National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls

Truth-Gathering Process
Part 1 Statement Gathering
Hilton Vancouver Airport Hotel
Metro Vancouver (Richmond)
British Columbia

Friday April 6, 2018

Statement - Volume 359
Maura Gowans, Jenna Breuer & Janice Abbott,
In relation to Lisa Marie Graveline

Statement gathered by Sheila Mazhari

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II

NOTE

The use of square brackets [ ] in this transcript indicates that amendments have been made to the certified transcript in order to replace information deemed inaudible or indecipherable by the original transcriptionist. Amendments were completed by listening to the source audio recording of the proceeding and were made by Bryana Bouchir, Public Inquiry Clerk with the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls and 2SLGBTQ, May 29th 2018 at Vancouver, BC.
### III

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**Documents submitted with testimony:**

Item 1: Written statement of Maura Gowans
(2 pages double-sided)

Item 2: Poem authored by Maura Gowans (1 page)
Upon commencing on Friday, April 6, 2018

MS. SHEILA MAZHARI: Good afternoon. My name is Sheila Mazhari here statement gathering for the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls. Today is April 6, 2018. We’re at the Hilton Hotel in Room 209 in Richmond, B.C. here to receive the testimony of Maura Gowans.

Also joined in the rooms are three ladies, and I’ll let them introduce themselves.

MS. JENNA BREUER: Jenna Breuer(ph), Algonquin Nation, Bear Clan, Kitigan Zibi.

MS. JANICE ABBOTT: My name is Janice Abbott, my grandmother was Catherine Ross, her grandmother was (inaudible) from Neskonlith Nation, and I’m a lover and believer in (inaudible).

MS. MICHELLE LABOUCANE: My name’s Michelle LaBoucane, I’m from the Métis Nation, and I’m here to support.

MS. SHEILA MAZHARI: I’m just going to read the consent about public statements. So the information you share will normally be shared firstly with the governments and other parties withstanding at the Inquiry. The parties with standing include such organizations as the Native Women’s Association of Canada,
Police Services, Assembly of First Nations, and many others including some individuals First Nations.

If your statement is considered public or is given in a public forum your full name and transcript of everything you have said on audio and videotape will be transcribed into a statement which is legally required to be provided to the government and the parties withstanding.

A public statement can also be used to write public reports, prepare educational material, support research, or question witnesses such as police witnesses.

So, Maura, what have you chosen for your statement, how you want it to be shared? Your consent you gave?

MS. MAURA GOWANS: I’m publicly.

MS. SHEILA MAZHARI: Okay, perfect. All right now that’s out of the way, so let’s go into your introduction.

MS. MAURA GOWANS: So I start now?

MS. SHEILA MAZHARI: Yeah. How about you start with introducing yourself?

MS. MAURA GOWANS: Okay. So my name’s Maura Gowans, I was born [birthdate]. I was given up for adoption, was given up when I was born. My adopted mother worked in a nursing home, and so when I was five weeks old she adopted me.
I’m from Tulita Band from the Northwest Territories. I’ve never been home. I have five beautiful boys, ages 1 to 17. [Son 1] is 17, [Son 2] is 10, [Son 3] is 9, [Son 4] is 3 and [Son 5] is 1. Everything I do in my life is for them so that they have a chance at a better future than I had.

I prepared a statement, so I’m going to read that. So I was raised in a family that made many sacrifices in order for me and my siblings to have the best life possible. I just want to say this is not about my family, although they lived through the heartache of it by loving me. I was adopted, I was loved.

I consider my family my family, my parents, my parents, and even though they loved me I grew up feeling like I was unlovable and that I didn’t belong. Even though I had that, it was my perception and that’s how I felt.

So up until I was 15 I had a pretty normal life. I dropped out of school at the age of 15. I was a great student until this time. I took education sports very seriously and was a competitive runner, skier and swimmer. I also was in the senior band in grade 9, which was like (inaudible/off microphone).

My parents were always at my competitions. We moved from the Northwest Territories to Toronto to Nova Scotia, back to the Northwest Territories, to California,
to Alaska, to Saskatoon, to White Rock, B.C., to Smithers and then back to B.C.

When we moved to Saskatoon I was 14 years old, I was in grade 9, and I experienced racism for the first time, at least that I’m aware of. So I was adopted by Caucasian parents and when I went to school people, you know, would say what are you doing here, you belong on the left side, you don’t belong here. I was very alienated, I didn’t have a lot of friends, and I ended up drinking to fit in.

Within the first six months of drinking I ran away from home, I was fired as a swim coach and expelled from school. My life spiralled downwards very fast.

From the moment I drank I lost control, yet I loved the feeling because I did not want to follow my parents’ rules and I rebelled. I ended up being signed into care at the Ministry. From there I went from group home to group home. I was introduced to crime, I was introduced to the sex trade. I was introduced to -- I won’t even say I was introduced, I was put out. That’s not something I’ve really shared before.

So I came from like a normal family to being on the street, to being involved in the sex trade at 15. I had friends that would beat me up with sharp objects
and rock me. I’ve had guns pulled on me as a result.

I’ve been on the outskirts of Saskatoon and my friend I were going to most likely be killed, and I’m trying -- I have a vague recollection on how we got away. But I’m pretty sure we stole a car and got away.

At that time I remember I was on Gravol, like I took a lot of Gravol. This man took me to his house in downtown Saskatoon. He went in the fridge to get me a drink and I remember looking, it was like a coatroom like that, and on the back wall were newspaper clippings all over about missing girls. I remember just having that feeling that I was going to die.

I said,

“I hear someone calling my name.”

Like, I pretended I was crazy so that I could scoot closer to the door, and then I just ran. I ended up -- yeah, I ended up with a lot of older men that just took advantage of us.

I remember -- sorry, the woman I thought was my friend took me to her hometown outside of Saskatoon, we drank, and she left me with her uncle, and I was brutally raped. This is at 15 years old. Somehow I believed I deserved it. Looking back at it, I think she sold me for a bottle of alcohol. In the sickness in my mind, for some reason I thought I deserved that. I was
taught I deserved that, I was taught I was worthless.

During this timeframe I was charged with my first offence. I was with someone that stole Oreo cookies. So I was like, whoa, I didn’t do it, so I’m not going to court. As a result, I don’t know how many charges I have from that charge, but quite a few. I ended up just in and out of group homes, foster homes.

I finally ended up in a treatment centre called White Spruce. My parents, who had moved from Saskatoon to White Rock, came back for family day. I remember just wanting to be cool and lying and saying that I’d done all these drugs, and I said that -- instead of saying I was a sex trade worker I said I had girls working for me, which is not at all true, at all true. But I was trying to make myself not be so ashamed. I don’t know if that makes sense.

So they told me, if I finished treatment, I could come back to White Rock, where I’d never been. I didn’t complete treatment. I was asked to leave treatment. The one thing I did learn in treatment was how to cut myself. When I completed treatment my parents let me go home to White Rock even though I shouldn’t have been allowed, because I didn’t complete it.

When I got to White Rock I ended up going to high school and doing really well for a short period of
time. Then I started smoking marijuana. So up until this time I had only ever drank and smoked marijuana, I never had done hard drugs. I had lived with women that used cocaine in Saskatoon, but I had never used it. I’m not saying that I’m better than or anything, I just had never done that.

I remember I would go to 12-Step meetings and there was a young boy, and I thought he was really cute and I wanted to be in a recovery house because he was in a recovery house. So I asked my parents if they could let me live there, because I needed it to be -- to get treatment. You know -- yeah, I love my parents very much, but it was hard to live with them, especially after you’ve been free, right? Even though the freedom wasn’t like a good thing.

I want to say one thing. So I grew-up non-Native. In Saskatoon I was at the Indigenous games and I heard the drumming for the first... That’s the moment I knew that I was a First Nations person. They say that I have a mother -- that drum beat is a heartbeat of mother earth.

So anyways, I lived in White Rock and I’d always see -- like, I’d go running, we lived right next to a ravine. I’d always see coyotes. Even -- I’d be sitting at my desk writing in my journal and I’d see like a coyote
watching me from the driveway. So that’s always been
something that’s watched over me.

So I ended up living in this recovery
house. One of the women took me down to Hastings and left
me there. I met this guy and he was a drug dealer and he
was very good looking, and so I started seeing him. I
think I started holding money for him. Like, he’d pay me –
- first, he’d just pay me for nothing, then it was for
holding money, and then it was for...

Then he -- a woman injected me that worked
for him, so I think it was all planned. A week later I was
found in the bottom of the Washington Hotel and I couldn’t
move. Some older men had given me baking soda or something
and I didn’t really know what I was doing and I injected
it. I remember he carried me to (inaudible) and they sent
me in a taxi to St. Paul’s, then I was there for 10 days
with blood poisoning.

But I couldn’t feed myself, I couldn’t --
you know. I was very lucky, because my dad worked downtown
at the time, so he would come and feed me and visit me.

Then they wanted to take me home. But when they came I was
gone after 10 days, like I was -- always just pulled back.

MS. SHEILA MAZHARI: That was when you
were 15 or 16?

MS. MAURA GOWANS: I think I was 16.
So I started hanging out downtown and this is when I met my friend Lisa Graveline. I want them to look up her name and I want them to see what was written about her.

MS. SHEILA MAZHARI: Can you spell her name?


At 16 years old I started going downtown. I was in the care of the government at this time. At first, he wanted me to help by holding money, and pretty soon after I was using intravenously.

During this time I met someone that looked after me and they actually really loved me. I don’t know why people loved me, because I was a mess, but I didn’t let anyone love me. So they loved me and took care of me -- and I’m just saying this part because my life wasn’t so bad at that time, but it was bad.

So I’m pretty sure I was still 16. I was charged with my first offence for possession for the purpose of trafficking. I’m pretty sure my mom -- my parents’ friend’s name was [Lawyer] and she was a prosecutor. So they worked behind the scenes to make this plan where I had 48 hours to go to Smithers, B.C. So I was given 48 hours to move to Smithers, B.C.
A paediatrician, like a family friend, he actually delivered me at birth, took me in. So my life was normal again. Like, a week after being on skid row I was living with a family. They let me work in his doctor’s office and I was like in high school and judo, and things were really good. Then I ended up coming back to B.C., like to Vancouver to go to Peak House, a treatment centre.

I ended up leaving and going downtown and relapsing. The person that used to take care of me was intoxicated and defended themselves and ended up in prison. So I’m just sharing that, because that was somebody significant to me.

Somehow I made it back to Smithers, but ever since I went back it wasn’t the same. I couldn’t stop drinking, I couldn’t keep on track, there was so much racism there. You know, people would say that they didn’t like me because I was First Nations.

The nearest reservation was Moricetown. I remember being picked up by the RCMP and left on the outskirts of town and told to get back to my reserve. I was so confused, because I wasn’t from Moricetown.

After one year I came back to White Rock for Christmas and left in the middle of the night to return to the Downtown East Side. When I came back I had no one that looked after me and my life was much harder.
So I carried drugs for dealers, like as a way to support myself. This led me to being in and out of jail. I was physically assaulted in the Vancouver City cells by the guards. I was jumped by eight prison guards. I had a miscarriage, was left in my [blood] (inaudible) with no medical attention. I have seen things that should have never had to witness. I’ve seen people stabbed in front of me and left there to die.

My close friend was murdered with an ice pick. People were hot-capped (ph); so many people were given heroin instead of cocaine so that it was never identified as a murder.

I cannot even tell you how many times I was assaulted by the VPD; grabbed by the neck, by the hair, thrown against walls. This is all at the age of 16, 17. Put in handcuffs and marched up and down alleyways. You did not talk to them. You did not go to them for help. I saw what they would do to people in back alleys.

The times they would take my money, even on cheque issue day, and tell me I could claim it at their office, which I never was able to receive anything.

Also the number of times that they would search me in the middle if the street, men, officers searching me physically to see what I had on me.

No one helped me. I was in foster homes.
and labelled high risk because I would not stay. Yet, it was okay to leave me living there. Like, I’m in the care of the Ministry and it’s okay for me to live on Hastings, but no group home will take me because I’m high risk because I won’t stay there.

I remember one night I went to a man’s apartment and stayed in. He said I could have a shower, and gave me clean clothes. When I got out of the shower and put on the shirt it said, “Murder King” instead of “Burger King.” Again, I ran. I did not have a safe place to go. I did not have a home. I would pay people to sleep in the room because a lot of people at like Portland Hotel and different -- I’d give them $10 to sleep, and the amount of times I’d wake up to being sexually assaulted, I can’t even tell you how many times. Somehow in my head I thought that that’s all I was, that that’s what I deserved.

I finally did find a place when I was 17 at the Regal Hotel. I witnessed a man shot in front of me. I witnessed women stabbed. I’d been physically assaulted for being in front of the Regal, as it was turf that did not belong to the people I associated with.

I was a teenager in 1994 and women were going missing all around me. My friend’s body, Lisa Graveline, was found in a dumpster after she was murdered.
and left there like garbage in a duffle bag. The newspaper clipping said something like prostitute and drug addict found. Like, why? Like, why did they have to say that?

I was taken in and cared for one of the women that was found on Picton’s farm. She just loved me and took care of me and we had nothing, yet we had each other. I’ve known numerous women on the murdered and missing list that are just gone. I think I’ve said this, but I’ve witnessed too many violent acts to mention.

It was acceptable, as it is now, and has been throughout our history to be subjected to harm, violence and abuse, rather than confront and put an end to the systemic and pervasive racism resulting in violence.

Society made it acceptable by dehumanizing and labelling us, making it easy to violate and murder individuals with multiple barriers.

As the judge said in the case of Betty Osborne,

“This would have never happened if she was not First Nation.”

I was arrested and put in a halfway house when I was 20. I was allowed to go home and attend treatment again at [Peardonville] (inaudible). I completed the program. I met a man and became pregnant and married him shortly after. I did not know he was abusive until I
started working for [Atira Women’s Resource Society]
(inaudible) society. I would tell women they deserved
better, but went home to an abusive man.

He would always hold me down, confine me,
call me crazy, a savage, put me down, but somehow I thought
this was normal. I remember the police coming, and I had
bruises from him grabbing me, and they asked me. Of
course, I said no. They needed me to make a statement.

I remember one night leaving with my son
in tow, and this was what finally did it. Through a window
while we were on the phone with a friend, telling them if
they can’t hear me, to call 911. I finally had the courage
the leave, but as a result paid the price with everything
else, including my son.

After I left, his dad came to me with a
relapse. He was always drinking, he never helped with [Son
1]. Even when we were married I was basically a single
mom. When I came home everything...

So when we separated we owned this like
townhouse together. I wouldn’t even call it a townhouse, I
think it was $90,000. But when I came home everything of
value in the home was gone. When I phoned the police they
said there’s nothing they could do because both of our
names are on the home. His father was an ex-RCMP officer.

He would go through my phone messages.
This was all proven in court. He would go through my phone messages and show up at places that I was because he could find out where I was. He would go through my mail. Why I am saying he would go through my mail, because when we were in Family Court I never received court documents. I ended up so tired.

For every weekend his dad wasn’t there he was drinking, partying, and I was staying sober and trying to learn how to be a single mom. I ended up relapsing.

My son was in a safe place. My friend worked for Shewee, she was babysitting him. The next day his dad and sister videotaped me in the Downtown East Side and said,

“Good luck ever seeing your son again.”

That just made me spiral down. I remember like being there and just wanting to die.

I could hear kids, but I couldn’t hear them. Like, I couldn’t hear anyone say mommy, I couldn’t hear kids playing, I couldn’t. Anytime I did, I just had to use again. I was like in a wheelchair. Like, when I use I use to die. Like, there’s no in between for me.

My son was four years old and I had always been his primary caregiver. I gave up hope. I was not allowed to see him for the five months I was out there.
Then after, I wasn’t allowed to see him for another four months. This is after I was seven years clean. During this time there’s a couple that tried to traffic. When it did not work I was brutally raped in the Motel Hollywood in Surrey, and I just remember screaming, screaming screaming. I felt like I was being videotaped, and they’d given me like, I don’t know if it’s called a roofie or what where you are froze. But nobody helped me. Like, the people in the hotel could have heard me. Nobody helped me. This led to more trauma, the trauma that almost completely froze me.

I also owed money to a drug debt and did not know he was the one that tortured people. So this person I owed money to actually went around with the torture kit and worked out of the Regent Hotel. I am very lucky, even though I’m not lucky, that I had a boyfriend that wasn’t -- well, we were breaking up, but he still paid my drug debt right before I’d probably be killed.

MS. SHEILA MAZHARI: What year was that in?

MS. MAURA GOWANS: That was in -- [Son 1] would have been four, 13 years ago.


MS. MAURA GOWANS: Yeah.
MS. SHEILA MAZHARI: Do you know this man’s name?

MS. MAURA GOWANS: I do know his name.

MS. SHEILA MAZHARI: You don’t have to say it if --

MS. MAURA GOWANS: Yeah, I’m not going to say.

MS. SHEILA MAZHARI: Okay. Is he still out there and...?

MS. MAURA GOWANS: He’s doing 13 years.

Just like -- I can’t even tell you how many times I’ve been threatened or -- yeah.

So this led to more trauma, but trauma that almost completely froze me. Like, I couldn’t be anywhere near a man. I learned to -- well, I was put into drug treatment court and so they helped me learn how to count clocks and how to pick out different colours in a room and to unfreeze me, like from the...

I couldn’t be on buses. When I was on buses I had to have space. I’ve never been that traumatized.

So my parents did not live in Canada at this time, but they helped me get into a private treatment centre.

It’s funny, I have to share this story. I
went to Bowen Island to the orchard and I got on the ferry,  
I was dropped off at a ferry, had no idea where I was  
going, someone was supposed to pick me up on the other  
side. Like, the whole VPD was on the ferry. I just  
remember thinking, they are following me to make sure I get  
there.

Then I found out it was the cancer tour,  
the bike tour. Like, I’m so important, right?

So [Son 1], who I was not allowed to see  
while I was in my addiction -- it took another four months  
of me going to treatment and before I was allowed to see  
him, so nine months. So how do you explain to a four-year-  
old who’s [only ever had their mom] (inaudible) that you  
can’t just see them? Like, I don’t understand.

You know, like had they not videotaped me,  
had they not -- you know, like his dad has relapsed I can’t  
even tell you how many times throughout the years on crack  
cocaine on different things. But he’s Caucasian, he owns a  
house, he has a job, he drives his truck, has property in  
the States. So he gets away with it, you know. I would  
ever do that to him because I love my son too much.

So I wasn’t allowed to see him and I  
worked for Atira and was off during this relapse. Atira  
offered to supervise me because I was not allowed to see  
[Son 1] unless I was supervised. But they refused and said
I had to pay an outside agency, knowing I had no money. So I was able to afford to see him once a week.

After a period of time, I was allowed to be supervised by my friend, Jenna, who’s a nurse, and we became roommates. So I was able to have more access to him. His father was remarried, and I remember in court his mother saying to me,

“Why don’t you just go away and let them be a family?”

His new wife called me a whore, a crack head. Told me in front of [Son 1], I chose cocaine over him.

She would always yell at me,

“You should be ashamed of yourself.”

She told my ex-husband I looked at her funny, I was not allowed to see [Son 1] until I apologized. One day he was crying when I dropped him off, so I reached out my hands, because his dad was holding him and he had his hands out to me. He was crying because she was screaming at me that I was a crack whore and all these things. I reached my arms out to him and they said that I pushed him. I didn’t know this until after, that I pushed him.

So I was working at the time as a stopping of violence counsellor, and I found out I had a warrant out
for my arrest for assault. I’ve never been charged with
assault before.

So after doing group on stopping the violence, I had to turn myself in for a warrant to Langley Police. Like, they just made me crazy, want to use. That was their intention, for me to just go away. It was just a lot of mental abuse.

So I spent at least four years in Family Court to have the right as a mother. Throughout the years his father’s relapsed numerous times and nothing’s ever happened to him. I’m lucky though that I had support that never let me give up when there were so many days that I said I couldn’t do it anymore.

Atira would send staff on their own time to personally support and advocate for me in court. In the end I stopped fighting for [Son 1] to live with me because I loved him so much that I didn’t think it was fair to take him out of the home and school he knew. So I settled for joint custody and guardianship, which still only happened when his father felt like it. Everything was to punish me for leaving him.

Did I mention that his father worked for Surrey Crown Counsel and the Surrey Provincial Court? So I never stood a chance. Just in that whole thing there’s so much racism, so many barriers, so many times that I’ve been
silenced. Many times I was able to leave only to return. I know without a doubt what finally saved me and continues to save me is the values I was taught growing up. My parents believed in me. My dad’s like really into seeing is perceiving is believing, so I didn’t love me. So many people in my life like Janice and Jenna and my parents, they just believed me into me, loved me into me. Like, I don’t know how else to explain it. Like, I’m okay with me today, I’m okay sharing this with you today. This doesn’t define me, but it made me who I am today.

I was told by broken systems that as a high school dropout I would never be anything. Incarcerated, in and out of foster homes, a file with a meaningless name. Thankfully, I’ve had family that, although I pushed away, never gave up and fought hard for me. I can honestly say that now, 20 years later, I have lived and loved life to the fullest.

Walking with humility, compassion, and empathy for all those that I’ve lost and all those that still suffer has given an opportunity to use this heartache to make women’s lives count. I can now make a difference in many of their lives through the work I do. There’s so many memories that have taught me how to work in a system
with so many barriers and so many things that are broken, and I take those reminders with me every day I get up and go to work.

I encourage you to accept, respect and support individuals regardless of where they are in their lives, to recognize the role colonialism, racism, substance use, struggles with mental wellness, and general patterns of violence intersect. By an understanding of these intersecting impressions, it can inform our daily work with and alongside the individual (inaudible/noise).

Working for the past 16 years I see daily the huge need for vulnerable individuals to receive and access services. Many organizations do not accept those that struggle with barriers such as mental illness and substance use, which leads many of them to live in unsafe conditions with no support which increases their risk of being harmed.

There’s so many young girls getting pushed out of care and into the world with little or no preparation, which again increases their risk. I cannot even tell you the amount of women that I’ve lost in the last two years.

I’ve worked for the same organization for the last 16 years, and it’s pushed me to use my voice, stand in my shoes, honour myself, and has given me a
platform to speak out against violence against women and children. It’s allowed me to work hard to break cycles of abuse, of addiction, and given me the opportunity to support women and having their inherent right of mothering their children.

It has also allowed me to be me, it’s also allowed me to be proud of being who I am. It’s given me safety in being an Aboriginal woman that I’ve never ever ever ever had in my life. I can go to work and know that I’m safe. I can’t say that when I leave I’m safe. I just told off the guy again for [following me around No Frills] (inaudible), like two days ago. You know, that’s just in everyday life for me, right?

I also want to say that my organization, Atira, supported me to go back to school. Because they not only know me as me, they hear my heart and I remember working and seeing all these moms fighting just to see their baby, just to hold their baby. Like, why should they have to beg for that?

So I ended up going back to school and I’m a registered social worker. So today I get to do preventative work with those women to try and keep families together. Because I don’t ever want a woman, although it happens all the time, to have to feel like their heart’s ripped out. I know what that feels like.
Living was one of the hardest things I had to do. For a time I could not figure out how to live when I had lost so many women that I loved. My family held onto me and despite their love I could not fathom loving me. Counsellors told me this was survivor’s guilt; I lived and they died. For a long time I did not understand why I was still here.

I didn’t deserve to be here. I didn’t want to be here. I wasn’t safe here. I’m still here. When I stopped trying to die because I can’t even tell you, like come to in a back alley, being brought back to life, and pardon my language, but telling them, “What the fuck did you do that for?”

Like, I can’t even tell you how many times my life should have been over. I am still here. So when I finally realized that I couldn’t die, somebody wasn’t letting me, I chose to live for them, for the women I loved, that I lost. I chose to raise my voice for so many of the women whose voices were never heard, and to dedicate my life to the work of ending systemic violence and to ensure my children have a chance to live life though having to face many barriers and broken systems I have had to face.

We are not to ever forget that our children will be our leaders.
So I have one more poem I’m going to read. But I want you to promise me, to promise me that you will take my words and use them to ensure that my children have a chance. Not just my children, all the children, that they’re not going to be incarcerated.

Like, they’re overrepresented, we’re overrepresented, their children grow up to be overrepresented in the institutions. They’re taken, we already went through the Sixties Scoop, we went through residential schools, what is this generation going to face? What is the government going to be held accountable for this generation? How many kids are taken? Like, they’re just taken.

When you try to fight that system you’re silenced, there’s no voice, you can’t fight it. Even lawyers will tell you, well you can fight it, but you have to wait six months. Like, why not just help them heal as a family?

So I’m just going to read a couple poems and then I’m done.

MS. SHEILA MAZHARI: Maura, before you read the poem, do you mind if I ask you a few clarifications?

MS. MAURA GOWANS: Yeah, sure.

MS. SHEILA MAZHARI: So Atira, how do we
spell Atira?

MS. MAURA GOWANS: A-T-I-R-A.

MS. SHEILA MAZHARI: What kind of organization -- what’s their classification as an organization?

MS. MAURA GOWANS: So it’s to end violence against women and children. They weren’t there when I was homeless as a 16-year-old, but now they support everyone from young women in the Downtown East Side to seniors in White Rock, and they do everything to prevent harm. The beautiful thing about them is there are no barriers. The beautiful thing about us is there are no barriers. You can come to me and it doesn’t matter if you’re homeless, if you have mental wellness issues, if you have addiction issues. If you’re fleeing an abusive partner and he’s very violent, some people would say, oh, I’m too scared to support you, we support them.

You know, my friend last night phoned me. She was coming here today and she was using, and I couldn’t bring her home even though I love her with all my heart, because of my children. But, you know, one of the houses in Surrey opened their door and kept her all night and brought her to the [SkyTrain this morning] (inaudible) and I saw her downstairs before I came up.

Like, they -- we treat people as human, as
human, and we know that they’re people, they’re human, they have hearts. We know that many women used to cope with the trauma. We understand that the systems are broken.

You know, as a social worker I’ve been silenced, I’ve been told I can’t advocate for women because I’m a fighter. I’ve been told, you’re not allowed to fight anymore so we can only speak between their lawyer and our lawyer. Didn’t stop me.

MS. SHEILA MAZHARI: Their locations, do they have more than one place? Oh, you don’t have to if you don’t --

MS. MAURA GOWANS: So Janice Abbott is the CO of Atira.

MS. JANICE ABBOTT: So we’re located across the lower mainland. So we have where Maura works, Maxxi Ne Wright Place in Surrey. But in the Downtown East Side, Richmond, Burnaby, across the lower mainland.

MS. SHEILA MAZHARI: Awesome. Is it an Indigenous organization?

MS. JANICE ABBOTT: It’s a women’s organization, probably 50 per cent of our staff are First Nations or First Nations ancestry. Probably more than that of the women we serve, I would say. So we’re predominantly or we identify as a women’s organization, but we serve mostly First Nations women.
MS. SHEILA MAZHARI: Awesome.

MS. MAURA GOWANS: Can I just ask? Jenna, did you want to share anything about [Son 1] when you supervised me?

MS. JENNA BREUER: Maura and I have a very similar story. So listening to you sharing that and revisiting that, that’s been emotional. I do remember at that time, Maura, when we connected. I mean, we’d always -- we’ve been connected for over 20 years as friends. But I remember that time when you were, you know, walking -- coming back off that relapse. I remember how, when you talk about being frozen and being numb, I remember that. I remember how hard it was being separated from [Son 1]. That was pivotal.

Because I think what that was is here was a woman who felt unloved and unworthy of love, and to be now a mother in sobriety, in recovery, still living in abuse, that brings on a kind of a shame in a sense that you don’t talk about, you don’t share.

So the resulting relapse was a big one. Regardless though, being separated from her son as a result of her son’s family who -- what Maura is not saying is her ex-husband’s father is an ex-RCMP officer and this is why she was videotaped in an alley.

There was clear power advantage on the
father’s side. I take pride in often being able to try and see both sides of every coin. There was clear and obvious power advantage and disadvantage on Maura’s side. So watching her walk through that was a really phenomenal experience.

Knowing Maura for over 20 years now is a gift. We support each other in a lot of ways, we understand both sides of the street. We both came from addiction, we both came from... When we were using, when we were 15 years old downtown there was no youth organizations. There was (inaudible).

When we started sobering and cleaning up and doing that, you know, through various means there was no youth recovery. Now there is, but there wasn’t 20 years ago, it was rooms full of old white men. There was no Indigenous meetings per se, there was no -- there were some organizations but they, you know...

Now, when I look downtown I see nothing but youth. Actually, I see the children of our friends is what we see when we go downtown. It’s the children of the people that we used to know.

MS. MAURA GOWANS: And the grandchildren.

MS. JENNA BREUER: And their grandchildren absolutely, yeah.

So it’s just been a really -- I’m just
really honoured, really honoured, as always. I’m just grateful that we were able to get [Son 1] back in your life. When they asked -- the barriers were -- I remember going to court with her, multiple days in court just sitting there shaking my head.

I just couldn’t understand why they were not focused on putting the child back with the mother. Saying that well, you know, because she’s been using. I remember sitting there thinking, but her father’s drunk, he’s at home drunk right now, he’s drinking. He’s not here in the courtroom because he’s drinking.

So, you know, the barriers, you have to pay to have visits. I said, well, then I’ll supervisor your visits and you can say you’re paying me. I’m a registered nurse and I’m not afraid to use the title then if I have to, you know.

The barriers were phenomenal, but that was pivotal, having her son taken was pivotal.

MS. JANICE ABBOTT: For all women -- it’s 95 probably per cent of the women we have is in the Downtown East Side grew up in the foster care system, and almost as many have children in the foster care system. If we keep stealing women’s children, we’ll just keep growing up homeless people. There has to be a way to keep mother and kids together.
MS. MAURA GOWANS: We can’t even speak to the number of children who now have no mother because of that fentanyl.

MS. SHEILA MAZHARI: So compared with 20 years ago, do you think is the same, exactly the same monumental barriers, nothing’s changed?

MS. JENNA BREUER: Yes and no. Yeah, I’d say yes. The barriers that exist is that we stigmatize addiction, period. Then on top of that we stigmatize women, then we stigmatize women who are addicted. We stigmatize women who do sex work. Those barriers, those systemic social labels.

Until we find a way to, I don’t know, to change the language, the change the approach, to change the colour that comes with the word drug addict, to change the taste that comes with the word native woman, to change the smell that comes with the word sex work, to change that somehow, it’ll be the women that’ll do that too. It’ll be us that’ll do that. Then it doesn’t matter how many organizations there are.

Atira’s a phenomenal organization, BWSS is a phenomenal organization, thank God. Thank God these things exist because it’s -- the change is coming, but there’s a lot that has to change. I think maybe there has to be some changes in RCMP training for myself as a
registered psychiatric nurse who’s worked in emergency

departments... Who do they bring people to when they
can’t...? When the police can’t control you, who do they
bring you to? So I can medicate you.

I’ve seen too many people coming in
tasered that shouldn’t be. I’ve seen too many people
coming in beaten. I was living in an abusive relationship
for the last 11 years, five years out, and I had a partner
who was abused by the police continuously. That didn’t
change anything, other than he would come home and take it
out on me.

Stop demonizing dealers, they’re not
dealers, they’re addicts who are working for their habit.
There’s very very few on the street who are actually not
using themselves that are selling drugs.

MS. MAURA GOWANS: That’s the craziest
part. Is like, why are they there? We know who they are.
Like, we know who they are. Why are they there?

MS. SHEILA MAZHARI: People who deal the
drugs?

MS. MAURA GOWANS: Yeah.

MS. JANICE ABBOTT: The people who they
work for, we know who the people they work for are.

MS. MAURA GOWANS: Yeah.

MS. JENNA BREUER: M’hmm.
MS. JANICE ABBOTT: Instead, they arrest the folks who are using to survive. So it’s not --like, we all know, in the Downtown East side we all know who everybody’s working for. Those guys never, they don’t seem to ever. They’re the brunt of what they do.

MS. JENNA BREUER: They’re cutting the tail of the snake instead of the head.

MS. MAURA GOWANS: I could just go -- yeah. I just really want -- like, all this money goes into foster homes, all this money goes into taking children, when money could go into restoring families and helping them heal and helping them. Their inherent right as parents. Thank God I healed and was able to be there for my son.

Had I not, I can tell you statistically he would have ended up in jail, he would have ended up on foster care, he would have ended up in addiction. Statistically, that’s what happens to the children that are removed, and their children. So how’s that a system that works? Why can’t you take than money that you’re paying to have them removed or foster homes and put it into preventative work or providing the family with tools.

MS. JANICE ABBOTT: With the amount of poverty.

MS. MAURA GOWANS: Yeah.
MS. JENNA BREUER: M’hmm.

MS. MAURA GOWANS: Yeah. Like, I’m sitting here, no offence, and the money that’s spent here, no offence, and there’s people that live in homes that are not even homes, with no water, you know. No, I’m not being judgmental, why I’m --

MS. JENNA BREUER: No, I was thinking like the minute we walked into the hotel I thought, man, there’s a lot of gold in this.

MS. MAURA GOWANS: At little bit, right? Just, I could go on and on about the amount of times they’re researched and the money that goes into researching us and when there’s people that live without water, yeah.

MS. SHEILA MAZHARI: So what would your recommendations be for the Inquiry, what you’d love to see come out of it for actual change?

MS. MAURA GOWANS: I’d love for women to be no longer subjectified. I don’t even know if that’s a word. But that it’s not -- how do I put this? First Nations women, anyone around the world knows that they can murder us and get away with it. That they can sex traffic us and get away with it, that we’re easy prey. Doesn’t matter if we’re in school and we’re just walking home, we’re prey. That needs to be made that it’s not acceptable, it’s not acceptable.
For the families, you know, that have gone through this and every system that’s been broken, you know, from the -- is it the coroner to the police, to the whole legal system? Like, it just -- they just need to let First Nations people have a voice. Because we can help fix everything without money, just listen. You know? Just listen. Just give them power back to help them raise their own children, to heal their own communities.

There’s cycles of abuse, addition, homelessness, poverty, we know how to break those cycles if we have the tools, but there’s no resources.

MS. JANICE ABBOTT: No land.

MS. MAURA GOWANS: No land.

MS. JANICE ABBOTT: Give back the land.

MS. MAURA GOWANS: Yeah.

MS. JENNA BREUER: It’s the women in our culture who are the culture, they are matriarchal, most of us come from matriarchal, not all of us, but matriarchal nations.

You know, I worked in HIV for a number of year and we would, with our HIV meds -- years ago, we’re not allowed to do it anymore, but we had what we called the Africa box. So when someone stopped one of ARA’s(ph) put the pill bottle in the Africa box. Because we know that in Africa, this is years ago mind you, you know, if you keep
one woman well in the village with HIV you’ll keep 20 other people alive in that village. Because that’s how integral the women are.

We need to start thinking about First Nations women that way in Canada. That if you keep us alive you help us thrive. We just might need a little bit of a -- little bit of a head start. Don’t worry, we got the rest. Then we’ll start healing.

MS. MAURA GOWANS: I honestly think that some people grew up in violent homes, they grew up in addictive homes, they grew up in poverty as well, and some people don’t know a way out of abuse. So if a woman comes to you she should be able to come to you without being in fear for losing her children. That should not even be a barrier. Yeah, she should be able to come to you.

As soon as there are children involved that are red flagged, then it’s more serious than I’ve seen than women with addiction with children.

MS. JANICE ABBOTT: I truly believe that if we can support women to parent their children that is the way out, and support women to support other women to parent their children, we can -- yeah.

MS. MAURA GOWANS: We have to heal our children. We have to make sure that our children have a chance, that they’re not -- it’s not okay to murder them.
Yeah.

MS. JANICE ABBOTT: So you didn’t ask me, but I’m going to tell you anyway. If I had one recommendation --

MS. SHEILA MAZHARI: Sure.

MS. JANICE ABBOTT: -- it would be support women to raise their children, quit taking women’s children away, quit paying other people to raise women’s children. I mean, I expect that there are extreme circumstances where that’s not possible, but those are the exceptions. Women, we need to support women to raise their children. That’s the only way out of this mess that we’re in. Whatever it takes.

MS. SHEILA MAZHARI: Thank you so much.

Do both of you ladies also consent to having --

MS. JANICE ABBOTT: Yeah.

MS. SHEILA MAZHARI: -- what you’ve said public? So do you mind saying your own name and that --

MS. JANICE ABBOTT: Okay. So my name’s Janice Abbott, and I consent to having what I said made public.

MS. SHEILA MAZHARI: Okay.

MS. JENNA BREUER: My name’s Jenna Brewer, I consent to having what I said made public.

MS. MAURA GOWANS: I have one poem and
then I’m done.

MS. SHEILA MAZHARI: Okay. So you know Lisa Graveline’s date of birth?

MS. MAURA GOWANS: No. She was 20 when she died. I met her when she was 14, I believe.

MS. SHEILA MAZHARI: Do you know what year that was when she passed away?


MS. SHEILA MAZHARI: Okay.


MS. JANICE ABBOTT: I’m going to see if I can find out.

MS. SHEILA MAZHARI: The assaulters in the hotel in Surrey, did anything get done? Did they ever have justice --

MS. MAURA GOWANS: You have -- well, I’d tear apart the hotel to make sure --

MS. JANICE ABBOTT: Shut it down.

MS. MAURA GOWANS: -- it doesn’t happen to anyone else. Because for over 10 years women were trafficked out of there. The City knew, the police new, nobody did anything. Even the owners were proud that they got paid hourly.

MS. SHEILA MAZHARI: The hotel’s name was...?
MS. JANICE ABBOTT: It was the Motel Hollywood, we’re in the process of renovating it and it will be renamed Little’s Place.

MS. SHEILA MAZHARI: What will it be named?

MS. JANICE ABBOTT: Little’s Place. So Little, that was the nickname of a young woman called [Savannah] Santanna Scott-Huntinghawk, she died alone in a tent in a wooded area in Surrey of a fentanyl overdose when she was 19, just after [aging out of care] (inaudible), about two years ago.

MS. SHEILA MAZHARI: So are those people that did this to you, are they still out there or are they free?

MS. MAURA GOWANS: Honestly, they’re free and, honestly, I won’t say that on camera, (inaudible) if I remembered who they were. Yeah, no, I don’t. I was given a chance, a time to run, and I ran.

Even worse than the rape, was I left my book, my album of pictures of [Son 1] there. Because he said,

“You can run now while you have a chance,”

and I ran. That was -- you know, and that was my -- all I had of [Son 1] at the time. Yeah.
MS. SHEILA MAZHARI: Are there any other details or names or anything you want to share or...

MS. JANICE ABBOTT: No.

MS. SHEILA MAZHARI: Okay. Would you like to read your poem?

MS. MAURA GOWANS: Yeah. So I was asked to present at the City of Vancouver on Coalition of Indigenous -- Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women and Girls, and so I wrote a speech and I was going to write some kind of like Martin Luther King thing. I decided to write my own poem. So when I wrote it I thought of Lisa Graveline, I thought of the woman that took me under her wing, and I just had this -- thoughts of a mixture of the murdered and missing women.

So I’m going to -- this is really for them, for their families, for me. It’s called Soar:

Death found you, I don’t know how or why;
I was the one living on the edge ready to die.
Together for ever, our motto, our love song;
If I could see your smile, touch your face;
Ensure every memory of you they
said was erased;
I would give my soul so they could
see your dance lifted my feet;
Hear your laughter through my
voice and all your dreams through
my eyes.
You’re the wind that gently pushes
me to continue,
The voice that speaks to me when
I feel silent,
The love of my heart feels so
broken,
The light within me that fills
the darkness.
You’re my hero when I feel so
fearful,
Fearful of the future I have to
pass on to my children.
If death gave me life so I could
live,
I promise you I will live for you
So your voice is forever in the
wind
That pushes me gently forward,
And will be the wind within my
children

That allows them to soar.

MS. SHEILA MAZHARI: Thank you so much, all of you.

MS. MAURA GOWANS: So I can leave these with you.

MS. SHEILA MAZHARI: Do you have copies of them?

MS. MAURA GOWANS: Yeah.

MS. SHEILA MAZHARI: Yeah? Okay, perfect.

Thank you, thank you so much.

I’ll stop it here.

--- Whereupon the statement concluded.
I HEREBY CERTIFY THAT I have, to the best of my skill and ability, accurately transcribed from a pre-existing recording the foregoing proceeding.

Jennifer Cheslock, Transcriptionist