



NATIONAL CITIZENS INQUIRY

Quebec, QC

Day 2

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EVIDENCE

(Translated from the French)

Witness 5: Marylaine Bélair

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[00:00:00]

Konstantinos Merakos

So hello again everyone. It's my turn to share another difficult testimony. Up until now, I know that the lawyers have had some very, very difficult testimonies on their plates during preparation period. When we talk about preparation, we mean calming the witnesses down, reassuring them, and helping them to organize their ideas a little. But what you will see here is all of their own free will; it's their own emotions. And sometimes we too have our own emotions and we need to remain strong during this process. So I'd like to thank our team here and all the witnesses of yesterday, today and tomorrow.

So without further ado, we'll continue with another difficult testimony—with Madame Marylaine Bélair. Hello Madame Marylaine.

Marylaine Bélair

Hello.

Konstantinos Merakos

So I'll start with your oath. Do you solemnly swear or affirm to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth? Say: "Yes, I solemnly affirm" or "I swear."

Marylaine Bélair

Yes, I swear.

Konstantinos Merakos

Excellent. Can you say your full name and spell your surname?

Marylaine Bélair

Marylaine Bélair, B-É-L-A-I-R.

Konstantinos Merakos

Excellent, thank you. So for our viewers, Madame Bélair is here with us in person in front of me. So Madame Bélair, take your time with your testimony. We're going to start from the date when the chaos started for you: March 2020. Does it make sense to start with that date?

Marylaine Bélair

Yes.

Konstantinos Merakos

Excellent. Go ahead.

Marylaine Bélair

Actually, I want to testify on the impact of government measures on my life. In March 2020, more and more measures were being introduced every day. On March 13, schools were closed. At the time, my husband had been studying with the APCHQ [Association provinciale des constructeurs d'habitation du Québec] to get his RBQ [Régie du bâtiment du Québec - for construction management] licences. So his studies were stopped. He had the choice of taking the CERB [Canada Emergency Response Benefit] because at that time, the government was offering students the choice of being paid or of finding a job and going to work.

My husband thought, "We're in a crisis in Quebec; I can't just stay home and get paid for doing nothing." So there was a call from the government for security guards to enforce the measures in public places. My husband got a job on March 29, 2020, as a security guard at Walmart. At that time, one of the measures in place at Walmart was to let in only one person per family; you couldn't bring in more than one person. It was his job to enforce those measures.

Konstantinos Merakos

Perfect. So because of lockdown, measures, and mandates, your husband was forced to find this type of work.

Marylaine Bélair

Yes.

Konstantinos Merakos

So the next date that's important to your story is April 4, 2020: What happened on April 4, 2020?

Marylaine Bélair

Well, my husband was on duty as a security guard at the Walmart in Fleurimont. While my husband was making the rounds inside the Walmart, a customer arrived with his girlfriend and wanted to get in and, well, he was prevented from doing so by the other security guard on site—it was a woman—so he got into an altercation with her. Finally, he withdrew with his girlfriend to the parking lot. My husband rejoined his colleague outside the store and she explained the situation to him. Then the customer returned in his car to the front of the Walmart. My husband was there and, being a man, he didn't want the woman to be annoyed by this customer again. So he got into an altercation with the customer. They ended it a little further down the Walmart parking lot. And the customer got into his car—he was still in his car, in fact—and drove straight into my husband. My husband got onto the car to protect himself. After that, the customer maneuvered to get him off, so my husband fell directly on his head. He was taken away in an ambulance with a skull fracture and internal bleeding.

I was called and I went to the hospital. As soon as I entered the hospital, they looked at me and said, "Madame, you need to leave. You have no business here." I said, "My husband just arrived by ambulance." She said, "Yes, but that doesn't matter. You must leave." A nurse who heard me, and knew what had just happened, took me to the sixth floor. And I didn't understand because my husband worked in a parking lot.

[00:05:00]

I was like, "Okay, it can't be that bad an accident. He must have been in his car." Then the nurse started explaining to me what really happened, and that my husband was in emergency surgery at that point. And then she looked at me and said, "But you can't stay in the hospital." I said, "What do I do?" She says, "You can wait in the parking lot; we'll call you with an update on the surgery." So I spent six hours in the parking lot with my parents-in-law waiting for a call that came around eleven o'clock in the evening.

Konstantinos Merakos

In the hospital parking lot, excuse me.

Marylaine Bélair

In the hospital parking lot, yes, waiting for a call. The surgeon told me that the operation had gone well. He was still in critical condition but I wouldn't be able to see him unless he died.

Konstantinos Merakos

Before we talk about the hospital, I just want to make it clear to the viewers and to the audience that the situation that happened at Walmart was because of—what? Explain a little about what was going on at Walmart that evoked such emotional reactions from customers towards your husband, who was there as a security guard.

Marylaine Bélair

Well, it was dissatisfaction and misunderstanding of the measures that the government had put in place. In the early days of COVID, no one understood what was going on and the measures made no sense. Everyone was in a state of panic. So it wasn't easy to keep people calm and enforce the rules.

Konstantinos Merakos

Perfect. So we can say that the person went haywire in this situation because of the measures, because of his anger. He potentially unleashed it on your spouse.

Marylaine Bélair

On my spouse, yes.

Konstantinos Merakos

So coming back to the hospital, were you allowed to be next to his bed or not?

Marylaine Bélair

The next morning, I called to ask for an update and I then spoke to someone else who gave me permission to go and see him that day. He apologized for the call I'd had the day before, and told me: "You can come and see him, but only with your spouse's father." So my mother-in-law wasn't allowed to see her son for a month and a half.

My husband was in a coma for four-and-a-half months. I was often in and out: at times I could go to the hospital at times I wasn't allowed to go there for two weeks. I had to take it day by day. My own children and my spouse's siblings—there are six of them—were only able to see their brother and father once in the hospital. It was very restricted. I wasn't even able to see my parents who lived in another district for the first two months because they were afraid to cross a district, because fines were being imposed.

Also, there was a regime of fear everywhere—even in the hospital. They were still understanding but it quickly became other patients saying, "Why does he have the right to have his family?" It quickly turned into chaos. It wasn't easy.

Konstantinos Merakos

And can you just mention, because you talked about your children, how many children you have, without necessarily mentioning their ages? We'll keep this a little confidential for you. Are they teenagers or are they in elementary school?

Marylaine Bélair

I have five children, and at the time of the accident they were all elementary school age.

Konstantinos Merakos

Excellent. Okay, and these five children weren't allowed to see their father during treatment.

Marylaine Bélair

They were only allowed once.

Konstantinos Merakos

Once. Okay. After the operation, after the treatment, there was palliative care.

Marylaine Bélair

Yes. After four-and-a-half months in a coma it became clear that my husband was dying, so he was transferred to palliative care. Again, once in palliative care, I was told that there was a maximum of two visitors a day. We're talking about someone who's at the end of his life. Two visitors a day, I said, "That's all? I have five children. He's got six brothers and sisters, there's his parents, there's my parents." As I said, the hospital was a little understanding, but it didn't take long for things to get out of hand on the floor. In the end, we had to manage who was allowed to come and see Philippe and who wasn't.

Konstantinos Merakos

Your situation has been publicized. Anyone can do a Google search to see what happened. Did the media have a positive or negative impact on your situation? Tell us a little about the effect of the media, about the pressure in your private life.

Marylaine Bélair

There was a positive effect in the sense that—among other things—that's why the hospital gave us a little more leeway. Because having heard the story, knowing that there were five children behind it who were perhaps about to lose their father, it had a positive effect all the same. I had a lot of help; there was a donation platform.

[00:10:00]

As far as I'm concerned, it's not easy having your story on TV! We agree that it's not something you want in your life, but still something positive came out of it.

Konstantinos Merakos

Like it or not, in spite of the pressure—the fear, as you said earlier—the media in this case created the pressure to act. Do you think that if the media hadn't been there, the situation would have been different?

Marylaine Bélair

Probably, yes.

Konstantinos Merakos

For the worse? Can you say?

Marylaine Bélair

Yes.

Konstantinos Merakos

Okay. So what happened after palliative care?

Marylaine Bélair

After my husband passed away it was time for the funeral. I never thought I'd have to choose who could attend a funeral. Again, you had to make a list of who could and couldn't

attend. Within the funeral complex, we again weren't allowed to hug, weren't allowed to shake hands; we had to wear masks.

Then even during the ceremony, there was the two-meter distance between family bubbles. I was all alone, sitting at the end of the row, really far from the other people around me. At one point, my best friend took my chair and said, "This doesn't make any sense; you come sit next to the rest of us." But it was very cold; it was dehumanizing to live like that! That's the word that comes to mind. It just didn't make sense.

Konstantinos Merakos

Did you, the parents, and the children have a last hug, a last goodbye to their father? Were they able to touch him to say a final goodbye?

Marylaine Bélair

I made arrangements with the hospital. Given the measures and all that, I said, "I'll just take fifteen minutes, I'll bring my five kids all at once."

Konstantinos Merakos

Take your time, no problem.

Marylaine Bélair

So they allowed it. Yes, they were able to say goodbye to their father.

Konstantinos Merakos

Take a minute, there's no problem. Take a Kleenex. We're here for you.

So following this unfortunate death, I imagine it was also financially difficult because now you find yourself a single mother with five children. And I salute the courage of the rest of the family, which I imagine helped you through this difficult situation. Have you received any suggestions—whether from doctors, the government, or whoever—related to bereavement support? What resources are available to you following such a tragedy?

Marylaine Bélair

Well, I really didn't get any help. There wasn't anyone to help me. I had to do the research myself because you're not born with the resources to say, "I'm going to mourn the death of my spouse and the father of my children at 35." So I did a bit of research. Then ironically, I came across the Quebec government's website, which gives a few guidelines for when you're going through a bereavement. And one of the first things is to avoid isolation. Okay, that was pretty ironic.

Konstantinos Merakos

So just a quick note, what were their suggestions—according to the government—in order to recover from a bereavement?

Marylaine Bélair

Firstly, to avoid isolation.

Konstantinos Merakos

Okay.

Marylaine Bélair

Secondly, to meet people who have been through the same thing as you. But you realize that you're in a lockdown and nothing was happening at the time: sports activities, meeting new people. That was the sort of thing I was reading. I was like, "Okay, I'm not entitled to any of that right now." Another was to find professional help—but then realizing that psychologists and other counsellors were already overloaded with all that was going on. So I found my own ways to help myself.

Konstantinos Merakos

Okay. So you tried to get resources and not only were they unavailable, they were contradictory based on the environment you found yourself in.

Marylaine Bélair

Yes.

Konstantinos Merakos

Perfect. I don't want to take more of your time. I know it's a difficult situation to replay because I imagine there's been a lot of media coverage, plus a criminal court case.

Marylaine Bélair

Yes.

Konstantinos Merakos

So I'd like to bring this to a close. In your opinion, as a human being, what could have been done better? What are your recommendations for humanizing what happened? Please give us your suggestions.

Marylaine Bélair

In my opinion, a prime minister's role—whether federal or even provincial—is to serve the people. He's not there to enslave people.

[00:15:00]

As for the vaccine— I didn't take it, but I didn't mind them making it available. But you can't impose a vaccination. Then if you make it available, at the very least you should say: it's experimental. Then when there are side effects, you should mention them, so that people can make the best decision for themselves because it comes down to your personal decision whether you choose to risk taking the vaccine versus risking the virus. That's the first recommendation.

The second concerns the other measures. I think isolating people who were at risk was a good thing to do, but again, with free choice. Some grandparents would rather see their grandchildren and die of the virus than be locked up in a nursing home. So they should recommend these things but let others live their lives. I mean, I could go out; I was ready to live with catching it. If someone was afraid, then it was up to them to isolate themselves. Don't bully others on behalf of someone who's scared or in danger.

Then, my last recommendation is this: I'm a mother of five, I'm a company director. A person experiences crisis situations on many levels. When faced with a crisis situation, you have to weigh the pros and cons in order to see the positive effects of the decision you're about to make, of course, but also to consider the negative effects—and there are always negative effects whether you like it or not. Then when you know what they are, you work with the people who are going to have to live with them.

The government has completely ignored us as a people. And the way I see it, the National Citizens Inquiry is doing is what our authorities should have done. They should have asked themselves more questions, then seen the impact it was having. Even François Legault, when it happened to my husband, said at the press conference, "Oh, it's unfortunate, it shouldn't happen." No alarms were set off—not a single one—about what he was doing to our society.

Konstantinos Merakos

Okay, excellent. And I also want to remind you that—you already disclosed it, but—vaccination status or any other medical procedure is personal, it's confidential. So just a reminder—and to other people too—that you mentioned it here, but you didn't have to.

Marylaine Bélair

No, but I don't mind.

Konstantinos Merakos

Yes, it's your choice. Excellent. So thank you very much. I'll now open the floor to questions from the commissioners.

Commissioner Massie

Thank you, Madame Bélair, for your touching testimony. We appreciate you sharing it with us so that we can understand the reality of this pain. My question is this: Looking back, where are you now? Despite the obstacles, have you managed to find a way to grieve? And if so, was it really that much harder to get through those stages given the circumstances you were in?

Marylaine Bélair

It was extremely complicated. That's when I learned how important mental health management is. Then—as I was saying earlier—I had to find my own ways to keep my mental health as strong as possible, while also supporting my five children. Today, I'm still able to see the positive despite everything. I mean, that's when you discover the strength that's inside you.

Commissioner Massie

Thank you.

Konstantinos Merakos

Will there be any other questions? No? Madame Bélair thank you very much. You're very brave. We thank you. You're a role model for your children. We congratulate you. Thank you for being here today and for your testimony. Thank you very much.

Marylaine Bélair

Thank you.

[00:19:00]

Final Review and Approval: Erin Thiessen, November 15, 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, and further translated from the original French.

For further information on the transcription process, method, and team, see the NCI website: <https://nationalcitizensinquiry.ca/about-these-translations/>

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