Trevor Stewart

Interviewer Don Bouzek

Q: What part of Jamaica are you from?

TS: I'm from a small village close to Negril; tourists discovered it. Because they discovered it, the prices have gone with the discovery.

Q: Were you living in a tourist place when you were growing up?

TS: No, but close to there.

Q: I mean your house, etc.

TS: About middle class upbringing. I wasn't deprived. I wasn't what one would think of as living in the ghetto; I was not there. I was middle class with all the privileges of a middle class person. I saw what I had and the rest of the people never had, so at a young age I went kind of left. At the time it was Manley, which was left of centre, and he wanted the disparity between wealth, he wanted to close the gap. I saw the masses out there who didn't have what I had, from an early age. I remember coming from one of my friend's place and going down the hill. Across the road coming down from this affluent neighbourhood, across the street was this lean shack with some chickens running around. You look at this disparity of wealth, and I saw that.

Q: So you were there during the Manley period?

TS: Yes, well the father and the son. Yea, I was there. He came here, he came and talked at the U of A and talked about a lot of stuff. I hope I don't get very political here. But about the things that happened, the Americans and CIA getting involved in the politics of the country, guns getting down there because the Americans didn't want it to be left, because you and Castro will be friends.

Q: There's always been a U.S. presence in the whole Caribbean region.

TS: Yea, that's the fact and one of the realities. In Cuba with Batista, he was for America so they supported Batista. Look at Santo Domingo, look at Grenada – you saw the might of the United States in a little small country, because they were friendly with Cuba. ?? I'm being very political here. But this is true, these are facts. I've seen in Jamaica where they're fighting in factions there because one is left and one is right. The Americans destabilized Jamaica, that's a fact. Because Jamaica was getting too close to Castro on the left, that's a fact.

Q: Did you start your working life in Jamaica?

TS: No, I never did.

Q: You came here when you were young?

TS: I came here when I was 17 or 18. I'm maybe more Canadian in my philosophy. I am Canadian, I am Canadian. It's not just because I'm living here, but from my heart I am Canadian.

Q: What aspects of being Canadian are you committed to?

TS: Canada is, the United Nations said that Canada is. . . I've gone through racism here, in Montreal. But in Canada you don't have to get up on a stage: Yea I'm Canadian, I'm gonna kill the whole world to show the whole world I'm Canadian. But I am Canadian. I lived through the Trudeau era when he got up and said, I am a Canadian, I am not an American cousin; I am Canadian. Wave the flag and say, I am Canadian.

Q: Did you first go to Montreal when you came to Canada?

TS: Yes, I lived in Montreal for a lot of years.

Q: What were you doing in Montreal?

TS: I was manager for an import-export company.

Q: Was it your experience as well that there was discrimination at that time?

TS: Oh yes there was for myself. I was hanging out with the French people more than the English, because of structure. The PQ and the Quebecois said, hey man ?. We are the majority. I've seen there would be one English person and there'd be a thousand French people, and they would learn English. But that one English person, oui and non, that would be it. That was the mentality. That is the evolution of the political that's happening in Quebec today. I lived among the French people and I spoke French; there was a time when I forgot English. I'd forget a lot of the words in English, but I'd remember it in French because I lived so much among the Quebecois.

Q: That must have been an exciting time.

TS: In Montreal, yes. I'm on the street, I'd say ?? and all that stuff. Maybe in today's world it's so foreign that there was a time in Canada when we did that, when we got up and marched and we got up and fought and we got up and stood up. I was a student and I did a radical thing. But that is also Canadian history. I lived in the East, I lived in Montreal, and the passions, that's one of the things that carries over today – to fight with a passion for us. I've always believed that – the us.

Q: What other things were you fighting for when you were a student at that time?

TS: I fought for the equalities of French and English. I've seen the white Anglo-Saxon protestant mentality power. The power structure which was Quebec, I lived through that.

Q: That was the Duplessis period, wasn't it?

TS: No, ? was in power. It was after Duplessis. I'm not even going to go there, because it was man called Rock Head because he was black. We can't have a black think happening. The best artists and stuff would be coming, live music, jazz – that was the music scene. You had this multicultural thing happening. You had guys ? liquor and drink the stuff and party. Duplessis didn't like that. But I lived in the time of Jean Capeau. After Duplessis there was Jean Capeau, the leader from the Liberal party in Quebec.

Q: There was also Expo and all kinds of things.

TS: For Expo in 1967 my gift to Canada was to get to be a Canadian citizen. That was my gift to Canada. On Canada's 100th birthday I became a Canadian citizen. I am Canadian, I am Canadian.

Q: How did you get from Montreal to Edmonton?

TS: There was a downturn of the economy in Quebec. Nothing was happening in Quebec, everything was shutting down. I knew somebody out here. My friend and I decided to drive here in the middle of winter. Believe me it's true, Winnipeg is the coldest place in Canada. I drove through there in the middle of winter. Froze. We drove up here, it took three or four days in a sports car. I didn't want to see a car for a while after that.

Q: What did you do when you got to Edmonton?

TS: I had a wife and kid, so I looked for work. I also went to this commission here too. When I came here in 1978 or '79, this city was very narrow colour-wise, social-wise and philosophy. When I came here it was like going to the sticks compared to Montreal. I came here and there was no place to eat. In Montreal you could to to any little place and find someplace to eat, but I came here and there was no place to eat. I tried about three places; yuck, the food here was terrible. Food, oh awful food. Clothes here too, for about five years I did not buy clothes here. It was like, no I'm not buying clothes here. If you want to party, you and your friends go buy a case of beer or something like that and hang out together. I came here and everything was closed by about 12 o'clock. I was coming from Montreal where at 6 o'clock in the morning you could find

someplace to go. Well here at 12 o'clock everything shut down. So I went through that experience.

Q: Did you look for work and then bring your family with you?

TS: Yes, I did that.

Q: What did you end up doing at first?

TS: The first place I worked at, I worked at Royal Alec in their ? department; I had to find something else. I couldn't handle it. I did it for a year, and that's it. I told them, sorry, I'm going.

Q: Did you get the school board right after that?

TS: No, I worked for a couple of years for the ? centre. That was another experience, a stressful experience. I don't want to go there again. I read the newspaper for the school board. The school board get a border ticket and all that stuff so I can decide, why the hell not? You have a year to get your border ticket. So I went there and I got it. Since we're talking here on the record, this man called Mr. Steve Smallack, last night I was thinking about that. That man, before I got my ticket, the bus strike was happening and he'd come and pick me up and take me to school, pick me up to take me to work. This Ukrainian man introduced me to the Ukrainian life. This man, whose daughter was getting married, invited me and my wife to go there. First time I did the butterfly dance and all those things, and having midnight supper. That man was Mr. Steve Smallack. I just went to one of my friend's father's funeral last summer. By the way, Ukrainian ceremonies are long. I heard it in both languages twice. It was in Lamont. At the end of it we ended up having supper in the basement of the church.

Q: When you started working for the school board, was that the first time you were involved with a union?

TS: Yes. I did my think independently before that, as a student. Eugene, we worked together for a year. Don't tell him I said it, but we gave the boy hell. He said he was going to form a PAC committee and stuff. Eugene, oh. He's my brother, we worked together. We did it.

Q: What kinds of things were you involved with in that political action committee with 474?

TS: Eugene is the one who dragged me there and got me involved in political action. That's where I really got started in the union. Politically, the people who are in power affect all of us; that is reality. If you get the people who are socially conscious, it means that all of us will benefit from it. There's no elitist things happening here. It's not the guys with power and the money get the thing, or the big corporations. It's being able to relate to the average guy down the street. You go on the street down there, the man who walks there, or that single mother out there or single parent out there that doesn't have Medicare. If you're on welfare, get whatever you need to make you survive. Minimum wage, all those things got me involved.

Q: Were you involved in the anti-privatization campaign that 474 did?

TS: Everything, yes.

Q: Do you think it's important that the education system is public?

TS: As a matter of fact, I was talking to a bus driver yesterday about that. Education shouldn't be accessible only to the elite, to the people with the money or deep pockets who can fund those things. A couple weeks ago some kids died from one of these elitist schools. As a parent, you don't want to see these things happening. But the schools like that are there where the elite go to, and Mr. Klein is going put our public money into schools like these. I work all over the city. I go to Norwood area, I go to McAuley area, I see kids who I know would never be mainstream. I read an article yesterday about aboriginal people – this is a federal thing – who have the intellectual capability to go to university but there's no fund there. Public education comes back to all of us. This is the future of us, this is the survival of us, this is going on to the

next step of us – education. Education should be accessible to everybody, not to just elite, not to just the people who have the money. It should be accessible to everybody out there.

Q: That's something you would be familiar with from Jamaica.

TS: Yes, I grew up in an era where if you didn't have the money you did not go to a decent school. You go cutting cane or planting bananas or whatever, but no economy thrives on people who are not educated. Even me as a custodian, education – and Eugene will tell you that – it's a continuous thing. It's learning, it's growing, it's learning all these things. It's not stagnant, it's not static.

Q: Does the union make a difference in your workplace?

TS: As ? ended, Eugene, one of the things we fought for was getting somebody in a management position who could relate to us and know what is relevant to us, what we need. Because he came from there, he has an idea what you need. Even last week he was trying to set up a seminar for everybody. That is one example. The union staffing is one thing that we have also fought for, because you can't have Cadillac ? to the Volkswagen budget. Teaching administrators that are in their total budget what the cost of living ? it doesn't make a great significant dent in their budget but it makes an impact on the person and it makes an impact on what happens in your school. It's not make a great ? but maybe it looks good on paper

Q: The union is able to take a role in serving the rights of workers and everybody in the education system.

TS: At my local, we think of the whole fabric of the whole thing. If my local does its job and our members do their job, it makes for a better environment. Statistics have proven that a kid that goes into a welcoming, warm, clean environment tends to learn better. These are things that our union has fought for. The safety of staff and students and the community – those are things that my union has fought for. My union knows, thinks and believes that if we do our job, it means that the whole community benefits. That is one of the philosophies of 474. One of the

things that goes through our union is the sense of ownership. Going back to privatization, that's one of the things that came out of study that we did. You have some guy on the street who comes in, he doesn't have the same amount of pride – this is my school, I've got to make sure my school is happening, and does the PR things and the interpersonal things. One thing that isn't in the job descriptions is tying Johnny's shoes and helping with their coats and comforting a kid. All of those things are the philosophy of our union, the total embodiment of the whole fabric of the whole community wherever we work. It's not just I will go and do my custodial work, it is all of those other things that's not on the sheet.

Q: The typical social status of custodians is so different than the reality of their jobs.

TS: We just won a grievance there, because they assumed these guys are custodians, they're dummies. We got into a fight, and you know what happened? We won. We did our homework. They figured it would be a walkover. A lot of us have degrees. That's something that they don't understand. Some of us have degrees or went to university. So if you're going to fight with us, we're going to fight back. There's the assumption that if someone's pushing a broom or whatever, that equates to you being a moron. That is not true. Sometimes it's insulting. Personally, I go and talk to them, and I talk on their level. This week here, a teacher came in. I said, oh why are you so effervescent? What? I said, you're so bubbly this morning. Then she understood, oh man, he knows words like that.

Q: How old are your children?

TS: My youngest is 19.

Q: In this work that you're doing, what kind of world are you striving to make for them?

TS: My kids are better than I am. I think parents want them to be better than they are. So a lot of us, our kids have degrees, they have secure jobs, and they wear ties and suits.

Q: What kind of Canada do you want for them?

TS: One of the things I always fight, I don't want them to have less than we have. It's going to happen if people like me don't get up there and fight. You don't have the money, you don't have healthcare. You don't have the money, you don't go to university. Post-secondary is a given in today's world, but it will not be there if we as parents don't get out there and fight for that. As I said, this is a great country. I love this country here. I love the peace, I love the calm, I love that we can dialogue without fighting. That is one of the greatest things. We can have disparate views. I don't have to go for a gun for you or a machete or whatever because your philosophy is different from mine. That is one of the things I love about Canada. What I love about Canada is that, in the same vein is that local conscience and election happens, and man you know the election is happening or somebody's died down the road or something. Here most elections, you read about it in the newspaper or see it on TV. It's pretty calm and maybe a little bit too blasé, especially in this province it's too blasé.

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

TS: I helped somebody last year to become a Canadian citizen. One of the things that is said in that brochure about the Canadian citizen, you can be a Canadian citizen just by being a member of the community, doing something in your community. Help your neighbour. We are living in the same country, the same world. I'm coming down here and the sun is shining. It didn't differentiate between what socioeconomic place you're from, it was shining on all of us. This country is for all of us. Family and country mean a lot to me. I think lots of people don't value. . . Last week my lady sat and told me how lucky I was, and she told me things why I was lucky. She told me about my kids; my kids are decent kids, great kids. My kids aren't in trouble with the law. They're raised up, they're doing their thing. I do my thing out there. I came as an immigrant but I have a little bit of influence out there. I know a few people out there.

Q: Canadians don't have a sense of what they have, and that's why they're so blasé about giving it away.

TS: I would like Canadians to look at the other world out there. A fridge is not a constant in every house in this world, a phone neither. But just about every house in Canada has those things. A fridge is a norm, TV is a norm. How many countries in this world is that a norm? How many countries? When Chernobyl went up a few years ago in the Ukraine there, you know what happened? That nuclear dust didn't stay there. It ended up in Sweden. . . There was a volcano in the Philippines, it didn't stay in the Philippines. We are a global family. Things that happen here, your economy here. . . A couple years ago Vancouver's economy went down, because ? economy went down. We are not an island. We are part of the human race, we are part of this globe here. The last thing I'm going to say, we are all cousins. If one believes in the biblical way that there was Adam and Eve, it means that we are cousins. If you believe in anthropology which says the first man was in Africa, we are cousins. Should I kill my cousin?

Q: That's also why we're at the G8s.

TS: Yes. I didn't know if I would live or die. There were people who died all over the world. ? end up in jail. I wasn't sure I was coming back home. But I had to do that. I had to do it for us, for the human race. I remember the last vision I had, my lady standing at the window watching me go. The night before, she baked muffins for me to take on the bus to give everybody. Pauline cooked food for the people on the bus. I'm going to go home now and tell her, do some things with her, hang onto her. I didn't know if I was going to live or die, I did not know. I had to fight for this, I had to fight for it. It's one of those images, her standing in the tall window in the living room watching me go. That image is there. Okay you got me emotional here, man. I will not talk again ever, I will never talk again ever.

Q: That's the whole point. We're often bad at being emotional. But if you don't care about something, what's the point?

TS: Some people think it un-mans you when you get this emotional.

Q: I appreciate people who care.

TS: That's the thing. That's one of the reasons why I'm there. We don't get paid for this stuff, all the hours we put in. It's not for money, it's not for prestige – it's because we care.

[END]