

## Susan Parcels

SP: My name is Susan Parcels. I'm Susan Parcels. . . .

I'm Susan Parcels. At this point, since '97, I've worked in private practice as an RN doing counseling and group psychotherapy, contracted to DTHR health region [David Thompson Health Region] to do some mental health counseling as well as contracted by a private company that does domestic violence treatment programming. So that's my job now.

Q: Tell us about your background.

SP: From 1977 to 1980 I went to the Foothills School of Nursing. Graduated in 1980 and my first job was on intensive care and rehab neural on unit 92. I fell in love with that job but I had to move back to Red Deer for personal reasons, so I was only there a year. When I arrived in Red Deer, which is home to me, there was about 23 positions posted for a new unit, a psychiatric unit that was opening. I had done psychiatry in my nurses training and enjoyed it, so I applied and got a job there in 1981. In 1984 I had been working psychiatry for a few years spotting off the head nurse when they were away. I got an acting unit coordinator position at the time, because there was a sick leave. I'd enjoyed doing that out of scope stuff, so I took that position. In '85 I was still in that position but I was going on maternity leave with my first child, our first child, a son. At that time in August when I left on maternity leave the idea was that we only had six months at that time, six months maternity leave, and that I would come back into that position. But in December of '85 the hospital deleted those positions through organizational restructuring to call them something entirely different. When I came back, I came back the following year as an RN, and I decided to go back to some of the old skills, and I worked ICU. ICU for a little while, and then the management structure asked me again if I would step into a management role as nursing care coordinator on nightshift. So I did full time nights for several months, 7 on and 7 off. Again, a few months into it, they deleted those positions through organizational restructuring. At one

point they came to me and said, do you think other people could do this job that you do at night, that the nursing care coordinators do on shift? I said, there isn't any nurse in this hospital that couldn't do this job, I said. So yeah, they're just resources for each other. I run around from unit to unit to help where I can, and talk to doctors that need to be spoken to, and call in OR staff in the middle of the night. I said, there isn't anyone else who couldn't do that if they were given the time to do it. So shortly after that they deleted me, all of us, through organizational restructuring. The handful of other nursing care coordinators weren't very pleased with me I don't think. So I started back on the treadmill of deciding where I was going to work. When I came back after that, I went casual. I said, I'll just work everywhere. So I worked in medicine and surgery and some ICU and some psych again, on a casual basis, until a position became available in psychiatry, and I took it. Then a couple of years later there I was, I was pregnant again in 1989 with Rachel. When I had gone off on leave with Paul in '85, there was no discussion about you know, you need to go and prepay 100% of your premiums. I guess I just took it, with my first pregnancy. I didn't know that I was actually getting something by being out of scope, something special, and having all of these premiums paid. I never put out any money, prepaid any money for my premiums, and they continued to cover me during the entire time that I was on that leave. So when I was pregnant with Rachel and I went down to human resources and said, I need to make some arrangements for my [benefits], because I covered the benefits for all of my family. My husband was working but he was in a non-union position, and he was also traveling back and forth to U of C four days a week to do his BA. So I was covering our benefits. There was our son and the two of us that were covered in those benefits. When I went in to human resources and said, yeah I need to make arrangements for my coverage to continue while I'm off for the next six months, they said, okay you'll need to prepay \$800 and some-odd dollars. I said, why, how does that work? I didn't do this before, this wasn't part of the plan. I was shocked. I said, in fact, I said I have to have coverage because I am the sole provider for our benefits for our family. They said, well you need to prepay 100% of the premiums before you leave. This was probably less than six weeks before my due date. I said, can I make arrangements to come in every month and pay you? Absolutely not, absolutely not. I couldn't even get a payment plan, which I guess in the long run is a good thing, because it did do some good

stuff for labour law. So what did I do? I went home and said to my husband, we have to come up with over \$800 in the next few weeks, extra. He said, why? When I told him he said, you know, you should really speak to the human rights commission about that, because that is sexual discrimination. I said, how do you know that, how do you put that together? He said, well at the time he was doing a, what do you call it, constitutional law course at the U of C. His professor was Ted Morton. Ted Morton had been on talking about the *Brooks v. Safeway* decision in Manitoba at that time. So my husband was way ahead of this as far as understanding how this fit with that. He said, you should consider it. He wasn't pushy about it. He said, you'll make some waves. We could probably find our \$800 but he says, it's not right. I said, no, when I walked into the office and heard that news, there's just some things that hit you as not right. It's not right, what you're asking isn't right. He said, there's very few people that get the opportunity to make a change, where all the stars align at once. You should take advantage of it. He went off to work and to school. I made a phone call to the human rights commission in Calgary and I said, this is the situation and I believe it's pertinent and relevant because of the *Brooks v. Safeway* decision. I hung up and within half an hour they called me back and wanted me to come and start the process. So I headed down to Calgary and filled out the forms. I guess I was a little naïve. I didn't know exactly how this would unfold for me. I thought it was just fairly straightforward. Naivety is good, because if you knew how difficult this was I don't think you'd go into it, I don't think you would, it took years. The inquiries and going to these inquiries and listening to people talk about you like you are a number. The actuary is getting up and talking about half the population like they're just vaginas and uteruses. But it's like, wait a minute, you chose this. Motherhood is a choice, right? So we tried to go down, in the inquiry they tried to go down that road of the risk associated with ensuring this half of the population in a special way. Well yeah. Your choice is that you don't have to recognize women or provide healthcare for women around pregnancy or provide labour adjustments for women. That's a choice, but it doesn't help your society very much. I had this whole feeling that it was just wrong, something is wrong. So I did, I challenged it, absolutely. But I didn't challenge it alone. There were so many good people that were just right behind me. I have to say, UNA was one of them. They were named in the claim, right? It was because the collective agreement was gender biased, was sexually

discriminatory. So they were named, but they never acted like they were on the opposite side of my case, ever.

Q: How did they get involved?

SP: I was involved with the union on the unit level. I always had been, even when I was... they wouldn't want to hear this even, when I was out of scope. But I was pro union, so when I came back into scope I always had connections with the union. The union reps at that time were very good friends of mine. I had their support always, and the regional support always. And it was really good. There was no worries about any repercussions. I didn't think there would be. But I supposed if they want to get rid of anyone it would've been me, because I guess I kind of ticked them off a bit. It was like a lot of work having me around. It was a huge issue for the hospital, because they were named. It was a huge issue for Alberta Hospital Association, because they were named. As for the union, they didn't see it as a huge issue. They saw it as a huge opportunity and they were onboard from the get-go, along with the human rights commission and the lawyers for them. Having said that about how difficult the inquiries were, because it's so impersonal. It's about you but they're talking about you like you're just a piece of meat, a number and a piece of meat. But they did have one fellow who came, an epidemiologist who came to testify, who actually redeemed the entire process for me. He talked about childbirth and made it a very human experience. He talked about the metabolic insult. So often, and I'm not complaining about my labour or delivery, I think that it was the same as anybody else's, it really hurt. But he put it in context, where yes we have... The one said, wanted to make childbirth a natural process that occurs and it shouldn't have any special considerations for it, and everybody in the world is doing it, and there's women in Africa squatting in the cornfields having their babies and then they go right back to work. They wanted to make it sound like it was a natural process for a woman and that we shouldn't have special considerations just because they're in the workforce. But on his side, he talked about infant and maternal mortality rates in those countries, and how we are supposed to be, we're supposed to not be a third world country and we're supposed to have more leadership around those issues of labour laws and stuff like that. And he talked

about the metabolic insult, what actually happens during childbirth and post-childbirth. He gave a huge credibility to having a period of time after childbirth where you should receive the same benefits as anyone going on sick leave or short term disability or any type of leave I guess. I went off on maternity leave once before and had all my benefits covered, and I was a woman then. So why are we treating the people that are working under our collective agreement less?

Q: How did you file the complaint? Did you go to Calgary?

SP: Yeah, it was just a normal part of my day I guess. During my pregnancy I had developed carpal tunnel syndrome. Dr. Bredo couldn't do anything about it until after I had delivered. He tried twice to inject cortisone into my wrist. The first time it worked, the second time it didn't. I had said to him, I need to drive to Calgary to the Human Rights Commission to do a complaint. I said, and I have a standard and I have a four year old boy, so I need to be able to drive with this hand. So he said, well come into emergency in the morning and I'll put some cortisone in it again and we'll see if that helps. So with the freezing and the cortisone and Paul in tow, I got into the Hyundai and drove down to Calgary. We made a picnic of it. I was going to take him to the zoo after, so we packed a picnic and drove down to Calgary. I knew Calgary, because I had trained there, so I had a pretty good idea of where the Human Rights Commission was. I felt a little intimidated by the whole process, but I wasn't going to let my husband see that. I wasn't, because I thought, yes the stars are aligned Jim, and I must do this. I must go forward and do the right thing. If you're not scared, neither am I. But it was intimidating. There was lawyers and legal stuff, and what was my employer going to say? How were they going to hit them with this? I still had a job. Thank goodness I was in scope at this point, because I found out all too well that being out of scope, all they have to do is delete you through organizational restructuring. They shouldn't even call that a term, really. They want rid of you, they get rid of you. They just change the name of the job. It's like, oops, you don't qualify anymore. But yeah, so I thought, am I going to be deleted somehow? Because I'd had that twice before. I hadn't even asked anybody. I hadn't even involved the union at this point. I hadn't talked to anybody. I just got in my car and went

to the Human Rights Commission, signed it. But then all of the fear came in. What are they going to say? Are they going to even talk to me? Are they going to be mad at me? Because this is going to cause a lot of grief for them.

Q: What happened after you filed the complaint?

SP: Immediately I heard back from the union. Absolutely we're onboard, absolutely. I had to meet with a lawyer from the Human Rights Commission, I wish I could remember his name, nice man. So there was lots of trips to make. Then there was things like affidavits and you had to describe what happened and approximately what month they asked you about when you were going on your maternity leave. In a setting like nursing where we're friends, we are, like we've kind of nursed together for a long time. The head nurse at that point was like a friend. I had to go and say, yeah in our conversation at coffee she asked me in February of '89 when I was going to be taking maternity leave. It was an innocent context in this coffee conversation, but it wasn't an innocent context because it was evidence of how this would proceed. When do we ask people when they're going to go on maternity leave, and how do we incorporate that knowledge into staffing? It all went down the road to prove a case. So I thought that these people were going to be upset with me, but they weren't. They were not upset with me. I think they were a little bit wary of me, because it's almost like, oh don't touch her because she's going to explode any minute. There's lots of bad karma around this girl. I think there was a lot of people not knowing quite how to take me. But I just carried on. I had a job, I had a family, and the legal stuff was left to the people who could handle it. When they needed me I would go. I didn't want to miss any of the inquiries, the dates, and I didn't want to miss the appeal. Even though at that point who I was, was irrelevant. The process had already taken over. But I didn't want to miss it, because it meant that much.

Q: Did you file the complaint and then go on maternity leave?

SP: I refused to go on maternity leave. I did not go on maternity leave. I guess I did in reality. But what happened was – my daughter's going to kill me for saying this, she's so

funny – my husband had at that point started a business and he was doing domestic violence treatment programming. He had actually pounded the pavement to try and get, when we didn't have provincial funding he was doing it in the early '80s, going to Rotary clubs and interest groups that would give some money for men's treatment programs or for victims groups. So he was doing that as well as going to school in Calgary, and then coming home and working at doing groups in the evening. He... okay tell me where I was going. Where was I going with this? Anyway, he gets invited to the 5<sup>th</sup> annual congress in victimology in Acapulco to present. It's the same day as my due date. Paul was two weeks late and they had to induce me. So I said, what are the chances that Rachel is going to be born – well this baby, we didn't know it was a girl – was going to be born before you get back? There's no chance. There's not even a twitch. She's not coming until you get back. I'd never experienced it without having to be on a drip, right? So he says, are you sure? I said, yeah, it's only five days. You go and present; it's a big thing for your business, go. He gets on the plane with his colleague and takes off to Acapulco. I had not said when I was leaving on maternity leave. So my due date is Friday and he leaves the Friday before, no he leaves on Monday. Monday I'm too sick to go. I'm five days away from my due date. I did not phone in maternity leave, I phoned in I can't get out of bed, my feet are this big. Something is, I can't do it today, I just can't do it. I had sick time in my sick bank. So I said, it's only one day, I'm phoning in sick. Okay. So my last day I was sick. So I guess I went off maternity leave sometimes after that. She was born on Friday.

Q: What's her birthday?

SP: July 27<sup>th</sup>. She'll be 21 this July 27<sup>th</sup>. She's proud to be that baby, and she is very pro feminist. She was raised in a family, even her father, my husband is the one who has really worked hard over the entire time that I've known him, to further women's rights and try to get rid of gender bias and the violence and abuse that's associated with that. She is definitely her parents' child.

Q: So you were away for how long?

SP: We only had six months off, six months maternity leave. Or was it 10 months? I think we got to add four months for something. I think it was 10 months. She was born the end of July, so August... There was so much going on. Well I took the EI benefits, whatever we were entitled to at that time and I came back to psychiatry. That was when, no I was working full time then. When I came back from having Rachel I needed to have a .6 position. So I found someone to split with and I came back and changed to a part time position, but stayed on psychiatry.

Q: Were you involved in the investigation process while you were away?

SP: Oh yeah. From the complaint perspective, that's a good question. After I had her, she was a horrible baby. She would tell you that she wasn't, but she wouldn't know. She was a horrible, she had colic. From the time she was born until she was 10 weeks old, she slept no more than an hour and a half at a time. By the time she was 10 weeks old I said, that's it for breastfeeding, put her on goat's milk or whatever we can do. It helped, really. Honestly, I didn't even know my own name the first three months. So if there was anything happening, I deferred to Andy Leblanc, who was the union, at the local level, who was the president at that time. He kept me abreast of everything that was happening. But after that, when we started the process of the inquiry, absolutely I was involved. It's hard to remember exactly. Most of it was discussions around chronological order of things happening, mostly to support me. The legal matters were now in the hands of the lawyers. There was nothing more, other than to ask me questions. They wanted me to be there, they wanted to make sure they were getting the information correct with the chronological order of things, with what people had said to me. That was the part that was hard for me. It was like, yeah they said this but they weren't saying it to be mean. They were only asking out of the way we've always done it. We've always done it this way, as far as going on maternity leave and replacing people and doing maternity leave benefits. Even the lady in human resources, the one that said no you can't, it was her job. Lynette Hood, it was her job to say no. It's the way she'd always done it; she was told to

do it that way. So when they were asking me to give almost testimony as to what these people had said, it felt strange. It felt like I was pointing a finger at them.

Q: So this was in the hearing?

SP: No, not in the inquiry, it was behind closed doors. It wasn't in front of the inquiry.

Q: So this was the investigation?

SP: Yes, that was the investigation stage. I sat at the back of the room in the hearings, because I felt strange about it. Like I said, I didn't want to be front row center. I wanted the process to continue without me being some sort of figurehead for it. It feels awkward when something is about you and it's that controversial. I come from rural central Alberta and I was raised in a very traditional community setting. I had a great upbringing. I loved my upbringing, nothing wrong with it, it was lovely. But it didn't well prepare me for the world of working women outside of that community, it didn't. I think when I was 17 I felt like, okay well you're either going to get married to a farmer or you're going to go and be a teacher or a nurse. That's the traditional way that women in the rural community looked for the next step in their life. Am I going to be a wife and a mother or am I going to be a nurse or a teacher? You didn't often get both. So at 17 I was catapulted. It was like, okay, I've been a candy striper for three years, I guess this means I go to nursing. So Calgary it was. I was very ill prepared for Calgary at 17, and the nurses' residence and three years of looking after myself, most of which I did very poorly at. But I wasn't alone. I was there with probably 300 other nursing students. Some of them did well at it, but some of them... I found it a real culture shock. So when I came back to this community and I had made this noise with the Human Rights Commission... My family are all good people and they're all very loving and nurturing. But when this happened there was a little bit of an outcry. It was like, what is she doing? What is she doing? She's costing us more money. Is she really taking our government to court? They couldn't believe it. I don't think they were talking about it at the curling club or at the Co-op. No, that's not our granddaughter or our niece, that's not our cousin. Because it really did play with their

traditional beliefs. They had to get their head around this. It wasn't what they'd been raised... they're Social Credits from way back. My grandfathers, my grandparents and my parents were Social Credit. You don't do this. You don't take your government to court and change things like this.

Q: Did they come to understand it?

SP: They came around to understand that they couldn't control Susan. I was passionate about certain things and I believed in certain things. Lots of the stuff is about women's rights and women's issues, and I'm still doing it. It think that more than coming around to understand it, they got used to it. I think that's how we change as a society, how we evolve. Some people will get it and start to understand it and change their perspective on it, and the rest of us, we do become dinosaurs in our beliefs a little bit. As we maybe, I'm not saying everybody does, but those who will be dinosaurs in their beliefs, they'll be dragged along to change. It'll be change whether they like it or not. My family still loves me, so that was never an issue. It was just a bit of, oh my god, she's not, she's not. In that perspective, I didn't have a huge amount of that emotional support in my environment, other than at work and with the union. But not in my immediate surroundings. I had my husband, but not a lot of other people were going, good for you Susan. I think I got a letter from one lady down east, a complete stranger. She sent me a card and said, thank you so much for doing this. Yeah, amazing. And she sent me a magazine, a labour magazine and the heading was, what about baby? There was a caricature of me pregnant on the cover of it. So there are strangers in this world that go, that are as passionate as I was about it, and want to support me. And they did and I was entirely grateful and happy that some people were responding that way. But because of where I come from and the lack of understanding around those issues, I watched Lloyd Robertson on The National doing the piece on me, I watched it like this, with nobody in the room. Nobody was there, I didn't want anyone around when I watched it. It aired that night and I couldn't even open my eyes to see it. I couldn't. I felt so exposed by it. People don't understand, this is rural Alberta. You're putting me, I'm on the National, they're all going to see me and they're going to know who I am and they're going to think I've done a really bad thing.

Q: Was that when the hearing was held?

SP: No, it was either directly after the inquiry, it must have been directly after the inquiry, because the appeal takes a while. All the fervour dies down in between the inquiry, and then there was a hole, everybody was up in arms about it and coverage was great and then there's nothing. Then the appeal is launched and it takes a while for that appeal. Then when the appeal came out everybody was like, oh my god, this is what's happened. Then it dies down and then the Supreme Court decision. Again after it, it was just like, after the Supreme Court decision, that one was like, okay it's done so stop it.

Then it dies down and then the Supreme Court decision. Again after it, it was just like, after the Supreme Court decision, that one was like, okay it's done so stop it. [Ed. note: the appeal was to the Court of Queen's Bench, not to the Supreme Court.] We can't argue about this anymore, it just has to happen. But the media coverage for The National I believe was after the inquiry. I believe that even the media didn't really understand what it was about. They didn't quite understand how this was going to affect labour. They didn't understand why it was such a big deal, so they kept asking me. It was just sound bites, you only have like 30 seconds and that's all they're going to show. So what are the chances that you're going to get people nationally to understand what this decision is really about? In essence, all I could say was, well it's what's best for working women, their families, their children, and society in general, 30 seconds, that's it.

Q: Were you brought in for the investigations?

SP: Yes. There was many trips, many trips to Edmonton, because most of it happened in Edmonton. I remember coming up to the UNA offices, and there were quite a few trips. I met their lawyers and PR or human resource people. There was a boardroom full of people. They were all very nice. And Heather, is she still the president? I saw her getting on the elevators. That's who that was. They were all very kind of good. It was quite a few trips to Edmonton, and lots of times Jim couldn't bring me because he was going the

other way to Calgary. Sometimes the union people in Red Deer would bring me, because they would always come when we were coming to the meetings. They'd always be there. As far as the content of the investigation, it was like my part in it was very small. My part in it was very small. Just tell me the chronological events of what happened, then proving, what is the strategy. It was a lot of strategy around how we incorporate this then into our case for with the Human Rights Commission, because it was collaborative. The Human Rights Commission were working, you can't say working with UNA because they were part of the named in the suit, but it was parallel. When I would go to the meetings at the Human Rights Commission it was along the same line as going to UNA. We're on the same side, we are looking at the same principles, we are trying to prove the same case. It was mostly about process. It was mostly about how do we fit this together, and then orchestrating meetings and organizing dates. I just was there when they told me to be there.

Q: What was the hearing like?

SP: Scary, it was really scary. I said I sat at the back of the room with my husband. He would always come with me. We had to make arrangements for childcare on those days. Sometimes we stayed overnight because sometimes it was two days in a row. It was odd, to say the least. They would be up there, the opposite side, the actuaries, the insurance companies, Alberta Hospital Association's lawyers and their human resource people, putting forward all the reasons why this would be too big a burden. Why this, not just this, but how this woman's claim would be too big a burden on the government. I think that's where my family and the community saw it at that point, it's going to be a huge burden on our society to do this. They weren't thinking any differently than the Alberta government was thinking at that time. So everywhere you went you were kind of lambasted with, you're a burden, you're just a big burden. What made you think of this? So the hearings were disheartening, for the most part, disheartening that people would discount or see half our population and childbirth as such a huge burden. And like I said, the only redeeming quality was that the doctor from the World Health Organization, the epidemiologist, took the stand to explain how things really were. That for me was very

reassuring. But that was late in the day, late in the inquiry. I don't remember how long the inquiry took, but I have binders like this of the inquiry, the hearings, and everything that was said. I wanted to keep that. I wanted to know that this really happened.

Q: Did you testify at the hearing?

SP: No, I didn't get, I was not required to. I believe at one point I was asked [by] the lawyers. I really didn't want to. Because my story is no different than any other woman who is going off on maternity leave. I didn't want it to be about me. I really didn't feel that it was fair on principle. It's not just not fair to me. I wasn't suing for any compensation. In fact, they had paid my, after all of this started and I didn't have the \$800 for them, they sent me a letter saying that they had paid 100% of my premiums for my entire maternity leave, without prejudice, meaning that if I was found, if they were found guilty of this infraction or innocent, either way they wouldn't be liable. They're not paying because they think they're guilty. I think they just paid because the lawyer said they should cover their ass. So I wanted it to be a process about women going on maternity leave who are in the workforce, covered by a collective agreement that treats other people way differently than it does them. When they talked about me testifying at the hearing, I didn't want to. I think that they were able to make it more of a principle-oriented case. Honestly I think the case was so strong that they would've had a hard time not saying that we'd won. I think that if it had gone to the Supreme Court, I think that nobody wanted to make the decision. That was what it was. Nobody wants to set the precedent. Alberta Hospital Association, oh no we can't do this, we don't want to set this precedent. So we're going to appeal it and then the court of appeal will be responsible for saying yes or no. So it's never in the hands of anything other than the justice system. Then it goes to the Supreme Court [ed. note: the appeal was to the Court of Queen's Bench] and I honestly believe there's no way they could find any other decision than what they did. I never believed that they could.

Q: What was your reaction when the decision came down?

SP: I remember seeing Sheila Greckol there standing in front, doing it, doing the arguing in the Supreme Court [ed. note: Court of Queen's Bench]. I thought, oh, isn't she wonderful, she's wonderful. I wonder if she's scared? I was scared at the hearings and I wasn't even testifying.

Q: So this was Sheila at the board of inquiry?

SP: Was it Queen's Bench, that's where she was arguing? What was the Supreme Court, who argued for them, in front of the Supreme Court?

Q: The board of inquiry, Anne de Villars, gave her decision, then the Alberta Hospital Association appealed on a narrow issue, which was the right to top up, and it went to Queens Bench, then it ended.

SP: It was done after Queens Bench. So Susan Brooks, when she took it, it went to the Supreme Court. The Supreme Court laid out a foundation. That foundation, the Court of Queen's, went to that decision to decide whether... because once the decision's made, they don't rule on anything like that again, the Supreme Court. They don't have to rule on anything like that again. So why, yeah.

... Yeah see, that was all foggy, but I did go to that one and that's where I saw her again. That's the one that did the caricature of me in the Edmonton something, a newspaper. The cameras weren't allowed in the courtroom. Edmonton Journal. So they did a caricature sketch of me. It was horrible, it was a terrible sketch. But anyway, because I went to the appeal as well and that's where I saw her arguing and I thought, oh yeah, she's good at this. But it was very, it's a foreign place for somebody who has no legal background, to sit in inquiries and to sit in appeals and to have the media calling. The Calgary Herald, I believe, they came and did a piece. That was kind of scary too, because no one really understood exactly what it meant. I think there's a clear understanding now, once that it's implemented and people see how it plays out, and it's not as terrifying or scary as they thought it was going to be. But I heard up until recently that there's still issues with the decision, with people implementing the decision. Is there still problems with, is there...

Doctors are now able to decide; your physician will say whether you're medically able now to go on to the maternity leave portion of your benefits. Is there problems with that?

Q: There has been debate about whether or not a doctor has to be involved each time. Do you remember that being an issue at the board of inquiry?

SP: Yes, we talked about the presumptive period, absolutely.

Q: Could you explain about that?

SP: Hearing what went on in the inquiry about the presumptive period? Well it was two sides arguing two sides of an issue. The one side was that women are going to take advantage of this. But that's the actuaries, because they work in numbers and risk and they work in insurance, so they want to lessen the amount that they're paying out. So yeah, that one side was, well what if it's like, what if it's a mental health issue, what if it's depression? How are we going to decide? These aren't the words they used but this is the tone - that women are going to take more because they say they're not fit to go back to work. Who's going to decide? It's like, wait a minute, really? I didn't buy that, but of course as actuaries and people who evaluate risk and save money, that's a huge thing for them. They want to have a definitive line. When this happens, you're ready to go back to work or you're ready to go back onto the maternity portion.

Q: So they were arguing for a presumptive period at the end of six weeks.

SP: Yes. They said, no we don't want any, we can't do it any further because who, it's almost like they're going to lie. Women will lie. They didn't say that but it's like the assumption was that women will take advantage of this somehow.

Q: So Anne de Villars said, no there's no presumptive period, it's up to each individual case.

SP: Yeah. It was quite amazing. The theory for insurance is that everybody's a liar. Am I wrong? Don't put that in then. The theory for insurance is that people will take more than they need, people are greedy. And in this case, women are greedy. I think that was the tone of it. I tell you, I could've testified to that. . . . I'm not complaining, and I know that women tell war stories about childbirth. I'm not complaining about it, but I do know that there is a period of time where a woman is not physically fit to return to her place of employment. For all those women who want to and the ones that had their baby in the morning and went back to work in the evening, good for you. But you are the exception and not the norm.

Q: Did you have any feedback from your colleagues at work?

SP: My union people. I have to say, on psychiatry I had a lot of union friends. They're very pro union. Those people were always supporting me, always. Like I said, that one woman from down east who sent me that lovely letter, she was very supportive. But no, other than that I think people were a little gun shy of the topic. It was a big deal and I didn't talk about it at work. You never know quite how to ally with someone who is considered a rebel or someone who paints outside the lines. You don't know. I think people were nice to me. I don't think they understood it. Even some of the people I worked with that weren't union people, I don't think they really understood what it meant for them. I think that a lot of them thought, oh great, they're going to take more deductions off is what they're going to do, because how are they going to make this happen without taking more money off my paycheck? So I think there was a little bit of that. But I work with educated people. They weren't vocal as far as not being on my side, or on the side of what's right. When something like this hits you, you can't argue against it. I think that even the people that argued against it knew it was a losing battle, like why am I up here saying this?

Q: Is there anything else you'd like to talk about?

SP: It was 21 years ago and I wish my memory was clearer about it, but it was really a stressful time. It was a stressful time for me. I'm glad I did it. Like I said, naivety is really important when you are going against a system. When you're trying to change a system, the idea of what's right and wrong is what drives you. A bureaucracy.

Q: What was important about this decision that people didn't understand?

SP: Yeah, equality. What's important about this decision is that you cannot treat half the population, who do have this wonderful ability to give birth, you can't treat them like that's something that they decided to do on their own, and it doesn't have anything to do with the workforce. You can't separate women from the workforce like that. Maybe years ago you could. But it's important to understand that when we fight for equality, equality doesn't mean that I'm going to treat you the same way as you. You're a woman and you're a man, I'm going to treat you exactly the same way. That's not equality. This was really important in recognizing that women have a special and, I don't know how else to put it, a unique ability and a unique metabolic function that needs to be taken into consideration when we are part of the workforce. I want more choice than just when I look back and look at the choices of my grandparents or great grandparents, raised in that environment where you're either a wife and mother or you're a nurse, and then you get to be a spinstress. I don't want that, I want both. I'm capable of doing both and recognize that I am in the workforce. I am a productive and important part of the workforce and I have babies. I can do all of it and I can do it well. So don't exclude me ... from the benefits package because I have this unique function.

Q: You were talking about the Calgary Herald coverage.

SP: One of the good things that came from some of the media coverage, the Calgary Herald did a story after one of the decisions, whether it was the inquiry or the appeal, I'm not sure. Shortly after that ran, this friend of when I was 13 years old I went to Camp Goldeye and I met my very, very best friend from when I was 13, 14, 15. She lived in Okotoks and we didn't see much of each other after that. But there we were 30 years old.

She worked for the Calgary Herald, she saw this article come up. She got my address and phone number, she called me. She has since moved to the Red Deer area and we're again best friends. She understood it. She got the decision. She was another one of those women who was catapulted into the workforce at 17. You kind of go in it a little naïve and then you realize there are a different set of rules for women, because of maternity leave. There's an accepted set of differences in the labor laws at that point, and the difference was that I just didn't accept it. It was wrong; I didn't accept it. At 30 years old you think you have a pretty good handle on what you know is right and wrong, and that you can stay the course to do what's right and not do what's wrong, and that you have the courage and solitude to persevere. I found it enormously stressful, enormously stressful, to be in that limelight and to have my name all over the place and to be that woman. I'm saying there was a lot of support, there was, but in the media there wasn't a whole lot of understanding or wow, this woman's doing a great thing. The media isn't like that. Another example, we're driving up to one of the dates for the inquiry. Bob Leighton comes on CHED, is it CHED, 630 CHED. He's doing an editorial on the Parcels decision, on what this woman, Susan Parcels, is asking her government to do. She is taking them to court. He was really inflaming it like maybe I should be burned as a witch or something. He really has a way of doing that. That was just on the radio. I had such anxiety. These people think I'm a demon. And the media, that's their job unfortunately, is to get controversy going over this issue, well Bob Leighton's job is. Phone and tell me what you think. Well they did. Generally speaking, they were very negative comments, very opinionated. There was a lot of sexist comments for sure, about women in the workforce. Maybe there was a handful of people who were supporters, but they were all women that were supporting verbally on 630.

Q: Describe the conscious decision you made and the courage it took to fight your case.

SP: The conscious decision. Going forward with my complaint, I thought it took courage. But I thought of myself as a real scaredy cat anyway. My girlfriend calls me Safety Sue. I certainly wouldn't be bungee jumping and I don't like flying. I don't take a lot of risks. So when I did this, I felt very anxious about it. I felt like I have to do this

because it's the right thing to do. I did feel very self-conscious about it. I felt very looked upon and I didn't want to be in the limelight like that. But I thought it was just, get over this anxiety, get over this fear, because this shouldn't be a big deal. This shouldn't be a big deal for you to make a complaint. At the moment, naivety is a wonderful thing. I thought, well that's all it's going to be, I'm making a complaint. Even at that moment when I was making the complaint, I thought, well they're going to back down and they're going to say, come on in and make monthly payments and pay your premiums off during that time. That's how naïve I was about it. I knew it was the right thing to do, I knew it was going to go against a lot of grains, but I knew I had to do it. I thought, if Susan Brooks can do this, I can do it too. And I thought, and she did it with Safeway, and that's huge. Safeway is like multinational. So the courage, yeah I went through a whole range of emotions about it. I don't think I've ever been described as courageous, but it did take a lot of courage. There was a lot of times I was hiding in front of the TV or covering my ears when the editorials were going on the radio. I knew I was part of it but it was like, oh here we go, I'm going to be sick. It takes a real toll. It takes a toll on the family relationships and it takes a toll on your conservative traditional community that wonders what the heck this girl's doing. You send her to Calgary, she comes back some sort of rebel. We just wanted her to be a nurse.

Q: Talk about how you felt irrelevant in the process.

SP: A good way of describing it, I felt absolutely disempowered in the process of the inquiry. It wasn't about me, but I had all of this passionate feelings towards this is the right thing to do. Actually I had a lot of indignation as well. I don't like to show my indignation, but I was indignant that they would do this, that they would say, no, you have to prepay 100%, we're cutting off your benefits; we don't care if... They may as well have said, we don't care if your family has benefits while you're on maternity leave or not, because you're not that important, you're just having a baby. It just felt like, I was really furious with them. I think part of my seeing what's right or wrong is the indignation around, you can't treat me like that and you can't treat women like that. I felt fairly vulnerable because I was out to here. You're fairly, you don't have a lot of defenses at that

point. All I had was mad; I'm mad. I'm mad and I'm huge, and you can't treat me like this. I'm going to the Human Rights Commission. The feeling of being irrelevant. I was that indignant, I was that passionate about it, I wanted that badly to win. I did. I wanted to win for women in the workforce and I wanted to win so that no other pregnant woman who was going to human resources would be denied benefits because she was pregnant. It didn't make any sense to me. I had all of that but then when the process started it was bigger than life. It is way bigger than life, and it takes on a life of its own. I'm okay with that because it's bigger than me for sure, but I felt the intimidation of it. That's where I started feeling I was irrelevant at this point. It had a life of its own. My story was one of hundreds of thousands of stories. This wasn't just happening in Red Deer, Alberta, this was happening all across our nation. I don't know whether other countries have adopted other policies or not, but it happens everywhere and in the world it happens, the gender bias around labour happens everywhere.

Q: This process influence what you do in your life now.

SP: I think that some things, some beliefs and some principles are just part of you. Maybe you don't know that they're there until they've had a chance to bud, but they come from within. I was given the opportunity and I was blessed with the indignation around this issue, so I was able to do something with it. But what I found out is that indignation is there around other gender bias issues. That's always been a part of me. That opportunity of the Human Rights Commission experience has actually given me enough courage and self confidence to go further to do domestic violence treatment programming, to work in my community to make it a safer place for women and children; not be collaborative with all of the other agencies that are working towards that goal. It's a part of who I am, and I'm not afraid of it anymore. I will speak out about these issues. I don't care if people disagree with me. When it comes to abuse and violence and gender bias, I feel obligated – it's my duty to say something and it's my duty to act, if I can. That was the beginning, the inquiry was the beginning. It was almost like Karma or the universe put me on a path and said, open your eyes, quit covering your eyes and don't cover your ears; you can do this. That was the hard part. The rest of this has been fairly,

I'm not saying easy, but I've been confident about it, that I'm doing the right thing in my career and I'm doing the right thing in my life. . . . But had I not done that, maybe I wouldn't be where I am, had I not pushed through that. I felt so alone in it. Someday I'm going to watch that, The National. Someday I am going to look at it and see, watch it. No, not now, today isn't the day.

Q: No, I don't have it.

SP: Good.

Q: I was going to ask you if you taped it?

SP: No, no. I had a little black and white TV and it was in my, we had no VCR. I lived in a 12 by 52 foot trailer in the Penhold Trailer Court. It was the happiest days, well not *the* happiest days, but my babies were little and I knew my purpose. I have purpose now, but you know when you have babies, there's an instinct. It's like I knew what my purpose was.

Q: You have two children?

SP: Yes, two children.

Q: So did you have another maternity leave?

SP: Oh yeah, didn't I tell you that? Interestingly enough, the first maternity leave that I had as the unit coordinator, that was the first one. I didn't have to pay my benefits, didn't even think of it. I said that, right? Yeah, didn't even think of it. Then Rachel was next and I didn't have to do it again because... I always wanted another baby. But when you do career and family, there are some things that you can't continue doing. You can't continue making babies and making a career.

Q: During that time, you also had other things going on in your life.

SP: While the inquiry was going on, my life didn't stop. We had a really busy existence. I worked full time, my husband worked full time. As well as working full time, he was driving back and forth to Calgary to the U of C finishing his degree. That was four days a week, and then working in the evenings. We had these two children, a 4-year-old and a newborn, to raise. We lived in a little tiny trailer in Penhold Trailer Court. Yeah, it was hectic. We had daycare issues, always worrying about your child. Always worrying about whether they're going to be cared for well in the setting that you've left them in. So yeah, we did a lot of... We were blessed with a good daycare. But there was always issues. We were busy, busy, busy, busy people. The inquiry, in essence it had to on many occasions take a back seat. Then you were thrown back into it and you're like, okay we have to go to Edmonton on these three dates next week. Then you juggle the kids and you get babysitters and you take the time off work. Life just kept going. I'm not complaining about it, I'm glad life keeps going. But sometimes when you want to do, when you want to have the experiences as a woman or a man, you want to have a family life and you need to have a career, there's a lot of juggling to go along with it. But I don't think, like I said, just because you're a woman that you should be excluded from that portion of life. Our society would be a lot poorer if we didn't have women in the workforce.

Q: It's about money.

SP: It is about money. There's some people that can afford this and there's some... some people can afford it and some people can't. You don't feel very good about yourself when you, oh well you're having more children, why can't you afford your benefits? If you can't afford \$800, why are you having more babies? We have a really judgmental society out there in a lot of aspects. There's a lot that aren't judgmental, but there is a pervasive attitude, and you feel fairly ashamed if you can't provide the benefits for your family. That's just something you don't tell people, right? Where do you go? You go to your friend or family and say, geez, I don't have \$800 so that we can be covered while Susan's on maternity leave? No. So many people would just go without them. It's not like I

couldn't go on maternity leave. Yeah, I was welcome to go on maternity leave, I just wouldn't have coverage. I didn't have the \$800, and it is about money. Money buys benefits, unfortunately. I would have been on maternity leave without any Alberta Health Care. I wouldn't have had any Blue Cross. I wouldn't have had dental, I wouldn't have had life insurance, I wouldn't have had short term or long term disability. No, it's not right, it's not right. To punish that portion of society because they are the childbearing portion of society, it's wrong. It's not okay to ask them for \$800.

Q: It's not about men and women, it's about justice.

SP: It's about justice, yeah.

. . .

It's maybe a good thing I didn't have the \$800, I don't know. I still would've felt indignant about it, but there's certain things... At that time I'd been in and out of in-scope and out-of-scope positions, and been hoisted around quite a bit. Because I liked management jobs... I liked nursing jobs as well, the direct care, patient care. But I also liked to fiddle with numbers and I liked to do rotations. The head nurse at neuro, who was my girlfriend when I graduated, she did it in rotations, and I loved watching it. It was like puzzles, it was like the Rubik's cube. I would love doing that stuff with her. So when I started doing the rotations and acting nursing coordinate stuff on the unit, and went out of scope, I took that jump, I really did not recognize the huge difference in the way in-scope people were treated versus out-of-scope people. There's no need for them to run around deleting people through organizational restructuring the way they do. It's like there's a new theory came in, so let's just wipe everybody out and get all masters, and they advertise for all these master's degrees, master's in nursing, to fill these spots. Well there isn't that many and at that point there wasn't that many around. So they stayed vacant for years and years and years.

Q: ... Giving birth is not economically valued in this society. . .

SP: That's right. It's interesting, because I have always blurred those lines. Always blurred the lines. Those principles have always been... When I was a head nurse, I took a patient assignment. When I was a head nurse I wasn't, in my estimation, out of scope. I was, really I was, but I believed that I was still part of the unit, that I was still there to relieve people for breaks. I was still there to carry, I carried three or four patients every day because I didn't want their workload to be too great and I didn't want my finger out of the pie. So I blurred all those lines. Management structures don't like you blurring lines, no. It's the same thing as having babies and having a career. I wanted both and I wanted to have the same benefits that I had when I had the other baby. Treat me the same. I'm the same person. So I hope it's useful.

[ END ]