

Chellae Rehbein

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Interviewer: Karen Werlin

CR: I was born in North Vancouver and I grew up there as well. My parents moved a lot. So I've lived down as far as California and most parts of British Columbia I've lived in – in the Okanagan, on Vancouver Island, and most recently Fort McMurray.

Q: Did you come to Fort McMurray with your family or by yourself to find work?

CR: As everyone goes to Fort McMurray for work, that's how I ended up there as well. I started out teaching preschool in the Okanagan just outside of Osoyoos. What happened there was when the economic downturn came, of course the recreational vehicles that were being built in the Okanagan, nobody could afford them anymore. So the whole company shut down and with that company left the young families; so went my preschool classes. I went from four classes down to two, and my program was cancelled. So, like everyone else, I moved to Fort McMurray hoping to see those streets paved with gold.

Q: Can you tell us a bit about your family history?

CR: Sure. My dad was a shop steward, and at the time I didn't know what that meant. He didn't talk a lot of union at home, but he was very principled in working and good strong morals for what you do. You earn your dollar and you deserve to get back from your company what you deserve. So I knew that he had a very good work ethic. He made sure I had a job at 15 and was a very hard worker. At the time of course when you're 15 and all your friends are out doing all the other things that are fun, you don't really appreciate that. But now I look back and I cannot thank him enough for setting me in that way.

Q: What union was he with?

CR: He worked for Finning Tractor and I'm not sure what union they're with.

Q: Probably the Machinists Union.

CR: I imagine so.

Q: So your father was a role model?

CR: Very much so. Really strong work ethic. He grew up working on a farm; as well he started working when he was 15. So he did the same thing for both my other brothers as well. We all started at 15.

Q: Can you tell us about any other role models or mentors you might have had growing up?

CR: He was my biggest. My younger brother was an actor. So we never really looked at role models outside of our home because we saw these people every day. It wasn't a big deal to see actors; so we really looked inside our own family for role models. The values that our family held were more attuned to what we wanted to be.

Q: What sort of education did you receive?

CR: I went to Catholic school for all the way up to grade 12. I spent two days in public school and begged to go back to Catholic school. I loved wearing the uniform; it was a really good way to equalize everybody. So that was a nice part of Catholic school, and the morals of course and the values that were held were about equality and family. I absolutely cherished that all the way through. I was very involved in sports. You walked a straight line, and unlike you hear about a lot of other schools, grade 8s could sit down with grade 12s and there wouldn't be a problem. There wasn't the bullying that you hear about nowadays with the kids in schools. You might have the odd football fight, but that's about it. It wasn't like it is now, that's for sure.

Q: Can you tell us about the first job that you had?

CR: The first job I had was at Wendy's. I actually worked there for three years all the way through high school, and loved it. I loved the people I got to work with, loved the customers I got to serve, loved the interaction, and absolutely loved the job.

Q: And that was in Vancouver?

CR: We'd moved to Langley by then.

Q: What about some of the other jobs you've had?

CR: I worked, like I said, I'd taught preschool. I went to school to be a police officer actually. Though I loved law at the time, I didn't like the aspect of having to deal with the children who were being abused and the women who were being abused, and it wasn't something I could bear to take home with me every night. So I switched my roles to child education, which I absolutely loved. You can't have any more rewarding of a role than being able to teach children and watch them be so excited to learn what you have to say: everything from how to tie a fish hook to how to do African dancing. The age I taught was three and four year olds, and they are like sponges. They're so ready to learn and they're so excited for what you want to teach them. It was an amazing career to have. It was sad that it's no longer there. When I moved to Alberta I did look at that field, but there were extra courses you had to take and so I fell into postal work, which was amazing as well. I love my job. It's changed over the years. I haven't been there that long – I'm on my sixth year. We started out walking. We're one of the first communities to be switched over to the community mailbox system of delivery. But before that, last year and previously, we were walking and it was great. It was paid-for exercise. We walked 25 to 30 kilometers a day—rain, snow, sleet, the whole rest of it. You talk to any of the letter carriers out there and they love it. They love to walk, they love to exercise, and they love to meet with the people in the community and be a part of the community. We've had so many... we need to stop for a second.

Q: You were on outside work at the post office.

CR: Yes. Just every part of the day was great. You had customers. One of my biggest issues is you would think a postie would lose weight by walking 25 to 30 kilometers a day. But I had at least two people if not five people, every time I got to their door they'd have baked goods; 'I made you lunch.' The community really looks at the postal worker as part of their community. I could go on for countless number of times that I've returned dogs, returned children to houses, sat with homeless people and given them my mittens for a little while or given them my heat packs out of my mittens. The last route that I did have I actually, the homeless shelter was on my route. A lot of people are afraid to walk by people that are homeless or sitting on the ground or who look dirty, but they're all just people. I'd quite often sit down and have a coffee with them. What amazing people they are. I was brought up definitely with the value of equality. My mom had taken us to the street. One day we asked, mom, are we poor? Cuz for a while she was a single mother. She said no, we're not poor. She took us down to the streets of Vancouver and we sat and we met the people there. We worked a few times in the shelter where they made peanut butter and jam sandwiches for the lunches there. She would tell us, these are the poor people, but they're still people. She would make sure we sat and had a conversation with them just like you would any other person. Being in Vancouver it's very multicultural. We grew up with friends on the Native reserves there and we hung around and played on the beaches. My family didn't grow up looking at any different race as any different. When I moved to small towns, which I have in the past, it's a very different feel when they're not used to seeing people of colour. For me I don't notice it until someone points it out. I think that's just how I was brought up and the background I've had. So sitting with people on the street, we have a lot of Somalians in Fort McMurray. People sometimes can look at them in different ways racially. But people are people, and what a great way to meet people to be a letter carrier. You go to everyone's house every day. Many of these people, that's the only people you see all day. A lot of seniors, they're so excited to see their letter carrier come. Love the job, it's great.

Q: What's the makeup of the workforce in Fort McMurray? Is there an equal number of males and females at the post office?

CR: Definitely not. In Fort McMurray, well of course we're in the oil sands. So we see a lot of the families with the husband in the oil fields and the woman doing a lower-paying job. So it's definitely mostly women there. Right now with the wages at Canada Post, all the wages are the same across the country. So in Fort McMurray, even though these wages in other places would be awesome, in Fort McMurray that leaves us below the poverty line. So a lot of the women that are posties use it as just an extra bit of spending money for their family.

Q: Do you feel there are any barriers for the women in the post office in Fort McMurray?

CR: In Fort McMurray, no, we are a very strong local. Anything that Canada Post wants to test the waters on, they try it in Fort McMurray first. If they can get it through Fort McMurray then they can hope to get it through the rest of Canada. So we're quite often first for pilot projects and other things like that. The women in my local are very, very strong. They know their collective agreement, they know the rights they have. It's a great group of women, really strong. And our few men are great too.

Q: There are a lot of grievances filed over working conditions at Canada Post. Is that the case in Fort McMurray?

CR: We do file grievances but the working conditions we have, recently like I said, we've gone onto the community mailbox system. What they did is they slashed the routes in half, gave basically two routes to one carrier, and then moved us all into the same building. So the working conditions that are hard for us right now of course are space is a big issue. We have a grievance filed on that. Another is the time values that they've given to letter carriers to do the routes. Letter carriers are amazing people. You tell them that they can finish something in eight hours and they really believe they can. So Canada Post takes advantage with that and they keep telling us that we can do more in this eight hours.

Amazingly enough, people do. They sometimes even run. They sometimes give up their lunch breaks to get it done. But a letter carrier always tries to accomplish their task and it's to their demise of course, because we're getting more and more to do in our eight-hour day.

Q: Was the fact that the post office is unionized one of the reasons why you applied for work there?

CR: Absolutely not. I went to work at the post office mainly because of the outdoor work. I love sports; I love to be outside. Actually for the first few years I had no part in the union – didn't go to union meetings, didn't do anything with the union. There was one time when both the, well the chief shop steward was away, the union president was away, and the vice president was away, so there was nobody there to represent anybody. What had happened was a girl who was hired the same day as me, she had taken time off to go to her son's graduation and when she came back there was not enough employees to have finished her route the day before when she was away. So she came back to two days of mail. Well if we're struggling to get things done in eight hours you can imagine putting 16 hours worth of work. The supervisor said, you're doing this work; you can do it all today. She's like, I can't finish it today. For one thing, I have more to do with the graduation; I've come back to do the work because I know we're short of staff. But I cannot get all this done. So I won't be doing it all. With no one there to defend her, the superintendent came out and said, I'm giving you a direct order to finish this work. Now in Canada Post a direct order means you finish it or you do whatever the task is at hand, or else basically you can get written up and such. I had been in someone else's workspace and I saw a collective agreement there and I said, I don't think you can do that. The superintendent turned to me and she said, excuse me? I said, I don't think you're allowed to do that. I think we have eight hours. I was shaking in my boots at the time. I was able to open up the page and say, see, right here it says it. So for the remainder of the time it was amazing--if people had a problem they started coming to me. People started coming to me, and I just kept reading the book. The more that I read it the more I saw was going on that shouldn't be; the more confident I got with the book. By the time our executive got

back I had highlighted many, many pages in the book. When they got back they had heard that Chellae was helping us out a bit. They came to me and said, would you like to go to the shop steward course? I put it off for a little while because at the time I didn't really see what I could do in the union. I didn't really see it. I was under the impression that we had a wonderful government who looked out for our best interests, and everything was good. In fact, I'd never even voted. I believed that the government of Canada was--why would they ever lie to us? Why would they ever do something that was not good for the people? I often say, I wish now that I could turn around and not know these things, but also you've got that hunger for knowledge. So it's a double-edged sword – the more you know the more you want to fight, because there's so many injustices. But the more you know the harder your fight is, because you see it. If you talk to anyone who doesn't know about the post office, they might think you're talking in conspiracy theories. Of course the government does not want the post office to work, because Steven Harper, his initiative is to sell off public services. We can see it. Quite often when you start talking about it to people you've gotta hold back some of the information or else you lose them like you're talking about aliens. But, as time went on, the president retired, and he had groomed me to fill his spot. The more education I can get on union activism and labour law, I just suck it up like a sponge and it's absolutely amazing. The people I've met and the people I've been able to help, it's quite contagious. I love being an activist.

Q: So the one incident with the woman being threatened basically prompted you to become involved.

CR: That was the whole thing.

Q: So the first position you held with your local is president?

CR: No, I was actually chief shop steward before I even took the basic shop steward course, because the position became available and I'd said I would take the course. I already knew more than I needed to know to be a basic shop steward. I had highlighted so much information. I could quote our collective agreement, which is much thicker than

most. So that course was a breeze for me. Then I went from chief shop steward after a year and became president. And I've been president now, I'm on my second year.

Q: So you were elected president in 2014?

CR: Oh maybe it was 2013 actually.

Q: Can you tell us a bit more about some of the important work you're doing within your union? I know you have a big campaign on right now.

CR: Sure. Well we've actually had two things in Fort McMurray that have been really unsettling for the union. Like I said, they try everything in Fort McMurray first. We've had two restructures, and a restructure is where they change how the mail system is done. So the first restructure we had, they actually when they restructured us they took away Fedex parcels, counted the mail, brought Fedex parcels back, and then implemented the change. So what that did is give routes to us where Fedex parcels weren't included. When the Fedex parcels came back, there was a 478 percent increase in parcels, and that's the workload that a letter carrier had to somehow fit into their eight-hour day.

Q: So they weren't hiring any more people, but you were expected to take in the...

CR: Within that route. Now of course we couldn't get it done, and what happened come Christmas time is we saw the warehouse absolutely explode. In fact, they had to tell Edmonton to stop bringing parcels up because we couldn't get rid of the ones we had. The workers were working overtime and they were working weekends. We were doing our best for our customers to get the parcels out. But, as we see it, and it's been to arbitration and marginally won because of language in the collective agreement that wasn't clear. What they did is they privatized our parcel system. So in Fort McMurray postal workers no longer deliver parcels, it is privatized by a private company that delivers the parcels now. It's actually a shame because the service that they give is, I wouldn't say that the people are bad people who are delivering the parcels, but they don't have the same

standards as Canada Post workers. I've heard stories about where items that were signature items were left on the doorstep or thrown up the driveway. I had a man tell me he had a hand gun delivered that was a signature item, and it was tossed halfway up his driveway. Play Station 3s thrown in the backyard over a fence, stuff like that, and they didn't find it until three days later. The company that is doing the work has to leave the parcel. So they'll leave it anywhere, whether they can find the house or not. Quite often it'll be at the wrong house. The sad thing about this company is they work sometimes side by side with us and we hear the horrendous conditions they have. They got paid in November, they didn't get paid in December, they didn't get paid in January. Finally in February they spoke up and said, we're not working, after two months over Christmas of not getting paid. Their employer eventually paid them. But their contracting company is known for that, and all over the province they do the same thing.

Q: Has CUPW considered trying to organize that company?

CR: We have. They are, for the most part, they are Somalian workers. They seemed very nervous about signing a card. I think if something else was to happen with them I think they would join up, cuz they were on the edge of doing that. They seem to be scared. I don't know if their citizenship or their visas have been threatened by their company, because it seems to be a scare tactic that this company uses. I said to one of them, I said, these are the things we can help you with: getting paid, for one, and a benefit plan. She said to me, you know, I could never dream of that for myself; I think I'm gonna have to sign up with Blue Cross or someone like that, because I have my son; he needs to go to the dentist. I said, we get that all covered for us. She just couldn't believe that it could be possible for her, which is really sad. As Canadians we all feel that we deserve that to be taken care of. So they got paid just before they chose to turn that over. But I think if anything more were to happen, and I do believe it probably will, that they'd be more willing and ready to sign up with us.

Q: Do you think the company is using temporary foreign workers?

CR: I've asked and I've been told no, but they won't show us any of their information.

Q: Can you expand on the door-to-door campaign that you have underway?

CR: Ya, that was our second restructure that we've had. We were slotted to be the first in Canada, but then they added ten other cities as well. So we became one of the first 11 to be slotted to go to the community mailbox delivery system. What this system does is it takes the letter carrier out of the community and puts us all in vehicles and takes us all to central locations and puts the mail there. Everyone else comes and does the last part of what our normal route would be, comes and gets their own mail. There are so many reasons why this system doesn't work. I can go on with litter; there is litter all over the grounds in Fort McMurray right now around these community mailboxes, and we've only had them for six months. There was vandalism and we've had boxes broken into. Mail theft is a common type of crime right now. People want your credit card numbers, your social insurance numbers. People quite often say to me, well what's the difference, you're gonna put it in my mailbox at my house; that's not locked. But that's on your property. People have to venture onto your property and up to your door and make a blatant attempt at getting your mail. In the community mailboxes, quite often they'll just tip the whole thing right into the back of a truck and take it all. Really easy, really fast, and it's an easy crime to commit. They don't even think about the person. At least if you're going to someone's home, a criminal has got to be in the mindset of, I'm doing this to another person. If you're just taking a whole box, it's a lot easier of a crime to commit. The graffiti on the boxes as well: it's quite a target for that. One of the people who are affected most by this is our senior citizens and people with mobility issues. There's two ways you can actually get mail if you aren't able to get to the box. The first is change your address to a family member or friend's house, and they can bring the mail to you. The second is you can go to the doctor and get a letter from the doctor stating that you are not able to get your mail; you're not able to make it there for such and such a reason. Then you have to qualify through Canada Post as to if you can have your mail delivered to you once a week. These are the people who depend on mail, cuz most of the seniors don't have computer and internet banking and such. So they're waiting for their cheque and they

have to wait that much longer to get their cheque. So every Wednesday there's about 30 people in Fort McMurray who get their mail delivered to their door, and they only get it once a week.

Q: How successful do you think this campaign will be? Will it turn around what the government intends for the post office?

CR: In the beginning when we were the first 11, we tried to rally our community. I believe that Canada Post handpicked different communities. We have a workforce in Fort McMurray who works 12 hours and sleeps for 12 hours and goes back to work. We have a community that works 24 days and has 4 off. We have a community that flies in and flies out to different provinces. It was difficult to get people to join our cause, although we did very well at it. We had lots of people with lawn signs and we had lots of people sign petitions, and they were vocal. We had a lot of help through the district labour council as to committing to putting some hours and knocking on doors and such. We actually were able to go to our town council, and the town council wrote a resolution saying, no we don't want these here. So we were very effective that way. As communities go on, they've learned from us what else they can do. But when we were going through the process, there was only just over 40 and it had just crossed the 50 mark of communities that stood up to the government and wrote the resolutions and said no, we don't want this. To date now it was 527; I believe the brother said it was over 575 just in the last 24 hours, that many more have jumped onboard. So it's a fast-moving snowball effect; it started small and it's getting huge. You have cities like Vancouver and Toronto and Montreal and big cities such as Edmonton as well saying, no we don't want this. We're seeing more and more people jump onboard saying, hey this is our public service, we own this, and we don't want what you've got. Not only that, we've seen Canada Post now put in what their annual report was. They're making money hand over fist. They've tried to hide the money. They were successful in the last two years because in the last year they changed their accounting process where they showed more of their pension on their final number. They actually did the best they'd ever done in the history of Canada Post the year that they claimed they'd lost \$21 million. The year before, they had, I

believe a \$250 million settlement to pay out for not paying equal wages to women as men. So there was a lot of reasons why they were showing these losses. But they have such a strong propaganda machine that they're very hard to fight. For Canadians who believe everything that they see in the news and believe everything they read on Facebook, people like I used to be who thought the government had their best interests at heart, they believe this and it's very hard to change their mind on that. But this year has been great. They've shown that they've made a ton of money, and they have nowhere to hide it anymore. So the real question is, why do we still need to make the cuts? Why are we still cutting? I think Canadians are seeing this now. So with the snowball effect, ya, I think we have a really good chance at beating this.

Q: You said the post office paid out a lot of money to women who had not been paid the same rate as men?

CR: Right.

Q: Can you expand on that?

CR: Okay. I'm not sure about all the numbers, but in the early '80s and '90s and even up to the mid-2000s women were paid less than men were. They won a court battle for equity, and I can't remember the entire wording it is. But the women all got paid out the money that they were owed, so it was a lot of money that Canada Post had to pay.

Q: Can you tell us about any other specific events from a women's perspective?

CR: From a women's point of view. I just laugh at that because I was at an educational school in Port Elgin at the UNIFOR Centre, and they have this great political activist course and it's a whole month long. I know that they had a section and they said the same question, as a woman. At that point I had never actually thought of that as a question. We were studying at that point the different minority groups and the different, oh what's the wording, the different margins you could be. I'd never seen myself as a margin. So when

they asked me the question, as a woman what do you think you could do, I said, well as a person this is what I can do, this is what I believe in. Just because I'm a woman doesn't make me any less equal than a man. I can do that much and twice as much. Everyone has their own strengths and weaknesses and we all feed off that. I may be strong at one part; this person is strong at another part. So as a woman, never mind, but as a person this is what I'm capable of. Some people were a little taken aback by that because they felt very marginalized. A lot of people were, as a woman I can't do that. I was like, why not, why can't you do that? You're no different than this person over here. You're people; you can do anything; you can do anything.

Q: Are you involved in any other activities outside of the union activism? Are you involved politically?

CR: Not yet.

Q: What about the Labour Council in Fort McMurray?

CR: With the Labour Council I sit as trustee on the District Labour Council. We do a lot of functions for Big Brothers and Sisters; we raise funds for them. We do a lot of, we do parades, and we try and take door to door the Fairness Works campaign that the CLC has.

Q: Can you expand on that campaign a bit?

CR: We're just trying to get out there that what's fair for Canadians. A lot of Canadians don't believe that they have the right to the money from the oil; they don't know that that's theirs. They don't believe that they have the right to better education. They don't believe they have the right to better jobs. A lot of people who aren't in unions feel like, well how come the unions are complaining so much? They have all that; I don't have that. Instead of that attitude it's like, why don't you want that for yourself? We can help you get that. So it's just a matter of letting people know that it's there for you. You just have to want it, and we can help you get it.

Q: Do you have any other interests in your spare time?

CR: In my spare time I play hockey. I'm sporting some good bruises right now. I play hockey, baseball, soccer, geocaching, airsoft, pretty much as long as I can get outside, snowshoeing. All year round I like to be outside.

Q: Have you found any responsibilities you have that made your union activism challenging?

CR: No, my family understands that what I'm doing is bigger than just us.

Q: So you come from a very supportive environment.

CR: Yes.

Q: Anything else you'd like to add?

CR: That's all I got, I think.

[END]