

Vicki Gillingham

March 9, 2015 Interviewers: Winston Gereluk, Don Bouzek

VG: I work at Suncor as a process operator and I'm a unit leader for off-plots is our area.

Q: Do you hold any position in the union?

VG: Oh yes, I'm the chairperson for the women's committee.

Q: What is off-plots?

VG: Off-plots is we take care of the tank farm, so we take care of all the oil that we get from extraction that we send to the plant. Then we get the final product back from the plant that is shipped down the pipelines. So we take care of all the pipelines, all the pumps, all the tanks. We take care of some wastewater, wastewater from the plant, the leftover water and we treat that. We take care of sewage ponds, we take care of steam, natural gas and nitrogen. We take care of sulfur where the sulfur trucks load, we take care of that in off-plots. What else do we take care of? Off-plots is everything outside of the plant that kind of goes in and out offsite. It's kind of hard to explain, but we take care of a lot of the utilities. We're kind of support for the plants.

Q: When you say you take care of it, what exactly do you do?

VG: We maintain. Because I'm unit leader, I take care of all the permits for maintenance. I have my own crew and there's usually about six guys on a shift.

Q: Guys literally – not women?

VG: No, I'm the only girl in off-plots. I take care of them and I take care of all the permits, the maintenance.

Q: Tell me about your background.

VG: I was born in Pembroke, Ontario. The only reason I was there was because my mom married and moved there to Ontario. She's originally from Font du Lac, Saskatchewan, which is on the other side of Lake Athabasca. She married and moved to Ontario. But when I was two years old we moved back to this area, so I've been here in Fort McMurray since I was two and I've been back and forth from here to Fort Chip. So I lived in Fort Chip a lot of my life too, but I left Fort Chip in 1989 to come to school here. I've been working at Suncor since December '89.

Q: So you took your grade school in Fort Chip?

VG: Some of it. I went to school here too, like elementary, junior high, a little bit of high school. But then my mom moved us a lot, because I lived in Uranium City too and a little bit in Edmonton. She ended up being a single mom and then she remarried in 1980. So when I say my dad, my dad is from Fort Chip, like not my biological dad but it was the only dad I really knew.

Q: Is he an aboriginal person?

VG: Yep.

Q: How did they make a living?

VG: My dad did mostly carpentry work and my mom did a little bit of community health worker in Fort Chip. She did some work here, I think when I was a kid she worked at Safeway. Then we lived in Uranium City she worked in a, well Uranium City was like a big mining town way back when, and she worked at the camp in the kitchen there. But we moved around a lot, but most of my childhood was here and Fort Chip.

Q: Did you take your training for process operator here?

VG: Yes.

Q: What sort of training was that?

VG: It was a ten-month process operator program at Keyano. We did four months I believe at Keyano and six months steam time, they call it, so you can write your fourth class. I did six months at Suncor. It was kind of like a co-op program, but there was no pay or nothing. It was a long time ago. Now they get paid, co-op students get paid; they're lucky. It was a program that was funded by Canada Manpower, that's what they called it back then. You had to qualify to get unemployment insurance, like EI, so you got unemployment insurance while you went to school, or EI they used to call it, or I'm not sure what they call it now. That's who it was funded from or through. Like I said, there was four months at Keyano and six months, and Suncor is where I was placed. So when I finished my program and passed, Suncor hired me.

Q: How old were you at that time?

VG: Twenty, because I'm 45, I'll be 46. I've been at Suncor for 25 years, so I was 20. This is my 26th year.

Q: So they hired a young girl to be a process operator.

VG: Yes, in the cokers. It was really shitty. Can I say shitty? It was hard work. Oh my gosh, it was hard.

Q: Explain what that was.

VG: Well, before the tank farm, because that's where I am now, cokers and tank farm were together. You started off in the cokers as a grunt. Cokers is, well at Suncor we use cokers and it's a delayed coking thing, a delayed coking cycle it's called. In the cokers it's mostly, you're a pipefitter, you're a labourer, you're a boilermaker, you're everything because you have to, these drums get filled with the hot bitumen and then they're cooled, and that's where we get our vapours to make our gas oil, kerosene. That's part of the process. So you have to, in the cokers you have to dehead these big coke drums. So you take the top head off and of course you let all the water drain out, like the process is done, and then you take the bottom off of the drum. It's like a can so you take the top off, take the bottom off, and then there's somebody that cuts the coke with like a big drilling rig almost. So it's dirty, it's hot, it's hard work. You find out you have muscles in the back of your shoulders and neck here that you never thought you ever had. So there's a lot of work. It's like a can. You take the top and the bottom off. It's all impact wrenches and stuff. Then there's lots of cleaning up of the coke, because it gets everywhere.

Q: You clean it up with a shovel?

VG: Yes.

Q: How were you as a worker protected at that point?

VG: I wore a respirator all the time.

Q: Which is doubly hard, right?

VG: Yes, because it's sweaty and crappy and you get rashes. But it's better than breathing in coke dust.

Q: Were there lots of women working in the plant at that time?

VG: No, there was only me.

Q: Are you telling me that you were one of the first women?

VG: I was, well there was a few before me but they had babies and quit, and there was nobody when I started. There was no other women there when I started in '89. This area, like cokers and tank farm, was part of the whole upgrader. There was all the other plants together, so there was a lot of workers. There was probably I'm guessing maybe 15 of us on a shift, and there's four shifts, so there was a whole bunch of people in upgrading. But there was no girls.

Q: How did the other workers treat you?

VG: There was a lot of guys that didn't want me there. It was 1989, there was no other women. We had old school guys. I worked with guys that were there since 1967 since

Suncor started, so they were old school, I should've been at home, married, having babies. But I was 20 years old and I just had to get out of Fort Chip, so I just figured I'd try it. I thought I did okay.

Q: Did they insult you, or did they give you the dirtier jobs?

VG: No, they treated me okay. It's just some of the older guys that weren't too crazy about it. I had to work really hard, I had to work extra hard just to prove to them that I didn't need them to carry me, I didn't need them to do my work. There's a lot of valves too, the big valves. You got to turn valves and stuff, so there's lots of that in the process. It was tough, because I was shy. I grew up in Fort Chip. Fort Chip is, like you're bushed. I don't know if you've ever heard that term.

Q: I come from a farm far away from civilization.

VG: Yes, so when I came here and I started working out there I didn't even want to talk on the radio. I was too shy, I was shy, so I just worked hard. I got used to being out there and I just did my thing. I just had to work twice as hard as a guy so they knew that, you know, she can do her own job, we don't have to worry about her kind of thing. We don't have to do her work. When a girl comes to the plant they think, oh we're going to have to do all her work plus our work, we're going to have to carry her. So all you have to do, you got to work extra hard.

Q: Where were you living at this time?

VG: I was living in Abasand renting a townhouse sort of thing.

Q: Tell me what Abasand is.

VG: Abasand is just off of downtown, like you cross over the hospital street bridge there and just go up the hill. Now I live down in Grayling Terrace. I lived up there for four years. The reason I moved to Abasand is they were going to raise my rent to \$520 a month. Now you can't even rent a bedroom for \$520 a month. So I said, I'm not going to pay \$520. It was a townhouse, three bedroom, underground parking, it was nice. You had your own washer and dryer, it was okay. But I thought, I'm not paying \$520, I'll just buy my own house. So from Abasand if you come down Abasand hill and you keep going towards the creek, I'm down there in Grayling Terrace down in the flood zone.

Q: So your fellow workers gradually accepted you?

VG: Yes. There was some really good guys. I just had to work hard, had to work extra hard. They just had to know that I could do my own, I could do my own work, I didn't need anybody to help me. I guess I was stubborn.

Q: Where did you go from the coker?

VG: From the cokers, that was part of the progression, was tank farm. So I went cokers and then tank farm.

Q: What did you do at the tank farm?

VG: Tank farm at that time was just oil from extraction sent to the plant, and then after the process all the oil from the plant, like all the final products, like naphtha, kerosene, gas oil, all the final products up to the other tank farm, because we have two tank farms, the south tank farm and the north tank farm. South tank farm is all oil from extraction and north tank farm is final products that we sell.

Q: Which one were you in?

VG: I was in both.

Q: What did you do on a daily basis at that job?

VG: Tank farm, you have to maintain your levels in the tanks, make sure they're not getting too high or too low. If your tanks get too low you'll lose suction to the pipelines. In the south tank farm you have to make sure you have enough oil to feed the plant, so you had to make sure that your tank levels were good, take care of all the pumps. You do pump checks and make sure that all your pumps are good, your lubes are good, your seals are good. Logs, you have to log all your pumps and your levels. You maintain your tanks.

Q: How long did you do that?

VG: Quite a while. Then I trained as a unit leader for that progression.

Q: That's like a foreman?

VG: Yes. Then I went to, it was hard to get into the plant back then because you had to work your way through the cokers and tank farm, and then the plant jobs didn't open up very often. So there was a job open in the plant and I wanted to get more steam time so I could maybe write my third class, so I transferred and went back to the plant and went into plant 5, which is like the front end of our process. It's where we get the oil from the tank farm, from extraction, and we process it to send it to the cokers. So I went to that progression. Remember when I said the old guys, the old school? I ended up on a shift with two guys like that. Things didn't work out and I had to go back to the cokers.

Q: How did they make it hard for you?

VG: Well my unit leader didn't want me there. Some people, I don't know, some people say he didn't want no Indian on his shift, then the supervisor didn't want no woman on shift because the supervisor was an old farmer.

Q: So you're guilty on both counts.

VG: Yes, so they just made it really hard. They nitpicked me a lot. If you really think about it, it comes right down to just plain harassment.

Q: At any point did you try to get the union's help?

VG: Well my unit leader was part of the union, he was a union member. He just treated me like crap. But back then it was hard to say anything. He was trying to, he made it really hard for me. He was horrible. He was doing testing on me that nobody else had to go through to qualify in his plant. He was really unfair. He'd get the board man, like there's a board man that controls, like a panel operator that watches over the whole plant, so he'd make him give me false calls on the radio, then he'd watch me from somewhere in the plant and see how long it took me, how I reacted, even if I went to what the board man was asking me to check. So he'd do stuff like that. He'd test me to see how long it would take me to climb a vessel. He'd point at a line, and in the plant there's I'd have to say hundreds of lines. They're not labeled, and he'd just point at a line and ask me what it was. I'd be, like usually you can trace something out in about 20 minutes. So I'd tell him, just give me 20 minutes and I'll trace it out. You can't just point at a line and figure out what it is. Not everybody knows every line in the pipe rack.

Q: As a unit leader today, would you ask somebody to do that?

VC: No, no I wouldn't do that, because I know how it felt to be treated that way. While I was in plant 5 under this guy, well I had a baby, I had my daughter in 1995. When I went back to work he told me, I don't know if I'm allowed to swear, he said, the first day I went back after maternity, and back then was only six months maternity, he told me I was nothing... He was working as a move-up supervisor, so he was working in a staff position as a move-up, still part of the union but you can work so many hours as a supervisor without losing your union status. He was working as a move-up supervisor and he told me that, on my first day back to work it was hard enough leaving my baby, he said I was nothing but a fuckin embarrassment. I knew then that it was time to leave. So I couldn't work with him, I couldn't work with the supervisor. The supervisor backed him on all this. So I went back to the cokers and I had to start all over right from the bottom. I had to work my way all the way through again.

Q: And meanwhile you had this little baby at home.

VC: Yes.

Q: Talk about how you coped with the job and motherhood. How did you balance that?

VC: It was hard, because you have to be two different people. You have to be a work person at work, and a lot of time you can't call home. You're busy outside, you can't check on your baby all the time. I was lucky when my girl was small that my mom took care of her and my sister, so I had family taking care of her. That made it a lot easier, but it was hard because sometimes she'd be sick and I'd have to go to work, nightshift. But

one good thing was six days off was good because I had six days off with my girl. I always like working shift work because you have that extra time, you don't just have a Saturday and a Sunday.

Q: Did you have a partner at that time?

VC: Yes, her dad and I were together till she was two and a half. But he gambled a lot, so things kind of fell apart. So then it was really hard, because then I was a single mom because he was too busy gambling, which was sad. I didn't grow up with my biological father, so it was hard, and I didn't want that for my girl. But what can you do? It's hard to live with somebody who gambles and spends his whole paycheque and you foot the bill for everything. So it was okay though. I just wanted to take care of my girl, so I made sure I took good care of her. I ended up getting a nanny, like a live-in nanny, because it's hard to find a sitter. There's no such thing as nightshift daycare. You'll find in Fort McMurray that a lot of people have nannies because of the shift work.

Q: The shift work seems impossible – 12 hour shifts, then a swing shift...

VC: Well you get half a day off. You work three days and then three nights.

Q: So that makes it doubly hard to be with your child.

VC: Yes, it was okay, because as she got older she was in school. The nanny, I had three really good nannies for my girl. I was really lucky.

Q: Where did you find them?

VC: They're Filipino women. There's a lot of Filipino nannies, and I was really lucky to find three really good nannies. They still love each other. My girl and her nannies, they hug and kiss each other when they see each other in town here. A few of them had their families in the Philippines, so they got their families over, and it all worked out for them really good.

Q: Did they come in under the Temporary Foreign Worker program?

VC: It's under a live-in caregiver. It was way before this Temporary Foreign Worker. My girl's 19 now, so it was a long time ago.

Q: How's your girl doing?

VC: Good. She graduated – that was my main goal in life. She graduated in 2013. She's been working at the Keg and Liquor Depot. She saved a whole bunch of her money. She went to Central America backpacking for 50 days last year. Now she's working again, saving some more money. She's going to Indonesia for another 50 or 60 days, then she's applying for RCMP. She's old enough, like she turned 19 in December, she's old enough to apply for the RCMP. But she wants to work and save her money and do one more trip,

so she's going to travel a little bit before she applies. She won't be able to go traveling like that once she gets into the RCMP.

Q: Is your heritage important to you? Do you do anything to preserve it?

VC: Not a lot. You won't see me chewing on a piece of moose hide at home. I don't have a teepee in the back yard or a smokehouse or anything, because my yard's too small. But if I was living in Fort Chip, I probably would be chewing on moose hide and smoking moose meat and making dry meat. But when you live in Fort McMurray it's not the same. But I still, I don't know if you call it traditional, but I still enjoy eating moose meat and fish and ducks and geese and berries and stuff like that. But I don't know if you heard everything about Fort Chip and all the cancer. It's hard because people are scared to drink the water. The moose meat has arsenic in it; they found arsenic in the moose meat in Fort Chip. The fish they say not to eat more than once a week I think. It's really hard because there's a lot of cancer in Fort Chip. My dad has cancer right now. So it's tough. We still want to eat that. I don't know if it's just the Indian in you or the native. I don't mind being called Indian. People are like, oh don't say Indian – you're aboriginal, you're first nations. I don't need a big fancy title – Indian is good for me.

Q: We get used to calling people by different names, and I call you aboriginal.

VG: I won't be offended. But I don't know if it's something in you, but you enjoy eating moose meat. Caribou meat, fried caribou meat, boiled potatoes and bannock, like that's the best meal you could ever have. Caribou meat is so much nicer than moose meat, it's so nice and tender and soft.

Q: Where is the crap coming from in Fort Chip?

VG: From Suncor. They think the water has always been contaminated. Suncor has been around since '67, and they've had breaches in their dykes, like their tailings ponds dykes they figure have been seeping into the river. They won't actually say it, but that's what they figure has been happening. Then Syncrude came along, because they take water from the river, and right now we don't put anything in the river. When I said we take care of wastewater from the plants, we don't send anything to the river anymore. But we did when I first started.

Q: How did you?

VG: Like the water from the plant gets treated and we skim off any little bits of oil and whatever might be left in it, and there's settling ponds and stuff. So there was water going to the river before, but it was, and we tested it all the time, but I don't know if we tested it for a lot of other things. Years ago before I even started, I don't know what was going on with the wastewater part of it then. So they figure over the years this crap's gotten into the river. The stacks, the powerhouse stack, because they burn coke from our process, they burn the coke that fires the boilers. But they have cleaned up what they're putting into the

air over the years. I'm not sure what they did in the power house but I know they've converted to a new system years ago where they're scrubbing out a lot of the emissions.

Q: But they didn't used to?

VG: I don't think so, no.

Q: People say there were times in Fort Chip when you could actually see the residue in the snow.

VG: Oh really?

Q: Is that something you experienced?

VG: Well I was a kid, teenagers don't really... But I remember when I was younger years ago, we're talking probably in the early '80s, there was times when you couldn't eat the fish because it actually smelled like oil. They were advising, I think they still advise pregnant women not to eat the fish from the lake. So a lot of times my dad would go inland, like an inland lake, not Lake Athabasca but another lake, like the water isn't the same as Lake Athabasca, it's fresher water I guess. We'd get fish from an inland lake. But people that grew up in Fort Chip, and my mom grew up on the other side of the lake, like Font du Lac. Lake Athabasca is huge, so Fort Chip's here and on the Saskatchewan side is Font du Lac. So people that have grown up all their lives on this lake, my mom and dad love fish.

Q: And as you said, your people live off the land.

VG: Yesfish, caribou meat, moose meat, berries, muskrats. Don't get a lot of muskrats anymore.

Q: Did you eat muskrats?

VG: Yes, smoked muskrat. It's good stuff. All that stuff – beaver meat, rats, beaver meat. Yes, rabbits.

Q: Are lots of aboriginal people working in the plant, or are you still a very small minority?

VG: There's not too many. There's not a lot.

Q: So they're not hiring locally?

VG: I don't think that a lot of people, like natives, Indians, whatever, will stick to a program like schooling. I shouldn't say a lot, but it's tough. It's tough to leave home. I didn't want to leave my granny. I was taking care of my granny with my dad. My dad worked at night and I worked during the day, because my granny was blind so somebody

had to be with her all the time. So we worked shift – I worked during the day and my dad was home, then he worked at night so then I was with my granny at night. I didn't want to leave her, it was hard for me. It was hard for me to stay in school here, because I got really lonely. It's tough leaving home, it's tough leaving your granny.

Q: What made you different?

VG: Oh I knew I had to get out of Fort Chip. There was nothing there. I worked for Municipal Affairs, I don't know what they call it now. It's part of the government. There's a lot of government jobs in Chip. They'd have so much funding and then once that funding runs out then, so I was doing odd jobs around like the volunteer fire department and I was doing a water meter survey. Fort Chip, you know we didn't even have running water till like the '80s. We still lived off barrels of water in our kitchen; we had no running water. So then when they put the running water in, it was just like a tap, it wasn't like flush toilets and kitchen water. There was no money for all that.

Q: When they put the taps in, where did the water come from?

VG: From the lake. That's why everybody's dying in Chip of cancer I guess. I don't know. I don't know if it was just the water we drank. There was no water treatment, there was just settling ponds just to settle out the sediment. Fort Chip on that end of the lake is where all the rivers come in, so it's kind of muddy. It's a delta where Fort Chip sits, so the water is muddy. As you go further up the lake it's beautiful, like the water clears up. But then you get closer to Uranium City and what's in the water up there – radium, uranium, I don't know. I don't know what's up there, but all I know is when I lived in Uranium City we had a Geiger counter in our basement. So did any of that seep into the lake? Who knows.

Q: It's a beautiful setting there, isn't it?

VG: Yes. But the water gets clearer up there. So in Fort Chip there was no water treatment, it was just settling ponds. Then they'd pump off the top I guess and you'd get water delivered in, actually we had an old man named Leo who used to deliver water with a horse and a cart. I was going to say buggy, but buggy is for people. It was like a cart. Then eventually we got this tap and it was like, ooh, I got a little tap, a little water line coming in the house. But before that it was all, like I said, the water barrel in the kitchen, slop pails. I bet you know what a slop pail is. And a wood stove. We didn't have a furnace. There's no natural gas in Fort Chip, it's all fuel oil or woodstove. Well we had a woodstove.

Q: So the plant doesn't have a policy to hire locally?

VG: Well I don't know. When I got hired I think they, maybe because I did all my time, I didn't miss time, like that six months I said I had to do. I didn't miss any time, so I don't know if they just thought, yes, she might work out okay. She might actually show up for work. I don't know. Or maybe they thought, ooh, she's native, she's a girl, we could say

we hired a native girl. I don't know. I worked hard, I didn't miss work, I wasn't getting paid from Suncor. And they gave me a job.

Q: When you ran into that early discrimination from those old school boys, was the union not very helpful at that time?

VG: No. And people knew what was going on. I don't know if they were just scared of these guys, but after the fact they're like, yes, well so and so didn't want no Indian in his plant, so and so didn't want no girl in his plant. I'm like, well why didn't you say something, why didn't you help me out here? The guy that was training me, he was a good guy. If I was just a piece of shit he would've have lied about it, he would've said, yes, she's garbage, don't keep her in the plant, send her back to the cokers. But he wouldn't lie, he was an honest guy. But the other guys just didn't want me there, the unit leader and the supervisor. So I couldn't stay.

Q: At what point did you become involved with the union?

VG: I didn't really go to a lot of union meetings because it was mostly all the guys. Then Angela Adams used to be our, what was she?

Q: Secretary Treasurer?

VG: Yes, but she was so much more than that. She was big in the union. Her and Kim Conway were in the women's committee and they invited me to a meeting. That was a few years back. I started going to the women's committee meetings and then I started hanging out at the hall a little bit and just offering my help. I figured I should give back. So that's how I became involved with the union more.

Q: Did you find that getting involved with the union helped you in the plant, now that they know that you're somebody in the union?

VG: No, because that was years ago all that crap happened. When I went back to the cokers, like I said, I left the plant and went back to the cokers and started off, I would just work my way through and I eventually got back to a unit leader position. I'm not that guy, I'm not that guy that picks on people. I help my guys as much as I can. If I don't know, I'll figure it out or I'll find out, if they don't know certain things about their job or pieces of equipment. I'll never be that guy to anybody.

Q: How do they respond to working under the direction of a woman?

VG: They don't mind, because they know that I'm there to help them. I'm sure there's some days they think I'm a pain in the butt, but I work pretty good with people. I'm not mean and nasty, I'm helpful. I have a little bit of OCD, so that helps, because everything has to be in order. I just try to make everything run smooth. If they need help I'm there to help them.

Q: Did you ever have to discipline anyone or start the disciplinary process?

VG: No, because I figure that's a supervisor's job. But if somebody's acting up or being a shit head, I'll tell them nicely, you know, don't mess around or don't do that. I just don't want to see anybody in trouble. I just try to help them out, not carry them, but help them, like if they need to be reminded, do your pump logs or do your truck sheets or whatever. I'm not going to be nasty, I'm not going to be mean – I don't have it in me I guess.

Q: Some guys are their own worst enemies, but luckily you haven't run into that kind of problem.

VG: Yes. And everybody knows their job. Everybody knows the rules, everybody knows what they have to do, so everybody knows what they're going to get in trouble for. If you want to push that and you don't want to listen to anybody, because most of the guys will correct each other. They all know what they have to do and everybody knows what they're going to get in trouble for if they're messing around. Lately it's been pretty, they're watching everything at work. They're watching your paperwork, they're watching your permits. It's pretty tense at work lately.

Q: Why is that?

VG: I don't know. Last year they fired a guy that was there for 28 years. Last month they fired the only other girl in off plots. She was at Suncor for 20 years. I'm like, are they trying to get rid of all the long service people? I said, geez, maybe I'm next.

Q: They must have had cause.

VG: It was over permits. We get a lot of permits. There's a lot of maintenance that goes on and you got to be really careful. When you're doing jobs, not only are, like people's safety is in your hands. You got to make sure everything is safe to work on, you got to make sure nothing's sour. You got to make sure all your permits are topnotch, everything's covered.

Q: We heard about the 12-hour shifts – three days, three nights, and six days off. We can't believe they would put such a shift system into operation. Problems must result from the fact that people must be tired.

VG: You get on the bus at 5:30 in the morning and you get home at quarter to 8. It's a long day.

Q: It's especially hard on women, who are often expected to run the home.

VG: Oh don't worry, I get up at, like I said, I got up at 4 o'clock this morning. That was just to do little extra stuff around the house. The people I live with, my family – my husband, my kid and my dog – yes, they're rotten sometimes. They make messes, they

don't put stuff back where it belongs. Yes, those people I live with are something else sometimes.

Q: Women have to jobs, because they're often expected to take care of the home.

VG: Yes, because this morning I did a load of laundry, I washed some dishes, I packed my husband's lunch, I fed my dog, I let my dog out. I have to talk to my dog because she expects long conversations. I packed my lunch. What else did I do? Tidied up a little bit. Yes, I got shit to do in the mornings. Then when I went home tonight around the house, change, talk to the dog again, let her out, give her a little treat. Yes, they're needy.

Q: You're chair of the women's committee – tell me what the women's committee does. Does it address any of these real problems faced by women who are in the working world?

VG: Well mostly when we get together we talk mostly about work. But then we talk about our kids too and stuff a little bit. We try to support certain things in town, like say Canada Day parade, Labour Day picnic. We fundraise for Family Crisis Society, and last year we raised I think \$3,000 at our Christmas party. So the women's committee organizes the union Christmas party. I got a bunch of silent auction items that we made money off, and all that money goes to the Family Crisis Society because they're trying to, it's sad, but they need to build a bigger women's shelter. I know it's sad, but whatever fundraising we do all our money goes to the Family Crisis Society.

Q: Do women have more trouble in Fort McMurray, given the nature of the community, the large transient population, etc.?

VG: It's hard to say. It's a shift working town; it's a hard life. And in Fort McMurray there's lots of money, so then you get people like my ex gambling, lots of drinking, drugs, because there's lots of money around. But for women, I don't know. A lot of women work shift too. It's a young community, Fort McMurray is young. So is there lots of partying? I don't know, I got all that out of my system when I was young. I did all the partying, smoked the dope, you know, I did it all. You do that when you're young – 17, 18, 19. Get it out of your system, then you have to grow up and get a job and start a family.

Q: You indicated you didn't go to the union because it was mainly those guys. Is one of the mandates of the women's committee to make the union more responsive to the needs of women members?

VG: I think the guys realize that they can't get away with it like they used to. I wish I could get more women coming to the women's committee meetings. I even feed them, I buy snacks. There's frickin cupcakes – come to my meeting. I buy the healthy shit too. There's a veggie tray, here's the fruit tray, here's the frickin cupcakes – come to my meeting. I try to bribe them.

Q: Are there a lot of women members?

VG: There's quite a few. I don't know the exact number, but there's quite a few. But women are a lot tougher I think than 1989. I think men are a lot more, I wouldn't say compassionate; they're a lot more, they're not such asses. You don't have a lot of those old school guys that think women should be having babies. I had one, that was enough. That was enough for me. It wasn't a beautiful experience, I'll tell you that much. Thirty six hours and this frickin' kid, ending up having a C-section – that wasn't a beautiful thing, no. If some women have more babies, good for them. But Yes, one was enough for me. But I just think that men are, maybe they just realize that, yes, these women aren't going anywhere, we've got to put up with them. Most of the women are good workers, otherwise they wouldn't last.

Q: Do you think women are still watched a little more than men, that there's more monitoring?

VG: I don't know about monitoring. You're not a guy but if you're working in a guy's world you got to work hard. You have to prove that you can do it. You got to let them know that you're not this delicate flower. You're at frickin Suncor, you're not working at a chocolate factory. The girls got to step up to the plate too and say, hey I got to toughen up. Sometimes the guys are rough and you just got to say, hey I can do it. If you need help, just ask. There's good guys. I work with good guys.

Q: Do you see any sexual harassment of the women members? Does the union have to deal with that once in a while?

VG: I never see any other women now. I work with all men. Well I see women coming to get permits and that, like contractors or like Catherine Canning. I think you're going to meet with her. She's an electrician. I saw her today, she came for permits. It's nice to see other girls. But I wouldn't say, like we joke around and that, but there's no like nobody's going for a boob or anything. I've never seen that. I work with good guys, like I said. We joke around. I probably have a potty mouth too once in a while, but there's nothing that goes over the line. I've been there so long sometimes I don't even feel like a girl. I went to a wedding once, somebody got married at work and I went to a wedding. This guy said, wow. I said, what? You look like a girl. I'm a girl, yes I'm a girl and clean, my hair is combed, got a skirt on. Yes, I'm a girl. He's just, I never see you as a girl. That kind of thing. You just blend in, you end up being one of the guys. Girls just got to work hard. A lot of the stuff you just, whatever, guys are guys. They'll talk about stuff, and a lot of times I just don't even hear it. It's hard to talk about girls in other areas because the only one, well there was one other girl and they fired her last month, and that sucks. But we weren't even on the same shift.

Q: Are you involved when the unit steps up to protect people from discipline or unfair treatment?

VG: No. If it gets to that level, usually you're shit outta luck. It's tough once you're getting disciplined and that. I've been disciplined. I've had discipline letters on my file. I've had two in 25 years.

Q: What did you get disciplined for?

VG: Oh the first one was horrible; you're going to love this story. We get forced in for overtime on our days off if they need coverage and you have the lowest hours overtime. I always strive for zero, zero overtime hours, because I'd rather be home with my kid broke than be at work working overtime. That was one thing I always, I dedicated myself to my girl because she's my heart. She'll always be my heart. That kid is my everything. I'm married now, I've been married five years or four years; I have to go look at the napkin. Going on five years, I think. That's awful. But this kid is my heart, so I dedicated all my time to her. I made sure this kid was happy, well-rounded, manners, she was always in lots of sports. I had six days at work and I had six days with my girl. That's how I kind of, I wouldn't say balanced, but I just dedicated myself to my girl because that's your kid, you got to take care of them. You're their mom and that's it. So I never liked working overtime right from the start.

I liked my six days off. But if they need coverage and you're the lowest hours on the overtime, you're forced in to work overtime. They have to cover the shifts, they have to cover the positions. So you're supposed to only be forced every second long change. We were really short years ago, and we were getting forced pretty much every long change for a while. They'd just say, well we can't help it, you're forced in again, just grieve it, put it through the union and grieve it. But you got to come to work. So I'd just suck it up, I had to do my share too. Didn't like it, but... There was one time when my mother was watching my girl. My mom has a pacemaker because her heart was defective. Every so often she has to go to Edmonton for a checkup clinic thing. I was forced in, for one shift I was forced in. My mother was gone out of town, my sister wasn't here. I had nobody just at the drop of a dime to take care of my girl. I was forced in, and I couldn't come to work. So I called and told them, I can't come, I don't have a babysitter. Well I got a blue letter. I think it goes yellow, green, blue, pink, and then you're fired kind of thing. The discipline colours of the letters, I got a blue letter, and that was pretty bad.

Q: That sounds unreasonable.

VG: Yes, but, and the shitty thing is they told me, next time call in sick. I said, I'm not going to lie. So they were telling me to lie and I said, no. I was being truthful and honest and I got a letter for it? The supervisor, he's long gone now. He said, the next time this happens you better just call in sick. So they're saying lie, so I got disciplined for being honest. I had no sitter for one day, and it wasn't good enough. That wasn't a good enough excuse.

Q: Why didn't you go to the union?

VG: I did, and I got them to grieve it. But it still stayed on my file. It can stay on your file for a year.

Q: So you didn't win the grievance?

VG: No, no. So that was, that's the tough part. My girl was five or six. What am I supposed to do? Bring her in and put her back on the panel with the board man? Here, here's my kid, I'll be out in the cokers. Take care of her, feed her something, play cards with her, I don't know.

Q: Did your child manage to stay out of trouble in Fort McMurray?

VG: Yes, because I kept her in sports. I kept that kid busy right from when she was small. She played everything in school: soccer, basketball, volleyball, she was on the cheer squad, cross-country running, ringette, and her last sport she played was lacrosse.

Q: What did you think about the famous case about drugs that your union got involved in?

VG: Well I didn't like, what they wanted to do was just pick random people, like you're up, piss test. That's not fair, because there were some people that weren't even included, like the office people. It was like safety sensitive workers. People in administration offices weren't part of that; they could all be crack heads for all you know. You don't know – coke heads, whatever. But they weren't part of it, so that part's not fair.

Q: Did you witness in your years there that drugs were a problem? Were people under the influence?

VG: Not at work. You see the odd guy years ago would come in like maybe hung over smelling like booze. Like geez, just go rest somewhere for a while. I know you're not supposed to cover for people, but it happens.

Q: Why did the company get so tough on it suddenly?

VG: I don't know. I don't remember a whole bunch of incidents happening where people were drunk or stoned. I don't know where they based it, I don't know what they based it from. I never saw a lot of any of that going on. You do that on your days off. I never seen a lot of that at work; the odd hangover or whatever. I did it once on the cokers and I'll never do it again. I was young. Go to work hung over, working in the cokers in the summer with a hangover. No. It was horrible because you're hung over, you're sick, you're dehydrated, you're shoveling coke, you're swinging valves, you're on the impact wrench. You don't want to do that. I learned my lesson; did it once. I'm not doing this again; it's not worth it. But you're 20, 21, you're being an ars.

Q: As a Suncor worker and a resident of Fort McMurray, what do you think when you hear the rumors about dirty oil?

VG: It's not just being a resident of Fort McMurray. It's being somebody that grew up in Fort Chip. Like I talked about the cancer, and there's lots of lupus. Lupus is supposed to be a really rare disease but there's like 10 people, even my cousin has lupus in Fort Chip. They don't know what it's linked to. So not just being a person from Fort McMurray, it's that Indian part of me from Fort Chip – you can't eat the fish or you shouldn't eat the moose meat – that part of the dirty oil story. It's hard for me because my band, I belong to the Athabasca Chipewyan First Nations, and my cousin Yayo, well his name's Allan, Adam is the chief, he fights a lot of these companies. He tries to work with them but what he wants, he had a big fight with Shell because... Most of the time my dad works, not works, but he sits on a lot of these boards and they just want to be included, they want to be consulted on your new project or your new expansion. Part of our reserve is just down the river here from Fort McKay, so there's a little piece there and then another big chunk in the delta across from Fort Chip is our reserve. So they just want to know what's going on. So it's hard to be a member, because a lot of my cousins, some of them get really radical. They're crazy. Maybe it's just the Indian in them, I don't know.

Q: Well, the land is being poisoned.

VG: Well that and they just get pissed off at you because you work at Suncor, and how could you work there. So it makes it hard that way. But like I said, I started from Fort Chip, my job was finished there, I graduated and just needed something to do. Had to go to work. My granny told me to go, even though I had a hard time leaving her. She just said, you got to go to work somewhere, you got to get a good job. So it's hard because you work at Suncor for 25 years and then there's the other part of you where your people condemn the oil sands, the dirty oil kind of thing. Sometimes even my mom kind of doesn't like it I don't think, but my dad.... Like my mom lives here and my dad lives in Fort Chip. My dad tries to look at both sides. He tries to look at the company's side and how they consult with the bands and stuff. He doesn't take a side, he kind of works with both. So you're kind of, they call it dirty oil but I know that a lot of things have improved at Suncor. I don't want to be a company [person], you know what I mean?

Q: Tell me about some of the good things.

VG: Like I said, with the power hose cleaning up their affluent or their stacks, we don't use as much water from the river. We reuse water. We don't put water to the river anymore, there's no outfall going. Well we call it outfall, it's just water going to the river. There's a lot of oil recovery. We try to clean up as much as we can now. I know they're trying. All this dirty oil, they're not going to shut down Suncor, Syncrude, Shell, Curl Lake. They're not going to shut all these places down. I'm kind of stuck in the middle between working at Suncor and then my cousins and the people in Fort Chip mean a lot to me too. But there's a lot of people from Fort Chip that work in the oil sands too. I can't trash this dirty oil, I can't really say it, because I work here. I made a living here, I made a good living here. I took care of my girl really good. That kid's never gone without anything. She doesn't know what a slop pail is and a woodstove. She has everything that I never had growing up. She's not one of those spoiled rotten kids you don't want to be

around. But I gave her a good life, and working at Suncor did that for me. I can't trash it. I've seen a lot of improvements. A lot of people come to work here from all over the world. I don't think a lot of people that work in oil sands would call it dirty oil and trash it, because how can you?

Q: Is the oil itself dirty?

VG: I'd say no, because it's closely monitored. They can't get away with being dirty. I know a lot of people were upset about all those ducks that landed at Syncrude – not Suncor, Syncrude. I don't know if that's where it all started, or just seeing tailings ponds from the air. I don't work with tailings ponds. I like eating ducks, but... I don't know, the people that call it dirty, they don't work here. They don't live in Fort McMurray, they haven't made a living from here. Maybe some have and now they're totally against it, I don't know. But I wouldn't say it's dirty; I just can't put that label on it. It's hard for me, because I grew up in Fort Chip.

Q: Could you describe something about living in Fort Chip as a young person? Talk to Winston.

VG: Living in Fort Chip it was awesome because you're so free. I think Fort Chip might have 1,200 people. When you're a kid in Fort Chip you don't have to worry, you can just run and play. You go home when you're hungry, unless you had to cut wood or haul water. You had to do a lot of chores. But it was fun, it was free, you didn't have to worry about anybody nabbing you, like kidnapping or whatever. Everybody knew everybody, so everybody took care of each other and watched out for each other's kids. It was nice because we'd go out in the bush. When you're a kid too a lot of times you didn't want to go in the bush but you got dragged in the bush with your mom and dad to go either hunting or picking berries. My mom and dad always wanted to be out in the bush in the summer. But it was fun – camping, fishing, swimming, duck on a stick. All that stuff is good when you're growing up, and Fort Chip was a free place to live. You didn't have to worry, because it's small. You know how it is, being from a small town. It's like a hug. Everybody cares about you, everybody watches out for you. It was the best time of my life, living in Fort Chip.

Q: You felt like you were part of nature; nature wasn't alien.

VG: No, and I still enjoy going up there. My dad's still there. I bought a piece of land, I just haven't bit the bullet yet and built a house because I'm cheap maybe. It's hard to build something up there. What I'm trying to do is save all my money so I don't have to have a mortgage – just buy something and build it or whatever. So I like being in Fort Chip because - you've been to Fort Chip, things slow down 100 km. People still sit down and have supper together, like families have supper together. It's not a rat race. I think there's one pedestrian light in Fort Chip. People visit, play cards in the evenings. It's quiet, peaceful, relaxing. It's a good place. I don't know if that answers your question. . . . When you get hungry, that's when you go home. If you're messing around and getting in shit, somebody will give you a whack, like your auntie or cousin or whoever. Then

they're going to call your mom and tell your mom and then you're going to get a smack when you get home. So everybody watched out for everybody else's kids and there was no messing around.

Q: Now we get the horrible news about all the aboriginal women who disappeared.

VG: There were two from Fort Chip.

Q: What's that all about?

VG: It's hard for me, because one of them was my friend Shirley Ann Walkwin. I think she's been missing since 2001, I can't remember. It's been quite a while. They never found her. But she got into the drugs, she got into the drugs and she went missing from here, from Fort McMurray. She got into the crack cocaine and selling drugs. There's two paths; she just went down the wrong path. It's hard for me, because I think about her. Then there was a young girl that went missing in Nisku, and all they ever found was her head or her skull. She was from Fort Chip too. I don't know what happened, I don't know the whole story. I know her mom, I don't know her. Like I said, I left in '89, and she probably was a baby when I left or she might not have even been born yet. So it's hard because I don't know what happened. That kind of stuff didn't happen in Fort Chip, that was out of Fort Chip. But it's just hard because it's girls from Chip.

Q: The national association has called for a national inquiry.

VG: They're saying that it's not, well what did the prime minister say? It's not a, how did he explain it, it's not a social thing or something. It was because of the way native people live or something. He didn't think it was a problem.

Q: Why are so many Indian women getting murdered these days?

VG: People must think that. They made it sound like it was all their spouses or boyfriends and husbands killing them. It's not; that's not the case. A lot of them, I think they must think that native women are weak. They must think they can nab you and nobody's going to care where you are and nobody cares who you are. I don't know why there are so many missing, but there's a lot. Native women aren't garbage, they have worth. Those guys in BC fed them to pigs. That's sad. They'll never find, they found a little bit of bones here and there, but those pigs ate those. It wasn't all native women either, but there was a lot. They'd take them off the street from the rough parts of Vancouver. So I don't know why it happens. I don't know if they just think nobody cares about you because you're an Indian woman, or nobody's going to miss you, you're just garbage. I don't know if that's what they think. But it's not all the spouses and husbands that are doing it. They don't even catch the people. But I guess they don't catch anybody because they don't, maybe they don't investigate it.

[END]