National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls
Truth-Gathering Process
Part 1 Statement Gathering
Fort Garry Hotel
Winnipeg, Manitoba

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Wednesday October 3, 2018

Statement - Volume 488

A.F.,
In relation to Cherisse Houle

Statement gathered by Pamela Vernaus

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ORDER

Pursuant to Rule 7 of *Legal Path: Rules of Respectful Practice*, Chief Commissioner Marion Buller ordered that all names except that of Cherisse Houle be rendered anonymous in this transcript and any related documents. This order was made April 1st, 2019.
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**Statement Gatherer:** Pamela Vernaus

Documents submitted with testimony: none.
Statement - Public
A.F. (Cherisse Houle)

Winnipeg, Manitoba

--- Upon commencing on Wednesday, October 3, 2018 at 10:00 a.m.

MS. PAMELA VERNAUS: Good morning. We are here today with the National Inquiry in Winnipeg, Manitoba. Today's date is October 3rd, 2018. It's about 10 a.m. I'm the statement gatherer. My name is Pamela Vernaus, and I'm here with...

MR. K.C.: [Traditional name].

MS. A.F.: [A.F.].

MS. S.M.: [S.M.], health support.

MR. K.M.: And my baptismal name is [K.C.] from Sagkeeng First Nation. I'm honoured and blessed to be with [A.F.].

MS. A.F.: That's it?

MS. PAMELA VERNAUS: You're good.


MS. A.F.: Now we talk -- now I talk?


MS. PAMELA VERNAUS: Yeah, and feel free to talk.

MS. A.F.: Okay.

MS. PAMELA VERNAUS: If you need to take a break, or -- like I said --

MS. A.F.: No, I'll start.

MS. PAMELA VERNAUS: Okay.

MS. A.F.: Well, I'll start when I was a kid, and then I'll just work my way up from there. I'm -- I have lots of
hatred from when I was a kid because of what happened to me when
I was a baby. My mom had to choose between me and my
sister -- no, me and my sister or this guy my mom was with, so
she chose him, and then I had to go live with my aunty and my
uncle, and my sister had to go live with her grandpa, so we were
raised -- well, she was raised with her -- our grandpa all her
life until he passed away, and then I was raised by my aunt and
my uncle off and on.

Soon, I got a little bit older, and I was
starting to see my mom and my step-dad a little often, and my
first experience with my step-dad wasn't good because he sexually
molested me a few times, and I tried to tell my mom what
happened, but she wouldn't believe me. She kept picking his
side.

So my aunty and my uncle and my family, my aunt
and uncles, they were having a party one night, and I -- I was
living with my aunty at the time, and they sent me -- well, they
told me to go to bed because -- I guess it was bedtime. I can't
remember exactly how old I was, but -- so I went and slept in my
aunty and my uncle's room, and that's when my step-dad came up
there and molested me, so I -- I ended up screaming. I told my
aunt and my uncle what he did. They ended up getting into a
fight because of it, and I -- I don't know exactly what happened
after that, but I have lots of experiences being sexually
molested by, well, lots of my family -- male family members in
my -- in my family, so it -- it really took effect of my life.

As I was growing up to be a teenager, I started drinking by the age of 12, and -- I was back with my mom by then, but I got my first assault charge against my mom when I was 12, I think, and then I just -- my life went downhill from there. I was constantly in and out of jail. By then, I was hanging around with gang people, and I was back here in the city. I was doing drugs -- well, smoking weed and drinking.

And then I think by the time I turned the age of 16, I got pregnant with my first son, and I kind of straightened out a little bit, but then -- I don't know. I started hanging around with, like, the bigger gang members, and I just tried my first line of coke -- cocaine, and then I started working on the streets, and I was actually dealing with CFS because -- because I was just a child myself having a child.

So I was with -- working with CFS because of my son, and I had to call them one day because my son was crying in his bedroom, and I was too busy smoking crack in my bathroom. So they showed up and they took him away, and then they sent me to treatment, but treatment wasn't -- didn't want to work that time, and I've been in and out of so many treatment centres to get my son back, but I think it was just because I was so young, and I just didn't want to -- I just wanted to party, and being a single mom was really hard.

I remember this New Year's, I was with his
dad -- this is when he was still a baby. I tried my first hoot
of crack cocaine. I had to beg them for it; didn't want to give
me it, but I ended up having my first hoot. Didn't really do
nothing, but I was too much into drinking. Like, I was -- I had
a really bad alcohol problem. I still do until this day. I'm
trying to work on it.

But I started bringing johns into my home when my
son was around, and I -- I don't know, I just -- I was really
messed up when I was a kid because I had family but I didn't have
family because just who I chose to have the kid with and things
weren't right, and -- because he was, like, way older than I was,
but -- now I'm just probably all over the place now.

MS. PAMELA VERNBAUS: No. You're doing fine.

MS. A.F.: I've seen so many people -- well, I've
been involved in so many witness cases or questions for a lot of
them missing and murdered Indigenous people that have gotten
murdered or who have gone missing or have been killed or found
dead or something. It's like, I don't know, some reason the cops
always come back to me just because I was, like, always -- I was
everywhere, being on the streets and everything, so -- I don't
know, maybe they just find a random street worker and then maybe
they work from there, and -- but more or less all the girls that
went missing I -- I knew them or associated with them.

But I really connected with Cherisse Houle.
That's my little buddy. I still miss her, but -- I guess the
night she went missing, we were at a crack shack, and we bought
the same dope from the same people at the same time, and my -- my
one $20 piece of crack, it fricking fucked me up for, like,
six -- six or seven hours, and I was, like, so paranoid. It was
like, I didn't want to go nowhere. I just wanted to stay inside.
I thought people were going to kill me.

So I -- and she asked me to wait at that house
for her until she came back, and I remember we used to always
stand on Juno and McDermot. There's, like, an apartment building
we used to sit on -- right by Ronald McDonald House. We used to
stand around there. We weren't allowed to, but we -- I felt safe
there, she felt safe there because -- just because of the Ronald
McDonald House. It's always open there.

MS. PAMELA VERNVAUS: M'hm. Yeah.

MS. A.F.: And there's cameras there, so -- so
that's where we used to stand, and -- but I remember she's saying
wait here, I'll be back, and then -- you know, because we used to
get each other high, like, you wait here, I'll -- we'll come, or
we used to go out and whoever got picked up first, we would meet
back at a spot, and -- but this time when I was waiting for her,
she didn't come back, but -- I guess more people are coming in
and out of the crack shack, and they're like, holy shit, you're
still fucked up off that thing? Like, I didn't want to smoke
anybody's dope. I was like -- I thought everybody, like -- I
thought honestly I was going to die, and --
MS. PAMELA VERNAUS: M'hm.

MS. A.F.: But this chick walked in, and she brought a piece off of the dealer, and she just gave me a hoot, and as soon as I had that hoot, I fricking came back to reality. I was like, holy shit, and then I asked for Cherisse right away, but they're like, she's not back yet, and I was like, are you serious?

And then I remember the cops finding me. I think it was a couple days later. I was passed out on the couch at a -- a friend's house, and they didn't call me by my name. They called me by my nickname. I remember that. There is three cops in front of me, and then they took me for questioning, and I told them what I -- what I just told you guys; like, I was supposed to wait, I bought a piece, and it made me, like, seriously paranoid, so -- I told them I was, like -- kind of thought, like, this was all -- like, it was all planned out, like, the dealers lacing that one piece and -- because me, I was, like, always with her. Like, we were always on the streets together. She would take me -- she was dealing with CFS -- like, she was a -- what, 16, 17 when she died or something, but she was with CFS, and she used to take me to her CFS office. We'd go to her foster parents' house. Like, we were so close, and -- like, I looked at her like my little sister, because, like -- but you don't want to be doing that with your little sister, but she was my little sister, but I really miss her, and -- but...
And then there's Tess (ph) -- Tess -- Tess who died. They found her in the garbage cans, like, long time ago. I can't remember exactly how many years, but I got questioned for that, and then there was another murder -- I remember it was a black guy that killed her because I had an incident with him. His name was [S.T.].

MS. PAMELA VERNAUS: [S.T.]?

MS. A.F.: [S.T.]. He's -- I think he's still in jail, but --

MS. PAMELA VERNAUS: Yeah.

MS. A.F.: I remember that night because he -- well, I met him through a mutual friend. He used to come to this house and get high and pick up girls, so -- and I remember because I was waiting for Street Connections to come. We were in a bed at my friend's house doing what we had to do, and then he wanted to -- like, we were getting high, and then he wanted to have sexual intercourse, but I was waiting for Street Connections because I had no condoms, so -- so he ended up strangling me and roughing me up in the bedroom, but if the owner of the house didn't hear me gasping, she probably would -- I don't even know -- I don't even want to think what would have -- would have happened, but she ended up pushing the door in, and she asked what was wrong, and then I was on the bed scared.

So I told her what happened, and they kicked him
out, and I never reported it to the cops, but when that other
lady cop was reported missing or found dead, I can't remember
exactly how it happened, but the cops ended up finding me and
questioning me about him because they knew about the incident,
what happened in the bedroom, and I was like, how do you guys
know, but I guess the owner told him, but I didn't really care
because I didn't feel safe telling nobody about it because I
thought, okay, if I tell somebody, he's going to come back.
Like, this guy's huge. But they ended up asking me about his
description and everything, and all I remembered was his eyes,
like, a black guy -- I've never seen a black guy with blue eyes,
so that's what I told them. I said he had blue eyes, like,
light -- light-colour eyes. So he was the guy that ended up
murdering that one girl. Aynsley (ph). That was her name. She
was an older -- she was older than me. She was pretty good. She
was an awesome lady.

But I've been in and out of drug houses. I've
seen so many things happen in drug houses that I shouldn't have
even seen, but -- I was also a witness to a -- a murder homicide.
It was my son's uncle, but that guy when he came to the door, he
asked for me or Nicole (ph) -- my friend Nicole, but she passed
away. Then -- then he asked her -- the guy -- well, his name was
[S.], but there is two guys that runned that house named
[S].-- well, he didn't even run it. He just came there to more
or less check up on me and make sure -- try to get me to go home,
but -- but I just wanted to stay at a crack shack all my life, and -- but -- next thing you know, I'd -- I ran upstairs saying holy shit, there's somebody here with a shotgun, and then we all ran to the bedroom, and, like, everyone's giving me shit: Why'd you let him in, why'd you let him in? I'm like -- it's like, why did you have a girl as a door person? But -- it's like, I'm not going to argue with somebody who asks for me and they -- like, their face is all covered up and it's not even winter. Well, it wasn't even cold, but...

Next thing you know, we heard, like, gun shots going off downstairs, and we all ran out of the house, but they ended up having to grab me and throw me over their shoulder because I didn't want to leave [S.], and then the cops ended up finding us. We only ran, like, two blocks over, but they found us all and took us all in for questioning, and -- the cops really cooperated with me because that's my son's uncle that got shot, and it's something I've got to deal with and, like, hold for the rest of my life because he wouldn't have been there -- he would have been alive today probably if I didn't get him to try to get me to get out of the house, but -- so I hold that against myself.

I also hold Cherisse's death and my cousin [Cousin]'s homicide still unsolved, but when [S.] got shot, one member from, like -- there was this other guy's brother who got killed, and then I lost my cousin, and it felt like they were taking people's family that seen whatever happened, and so I hold
my cousin -- my godfather's death to my -- my -- to blame, but
my -- I remember my old drug dealer, he used to yell at me,
don't -- because -- like, don't hold this against you, you did
not -- you had nothing to do with none of these deaths, but I
took him to -- for me to realize, like, because when their
memorials come around or the year -- the anniversary of them
being dead, like, them, passing away, I can -- I don't cry about
it no more. I don't, like, lash out anymore as much as I did
when I was on the streets doing drugs. So I think my dealer
actually in a good way helped me to heal with that grieving part.

And until this day, they don't know who shot my
cousin. He was randomly shot by three guys, so I know there's
somebody out there that knows what happened to him. I know
there's somebody that can solve this case and -- because you
don't just all of a sudden say, oh, he got randomly shot by three
guys. Like --

MS. PAMELA Vernaus: What was your cousin's name?

MS. A.F.: [Cousin].

MR. K.C.: How long ago?

MS. A.F.: I think it was 2009. Might be a
little -- because I was still a drug addict, so it might
be -- but --

MR. K.C.: 2008?

MS. A.F.: Yeah.

MS. PAMELA Vernaus: Somewhere in that time
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A.F. (Cherisse Houle)

frame?

MS. A.F.: Yeah, it was April 14th. I remember that day.

MS. PAMELA VERNAUS: Okay.

MS. A.F.: But yeah, I've seen so much, and, like, the law's not doing anything. Like, they're letting diddlers out of -- pedophiles out of jail, and, like, what -- and dealers. I understand dealers doing time, but it should be both -- like, the kids -- the people -- the guys that are -- that are hurting these young girls, they should be in there doing their time and not getting just a slap on the wrist.

Like -- and then right off topic, but, like, with Bill Cosby, like, sure, whatever, he's going to be dying soon, but he should have gotten more -- more time than -- he should have just got life because it's, like, so stupid. Like, people are getting away with harming young kids, and then we have that 2-year-old, that Draven [sic] who just got killed by a step -- like, a boyfriend, but -- and watch, he'll probably get nothing, more than -- more than -- more -- to nothing. But the law is, like, really messed up right now, and -- yeah. I don't know what else to say, but it was really good to cry.

MS. PAMELA VERNAUS: Thank you.

MS. A.F.: Oh, and I also changed my life around.

Three years sober.

MS. PAMELA VERNAUS: How'd you -- how'd that
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happen?

MS. A.F.: I got pregnant with my fifth child.

MS. PAMELA VERNAMUS: Okay.

MS. A.F.: I have four other kids, but -- I have five kids, but I only keep one. My sister keeps my other four kids because I was too busy being an unfit parent and doing drugs, partying still.

MR. K.C.: How old's your oldest?


MR. K.C.: 18? Hm.

MS. A.F.: Yeah. My youngest is 3, so -- obviously, three years clean, three years normal.

MS. PAMELA VERNAMUS: Congratulations.

MS. A.F.: My daughter helped me -- well, her father pushed me to get clean and to get her out of the system because she got apprehended from CFS July 27th, 2015. I had her on the 25th. I remember that day perfectly because it was fricking hot, but -- my social worker let me walk her to the car, but I was coming from the women's hospital, and you know where that little street is where the crosswalk is --

MS. PAMELA VERNAMUS: M'hm.

MS. A.F.: -- and you walk to the other side?


MS. A.F.: I was going to run with her there. I told her that, and I said, I'm just going to fucking run.
MS. A.F.: But he's like, what is that going to do? I'm like, she's not going to chase me. She's not going to jump in her car and chase me. Karen (ph) might chase me, but she's not going to chase me. He's like, that's going to fricking make -- make things worse, so I just put her in her car seat and watched her drive away, but I got a visit with her two days after that, so things are -- things are awesome. I got sober October 11, 2015.


MS. A.F.: I just had enough -- enough. I said to my baby's dad, I said, enough is enough, I need to get our daughter home, and so I went to programs. I went to treat -- well, I went to treatment when I was pregnant with her, but after them apprehending her, I still had a couple slips after that, and I got her home a year -- a month before she turned 1. I got my file closed, so my file is closed with CFS, and...

MR. K.C.: Which treatment centre did you go?

MS. A.F.: Hm?

MR. K.C.: Which treatment centre?


MR. K.C.: Ste. Rose?

MS. A.F.: Yeah.


MS. A.F.: Yeah, I was -- so many days I wanted
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A.F. (Cherisse Houle)

1 to leave there, and --

2 (LAUGHTER)

3 MS. A.F.: -- phone my sister, come and get me,

4 I'm only 20 minutes away from you.

5 (LAUGHTER)

6 MS. A.F.: She's, like, no, you stay there, you

7 need to get better for your baby. So ended up -- Propicipants

8 [sic] kept me there, and -- so after a while -- I think

9 after -- the first week, it was so hard for me. I was like, oh,

10 my God, and then I was like, I want to go on Facebook, and

11 then -- I didn't know there was a library across the

12 field -- well, across the way, and my friend [C.], he's like,

13 come on, I'll take you for a walk. So we finished our program,

14 and then we went -- he took me for a walk, and he's like, here

15 you go, here's Facebook. There's a fricking public library right

16 across the --

17 (LAUGHTER)

18 MS. A.F.: -- like, by the parking lot. So I was

19 all happy, and then my days went good after that, so...


21 MS. PAMELA VERNAUS: Is there anything in

22 particular in the treatment that helped you?

23 MS. A.F.: The Propicipants [sic].

24 MS. PAMELA VERNAUS: The --

25 MS. A.F.: Not even the program. It was the
Proplicants [sic] that -- more or less that kept me there because I've tried -- like I said, with my first son, I tried treatments in and out at BHF, and --

**MS. PAMELA VERNIAUS:** Yeah.

**MS. A.F.:** -- the longest I did was 29 days, and the 29th day I left because they told me that my son wasn't coming there. So CFS kind of just went back on their word, so I just went back to the streets and started using and drinking and partying again, and my daughter, she more or less got me to where I am today, her and her dad, but now her dad's downhill. So he hasn't seen her since -- he walked out on her life on her 1st birthday, so -- and he's just going downhill from that. It's that meth. We've got to get the meth off the streets.

**MS. PAMELA VERNIAUS:** Yeah.

**MS. A.F.:** It's killing and it's taking lots -- destroying lots of families. Like, to this day, her -- my daughter was -- like, a couple of days ago, I remember her saying, I love -- because I'm like, I love you baby. She's like, I love you, Mommy, and I love my daddy too. And I was like, where did that come from?

**MS. PAMELA VERNIAUS:** Is there anything in your -- that you would feel that would help that meth crisis?

**MS. A.F.:** They need to, like, put their fricking foot down. Like, sure, they're putting their foot down now because they're -- they're legalizing marijuana. Like, they're
strict -- making laws strict. Well, if you see a crack -- I remember when I used to get rolled up on by cops, and I'm associated through crack dealers, and -- but they used to throw me in jail, like, for a couple pieces. Like, holy shit, they were so harsh to me. But -- but I wouldn't speak to where I got it from or whatever, but they would, like, question, question, but the -- they need to get the -- like, more or less, you can't really get meth off the streets because it's under your kitchen sink.

MS. PAMELA VERNAUS: Yeah.

MS. A.F.: Like,
everybody's -- everybody -- like, if I wanted to, I can go make it.

MS. PAMELA VERNAUS: Yeah. Yeah.

MS. A.F.: Like --

MS. PAMELA VERNAUS: And it's so cheap.

MS. A.F.: -- anybody -- it is. Like, anybody can go --


MS. PAMELA VERNAUS: It's bad right now.

MS. A.F.: It is. It's -- like, it's going out to the rezzes --

MS. PAMELA VERNAUS: Yeah.

MS. A.F.: -- little communities and...

MS. PAMELA VERNAUS: The whole communities right
now are just devastated.

   MS. A.F.: Yeah.

MS. PAMELA VERNANUS: Downtown Winnipeg, the north end.

   MS. A.F.: And then there's, like -- there's no resources out in the little -- I heard there's no resources for --

   MS. PAMELA VERNANUS: M'hm.

   MS. A.F.: -- people in, like, little towns or --

   MS. PAMELA VERNANUS: Yeah. No treatment centres, nothing.

   MS. A.F.: There's nothing. Like -- and that's where, like -- because as -- when I got sober, I started getting involved in here and the EAC committee, the 24/7 rally and committee. We're trying to make a safe place for -- for adults -- well, adult women or --

   MS. PAMELA VERNANUS: M'hm.

   MS. A.F.: -- adult women, transgenders. There's actually a rally tomorrow.

   MR. K.C.: Hm.

   MS. PAMELA VERNANUS: Yeah. 7:30, right?


   MS. PAMELA VERNANUS: Oh, okay.

   MS. A.F.: Yeah.

   MR. K.C.: You have Participants.
MS. A.F.: I'm going to be -- I'm not going to be able to make it, Propicipants [sic], but -- I mean -- oh, wrong one.

(LAUGHTER)

MS. A.F.: I'm not going to make the rally. I have a hospital visit. I've got to go get my leg checked out, but...

MR. K.C.: And when you were -- when you were talking about the Participants, that's family.

MS. A.F.: Yeah, I consider them family. They --

MR. K.C.: It's not so much the program but the family.

MS. A.F.: We're all street girls before. We used to always get high before. Like, we've come so far and got our families back. I had my kids in my life, my other four kids, but I messed up two months ago when I started drinking, so I'm going to actually -- my support worker, she's going to -- through my program, she's going to help me fill out the rest of my Sagkeeng application for treatment for me and my daughter to go to in January.

MR. K.C.: In Sagkeeng?

MS. A.F.: Yeah. They're having a Seven Teaching treatment for January 2nd, so -- I'm hopefully hoping that me and my daughter can both go --

MS. PAMELA VERNAS: That's awesome.
MS. A.F.: -- because if I can't take her
nowhere, I'm not going. I'll just --

MR. K.C.: I'll try -- I'll try and talk to [B].

MS. A.F.: Okay.

MS. PAMELA VERAUS: There you go.

(LAUGHTER)

MR. K.C.: She's -- I'll tell you a little story.

Many years ago, I -- she came to our sweat lodges. She got
married, and then she couldn't get pregnant. Well, she got
pregnant but she aborted, and she lost three, and she came and
seen [S.] and I, and she says, (speaking in Native language), I'm
losing my kids. I'm aborting. Miscarriages. Is there something
I can do, or is there something happening?

Our people have incredible gifts. Dreamers.

This one particular lady, she dreams, and -- so I called her. We
went into the lodge and gave her some (indiscernible) tobacco,
sacred tobaccos. (Speaking in Native language), see this lady,
and -- so it's one thing to talk, eh? But it's another thing to
dream.

MS. A.F.: M'hm.

MR. K.C.: And -- (Speaking in Native
language) -- said I'm going to go see her the spirit way, and
sure enough, on the fifth morning she called me,
says -- (Speaking in Native language). Says, we'll bring her in,
so we brought her in, and we went in to the lodge, and we did
this ceremony -- did our ceremonies and we did our healing, and
so she was told to do something, and that gray willow, medicine,
that was a -- (Speaking in Native language) -- says, you're going
to have three sons, and sure enough.

You see, prayers, family, spirit, all means so
much for -- for our ways, and we were always told, always look
after the women. If we want our people to live, you've got to
live, got to find a strength to be able to create and make your
family. You're blessed. Creator given you that gift of life,
and you carried life, and you brought life into this world. So
[B.] now has three sons --

MS. A.F.: Awesome.

MR. K.C.: -- through traditional ways and
prayers, and the -- her son [C.], they're all sun-dancers, all
through the drums. Good singers. And that's one of the things
that have helped so many of our people: Prayer. Whether your
prayer with Christian ways or -- or Muslims or -- all prayers are
all sacred. They all have different -- although we speak
different languages -- I -- I happen to speak Ojibwe and English,
but I have families that are Sioux, German, and Cheyenne.
Different languages, different prayers, different ceremonies, but
all say the same thing, asking for that healing. So within her,
[B.] was blessed for having three children. Now she runs that
treatment centre.

MS. A.F.: Awesome.
MR. K.C.: And so I'll see what I can -- see if I can talk to her. She lost her father not too long ago, her mom, too, and -- but we're having a -- a memorial. We lost an Elder again yesterday. That's the reason I had to rush home. I had to go out to see the family, and so -- but anyway, I'm hoping to see [B.] tonight or tomorrow or this weekend because we're going to do a family gathering because I dreamt of her dad and her -- her and her dad are -- and I were really close. We grew up together, and -- but anyway, [B.] and that whole family will help you. There's lots of good people.

-- Upon adjourning
LEGAL DICTA-TYPIST’S CERTIFICATE

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

Jenessa Leriger

October 24, 2018