National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls
Truth-Gathering Process
Part I Statement Gathering
Onion Lake Recreation Centre

Onion Lake, Saskatchewan

PUBLIC

April 10, 2018
Statement - Volume 425
Toni Chief, In relation Jeanette Chief

Statement gathered by Kate Langham

Charest Reporting Services
# II

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Statement Gatherer: Kate Langham

Documents submitted with testimony: none.
KATE LANGHAM: This is Kate Langham, statement gatherer for the national inquiry. It's April 10th, 2018, and we're here in Onion Lake, Saskatchewan, at the recreation centre. I'm here with ...

TONI CHIEF: Toni Chief.

KATE LANGHAM: Thank you for being here, Toni. So you can just start off by saying what it is that you want the commissioners to know.

TONI CHIEF: Okay.

KATE LANGHAM: Just take your time.

TONI CHIEF: My Auntie Jeanette was murdered [indiscernible]. And I was one of the last people that was with her the night before she went missing. I was sober and it was me -- I ran into her -- I was sober, drove for some people to town, and I ran into her in town. And she was talking to me in Cree saying some stuff about her children. How much she loved them and how she never wanted anything to happen to her.

So we went to the bar -- a bar called -- at that time it was called The Alberta. And I didn't drink all night because I had just got out of treatment. And something was off. I could feel it. That for some reason I had to just stop, watch what was going on around the people, the company we were with.

There was a wedding that night at Alkur [phonetic] a little truck stop not far from here, from Lloydminster, from here half way to Lloydminster. And she went with my Uncle Charles to go and check out the dads. So I stayed with my other friends. And she came back with the wedding party, and the wedding party came to the bar and whatever. She said she was going to go and play pool, and somebody brought us beer. I can't remember, but he was Caucasian. And I told him I didn't drink, but I thought I'll just take the beer and I will give it to my auntie, because the last time I saw her was at the pool table. So I took this beer, gave it to my friends, and when I looked up, she was gone. She wasn't
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there.

So because I was a sober driver, just waited for her and waited and waited and waited. Nobody. And I thought, well, I'm going to go check again. So I jumped out of the vehicle and I went to the bar. And the doors are already closed so I went through the hotel. And I asked the people there, the front desk people, if there was a way to the back, and they said, no, it was locked. So I went around to the back driving, there was nobody. So we drove to the next bar where I met her, the PC. There was nobody. She was gone.

So I thought, well, maybe she just -- because she was staying at the PC at that time in a room up there. Maybe she went home. So I went to go and check but it was closed already. The doors were locked. So I couldn't get in, into the apartment part. So I left and went home.

Drove everybody home.

And then that was a Saturday. I'm pretty sure it was a Monday or a Tuesday they said they found the body. Monday, I think. And on the Tuesday it was confirmed that it was her. She was dead.

KATE LANGHAM: Approximately how old was Jeanette at the time?

TONI CHIEF: I think she was -- I'm not even sure. Maybe 39, 40, 41. She passed away just before her birthday. On or just before her birthday.

KATE LANGHAM: June?

TONI CHIEF: June of 2009, I think.

KATE LANGHAM: June of 2009, okay. What was the police response like?

TONI CHIEF: I'm not too sure because we had the funeral -- I kind of -- I was kind of in a haze. I don't really remember -- I just remember the funeral and -- but I left with my other auntie right away. Like, because I was in shock -- or I was heartbroken.

KATE LANGHAM: Of course.

TONI CHIEF: So she took me to Canoe Lake with her because she didn't want me to start drinking.

KATE LANGHAM: Yeah.

TONI CHIEF: And then I came home, back to Onion Lake and she just told me to smudge and pray. I remember I was home alone and I went outside and
there was a [indiscernible]. And made some tea
and I sat outside and I made a fire. I just
cried or laid down. Our mother earth heard my
cried [sic]. And I asked her to forgive me. And
then I seen this green light in the sky. I
remember that. So I kind of took it as a sign
from her.

KATE LANGHAM: Beautiful.

TONI CHIEF: Yeah. But it was really hard to see her
kids, my cousins.

KATE LANGHAM: Yeah.

TONI CHIEF: Because I knew they had questions, and I
kind of felt like they blamed me. But then, I
blame myself for that because I didn't take care
of her.

KATE LANGHAM: How old were Jeanette's kids at the time?

TONI CHIEF: I don't know. I don't remember. They
were just young.

KATE LANGHAM: Adults or --

TONI CHIEF: Okay. Just young adults.

KATE LANGHAM: -- or young kids?

Okay. How has the family been coping?

TONI CHIEF: We're a big family. It's just -- because
we grew up with them, they're my neighbours, it
just split them apart. It just -- seeing them
get addicted to drugs and alcohol. I think
that's how we all coped was drugs and alcohol.

Yeah.

KATE LANGHAM: After that time, was your family
offered any supports by victim services or
counselling or community?

TONI CHIEF: I kind of don't remember because I
just -- I kept away from everybody. Oh, that's
what I was going to say. After I came home from
the funeral, that's when the cops came and took
my statement because I was sober. And that
investigator said that my name came up a lot from
people. And just asking what she was wearing and
I was kind of -- I don't know. It's been quite a
journey. It just happened.

KATE LANGHAM: Did the police ever have any leads or
any charges?

TONI CHIEF: In the beginning I didn't really -- I
don't know if I didn't want to know or I didn't
want to deal with it, but at that time I think
they did. And I didn't want to impose on my
cousins and ask stuff because I didn't want to
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bring it up for them.

KATE LANGHAM: Yeah.

TONI CHIEF: We did a walk for her for four years.
And for myself I know that I walked for my auntie
to find who did this to her.

KATE LANGHAM: Right. Did your family do anything
else to memorialize?

TONI CHIEF: They go every year to the site where she
was found.

KATE LANGHAM: Okay.

TONI CHIEF: I haven't gone.

KATE LANGHAM: Yeah.

TONI CHIEF: I just moved back home, so I didn't go to
any of the court things because they did find who
did it.

KATE LANGHAM: They did find who did it?

TONI CHIEF: He was charged. He was finally sentenced
in January.

KATE LANGHAM: Of this year?

TONI CHIEF: Yeah.

KATE LANGHAM: Okay.

TONI CHIEF: He killed two woman from here.

KATE LANGHAM: Okay. Was he from the community?

TONI CHIEF: No. Originally from Calgary, I think.

KATE LANGHAM: Okay. How have you coped?

TONI CHIEF: I think I'm just starting. Yeah, because
for a really long time I blamed myself.

KATE LANGHAM: Right. Right.

TONI CHIEF: I kept it, like -- it was just mine that
I couldn't share. And then every now and then I
would share with whoever I was with. Like, my
aunties, like, her sisters, I shared with them
that I was with her. And they were, like, What
you were? Yeah. Well, did she say anything?
You know, what happened? That was what I didn't
want was to have them ask questions I didn't have
answers for.

KATE LANGHAM: Yeah.

TONI CHIEF: What was the question?

KATE LANGHAM: Just how have you coped. Have there
been any supports or counselling or treatment,
or ...?

TONI CHIEF: I've gone to treatment. It's going to
be -- I've been sober -- while I was in treatment
last year, he plead not guilty and then the guy
plead guilty. I remember I was at home and I was
with my kids and, you know, the kids just stay
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home with me for a little while and help -- you
know, I told them I'm going to cry. And my
children know. So they stayed home with me and
lit sage and a candle for her and the other lady.
And the sense of relief that I had when he plead
guilty, I was laughing, I was crying, I was --
like, my son thought I was going crazy. But it
was just -- you know, it was, like, a relief.

And then I moved home and we had to go to
court, because I didn't go to any of the courts.

KATE LANGHAM: Okay.

TONI CHIEF: So we went to court in January, the
sentencing. So I wasn't there when they read a
lot of the gory details in this.

KATE LANGHAM: Yes.

TONI CHIEF: But there was some stuff and it hurt. He
brutalized her. I was just -- the pain that,
like, she probably went through. It was
[indiscernible].

When we were in court, he didn't even look
at us. He didn't even apologize. No remorse.
And then he had the nerve to ask the justice
system that -- to tell them that he was afraid
for his life. And he was sentenced. He had
nerve to be afraid for his life. I started my
healing journey, and I think this is the last
part I have to do.

KATE LANGHAM: We're so glad you're here today to
share this. Thank you for coming forward.

TONI CHIEF: I don't feel like -- I felt sorry for
him. I felt sorry for him. I don't have anymore
anger towards him. Like, once I finally was able
to put a face to the name, because all my other
family was able to see him almost -- I don't know
about some of her sons and -- now I know she's at
peace now.

KATE LANGHAM: Yeah. Was your family offered any
supports during the court process?

TONI CHIEF: Yeah.

KATE LANGHAM: They were?

TONI CHIEF: I wasn't around, though, but some of my
family was, yeah.

KATE LANGHAM: Do you know what kind, or ...?

TONI CHIEF: I know they went to some of the missing
and murdered inquiries like Saskatoon. I know
they went to that one.

KATE LANGHAM: Yeah.
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TONI CHIEF: I'm not too sure about what else they received.
KATE LANGHAM: But they did have some supports there?
TONI CHIEF: Yeah.
KATE LANGHAM: What was Jeanette like? What kind of person was Jeanette?
TONI CHIEF: She was beautiful. I used to work with her in town. And she was bubbly. She liked to laugh and joke around. She always used to tell us how much she loved her kids. Every time I talked to my auntie, she always -- all the time said how much she loved her kids. She was fun. She was loving. She was kind. I never remember her getting mad. Just when we were younger when we weren't listening.

But as I got older I don't ever remember her being angry with anybody. And just small -- she was just a tiny little thing.

KATE LANGHAM: Is there anything that you would like to do to memorialize Jeanette or any of the other women?
TONI CHIEF: No, I think we do it every year in our community with the missing and murdered women. On October 4th, I think, we have a walk -- a REDress walk, I think. And this is the first year that I have been home, so this year I really participated. We went up on the hill and we put the red dresses up. Where I work with Onion Lake justice, we have the red dresses hanging. We have a poster for them with all the ones that have been missing and murdered.

For myself, once I learned about the REDress Project, it's something that I am really interested in is just -- like, always just having a red dress and taking pictures of it. It's nice. It's beautiful.

KATE LANGHAM: Where have you taken some pictures?
TONI CHIEF: I haven't taken any yet.
KATE LANGHAM: Just plans?
TONI CHIEF: Yeah. Yeah, so I think about her every day, though.
KATE LANGHAM: She sounds like a beautiful person.
TONI CHIEF: She was, yeah. She was always a teaser. She always used to tease me too and the kids.
KATE LANGHAM: Do you have any recommendations for the commissioners moving forward?
TONI CHIEF: Just to keep offering supports to
families to allow them -- their voices to be
heard so that they can heal and move on and to --
there's so many of them, there's so many missing
and murdered women, aboriginal women. It's like
an epidemic, and it makes me worried for my
daughters. I don't want them growing up in fear.
I don't want them to be, you know, like, to be
scared of men. So I don't know. Just to have
the supports for the families. And I know
there's, like, so many old cases out there that
maybe this, you know, like, answers the questions
that can't be answered. But not let them be
forgotten.

KATE LANGHAM: You mentioned you don't want your kids
growing up in fear. What do we need to do
differently for the young ones coming up?

TONI CHIEF: Educate them. For myself, I have taught
my daughters to listen to their instincts, their
spirit keepers. If you don't feel right, get
away. Like, they already don't trust Caucasian
men, you know. And I have tried to explain to
them too, you know, they're not all like that,
you know. But still they just have a fear of
men. So they have been pretty sheltered. But
they're grown up now, so ...

KATE LANGHAM: Did you raise them not in community?

TONI CHIEF: Yeah, I raised them --

KATE LANGHAM: You raised them here?

TONI CHIEF: Yeah.

KATE LANGHAM: Okay.

TONI CHIEF: They're on their own now, though. They
live in Lethbridge. School and work.

KATE LANGHAM: Do you have any other suggestions about
how we can keep our young girls or women safe?

TONI CHIEF: Not to feel targeted. Not to feel
targeted. Not to live in fear because we're
giving our power away if we're constantly living
in fear. To have faith. Faith over fear.

KATE LANGHAM: And what helps you with faith over
fear?

TONI CHIEF: What helps me, like, spiritually?

KATE LANGHAM: Yeah, what do you draw upon?

TONI CHIEF: My faith and creator. He has given me so
many blessings in my life. And knowing for
myself, starting to know who I really am and --
as a woman, a First Nations woman, that I am a
gift. And I do have gifts to offer. And not to
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give my power away. That's mine and it's to be shared and not taken. I won't live in fear.
Like, I still don't trust, but I'm not going to live in fear. I'm not going to be a target.

KATE LANGHAM: Yeah. Is there anything else while we have this time together that you want known or that you want us to know about?

TONI CHIEF: That it needs to stop. I said that. There was a lot of trauma in our lives as First Nations people and women. And that makes us more susceptible to -- there's a lot of them living high risk lifestyles. And they just need more support in communities and First Nations to know that people love them; they are cared about. Those supports need to be there. Wellness centres, aftercare centres, counsellors, more youth groups. And stuff like this, like you guys coming out to our community. Yeah, that kind of stuff [indiscernible]. Somebody is listening to us.

KATE LANGHAM: What kind of things here do you have here in Onion Lake?

TONI CHIEF: We have a wellness centre, we have an Ekweskeet Healing Lodge, which is a treatment centre. Onion Lake needs an aftercare centre. We really do because I can only speak for myself when I was an alcoholic, an addict, to come home and to have that stigma of, oh my God everybody knows. Oh my God, do I belong here? No, I don't belong here. Just feeling kind of ashamed but nobody knowing your story. Like, I wish I could have just came home, but I went to treatment and to an aftercare centre but in a big city in Calgary. It wasn't First Nations run or anything. But I already knew there -- like, I need to go home. I have to go home. I need to go home. That's where I belong. But I would have liked to be able to go for treatment to an aftercare centre.

And another thing I noticed that two women that are in treatment are coming out of institutions, there's no all-woman's treatment centre in Saskatchewan that I know of. And there needs to be ones that are longer than 30 days, 29 days. Like, to really actually dig at that stuff to get it out. Because especially where I work I see a lot of people coming out of jail,
and you're happy for them, they look good, they
look healthy. But they just -- well, where do I
go? Where do I stay? A lot of them don't have a
place to stay, so go to Lloyd and they just end
up back in the addictions and alcohol. I really
believe an aftercare centre would help.

Because I think -- we basically have
everything else except that. Like, a safe place
where you're able to stay. Because they -- like,
they can have family, but somebody is going to
be -- you don't know what's going on in that
home, so ...

KATE LANGHAM: Yeah. Those are really good --
TONI CHIEF: Thank you.
KATE LANGHAM: -- really good recommendations and
suggestions.
TONI CHIEF: Thank you. Because everybody -- I was
about -- well, the drinking and the drugging,
and, you know, well, what do you do -- it's like
what do you do with after. It's like you're
ripping a Band-Aid off and you need to make
sure -- you know, because a healing journey is a
long time. It's not just -- it's forever. There
is always going to be stuff that comes up,
especially with trauma.

KATE LANGHAM: Yes. Anything else while we have got
this time?
TONI CHIEF: No.
KATE LANGHAM: No? Okay. Well, it's 1:41. And that
concludes this public statement. Thank you very
much.
TONI CHIEF: Thank you.

(PROCEEDINGS CONCLUDED AT 1:41 P.M.)
REPORTER’S CERTIFICATION

I, Alyssa Fontaine, Official Reporter in the Province of British Columbia, Canada, do hereby certify:

That the proceedings were taken down by me in shorthand at the time and place herein set forth and thereafter transcribed, and the same is a true and correct and complete transcript of said proceedings to the best of my skill and ability.

IN WITNESS WHEREOF, I have hereunto subscribed my name this 7th day of June, 2018.

____________________
Alyssa Fontaine
Official Reporter