



NATIONAL CITIZENS INQUIRY

Toronto, ON

Day 2

March 31, 2023

EVIDENCE

Witness 7: Tamara Ugolini

Full Day 2 Timestamp: 05:37:40–05:59:15

Source URL: <https://rumble.com/v2fm8wg-national-citizens-inquiry-toronto-day-1.html>

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Geneviève Eliany

Could I ask you to state and spell your name for the record please?

Tamara Ugolini

Yes. It's Tamara, T-A-M-A-R-A, Ugolini, U-G-O-L-I-N-I. And before we proceed further, I just want to make a note of clarification here that I am a journalist who has been reporting on the National Citizens Inquiry and I plan to continue doing that work. However, I'm here this afternoon in my complete personal capacity.

Geneviève Eliany

Thank you. Do you promise to tell the truth today?

Tamara Ugolini

I do.

Geneviève Eliany

We'll start with an incident that happened on the beach with your family. Can you tell us what happened and how many of you were out?

Tamara Ugolini

So the first incident happened on the beach. There's a beach where I live called Pebble Beach. And in the end of March 2020, or perhaps even the very first few weeks of April 2020— I can't recall exactly when this happened but it was when we had restrictions on outdoor gatherings of five people or less.

I had taken my four children—we've since had another child but at the time I had four children; and myself, so that was five, including my youngest sister, who we lived with at

the time; so five children total plus myself, six people—to a beach to throw some rocks because there was literally nothing else to do. The playgrounds were closed. The schools were closed. The swimming lessons ended abruptly. The membership that we had just purchased a week prior to the local YMCA was null because that was also closed. There was literally, quite literally, nothing else to do. So we got to the beach to throw rocks in the water and we ran into some friends who also were doing the same. And the children hadn't seen each other for, at this point, it was three or four weeks because of the school closures. And so they ran over and they're like, "Hey, our friends," none of which we've seen for nearly a month. And we had a brief conversation. The mom was really nervous because she's like, "Oh, wait, we can't even be talking outside. We're going to get in trouble for this." And I thought, okay. I didn't really give it a second thought, but you're right. So she continued on, and my kids continued to throw rocks in the water.

I took up exercising on a log because, again, everything else was closed; there was no way to engage in any sort of physical activity, so I was doing some of that. An officer approached me from behind, tapped me on the shoulder—I didn't even see them coming, and wasn't obviously expecting that to happen—and asked me if the children who were in my care at the beach were all mine because we were over the five allotted people outside together. And I basically told the officer that was none of her business but that we all lived in a house together and was obviously very shocked as to what she was asking me. And I said, "And what brings you here?"

She alluded to the fact that someone in the apartment dwelling adjacent to where we were had seen that there was some sort of gathering happening and called the police. She was hoping at that time that the person who called would be satisfied that the police were responding to the call. She issued me, I suppose, some form of a warning and then she left. And we continued to stay at the beach.

Geneviève Eliany

I understand that you'd looked into the property lines. Can you tell us about that?

Tamara Ugolini

Yeah, so there was another incident: the culmination of events that led to my questioning some of the arbitrary closures that were happening in my local municipality, the Town of Cobourg.

My husband and I had lost a business very early on in the pandemic. Just to kind of give some context here, we had executed a five-year plan: We re-mortgaged our house, we consolidated all of our debt, we took out all of the equity that we had built up in our home. And we started a business that took several months longer than we anticipated to get off the ground. It was a construction-type industry.

My husband had been operating a hydrovac excavator. The context here really lends to why I was engaging in the advocacy work that I was in this particular instance that you're asking me about. My husband had been working as a hydrovac excavator.

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And they use heavy pieces of equipment, large hydrovac trucks, to excavate and dig underground to expose things like utilities, gas lines, water mains. He was working in the utility industry, so they were doing installations for things like Rogers Communications and

Bell Fibre Optics. We purchased this large piece of equipment, about half a million dollars, in November of 2019. And we didn't realize at the time that financing would take so long to go through because obviously construction—especially tunneling underground in December and January in Canada—is very tough. December and January were really a hard go for us with nearly \$20,000 worth of overhead on this particular endeavor, which would have been fine, because the money coming in would have easily offset that.

February was still a little bit tough, but March 2020 was his best month worked. We thought, "This is great. If this continues, we'll be able to pay off this vehicle a lot sooner than we had originally anticipated, get out of this one-year rent-to-own contract, bring our expenses way down, and the rest will be gravy." We planned this out. We rented our house out. We moved in with my father. We did all the things over a five-year plan to execute this business endeavor.

And then April of 2020, the Ford government instituted further restrictions on construction. And the company that my husband's company was subcontracted to, which was Rogers Communication, shut down their construction across Ontario for one month. At that point we only had one month worth of overhead left. So that month, those four weeks, turned into six weeks. And then when things started to slowly come back a little bit in his industry in May, he was working one to maybe three days a week, not enough to give us that threshold of meeting that overhead expense. And so by June of 2020, we made the extremely difficult decision, with literally nothing left— We had nothing to fall back on, all of our savings were gone, the equity in our home was used. We made the very difficult decision at that point to give back this truck and end our contract there, which had a ripple effect for that company. But it was at that point that I decided we had nothing left to lose anymore.

I had been delegating at our town council meetings. I had been reaching out to our MPP and eventually even our MP. I had been petitioning the Town, who went above and beyond the provincial regulations and arbitrarily closed all of our green spaces. They restricted access to the Northumberland Forest, which is hundreds of acres worth of forest. They closed down our local public beach, arbitrarily above and beyond the provincial guidelines, without a bylaw, without any sort of legal check or balance put in place to do so. I had been petitioning them and delegating and asking questions and never receiving any answers. Either I was completely ignored or they were responding to me, "noted and received."

So by June, we had lost our business. Still these closures remained. My children had no access to any of the normal amenities that, you know, our tax dollars go toward funding; they were really suffering the effects of isolation, as were we all. And so I decided to engage in an act of civil disobedience. When the town continued to keep restricting access to this shore and the public beach—they weren't paying attention, they weren't answering my questions, no one was listening to any of my concerns and the concerns of other people who I had met along the way expressing the same—I decided to walk the shoreline in defiance of their arbitrary closure.

Now for the lot lines, I want to mention that I had researched the roll call numbers and where the town's property ended and where it began. And I discovered that the town doesn't actually own a segment of the sand, and of course, they don't own the water. So there's riparian rights that are involved here when you're looking at a shoreline—a fluid moving thing that doesn't have a defined lot limit. So I strategically entered the water from the pier, which is on Crown land—the town does not own that property, they could never have restricted access to it. And I walked the beach shoreline. In doing so I think that there was calls put to bylaw and/or the local police. They met me on the opposite side of the

shore and they proceeded to tell me that I would be hit with an \$880 COVID-related trespass fine, to which we bantered a little bit back and forth about the fact that

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I was not on any Town of Cobourg property. I was not trespassing and I never actually entered any area of the sand, which they had—in my still-to-this-day opinion—unlawfully restricted access to. One thing led to another. I refused to identify myself to receive that fine and it resulted in me being arrested. I was handcuffed. I was detained. I was put in the back of a police car. And I was brought down to the local jail where I was held for about an hour and a half in a jail cell after being fingerprinted and mug-shotted for walking my local shore in defiance of arbitrary COVID restrictions—when no one could answer me whether or not outdoor viral spread was a documented scientific thing, which to this day we know it is not.

Geneviève Eliany

Did any of the officials seem to have an idea of the lot lines you were referring to?

Tamara Ugolini

I had been asking the town what justification they had to close this shoreline, where their lot lines ended, if they had the lawful authority to impose this sort of measure. Again, my communications, my questions, my delegations, were met with the response that it was “received and noted.”

Geneviève Eliany

Now, we’ll shift back to the business losses, which you’ve already explained a little bit. We heard that you surrendered the heavy equipment in June 2020, right?

Tamara Ugolini

Yes.

Geneviève Eliany

Can you comment on whether or not the company that you purchased the equipment from was at all flexible, and what kind of circumstances you could observe them to be in?

Tamara Ugolini

The company was primarily based out of the United States, which didn’t have at that time the same level of restrictions that we had. But they had a satellite office here in Ontario. And they gave us a little bit of flexibility in terms of making the payments because there were some months where we said, “We need a few extra days,” But there is an interest factor on a late payment like that and then, when you’re dealing with an overhead charge of \$13,500 and change, the interest adds up very quickly. So it wasn’t long that we could sustain something like that. And we also had to come up with the bulk of the purchase price by November of 2020 to meet that contract deadline of buying the rent-to-own vehicle outright, which we would have done easily and happily had that March 2020 same level of invoices been continuing on throughout the next six, seven months.

The company that we had been on this rent-to-own contract, the gentleman that we were dealing with directly here in Ontario: his job was commission-based. And so when he had these vehicles out on rent-to-own contracts, or on leases, what have you, he received a certain percentage of commission on those vehicles.

And it was very difficult for us to decide to give back this truck because the bulk of the financial fallout of that really fell on this particular gentleman. All of the trucks he had been receiving commission on were coming back to the lot. And he expressed to us privately that he was really concerned that he would be losing things like his home and his livelihood and other things to do with his personal life and his family. So we started to see, really, the ricochet effect. And we held on to the vehicle for longer than we probably should have because we didn't want to negatively affect this gentleman, who we'd developed rapport and a relationship with. So that was a really, really difficult part of the decision as well: was knowing that it would harm other people too.

Geneviève Eliany

Did you apply for any business grants from the government or elsewhere?

Tamara Ugolini

So that was— Another part of this puzzle is that in order to apply for the grants that were being rolled out at the time, you had to show one year of tax returns. We had just begun our business in November of 2019. We didn't have any form of record-keeping or paperwork to show at that point, nor did we really have any form of invoicing. November was a really tough month. We were just working out all the kinks of the business and of the vehicle. And December of course, with the nature of our country and winter and digging underground and Christmas, it was not fruitful for those two months. But regardless, you needed a full year's worth of tax returns to even apply to these business grants. And even if we were able to, I don't know how we'd ever repay those grants, given the situation that we were in,

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with the rental of this vehicle and not having consistent work from April onward.

Geneviève Eliany

Ultimately, how did your family survive financially?

Tamara Ugolini

Well, I was primarily a stay-at-home mom at that point as well. And I ran a small graphic design business, which I had mostly shut because I was helping my husband do all his advertising work and I was doing the bookkeeping for him. And I also served on the side, evenings and weekends when my husband was at home. I was a server at a local restaurant and that was completely gone. I actually worked the St. Patrick's Day before the shutdown happened and I thought, "Wow, if there's this crazy viral threat, I really hope I didn't pick it up at the bar I just worked all weekend, touching people's cutlery and glasses and being in close contact with intoxicated people." But if it weren't for the fact that we rented our house out and moved in with a family member, we also would have lost our home. It was by the grace of God, really, that that didn't happen and we set ourselves up for the success of getting this business off the ground. No one would have ever foreseen that a mere six

months later we'd be facing unprecedented lockdowns and closures and economic sanctions by our own government.

But then my husband— It was really hard. It was obviously a dream of his, so it was really difficult for him, that drive back to take the vehicle back. He then went to work again in the industry for “the man,” not for himself anymore. And over the next 14 months he worked his way up in his company doing the same line of work. He was one of their most reliable workers. During this time, we had a baby also, a little surprise pandemic baby, who we love dearly. And so this company that he had been with since the time of our business loss even sent us—when we had our baby in March 2021—a small monetary congratulations with a little bib.

Then seven months later, when the COVID mandates came out in September of 2021, my husband was terminated from his job in October of 2021 for refusal to divulge and disclose his personal private medical information. He repeatedly inquired with his supervisors, the human resources people deploying this policy indiscriminately onto their workers. And I want to remind everyone that a hydrovac excavator works primarily outside and alone. He was not in close contact with anyone throughout any length of time, any day, and they were never able to ascertain the policy. They were never able to answer our questions on if this was reasonable, if it was justified, if there were any form of accommodations that could be exercised to ensure that he was keeping everyone else safe while still remaining gainfully employed. It even came down to the point where, in an email, one of the people involved in this situation told him that the policy was about vaccine uptake and not immunity.

Our family— At that point we had already moved back into our home and we were trying to regain some financial security. And at that point our loose plan was—because I was still on maternity leave with a seven-month-old at home in addition to our other children—our loose plan was that he would take the remainder of my maternity benefits and I would transition to work full-time. And it would get us through the winter months until the construction industry picked back up again in the spring and he would be in a better situation to get another job.

But then they put on his ROE [Record of Employment] that he had, I think it was Code M: that he was in noncompliance with a workplace safety policy and he would not be eligible for government assistance. So I immediately pivoted— And thank goodness for my line of work I was able to pivot and go to work full time, but we were down our main breadwinner's income. And to this day, in fact these past few weeks, we have been discussing the very real possibility that we will be selling our home and moving back in with our family member because we can no longer sustain ourselves and stay afloat.

Geneviève Eliany

Can you comment on ongoing childcare issues since you had to pull the kids from Montessori?

Tamara Ugolini

When my husband lost his job—our children had been attending a private Montessori school. And they had been attending there for the duration; we've been with the same provider for approximately 10 years. At the time, we had to obviously cut major financial commitments way back.

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So we made the decision to remove our children from this facility. And since that time, we have been unable to secure any form of reliable, consistent childcare. Our two older children now go to conventional school, despite my convictions otherwise. And we struggle to this day, to this week, to have gainful, readily available, consistent, reliable childcare because we've since lost our space in that other school where the younger children would have been grandfathered in.

Geneviève Eliany

Do you expect that you'll both be able to return to full-time work unless you secure full-time childcare?

Tamara Ugolini

That's part of the piece we're trying to figure out currently. So for anyone who says that COVID is over and the worst is behind us, there are still people out there suffering the fallout of these misinformed policies.

Geneviève Eliany

Thank you. We'll see if the commissioners have any questions for you. No questions. Thank you so much for attending today and telling us your story.

Tamara Ugolini

Thank you.

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Final Review and Approval: Jodi Bruhn, August 16, 2023.

The evidence offered in this transcript is a true and faithful record of witness testimony given during the National Citizens Inquiry (NCI) hearings. The transcript was prepared by members of a team of volunteers using an "intelligent verbatim" transcription method.

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