

Our People's Stories



Nobody Wants to Die. They Want the Pain to Stop
THE PEOPLE'S INQUIRY INTO OUR SUICIDE PANDEMIC



In 2013, directed by the Mushkegowuk people and Council, an Inquiry was conducted into the suicide pandemic that had been crippling the region. Hearings were held in each of the Mushkegowuk communities of Moose Factory, Missanabie Cree, Taykwa Tagamou, Fort Albany, Attawapiskat, Kashechewan, Chapleau Cree and the town of Moosonee. At the community hearings, the Commissioners who lead the discussions, heard from hundreds of courageous people. The people affected by this pandemic- mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, Elders - the people- came together to share their feelings, thoughts, experiences and solutions about the suicide crisis that took the lives of so many, including hundreds of youth.

The Commissioners felt the pain of the people and they compassionately express their sincere thankfulness to all those that participated.

These are OUR PEOPLE'S STORIES.

PRIVACY

We have tried to remove as much identifying information as possible, but we live in small communities. Despite our best efforts, it may be possible for some people to identify some of the story-tellers. We ask you not to try and identify them. We ask those who heard the stories in public meetings to help keep the story-tellers' identities private. We ask you to respect the courage our people have taken in sharing their stories, so that we can learn. It's time for listening and for an ongoing dialogue.

The story-tellers have taken the first steps, breaking the silence about suicide, its causes and its devastating effects on the survivors and its long-lasting impacts in our communities.

As one speaker said, "This is the first time I have spoken freely about this. I tried to speak freely once before, only to find that my words were taken out of context and shared as gossip ... We need to talk about it. I hope this work doesn't stop. I'm glad we had this chance to share."

Please walk with the speakers. Please walk with us ... together.

Based on OUR PEOPLE'S STORIES a report was compiled, title: "Nobody Wants to Die- They Want the pain to Stop- THE PEOPLE'S INQUIRY INTO OUR SUICIDE PANDEMIC" highlights the findings from the inquiry and proposes recommendations and possible solutions. Every community and the people have been tasked with the implementation.

1. Nobody Wants To Die

I returned to my community, after being away for quite a while. I'm back home now for good. I had to take stress leave. I was feeling overwhelmed by crisis intervention and counselling. We're overworked, burning out. I started working as a counsellor because we need to do something to try and help. My passion is to keep helping, to try to save lives.

What I want to share is that almost every call has something to do with suicide. Talking about suicide, it's very heavy. You feel this overwhelming sense of despair. Being back here in the community, there's a lot of heaviness. I feel the weight since being back here. Suicide is always around us.

You never get over a suicide, every time someone takes their life. At the powwow, we did an honour song for her, but it still hurts. You never get over it.

The first time I experienced a suicide, it was a young man who was my friend. When he talked about committing suicide, people said he was crying wolf. After a while no one took him seriously. People say he was always talking about it. It sits on my heart so heavily, because I feel that I could have done something.

Another time a woman shot herself outside our house. I couldn't sleep after that. I don't understand what makes people stop trying. It also makes you wonder, why do we freeze when we should be trying to help?

My best friend froze to death on his way to see his girlfriend. When people drink and go out into the elements, it's a form of suicide. It left a hole in my heart for a long time.

When I started to do counselling, gas sniffing was a big issue. Every client had sexual abuse issues and was suicidal. One client expressed his thanks. He said what helped him was when I sang hand drum songs. It brought joy to his heart. I know what still hurts me. I don't know how long I will be on this road. They are supposed to be in treatment for a year, but the parents wanted them released. Out of the four who I befriended, three committed suicide. They were hearing voices, telling them to harm themselves. One young man said, "There's nothing you can do to help me." He said there was a demon leading him astray. Sometimes I think we're dealing with spiritual forces. When he tried to smudge and pray, the evil forces would defeat him. The only

time he felt safe was when I sang drum songs. This is what these young people must have been dealing with. I'm sharing thus so the kids will have faith and hope. It's good to have this forum.

There aren't enough workers to deal with all the pain in our community. The work is taking a toll because the workload is too much. That's why I am on medical leave. I needed time out. I'm working to get my energy back, working on my spirit.

When we hear that someone wants to commit suicide, sometimes people don't react. Maybe they feel numb, almost conditioned to it. Is it because they don't know what to do, or who to call? We need to teach everyone what to do when they hear this. Do did they know what to do? Do they feel overwhelmed? Are they afraid of those who are suicidal? I tell people to call the police or call the hospital - so we know that we tried.

One woman took her life after she lost her children. She never saw her children after they were apprehended, and then the Crown took them. There should be more support and training, so people know what they can do when people are suicidal.

I learned in a workshop that nobody wants to die. They just don't want to feel the pain any more - and that's so true.

My father taught me a lot. In the old days, there was no such thing as suicide. We had a strong connection to the Creator when we lived off the land. This is what provided balance in our lives. It's not like that for the young people today. They don't have that connection, that balance. They have more distractions today, and it's hard for them to live.

What happens to those who take their lives when they're drunk - do they go to heaven? The young people today don't have anything to guide them – the land or the Bible. It's the responsibility of elders and the whole community to create a good environment around our youth, to guide them.

In my younger days, the church said it was a sin to commit suicide. I talked to a priest who said those who commit suicide will suffer, but they will come out of it. In our traditional faith, if someone commits suicide, and their time on earth was supposed to be 60 years, they will go to heaven when they reach 60.

2. Today We're Talking About It

I come from a traditional family. I was raised on the land. My first steps were on branches. I was raised for six years on the land, and then I went to residential school. I'm a mother. I had a rough life, struggling with alcohol and drugs. Twenty years ago, I decided to change my life. Today, I am drug-free. I made a lot of changes in my life, but I still have struggles.

My youngest son died of suicide. In an 18-month period, I lost six members of my family, three of them to suicide. Because of my background in social work, I was able to help my family cope with these multiple losses.

Suicide is a complex grief. It's a roller coaster ride. I saw that we were lacking the resources to help people cope with grief. I saw that we needed a support group for survivors of suicide. I started looking into this. After I lost my son, there were five more suicides. When my daughter wanted to do something, we were in a community crisis. I felt unable to answer her. We decided to start a support group, and we reached out to resource people. I called the public health nurse, and we started the SOS group - Survivors of Suicide.

Our communities don't talk about suicide. The word suicide is not easily accepted. I've lived here all my life and I knew all those who completed suicide. I know all the survivors. In our first group meeting, there were 32 people. We used a facilitator, because it was so personal. There were elders who, for 30 or 40 years, had never talked about suicide in their family. They were told not to talk about it. They were just told to wear black. Today we're talking about it. That's how we're healing.

There was a cluster of suicides, a pandemic, and it scared everyone. We used a traditional approach, a sharing circle with the immediate family. It was very powerful. We have people in our community who can provide services. The grief from suicide is so complex - you feel crazy. You need a strong faith and belief in the Creator. He will help you. Our young people don't have that spirituality. They walk around unbalanced. The Alcoholics Anonymous program is active again, after being gone a long time. The people are afraid of confidentiality with AA. There are trust issues, even after 20 years. Without trust, people close up, put up walls.

I don't really know why my son took his life. I know one of the risk factors is bullying.

Another is peer pressure, especially when it comes to drinking. I explained to him why people walk around drunk. That's how our children speak today. Even kids in the hockey change room talk about people "passing out." This was only a novice team, but they were talking about what they see. Children learn at a very young age. They watch how we handle ourselves. Role modelling is very important.

Relationships are another risk factor. When a 14-year-old has a girlfriend, it needs to be a healthy relationship. We need to talk to our young people about healthy relationships.

Our young people seem to think they need alcohol in order to have fun. As a single mom I used to walk around looking for my son if he wasn't home by curfew. I used to walk around in the bush, looking for parties, calling other parents. My son didn't like it, it was embarrassing for him. It seems like many parents have given up, lost control of parenting.

There is a lot of bullying happening in the schools. They don't want to be known as snitches. There needs to be effective parenting, and bullying needs to stop when you call the school about it. It still happens, even if you call. Bullying also occurs in the community, especially after school. They forced him to drink. It was very hard for him to be alcohol-free and drug-free.

We also need to educate parents about being in a blended family - to accept each other, to treat all the children as their own. Some children struggle with that. We need support groups for families like that.

I'm glad we have grief recovery programs. Grief is many things, and every person is different. As a family we always talked about this. My son had a hard time expressing himself. It's important to help each other. Our families struggle.

In my family we live a traditional life. I speak my language. I intend to go back to the land. That's where I come from, and that's where I will retire. At camp, the stories are happy. There's lots of life at camp. The trees are life.

The elders have wisdom. We need to build that relationship, that bond between our youth and elders. There's a gap there. The relationship is not strong enough. In our culture, they say to use our elders - then let's do that. We have the resources.

I'm mother who lost her child. I'm in recovery. I'm a traditional person. I'm a residential school survivor.

That is all I have to say. Meegwetch.

3. We Need To Work Together

I didn't want to speak, but my friends encouraged me to share my story. It's very important to speak. I speak to help others. It's very emotional. When I hear another person describing their experience, it feels almost like when my daughter committed suicide.

My daughter suffered mood swings and anguish, low self-esteem, hopelessness and depression. She shared her feelings with me before she took her life. She had experienced many problems including bullying, domestic abuse, alcohol, drugs and rape. Men abused her sexually. She told me about all those things, her torment and grief, and I tried my best to discourage her from committing suicide.

One night it happened, I felt the presence of someone alerting me, and I searched for her. In the morning, someone fetched me to go to the hospital. I knew what I might find. I felt everyone staring at me, just like I feel now. I saw the medical people working on her. I broke down and I disappeared into a safe spot in my mind. I just stood there feeling numb, unable to cry. When the doctor told me it was useless, I accepted what he said. Afterwards I felt the pain and grief wash over me, and I didn't know what to do. I couldn't react.

Somehow, she sent me a message, urging me to finish the sundance I had planned to attend.

When it came time to enter the church, I couldn't bring myself to do it. Something was preventing me. I was heavy with grief. My mother and sister were there, and I told them I couldn't bear it anymore. I noticed my mother was near her breaking point. She pushed me to enter the church, and I forced myself to do so. I had to support her. A humorous moment gave me the strength to continue.

I'm still carrying my grief at losing a child through suicide.

We need to work together to help those who are suffering from guilt and bad experiences. I have memories, photographs. When I looked them, I started to feel bitterness towards the frontline workers. Why couldn't they address these kinds of issues? Then I realized that all of us, including the workers themselves, carry burdens of fear, shame, humiliation and guilt.

As we speak, there is the constant presence, a reluctance to do anything. We deal with the effects of suicide, drugs and alcohol in different ways. Through my own personal experience and reflection, I now understand that we have all suffered the intergenerational impacts – my grandparents, parents, me, my daughter - of ruthless changes in our lives. We suffered and learned from the church and the clergy.

There is a lot of confusion. I finally understand that I need to look after myself, my mental health. I cried at the start. Life is hard, but we must continue. We cannot only talk about it. We need action. There is no action today.

I say to the frontline workers, let's start the journey. Let's put our words into action. Let's learn from our experience and move forward. We need to help our youth. We need to give them support.

I was asked to share my thoughts. I could say more. Thank you for listening. I thank my mother, my friends and relatives for their support.

4. Stable Marriages Are The Building Blocks

I haven't directly experienced the trauma of suicide, but I have a teenage granddaughter whose parents separated about 10 years ago. We always expressed our love, even though her parents were separated. In the back of my mind I wondered, "How is she going to cope with this?" She told her mother she wasn't happy, and she was going to hurt herself. She has so much to live for, so we don't understand why she would say this. It doesn't seem to be any specific problem. There are probably different factors. Our youth need to be able to communicate, to share information in a process that will help people.

When I was a young man, I was burdened with a lot of things, including the new role of husband and father. When I grew up as a teenager, there was lots of drinking and noise. Sometimes I was scared to sleep. I made a vow that I would not get caught up in that, but I did get caught up in drinking for a while. I did a lot of soul searching. I knew I needed to break free from it. I was in residential school for seven years, and those teachings stayed with me. I remembered an article about reaching out to the Bible.

I had seen my mother put the Bible under her pillow, but I didn't understand it. So I read it to help me understand. I asked for help. For two weeks straight I read the Bible, and I began to see different things in it. I saw God's love, his eternal love, forgiveness, a new beginning. I read about fulfillment, purpose, meaning and happiness. The Holy Spirit empowered me. It saved my life.

As parents we can influence our children but our children may still struggle. I am reading a book that says stable marriages are the building blocks of a society. If families crumble, so will society. Stable families provide comfort, emotional and social comfort, to our children.

Strong marriages enhance the community. Where are we as a community in the concept of marriage?

I see this with my granddaughter. I see the impact of divorce and how it impacted her. The traditional value of marriage was important. We need to revisit the value of marriage that we had before.

5. Each Community Has Secrets

For a long time now, we have faced tragedies in our community. When I came home from residential school, I didn't know my parents that well. There were times when I wanted to commit suicide, but I was caught in the act. My brother caught me putting a gun to my throat. I was sexually abused in residential school. I was molested.

I'm still drinking. I won't hide that. I'm angry about everything that's happening in our community. I stopped practicing my traditions.

A long time ago, our people were healthy. We grew up on the land.

After we experienced the first suicide in our community, it snowballed from there. It's getting worse and worse. The kids don't give a shit today. Sometimes they come to visit me. They don't like their lives the way it is today, the things that are happening in the community.

People don't want to come to meetings like this, in a building. It reminds them of residential school. They'll go to activities outdoors, away from any controlled setting.

Those who committed suicide, those who succeeded – they did this because there's no support. Sexual abuse is rampant within families. I started using alcohol because my uncles did certain things to my body. I still drink today because of it. I was molested by my aunts, sexual abused by my uncles and father. I know what it's like. I understand those who commit suicide. They don't want to talk to people. My own aunts and uncles have done these things.

Traditional activities and teachings have helped me become strong in my spirit. They have helped me to begin asking what's wrong in our community. Ceremony is a tool that is given to us. We were told not to be afraid to practice our ceremony, to pursue our traditions. Ceremonies have allowed me to understand the issues, become aware, accept them.

I remember when I could really appreciate activities on the land with my grandparents. I heard the birds singing. I was a free person. My grandfather used to put me on his back. I remember him on the trail. I remember seeing rabbits. That was a good life.

Today we have forgotten to be humble. In the past, our people were humble. Our elders were stern in their teachings. They taught us about the virtues of good living.

Today there is cancer and other sicknesses. People are angry. They are even angry with the leadership. We need to go back to the land. We get better when we go out on the land. You hear from someone who has diabetes - when they go back to the land, their sugar is good. When they come back, the sugar is high or low. We need to do things on the land, the way God gave us to live on that land.

Each community has secrets, lies, problems behind the door when people drink.

We need to protect our youth. They are suffering from ongoing sexual abuse. My own father did it to my children. The whole family was abused. I thought I was safe coming home, only to experience sexual abuse in my home.

I taught my children about good touching and bad touching when they were eight years old, because I went through it. You see our people walking around with their heads down all the time. There's suicide from alcohol and drugs as well. People don't say what really happened to their kids. They say they died of a heart attack, but really they died from cocaine. I don't do drugs. I drink though.

I'm not a Christian. I practice the customary way of prayers. I revitalize myself through prayer. I talk to the trees, the sun, the river, the grass. I give thanks to all living things. I give thanks when I take the life of an animal for food. That's my identity. That's what I was taught in the goose dance.

Suicide didn't happen before. It isn't part of our culture, our tradition.

Kids just can't commit suicide when they live the good life. I want to share a story. There were six young men in a basement one day, when I went looking for my son. I went into the basement, and these young men were making love in the basement. They were all stripped, naked. Why is that? It's because they hate their bodies. I was attracted to men when I was growing up. I wanted to be with men because I had been abused. That's why our kids commit suicide. Because of abuse, direct from their own relatives. After they do this, they sit together. That memory will stick in their mind, and they will try drinking. They will have a hard time speaking about it. Sometimes it's too late, and they would rather use a gun or hang themselves. That's why there is suicide.

I was drinking last night. I'm not going to hide it. I'm only human, but I have words to share. After I got married I said I would keep drinking until I have white hair, because of all the pain I carried. I've tried, but I can't stop.

Sometimes when you walk in the bush, you feel like someone is following you. It's your spirit wanting to go back to your body. When you drink, when you stagger, that spirit is not intact.

We have to work with each other. We have to share our stories and experiences. We have to share the truth. We have to help each other face the truth about ourselves. We have to go to people's homes. That's where the families are. We can't meet in buildings, in white areas like this. We need to share our stories with them now. We need to speak the truth to them. That's the only way to stop suicide.

Someone brought religion here. It's foreign to us - this man came down the mountain with the ten commandments. That wasn't our way. We say a prayer to our Creator. Our lands are grown over because we don't go back to look after them.

We need to get back to the ways of our people, respecting and honouring our children. People are suffering in silence because parents don't know how to say, "I love you." Each household cries because they can't say anything. They don't know how to be parents.

6. I've Been There Myself

I'm glad to be here today to talk to the suicide inquiry. I've been there myself. I am glad to be here today.

I wasn't raised by my parents. They abandoned me, and I ended up in residential school. When I was unhappy, I was angry at my parents. It started when I was a child. This is when the anger inside me grew. I became bitter at a young age. The supervisor was mean to me. I was beaten.

Today, alcohol still interferes with my life. I battle my will and I abstain from alcohol. I fear, if I drink, I will take my anger out on my family. I am fortunate to have a good wife.

The people who have attempted suicide speak of the same life that I grew up in, the parents not being there. I lost my best friends to suicide. I know what it's like to lose your friends this way.

I can relate to anyone who thinks about taking their life. I have the scars to prove it. I tried to take my life. Somehow it didn't happen. I know the Creator created me. I prayed for him to help me.

When my wife became sick with cancer, my daughter was upset and wanted to commit suicide. I talked to her. I prayed for my wife, my daughter. I went back home and told my daughter that I didn't want to lose her, or my wife. I shared this with her. I hid my guns, sharp objects and medications, thinking that she was going to do it. I prayed at the same time and asked for help. I didn't want to lose anything. At the same time I was dealing with my wife and her doctors.

What helped me was thinking about my Creator, praying for guidance. I'm not here to offend anyone. No matter what belief you follow, there is only one Creator. I go and support people with traditional prayers.

I feel bad for anyone who talks about ending their life, because I understand their torment. There is one particular young man who I spoke with. I tried to talk with him. I asked him if it had anything to do with his upbringing, the upbringing that we shared. He answered, Yes. He hung himself a few weeks later.

I am struggling, myself, trying to deal with my issues. I went for treatment, but people began to ridicule me for trying to lead a good life. They said, "How come you don't drink any more?" When you have a bottle, you're not afraid any more. Your friends find ways to distract you.

I'm glad to be here to say that my marriage is good, and my kids are listening to me. Suicide is a painful thing to discuss. I try hard to cope, and I try to remember God's creation. I go for walks to help myself. If we pray, we will see the cure within ourselves.

7. Change Needs To Happen In The Home

I worked in one of the communities that's dealing with the suicide pandemic. I worked there for 18 months. I saw a lot of children without direction. With suicide, it was not having hope. Alcohol and drugs are so prevalent. The youth can tell us about their situation, if we're willing to listen. They have no guidance. They don't have people to talk to.

Change needs to happen in the home. Someone, an adult, needs to take an hour of their time and provide for a place for a child to speak. It takes a community to raise a child. The youth say that they don't hear from their own family. I attended a suicide conference. there are simple solutions but we all need to be on board. There are simple solutions.

That's all I have to say about this.

8. You're Left With So Many Questions

We need to create an awareness of the need to heal. People need help releasing the buried emotions that are bottled up inside. They might not even be aware of them.

Suicide is the hardest death to deal with. You don't know where to begin. You're left with so many questions.

The roots of suicide were passed down from parents who experienced abuse in residential school. A long time ago, we learned from our families. We learned on the land. We travelled. We were nomadic people, and we followed the animals. We lived in freedom before residential schools. Things are so different now.

I experienced suicide in my family. It's worse than a natural death. It's hard to deal with. With suicide, you feel blame, you feel helpless. You see the children suffer, the spouse suffer. Then after a suicide, there's no counselling for us. It took me 3 or 4 years before I was able to cope. After talking with an elder, I came to understand it was that person's choice.

The communities need to work together in creating awareness of suicide, and help the survivors. Each community should have an aftercare program. Impacted families should be given the opportunity to debrief. Frontline workers should establish community programs, like gardening and posters, to involve everyone. Even the young ones are affected when they lose a loved one. It's so sad to hear from a five-year-old say, "I wish I was dead." They don't know what death means. Suicide should be out in the open – maybe a radio talk show. We should talk about it in public. We need to express our feelings. We need to educate everyone about suicide. We need more traditional activities, like hunting. With addictions, we should work with families.

9. I'm Still Trying to Deal With It

I lost my daughter. At first, I didn't know what to do, what to expect. I didn't understand the grieving process. I'm still trying to deal with it.

There are constant reminders. There's so much pain. It's hard to let go. It was really hard on her birthday. I made a cake, and I didn't want to blow out the candles. I wanted to keep her things, but my other kids wanted to give her things away.

When I saw my brother, who looks like her, I wanted to leave, to run away. I felt so much pain. My daughter was my rock when I separated from my husband. I long for her. I feel alone without her.

Sometimes we can't do anything to prevent suicide. I tried to talk with her, but she closed her self off. We all tried. She didn't know what grief was, she didn't know how to get help. She ran away from people who wanted to talk to her. Sometimes they plan to do it and won't tell anyone. That's when we can't do anything. I have to accept that and learn to live without her.

My other children have also had to learn to live with that knowledge, that they couldn't help her either. My children are still trying to get help. I run a girls group, but I need to get help for myself first. I hope to go to the Dialogue for Life suicide prevention conference in Montreal.

I wanted to share my story that there was nothing that I could do. I have moments when I long for her, that I want her back. I am on the journey of grief to heal. It's not easy when you lose a child to suicide. It's a different kind of grief. I wasn't ready for it. It happens in a blink of an eye. You're startled. With my daughter, I argued a lot. Our family fell apart with the separation. I reassured my other children that I am there for them. I was married for quite a few years and then, when the marriage was over, it devastated the family. My daughter wanted her dad back, but we had no control over that.

My daughter had a short life but she was a very caring person, especially to her nephew. I am seeking the help I need. My brother has helped me a lot through the journey of grief. Tears are a language, and it helps.

Thank you for letting me share.

10. I Pray for Strength

My husband and I have been separated for a while. He's been in and out of jail. When I was young, I had always hope that our life could change. I drank. It was a very abusive relationship – psychologically, physically, mentally – but it wasn't always bad. You always think it will get better, but it didn't. I took my marriage vows seriously. I supported his drug habit. He was very controlling. Most of his pay cheque went to drugs, affecting the family. I quit drinking but he kept drinking. Kids started partying in our home. I had no control. I started taking pills to get away from the situation. I had thoughts of suicide. I started to wonder what it would be like to just take all the pills. The feeling was so strong, that I should end it all. I was actually contemplating suicide. Fortunately, just at that moment, one of my daughters came in, wanting something. I saw how sad she was when I turned away from her.

I cried out to the Lord for help. The next day, things changed. My husband assaulted me and he got sent to jail. My life took a drastic change. I went to church with my children. I made a commitment to the Lord. I realized it was the Lord who saved me. There was a sense of peace in the home with my husband gone. It was serene. It had never been like that before. I started my journey of abstaining from addiction. It didn't happen all at once.

After his incarceration was over, the family home went back to the same situation. When we separated for the first time, quite a few years ago, I continued to support my husband if he was trying to make a positive change. I had to deal with manipulation, a co-dependent relationship, enabling him. It's been a battle to find balance.

My ex-husband struggles with depression. He had a rough upbringing, growing up in an alcoholic family where he had to fend for himself, dealing with his own demons. He was mistreated in the justice system. It was difficult to get help from community services. The girls struggle with father not being there.

I refuse to believe that nothing can be done. It will take time. I put most of my life into helping him. When he threatens suicide, I don't walk away. There is hope for me, so there is hope for him. My daughters don't want to accept that this is how their dad is. He has to want the help. I feel like someone who is trapped. I pray for strength. I turn to God and pray.

I do the best I can for him. I am always drawn back into the relationship. I want a good life but it's frustrating trying to find help.

I feel that a lot of families feel this is the way that are being affected. Mine is not the only situation like this. We are so bound by policies and procedures. The struggles have helped me to be the person I am today. I use this struggle to find strength.

11. I Never Thought My Father Would Say He Was Sorry

I was very suicidal as a young man. Sexual abuse started when I was six years old, and lasted until I was 12. I started sniffing gas to relieve the pain. It helped to numb the pain. When you sniff, you hallucinate, you can be anything you want. I tried to reach out to people for help. When I told my mother, she said, “Shhhhh,” so I kept it quiet.

I lost friends from suicide. I also lost a friend through sniffing, in a house fire. There was no counselling. We just kept quiet.

The first time I heard of suicide was when my father said, “I’m going to kill myself.” He would often speak of taking his life. I didn’t know what suicide was. It was very confusing. My father was a good man when he was sober, but a different man when he drunk. He cried for his mom, even though he was a grown man. To me, he seemed like a little boy crying for his mom. It reminded me of myself, crying for my mom to protect from my abuser.

I became part of a pedophile victim ring. There was a certain man in our community who was respected and loved, considered a good man. There were a lot of us in that ring of sexual abuse victims. Everyone knew this was going on, but nobody said anything. When a friend confided, talked about sexual abuse, we immediately knew who the perpetrator was. I felt dirty. I wanted to die.

All my relationships failed. I didn’t know how to communicate with women. Because of my anger, I only knew how to manipulate them, lie to them, abuse them. I would say cruel things to them. Even though they were beautiful, I would tell them they were ugly and say things to hurt them. I couldn’t control my emotions.

The trauma of my friend screaming in that fire lingered forever. I could hear my friend dying, and I started seeing things. The next day I went home and started sniffing gas again.

My father’s anger also contributed to a build-up of fear in me. I missed school because of it. Many times we would be homeless. It was tiring, and I failed so many times in school. By the time I was in grade 8, I was 16 years old. I failed so many times, I couldn’t understand what they were teaching. I thought my brain must so small I’d probably feel it rattle when I shook my head.

I was abused by my father. He would hit me. He followed a routine. I knew when he was coming home. I knew whether he was in a good mood or not. Behind doors he was different than he was in front of people. My parents had a hard time telling us that they loved us. It was hard. I witnessed a lot of rape in our home. When there was a lot of drinking in the house, I would get up early. There wouldn't be any food, and the floor would be dirty. I was responsible for my younger siblings. When I think back, I was just a kid - but I felt like a man. Many times we went without food. Macaroni was a staple. Today I still like macaroni. If we had sauce, it was a bonus. Many times I saw my mom crying, although she tried to keep it a secret.

My favorite time was being in the bush. On the land, my father was a totally different person. We were never hungry, we always had goose. He taught me to hunt, he showed me how to be a good hunter. He was always kind. But back in the community, he was a drinker. My dad taught me how to play the guitar, took the time to teach me. These are the fond memories that I have.

Playing music was my therapy. My dad was the reason I quit sniffing. He bought me a guitar. It cost \$400, which was a lot of money for us. Music became my love. It replaced the sniffing. When I played, I came to life. When I saw people smiling, it made me happy.

Then I was introduced to alcohol, and I became an alcoholic. It became another problem. This is where my rage, my suppressed emotions came out. I started to hit my father and my uncles. When I came home angry, I would attack my father. We were a violent family.

I started losing my friends to suicide, the friends I grew up with – more than I can count on both hands. I started taking pills, and I tried to take my own life. They pumped all those pills out of me. I drove so fast on a snowmobile, that I almost killed myself. I thought about killing myself, and I crashed that snowmobile. I ended up in the hospital.

When I started having kids, I told myself I would never ever do what was done to me. I would be a better parent. But I blew up in anger at every little thing they did. I started to hit my kids. I became enraged. I asked myself, why do I do that? Why does my old thinking come back? I was powerless to control my feelings. I started to beat up my ex-wife. I would hit her, and say things like, you'll never ever find another guy. It was only

about sex. That's all it was in that relationship. I didn't know how to talk or listen. I felt irritated, uncomfortable. I would say, "Why are you crying? It's no big deal." Even my kids, I would tell my kids to shut up and be quiet. I wasn't even talking to them anymore. I would just yell at them. I didn't know how to console them.

I remember busting the window because there were no bottles in the house. That's all I thought about. I didn't think about my kids, my house. I remember one day I drank a bunch of mickeys. I took some pills that night and something amazing happened. When I woke up, I didn't feel any side effects. I felt normal. So I started doing that, taking pills before bed. I thought it was a cure.

Then I lost everything. I lost my kids, my wife, my home. I hit rock bottom and I said to myself, I'm going to die here. I am going to kill myself. I told my mother this. I hated the feeling of loneliness, emptiness. I had nothing to look forward to the next day. I just sat there and thought. I didn't know that I was moving from one room to another. My mom asked me, who are you talking to? I didn't even know that I was talking to myself. I was drifting out of control, unaware of my thoughts and actions.

The alcohol wore off, and I felt depressed. That morning I said, this is it. I'm going to do it. I talked to God, the Creator or something. I asked, where are you? If you're there, move something, show me. There was this guy there laughing at me, laughing. And something happened to me - it was spiritual. Something came and woke me up, came and lifted me off the ground. I didn't feel any more pain. The friend who was laughing, that was the devil - but I felt really good. I remember the exact day.

I ran home to my mom and told her. She believed me. She told me, you look alive. I told her, this is the last time you'll see me drunk or high on drugs. I knew I needed treatment, I needed to work on stuff. I had no idea what it was like, but I went to treatment and I heard other people talk about their lives. I thought they were crazy. Why would talk about things like that?

It took me two weeks, after writing in a journal. It hit me hard when I remembered the time I was forced to have sex with my brother. I slept with him, not sexually, until I was 14 because we felt safe together. I ran to my worker. I wanted to call my brother. I was scared.

When I left treatment I was afraid of my family. No one talked. I went to a recovery

home and I felt safe there. I stayed there for months and months. I have been clean since then. The rest of my family, almost all of them are clean today. My father, my mother, my brothers and sisters. My father apologized for how he raised us. He apologized to me for the first time. He was crying so hard, I thought my mom had died. He was literally crying. I'm sorry for how I raised you. And right there, something was lifted. I never thought my father would say he was sorry. But it's like that dysfunctional life was washed away. He's a changed man. He's a loving, affectionate man. He said, I know I lost time with you, but I have my grandchildren to love. Now he always hugs his grandchildren. When I went for healing, I stopped expecting my parents to apologize.

I'm very content today on my healing journey. I'm a very happy sober man, not a miserable sober man. I'm happy. With my family I see hope. My kids are not afraid to share with me. They talk with me. My son was just talking to me about girls. I try not to shame him, just say, 'Wow. Wow.' He's proud of being able to share his emotions. My youngest says, I love you, every day. And I hear my nephews and nieces say it a lot.

It doesn't matter where you pray. My mom goes to church, it helps her. She goes to sweat, it helps her too. When she talked about residential school, it was like opening a dam. She suffered immensely in residential school. She cried for two days. After that she quit drinking.

Treatment is a challenging journey. It takes a long time. There are emotions that need to awaken, thoughts that need to be used in a good way. It actually took me a long time to forgive my father. He wrote me a forgiveness letter. When I started to read it, the forgiveness part, I ripped it up. I felt like a failure after that. But my counsellor told me, you're the only honest person in the group. It takes a while to forgive someone. You have to go through that process. It isn't easy, but once you begin to apply forgiveness, there's no turning back.

When I went home, I said to myself, my parents never hugged me - so why don't you hug them. So I hugged my dad, and he froze. I said to myself, holy cow he's never been hugged. I told him, I love you Dad. I did the same thing with my mom. She was just shaking. I kept doing it. Then one day, I didn't do it, but my father got up and hugged me. These acts of kindness become contagious in the family.

When I heard that apology, it was hard day. Don't wait for that to happen - do it. When

you start to do it, you feel a change. Some people take five years, ten years. The action part is good, then there's the saying part. I knew I forgave my father, when I didn't get mad. I didn't feel angry. Then I asked him, what's wrong? I knew it wasn't about me any more. It took me a long time to love my father.

Today I love my parents so much. I can honestly say that. I did a lot of research into what they went through in residential school. They missed out on parenting skills. I started to understand what happened to them. A lot of my cousins are sober now, and we talk about what happened. A lot of my aunts have started to change. I had no idea that my mother went to residential school. My father did his best to raise us. He's a good hunter. He taught us to survive. Now he relaxes in the bush. His old Elan still runs. He still cuts wood.

My grandmother never drank. She was the heart of the family, our safe haven. She kept the family together. Now my mom has that role. She has the same heart.

It's very difficult when you're impacted by suicide. When I lost my cousin to suicide, it was like losing a brother. I also lost one of my sisters to suicide. My dad struggled with her loss for many years. Then he told me one day, your sister came to see me in a dream. She said, "Dad, forgive yourself. If you want to know where I am, I'll show you. Then she turned into a light and she went into my heart." When my dad woke up, he started to cry, "My danis is right here." He started to change after that.

12. We Need To Be Beacons of Light

Yesterday was difficult. When I went home, I talked to my wife about the hearings. Today we are both here.

My father was a hunter and trapper for most of his life. Your parents leave you with values and principles. We went to residential school. That experience wasn't so good, but I remember we won a hockey tournament one time. In my teen years, in high school, I started playing the guitar. Those were some of the best years of my school life. The Beatles influenced me to play. The '60s and '70s were a good time in my family. Then, in the 80s, people started dying in my family.

It is a challenge to raise children today the way you were taught, and what you learned from your grandparents. They were humble. They lived through lots of hard times, times when they went without.

Today the concept of family, and family values, is changing, because of the changes in the world. It's amazing what you see in your family today, and you wonder if it's good or not. I have a three-year-old grandchild who has an iPad, and he's really good on it. I don't know if that's a good thing or not. I don't even know how to turn it on. All my grandchildren have one.

The way we were raised was so different. We had rules to obey, structure. If the police came looking for you, watch out. If your name was called by your parent, you had to answer. There was corporal punishment and the broom was the enemy. It wasn't my friend. You can ask my brothers.

I have four children, and growing up in my house they heard "No" a lot. But today, when my grandchildren come, it became the house of "Yes."

It's hard for families raising kids today, when alcohol and drugs are rampant. Today's generation is confronted by an epidemic. It's not only in this community, it's everywhere, but it plagues our community. When we try to address it, sometimes we encounter roadblocks, and the ones who try to deal with it, get punished. It's reversed. Why?

With health there are no boundaries. We work with every community in the region. We

need to work on ideas for things to be done in our area. We know what happens when someone goes to the hospital. Suicidal ideation is usually related to drugs and alcohol use, or sometimes rape or abuse has happened to the individual. They're trying to numb their misery and pain. Sometimes they don't know what drugs they are taking.

The community is devastated, and the workers are too, when a suicide happens. It was heavy in 2008, 2009, 2010. We lost a lot of members. It was hard for the frontline workers, it was really tough. Sometimes they don't know who to turn to.

I used to play at funerals and watch the families grieve at funerals. Eventually, it got to be too hard. Just the question of where the soul goes after suicide causes great stress. If the person don't know the Lord, I don't know where they went. My uncle was taught that it's not good to take your own life, that only God can take your life.

A young boy committed suicide at a tournament recently. My sister's family was so hurt, they knew the family. I didn't know what to say to the family. The players wore arm bands, but it was too hard to see them. It was devastating for the family, the community, the tournament.

A few years ago, we went in the bush to cut wood. We were gone all afternoon. When we got back, my wife told me, your friend committed suicide. I sat down and asked myself, "Why would he do that?" I started to carry in billets of wood, and I kept asking myself, "Why?" I told my son what had happened and he broke down.

When my daughter-in-law lost her cousin, she came to my house. All she did was cry. It's hard on a family. It's hard on the frontline workers. We need debriefing each time it happens. I thank the response team. They left a spirit plate for him at the feast. It showed respect. We need to respect each other's beliefs. We need to embrace our beliefs. Today, despite all the losses from suicide, I am faithful and full of confidence in my beliefs. I have walked with the Lord for many years and I am thankful for this.

I wanted to share with you how difficult it is for the workers. We need to take care of each other. The Bible says we should love one another.

There's a song that talks about how we need to join together, so every soul that's suffering will know they're not alone. We need to be beacons of light.

Drugs and alcohol are an epidemic here. Families aren't buying food. Kids are going hungry. Drugs are rampant. This is the truth. It's an epidemic and we need to do something about it, or it's not going to get better.

That's all I have to share.

Meegwetch.

13. How Will Life Be For Him?

Yesterday evening, I was holding my grandson. He's just learning to speak, and I was wondering, "How will life be for him?" I'm concerned not just for him, but for all the children in our community.

The community influenced my upbringing. There's a lot of good history in our community, and also a negative side. This is the part that is hard. I grew up in a violent environment. I fought a lot. I swore. I drank a lot. I was abusive. For a long time. But I addressed those things. I changed in the past 20 years.

For quite a long time, I've been thinking about and trying to understand why people take their lives. I remember coming home one time after hearing about a youth who taken his life. I cried and I wondered what to do. At that time, there was a series of suicides, and it affected the whole community.

I was on a healing journey in spirituality at that time. When I was in recovery, I was introduced to self-help groups, and I started to learn about a higher power. I started to pray, and wondered if I was in a spiritual crisis. I wondered if others were doing the same. I looked at the churches, and wondered why I was hurt and felt confused. At the time there were five active churches and three other spiritual groups. I had enough courage to approach a minister and tell him my story and how I started my prayer. He told me I was doing it right. I also went to see a traditional person, and he told me, "You're okay." No matter how we do it, we're praying to the same God.

It makes you wonder about the religious and spiritual differences in the community. Some people are concerned about the differences, but it's all good. It helps our community. We should be able to pray in a safe way without being judged.

Our women need to be acknowledged. It's our women and our wives who hold everything together. Reflecting on my own journey, I acknowledge how strong my wife has been throughout our marriage. I put her through a lot in the beginning. I cannot see our family existing today, without her. I see a lot of this in our community. We need to always acknowledge and respect the roles and responsibilities of the woman.

In our community, I see the alcohol and drug use, the lateral violence among us. I have

heard people say, "I don't talk. I don't trust. I don't feel." There's fear. There's shame. Every day I see people going to buy drugs. I share my concerns with the police and it's a great concern. We really need to address this issue together, as a community.

Another area is family. It starts from the home, but how do we define "family" and "home"? My father went to residential school. The original definition of family is extended family, a big family, where uncles, aunts and siblings were part of family life. I lost my parents when I was young. I've been able to come this far in life because of the support of my extended family. I like to hunt. I like being out on the land. It brings back a lot of fond memories. I would rather be out on the land than be here. Today there are a lot of people being pulled out on the land for more hunting, for the spiritual connection - because that's who we are. The land is who we are, not living in the community. We've come a long ways.

We need to really be good to each other, to help each other. We need to pray together. Prayers keep us strong, brings us together. It breaks down barriers. I pray. I'm thankful for the elders and the things I've learned from them. They can teach us a lot.

I would like to end the way I started, with my grandson. He's happy. He's full of energy. He picks things up easily from you, copies you, follows your example, likes to mimic you. It is important to determine what we teach him today. What is his future? Will he be able to hunt and smile about what he has been done? We really need to work together as a people.

14. We Can Make This Happen

I want to thank those who showed up and shared their stories. I'm inspired by what I'm hearing. And yet, many young people are in crisis, walking in life's hardships. All our community members need our care and attention – the parents, for example. We cannot neglect anyone who needs our help. When you drop a rock in the water, it makes a wave. It's the same in our community – it's a wave that carries on. Talk of suicide may trigger those who are affected, so we need to be cautious when speaking of it. Some people are not well enough to deal with it. Still, we cannot ignore it.

I just wanted to share a few things. I've heard a lot of good things today.

Our front line workers need to be debriefed, to help them release their grief. There is only so much that an individual can take. The workers can only do so much. It's important that we all work together.

There is one thing that I see, not only here but in other places. When children are belittled in sports or at school, told they are not good enough - I don't think it should be like that. When my mom says something, she doesn't say much – doesn't use a lot of words – but when she speaks it covers a lot of teachings. My mom taught me to respect my partner, to protect my partner – and I do.

When I using the drum, maybe 20 years ago now, my dad taught me that I was no good. Today my dad is different. He opened his mind to the traditional teachings. We had a discussion. I asked my dad why Jesus sat with twelve disciples. I tried to test my dad, but he told me to go first. I told him I don't really read the Bible, but this is what I told him. After Jesus was crucified, they were told to go out and preach their faiths. That's when Peter made the Catholic faith and the other disciples made the other religions. The devil – Judas - even sat among them. He was already sitting there among them, and Jesus knew this. I told my dad this. He looked at me, very surprised, but I kept on talking.

I'm really happy about what people have spoken about. It was good. I heard people say we should go back to the land, and that's true. We need to go back to the land, the teachings of the land.

I'm not saying to walk away from the church. We need to be honest with ourselves. We

need to practice whatever belief brings us joy and fulfillment. It's up to us. I see people misusing their faith, misleading the youth. The way I see things, we are the church. We are the walking church. It would be good to have a camp to go out on the land.

I was told there's no money for such a camp. I find that hard to believe today. At the community level, we need to step up and start volunteering our time. Too often the excuse is a lack of money. Everyone wants to get paid. We don't need to volunteer full-time - just here and there.

Suicide happens when we neglect our people too much, when we don't say hello to them, or speak with them. When the youth do something wrong, we jump all over them. It shouldn't be like that. It's up to the parents and grandparents to step up, as well. We need to walk our talk. Our youth deserve better. They won't be able to do it by themselves. We need to empower them by our own actions.

We can work together, put something together. We can make this happen for our people. I hear someone talk about the internet, that it's good, but it's not always good for our young people. It's good for education, and there are sites with Bible teachings, but we need to minimize it for them. It's not healthy sometimes. If a computer shows a bite from an apple, that reminds us where sin started. The priest and elders tell us to pray. We need to take the time to take our young people out on the land.

My dad told me the best medicine is to drink only water, and then you can eat all you want. You will see the results, he told me. I told him that I can't skip coffee.

15. God Wants Us To Be In This World, And To Have A Good Life

I always seek guidance from the Creator. It's quite a few years since I moved away from the trapline, to make a home in the community and find a job. Living in the bush was a good way of life. It was very harmonious, as all the elders will agree. We used to take care of each other, keep the families together. We were able to demonstrate love and respect for each other. We were taught how to pray, to have a good way of life. I think about those teachings. It's very important to understand what someone is saying to us, to try and understand. Communication is very important. Being a friend is very important. We should always speak the truth about each other.

As elders, we hear about the strife in our community today. In my youth, we never had to go through this. We had a good life. Today, when I'm sitting here in my community and hear about suicide, it's hard to understand. It brings hurt to the community, to the good life. No person should turn to suicide. Things have gone in a wrong direction, from the teachings we learned about what life is, and who gives life. We are not supposed to take life for granted. Life is a very serious thing.

I get phone calls from youth who want help. I try my best to help them. I let them know the teachings, that God wants us to be in this world, and to have a good life. When a youth asks me to come and talk to him, they don't want to talk to someone in public. They want to trust someone. I go with the youth to a quiet place, a safe place outside, and we talk. It's usually about the loss of a loved one – a mother, brother, sister or grandfather. I understand that they want to talk to someone about the loss. I talk to many youth. The most troubled ones are using alcohol and drugs, and it has taken over their lives. That's when they lose hope and feel like suicide. We, the elders and the whole community, we need to keep a close eye on them. We need to abstain. We need to keep them safe, so they don't hurt themselves. I always talk to them about the Bible, and the life God has given us. And let them know this. They appreciate it. They like how I talk to them and they accept me.

Judas, the disciple who betrayed Jesus, took his own life. He knew he did wrong. He was ashamed. He thought he had no way out, and he hung himself on a tree. I think about my community and the other communities. I think about our people who are confused and think they have no way out. This must be how our youth feel.

When we hear the news of a suicide, of someone taking their life, it's very hard for the

community. There's so much sadness when a youth has taken his life. We need to think about Jesus and his teachings. We need to find a way to go in the right direction for all of us. I know that it's hard, what the youth deal with today. My dear friends, let's try and find something. God says if we look, we will find it. Let's try and find a way the right pathway, a cure for them to go on the right path. Let us find a way to do our best.

16. It Has To Be Community-Driven

My aunt was like a mother to me. She talked about her life, how she was raised. She taught me about life, how to respect people, to be caring and not judgmental. She told me not take revenge, not hurt anybody, not to think about it. She said the Creator will take care of those things. He will deal with whoever wants to hurt you.

I feel many emotions. I experienced many things. I went to residential school from the age of six to ten. I saw a lot of abuse. I witnessed so many bad things. The children abused each other. I was physically and sexually abused by other kids. I was always alone. I was told that I didn't belong there. They picked on me because of my fair complexion. It caused me to feel insecure. That feeling is still with me to this day. I still feel lonely. I still feel the impact of residential school. Even to this day, I get scared, like I was afraid in residential school. I feel like someone is going to hit me. Sometimes I feel like that when I'm in a community meeting. I feel anxiety. Even in government meetings, I feel like someone is going to slap me while I'm sitting in my chair. I went to counselling, but it's still there, every day. I do my best to separate it.

When I think of what's happening in our community, the high rate of suicide, we know the root cause, to some extent, is all the pain from residential school. Our people are going through great suffering and it won't stop. They're trying to take the pain away by using drugs and alcohol. It's sad. They're carrying that pain because our community is silent. No one wants to talk about it. They want the pain to stop. The reason for suicide is that the pain becomes too much, way too much. Pain and anger the reasons that people take their life.

I remember when my friend committed suicide, while she was intoxicated. My aunt saw us feeling sad. She told us to not to blame our friend or be angry with her. When she committed suicide, she explained, she was not in the right state of mind. She never let go of her pain. She kept it all to herself. She couldn't deal with it. She suppressed her pain until it took over. Accept the truth about pain. Try not to be sad about it. This is part of life. Just pray for her in the other world.

It really affects us when we hear about someone who has taken their life, or is thinking of doing it. There are times when our members come to our office to talk about suicide. Sometimes we manage to calm them down. They often open up about the pain they are experiencing. They cry in our office. We worry that we might say the wrong

thing. I would welcome training, so we could say the right things. I get scared when someone talks about suicide. My hands get shaky. It's scary to see someone like this. We're afraid of causing anger or even triggering suicide.

It's important for our community to let go all the pain that we carry in our lives. We need the programs and expertise to get this done. It's important to let go of the pain. It's impacting everybody. The silence is too strong. It's time to let go.

Now that we know the cause of suicide, we should think about having a community meeting to address the issues of alcohol, drug abuse, domestic violence and sexual abuse.

We need to educate ourselves about suicide, and it's important to educate our youth about life. We have a lot of work to do. It has to be a community-based. How do we keep our community healthy and safe? We need to stop relying on the non-native legal system, especially in the court system. The perpetrator is punished, but there's nothing in place for the victims. We need to take charge, take ownership of our justice system. The current system of incarceration and CAS policies don't work. We need our own institutions, if we're going to take ownership of the social crises we see. The western way of doing things doesn't work. We need our own people to look after our own matters.

We also need to address the lack of principles and values in our community. There's a lack of spiritual growth and awareness.

We need our own judicial facility. We need to communicate, and heal from our past.

My own daughter tried to commit suicide. She had pills in her hand and I told her to give them to me. She cried when I confronted her. We talked for a long time, and she felt better, then she went out for more counselling.

We need the facilities and the ability to heal from what we have gone through because of the colonial invasion. We need aftercare. We need the expertise to educate our people about the need to heal, to move forward instead of suppressing the pain. There's a lot of work to do, to create the awareness. It has to be community-driven. We need our own institutions to collaborate on judicial matters and keep our people in the community.

The residential school experience will not be easy to deal with. It will be with us for a long time.

Our children need to be taught the traditional ways of respecting and caring for each other. We need to celebrate life, focus less on tragic events. We need to focus more on love and kindness towards one another.

Meegwetch to the commission for coming to our community and listening to our people share their stories of pain. We are still carrying pain, even people in their 70s and 80s. I still carry it, but I hope to some day let go the pain of my past, the pain of residential school.

I pray every day for the wellbeing of our people. Prayer helps. Hopefully one day we will all pray together.

Meegwetch for listening.

17. Only Time Will Allow Me To Heal

I'm filled with heaviness at seeing all my children spilt up from their relationships. They were all married at one point, then they started separating.

I feel anger towards them for separating. My grief causes me to be angry. The anger is so powerful, it makes me want to throw things. Sometimes I can't speak to anyone. I close the door. I close myself off. I feel the heaviness. There's no one to talk to, no one to confide in.

I lost a teenage son to suicide. My daughter also lost a child. My oldest son experienced difficulties. It's very sad to see your children in this situation. I never knew how hard it would be to lose a child to suicide. It's hard when families separate, but it's harder when you experience suicide.

When I think about the teachings we learned, I wonder about my grandchildren who took their lives. I wonder how they are, and where they will be in the afterlife. This is the kind of counselling I look for, counselling about spiritual matters.

When I lost my grandchild, I was able to cope. I felt the impact, but I felt supported by the people I talked with. Then I lost another one and I felt overwhelmed. She went back and forth between her mother and father. I get emotional when I think about her. She was victimized by the situation. It caused her a lot of harm.

I feel overwhelmed by the situation with my family. Sometimes I pace back and forth in my house, talking to myself. I try to understand why this happened. I'm trying to trust in the grace of God and accept it. This is what happened to me. I feel these emotions.

I have two friends who phone me and try to distract me, change my frame of mind. They try to cheer me up, help me to experience some humour, speak with me so I can cope. Sometimes I'm not eager to visit others or go outside. I prefer to stay home, or just go to the store. Sometimes I don't mind. This is the first time I've spoken about it publicly.

Initially I didn't like to discuss suicide or hear it mentioned – because I'd experienced it, felt it. Now I feel comfortable hearing it discussed, and talking about how to improve things.

I'm grateful for God to helping me get through these times, helping me to cope. I don't think these feelings or emotions will ever leave me. I will be able to live with them. Only time will allow me to heal. I will have the strength of my religious beliefs. They will support me through these ordeals.

Sometimes I feel a lot of anger towards my grandchildren because of their drinking. They don't listen when they drink.

Whenever I hear of a family losing their child through suicide, it causes a lot of stress. Everything comes back. Watching the coffin being closed reminds me of my own grief.

I'm happy to be here. It's uplifting. I take great satisfaction when I hear the elders talk about everything they have endured.

One of the little girls I look after looks at family photos sometimes, and asks me the names of her uncles or her cousins. She looks and says, "She was too young to die." She's aware that the people in the picture are now gone. She asked how they died, but I didn't tell her. Then one day she shocked me. Maybe someone told her how, and she told me, and I was shocked. She wanted to know why she did that. The little girl asked, "Why did she do that?" I told her, never mind - just forget about it for now. Everything came back to me. I felt overwhelmed again. I went to my room and I cried. Maybe she was just trying to find out why it happened.

The reason why I'm talking about suicide is because we should try and help these young people in every way. Maybe there is no help. There are a lot of drugs and alcohol. It's a huge problem in our community, but people are divided about how to deal with drug and alcohol abuse. When something goes wrong, they blame the drug pushers. We should gather together collectively and try to find solutions.

We need to return to spirituality. This was useful in the old days. Our elders prayed a lot. That's where they found support and strength.

When I have more strength, I will participate more in what we can do for our communities.

I was in Kingston when I heard that my nephew had taken his life. I burst into tears. I am grateful to God and that's what I want to say. God gives us strength. We all know there is one God.

My grandson participates in drumming. He wanted to do this, and I accepted it. Sometimes he drummed on anything. The young ones bring us joy and laughter.

We need to work on things gradually. It doesn't happen quickly. Some community people don't attend events like this. They think it won't happen to them.

I will participate in the future, to help the young people, to support them. We need to be role models for the youth.

That's it. Thank you very much.

18. I Was Angry At Everyone

I want to talk a little about suicide, about my own experience, what I've been through. I started drinking quite a bit from the age of 13. I went through a lot as a young person. By the time I was 20, I drank heavily. One time, I even went to Moosonee by boat. I left at midnight, arrived at 8 a.m. and went straight to the LCBO. I spent \$3,000 and drank for three months straight. This was a common occurrence.

There was a reason why I drank. I was angry at everyone - friends, family, community members. I had suffered sexual abuse, and this drove me to drink out of anger. I thought I wasn't properly cared for. Because of my anger, I became destructive to myself. I thought I had nothing to live for. One time I put a gun to my mouth, but for some reason it didn't go off. I squeezed the trigger, and there was only a click. When I checked why the gun didn't work, it fired. Then I blacked out.

I remember a couple of times I was in handcuffs. I don't know why. Another time, I was beat up by the police. I was angry at everyone, for years. I was told that suicide is not the answer.

After I had tried, maybe 20 times, I started thinking about what to do with my life. I realized that I had been hurting a lot of people all those years when I was trying to harm myself, hurting my family.

My mother told me to pray, to ask for what I want, and keep praying. This is what I did.

I went to counselling. After I came back from treatment, I still drank. There was something I didn't know. I started drinking again.

Then one day, an elder spoke to me. We were sitting by the river when we talked. She told me something had happened to me when I was young, and my body was feeling the impacts of this childhood trauma. I started to understand. Your body tells you. My leg and hand, that's where the abuse happened. I had a lot of anger and things came crashing in.

My mom and elders in the community told me to destroy my enemy, not myself. I said, "Do you want me to shoot someone?" "No," they said, "you need to get your strength

back. To destroy the anger you have towards those people, you have to confront them, the people who hurt you, abuse you.” They asked me to forgive the people who abused me. I confronted them. It was hard. When I finally confronted them, I was able to forgive. I didn’t see them in my mind any more – this is the power of forgiveness. As I confronted each person, I got stronger. I prayed and asked the Creator for help. If you forgive someone, things are going to change. For years I have heard a lot about residential school, but no one talks about forgiveness. I felt mad at the church, the priest, the bishop.

In the old days, you would see camps all along the river. Today you don’t see that. As a community we’ve forgotten our connection to the land. How can we heal if we cannot come to terms with our past? Forgiveness is the way.

I went to my dad, in his final days, and told him about the things I had in my head. I asked him to forgive me for being angry with him, giving him such a tough time. He forgave me. In his dying hour, he told me to live as free as possible. What’s the point of being angry all your life? I felt happy when I told him. I had peace with him.

The people who I was angry with, I dealt with. I felt like my body was in pieces when I was angry. I started to go to everybody who I was mad at, and I got them back. Today I feel strong.

No one talks about forgiveness when they talk about residential school. What kind of message do we impart to the youth if we keep blaming the school? I knew so many friends who died because of their bitterness towards residential school. There’s not enough money to make us happy. What’s the point of living and being mad? You’re going to pass it on. We need to forgive each other. It’s because of money that we don’t hear about forgiveness. All the money in the world won’t make you happy.

I think we have to stop and make a decision. I made a decision to be happy, and not let the people I was mad at own me. I started to find out about my life. We need to go back, find our way. I used to do that as a kid, go out in the bay.

I listen to the land, the noises. I feel the wind and hear the water. I know how closely the elders were connected to the land. Today, I have a better appreciation for our elders. They lived humbly off the land. That’s why we hear, “Respect the elders.” They helped me a lot, in so many ways. This is what I understand now, living and harvesting off

the land. Last year I killed a moose, and I used everything. I made moccasins. When I walk on the land, I wear those moccasins.

You have to love yourself in order to love your people. The hardest thing for me was forgiving myself and loving myself.

I go to sweats. If you show the young people. I tell them to forgive and love themselves, and things will change. It worked for me. I'm glad I am here to share my story. I would have been dead. You will see good things once you forgive.

If we want to hurt, we will hurt. People who are hurt are going to hurt people. We need to forgive and treat each other like a family. Why do we do things when they're dead, when we can do things when they're here.

When I was drinking, I thought I had good friends. When I stopped drinking I lost 20 friends, but God gave me 200 more.

I just wanted to share my experience with forgiveness. Residential school has been here for a long time now. We should move on now. We just can't focus on one thing on life. There's a reason why it happened. If you can switch the pain around, you're untouchable. All we hear are negative things, like residential schools, abuse. When I was growing up, all I heard was residential school. Maybe that's the problem today - our kids are hearing this all the time. Our kids need to hear positive things, so they can have a better outlook on life.

If we can say, "I forgive you," we will go far. If we forgive, good things will happen.

19. We're Just Waiting For The Next Call

It's an important and sad topic that bring us together today. It's been on my mind for quite a while.

It used to only happen periodically. One would commit suicide, and then another one. We always believed, "It won't happen here." There are a few other communities where this has been going on for years. We should have paid attention, but we didn't.

At one time, it was older people. When the youth started, it was so unexpected. The first one was a child. It was hard to understand. Then the next one happened. It started to become really difficult, a problem that didn't seem to have any solutions.

As first responders, people came to see us after the first one. Then, after a while, they stopped. Nobody came to show their support. Nobody wanted to be part of it. We kind of felt it was our problem. We all got caught off guard. This wasn't supposed to happen.

When we started responding to calls, it was usually alcohol-related. It was easy to understand.

Then this one boy did it. You think that a child doesn't know how to do it, isn't capable of it. It's hard for us because they're still a child, a child taking their own life. It makes it harder for us to understand it. We were unprepared. Maybe we can't, so we stop trying to understand it. We think we're just going to do this and go home. We went into shock and became robots for a while.

One of first things we're trained to look at is the condition of the home, whether there was drinking. And we noticed that his home was really neat and tidy. The cupboards were full. There was food in the house. The body was there, but it wasn't the usual. We felt comfortable in this home. It felt like a good home. There was a laptop. We weren't used to this. It wasn't the usual cluttered home from alcohol. I began to ask myself, "Am I being too insensitive?"

So that's when we began to see a difference in the kids. As the deaths went on, the homes were not a factor. They were coming from good homes. It became really scary. We became frightened, afraid to answer the next call. It became harder to understand.

It came to a point where we prepared for it. We came home and took turns appointing each other as the lead for the next one.

My kids used to ask me where my work took me. All of a sudden, our community became known as a place where we were only responding to suicide. The more it happened, the more it raised a lot of questions outside of the community. They asked repeatedly. And then people stopped asking.

We've been dealing with this now for a long time. We get a call for a suicide attempt at least once a day in one of our communities. Today, we had two calls already. It makes you afraid. It makes you wonder what is going on. Is the ball in our court? Everyone in the community feels it. It makes you want to pray that it's over, but we know it isn't.

It's become almost routine. We sober them up and take them to the clinic, and they send them home five minutes later. They treat them too lightly. Even us, the first responders, have almost come to treat it as routine. "Here we go again." When will the next one be? We don't want this to be a routine.

Most of the time now, the ones who take their lives weren't drinking. Also, they leave messages on social media. Most of the calls we get are tips from worried friends reporting their friends' posts. This has saved lives.

We have an arena that was supposed to be for the youth, but it's never used because of the cost of running it. Even the youth centre has been turned into offices. We've tried to give as much as we can to the youth, but they don't use the facilities. Tonight, when this inquiry is happening, something really important, there's a dance in the community.

Too often we hear at funerals, "They're in a better place." What's the message when youth hear these words? You begin to wonder. You begin to question yourself. Are we going in the right direction? Because the ball is also in our court. We need our youth to know that the better place is with their family.

Some of these kids just went and did it. There was no warning. They were sober. It's frustrating when you draw blanks, and when the youth don't show up to events such as this. They know what we know. They know this is going on. Maybe one or two have tried it before, but don't want to talk about it. The ones who succeeded, they're the ones

who just did it.

In many of the families today, there's no parenting. A lot of parents have let their kids do whatever they want, and the kids are out late at night.

It's only recently that responders have had a support group. Police are stubborn. They find ways to park their emotions, to put them out of their mind. There's also an ego thing – officers are supposed to be tough. They keep an eye on each other, check in on each other. One or two officers have committed suicide. Police are offered the support, but most times they say no.

Most days, we're just waiting for the next call. I really appreciate that this inquiry's happening. And I hope it will help our people.

20. When People Started Talking, It Gave Me Strength

I never heard of suicide when I was a young boy. Now, as an elder, I think, “Where did suicide come from?” As a survivor of residential school, I know that we carry issues. There’s so much that we experienced, so much trauma, and we pass it on to the young people. When I attended a residential school gathering, an elder told me that I was troubled. He told me to be strong and not to let them win.

I had thoughts of suicide when I grew up. Even yesterday I had them. People see me as a happy and outgoing person - and yet I struggle with suicide. Every time this happens, I can’t help but think of the young people. It’s so hard to think of the way people can treat each other, how they can treat young people. When I think about my grandchildren, that’s what gives me the strength to carry on.

The supervisors in residential school inflicted so much pain on students. Fort George wasn’t as bad as Fort Albany. The school in Fort Albany was absolutely hell. There was so much sexual abuse. There were two sections in the dormitory. I woke up one night and saw a worker waking someone up, and taking that little boy to her room. He was gone for a long time. Over the years I figured out what was going on. Our people entrusted them to educate us and give us the good life. But I saw things done. I didn’t talk about it for a long time. We weren’t treated very well. It’s no wonder so people drank and were abusive. There was a lot of sexual abuse in residential school, but nobody wanted to talk about it. It’s only in the last 10-15 years that people started to talk about it. When people started talking, it gave me strength. It helped to get more people talking about it. I tried to talk to my parents, the adults from the any denomination, the old generation. I tried to tell my dad, but he told me not to talk about religious people like that. We should be able to talk about all these things. We need to fight back, have a better understanding.

Suicide is not the solution to a long-term problem. The experience of sexual abuse doesn’t go away. It’s there. It never leaves you. I personally experienced it. When they compensate us with money, money can’t repair the damage of sexual abuse. It’s nice to have money, but the damage from residential school will always be there.

The Truth and Reconciliation hearings don’t have a full grasp of what happened, especially the legal counsel. They assume that we were taken care of. They were shocked to hear the stories. I talked to a lawyer about my issues, and she was in tears.

There were quite a few who attended residential school by choice, but some were forced to go there.

The memories are still vivid today. I remember the train being full of kids going to residential school. When the train stopped, we went into the bush to hide, but we peeked out and saw a lot of kids. It was a special train, just for rounding up children. In Moosonee they gathered us and put us on the mission boat.

People wonder why suicide happens. It's the experience of residential school that caused people to lead hopeless lives. As adults there was structure to life, no self-discipline to handle money.

We have a lot of young people with lots of drinking. I shared my story with the young people, how residential school made me a drunk, an abusive person. Someone asked me, "Do you want to talk about residential school?" "Sure," I said. One time I got mad at a speaker who said, "Residential school was the best thing that happened." I put my hand up, but she ignored me. So I stood up and asked her, "Did you go to residential school?" "No," she said. So I told them. It was hard to talk about it. Memories of the trauma can be easily triggered, especially when ignorant people make public statements, like residential school being a good thing. These kind of people have no idea of the damage they cause when they talk about something they don't know about. My friends came and apologized for this person's ignorance.

Where do we go from here? What will happen after this inquiry? I don't know how much difference it will make. How will we implement all the recommendations? How do we make them into an action plan?

Some people say they understand residential school. When I talk about residential school, I understand. But do you understand?

I vowed that I would never treat a kid the way I saw kids being treated there. When I spoke Cree there, I got slapped across the mouth. We lost a lot. They took away a lot from us. We were given a number, not a name. Then, when we went home and they called us by name, we didn't answer. I couldn't remember my name. We still remember the number we were given.

So let me ask again, how do we solve it? It's going to take a long time. We need to be strong and work together. We need to help one another and not be afraid to talk.

21. We Need to Walk the Talk

I was in living in the south when the suicide pandemic happened. I felt the grief, even though I was away. I stop counting at 14. My uncle died and my great grandfather died of suicide. There's too much silence about things like addiction and abuse. It affects our lives, especially our children. There's so much violence in our community, and we accept it as normal, but it isn't. So much anger comes from the historical trauma in our relationship of our people with the government of Canada. We need to learn the true history of our people. Most of our people don't know how colonialism impacted us and created anger in us. It can empower people once they understand where we have been. The lack of historical awareness is the biggest contributing factor in our people's suffering and demise. Suicide is a symptom of bigger issues.

I used to want to hurt myself. There is too much violence and sexual abuse. We need to understand what happened to our people, and stop blaming each other, putting people down. What's missing is our true identity. It's our responsibility to educate. Forgiveness is huge. We need to start talking about it. It's not good to feel like we are alone. Our community is fortunate but our people don't see it. They don't see it because they are hurting. Once I understood where the hurt comes from, I stopped blaming.

It is our inherent right to know who we are, not to sit around and wait. This knowledge that is ours is slipping away. Our people experience trauma after trauma. If we don't deal with it, it festers.

We live in a system of distrust. The Indian Act created divisions. I am optimistic that things will change. We need to focus on our young people. My own son was harming himself - as a parent that's hard to hear. We need to start forgiving, we need to honour our kids.

We have more children in care than ever before. We need to bring back spirituality, or whatever it is. We need to stop bashing each other, stop the lateral violence.

I brought my baby back home to learn about his identity. The land-based program is good, it instills a sense of pride. As adults we need to walk the talk. We are taught to be silent, but we need to feel the gifts from the Creator. We give these gifts to the children.

We need to disconnect our kids from technology and reconnect them to the land, give them a sense of who they are. We need to teach them to walk in both worlds. The media portrays too much negativity and stereotypes. We need to honour our youth to avoid the pandemic again. We need to help them reconnect, and find their identity. This will help them understand the meaning of the world.

Thank you for listening.

22. Sharing Circles Would Be Good

I lost my brother to suicide. I miss him very much and I wonder why he did it.

I had the same feelings when I was a teenager, but my mother talked to me about it. After my brother's suicide, I had no one to talk to. I didn't speak to anyone. I still have thoughts of doing it, but then I think of my children.

This is the first time I've spoken about this in public. There was a grief session, but I didn't attend.

I'm not too sure what to say. I lost another sibling to natural causes. I knew others who took their lives. It would be nice to continue this type of meeting. Sharing circles would be good. Perhaps that is all I can say for now.

I was aware that other people would be here. I feel okay with this process, being listened to. I've never done this type of thing before.

23. We Need To Walk A Good Path

I had a nephew who committed suicide, and I always think about him. We should make resources available for those who are suffering.

The legacy of residential school continues to linger and it infects local politics. I see this in our community.

I am inspired by the other speakers. We need to overcome our own insecurities. We need to walk a good path. The youth look to us as role models.

When I think back, my strength came from the elders who shared their knowledge with me.

We can't blame the government all the time. You can live on \$500 per month if you don't gamble. If you learn how to grow food, save money, budget.

There is a deep disconnection from the land and this affects our identity. We need to protect our land, our water. We need to avoid corporate greed.

24. It Can Take Up to Seven Years

Dr. Joe Jolly told the Inquiry that there are two kinds of grief – normal grief, and traumatic grief. With traumatic grief, like suicide, the grieving process is complicated. It can take up to seven years.

There's no way to rush the grieving process. We can't expect people to just let go of their grief.

It's really hard on the survivors of suicide. The immediate family feels the stigma of suicide - even though they are not to blame. It was that individual's decision.

The only cure for grief ... is grieving. We have to go through the grieving process. It's important to understand the grieving process.

We have to be sensitive to the grieving survivor. Anger, shock, depression and guilt are all symptoms of grieving. We have to learn how to grieve so that it doesn't impact our overall health and wellbeing.

You have to accept our loss from suicide as soon as you can. Failing to deal with grief can be very detrimental to your health. It's good to join a group with others who are grieving.

We must be determined to live again. People have to start putting the stars back in the sky.

Meegwetch for listening.

Joe and his wife Sheila grew up in Moose Factory. They have written books about grief, from both biblical and Cree perspectives:

Going and Growing Through Grief: Understanding the Grieving Process.

and

My Grief Journey from Mourning to Dancing: How I Recovered from Multiple Losses.

25. We Need To Have This Dialogue

I want to thank the commissioners. Your work is important. I often think about this and I know how heavy the burden can be, how devastating it is to lose someone from suicide.

It's very hard to address the topic of suicide. Everyone is involved – elders, youth, adults and children. I've been working in this field for several years, and I feel honoured to have been able to do so. It must have been the Creator's wish for me.

I want to share my story. I lost a son to suicide.

When I heard the news, I was truly devastated. I didn't know how to react. I didn't know what was happening. I was in shock. I was numb.

I held on to my religious beliefs, acknowledging the Creator, maintaining my composure and my own mental health. This is how I was taught by my parents – to expect the unexpected. This is what helped me to pull through.

It was hard when evening came. I drove to the outskirts of town to be alone. To mourn and to grieve. To cry. To pray, asking for support and strength. Dusk settled as I prayed, and I watched the stars appear. I felt a sense of comfort, and I regained my balance as I watched the stars, thinking that my son was one of the stars blinking at me, understanding that my son was on the other side of life. I thought to myself, as I looked at the stars, "I hope he's happy." It was a soothing feeling that enveloped my whole being, just thinking of him up there. It brought me great comfort and I came back to the community feeling stronger, in a happier mood.

But it's hard each time I witness others going through the same thing. Some people who share this experience come to offer me their support. Others blame me for my son taking his life, for starting the epidemic in our community. When this happens, I say my prayers. I hold my anger and grief, and I pray for them. "Yes," I say, "I hear you. I accept your words." I let the person know that I pray for them. I also tell them that perhaps they don't fully comprehend their actions and words in their time of grief.

I acknowledge my own failure at not being able to fully care for my son. I give thanks to the woman who helped me realize that I need to acknowledge and recognize my failures.

We need to be open, and begin to take ownership of our shortcomings. We need to use our strengths, to rely on ourselves, and not the toxins we use to mask our pain. This is our work, that we need to do on our own. We know that alcohol and drugs don't help us. We mustn't look for solutions through drugs or alcohol. We mustn't give up on life or trying to express our feelings.

We need to support one another. We need to have this dialogue, talking with one another and sharing. We need to release the pain we have suppressed, and find the healing path.

It's much better to support one another, rather than put down or ridicule one another in our grief. We're given a soul so we can feel emotions. We're all the same. We need to embrace one another, to remind ourselves that God gave us gifts. We shouldn't be caught up in our own jealousies.

When I attend events, I'm trying to help. We may be afraid to share because of shame and low self-esteem, but we need to get past this.

Elders play a role, and their teachings are helpful. I'm happy when I'm with our elders. But sometimes our elders put down the youth. We need to sit together.

At least we have The Seven Grandfather teachings as a start, but we need more. There should be more gatherings like powwows and feasts. People are happy when they get together.

People are leery about coming to this public inquiry. I know many who are suffering, and reluctant to come out, because of the put downs and lack of respect. The elders say we would always give thanks to the Creator. This is lacking today – the teachings of the elders about life, love and respect. I see signs of hope in our community, the dwellings erected for our youth, the gatherings at our old site, the drumming. These gatherings will heal us.

Perhaps the commissioners should visit the reluctant ones in the privacy of their homes. It would be a good idea also to invite people to a pot luck, to share some of these thoughts and ideas about how to begin talking about suicide.

These are my thoughts about suicide. Thank you.

26. I'll Share This, Hoping It Will Leave Me

I'm very emotional today. I'll try my best. I'll talk about residential school. My parents sent me there.

There were a lot of good things. We learned to read in Cree. We learned about the Bible. These were the good things.

What I'm going to talk about - it came back to me, especially since I lost my husband. I'll share this, hoping it will leave me.

One day the nun took a couple of girls out, to get things from a storage room. We saw three brothers who worked for the mission. Suddenly one of the brothers began fondling himself in front of us. All we could do was yell out in fear. The other girl and I had never seen this before, not at home when we were looked after by our parents. We didn't want to talk about it. We took off from the building and ran toward the residence. When we yelled out, the nun asked us what was wrong, why we were screaming. We didn't say anything to her. We couldn't explain it to her. So the nun punished us: no supper and no outdoor activities.

The next morning, we went to go eat in the cafeteria. I witnessed things happening there. When I think about it, it hurts me. I have my own grandchildren today. When they come to my house to eat, the memories come back to me, about when I was in residential school, and I recall what happened when children were denied proper care and food.

One morning, when we were eating in the cafeteria, my friend couldn't eat. She was only a little girl. When she tried to eat, she threw up her porridge into her bowl. The nun came over and told her to eat her porridge. She stuck my friend's face into the bowl and made her eat it. She forced her. This is the saddest memory of my life for me. It still haunts me today.

My grandchildren love porridge. When I feed them porridge, I can't help but remember that dreadful morning back at the school. I picture this little girl and what the nun did to her. It reminds me, each time I make porridge. My grandchildren don't know that I'm trying not to think about this. Sometimes they see me in tears, and they ask me what's wrong. I make up a story, not telling them what's really bothering me. These

things still come back to me, no matter how hard I try to forget.

There were other, worse events that happened to our friends at school, when we there. This caused me to be insecure in life. There are other stories, but I will leave it there.

I lived with my parents until the age of 20. They were living off the land in the old days. We learned everything from our parents, and we kept their teachings. They showed us how to be safe, how to protect the environment, how to pray. At our camp, we were the guardians for that area. We only took what we needed.

When it was time to return to school, I ran off. I was determined not to go back. I cried and said, "No. I don't want to go back." My dad understood and he agreed, but my sisters had to go. My experience always comes back to hit me, although I try not to think about it. I never spoke about this before. This is the first time. Perhaps this is why I am emotional. I tried to share, and maybe here is good place to share what has transpired over my life. I will stop talking about that for now.

I got married. We had a good marriage, a good family. When my children reached their teenage years, that's when the problems started. The use of alcohol and substances became the way of life for our community, just as my kids were going their separate ways as adults.

Late one night a young woman phoned. I had known her since she was a girl. I thought something had happened. She said she wanted to talk to someone she trusted. I asked her what was wrong. The voice said, "It's me. You know me." I listened and the voice said, "Can you help me? I need your help." She started to cry. Again I asked her what was wrong. She said, "Someone did something to me that I can't forget." She kept on saying, "I can't forget what happened to me. I feel like committing suicide because I can't forget." As we were exchanging words, I told her not to do that to herself. "God has given you life," I told her. "You're a good girl. You did no wrong. "Whoever did that to you, he committed the wrong." I started to pray for her, and told her not to do it. As she listened, I heard her baby crying. I knew she had a baby. "Do you know something?" I told her, "that's a precious angel crying to you, telling you to stay." I tried to counsel her over the phone, and before she hung up she promised to call me back. I waited for her call.

A little while later, I saw her at an event. She came over to see me, and she had her

baby. She held me tight and she thanked me for helping her. She told me, "What I talked about, suicide, I haven't thought of it again." Her love of life had returned.

There's also another girl who I have talked with and helped. She called me, distraught as well over sexual abuse. She promised she would never think about that again. She promised to get help. "Don't worry about me," she said, "I have a responsibility to my family." She hung on after I encouraged her to live life to the fullest.

I went to the hospital for a check- up and was sent out to Kingston. I was reluctant to leave, because my husband was ill. As I flew, I prayed for my family's safekeeping. I didn't know anyone on the flight and I was feeling lonesome. As I sat there, trying to make myself comfortable, I saw something out the window, something like a flame. It came over me, enveloped me. It took over my entire body and I felt its heat inside me. I heard a voice telling me, "You're not alone. You're traveling with your brothers and sisters." After that, the flame was gone. We landed in Kingston and I stayed for three days. The doctors examined me. They said there was nothing wrong with me, nothing wrong with my heart. When I told the doctor about the flame I had seen, he said to me, "Jesus has healed you." I wanted to share that with you.

Our young people face challenges today, especially my own family members, even though we try to talk to them. There are problems with drugs and alcohol. It's a very big problem in our community. It has taken over our community. It's a problem when the parents don't buy food, when they use their money for drugs. It seems that the youth have nothing to do. They need things to do, to keep them more active.

We need to create something to keep them away from the drugs. I listened when other speakers suggested a youth camp where they go and learn. I have seen how they enjoy the bush, snaring rabbits and cutting wood. When they snare something, they are so excited. Our youth like to go out on the land. They enjoy duck hunting, learning how to prepare and take care of their kill. It's good when people take their families out on the land, they have a good time. Our elders enjoy that, as well. A trip on the land heals you. It's good for the youth to learn from the elders. It's good to mix the generations. The elders who are shut in yearn for the land.

Thank you for listening.

27. True Healing Lies Within Our Culture

I attended Ste. Anne's residential school. My parents are also residential school survivors. It was after leaving residential school that I realized the intergenerational impacts in our home, even among older family members. Dysfunction was a normal state of affairs. No one ever said this isn't normal, it's not supposed to be like this. I thought it was normal to have a party in your house. I thought it was part of being aboriginal.

I am glad that I received an education, glad to have received help going forward. It was hard to pursue a higher education, hard to get away from the dysfunction. I didn't get any help from my band. There was no support for education for off-reserve members. Our communities need to support us, the ones waiting for our home communities to provide funding. I can only imagine what other youth are going through.

Support came from Quebec, where my mother is connected. Education is the key to improving our lives. I don't know what kind of education our kids are getting. The community and families need to get involved in education. It fosters wellbeing. It gives the youth hope, and a dream to change. Right now, our youth are hopeless and helpless. Education is the tool to get them focused, we need to work together to feel better.

We need to start doing things ourselves. Our dependency on government has to change. We did it a thousand years ago. We need to do something, we are losing our future. We as a people should not be afraid. We're at the bottom of the barrel and our kids are the ones who are paying for it. In the past 10-12 years, so many of our youth have taken their lives. This is a huge indicator that something isn't right. Even our leadership has been affected by residential school syndrome. Healing has to happen for our communities. There are many dedicated workers who are willing to help.

My daughter was almost sexually abused, but she was able to escape and lock herself in the washroom. I immediately called the police and a worker came over, and took a statement. We never heard from her again. My complaint went nowhere. There was no formal charge, not enough evidence. She was offered no help by the agency. We took her to the hospital, and she was seen by a doctor. She disclosed, in one session, that she wanted to take her life as a result of what happened to her. I was surprised that she had those thoughts. Luckily there was good mental health support and training. Otherwise, she wouldn't have been taken seriously.

Trauma impacts the individual differently. Depending on the age, it has a bigger impact. Trauma faced in residential school is called complex trauma. Addictions and violence are coping skills for dealing with trauma. My family learned about ceremonies. I should of done this long time ago. It brought so much healing to my family. It is an effective way of healing, of seeking your true identity as an Aboriginal. It offsets negative experiences, and offsets unhealthy coping skills.

My daughter was a victim of bullying. She was physically shoved at school. I talked to the principal, but the bullying did not stop. I had to go to the police, because my wife felt intimidated, reluctant to make a report. Cyber-bullying leads to suicide. We read about it in the news. It's no different in our communities. We need a venue where a person can go and tell their story with confidence and feel validated. We need to act upon these issues, otherwise they will fester and get worse. True healing lies within our culture, it's always been there.

We're working to integrate services within the region. I'm learning a lot, discovering our strengths, as well as what we're lacking within our communities and ourselves. Our youth are lacking spirituality. They don't know who the Creator is. The youth are looking for cultural knowledge. They want a traditional worker. We need to educate our children in the classroom about our ceremonies, so their spirituality will come naturally. Our spirituality is key to helping our youth, to bringing awareness of who we are, our identity.

My grandmother tells stories about when she was a child. She says they were so content, living in harmony with nature. She had a happy childhood. People shared and talked with one another. We need to go full circle. We have to adapt to today's life, without living too comfortable in the western lifestyle. We need to somehow balance modern living with how we lived before, the traditional lifestyle in harmony with the land. Our traditional values and worldview need to be resurrected among our people. There was a doctor who had a nice house, nice things, a good education. But he felt that he was missing something. Then he went to a sweat lodge and learned who he was.

Thank you for listening.

28. The Cycle Never Ended

I pray for strength to share this. My story begins in the bush, where I was living with my parents. My father brought all his children to residential school by boat. It was a long trip. All my siblings went to residential school. My father married twice, that's why we were many.

Most of my older siblings died. Two sisters died in the school hospital from pneumonia or tuberculosis. One brother ran away from school and was never seen again. Our relatives did not witness this, they only heard stories. They didn't actually see bodies or burials. It was hard for my father.

My father didn't send the youngest kids to residential school for a while, because of the deaths of these older children, but finally he consented and the Catholic missionaries came to pick us up by sailboat. All the children were crying in the hold of this boat as we sailed away. We were gone for two years.

We had hard times in the residential school. We were bullied by the other children, because our parents were so far away. During our two years we never went back home. We were told we had relatives at Fort Albany, and we visited them on Sundays. During summer break, the other kids went home. My sisters and I were stuck in Albany. We were happy when a new school year began, marking the second year, after which we would be home. After two years we finally went home.

I came back after that, not to go to school, but to work. I was expected to provide free labour force to the RC mission. They made us work hard, with no compensation. One time I was sent to Moosonee and given \$20. Then it was back to Fort Albany and working for free. We were constantly punished for minor infractions. Once, we were reprimanded for being late. The priest was hard on the children. The beatings continued. We rebelled, we flirted with the local boys and visited with them in the community. The priest heard about this and said if we didn't stop doing this he would make arrangements for us to be married. The other girls left, but I agreed to be married, just to get out of school.

After I was married, I worked in the residential school for money. I thought life would be better. I thought my life would change. But it was the opposite. I experienced a new type of abuse, domestic violence in marriage.

My husband was addicted to alcohol. He lost his mother on the trapline, when he was a baby, and his step-mother was very hard on him. He suffered great abuse at her hands. Sometimes he would run away into the bush, and wake up under a tree. When he went home afterwards, she would repeat the process all over again. This is problem with broken marriages. Sometimes the new spouse is not kind to the children.

The cycle never ended. My husband continued to abuse me. I stayed with my husband throughout our married life. I would hide from the community, hide from everyone.

It got worse as we raised our kids. I started drinking, and things got even worse. The violence increased. He was very jealous and possessive. Once he got mad, and I ran away. He caught me near some rocks and he beat my head against the rocks. Luckily one of our children intervened, took off with the knife, and he gave chase. I got away and ran to my house, very much in pain, gathered my kids and hid outside. We hid in a nearby neighbour's house until he sobered up.

I endured the violence in my marriage. I continued to work every day, raising my kids. He continued to drink. Recently, he started caring for me.

Today, in dysfunctional families, where drugs and alcohol are involved, the children are neglected and abandoned. They move into their grandparents' home, but aren't happy there, and move back with their parents. The parents fail their children. The children struggle, trying to fit in, going back and forth.

One of my grandchildren tried to commit suicide, because the parents were neglecting them, but we were lucky and they were saved. The parents eventually sought help, got sober, and established a balanced home life. They finished raising their kids, and there were no more suicide attempts.

I think the constant presence of alcohol abuse, and the unsettled atmosphere in such a home, is the root of the problem.

That's all.

29. We Need To Start A Movement In Our Communities

My late grandfather said one day the youth would take their lives, and the government would start reducing the help we are given. All the things he spoke about are coming true today.

He said that we were going to be very lost with our children. This is what my grandfather told me, along with a lot of other things. With the children killing themselves, it's happening. I think he was talking about welfare being reduced, the child tax being blended in with welfare.

What I hear today is unreal, how overwhelming it is in each community. There's a lot of sexual abuse, it's so huge, and it's unreal.

We don't teach children how to deal with their pain, that's why there is suicide. The majority of us, here in this room, have gone through sexual abuse. All of my children disclosed they had been sexually abused or experienced incest. I thanked them for sharing. I told them they had to forgive the perpetrator, in order to be free of anger and resentment.

Many people live in anger, trying to suppress their pain. They become overwhelmed with pain and hurt, and don't know what to do with it. Being unable to do anything, they take their lives. It's the pain and helplessness they want to get through, and we need to understand that.

We need to start a movement in our communities, create an awareness of this problem. We are losing our children left and right. One evening my son almost took his life. Every time we lose our young people, no one wants to talk about it. Not only with suicide, but with anything. They are still in the dark. They are suffering as well, they are living with pain.

There aren't enough workers. We have workers, but they have a life after 5 pm. People need help after 5 pm.

One time I was listening to a young man who struggled for 20 years He used drugs and alcohol to numb his pain. He started to hear about residential schools and religion, and he took it the wrong way. He started to have something against religion, against