



NATIONAL CITIZENS INQUIRY

Toronto, ON

Day 3

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EVIDENCE

Witness 3: Catarina Burguete

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[00:00:00]

Allan Rouben

Can we get your name, please?

Catarina Burguete

Catarina Duarte Burguete.

Allan Rouben

And we've been swearing in witnesses, so Ms. Burguete, you swear that the evidence you're going to give will be the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?

Catarina Burguete

I swear, so help me God.

Allan Rouben

Thank you very much. Tell us a little bit about yourself.

Catarina Burguete

I am 51, I am a mother of four: three girls and a boy ranging in age from 21 to 13. My husband and I own a business in the hospitality industry. I am a retired healthcare professional. I retired to raise my children a long time ago. During the pandemic, when they were short of PSWs [personal support workers]: because of my background we could quickly train, and I went to work in long term care.

Allan Rouben

What is it that brings you here today?

Catarina Burguete

Today, like everyone else, I just feel it's important that our stories get told. And I would like people who maybe aren't aware of the consequences, of what some of us went through, to listen.

Allan Rouben

And so you mentioned about your children. What are the impacts of the last few years? What has that been on your children?

Catarina Burguete

Well, all four of them have felt the impacts in very different ways. So early on—my husband is a retired scientist and with my background in health care too—we questioned everything. We've always been like that anyway.

So for the kids, if I start with my oldest, who was in third-year biology at Queen's University, we made her aware that the vaccine had no long-term safety data and that we did not want her to take it. We showed her the information and we held our breaths and we let her decide for herself what she wanted to do. There was a very real threat that she'd be kicked out of school. And she was. We are grateful that she decided she wasn't going to take it but it was very difficult.

Allan Rouben

What happened to her, exactly?

Catarina Burguete

So ironically, the January before she was dismissed from university, she got COVID from a fully-vaxxed friend. And we tried to say, "Well, what difference does it make? This friend is allowed to return after the Christmas break. She is not. They've both had COVID. She's fully recovered now." Anyways. So nope, there was none of that. She had to come home.

She went through a very difficult time with, maybe not depression, but feeling very low, being ostracized by friends who were afraid. Her roommates made her life very difficult. Somebody who'd always been popular just couldn't believe that her friends would turn their backs. These kids were ruled by fear, total fear.

Allan Rouben

Did your daughter know if she was going to be going back to school?

Catarina Burguete

She had no idea if she would ever be able to go back and she was devastated.

Allan Rouben

What ended up happening?

Catarina Burguete

So she came home, she worked, and then the mandates were dropped. And she was allowed to return in September of—this previous September. Of course, now she's a semester behind, so she's going to have to go back and finish to get her degree.

Allan Rouben

And your other children, what grades are they in?

Catarina Burguete

So my middle two were in high school throughout, and then my youngest is now in grade seven.

Allan Rouben

What did you see in terms of the impacts on them?

Catarina Burguete

Oh, mentally, huge. We've heard this morning about all the crazy school requirements and the cohorts and not being able to socialize,

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and the fear that was instilled in all these children. And of course, they felt they had no social lives. It was depressing: they didn't leave their rooms, they had no sports, they had no outlet, no clubs, no nothing.

Allan Rouben

In your school district was it mostly remote learning over the last three years?

Catarina Burguete

Remote learning, yep. Luckily a very good friend of mine is a retired high school teacher, so she was able to help my teens. And my son, I said, "No, you're not logging in; we're going to homeschool for the time that you're meant to be online."

Allan Rouben

From your personal viewpoint, what did you see in terms of the effects of remote learning?

Catarina Burguete

Well, if I focus on my youngest son, there's no socialization, there's nobody to play with. He had a diagnosed speech impediment and luckily, we were fortunate enough that his speech therapy could continue online. When he did return to work and they were meant to be masked, I said no. I mean, show me the data that a masked child with a speech impediment isn't going to be adversely affected. And it didn't exist. So we were given an exemption. He was the only one in the school of 250—he's got a spine of steel—he was unmasked.

The following year, I was no longer able to just say as a parent, “My child will not be masked all day.” And that we had to use his speech impediment as the reason for them to tick that box.

Allan Rouben

I’m guessing that was a bit of a struggle to get that exemption.

Catarina Burguete

I think they knew we weren’t going to back down as parents and they were happy to have the out. I felt for other parents who I’d heard from who didn’t have that excuse, and I hated to use it as an excuse. No child should be masked six hours a day, never mind an hour a day. Yeah, I hated to use his disability as an excuse but in the end, I had to.

Allan Rouben

And tell us a little bit about the impacts of mandates and COVID policies generally on you.

Catarina Burguete

Well, on me, because I was working in long-term care, we were being tested every day. And it came through the pipeline—even though I had started, I had trained as a PSW through the pandemic because they needed us—it was coming through that you were going to have to be vaxxed. And by then, my husband and I were pretty sure; well, we knew right away that we were not going to do that.

He’s a retired scientist and I’ve worked in healthcare. And it was just insane to me that a rushed product, for which we now know there was ample evidence that didn’t even stop transmission, and that carries huge risk, could be mandated for anyone. So I said I wasn’t going to do that. And I tried to find ways around it. I said, “I will submit to testing before every shift.” I said, “You know, there’s evidence of a really good prophylaxis coming out of South America.” No, it was just, it was a non-starter. There was no way. It’s the vaccine or you’re out. And the irony is, all of my colleagues in long-term care are tested every single shift.

Allan Rouben

So you lost your job?

Catarina Burguete

I lost my job.

Allan Rouben

When was that?

Catarina Burguete

October of 2021.

Allan Rouben

Have you gone back?

Catarina Burguete

No, it is a county-owned facility, and our county still has a COVID vaccine mandate.

[00:10:00]

Allan Rouben

And I understand you're a churchgoer.

Catarina Burguete

Yes, I am a singer too. And I sing in a few different choirs and I sing in our church choir. I also worked very part-time in our church office.

But through COVID, choirs were devastated. We weren't allowed to sing as a group. And they asked for volunteers to maintain the music in ministry, which I did. Nobody else volunteered, everyone was too afraid. I said I'd do it.

And then when choirs were allowed to resume, there was a catch. And you had to be vaxxed. So the people I had stood beside for ten years, twice a week, every week, said nothing. They watched me walk away.

Allan Rouben

So you couldn't sing either?

Catarina Burguete

No.

Allan Rouben

Today?

Catarina Burguete

Today, it's okay. I can sing, but only in selected choirs, because some choirs require more protection, I guess. And so it's okay to sing in my church choir every Sunday, just like it is in, I assume, every church in the diocese.

However, for some years, I had sung in a diocesan choir, which brought together people from all over. And we did some big events. And in that particular choir, you must be vaxxed.

Allan Rouben

You mentioned about a business that you and your husband own?

Catarina Burguete

Yep, we own a business, we own a brewery. And so early on— My husband is a retired scientist. He actually happens to be a yeast specialist and RTQ [Real-Time Quantitative] PCR specialist. He performed PCR tests hundreds of thousands of times in his postdoctoral research.

But in the beginning of the pandemic, we thought, well, you know, we have to do our bit. We're going to help. We have to do our bit. And he ended up making hand sanitizer when there was a huge shortage. We donated about \$30,000 worth of materials and he made the hand sanitizer and donated it all to local— There was a charity set up that was trying to get PPE and supplies to local hospitals, doctors' offices, and businesses.

Allan Rouben

So this was in the early days of the pandemic?

Catarina Burguete

Yes, yes.

Allan Rouben

And was your business—did that remain open?

Catarina Burguete

Well, because alcohol was essential, we were allowed to keep the bottle shop open, so people could come in and they could buy. But we couldn't operate the bar. You couldn't come in and sit and have a beer. You could come buy it and take it home. So I mean—and the other thing is, the pubs and restaurants are closed. So we had nobody to sell to. So our business suffered like everybody else, pretty much.

Allan Rouben

And from a social perspective in your community, how would you say you and your family had been impacted?

Catarina Burguete

We've lost a lot of friends, but we've made so many more friends. We discovered—at our lowest and like many people, feeling so low, just like a cloud over your head constantly—we discovered an underground of people who were suffering in all sorts of ways. And we started to meet. I mean, this was during lockdown, too. It was all secret.

It's just crazy to think about it now, but I found a lifeline. And I still remember showing up to that first meeting and I couldn't believe it. I couldn't believe I wasn't alone. We all told our stories. And we all had to park, like, far away, so that neighbors wouldn't report you. And those people are some of my best friends now.

[00:15:00]

Yeah. A really dark time, really dark time.

Allan Rouben

Do you feel like you're coming out of it now?

Catarina Burguete

Yes. Yes, things are somewhat back to normal. But like many people, I struggle with the idea of forgiveness. Because forgiveness does not happen in a vacuum. It requires an apology. It requires a sense of what was done wrong, an acknowledgement of what was done. And reparations, whatever they may be. And a system put in place so that it won't happen again.

Allan Rouben

We talked in the education sector earlier with Mr. McCurdy about acknowledgements by officials and it doesn't seem like that's occurred. What have you seen, if anything?

Catarina Burguete

Nothing. Nothing. No one's apologized. No one. Not on a personal level. Actually, that's not true: I've had one or two people on a personal level apologize. And I am so ready to forgive on any other level, though no one's apologized. No one.

It needs to start from the top down, from the politicians. Public health needs to be gutted. Reprehensible. And they need to apologize. They need to pay for what they've done. But I'll take an apology, any day.

Allan Rouben

I wonder if any of the commissioners have any questions?

Thank you very much for coming.

Catarina Burguete

Thank you. Thank you so much.

[00:17:27]

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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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