National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls
Truth-Gathering Process
Part 1 Statement Gathering
Courtyard Marriott
Prince George, British Columbia

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Brenda Wilson,
In relation to Ramona Lisa Wilson

Statement gathered by Bonnie George

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MS. BONNIE GEORGE: Okay. This is Bonnie George. I'm a statement taker for the National Inquiry into the Murdered and Missing Indigenous Women and Girls. And we're in Prince George, B.C., on November 28th. We are at the Courtyard Marriott, and it's 1:21. And I'm speaking with Brenda Wilson and her husband --

MR. CLARENCE JOHN: Clarence John.

MS. BONNIE GEORGE: Clarence John, with the Gitxsan and Lheidli T'enneh Nation. And we're here to hear Brenda's truth of her sister, Ramona Wilson.

[Note: off-the-record informed consent discussion omitted]

And, Brenda, this is your time to share your truth about your sister, Ramona.

MS. BRENDA WILSON: I'd just like to thank everybody that came out to support me, and I really appreciate it. Since I ended up not even knowing if I was going to be able to do a statement because I'm a support worker in the job that I do and the job that I've done for the last 25 years, and I've never put myself ahead of any of the other families. I've always put them first and made sure that they got what they needed and ensured that their stories were heard first. And I didn't even think about
myself to do my story. But as the time came down to it, and it's pretty much the last minute, the last hour, the last day before the deadline for statement-taking, and I decided that I needed to do it. Unconsciously, it bothered me, I guess, because I couldn't concentrate on a lot of things as I was more and more other families' stories and helping the families, you know, with -- with their needs. And I -- and I just -- I guess it was always there, asking myself why am I not doing this.

So that's the reason why it's today, and it's the very last day.

So all this started in 1994 on June the 11th. My sister went missing in Smithers. I was 28 years old. And I was a young mother of an 11-year-old son and an 8-year-old daughter. Some of you know my daughter, [Daughter 1]. So for her, that's, like -- that happened ten years ago or not -- I can't even calculate. She's 32 now, so -- so about -- and at the time, I had an older son that was probably 14, and he was adopted.

And I was working at the Friendship Centre in Smithers as a program director. It was about four years. I was doing very well in the program. It was well received with the work that I was doing. I was, you know, very -- just moving forward in life at 28 years old. And I had my driver's license for the first time four years
prior. And I -- I had just completed a human service worker program that got me into this job. And, actually, Bonnie and I ended up doing that program together, so it's really -- yeah.

My career was just -- it was just beginning. My life was just starting to happen. And everything was starting to fall into place, and my children were doing well in school. And I had a job. I had a car. I had a roof over our heads. I was in the process of buying my house.

And although I was young and the partying and stuff was there, it was kept to a minimum to ensure my children were taken care of, and that I kept my job and kept bills intact. I was quite responsible with everything that I did with my work and -- but at the same time, I was a shy person. I wasn't somebody that always spoke up or -- or was able to talk in front of people. When I was younger, my dad died when I was seven, so I was quite distant from a lot of people because so many of my relatives and people in our community were -- were not well, and I was always a target for sexual abuse.

And so I -- because I didn't have a father to protect me, I ended up being the one that was assaulted or some kind of -- anything that could -- bad that happened would happen to me. I almost lost my life falling off a
cliff because I wasn't being cared for. I was probably about five years old. And, you know, and it was due to alcoholism and that's -- was a big part of our life. And it was something that I didn't, you know, want in our family and in my children's life, so I really tried to keep that to a minimum.

At the same time, when Ramona did go missing, my mom was on her own. She had just left an abusive relationship, which was Ramona's dad. He -- he was non-Native, and he just seemed to be so racist. And I always wondered, like, why are you with my mom if you're racist and you don't like Natives, and now you've -- you've brought a child into the world that is, you know, part Native? And I couldn't understand that part. And there were times where I -- like I said, I -- I never -- like, I'm not a -- at that time, I wasn't very outspoken. And -- but when he laid a hand on my brothers, that's when I just started swearing and telling him to leave my brothers alone. I was very protective of my brothers and my sister. If anybody touched them, I would be there to, you know, stand up for them.

And from that day on, it's always been like that, too. I stand up for my brothers and my sister and -- so we were a very loving family. We celebrated all of our birthdays, even though we had nothing. My mom
always made our birthdays very special, and Christmas, very special. All the occasions. She always made it happy, no matter what. You know, she could make a feast out of nothing. Like, we didn't always have a lot of food and stuff like that, but she -- she just made it happen. And that's what -- we always did. We always just tried to keep ourselves happy and -- and just love each other and look after each other.

But then June 11th, 1994, my sister Ramona went missing on the Saturday and was not heard from on Sunday, June 12th. My mom called me and asked if I had heard from Ramona. I told her I had not heard from her. But she had talked to my ex-spouse, the father of my children. She had asked them for a ride as she was walking past a friend's home where they were having a barbecue. And no one was driving at the time because we were at a barbecue, and you have drinks and stuff. So we were also having some drinks. So she continued on to -- towards Main Street, which is only, like, about four blocks from my mom's place and our friend's place.

This will haunt me probably for the rest of my life, because I wished I could have given her a ride. And maybe she would still be here, because I'd always give her a ride everywhere she wanted to go. Of my mom and my brothers, I was the only one that had a vehicle in our
family. Out of the three brothers and my little sister and my mom. I keep trying to forgive myself for that, but it doesn't go away.

My mom and I started to call all her friends on the land line, because we didn't have cell phones or anything back then. We called as many friends and family that we knew to ask if they had seen her, and she hadn't been seen. When we didn't receive a response from anyone that we contacted, panic started to set in. My body started to shake, and it felt like I couldn't touch the ground. I kept asking myself, "Where is she?"

Then, like, it kind of breaks. It just dawned on me. It hit me that, oh, my God, she was one of the many missing and murdered on Highway 16. It was just, like, no, this can't be happening. I can't -- I can't deal with that if that's the case. I just can't. I don't know what to do. I don't know where to start. And I could understand how the Nikal family felt, Delphine Nikal's family, because Delphine went missing four years prior, and her family still hasn't -- haven't found her, nor do they know where she is. She's still missing. It's been 29 years. So from a report that I was given, my mom contacted the police on the Sunday, stating that Ramona was missing.

At the time, because I wasn't the one who -- who reported it, nor was I receiving any of the
information from the RCMP, I have no timeline of what was given -- given to my mom, only a report that was given to me 25 years later, of what was -- of the timeline that -- of the duties that the RCMP provided for -- for my mom. Because myself and my siblings left it up to her, and we never questioned her in the first few months. We felt -- but I felt I needed to know what was happening with the police, because I felt that we weren't being informed, and that my mom was not in her right state of mind to receive the information by herself. I felt really helpless because I didn't know who to reach out to. There was no specialized help for us in this situation. We were -- we were pretty much the ones who -- who started off the whole process of what needs to be done when somebody goes missing or murdered, because nobody in that community, nobody across the country, knew what to do, how to deal with missing and murdered, when somebody goes missing in your community.

The first thing we did was we reached out to the local radio station and the local television station. And it was -- it was them who helped us bring out the information to the community, and pretty much, it started spreading across the province. And then now it's pretty much worldwide with people wanting to know the story and how they can help and everything. But at that time, we
only had the Smithers area where this information just stayed put. Global or anything like that wouldn't even touch the story because it was northern B.C.

Because I worked in a -- at a Friendship Centre, I was able to receive assistance from the organization, so from their staff, to provide some -- you know, through -- be able to do vigils and to put out posters, to photocopy posters were that black and white because, at that time, there wasn't really colour photocopiers. It seems so ancient in 1994 where technology was just beginning, and we don't have the communication. We didn't have it back then as to what we have today. And there's just nothing -- like, nothing in place to deal with this in any of the programs in the community. There was -- there was a Victims Services, but it didn't even know about them, it didn't really understand, and all they did was deal with my mom, like, only my mom. They never dealt with the family, the brothers, the sisters. And we were adults. It's, like, how are we supposed to deal with this?

My mother and I kept Ramona's name in the news and media as much as we could, tirelessly doing awareness campaigns, vigils, walks, fund-raisers to raise awareness for a billboard which never did come to light. Every little bit of funds we could afford from our -- or
from our own pockets, we'd put it -- we'd put -- we'd put all these funds into these events to bring awareness to my sister's disappearance. We kept hoping that she would show up, phone us, and tell us she was okay.

For me, it was so very difficult to work because I couldn't concentrate. I started to consume more alcohol than usual. Although I was providing for my family, I was not fully present. My temper started to increase. And I was very nervous every day. I don't know if that has changed much since 1994, but I -- I think it's still there, but I'm -- I'm able to, I think, manage it a little bit more.

I didn't know what to expect from day to day. I heard so many rumors that gave some hope, only to find out later it was a lie or information was investigated and no leads came from it. Our family started to distance each other because we didn't want to talk about the fact that Ramona could be gone forever. We started arguing with each other. We couldn't have calm conversations. We were a loving, close family. What is happening to our family?

At that time that Ramona went missing, the family should have been gathered together to be given the report of what had -- what has been done and what will be done in the future to find Ramona. The family should have been given ideas on how they could assist. The family
should have been provided group counselling to ensure the well-being of each of the family members, what to expect from the anxiety that was going to occur. My mother should not have been the only one that was provided with information, as she was not in a good state of mind to comprehend all the information that was given to her about her missing child, her baby.

In 1995, April 10th, Ramona's remains were found near the tree line on Yelich Road, which is about 10 kilometres west of Smithers, at the end of the airport runway. A few days before she was found, I had recurring dreams, and she kept saying, "They found me."

When I received the news, I went into total shock. I don't remember the funeral, and I barely remember the rest of the year. I know from news releases and hearsay, from family and friends, that we drove down Main Street to bury her remains at the cemetery. During that whole time I was there, I vaguely remember having to identify Ramona's belongings: A faded black acid-wash jacket, a white fleece top, and a purple pair of pants.

I wish I didn't have to see that. I didn't want that to be the last thing that I remember about her. The smell was awful, something I will never forget. It was a blood -- a blooded earthy smell. Her clothes are laid out on three pieces of brown paper, and my mom had
to -- and myself -- walk into the small interview room. As soon as we noticed the clothing, we all just broke down and started wailing. My sister. Why did they have to do this? Oh.

**MR. CLARENCE JOHN:** It's okay.

**MS. BONNIE GEORGE:** Brenda, did you want to take a break or we can carry on?

**MS. BRENDA WILSON:** (Indiscernible).

**MS. BONNIE GEORGE:** Do you want to take a break? No?

**MS. BRENDA WILSON:** It took us what seemed like an eternity to regain our composure. We had to walk back outside and let the rest of our family know that it definitely was Ramona. Oh, my God. It was so terrible. We didn't even have to say anything. Everyone knew by our -- our reactions that it was Ramona, because we were all trying to hold each other up as we walked out to meet them.

It took a long time for Ramona's remains to be returned so that we could have the funeral. And it's such a -- it's so difficult because you want to start the grieving process, but they're holding everything back, coroners and all the things that need to be done. So we had to wait for that.

In the meantime, we were bombarded by media,
and there were talks about -- about a serial killer and all
that in our community. We didn't know if we were next or
if our -- our children were going to be next. We were
just -- for myself, I was just full of emotions and anxiety
and anger, and I just didn't know how to deal with myself
at the time.

The only thing I could do was talk to the
media to make sure Ramona's name stayed out there, because
I -- I see what happened to Delphine and her family, where
they just forgot about -- forgot about them. We had to be
really vigilant in keeping Ramona's name in the media
through documentaries, magazines, books, newspapers, and
through the television. So I ended up becoming an advocate
and a spokesperson for our family, along with my mom.

That's something that I was prepared to do,
but I did what I had to do because they started calling my
sister a prostitute and a -- and a careless person. And
it's, like, no, you got the story wrong. That's not who
she is. My little sister, she was very vibrant, very
beautiful. She had a lot going for her. She was working
in a restaurant. She was going to school. She was a peer
counsellor. She had hopes and dreams of becoming a
psychologist. She was an auntie. She had four nieces and
nephews at the time. She had friends.

My little baby sister wasn't a street
person. So I had to fight for her. I had to make people see who she really was, that she didn't belong in the same basket as everybody else was trying to put her. I had to stand up for her and really fight for her, just as I've always done for my brothers and -- and my sister, my family, because I'm the oldest in my family. So that's my duty, to do that. When my dad passed away, it was my duty to be a parent with my mom.

It was so difficult when they tried to include us in the Downtown Eastside missing and murdered women. I'm, like, no, that's not us. We have a different situation happening in the north. We were totally separate. You can't put us in the same basket as the people in Vancouver. We are people in -- in northern British Columbia that you've forgotten about. But you are not going to forget about us anymore because we are going to keep fighting for our loved ones that are missing here.

And that's what became the story of northern B.C. and the Highway of Tears is our fight to tell the truth about our loved ones, especially my sister, Ramona. If it wasn't for Ramona, I would never have been a part of this whole national public inquiry.

But it gets the best -- it gets the best of you, your life, when you have to do this over and over. And when anniversaries come up, when my son turned 16 years
old, I couldn't handle it. I just was so afraid for his life. The same with my daughter, when she turned 16. I just was afraid for them, because that's when Ramona went missing. You just don't know how to comprehend. Like, do I walk my child to school? They're 16 years old, but I feel I need to walk them to school because I'm afraid that they're going to be targeted. They're going to be next.

My life has always just been chaos. I haven't -- the only thing that really made me forget for a while I was using alcohol to help the pain. But the -- the downside to that is carelessness and anger. The anger just increased more. I'd be doing things to people that I wouldn't even remember, and that scared me. So -- and I lost my driver's license for a year from a DUI trying to go to a friend's funeral while I was drunk and bringing a whole bunch of my other friends with me, just carelessness, not even thinking that I could have killed all of us.

It's really important when families are going through this that they be surrounded by family to lead them in the right directions because we're so lost. We just don't even know where to go, don't even know what to do. As an advocate, I'm supposed to be strong. But I don't feel that way.

Throughout the years, I've got fired from many jobs, my job from the Friendship Centre, because of my
drinking. I couldn't focus on anything. I started working in a child program, a child care referral. I was a receptionist. I figured as a receptionist, I don't have to deal with -- with anybody, just take calls. I don't have to be a people person, well, sort of just over the phone. I lost my house that I lived in for about ten years. I ended up moving into a basement suite.

I was just starting to lose everything in my life, and my children -- once [Daughter] turned 16, that scared the hell out of me, because this is when Ramona went missing (indiscernible). What am I supposed to do? How do I prevent this from happening to my daughter? She's going out with her friends, smoking and drinking. This is when it dawned to me. It's, like, I've forgotten my children through this whole process. What am I supposed to do for them? How am I supposed to deal with their feeling? They're grieving, too. They miss their auntie. She used to babysit them. She used to live with us. It's, like, what the hell am I doing? I need to do something for my children and for my sister.

So in 2003, I started training in early childhood, and I did that for about a year, and I realized that I can't do this. A lot of the children I'm -- and I was doing my practicum at an early childhood development program, and I could see the destruction of the families
that were coming in there. They were called high-risk families, which meant nobody else wanted to deal with their situations in the community. So they sent them our way because we were an Aboriginal organization, just a part of the systemic racism within the -- in our systems that we have today. Oh, just send them over there. They'll deal with them.

And sure enough, we developed a program. After a couple years, I realized what needed to be done because our families weren't receiving services from our community. For myself, I had to, you know, start the training, but most of all, what needed to be done for me was to go to a treatment centre, so that I could deal with the issue of alcoholism and to let my sister go, to let her know that I was going to do this in a different way, that I was going to be stronger by letting go of the alcohol, and to be somebody that people could look up to, because we've been through it, and we know what needs to be done. I didn't know at the time how we were going to do it. I just knew it had to be done somehow.

So when I was in the treatment centre, I went there a year later after I started my practicum at the early childhood development program, and after I started training. And a lot of the participants within that treatment centre were attracted to my character. And I had
to find out who I was. Like, I'd ask myself, what the hell is my character? Why -- you know, why are some of these people, like, they're pushing it a little too far with wanting to be intimate with me? And me almost falling for it because I'm so vulnerable being in that program, needing something, but I don't know what it is. But it wasn't -- it wasn't the intimacy. It was to build myself up as a strong person.

So I just felt -- I learned things there about myself, and I learned about -- I didn't want to drink. It gave me time to think about what I wanted to do and how I was going to do it. I didn't learn anything from the actual information, the 12 steps, all those things. It's just, like, you guys -- you know, this -- I need something else, and this isn't it. Like, I could teach this -- I could teach this program, and I can see why many of these people were coming to me because I was there to listen, and I could give them some advice, and, you know -- but the intimacy part of it was the other hand. And many of them were doing that thing there. And it's just, like, whoa, this is crazy.

So I really wanted to get out there -- get out of there. It was, like, a five weeks co-ed program, and it made me feel very uncomfortable. So I was looking for something where I could deal with the -- with the
trauma that I was going through. And still, to this day, there's still nothing out there that I know of for many of us that are going -- that are dealing with missing and murdered loved ones, there is nothing. We need something where we don't have to worry about people trying to be intimate with you. You're only dealing with what is -- what the cause is. In a treatment centre, everybody is dealing with different things. If there's a -- if there's a healing centre, just to deal with missing and murdered loved ones, and that's the only focus, then that's what we need. That's what we need today, to help our families. Because by -- when I did this treatment centre, it's not what I -- it helped with my alcoholism, to address it, but it didn't help with my loss or my grief. It didn't help with the pain. The pain was still there. It's still there today.

In 2005, I graduated from the early childhood development program with a diploma. I passed all three sections of my early childhood development, and my infant-toddler, and my special needs. It was really something that I was very proud of because I actually accomplished all of this through everything that I had gone through -- through the alcoholism, through the grief.

And I have to say, I can't say the treatment centre was all that bad because after 14 years, I'm still
clean and sober. So I'm very happy that I was able to go there and learn, even though there's some negativity in it.

In 2006, they had the symposium here in Prince George, and I attended with my mom. And there was a walk from -- she joined the walk. It actually started in Prince Rupert, but she -- she joined the walk in Smithers. And I was sad that I couldn't be a part of this walk due to work commitments. My mom and cousin walked with some people who were from the Downtown Eastside and some of our families from the Highway of Tears. I met them along the way on weekends to see how they were doing and to assist wherever I could.

I was able to take some time off work to do the walk -- to do the walk-in with the families that had walked into the meeting place. It was a horrible feeling. It felt like we were part of a huge funeral procession as we -- all the families walked into the CN Centre. And if there was a heads-up given as to what the process was, I wasn't made aware of it, because later on we were -- we were brought to -- into a room with some investigators, thinking that we were going to be given information about our loved ones. Instead it was, like, what do you want from us? Just, like, what? It's, like, we want you to find our loved ones. What do you think we want from you? My anger was still harsh back then.
But there was -- there was never really a good relationship with the RCMP. We just always stayed clear of them because in our small town, my mom, being a single mom, she had to deal with my brothers and raising them. And they -- you know, they had records with the -- with the police and going to court and stuff like that. So there wasn't always that good relationship. I never did -- she didn't have to go to court for me because I was sort of the parent along with her, trying to look after them.

It took a long time to understand the 33 recommendations that came out of the symposium. I didn't really know what that -- what they meant, what they always talked about. And it wasn't until a few -- a few years later that I ended up being a part of the -- of the governing body for the Highway of Tears Initiative. And at that time, there was only one family member per loved one allowed on that governing body. And a lot of the information that my mom was receiving, she wasn't passing it along to our family, so we had no idea what was going on with this governing body or the 33 recommendations. And so it wasn't until I finally started attending the meetings of the governing body did I understand what the 33 recommendations were.

And those were -- the 33 recommendations are
what -- what many organizations have been using to bring forward to the government regarding missing and murdered women, such as the transit system that is in place today that runs from Prince George to Prince Rupert. That was the number one recommendation, along with better cell service and viewing for cameras on Highway 16, so that we could see if people were hitchhiking on the highway or at this different spots along Highway 16.

During the -- during the symposium, we also had a young lady who was -- or not even a young lady. She was, like, a child. She was 14, Aielah Saric-Augur, whose body was found out by Taber Mountain. I got to meet her mother, Audrey. I tried to console her and be there for her. I felt so helpless because I just didn't know what to do. She just cried in our arms. And it just seemed like there was nobody there for us, even at the symposium, like the support workers or anything. It's just like, what do we do for her? How can we help her? It's so hard to know what -- how to help families except for what you know, because there's just nothing in place.

In 2011, I was a preschool supervisor, teacher, and family support worker. I was starting to build myself up again, like, acquiring my job through the early childhood development program after I graduated. So from 2004, I was training with my EC, early childhood development
education, and built up a preschool in the process in this early childhood development program. So it wasn't -- and it was all on a volunteer basis, because I was doing my practicum. So I wasn't getting paid to do that. But during that time, it was also taking a toll on me because I was giving a lot to the families with being a teacher and also advocating for the missing and murdered and for my sister.

So in 2008, I resigned from the early childhood development program, and I started a -- I went to a job that was only a few years, which was the community futures. And I was an employment advisor. I needed to get away from the everyday stress of the family situations, dysfunctional lives. I just couldn't -- I couldn't do it anymore. I couldn't give myself. I couldn't watch the kids. I couldn't watch them suffer. Some of them were -- were in foster homes, and -- and I'd help with visits, family visits, and stuff like that. And it was just, you know, a terrible time for those kids to deal with the dysfunction that was happening in their lives.

I had one little girl. She was only three years, because we dealt in preschool with three to five-year-olds. She was in a -- she was in, like, six foster homes by the time she was three years old. And when her mom wasn't able to visit her because she couldn't get a
ride or she just couldn't get there, her child would be very angry and start picking on the children -- other children in the school. And this is a three-year-old. This is where it starts. And year after year, I tell this story so people can understand. You need to be there for our children at that tender age. They understand more than we think.

So she -- when her mom didn't come to visit, and then I tried to talk to her, and she -- I told her she couldn't hit the other kids. And so we sat out in the -- in the foyer with the door open so she could still see the kids. And I said, "We need to sit here until you calm down." And I sat with her while the other teachers in the room with the other children. And she'd just scream. Like, she'd just scream, crying, wailing at the top of her lungs. And I was, like -- I was freaked out. I was just, like, oh, my God, what am I going to do, you know? And I just sat there with her. And I tried to hold her, but she was just, like, no, leave me alone. And she kept screaming for about half an hour. And I was just, like, what -- what do you want to do?

I said, "Are you -- are you okay now?" I said, "It's okay to cry and to be angry and mad and let it all out." She just looked at me. She's, like, a little baby just looking at me and saying -- with just -- not
knowing what to say or do, just tears in her eyes. I said, "We can sit here longer, as long as it takes. Whenever you're ready to go back in," I said, "We'll both go back in."

It took another half an hour before she finally calmed down, and she had no more tears and she was just out of breath. And she was, like (indiscernible). Then we walked back into the class, and all the kids started hugging her and playing with her. And she was fine after that. But she needed to let it out. She needed to let go of her anger and cry.

That's when things started happening for me. It's just, like, so many of these children of the missing and murdered loved ones' families, the children are being forgotten. They're being left on their own because we think the children have no feelings, and they don't -- you know, they don't need to deal with the grief because they don't understand it. But they do. They really understand it. They understand when somebody is not there. They understand when they're not being looked after.

So I just couldn't -- I couldn't deal with that anymore. I couldn't deal with watching the children -- the pain. So I needed to leave that job.

In 2010, I resigned from my employment job. I just couldn't -- I couldn't focus on anything. I
couldn't -- I didn't know how I was even working every day, how I was even waking up and getting up. By 2010, I was just going to work, going home, sleeping, maybe eating sometimes. It got really bad where I just was blocking out -- started to block everything out. I only worked to keep up the bill payments, to put food on the table. My son was still living with us part-time.

So I also left my relationship of 29 years. I couldn't -- I couldn't handle the relationship because it was a relationship that was made up of violence, a relationship that took advantage of me as a woman, that had no respect for me at all. And I -- I couldn't deal with that when I've seen so many families and so many women being murdered around me, the disrespect that so many people have against these women. It's, like, am I going to be next? Am I going to be the next one that will be on the poster? Because if this man doesn't get what he wants, I'm going to be the next victim.

So I wasn't going to put up with that. I wasn't going to put up with being disrespected as a woman. So I left the relationship of 29 years. I -- it blows me away to even see that number, but I've been in that relationship since I was a teenager.

And I had to move away from Smithers because I had no support from my family or community. For me to be
fully supported, I needed to be looked after. I didn't need to worry about finances. I didn't need to worry about my family members' self-destruction. I needed to be in a safe place where I didn't have to look after anyone except myself. I needed to find myself, and I needed to find my spirit. And I couldn't do that in the relationship I was in, nor in the town that I was in, because there was just nothing there for me. I couldn't find anything that could help me deal with what I was going through, through my grief. Just searching, searching all the time for something that's going to make -- make me feel better, make me stronger, make me feel like I am breathe and walk without this wall or this barrier or ... 

I don't know if you guys want to take a break or ...

MS. BONNIE GEORGE: It's up to you. But if you really want to take a break, we could.

MS. BRENDA WILSON: Yeah. I think so.

MS. BONNIE GEORGE: Okay. It's 2:38 right now, and I'm turning the equipment off so we can take a -- take a mental break.

--- Upon recessing at 2:38 p.m.

--- Upon reconvening at 2:56 p.m.

MS. BONNIE GEORGE: It's 2:56, and I'm turning the equipment back on again. We've finished our
break, and we're re-convening. It's 2:57.

MS. BRENDA WILSON: So in 2010, December, I moved to Prince George and started working with Carrier Sekani Family Services, who held the portfolio for the Highway of Tears Initiative. And I did apply for the position, but I was unsuccessful in -- in acquiring the -- the position.

So they offered me another position as a child and youth care worker, and that was a pretty difficult job to do, because it was a lot of young people aging out of the system, out of the foster care system. And it really brought upon a lot of triggers in -- in how we were dealt with in the foster care system. We were in and out of foster homes for about three years, my brothers and myself. And then we were also in a group home, which I was -- which I was, I guess, assaulted by one of the boys living in the foster home. And it just brought a lot of bad memories of being in the foster care system and my mom eventually -- we got to move back with our mom because she jumped through all the hoops of the -- of what Social Services wanted from her to give us back to her care.

I also dealt with jealous children of the families in the foster homes that we were in. And so I'd be fighting with -- with some of the kids, some of the girls that were older than me and bigger than me. I was a
very frail scrawny little girl when I was young. I was probably about 10 or 11, 12, somewhere around there, and so just always fighting with -- you know, in the foster homes or being assaulted, sexually assaulted. And nobody did anything about it. We were just second-class citizens in the homes.

In another home, we were -- we had to work on a farm. And the people there, like, had no children, but, you know, they were into growing their own drugs and stuff like that, marijuana. And it was, like, they thought we didn't know what it was. And just, like, no, we're Natives. We know what that stuff is. Even though we're still young kids, we know what it is. And they tried to tell us that it was just tobacco and all that. It's just, like, yeah, right. But, you know, all these things that we were subjected to in the foster homes, it -- even after all these years of trying to work with -- in a youth care service was just, like, so triggering. There was so -- like, it ended up being something that I just couldn't really handle, either.

It was hard to watch the kids go through -- tell me all the stories of what they've been through, and now they're just being dumped out into the streets. And because they have no place to go, they're required to, you know, find their own places. And they're
scared to live on their own, and, you know, all
these -- all these stories. And -- and I didn't even think
about that because we didn't go that far. We didn't age
out when we were in foster homes. We got to go home with
our -- with our mom. So I didn't really understand that
part of it.

The system is just, you know, so harsh.
There's never enough monitoring of the families, the foster
camilies that these children go through. And they just get
to treat the foster kids any way they want. It's, like,
they're just tokens. They're a pay cheque, you know.
There's not always a lot of love and care when it comes to
foster parents, and this is from my own personal
experience, and from the experiences that I've heard from
many youth within -- that I've worked with. And my
own -- and my own nieces and nephews who are still in care
today and from, you know, past generations, you know, the
60s scoop, where I've heard stories of people in foster
homes there, too. And it's really sad that nothing has
changed within the foster care system.

We're still being treated like secondhand
citizens. Where is the love for these children? Why are
your children in all these activities and sports, and we,
the Native children, our Native children, are still sitting
on the sidelines? It's, like, why -- why weren't they
offered the same? You know, there's no equal opportunities. Why take the children if you're just going to treat them as second -- secondhand citizens.

That's the way I felt my whole life is that I was never good enough for anybody, that I always had to be proving myself to the systems, to the school. There's so much racism in school and throughout -- you know, when I raised my children and I see my nieces and nephews. They're still struggling to get through the school system because of racism. They don't get the same opportunities as the other students in the school. I know that pain of what they're going through and how they're feeling. You don't get to be on the basketball team. Or if you do get on it, they find a reason to kick you off the team, because you're -- you're not good enough because your skin is brown.

You get taunted and teased because we don't have the clothes as them and all the fancy toys that they have. And it's still like that. And we wonder why our families are always trying to buy things for our children that they don't need. It's just to keep up with the Joneses so they don't get teased or they don't -- you know, aren't left out in the crowd. Meanwhile, the family can't even afford to buy stuff like that.

And I raised my children. I was the only
Statement - Public
Brenda Wilson (Ramona Wilson)

one working most of the time in my family. But every penny that I had went to my children, to their extracurricular activities, to hockey, to dance, to baseball, to bowling. I want my children to have the experiences that I didn't have. And for that to happen, I had to ensure that I gave up my whole pay cheque to do that, because that was the norm, for our kids to fit into the system. It's just still not fair to this day how we are treated, how our children are being treated today.

So that's why I do a lot of work. That's why I still do the work today. In 2016, I became the Highway of Tears Coordinator, and I did a cleansing the highway walk from Prince George to -- or from Prince Rupert to Prince George. This was the ten-year anniversary for the Highway of Tears symposium in 2006. I had the opportunity to feel the pain and the pride of many of the families as we walked on the Highway of Tears. I did workshops in each of the communities, and some of the families organized the venues with me. They got national and local attention, which also brought in some tips regarding some of the cases along Highway 16.

It was really hard to -- to do this cleansing the highway walk. We would walk 10 to 20 kilometres a day, and there was four of us, four women, walking. And sometimes the families would join us. There
was no initiative to -- at the beginning of this walk, nobody really knew about it. I sent the fliers out. I sent everything out to bring attention to it. It's, like, this is the 10-year anniversary. Why isn't anybody doing anything about it, you know? So I had to go ahead and just do it on my own. Near the end, it started to build, and more people started to know about it and wanted to be a part of it, and there was more media attention about it.

But it's something that was really -- it wouldn't have happened, you know. Nobody -- nobody has that -- those intentions to try to bring awareness to -- to the Highway of Tears or to the families. And some of the families still are not ready, you know, to stand up for their loved ones and talk about them.

When I -- when I talk about Ramona and then I talk about my family, to me, after 25 years, it's normal. And I know for families, I still know -- understand how they feel, to take that first step of talking in front of a -- of a group of people and how scary it is and how much courage you need to do it. You don't sleep the night before. You don't eat the night before. You cry. For me, I cry as much as I can so I can let it all out so I don't cry when I'm doing the presentation, so I can get that message across to the people that need to hear what I have to say.
Every day, I have pains in my body, on my neck, mostly, and headaches because it becomes so overwhelming with -- with the pain of trying to do this work, trying to make sure the families are getting the help they need, trying to make sure my family is getting the help they need.

The 22nd annual Ramona Lisa Wilson Memorial Walk was held for the first time on Main Street in Smithers, on the outside of the music festival. It made me wonder a lot about did this happen because a Non-native woman organized it? Because after all these years, at that time it was 23 years, we'd never been able to have Ramona's memorial on Main Street of Smithers. It took that long for it to actually happen. Or was it just a coincidence where the right people or are the right people in a different state of acceptance for Smithers?

We even had some people -- some of the storekeepers refuse to put up my sister's poster for the walk and music festival. So that, you know, left me to think about, you know, racism is still alive in -- in that little town. It hasn't gone away. And, you know, if that one store didn't want the poster up, they also owned other stores in the town. So it was just, like -- so that meant there were more stores that weren't going to have her poster up. So there's a lot of work to be done regarding
racism within our communities and how they look at First Nations women and First Nations people in general. Look at our children that have to deal with racism on a daily basis.

The 22nd annual Ramona Lisa Wilson Memorial Walk will forever have a special memory, because it's -- it was a time when my brother, Louis, got up on stage and got to sing. My sister -- and he did a song for my sister, and he got to sing on stage, along with my brother -- my other brother, [Brother 1], and my uncle, Frankie. It was a very special time. It was a celebration of Ramona's life. And we were just starting to -- starting to deal with her grief, or so we thought.

My brother Louis was in a car accident on September 2nd, and he had passed away. This was so sudden, just as Ramona's death. My mother called me on the phone. And thank God I was with my daughter, because I answered her call, and she could barely talk through her crying. She said that my brother was in an accident and didn't make it. I asked her, "Are you sure?" She said, "They're waiting for the coroner." I was really grateful for some of our family -- for our friends and family that came to comfort me that lived in the Prince George area. Otherwise I would have been alone.

But when I went back home, it was major
Brenda Wilson  
(Ramona Wilson)

chaos. My family, once again, was falling apart. We had
to wait almost two weeks before we could bury our brother,
due to the -- the delay in process of the coroner.

My brother, Louis, the one in the cowboy
hat, he always wore a cowboy hat, was very heartbroken
about Ramona, about her -- about her murder. Because as
a -- as a man, as a big brother, he felt that he should
have protected her, and that he should have been there for
her. And he just really -- like, the rest of us just use
alcohol to numb the pain, but for him, it was on a daily
basis, and it was self-destruction where it brought him to
his death. And I always talked about my family, about it's
so hard to watch them self-destruct, that even though I
knew it was going to happen, I just was not prepared to
deal with it. I couldn't stop their pain, and I couldn't
stop them from drinking. He had to die with the pain of
the loss of our sister.

I've since written a letter to the coroner
to say when they take almost two weeks to process a report,
that also causes a delay in the process of our traditional
protocol of burying our loved ones. It causes a delay in
our grieving process, and undue financial stress, as I had
to take two weeks off work to deal with arrangements,
because my family was unable to at that time as they were
going through so much grief, they couldn't handle it. If
there was a recommendation for the coroner, it would be
that they need to add more staff to their ministry to avoid
the long delay in processing a coroner's report.

Not too long after that, after my brother's
death, I was -- dove into the pre-public inquiry. I was
one of the support workers for this gathering, and I was
also one of the people that assisted in organizing the
gathering. So the main purpose was to receive feedback
from families on how to proceed with the national public
inquiry. This was a very terrible experience for me, as I
sat through four sessions of families that were telling
their stories and not so much about what they wanted out of
the Inquiry. They had to tell their stories before they
could really understand what they wanted and needed.

We were done around 11:30 PM and required to
be up at regular work hours, as everything was starting
early the next day. As families arrived, it was chaos.
People were stranded at the airport. People were standing
in the lobbies of several of the hotels in which they were
booked in. They were asking for directions and asking for
people whom I didn't know, so I couldn't help them. Once
again, I was feeling helpless, not knowing what to do to
assist. So I went to the hotel where the main registration
was located and told them that there were people stranded
at the airport, and they eventually got -- went there, got
some people to go there and pick them up.

All I could think of was why did they just not contract Carrier Sekani or another local group to organize the gathering? They know the majority of the families, the protocols that are required, and the territory. They know the accommodations and travel. They've been dealing with families and bringing them to the hub of Prince George for so many years. Instead, people from a distant city were trying to organize a gathering from afar. It was so frustrating to see it all unfold. I was so happy when it was over, as I was extremely burnt out.

And the same thing with the National Public Inquiry in Smithers. At that same time, my uncle, Charles, my cousin Noah, and my cousin Miranda, all had passed away within the same week. And I just -- everything was getting so heavy. We could just -- year after year, I -- it just -- this is, like, 24 years, and I just -- I'm almost to the point where it's I can't do this. It's, like, am I -- am I in the right job? Am I really going to be able to help people? Because I'm getting to the point where it's -- I can't handle -- handle anything on a daily basis since my brother Louis passed away.

And I question -- question myself every day if I'm able to do this job of helping families. Then just
this year in 2018, my brother Tim passed away on July 31st. I'm having a really difficult time dealing with the death of a second brother and a third sibling. I feel like I can't do my job. It is so hard to focus. Every phone call I make to families triggers sadness, and I cry after the call, or I'll hold it in for a long time, and let it go at a later time. I have received no counselling, no self-care, only self-destruction that I do not wish to disclose because it's too embarrassing for me. I feel I'll never get help because of who I am. The person that's supposed to be strong. I'm the one who has to hold everything up. My family, the groups are participating in the vision of hope and strength. I feel guilty and hypocritical because I'm not strong today. I'm struggling to live each day, to see the brightness in the day. Nobody will ever understand what I need because I don't even know what I need.

My sister's death has taken everything from me. I have lost many jobs. I've lost my home. I almost lost my children's respect, but they gave it back because I didn't want to lose them. Now I've lost my brothers. I can't lose any more. But I feel like I'm losing myself. They're still nothing that is there to help. And I've tried. And today just feels like it's getting harder, and it's getting worse.
I'm supposed to be able to give people -- families hope. How can I give them hope when my -- when I don't believe there is any in my sister's case? It's been 25 years, and it's unsolved. And I know many other cases, many other families, who are feeling the same way. None of our cases in northern B.C. have been solved. I just don't know if I can continue doing the work that needs to be done, even as much as I want to. My mind and my body is no longer able, and that's what's hurting me. That's what really hurts so bad is, like, I can't give anymore.

I just hope one day my -- not one day. Today. I just hope today that there's answers, that my sister's murderer will be found. I -- that way, I can give others hope that their cases will be solved. Otherwise I can't -- I can't do it anymore.

The last part of my story is such a recent murder was my cousin Jessica Patrick, who was missing and found murdered -- found murdered a week later. She went missing on the same day as -- that my brother passed away. I recognize that there's still work that is to be done in regards to people going missing or are murdered. Why is killer not caught yet? Will this be another repeat of the other cases on Highway 16? So many unsolved cases, including my sister's. Like I said, 25 years, and no
resolution to her case. How am I as an advocate able to give the families hope when my sister and many other loved one's cases are not solved? And how am I supposed to stand up for the RCMP and the government that I work for when they can't find answers in my sister's case and the many cases across the country?

Although I've lost hope in my sister's case, I -- I will continue trying to do what I can. But I know I'm very weak, and I know that I don't have a lot of -- I don't have a lot left to give. So I just want to thank everyone that was here today and thank everyone for listening. And I appreciate the opportunity to tell my story. And I'll just continue on.

**MS. BONNIE GEORGE:** Is there anything further that you would like the Commissioners to hear after hearing what you just shared with us? Any final things that you want the Commissioners to pass forward through this Inquiry?

**MS. BRENDA WILSON:** I want to be able to find solutions to the systemic issues that are ongoing throughout our -- throughout our communities, especially in northern B.C. where we are left out of the loop, where we don't always have -- we're not always included in many of the decisions that are made regarding British Columbia. And we really need to look at educating our communities
regarding racism and learning about the cultures within each community, on the territories, so that we understand and really bringing forth our cultures, so that our -- our young ones know where they belong and where they come from, so that they don't feel alone, that they always have somebody to turn to, because they know who their family is. Many of us are lost, living in different towns. We don't live close to our families. And we don't know who to reach out to. And there are times when I've had to try to call the help lines, and you can't even get through to them. So those need to be better equipped in each of our -- in each of our communities.

And with this -- with this report, we really need to include the communities, because each community -- like, every person has individual needs. And one program, one project, doesn't fit that -- that community as they have recognized with our transit system, they've had to re-adjust a few times already to make it work. And that's what they need to do with the safety plans that need to be implemented in the -- in each of the communities.

I really -- in our First Nations communities, really encouraging the chief and councils to -- to look at these -- to implement the safety plan for their communities, so that they know what to do when
somebody goes -- is murdered or is missing. And that has
to include abductions, you know, because there are many
people that have been -- attempted abductions happening in
our communities, and they need to be addressed. There's
nothing in place for that, either, and that needs to
happen, and awareness for -- for our youth, for our
children.

And last but not least is programs that
will -- that will assist grief, the families that are going
through grief, wellness camps for families of missing and
murdered so they are focussed only on that. They're not
going to a treatment centre to try to deal with their
missing and murdered loved one. They are dealing with the
grief and not other issues such as alcohol or drugs, even
though they may be a part of it, but they still need to be
able to just focus on -- on the grief and loss of their
loved ones that have gone missing or that have been
murdered.

And it has to be easily accessible. I see
ones around that are available, but they're just
outrageously expensive that many of us can't afford to go
to. So that would be my plea to the Commissioners, to
ensure that these wellness camps are -- are available for
the families.

MS. BONNIE GEORGE: Thank you, Brenda.
Thank you. It's 3:42 right now, and I'm turning the equipment off. And we are done Brenda Wilson's truth for her sister, Ramona.

--- Upon adjourning at 12:42 p.m.
LEGAL DICTA-TYPIST’S CERTIFICATE

I, Jessica Caudron, 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.

Jessica Caudron
January 11, 2019