Deb Jamerson

Q: Tell us about your early influences.

DJ: I think I really would have to go back a little bit in history and talk about my family roots. My family comes from Missouri, Oklahoma, and Texas. They migrated up to Canada in the early 1900s when they were doing land grants. So they were homesteaders. My father's family came from Texas and moved up to the Athabasca into the Amber Valley region and my mother's side of the family came to a place called Maidstone, Saskatchewan, then on to North Battleford, Saskatchewan. So I'm second-generation Canadian. What's really interesting is that my family, one of their reasons for moving north and migrating was the ability to truly be free. They had gone through slavery and my great-great-grandmother, who I actually met only once, actually went through emancipation and the Civil War. So that was really quite interesting. So they came to Canada to be free, to have the ability to be their own persons. So that's really where I come from, my history. My grandfather, who came to Canada in the early 1900s, actually fought in World War I. They had a troupe of soldiers who were all black, and what they actually were were the ditch diggers for Canada, so that was their contribution to the war was they dug the trenches for the soldiers who actually had shotguns and killed people and fought for Canada. Came back and rode the railways and was a vagabond. But truly my grandfather and a good portion of my family on both my dad and my mother's sides settled in Winnipeg and worked on the railway. So of course you had unions, everybody had unions except for the porters, because they were black. It was in the 1950s that they started to organize from Nova Scotia right through to B.C. My grandfather was one of the organizers in Winnipeg for the Union of Porters and Sleeping Car; I can't remember the actual words of it. But it's really through my grandfather, through my grandmother, and just the history of fighting for freedom that has made me an activist throughout time.

Q: Where were you born?

DJ: I was born in Winnipeg, Manitoba in the late '50s. Oh geez, I dated myself. But I grew up in Winnipeg and actually have spent all my life in Winnipeg. How I actually got involved in the labour movement was that I was working in a nursing home at 16. I went in on a work incentive program through school; I was taking an institutional course in childcare, healthcare, and a bit of nursing. I did a six-month work experience program in a nursing home and I got a part-time job. That was back in the early '70s, where at that time they had something called student minimum wage. You worked for $1.98 an hour and you would be working beside someone who's over the age of 18 who was making $2.90 an hour. So they're making almost a dollar more than you were. That was just the way it was. So one day I came into work; I was actually working part-time doing my work experience and going to school. I had actually taken on a fulltime evening shift where I worked from 4 to 9. I came into work to pick up my paycheck and there was two. I was being paid $3.55 or something an hour and there was this thing called retroactivity. I'm 16; I don't know what that is. Anyway I thought they paid me wrong so I went over and talked to a fellow I knew on one of the floors and I said, you know the employer has paid me wrong, they've given me this retroactivity – what is this? He said to me, oh we belong to a union now and they can't pay you any differently than anyone in the workplace. For me that was the selling point to being part of a union. You know what, I wasn't being treated any differently in the workplace, because now I was as equal as anybody else in there. For me that was the selling point to a union. But it's followed through in my life too as well. A union has given me the opportunity not to be treated different in the workplace. A union has given me the opportunity and developed me to be strong within my community. It's tough being a black person growing up or going to school in an all-white community. It's not an easy task. Things certainly have changed over the last 40 years where you've seen much more influx of people of colour and off different backgrounds. You see more Aboriginal people working and living in the communities. So it's much different. But I think truly for me the union has been a good saving grace of respecting who I am and respecting my rights and other workers of different ethnicities.

Q: How did growing up in a white neighbourhood influence where you are today?

DJ: Well it didn’t influence me. Quite honestly, I grew up not having a lot of friends in a community where you would go out and play with kids but you were never invited to their birthday parties, you were never invited over to spend the night. It wasn’t until I actually moved to junior high school where there was a larger group of people. Actually my true friend, I met a girl when I was in grade 7 who was Metis and she became my friend. What’s quite interesting is I’m here in Alberta and I stopped before coming to Jasper to see her. I hadn’t seen her in 26 years and it was just like yesterday. It was like the years haven’t gone by. But it really wasn’t until junior high school where I actually developed friends, because it was not easy. It’s really hard to be ostracized because you are of a different colour.

Q: Who were your early influences?

DJ: I’m not one to idolize people but I certainly would say that there are a couple of influences in my life. I would say that Martin Luther King and Malcolm X have always influenced my younger years of life, but truly it has been my family that have made me who I am. My grandfather was a storyteller; so he would talk about why he came to Canada and how it was so much different from the United States. I once travelled when I was 17 to Florida, Alabama and Mississippi and truly got a good clear understanding of why my family left the States. Not that the U.S. is a bad place to live but certainly the injustices of the south, you can certainly understand why the struggle. And there’s racism here in Canada and discrimination, but I always found that for me what I saw as an unfairness is what is happening to the Aboriginal people. I think that’s what drew me to my girlfriend those many years ago was because she was being treated just as differently as I was because she was Metis, so that sort of drew us. When you talk about influences in my life, there have been many influences. But as I say, my grandparents probably the most because they always taught me to stand up and be strong, and even though things look tough and difficult they could get worse, but there’s always that opportunity for it to get better. One of the other things I’d like to say is that in the union movement the people that have influenced my life. I come out of Manitoba;

one of the major influences was Dick Martin from the United Steelworkers. But within my own local there were maybe four or five people who have played a major role. Lorraine Sigurdson out of CUPE Manitoba and Sandra Oakley, Murray Craddock – these were people that, we didn't have women's committees in those days and they just sort of took you under their wing and just carried you along.

Q: What were the challenges your family face that made them come here, and what trials did they face once they arrived?

DJ: As I said, my grandfather was a storyteller. My grandfather always talked about why they left the United States, and they were actually in a very small community called Palestine, Texas. The major industry in that town was cotton, so they picked cotton for a living, so they were sharecroppers. My great- grandfather wanted to leave the States because they didn't want to pick cotton anymore. So that was the major key thing for them, that even though emancipation had happened, they still weren't free, they were still doing the same old same old. They lived in a community of a couple of hundred people whose all last name was Jamerson: it was actually Jamieson. What it was is that slaves took on their owners' last name because they didn't have one because all of that had been lost to them. So my grandfather, my great-grandfather, saw this as an opportunity to truly be free, to come to Canada, so that's why they did. They came to Canada by train to the border and then by horse and wagon to Athabasca and to Maidstone. My great-grandmother, who's gone now, talks about going to Maidstone. I just drove through there coming here. But it was a place of rocks. There was no settlement; there was very little there. Athabasca was not much different. My uncle now has a horse farm in Athabasca and the old homestead is still there. We do have the old homestead in the family still from North Battleford actually, in between Maidstone and North Battleford. So we still own that land, it's still within the family on both sides. Certainly my mother, who grew up during the depression, talks about the influence. They were in a larger black community so they all did go to school together. I don't think it was any different from any of the Ukrainian families or what have you who came to Canada – walking to school in the wintertime and horse and buggies and stuff like that.

But there were some very similar parallels for me. There might be a set of cousins of 10 or 12 that went to school, but the word “nigger” was quite common, as it was for me from grade 1 to high school. So there were some parallels. The struggles that my parents went through I think were no different than a lot of poor whites did during the depression. If anything, it was sometimes easier for them to find work because they understood that they had to work no matter what in order to put food on the table. For many white people it was a little more difficult because they had a little bit more so didn’t understand that struggle and the ability to persevere. As a personal note, for me my personal experiences in going to school, my brother was five years older than me so I always kept missing him. But when I was young it was not unusual to be called a “nigger” every day or to be blamed for things that I didn’t do, because it was just easier to put it onto me. In grades 1 through 3 that wasn’t quite as bad as it was from 4 to 6, because then people start to develop and their sense of being a little more nasty or more evil comes through. I guess in my 6th grade I had an encounter with a fellow where I chased him down, actually literally ran him down to the high school, because the elementary school and the junior high school were right beside each other, and I chased him down and was putting the boots to him. Oh geez, I can’t believe I did that. But anyway, a teacher came out of the high school and picked us both up by the throats of our necks and carried us into the school. My brother was coming out of the school and he literally grabbed the teacher’s arm and said, that’s my sister, put her down now. And he did. So I went into the junior high principal’s office and then I was sent back to the elementary school and the teacher. My brother has already gone home by now. So we’re sitting in the principal’s office and he said to me, you know Debbie, I’ve had the odd troubles with you but never to the extent that I might want to have to give you the strap. I looked at him and said, you’re not about to give me the strap. I’m 12 years old. He’s saying, no I can give you the strap. I said, no I’ll tell you what, I’ll get up, I’ll walk out of this school, and I will not come back. There are only two people who are able to strap me or discipline me, and that’s my mother and my father, and you don’t have that right. My mother was the type of woman, my mother actually phoned the school and was on the phone to the principal and said, you send my daughter home now. And she phoned the superintendent of the school.

Q: Can you talk more about your grandfather organizing the railroad workers?

DJ: I can tell you a bit. Certainly the real historian in the family is my brother. It's my understanding from my grandfather that the sleeping car and porters were being treated really badly both by CN and by CP as workers on the railway – lots of discrimination, pay was not great. There was a movement in eastern Canada to actually organize, which started to move towards signing up members and getting them organized. At that time they weren't able to join one of the other unions because there weren't a lot of black people. So they wanted some cohesiveness of all the workers together. It was a struggle and I think it was a three or four year process to actually get them organized and recognized as a union organization. But again, I'm not really the historian on that piece.

Q: What year was that?

DJ: It was in the 1950s, after World War II. I wasn't born, but certainly the history of my grandfather and his stories and talking about unions. You have to remember too, we went to an all-black church. Everybody who was a relative was a porter and worked on the railway, and that's just the way it was. The railway was the best paying job for anybody who was black in the '50s and the '60s, and it's still a great paying job. But at one point in time that was the majority of the sleeping car workers and the porters were all black at one time. You didn't see somebody white doing that type of work, working in the dining car. It was that subservient type of role for them.

Q: Could you expand on how you were influenced by Martin Luther King and Malcolm X?

DJ: That influence certainly was because there was such a movement in the United States. Although I'm Canadian-born, it was the roots there. We had just gotten a TV so you're seeing this news and you're seeing a family who would come to visit and they

would just talk about Martin Luther King and just the whole black movement in the United States, still fighting for freedom. Even my grandfather would talk a lot about Martin Luther King and Malcolm X but more so about Martin Luther King just in the way they were still struggling for freedom. Even though slavery had been ended, black people in the United States were still not free. In Canada there was so much more freedom and I think the word would be better quality of life living in Canada than in the States. I can remember the day that Martin Luther King was shot. Actually I was getting ready to go to school, and this coming on the news, and just starting to cry. He was such an inspiration for being yourself, and I think that more than anything is the influence. Malcolm X for me was that rebel inside of me, that person who wanted to, as I was talking about the story of punching the kid and being grabbed. That was the rebel inside of me and that's why I respected him, because sometimes people push you to the point that violence does happen. It's not that you want it to happen, but sometimes there's that rebel in you where things aren't moving fast enough, things aren't changing fast enough. That too happens in the labour movement. Sometimes we want things to move much more quickly than we do. Not that we're violent as a labour movement, but there's those rebels in us and sometimes that little rebel side of me, the real left of left, comes out. I call those my Malcolm X kind of moments.

Q: How did you become involved in the union?

DJ: As I said, at 16 I was sold on a union. I always say I cut my teeth as a CUPE member, eight years as a healthcare aide, and I certainly learned a whole host of things. I learned how not to be aggressive to be assertive. I had a lot of my early education and training working with CUPE. My philosophy was that if a union could put me on equal footing with everybody else in my local, then that was a good thing and that I wanted to learn more about it. So I in the early '70s was quite involved in CUPE as a steward and always took on the position of secretary because I thought that was a really good way to learn parliamentary procedure and stuff like that. So I was always involved. Like I say, there were a group of women mostly, one man but mostly young women, who just enveloped me and I think we all enveloped each other, and just

started to learn about becoming more involved and being more active within the labour movement. At that time in the early '70s and even before that there were way many men running for executive positions and holding those positions. You didn't see a lot of women in those positions. I think they call it the old boys' club; they might still call it the old boys' club, depends on what union you're coming from. So it felt like a second home, the labour movement for me. When I left my job in 1980 and became re-involved in 1985, I was working for the Government of Manitoba as a homecare attendant and we were non-unionized. I wasn't there very long and I started to talk to some people. So, of course, we talked about getting unionized. We had no benefits, no pension plan, no nothing, and we had no regular hours of work. So I worked in a small unit at that time of 45 people – there were eight women and the rest were all guys. So we talked about getting involved and getting a union, so we went out and did some hunting. So we decided to go with the Manitoba Government and General Employees Union, and then we had our first union meeting. All the boys ran for all the positions and they were all elected. Actually they let one sister become the secretary, because they thought that was a really good position for her. So that was in 1986. In 1987 the Howard Pawley NDP government was in some trouble, and in 1988 we were organizing. It took us two years to organize. What ended up happening is the Howard Pawley government was going to fall in defeat and what they ended up doing was giving us an automatic certification. We were organizing in the city of Winnipeg; they gave us an automatic certification for the province of Manitoba. So as opposed to the 1,000 workers we ended up with, about 2,500 workers across the province, automatic certification. And they negotiated a collective agreement within a two-month period, where you saw some major gains: a pension plan, dental benefit, all the stuff that we didn't have.

Q: Can you recall some of your Malcolm X moments?

DJ: As I was saying, we became unionized. I guess I'll try to do some parallels as I tell the story. As an MGEU member what I found really frustrating is that we were this huge massive group of people who became organized right across the province, and they didn't know how to deal with us. We ended up with a staff rep who was a steelworker.

Steve was just this absolutely wonderful polar bear kind of guy, soft and fluffy on the outside and like steel on the inside. We had a local executive that just kind of didn't--sort of males who just didn't get it. If you looked at the component, it was probably at that time 75 percent women and 25 percent male, and we were very broad in our culture. It was women's work for the most part; lots of people think that healthcare is women's work. So I fought some battles. What we ended up doing is in 1996 we had the government of the day, which is now Conservative, decide that they were going to privatize the homecare program across the province. What they decided they were going to do was they sent us to these mass meetings. I actually happened to be off on a union secondment and I was doing what we called our Yes We Can Campaign to develop workers and pride because they wanted to go for a strike vote for the civil service. So I'm off, and this announcement comes out. So I get sent off to this meeting with government officials and nurses and doctors, and they're trying to explain what they're doing. The employer is explaining how they're going to give pink slips or layoff slips to the nurses and the social workers and the case coordinators in the program and the LPNs in the program. But when it came to the homecare attendants, they were just going to move us over from the public sector right over to the private sector. So they were giving us no choice. Well I think I had one of my Malcolm X moments because I distinctly remember putting my hand up and being recognized to say something. A man walked over with a mike and I looked at him and said, I don't need no mike, I'll tell you now, everybody's gonna hear me. You are giving everybody else a choice but you're telling the people who are on the front lines who provide the service that they have no choice. I can go over to the private sector and work for some private company, and you give me no choice but everybody else has a choice? I don't think so. So that was my Malcolm X moment. Not that I lost it, because I had learned assertiveness training through the labour movement. But I was angry, I was absolutely furious, that a government could try to treat people like a commodity. I was no commodity and the people that I worked with were no commodity. So ensuingly what we ended up doing was taking out 2,500 workers across the province of Manitoba out on strike for almost six weeks – not for better pay, not for wages, but all on the issue of privatization. We were successful. I mean you always have to cut a deal, so what we did was we gave

them 25 percent in the City of Winnipeg only on a trail basis. I had a few Malcolm moments during that time in that negotiating period only because I truly believed that we could push the government back enough so we really didn't have to give them anything. So accepting that 25 percent was really hard for me. What's really interesting is we gave them 18 months and within six months they had blown all the money in the private sector and it fell apart in 12, and the report that they did in 18 months they buried and we actually had to go through the Freedom of Information to actually get the report, because they tried to bury it. I've had some of those but I think those experiences, I think my Martin Luther King moments again as inspiration, is that I'm really pleased the Manitoba Government Employees Union is a membership of about 30,000 members. I can truly say that I have worked really hard in that organization. I became the first woman of colour to become a fourth vice-president of the organization, the first woman of colour to go on staff. Those are my inspiration moments and I believe they're inspiration for other people of colour. I was never elected because I was a person of colour or took on that position. I was elected on the floor of convention because of my true convictions of being a trade unionist. So those are my inspirational moments, but it's the hard work and the support of other trade unionists put me there.

Q: What is your role in the labour movement, and what challenges lie ahead for the labour movement?

DJ: I think my role in the labour movement now is the ability to mentor people. That's what I see myself doing for the rest of my career in the labour movement. I don't want to become an elected official. I really am truly happy in the role that I do – educating, training, doing political action, getting people involved, putting the links together between labour and the community. The struggles that we're facing now are really huge. We're finding ourselves in a position where people are tired and they don't want to do anything, and yet we have not done enough to inspire our youth to participate. But not only have we not done enough to inspire our youth to participate, we haven't done enough to inspire our workers of colour and our aboriginal people to participate in the labour movement. You know what, that's the changing face of Canada. Canada's face

changed in the early 1900s and again after the Second World War where we saw an influx of people moving into Canada, the majority of them being white. Canada is a melting pot; it’s a huge melting pot. We have so much room and we have so much opportunity for people to come to our country, but first we need to treat and embrace our Aboriginal people and have them participating in the labour movement. We have to learn to understand their issues and then we need to also embrace our people of colour, because that is our future. The way our governments are working today, if we don’t start to do that then we will find ourselves taking humongous steps backwards.

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