

Testimony of Wendy Newell Dyer  
In support of LD 1970, An Act to Enact the Maine Indian Child Welfare Act  
May 31<sup>st</sup>, 2023

Senator Carney, Representative Moonen, and esteemed members of the Judiciary Committee My name is Wendy Newell Dyer I am testifying in support of LD 1970, An Act to Enact the Maine Indian Child Welfare Act

As I stood atop Cadillac Mountain in Acadia National Park on Earth Day in April of 1990, I felt as if I had finally found my way home after a lifetime of wondering who I was and where I came from Citizens of the four tribal nations of Maine had gathered for a sunrise ceremony on Acadia's highest peak It's a sacred spot to the masses, but particularly to the People of the Dawn In the darkness, before first light, standing there on the summit, I began to weep

My tears were of relief and gratitude that my search to find my biological parents had ended I was filled with emotion finally knowing that I was a citizen of the Passamaquoddy Nation, newly found information that explained so much about my personality and sense of being I had spent my first twenty-five years feeling different from my adoptive family, peers and neighbors I often felt like an outsider growing up, like I didn't belong In those moments on Cadillac prior to sunrise, as I listened to the drums and songs of my ancestors, I felt connected to the earth and to other human beings in a way that I had never experienced before

It had been almost a year since I had called my birth father, Wayne Newell, a well-respected Passamaquoddy leader and forward thinker who had devoted his life trying to preserve the language of his ancestors and to improve the quality of life of those within the tribe Legally blind since birth, he was a man of vision He was known throughout the state and country for helping bridge the gap of understanding between the Native and non-native worlds

When I phoned him that day, I asked if he knew my mother back in 1964 He said that he did but after I asked if he might be my father, he quickly replied, "No, oh no, it's not possible That's just not possible " Out of frustration and disappointment, I hung up the phone without telling him my name I had taken a risk to call His denial pierced my heart like the sting of a wasp

My first reaction was to hang up but instead of giving up, I wrote a letter to him with my name and intentions, then asked him to search his soul When he received my letter a few days later he immediately called After we had previously talked, he realized that he was likely my father and had been frantic for several days not knowing my name or how to find me

We agreed to have blood work done to be certain Paternity tests confirmed our shared DNA three months later and thus began my journey to come to know myself as a Passamaquoddy woman Finding my birth family was a lot to process, but even more so when I found out that I was of mixed race, and that I had been purposely disconnected from my cultural heritage and teachings

It was upsetting to know that racial indifference was why I was ripped from my white mother's arms, withheld from my Native father's knowledge and kidnapped from my tribe and culture all because of the

color of my father and my skin I felt a great deal of negativity toward my birth mother's father who had declared that he wanted nothing to do with a Passamaquoddy baby He sent my birth mother away so that no one would know she was carrying the child of a man from the neighboring reservation He was embarrassed and disgusted

The mentality in child welfare at that time was to adopt out as many Native children to non-native families as possible to give the children what was perceived as a "better" life with more opportunities My adoption was before the Indian Child Welfare Act became law Had I been born after 1978, an effort would have been made by child welfare to connect me with my father or to place me within the tribe

Finding my way back was the easy part, finding acceptance for what had been stolen from me took many years to achieve In the early days, the culture was foreign to me I didn't know the language, customs or teachings I had grown up with the whitewashed, textbook, Hollywood version of our country's history filled with inaccurate information, unmerited generalizations and stereotypes I had not been taught about the tribal nations of Maine I didn't know there were three reservations within two and a half hours from the island where I was raised There was so much that I didn't know

As the sun rose over Acadia that day, it was the first time that I heard drumming I was mesmerized Though it was my first experience, it seemed as if I had always heard the drum I didn't know the words but the songs were so familiar My father's voice rose above the others that morning as he sang and prayed I was uncertain what I should do, so I awkwardly followed the cues of those gathered when we turned to face the four directions as they prayed in our Native tongue We smudged with sage They sang, danced and drummed

Over time, I learned the songs, how to drum and dance I've smudged and prayed on many occasions I went into sweat lodges, accompanied tribal members on memorial canoe trips, climbed our sacred mountains and took part in many different ceremonies Each time I did something new it took great courage Many times I was hesitant but reminded myself that those things were my birthright, so I stretched myself in ways I had not thought possible

For the next thirty plus years, I accompanied my father to similar gatherings where he shared a part of himself to help the world better understand Native People and our history My favorite memory was when I accompanied him to Washington DC, to watch him perform at the Library of Congress then at the Kennedy Center It was truly one of the best days of my life, a memory that sustains me and one that I will forever cherish

Just before Christmas in 2021, I stood over my father's hospital bed in his living room on the reservation The last words that he said to me were, "Have you met my daughter?" It was a line that he always used to introduce me to his friends and acquaintances at the events we attended together Though we had been separated for twenty-five years, we shared a special bond over the next thirty-one I was humbled that he carried me in his heart even as he lay dying As he drew his last breath, I had a deep sense of gratitude that I had found him and my tribe, and for the relationship that we had shared. He touched my life in countless ways He was a father to me in every sense of the word

Learning the Passamaquoddy teachings and traditions has taken a great deal of effort and dedication. Doing so has given me many profound and moving experiences. My greatest heartache has been that I was disconnected from the language of my ancestors that had been passed down for thousands of years. Though my siblings understand the Passamaquoddy language, I have only learned a few words and phrases. So many of our cultural teachings are held within the language. I cannot pass those teachings on to my offspring in our Native tongue.

I have learned so much but still have so much more to learn. I marvel at the resilience of the Passamaquoddy people. We have somehow overcome all the attempts to wipe us off the face of the earth. Our cultural teachings, language and customs have endured one attack after another, but we have survived. Many, like me, were taken from our culture but somehow, we found our way home. We as a People are still here. I am still here.

I urge you to support this legislation, and ensure every effort will be made in Maine when Native children cannot be with their parents, to keep them with their families, tribal communities, and connected to their cultural heritage. Thank you.