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Interviewers: Winston Gereluk, Don Bouzek

AD: I'm currently the executive director for Girls Inc. of Northern Alberta.

Q: Tell us about your background.

AD: I moved here in Fort McMurray from St. John, New Brunswick, but I was born in Nova Scotia on the East Coast; so I'm one of the many East Coast people who live here and work here. I came in 1978 with my two young sons and my husband. He had a contract, a one-year contract to start up Syncrude Canada. He was a process operator at Irving Oil in St. Johns. So we came for one year, and I'm still here; so it's been a long year. I went to university in the East Coast. I went to St. Thomas University in Fredericton and got my BA, and I went to Dalhousie University in Nova Scotia and got my Masters with English as my focus. Then we moved. When I finished my MA, we moved back to New Brunswick. My first son was born in Nova Scotia, my second was born in New Brunswick, and my third was born here. So I decided that I should stop moving, because I didn't want any more children; three was enough, three boys. My family background: there's just my brother and I, so small family. Had a stepfather, lived in rural New Brunswick. Politics was interesting. I don't think my mother or stepfather were overly political. So anything I picked up I just picked up from what was going on in the Maritimes, family contacts. Politics was very interesting. I can remember on elections the Conservatives and Liberals, you either got a small mickey of booze or you got \$5 for your vote. They would pick people up and take them to the poll. They tended to give the lady the \$5 cuz they didn't think women should drink. But you hear stories about people that were Conservatives' supporters having barnfuls of booze. That was actually quite fascinating to me. I thought, well that's really odd. When I grew up I never heard of any other political party. So there was no talk about New Democrats or anybody else except the Liberals and Conservatives. Politics in New Brunswick was they left one party in forever and a day, and then when they became so corrupt that people couldn't stand them, they do a flip and put the other party in forever and a day until it got totally corrupt, then do a flip again. It used to fascinate me that when the government changed, all of the government positions changed, from the top to the bottom. If you worked the ferry going

across the St. John River and it was a government position, you lost your job if there was a flip in the government, even though you probably weren't political to begin with. But you just automatically lost your job, and people that they thought were more favourable got those positions. A fellow that I went to school one time, he had a job running the ferry back and forth across the St. John River in Burton, New Brunswick. He'd lost his leg in a mining accident in Sudbury. So he was handicapped, but he was a character. Change in the government: Clarence lost his job. Probably never voted a day in his life. He was very upset about losing his job; so he hijacked the ferry. It was on a cable and you really can't hijack a ferry on a cable. So he took it to the middle of the St. John River and stopped it and said, 'I want my job back.' I don't think he did; he never did get his job back, but I love that story. Politics in New Brunswick or the Maritimes is very interesting.

Q: How does it compare to politics here?

AD: Well I wish there were more people hijacking ferries. I'd like to see more direct political action and more people saying, enough, and doing something about it. Out here, a lot of apathy, and I think that's really sad.

Q: What political atmosphere were you raised in?

AD: I would have no idea of what their political inclination was. They voted.

Q: Were they religious?

AD: No, not at all, no. My stepfather was almost fanatic anti-religious, bordering on redneck if not over the line to redneck. He had some horrid, horrid theories on social programs and Catholics. Considering I'm Catholic, it was stressful at times. Ya, not very progressive or very liberal in their leanings at all. I suspect that my mom probably voted however he told her to vote, which has always been a bone of contention for me – women voting how they're told to vote. I suspect that he probably voted Conservative, just cuz his personal thoughts would lean more that way.

Q: I suspect that you're not very socially conservative – what made the difference in your life?

AD: I think just seeing their lack of, you know, their rigidity in social programs. My mom had a good heart. So she was always bringing home stray dogs or helping people out. She had a kind heart. She grew up in an orphanage; so she had a whole different slant, but I think she was very much influenced by my stepfather in negative ways. But I think sort of the mix of his lack of flexibility or any sort of kindness and her by nature good heart, maybe I just did it to annoy him. That could be. Then when I went to university was an eye opener. It was a whole world out there, a lot of different people. It was okay if you didn't have those thoughts and inclinations and think that that's the way the world worked. So I think university was probably the saving of my soul. So yes, I certainly went the other way.

Q: What sort of work did you do? Did you work back then?

AD: Yes I did. I worked in accounting for business and doing accounts payable and accounts receivable, and quite enjoyed it. It certainly had nothing to do with my degrees, but I enjoyed it. I had two small kids. So I stayed busy with them and my job. When I was in the Maritimes I wasn't overly involved, other than I voted. I take that very seriously in every election but wasn't overly involved in any community activities until I came out here.

Q: Like not the women's movement...

AD: Not really. I lived it more than talked it.

Q: So you came here because of your husband's job.

AD: Yes, he had a one-year contract and then at the end of that one year Syncrude offered him full-time employment. By that time the economy had sort of turned sour in the East Coast; so Irving Oil was laying off people, people that he'd worked with. So there really wasn't, other than family back there, there was nothing to go back to. So we stayed here and it's been an incredible experience. I can't imagine not having moved and staying here.

Q: What was your impression of this community when you first came here 36 years ago?

AD: When I first moved here in the summer of '78 I swear I couldn't find anybody who'd been here longer than a week. It was like instant community. I'd say to someone, well where can I find this? They'd say, I don't know; I've only been here two days. I'd say to someone, where can I find that? They'd go, I don't know; I've only been here a week. I was like, has anybody been here longer than a week? So everybody was new and it was on an incredible growth spurt. There was housing issues. The first year we had a trailer provided by the contractor that Rod worked for, and then the next year we moved into Syncrude housing. The oil plants then, because of the boom, because of the growth, they actually did have housing arms to their companies and they were providing housing to their employees. Not free, but nevertheless they had to provide housing, because there was a horrid lack of it. One of the first things I noticed was women doing non-traditional stuff. It was a lady that hooked up my cable; it was a lady that hooked up my phone. It was like, oh wow, that's really cool, because you didn't see that back east. The next thing that I noticed was that everybody was very young, and I swear half of the community was pregnant. There was just pregnant women everywhere; so it was like, oh, very fertile. But it was a very young community: the average age was well under 30. So that's the period of time when they're having babies, and within a year I was pregnant. So, ya.

Q: Sex happens.

AD: It does; well yes it does. And babies happen. So that was the two things I noticed. The next thing I noticed was it was bloody cold in the winter. Different cold than the East

Coast, a lot less snow. I didn't know what a block heater was, but I quickly found out you needed one. It got cold on the East Coast but we really never needed a block heater, but certainly did need one out here.

Q: Were you aware of problems in the community?

AD: Ya, at that time, and that's what I really like and still continue to like about Fort McMurray, is that people see a need and they just do it. Maybe because we're isolated and that's how things get done. It took me six months to find--my son was in Beavers in New Brunswick; so I wanted to put him in Scouts. So that was one of the questions that I had my husband ask – is there Scouts in Fort McMurray, and was told yes. Got the little booklet: this is what Fort McMurray has. Well it took me six months to find a Scout troupe in Fort McMurray, the Cubs, Beavers that he could join. Then I ended up being a Beaver leader because they needed leaders in order to have the colony. So I spent 20-plus years involved in scouting in Fort McMurray, even after my kids had all gone through it and they were gone. I stayed involved for a bit and then said, okay I'm done that, I can back out now. But ya, there was a lot of need, just because it was so new and it was on such a rapid growth thing and so many people were from elsewhere. There were people from all over the world here and there were people from all over Canada here. It was an exciting place. Hearing stories about, oh you're in a good time, a couple of years ago they had to rotate the kids in school because they didn't have enough schools. So they had half days and they rotated; some went in the morning, some went in the afternoon. They said, oh Fathers Day you have to be there at ridiculous hours to get a Father's Day or Mother's Day card. So I was spared that, but there was still growth pains and things that needed doing here.

Q: Any issues with the transient population?

AD: Probably not so much. Well everybody still thinks that the streets are made of gold up here. So they think they can come up and find work. Unless you have the skill, it would be a horrid place to be unemployed. One of the first jobs I got was with Labour.

The AFL had gotten a grant from the federal government – strange marriage, I know. But it was to set up unemployment action centres, is what they were called, all across Canada. So I went to work for them, and that was an eye opener. They didn't stipulate that you had to work with just unionized labour; it was work with anybody that's unemployed, anybody that's unemployed that's coming in the door. This was in the '80s when unemployment nationally was 11 percent, which is quite high. It was high here as well. So it was go be an advocate for people to identify what issues they were having and try to help them out with it. So we did everything from helping them put a resume together. The one thing--and the board was obviously the local labour council board that ran it--the one thing that I noticed was that a large number of those people that were coming in were having problems feeding their families, which was an absolute shock for me. Food is such a basic need that to have a man sit across the table and say, my wife's coming home from hospital with a new baby, I have no food in the house, I have no job. So I identified that to the board and said, okay what can we do about that, cuz that is the one biggest need that people are saying when they come in. Yes, they want the help with their resumes or they want suggestions on where they should go for work or should they be going back to school, that type of thing. But that very basic need. So we said, okay who is currently providing food? It was a few churches. So we contacted them and said, okay you have a food program, people come to you. It was the Catholic Church, the Salvation Army and a few other churches. Collectively, can we do a better job? It's gotta be stressful for you, it's gotta be a strain on your resources – collectively, can we do a better job? They all agreed yes. So we put a group together and we actually started Fort McMurray Food Bank Association. The board consisted of churches, consisted of labour union people. The local NDP had a chair at the table, and all worked really well, identified the need and set up the Fort McMurray Food Bank. One of the unions, actually the Suncor union, which at the time was the MIOU, provided us a venue, an office space; scrounged freezers and tables and opened it and hired a part-time person. The first part-time ED was a minister of one of the Baptist churches. Used a lot of volunteers, had hopes that it was gonna be an interim to get over that hump of high unemployment. Had a lot of media attention because the media said, oh my God, what do you mean food bank in Fort McMurray, isn't everybody rich up there? No, they're not.

Q: What kind of people weren't rich?

AD: Well, elders. At the time there weren't a lot of seniors here, but there were seniors here and they're on a very fixed income. Even then, expenses were high in McMurray. Young families, people that didn't work, and not everybody works at the oil plant. There's all of those jobs that are supportive but don't pull in the big dollars. Students – there's a local Keyano College. So a lot of those are struggling to be in school, support families, pay housing. So it was a mix. And people that maybe were coming up on spec to hopefully get a job, and maybe were lucky enough to find a place to rent, but food was the first thing that, if you don't have a lot of money, you cut there. What we hoped would be a part-time or just a short-term organization is still going strong in Fort McMurray. The numbers have done nothing but increase. Originally we talked to the grocery stores and said, what can you give us, what can you do to help us out, what can you give us in the way of supplies for food? I remember the first, oh my God, we got bananas, it was ridiculous the number of bananas we got. We had people making banana bread, which we later found out you're not supposed to do. But we had volunteers make banana bread and we gave that away cuz we didn't wanna waste it. We had the local postal workers were absolutely awesome. They used to do a campaign called Break My Back. For one week of the year you could put a donation of a food item, nonperishable, so cans mostly, in your mailbox and they would pick it up. They brought in tons of food. There wasn't a whole lot of money to go out and buy food. So it was basically donations. The stores gave us what they could. They had boxes in their stores and we did food drives and the union did their bit. It was partially funded by the United Way. So the food bank was started, and that came about directly as a result of the Unemployment Action Centre, and it's probably the one lasting thing that came out of that whole work program.

Q: Where did you go from there?

AD: From there I worked for a short period for the local YMCA. They managed a couple of leisure centres that were Syncrude housing. As part of the housing units they had

leisure centres. So I managed those leisure centres for them. Then I went to work for Big Sisters, which has morphed into Girls Inc., which is where I am now. I've been there for 20-plus years.

Q: I thought you were with Girls Inc.

AD: Yes, we started off as the Big Sisters organization. We were gender-specific, and we still are, but we started out as Big Sisters. Big Sisters started in Fort McMurray in 1979.

Q: Describe the organization and the work it does in the community.

AD: Big Sisters screened and matched, provided mentors for young girls that needed an adult female mentor in their life. It might be that there's only one parent; it might be a single mom that was working long hours and just wasn't able to give the child the attention the child may have needed. It might be a single dad. We had a lot of dads raising their kids on their own, and it just provided that positive female mentoring for the child. It might be two parents working that are just working hard and the child just needs that little bit of extra attention. The Big Sisters program was an awesome program. There was an amazing number of women in this community that gave their time and went through the screening and spent time with those girls. You'd hear of the big sister going to the little sister's wedding when they grew up, staying involved long past when they weren't in the program anymore. Then about 12 years ago we morphed into Girls Incorporated. Girls Inc. is also gender-specific. The reason that we morphed is that the Big Brothers and Big Sisters nationally were going to merge into one organization, and our board felt that it was really important that we stay gender-specific. The research that we did said that organizations like Boys and Girls Club, cuz there used to be a boys' club and a girls' club--when they merged the quantity and the quality of the programs to girls sort of declined. We weren't prepared to do that. So we wanted to stay gender-specific. We looked around and found an organization in the States called Girls Incorporated. They had some awesome programs; so we contacted them and found out there were former Big Sister organizations in Ontario that had sort of gone through the same process and had

decided they wanted to stay gender-specific. So we talked to them and said, okay, you're further along in the process. How's it working? What's this organization like? For us, we didn't wanna lose our Canadian identity, we didn't wanna be controlled by an American organization. They had nothing but good things to say about the organization. So we started on the process of becoming a full-fledged affiliate. The difference between Big Sisters and Girls Inc. is that with Girls Inc. you don't do the one-on-one mentoring. You have very specific and developed and well-researched programs that you provide the girls. So you do it in a group situation. We have programs around substance abuse prevention; we have programs around media literacy where we talk to the girls about developing some critical thinking skills around media messages that they're getting; we have programs around discovery leadership, which is women as leaders; we have programs around economic literacy where we talk to the girls about the importance of being in control of their finances – what does that look like? How do they manage it? So just any number of really awesome programs. We do a lot of our programs in the school as part of the school curriculum. We actually convinced the school board that it was a really good tie-in to the Alberta curriculum, and that we should go into the classrooms and deliver those programs, which makes our lives so much easier. You don't have to deal with transportation issues where the girl has to go home by bus so she can't take the program, or she's involved in sports; so she's gonna miss the program. It's part of the classroom time; they get the credit. We get a captive audience. So it works out really well. Some of our programs are after school and some are on weekends, cuz some don't fit into the curriculum. We do a project bowl which is a self-defence and a safety awareness program, and we do that as an after-school or weekend program. We are also running a mentoring program which we do on the weekends and after school. It's not a one-on-one, and all of the mentoring takes place together in one location. So the volunteer is never alone with the child; so you don't have to worry about safety issues.

Q: What's wrong with one-to-one?

AD: There's nothing wrong with it; it's a lot more monitoring. Obviously, making sure the child is safe and the volunteer is safe is a huge issue. So it gives the volunteer a little

bit of comfort to say, okay I can mentor a child. It might be two or three girls. So it's not one-on-one. It might be two or three girls in a group and they're together doing a group activity but they're doing their mentoring with them.

Q: What's involved in teaching them leadership?

AD: We made it Canadian, cuz a lot of the references were American. So we sort of quickly pulled those references out. So when we're talking about female leaders, we specifically target Canadian women. They can be local women, they can be national, they can even be international, but we really try to make it Canadian. At the beginning of the program we say to the girls, okay, describe a leader; what does a leader look like? They'll all say, it's a man wearing a suit and he's the boss. At the end of the program you say, okay, describe a leader; what does a leader look like? It's their grandmothers, it's their moms, it's women, it's themselves. All of our programs are really hands on and interactive. It's not us doing this, cuz they get that in school all day. So it's the girls doing the research and doing skits and doing presentations to each other, and inviting in women from the community and talking to them. At the end of the discovery leadership program the girls have to identify something in their community that they think could be tweaked or needs to happen. That is as different as the individual groups of girls. We do our programming in the outlying areas as well as Fort McMurray. So we'll do it in Anzac, we'll do it in the reserve Janvier, we'll do it in Fort McKay; we've got programs running in Fort Chipewyan. Every session, whether it's the same program, is different. The dynamics are different. So it's never boring.

Q: How are the girls recruited?

AD: Doing our programs in the school is great, because it'll be an option or it'll be part of their health program. Doing the after-school and the weekend programs, we just approach the community and say, this is a program we wanna run. We'll work with maybe an existing organization in that community and they will help us recruit the girls and target the girls. One summer we did some programming in Fort McKay and the band hire

students for the summer and get them to do jobs around the community, and does some training. So we said, okay, we wanna be part of your training. So we'll go out and work with your female employees, your students, and we did a substance abuse prevention program. So we went in; it was great. It's really not that difficult to recruit the girls. A lot of the parents are looking for programs. We'll get referrals maybe from United House, from Social Services, from all over the place. More than not, we have the problem when people call and say, well my girl goes to this school and I want her to take your program. Well maybe we're not into that school yet. So it's saying, well if you want us there, go talk to the teacher, the principal, and have them invite us in and we'll be glad to go in and do it.

Q: Do you run different sorts of programs in the Aboriginal communities?

AD: We run exactly the same program. The dynamics might be different, but the dynamics are different in the different schools in Fort McMurray – it depends on the community, it depends on the mix of girls. But it takes the girls in the outlying areas a bit longer to make that connection with you or get to trust you. I think in a lot of cases maybe they've been disappointed with people going into the community and not fulfilling their obligations. So it takes them a little bit longer to make the connect, but once they've made that connect, they're great. You'll see them three years later and they'll make a point of coming over and talking to you, when you coming back? None of the girls want the program to ever end. They all have a definitive start and end but it's like, but I don't want it to end. But it's the end of the program; we'll be back next year; take another one.

Q: Do you infuse the program with traditional Aboriginal cultural values, or do you import a little bit of Queen Victoria?

AD: Oh no, no, we don't import Queen Victoria. We will invite local women from the community in. So if we're talking about something specific, like when we did the discovery leadership in Fort McKay, we had ladies from the community come in. They talked about their childhood and the road they took and how they may have gotten off

track but they came back. So they get that flavour that way. We certainly talk to the girls about their community. With the discovery leadership, with them picking a community action project, they design it and they decide what it's going to be, and we talk about the difference between community action and community service. You go out and pick up garbage--that's community service; you figure out why people are littering and you develop a campaign to get them to stop: that's community action. Those projects have been so diverse. Some of the kids have done public service announcements, they love cameras, around adopting and neutering animals from the SPCA. We bring the SPCA in and get them to talk to them and let them know how the system works. In the Fort McMurray band the girls identified housing on the reserve as their issue. It was overcrowded, maybe too many family members living in one house, the houses being run-down. So we had the conversation: well okay, who's responsible for providing the housing? We invited somebody from the band to come in and talk to them about where does the money come from, how does it work. Then once they determined that it was actually the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs that were ultimately responsible for building new houses on the reserve, they all wrote letters. I said, okay but be respectful but put your personal situation in there. Make it personal, and just say what you want. So they did that. They were just absolutely thrilled that they were able to have that voice. They all got a response from somebody in the minister's office. The next year they got a few more houses, which they all took credit for, and maybe it was due to happen. But they took action. For them it was very powerful.

At McKay they identified safety as an issue. They identified that there's a lot of camps around their community. So there's a lot of strange people coming and going. They wanted more of a police presence. So they thought that the RCMP should have an office in their community. Again, we brought in an officer, talked to them, told them why that couldn't happen. But they asked those questions and they got those answers. It's interesting to see what they come up with, what their community action is going to be. But they are quite thrilled that they actually get to follow it through and speak up.

Q: Do you deal social assistance, child protection, and other social agencies?

AD: We have training for our staff and volunteers on what to do say if a child disclosed. What are your legal obligations and how do you work through that? So we make them aware. Because it's a girls-only environment, they are extremely comfortable in sharing. We're very upfront with saying, if you share something it's gonna stay here unless it's something that we can't keep. I jokingly say, if you tell us you've murdered your brother and buried his body in the back yard, I'm probably gonna have to tell somebody. So the girls are aware, but they still share. We have a good enough relationship with the schools or wherever we're at that if a girl says something I can go to the principal and say, okay this came up. You're more familiar with the community: is this an old issue that's been addressed or is this an unaddressed issue that needs to be addressed, in which case here you go, can you do it? It's tough when you have girls sitting around a table and they're talking about when their different parents are gonna get out of jail. Well my mom's getting released; my dad's getting out. Very open. We try as much as possible to get them to think about what's the program, what are we talking about. If it's a substance abuse prevention program, let's talk about that. How do you feel about that? One girl one time said that her mom had gone to rehab but her dad wouldn't go. I said, okay so the good side is your mom's gone to rehab. Your dad still has the option of going. Maybe he's not ready now, but that option is there. Then sort of getting into the conversation about you having seen the effects on your family, you having seen the effects on the community – how do you feel about using or trying? How does that make you feel, having seen all this? It's very easy for a child to mirror what they're seeing, and we want them to think and develop those critical thinking skills so that they know they don't have to mirror that action; they don't have to go down that road. As part of our substance abuse prevention program, which is called Friendly Peersuasion, we bring in a recovering female addict who is very honest with the girls. That puts a face on it. Mind you, a lot of the kids are seeing this at home. But it puts a face on what we've been talking and dealing with. They ask some pretty tough questions. It's good for the volunteer because she says it helps her in her road to recovery. But the thing that amazes me is how much the girls care about that person. For weeks after, they'll ask how she's doing. So that's a good thing.

Q: How good of an environment is Fort McMurray for women and girls?

AD: I don't know if we're any worse. A lot of people get really aggressive or get angry about some of the national media we get. What I'll say is, okay, if you take Fort McMurray out and you pop in another community that's going through the rapid growth development, it'll fit. Number one, is any of the stuff that is in that article not true? Chances are it is true; so why are you... Maybe it's slanted. Maclean's did one show several years ago – it was slanted. They went out of their way to find the negative. The negative was true, they didn't make it up, but they didn't go out of their way to find any positive to balance it out, which sort of annoys me and I don't read Maclean's anymore. But I don't get unduly upset about the media coverage. I live here, I know what the community has to offer, and I really don't care if somebody in Bay Street in Toronto has a negative impression of us. They probably won't move here; I'm okay with that.

Q: So it's rapid growth of a community that's quite isolated and has a large Aboriginal population...

AD: And a lot of transients and people from different parts of Canada. I've been to conferences in Ontario and heard people from the East Coast at the conference complain that 80 percent of the children that they work with, the dad is out here working. So they're having to deal with all of the social ills of there being an absent parent, blah blah blah. I'll say ya, I acknowledge that, but at the other end of it I'm dealing with a transient population, and people that work away from home tend to behave in a different manner than if they were home. They leave some of their moral restrictions behind; so they might do stupid things here. So you're suffering, but so are we. We're seeing the downside of that, the flipside of that as well.

Q: Is the community responding to the issues?

AD: I think the response is pretty good. Take the oilsands industry – they want those families. They don't want necessarily the dads with the family back east, because none of

the resources are staying here but the expenses and the demands on the infrastructure are staying here. Let's face it, people that move their family here, they're probably gonna be a longer-term employee. A lot of people don't want that, they wanna leave their family back east, and they wanna come out here and work and make the big bucks and ship it home or go home and buy a new house or whatever. But I think that the employer is working more towards making it a good place to move your family to, cuz they recognize that in order for it to be sustainable that has to happen.

Q: What are the indications of that?

AD: A lot of them are getting away from the, they had what they called the living out allowance, and a lot of them have done away with the LOA. Your LOA was just like a cash cow; you got your paycheque and you got your LOA. So they all wanted to have an LOA, they all wanted to fly in from BC or fly in from Saskatchewan or fly in from Newfoundland and get that LOA. A lot of the plants have stopped that. They said, okay that's not conducive to what we wanna do; that's not conducive to building a stable community. If you want a transient workforce, then yep continue it. Plus it was putting stressors on housing inside of Fort McMurray so that you work at Starbucks, you work at Tim Horton's, you're gonna pay an awful high premium on an apartment because somebody that's getting LOA can afford it. So they recognized that it was putting all those stressors, and they did away with that. A lot of them have had another serious look at their fly-in fly-out policy, where they're flying in the workers and flying them out, and saying, okay is there any way we can get around that; we can encourage people. I know the municipality is really keen on people coming and bringing their families and settling here, because they see the benefits to the community.

Q: Are we seeing any tangible inputs from them into community development?

AD: From the municipality, ya, they're trying. But it's a question of resources. They know what the needs are and they're trying to build those recreational facilities or trying to support the nonprofit sector that provide a lot of support to families, but are the dollars

there? Can they get the dollars out of the provincial government? Can they get the dollars out of the federal government?

Q: Can they get the dollars out of the companies? Are the companies providing input?

AD: Yes. You go down to Mac Island. Mac Island wasn't necessarily built with municipal dollars; it was a healthy chunk of change. Go down to the Keyano Wellness Centre.

That's industry putting an awful lot of dollars into developing sports fields and developing recreational complexes. They have a fairly healthy attitude on supporting the nonprofit sector as well. I'm sure they get a lot of requests; I know they get a lot from me, from nonprofits, saying, we're running this program, we want you to sponsor it.

Q: And they do?

AD: And they do. For the most part, if you can tie it into their mandate and they can see a value to it, they do.

Q: Do you run into the environmental issues?

AD: Yes, and I sit on numerous environmental committees and have for decades. It's strange. I think there's a healthy paranoia for local people to be critical of environmental impacts, because there's that degree of separation from their employer, their husband's employer, or their dad's employer. So there's a healthy paranoia there to be very vocal, but there are a number of environmental organizations in town. The Wood Buffalo Environmental Association does the air monitoring, extremely comprehensive air monitoring that happens in the region. That information is made available. Anybody can go online at any one time if they live in Fort McKay and say, okay this is what the readings are on the air monitoring station in my community, and if there's any sort of red flag, they're alerted. If the plants have an upset, there's a process where they would call the community and say, okay we had an upset here, this is what you can expect, elevated readings, blah blah blah, so that people can communicate that to residents. People are

also afraid. If people have a child that has respiratory problems, then air quality is a huge issue. CEMA, which is the Cumulative Environmental Management Association, has a look at cumulative effects. It does a lot of studies around what are the impacts of cumulative emissions, be it in the water or be it in the air. They did a fairly comprehensive research around tailings ponds and said, we're not endorsing in-pit lakes as the ultimate solution to tailings ponds; however, if you're going to have in-pit lakes, this is a management plan and this is the checklist. Those groups are made up of industry, environmental groups, Aboriginal communities. So it's a pretty good mix of people that have different perspectives and different slants and different interests. But they come together and say, okay this is the issue, let's look at it, let's come up with a management plan that we then give to the Government of Alberta and hope – because we have no control over what they will and will not accept – but hope that they'll adopt it either in part or in whole. That's sort of a neat thing for me with Fort McMurray, is that you can have that impact, you can have that level of participation that you might not everywhere.

Q: Is there adequate response to the environmental issues?

AD: I think the response is doing some good. Again it's a question of resources and giving these people the resources that they need to do a great job.

Q: You mean the companies' resources?

AD: Not the companies – the companies are usually the ones that are footing the bill. With WBEA it's 100, well it used to be 100 percent industry-funded and now the government has taken it over. With CEMA that same sort of thing is happening – we used to be 100 percent industry-resourced and now it's the government that's taking it over. I don't have a lot of faith in government goodwill with the government coming along and saying they're going to have this world-class monitoring system. Well to begin with it never even was world class, but what I see is I think, and they come up with some \$50 million that they pulled out of the air. There's absolutely nothing to substantiate that figure. This is what it's gonna cost a year, \$50 million. So the minister is saying, okay so

we need certainty that's all we're gonna be asked to pay for is \$50 million a year, that's it, that's our cap. So they're holding them to it. Well they pulled it out of their asses or the air. It wasn't based on any sound figuring or figuring out what it's actually gonna cost around those programs. So now you have a number of different agencies that are doing work, and the government's saying, well we're going to be controlling this. Both the federal and the province saw it as a, well we've had some cuts in our departments; so we're gonna take this chunk and we're gonna take this chunk. So that pie got smaller and smaller and smaller. You get to the point where you're restricting the WBEAs and the CEMAs in their ability to do what they do well and what they have done well. Plus now the government is saying, well we're gonna tell you what you're gonna do. Well before it was totally driven by the membership, which was industry, First Nations, environmental groups – it was a really good mix. So you all came to the table, you arm wrestled, you did what you had to do, but you decided this is the work, this is the work plan, and you went and did it. It was driven by local needs; now it's driven by provincial or federal.

Q: When you hold your programs in Fort McKay, do the girls not sometimes bring up some of these environmental issues? I know that community has complained about the environmental impacts.

AD: Oh sure, they're totally in the shadow of all of the industry. They're surrounded by it. They are probably the community that is the most directly impacted by it. The girls hear it more at home. I think in a lot of the First Nations communities the elders, because the elders remember and they have memory of what the land was, what the trapping was, what the air was, the health of the trees. They're very holistic in their view of the environment. So they have a serious concern on what that development is having, not just on the environment, but on their ability to enjoy it and to use it in their traditional ways. Unfortunately, a lot of that is just being lost. Then they have land claim issues – their land is constantly being taken. It's just constantly being taken and they're being squeezed smaller and smaller. So ya, there are concerns. Sometimes the girls will bring that and you talk about it. If that's an issue and you wanna talk about it, let's talk about it. If it means bringing somebody in, let's bring somebody in to talk to them about it so that

they're getting some sort of a balanced information. I don't want girls to be afraid. I want them to be able to make opinions and decisions based on fact. But that history, that baseline of what this place was like before development, is crucial.

Q: But you're personally comfortable living in Fort McMurray?

AD: Yes.

Q: It's not a particularly polluted or dangerous place to live?

AD: No I don't think it is, but with my work with environmental groups it's the cumulative effect. At one time whenever the government looked at giving a license to operate, they did it in isolation. So the environmental groups would go and say, well that was okay when there was Syncrude and Suncor, but now there are dozens and dozens and dozens – you have to start looking at cumulative effects. So what is the emissions for this one going to do in combination with all of these? You can't look at it in isolation because that's not realistic and it's not being very honest and transparent. So with a lot of pushing and prodding and gnashing of teeth, they have sort of gotten their head around it so that they do look at cumulative. But the government has never said no to a development either, and that's a concern. I would feel a lot more comfortable if just one no, just one no would tell me that they're serious about the end result.

Q: Wouldn't that be nice?

AD: Ya, it's not in the environment's interest, or not at this time. It would be nice.

Q: In your work have you confronted the temporary foreign worker issue? What is their effect on the community?

AD: I have a friend that works with them and I've known a few. My fear is that they're being abused. My fear is that we're creating a second class of worker, and I don't

particularly think that's healthy for anybody. I sort of turn off when I hear, oh we can't get Canadians to do the job, cuz I think that's just BS. Let's talk about a living wage, let's talk about, cuz I think it is. But there are a lot of them in town and I see them as people but I see them as being exploited. I think some employers abuse the system; they see it as cheap labour.

Q: Like the employer who advertised for somebody who could speak Mandarin.

AD: Yes, and then to say to the government, well I have to hire people that speak Mandarin because there's nobody in the community that does.

Q: What about the interface between social action with political action?

AD: We have such a dismal turnout at the polls. It causes me grief; it causes me personal angst to see that people just, and I don't know if it's because they don't care. I hear them say, it doesn't matter, they're all the same, in which case I just wanna punch them in the face. It does matter; they aren't all the same. I think they have to suck it up and take some responsibility, like don't gripe to me about what you've got when you didn't. Like I say to them, if you're not gonna be part of the hiring, don't complain to me about who you got. I don't know if they genuinely feel that disconnected from their political system, in which case that may very well be, and that's really sad. Or if they're just so busy, and I can see that, like just trying to make ends meet, that one more thing for them to deal with, it's just as easy to push it away. I'm too busy working flat out to keep the rent paid or buy my toys, cuz a lot of people have toys. I don't know what the disconnect is, but there's a horrid disconnect between the average person and them going to the polls and voting. It causes me personal angst because I think it's so important. I talk to the kids a lot about the importance of voting. I say, go home and ask your mom and dad if they're going to vote, and if they say no, ask them why not; tell them how important it is to you. If I can get the kids to see how important it is to them...

Q: People don't seem to realize you can vote for something other than Conservatives.

AD: It goes back to that healthy paranoia. If you're getting the message, anybody with any sort of socialist background in there, they're gonna shut everything down and you're not gonna have a job.

Q: Is that what happens?

AD: Oh sure, it's there. It's like, oh no. The NDP get branded with they're anti-development, they're anti-oilsands. So anybody that makes a living says, oh I don't wanna be unemployed; I don't wanna lose what I've worked hard to get. So they shy away. They just sort of say, no. I mean I ran for the NDP a number of times and I was shocked the first time someone asked if I was a Communist. I said, well that just shows your ignorance in the whole political system, because there's a little bit of a difference between.

Q: I didn't realize that you ran for the NDP.

AD: Oh god, the first time I ran in the '80s I ran federally, which was totally naïve. I think if you knew what you were gonna do before you did it you'd never do it. Then I ran provincially a number of times.

Q: And the reaction you got was the anti-development reaction?

AD: The anti-development, you're gonna shut it down, you'd make Fort McMurray a ghost town – oh it's just incredible. That and you're a woman.

Q: You mean there's still some of that?

AD: Oh my God, you have no idea. It's still there; those dinosaurs still roam the earth. It's still there. They would say that. I tend to be flippant, which doesn't work to my favour, but I tend to be flippant. If someone says something outrageously stupid, I have a

hard time not drawing their attention to it. It's not a great success thing for politics. I sat on council for three years and learned a lot from that and I was a councillor for a period. It was tough to be a socialist and to be a woman and to be a New Democrat.

Q: And it continues to be tough.

AD: It continues, ya. It continues to be tough, and that's sad but it's true. And not just the men, there's women that, oh my God, why are you doing that?

Q: One of the things that's impressive about Fort McMurray is the number of women up here who do non-traditional work.

AD: Yep, they break out of the mould but that doesn't mean they have a good time in that new mould. There's a lot of female engineers at the plants obviously, and they still go through grief because they're women.

Q: We just interviewed one who seemed quite happy.

AD: Well then she's lucky. The mayor, I can remember the mayor coming to one of our functions and talking about, and we had done a screening of "Misrepresentation," which was a documentary a number of years ago that talked about women in the media and how they're portrayed in the media. It dealt quite extensively with females in politics who were trying to break into politics. Hillary Clinton was used and that silly woman from Alaska, Sarah Palin, and how they're presented. Actually live clips of news coverages where they'd refer to the women as bitchy. One shot was Sarah Palin sort of between her legs with the nails, looking up at her, and ragging on Hillary Clinton because she's loud and she's bitchy. So we aired it and the mayor came and spoke to it and told a story about being interviewed as a mayor of Fort McMurray.

Q: A man?

AD: No, female, Melissa Blake. And how she did the interview and the whole nine yards. I think Melissa was at the time living common-law and had a couple of children. Did the interview; thought it went wonderful. But the by-line is "single mom, mayor of...". Really? That's what you pulled out of this whole interview? And she wasn't single, because she was with a partner, but you know she wasn't married. How disappointing that was for her. But she will, if you ask her about being a female in politics, she'll say all the positive things. So when she said that I thought, oh so there's negative there, you just choose to ignore it, and that's okay. But it's there; it's still there. She still struggles, being a woman in that position. That's sort of unfair, but ya, those dinosaurs still roam the earth.

Q: Do you have any questions, Don?. . . I'd like to talk about housing. How expensive is it? What levels of social housing exist?

AD: Initially Syncrude and Suncor had housing arms, and they've backed away from that because eventually they got their workforce established and said, you know, we're not in the business of providing housing. So everything went on the open market. It's tough to live here. I know I had a friend who was married and said, well you know, we wanna buy. It's gonna have to be a trailer cuz we can only get a mortgage for \$350,000. I giggled and said, only in Fort McMurray would you hear that. Only in Fort McMurray would you hear someone say, well it has to be a trailer, it has to be a mobile home, because we can only get a mortgage for \$350,000. People paying \$2,700 for a two-bedroom apartment, it's tough. People are renting rooms out to workers, people that maybe work 7 on, 7 off, for \$800 to \$1,000 for a room. They probably need the money to pay the mortgages that they're paying, and it's just crazy. In Fort McMurray there is Wood Buffalo Housing Authority, and they're supposed to be subsidized rates. They're still high. Maybe they're high by other communities in the real world, but maybe reasonable. They have a look at what you make, and judge it. But in Fort McMurray, first year teachers, RCMP officers, they're all eligible for subsidized housing. They all fall within the poverty line of Fort McMurray, or they're close to it. It's hard to then recruit teachers if they know that housing's going to be an issue and they're gonna have to bunk up with other people to just pay the rent. So those things are still here. I've heard with the downturn in the economy

some of the apartments are lowering their deposits that you have to put down. Fair enough, but I haven't heard of any that are necessarily lowering their monthly rents, and that's what's ridiculous. So you do have overcrowding in a lot of apartments because if you're driving a cab or you're working security, there's gonna be a lot of them in that apartment. Somebody that I work with, her boyfriend, I think there was 7 in a two bedroom and they almost rotated the beds and the couches just to get it covered. The temporary foreign workers, I think a lot of people that are hiring them provide housing for them. I think some of the restaurants actually have a house and they'll provide a room. They still have to pay board or rent, but they recognize that it's not going to be possible for them in the open market to find a place.

Q: But the provincial government hasn't done much to ease the housing problem?

AD: No, it's always a big thing with the municipality because they're always trying to get the province to release land so that houses can be built. For some reason they hang onto that land like I don't know why, but they hang onto it. They're not very generous in releasing land so that developers can go in and build houses. But there is, like I say, the Wood Buffalo Housing, there are subsidized housing for seniors and for lower income. But there's also long waiting lists for those units.

Q: Is the population becoming more stationary?

AD: I hope so.

Q: Do you see it?

AD: Well, with the downturn, a lot of the camps are closed down. At any one time before there'd be in excess of 10,000 workers living in camps. A lot of those camps are shut down because of the price of oil. So you're seeing less of a demand on the infrastructure in town, be it the hospital or whatever. Some of those camps are fairly well developed. I can remember talking several years ago to this young fellow who was up here working

and living in camp. He had a plan; he had a life plan. He hadn't been out of the camp or in town for I don't know how long, had no intentions of coming into town. He was driven – I'm gonna work, save all my money, and then I'm gonna go home and live happily ever after. So I think you have a lot of people doing that. I don't know what happens to their psyche if they live and breathe work and don't get out.

Q: It's the antithesis of community.

AD: Yes, totally, totally.

Q: So the downturn is real?

AD: Oh yes, the downturn is real. I've talked to organizations that--we have a golf tournament as a fundraiser every year so we hit up a lot of businesses to be hole sponsor. The letters went out and I got a call from one who every year was a hole sponsor. He said, you know, the people we work for are really asking us to cut costs. I said, ya and I know what you're gonna say. So the first place you're gonna cut is community participation. I understand that, I know that's real, and I know that's the first place that people are gonna go with their little scissors. I'm not holding that against you. I can appreciate that. He says, well how about I give you half? I said, you know I will be appreciative of whatever you choose to give us; I'm not gonna say you have to give me more. He said, okay. Then he called back the next day and said, okay, I've thought about it. I'll do the whole sponsorship. But we are hearing that at our level, we're hearing we're being asked to cut costs, and unfortunately it's gonna be the community support that's gonna be the first victim of that.

Q: I don't believe there has to be a downturn, because \$50 a barrel is still enough. It's more than the cost of production. It's something like a capital strike.

AD: But the impacts are real. The first thing people do is a lot of them get rid of all their contractors. The camps, a lot of the camps are closed and empty. So then you have the

people that worked in those camps;, they're unemployed. I'm hearing, I lost my job. I'm hearing that, and I'm seeing the impacts.

Q: I wanted to talk about Highway 63 and the whole issue of transportation. Keep talking to Winston.

AD: Sixty-three. I've been here a long time but I've never been afraid of driving the highway. I will say in the last maybe four or five years I've actually developed a fear of driving the highway. There's so much traffic on it and there just seems to be a lot of foolish people on it. There's so many deaths on it. It's just constant where you're hearing of entire families being wiped out or two or three people, and people I've known. So it's become very real, just the volume. When I was on council, I suggested, and that was in the '80s, that they have a ring road to divert a lot of the heavy traffic out of the community, cuz it all goes straight through Fort McMurray. They looked at me like I was mental. I think they should've had a ring road. I think they should've worked on it then and they'd have it by now. I also think that they should've put a lot more money into having a rail system to get a lot of that heavy system off. Instead of decommissioning the rails, use the rail system, even if you put a rapid transit. Even if you don't touch pedestrians, even if it's just the stuff that's being transported out, it would make life easier. But they haven't.

Q: They decommissioned the rail line?

AD: Yes. I think that's just a strategy of the federal government; I think they just wanna totally dismantle Canada's rail system, which I think is sad. But many, many years ago I did some volunteer work for the local cable company. They called and said, would you go interview at the time Peter Lougheed? Our regular person isn't available. I said, oh well ya fine, I'll do that. So I went. A lot of the reporters here are very young and timid. They're just learning the trade. I was older and it wasn't a paycheque. So I could be aggressive or nasty, whatever. I could ask questions. So I asked him. That was in the '80s. I said, when can we expect 63 to be twinned? He hedged and he hedged, and I just

persisted and persisted and said, you're not answering my question – when can we expect 63 to be twinned? His response, and I remembered it, was, when industry warrants it. When he finally gave me an answer, that was his answer – when industry warrants it. I sort of went, oh. So it hasn't happened as fast as it should. I think it's ridiculous that it isn't twinned all the way. I love that 50 kilometre stretch that they do have twinned; I love that.

Q: Why wouldn't we have a rail line picking up a lot of that traffic?

AD: Of course. In some ways Canada is so backward in things like that. Why wouldn't we have a rail system? It's beating the hell out of the roads, not to mention the volume of those big rigs. You hope you don't get behind some piece of equipment that's taking up the whole highway. Or it'll take you 15 hours to get here cuz there's been a fatality on the highway and they've shut it down. You're not gonna eliminate the bad drivers or the people that consistently will speed and do dumb things. If it was twinned the whole way, you'll still have people going off the road. But I don't think you'll have the volume and the numbers and the devastation that you have now. I had someone say to me once, well Fort McMurray shouldn't get special treatment; it's not your oil, it's the country's oil. I don't disagree with that. If it's a national resource or a provincial resource, I don't disagree with that. However, if the people in Fort McMurray who are developing that resource are paying an unfair burden in that development, then I think that needs to be recognized and that needs to be taken care of. That would include things like the highway and the cost of living for housing and things like that. So I don't think that's us saying, we deserve more. I think we do deserve more, but we deserve more because we're paying more on a personal level.

[END]