

Suzanne Sirias

SS: My name is Suzanne Sirias and I'm a social worker for Chinook Health for community mental health. I belong to the Health Sciences Association of Alberta. We don't really have a local. It's a bit different than AUPE.

Q: Tell us about your background.

SS: I was born in Prince Edward Island but I was raised and grew up in Lethbridge. So I haven't gone far from home. Both of my parents have political connections in that my paternal grandfather was the mayor of Kitchener, Ontario during the '30s and my maternal grandfather was an MP for the Niagara Peninsula. Both of them Liberal backgrounds. I wouldn't say they were opposed to trade unionists, I don't think they knew what they were at that time. My influence from my parents was one of fairness for the underdog. It wasn't so much a political belief, I guess, that spawned from me later on when I saw unfairness.

Q: Do you remember any other influences on your life?

SS: I've had teachers and bosses along the way that confirmed that society needs to be a just society. I guess that's why I went into social work, because I have a sense of being your brother's keeper and being aware of being fortunate being born in Canada, being white, those kind of things. It's just having an awareness of that. People that have influenced me are people that have shared that message.

Q: Describe how you became a social worker.

SS: My mom was quite an influence. She was a schoolteacher in the area. At the time, they were busing in Aboriginal children to the junior high in Lethbridge, and that is quite

a long bus ride. I can remember as a kid, my mom took the underdog under her wing and would tutor them at home if they weren't keeping up with the rest of the class. I was trying to aspire to being a very cool, hep junior high person. I'd go home and my mom would have probably the most disenfranchised kids sitting at our kitchen table and she was tutoring them. That was my first conscious awareness of equality. The other thing I remember quite clearly is they didn't have lunchrooms in this junior high I belonged to. So these poor kids would have to eat their lunch on the bus, because most of the other kids went home for lunch. So here they bused in these kids; there was no resources for them because they had to stay. And we have cold winters. I guess the bus driver would turn the bus on. I clearly remember thinking, if you're going to bus them in, for heavens' sake, provide someplace decent for them to eat. So it's those kind of memories that encouraged me to go into...well at the time I went to university in Calgary they didn't have a department of social work. I'm old; they didn't have that. So I went and got my degree in Psychology and then ended up becoming a registered social worker after the fact.

Q: How did one become a registered social worker back then?

SS: I got a degree in psychology. I kind of fooled around with courses in Athabasca and went on and got a second degree. The College of Social Work had a grandfathering in program about five years ago. So we had to take a few courses and I was able to grandfather in with some undergraduate degrees and some more courses.

Q: What kind of conditions did you encounter in your first job?

SS: Right out of university I worked at William Roper Hall Home in Calgary. I went to U of C and right out of school I went to William Roper Hall Home. At the time it was pre-medication time, a time they were practising reality therapy. In hindsight you look and you were young and enthusiastic and you think you're doing the best by these young kids that were in trouble in school or in trouble with the law. I think back now and I think it must've been a pretty awful situation for them. Probably lots of them were undiagnosed

schizophrenics or depression, etc. It was more of a behavior mod program when really what was called for was maybe a little more psychiatric intervention.

Q: Tell us a bit about the work that you specifically did.

SS: I worked with troubled youth and troubled teens. It was more of a behavior modification program, rewards and punishment of time out and isolation and things like that. I'm sure it was quite different than Hall Home is today. We're talking about the '70s. So there's a lot of different therapies out there, very unusual therapies that I think now people would be dismayed. So from there I moved down to the States for a while, got married, had kids, and went back to work in the mental health field at the Raymond Care Centre, which was a psycho-geriatric institute. Again, I worked with people with chronic mental health issues. These were people that actually, it was a sister hospital to Ponoka. The history of the Raymond Care Centre was quite interesting. People actually came by train when they downsizing Ponoka, they came by train and car. Raymond Care Centre started in the '30s. Listening to the history of the care centre and how these patients arrived here from Ponoka was quite interesting. One of the things that I thought was so unbelievable when I started at the care centre was some of these little old ladies; I think if you're not insane when you go into an institute you soon will be, just by virtue of proximity. Some of these little old ladies, going into the archives and reading their files, they were there for circumstances that just would never happen today. That really dismayed me. These were war brides that came from England and Ireland and came out to the prairies and their husband went to find work and left them abandoned, and were found destitute. One little lady that I just adored, she lived on a farm, she was from a Ukrainian family, she was quite a little social gal, and she would sneak out and go to dances. She was certified and sent to Ponoka and then sent to Raymond, because she stole her sister's boyfriend and was a little bit of a flirt and didn't stay home on the farm. The doctor came to town in a horse and buggy, mom and dad, and they put her in an institute. You could do that. So that was such a shock. Then we also had patients who were sterilized. Now we know what's happened with that; they all came into money after. But it was a real shock. You go into this profession and you think you're there to make a

difference, to help people, and then you see the injustices by people that go into the profession you think for the same reason as you did, and yet they're part of this series of injustices that somehow they justified at the time.

Q: How did you become involved in unions?

SS: At the time we were under Alberta Health. Well, we were under several government departments. We went through a series of government departments. Our directions came from people in the big house in Edmonton. Some of the things that were supposed to do in this little rural community in this hospital that used to be an agricultural college, some of the things we were going, what page are they on? The consequences were injustices were happening to staff. It wasn't blatant, but injustices were happening to staff. There were these rules that applied and I guess they fit in some situations. But this was a small rural, sometimes three generations of family members working as staff in this place. Some of the things they were called on the carpet for were just shocking to me.

Q: Like what?

SS: They sound stupid when I talk about them. But I remember when I became a union steward I sat in on a few disciplinary actions. One of them was we happened to have a boss come down from Edmonton. One of the staff had phoned in sick and the next day he returned to work. The boss called him in and said, no, you have to phone to say you're coming back. I guess the union contract does say, but if you're not coming back you'd phone in. But he held this fellow accountable for this and said, no, now you're suspended. I just said, grieve this. I was actually his boss but at the time I wasn't out of scope. So I said, grieve this; this is nonsense. It was things like that, just simple basic things. I just thought, there's so much bigger issues, why bring up things like that? Why discourage someone from being a good staff and working and caring, over something as insignificant as that? So I guess that's just kind of what started it. It was little injustices that really ticked me off, and they still do.

Q: What union was that?

SS: It was AUPE.

Q: What were some of the positive and negative aspects of the union?

SS: My first introduction to AUPE, here in Alberta you hear talk about what a trade unionist is. They're like the Steelworkers and they're tough and mean. My first introduction, I can't remember his name, but he actually was a former prison guard and he had that rough edge. But he also said, no, what you're saying is right. There's been an injustice; stand up for your rights. On the one hand I thought, don't mess with these guys cuz they'll break your knuckles. But then on the other hand, they really helped to get that message across. They really made you feel like what you were standing up for, you were within your rights. So that was my first introduction to AUPE, this big burly guy that I took this complaint to. He said, you're right.

Q: Why was that guy? Dave Potter?

SS: No, it was before Dave Potter. But there was a few of them that came along, and they gave me courage to stand up for what I believed in.

Q: Do you remember other features of the union that may not have been so good?

SS: It's very similar to what I see in politics. I think there's this core of people that have solid values and want to be there for the right reasons. But absolute power corrupts absolutely, and I saw that in AUPE when I started going to meetings and things. That was sort of the downside of it. I see that getting involved with politics too. There's some wonderful people that are so true to a cause, but there's also ones that ...

Q: What happened to you after you went to the Raymond Care Centre, or is that where you did most of your work?

SS: I would say half in half. I left the care centre in '91 or '92, so about half in half. I've been at Community Mental Health since, and came over with Alberta Health and then around 2001 we were regionalized and came under Health Sciences. AUPE, and it could just be that I was so much more active in AUPE, but AUPE was really a powerful union and really had clout and political connections, which is very hard to do in a province like Alberta. I don't think Health Sciences has quite the same clout. I don't think unions have quite the same clout as I perceived them to have back in the '70s and '80s. They just seemed so much more powerful then.

Q: How was Health Sciences different than AUPE?

SS: I hate to say they're not as organized, but AUPE was a very big union and it was from the smallest town to the biggest city that you'd find membership. It seemed like there was a real commitment to the union. I don't know if it was because of difference in the unions, or just the times. I saw a change in AUPE as well by near the end and the first time I ran for the NDP. I phoned the union and said, I don't expect monetary support but any kind of support or advice or suggestions would be good. At that time our president and our premier were buddies; they were golfing together and things like that. So I sensed a real change. I guess that's when I started thinking I'd move on. I sensed a real change in the union. They were becoming more influenced by the politics of our province than the membership. That was sort of sad.

Q: What about the change in governance of the places where you worked? Mental Health probably went through more transformations than any other part of our healthcare system. Talk about the transformations that you saw over the years.

SS: I was trying to recall all the ministers and departments we were under, but I can't. We didn't just fall under Health, we fell under departments that didn't even make sense. I think we were under Corporate and Consumer Affairs at one time. We were just like, well throw them somewhere.

Q: Describe what the government was doing.

SS: Being in Raymond, being at a small institution and being way down in the south, we were very fortunate. I was in management although I wasn't out of scope. It was kind of nice because although to order anything we were getting hand-me-downs from Ponoka, like if you wanted a microwave or something you'd get a second-hand one from Ponoka. But they basically left us alone. Because we were under departments that really wished we weren't under their department, we were left alone and did a lot of our own thing. We were able to turn on a dime, be very creative, did a lot of community work. It was probably some of the better times I've had in Mental Health. You were allowed a wide latitude of creativity because big brother wasn't watching. Unless you did something horrible, you kind of did your own thing. So when I came into Community, at the time the whole thrust for mental health was, they were closing the doors of Ponoka, they were downsizing Ponoka and a lot of the institutions. The idea was a real promotion of community, which I really liked. It's normalizing an illness; it's talking about mental health rather than mental illness. I thought that's the way it needs to go. When I was working in Lethbridge I was seconded to work on a project to help clinics come into a community type of venture. When I came to Lethbridge the clinic would operate and then Canadian Mental Health, which is non-profit, would operate, then the Schizophrenic Society. There was no liaising. I thought, this is just great; it's wonderful. Those to me were the most exciting times in Mental Health. At that time I joined the board of Canadian Mental Health provincially. At one time if you were employed in mental health the government wouldn't allow you to sit on a non-profit, which was ridiculous. Eventually they came around and said you could. So it allowed me to politically vent under the umbrella of the non-profit, yet still do my work, which I really enjoyed. Then we were regionalized.

Q: Talk about the effects of regionalization.

SS: Politically I think some of the stupidest moves they've made have been in health. We started with five health regions, then we went to 17, then they went to 16, then they went down to nine, and now I guess we're one, under super board. All this in a very short period of time. All I could see from the front line, politically and as a citizen of this province, was a lot of money going out for infrastructure in a huge corporation, and very little coming down to things that are tangible that matter, that are patient care and client-focused. These have been some of the worst times in health. And the worst times in mental health, because any identity we did have we lost under the umbrella of health regions, which really function under the medical model, under a hospital umbrella. So we've gone from really trying to promote mental health as part of the community and getting people back into the community instead of these horrible institutes. And what do they do, they put the whole lock stock and barrel of us under an institute called a health region, which is run from a hospital, which is a medical model.

Q: How did the changes affect staff morale?

SS: We're abused housewives. We've got the battered housewife syndrome. It's just change and change and change, and no logic or reason. They do this, well let's gather you and ask your opinion, which is just bunk because they don't care what the staff think. It is like battered housewife syndrome: keep slapping me because at least I know I'm alive. It's just a constant transition; you're constantly in transition. That climate affects the people you're working with and for, affects the clients. You have this, well we'll do it this way for now but don't hold your breath because it's probably going to change.

Q: When and why did you become involved in the NDP?

SS: When I saw AUPE changing and becoming more a political being than a lobbyist, I thought, gee, that's not where I want to spend any extra time I've got. My values are the same and I just thought, well I've got to do something, I've got to do something that makes me feel like I can carry a message somewhere; I can do something. So I guess that's why I did.

Q: Describe where you ran and what it was like.

SS: I ran in the Taber-Warner-Cardston configuration... the first time I ran our boundaries changed and I think I ran under one set of boundaries the first time and then they amalgamated so that we go as far east as Grassy Lake, as far south as the Montana border, and as far west as the border of Pincher Creek. We don't have the reserves, but it's a huge riding.

Q: Which election was that?

SS: Let's see, 12? I ran two years in a row. Then the next election I took off; then I ran again this last election.

Q: So, when you first ran, who was the premier, Ralph Klein?

SS: Yes.

Q: Why did you decide to run and what was it like?

SS: I just felt our whole province was becoming a giant corporation. People in our province, as long as you've got money it's easy to support capitalism. But as soon as you don't have money, where's the socialists, bring them in? That's what you see happening in the States; please bail us out. I could just see that happening in our province. When you talk one to one with a person on the street, that's not what they want. They want to know that healthcare is going to be there for them. They want to know their kids are going to get a decent education. They want to know that in retirement someone's going to look after them. That's what the basic person wants, and yet that's not what's happening politically. So what else could I do? When I ran the first time, deregulation was the big issue. It was like, people, do you know what this is going to do? Deregulation is a bad thing; it's not a good thing. The riding I come from, they have debates in every little

town. I think we had eight debates, and they bring their little entourage with them, which I didn't know at the time. So you're just game. They have their groupies come with them and they ask you questions. I always got questions about why do you believe in abortion, and things like that. And you like same-sex marriage, don't you? I always got those questions. So the first time I was sort of shellshocked; after that, I had a comeback.

Q: And what was the comeback?

SS: One thing I told to a friend after, I remember being in Cardston at one of the elections and someone in Cardston said to me, what do you plan on doing about the gopher population explosion in the county of Warner? I gave my answer but on the way out I said to a friend, now you see, if they believed in abortion we could abort all these gophers. You have to kind of laugh or you get really disenchanted with the whole movement.

Q: So you ran in the last election?

SS: I did.

Q: Describe that experience.

SS: It was really a no experience. Everyone knew an election was coming and I had said in December, sure I'll run again. The year I didn't run they had a stand-in, and I said, I really think it's important that you have someone that lives in this riding and at least knows the problems of the riding. Well I had a total knee replacement at the end of January. So I phoned up the NDP office in Edmonton and said, look I'm running, but not fast. I couldn't even drive. By the time the election came I said, I'm not going to go to the debates. I've been to enough that I know what they are; so I'm running in name only. So it was real easy.

Q: Did you work while you were raising children, or did you quit work to raise the children?

SS: I pretty much raised them all while I was working.

Q: What's it like to be a working mother?

SS: It's not for the faint of heart; I'll tell you that. I got divorced at the same time. So I had four children I'm raising and working full-time. It's a good thing I live in a small community because everyone looks after everyone else. I did have that flexibility at work. I think I've raised a bunch of socialists. They spend a lot of time at the Raymond Care Centre. History repeating itself: like my mother, I often had clients that didn't have anything to do at Xmas and I would take them home. So my kids were brought up quite comfortable in an institutional setting. They were okay with it.

Q: Did you ever get formally involved in any women's groups?

SS: No. I think the other big thing that I got involved in was the environment. I feel very strongly about what we're doing to the environment.

Q: What are we doing here in Alberta to our environment?

SS: I started out probably 20 plus years ago. I joined the Castle Crown Coalition, which is a group that when Waterton was formed into a national park, the area called the Castle Crown was to be part of that federal park. Because Shell had already discovered oil, and this was back in the '30s, they said, oh no we don't need that, and pulled that out of the territory that was earmarked as this national park. Shell has got a big plant there and there's constant battles to keep drilling at a minimum, and it's a constant struggle with this Castle Crown group to reclaim oil wells that have been closed down and reclaim the land. That's just this little corner of the province. As soon as you open the window of environmental issues then you hear about the grizzly migration and how that's because of

the way we've torn up the province. There is no corridor for the grizzlies. I've flown over northern Alberta and it is frightening. Another story: I remember when I was campaigning I was at the farmers' curling bonspiel in Warner. They had a banquet after and they said, come to the banquet and you can hobnob around and try and talk to them. Of course silly me, not realizing a bunch of drunk farmers after a curling bonspiel wasn't a good idea, but one of the gentlemen said to me, don't tell me that there's a problem with logging Alberta. He said, I've flown over Alberta; there's lots of trees. I've seen trees out the window; there's lots of trees; don't tell me there's a problem. How do you enlighten people with that mentality? Just some interesting experiences. I went to court with the farmers from Coutts that wanted the right to market their barley. I sat in court with them one day to try to get their spiel on it. I said, you guys, on the one hand, if barley is high and you market it, then great. But if barley's not high and you still want a high price so you stick with the Wheat Board. You can't have it both ways. You simply can't have it both ways. A lot of people don't like to hear those realities.

Q: What do you think the future is for this province?

SS: I was really happy about the last federal election and what happened provincially. I was a scrutineer out in Raymond and amazed that the Green party was acknowledged. I couldn't even believe they got votes. They didn't get lots, but they got votes. It's like, wow, I've got neighbors that are Green. The NDP candidate was second. Then when I looked provincially they were second in a lot of ridings. Then you come to the conclusion if you took all the Left-thinking people, you could kick some major butt. If they joined forces you could kick some major butt on the Right. I don't know if that'll ever happen, but I felt pretty good about that.

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