thought back to speaking to him at that moment. I don't -- I don't understand why they don't have people that are a little bit more sensitive to talk to family members.

The court process that was something else. Anyone that was in the room had to notice, but nobody spoke up and said anything. But the slimeball lawyer that one of the -- one of the people that killed Loretta, her lawyer was very inappropriate in the way he addressed his client. That really bothered me. I don't understand why -- why nothing was said about that. How do you get close enough to a client that you sit them near between your legs to talk to them? How do you do that? It just -- I know, my mind is all over the place. I am so sorry for that, but I keep getting these flashes of everything.

MARIE-AUDREY GIRARD: You mentioned a little bit earlier that you have been -- and, again, if those questions are too difficult, just let me know.

PAULA MACDONALD: M'hm.
MARIE-AUDREY GIRARD: You mentioned that 14 different people abused you in your life, is that something that you would like to share with us or that was just some references or is there anything that you would like to share?

PAULA MACDONALD: I don't know why it has been that way for me. I know my mother before me had had abuse in her life. Um, but I don't know what about me makes that happen. I don't know what is inside me that stops me from seeing the reality of it I guess. I -- for some reason I am attracted to men that are abusive, because it is -- really it is the only way I know. I am -- oh, goodness, my mind again is all over the place. I did have something that I wrote when I was on the airplane that may sound a little clearer, because my head was clearer at the time and I didn't have this splitting headache and thousands of tears. Is it okay if I read to you what I wrote?

MARIE-AUDREY GIRARD: Of course.

PAULA MACDONALD: Because I -- that was again from the heart. Um, how do I find notebook stuff to read. Here this. This was -- I didn't know how the inquiry was going to go down so I thought it was just -- kind of all us getting up and having a little --
Paula MacDonald
Loretta Saunders

having a little thing to say.

MARIE-AUDREY GIRARD: M'hm.

PAULA MACDONALD: So I wrote something thinking, um, -- and
this might be -- I might be repeating myself on
some things here, but I think there might be
something in here I am missing. And I just said,
I am here today for two reasons. One is because
my children's aunt is one of the many missing and
murdered Indigenous women and I was one of the
people on scene in Halifax to search for her when
she went missing.

Loretta was a student at Saint Mary's doing her
thesis on missing and murdered Indigenous women at
the time of her death. When Loretta went missing I
was a student myself with little funds. When my
ex-husband called me I knew I had to head to
Halifax to help look for Loretta. And at the time I
didn't have the money to get here. And my son had
some savings and he gave me his money and he said,
mommy, I want you to take my money and go help
look for Loretta.

My -- my love and my understanding for
[Ex-Husband]'s family goes deep. I really think a lot
about them. I divorced [Ex-Husband] over 13 years ago,
a lot of them. We lost contact from time to time over the years due to conflict, which kind of brings me to the next reason and that's I am a survivor. I did, as I mentioned earlier, suffer abuse. But I mentioned about -- I didn't want to speak of the abuse that has to do with my mine and [Ex-Husband]'s marriage. [Ex-Husband]'s mother and I used to be close, but it was difficult on both of us to remain that way, because she -- you know, she is a very supportive mother and he needed her so understandably so she had to be there for him. And I am sure she gets sick of being peace maker between us, because, you know, she has been that on many, many occasions.

So Loretta and her sisters kind of took on the role of my confidante in my conflict with their brother after -- after we split up. This is -- they were kind of like go betweens to keep things on a level with us so we could still manage to communicate for the sake of the children. [Ex-Husband] tells me that he began to change when Loretta moved in with him and his wife -- his now wife. And I believe that, because Loretta is such a peaceful soul. She just had that impact on anyone that had the privilege of knowing her and were blessed to
have loved her.

And the change in [Ex-Husband] became most evident to me when he and [Ex-Brother-in-Law] and I became our search together. [Ex-Husband] and I made peace. And he told me after all these years and everything we have been through he knew he could count on me. And it was then that he admitted to me, you know, his mistakes of the past and he apologized and he gave me my closure I needed in order to let that part of my life go. And I truly forgive him, I do, finally. And I am proud of him for how far he has come and for the changes he has made in this life. And I just wish that it had have been available to us sooner, you know. Why did it have to happen, you know, 13 years after the fact?

And that's getting to him being one of 14 people who has abused me. And like I said to my knowledge the only one that has changed -- and then I went on to speak about my last relationship that ended after Loretta was killed. And I already mentioned that abuse to you.

What I didn't mention was during that assault -- this part I forgot -- I kicked him in the genitals in defense and he fell to the floor at one point. And after my mother came and
retrieved me from his front step I am told by his friend that he went to the hospital and filed a report with claims that I abused him. And put that on record to make sure that if I picked up the phone that there would already be something on record I guess. And that word from his friend is probably one the reasons I was afraid to speak as it was assumed that it wasn't going to be taken seriously.

I have been starting to think that -- I hear a lot of people talk about inter-generational trauma and I have been starting to think that maybe inter-generational trauma is the reason that I have been in 14 abusive relationships. But can I be effected my inter-generational trauma if I didn't even know that generations of Indigenous ancestors existed. Like can my problems still be a result of what happened to them? I don't know. I don't know if anyone has the answer to that for me.

And I would like to know why I survived for 14 abusive relationships and not many people do. Through tracing my family history I have come to the conclusion that many family's hidden past or my ancestors’ hidden past which resulted in me
having white privilege is the reason I am here
today and they aren't. I have had a very
supportive mom who has always stood by me. I
guess that privilege gave me access to the
resources I needed, because I was able to fight
for the resources because people would listen to
me. And if they didn't listen to me, they would
listen to my mother. It's -- I fear how things
are going to be for my daughter if changes aren't
made. I fear that a lot.

Today when I was listening to Audrey talk
about her life and the abuse she has experienced
and how she lost her children I realized that --
how hard it had to have been for her and I
couldn't understand why she lost them. Audrey was
a good mother. She was a good mother that chose
the wrong man that abused her. But so was I. So
am I. Fourteen abusive relationships. Many, many
times child protection walked in to my house, many
times they found me bleeding and the floor. But
yet they didn't give me or my ex-husband help to
fix it. They made us sign the same kind of
agreement that other family members once had to
sign promising to stay apart. And we didn't. We
snuck around. We got back together. I phoned
child protection myself one day and told them, I
still didn't lose my kids. Because every time I
had an interview my white mother was sitting next
to me and that's why. Why have I -- my kids have
been exposed to so much more than my
sister-in-law's kids, but yet she lost hers. And
if this happens to my daughter, if she makes the
wrong choice in her life the same thing will
happen to her. I can see the same thing is going
to happen to her, because she holds a card. She
holds a card that says she don't get to get
listened to. That she doesn't get to get help. I
thought, wow, how great, my children have cards.
They never have to worry about medical care, you
know, this is so wonderful. If they get sick,
then they have this help. Yeah. But it also puts
a target on their frickin' heads.

Someone said to me today when I talked about
my ancestry and a lot of people don't realize that
parts of it are close enough that if I investigate
it and I proved it I could get benefits. But I
don't want them. I don't. I don't want that
card. But I want the benefits. I don't want to
be labelled.

MARIE-AUDREY GIRARD: And how do you think your daughter
PAULA MACDONALD: I want to hang on to that -- I want to hang
on to enough whiteness to keep my children safe. Does that sound stupid?

MARIE-AUDREY GIRARD: I don't know. I don't know.

PAULA MACDONALD: But yet I am not that person inside. I
don't know. I guess as a mother you do what you
have to do to keep your kids safe. And I guess
now -- now I need to talk about something that I
need to keep off record.

(PUBLIC PROCEEDINGS ADJOURNED)

(PROCEEDINGS ADJOURNED AT 8:14 P.M.)
I, Michelle Eng, Official Reporter in the Province of British Columbia, Canada, do hereby certify:
That this is a true and accurate transcript of these proceedings recorded on sound-recording apparatus, transcribed to the best of my skill and ability in accordance with applicable standards.
IN WITNESS WHEREOF, I have hereunto subscribed my name this 25th day of April, 2018.

Michelle Eng
Official Reporter