

Muriel Stanley-Venne #1

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**Métis community – Whitford Lake - Andrew - residential schools – tuberculosis – 1918 flu epidemic – spousal abuse – Native Outreach – Syncrude – employment discrimination – Jack Dyck – apprenticeship – Human Rights Commission – Aboriginal Commission on Human Rights & Justice – police brutality - Institute for the Advancement of Aboriginal Women - Esquao Awards - missing and murdered aboriginal women - Helen Betty Osborne - Care Project – Supreme Court decisions – Métis scrip fraud -**

MV: My name is Muriel Stanley-Venne. I was born Muriel Esther Copp in Lamont with my twin brother Wesley Duncan Truman Copp, a long name for my brother. I've been thinking about what has spurred me on through the years, and I'm sure one of the reasons was my twin brother. I was always fighting with him and wanting to be the boss, do all the good stuff he was doing, and wanting to excel.

Q: Just talk some more about your background.

MV: Being the oldest with my brother. . . My brother and I were the oldest. He ended up working outside harnessing the horses and doing all those things that I wanted to do, and I ended up in the house helping with the cooking.

I grew up on a farm, lots of work to do, in the house cleaning and cooking and helping my mother. Being the oldest girl - I have seven brothers - I was really very responsible for a lot of things in looking after the children and doing the work there, and felt I was really missing out on the good stuff like harnessing the horses and getting out of the house.

I went to school in Manowin school, a one-room schoolhouse. There was a junior room and a senior room; they were two buildings. It was pretty devastating, because the teacher there – and I give so much credit to the parents of the children – because the teacher there was actually molesting the older girls in the junior room; they would've been grade 6, putting the girls on his knee, etc. But the parents found out. They put up a petition and got rid of him. He went to Andrew. That was one of the things that inspired me. Most of the parents had very little education, as mine did. Nobody on the farm had any education, but they were adamant that they were going to get rid of that teacher, and they did. I saw that happen, even though I was in grade 1 or grade 3 - well anyway, from 1 to 6.

The thing about it was that he didn't know how to teach. He had three subjects: music, arithmetic and writing. When he wanted to get rid of the other school children, he did awful things. The teachers inspected those kids when they came to school. I could never understand why their teaching methods were based on humiliation. They tried to

humiliate the boys, not so much the girls, although Eleanor Minnie was humiliated in front of all of us when she was guilty of chewing gum. This was the worst crime you could ever commit, was chewing gum. The teacher put her gum on the blackboard and then she had to stand there with her nose on the blackboard, and then they made all the students walk past her. So dreadful; I don't know how she lived through it, it was so awful. But teachers seemed to be able to get away with anything in those days.

I felt so bad for the boys because they were going to be found guilty, in many cases, for having dirty legs. Coming from their home to school after doing chores, they were bound not to be perfect. The teachers knew that. I just felt they were teaching a lot of lessons that we were learning that weren't in the school curricula. The lessons they were teaching were cruelty and discrimination and all those things. I realize that now. We often thought about what we actually learned at school, and that was it - that we were really humiliated in many cases. I wasn't humiliated, but I felt so terrible about my brothers and the boys in particular. Somehow they singled out those boys to make them feel bad. . . .

I came home crying to my mom and told her that we were being left out of everything. We weren't involved in getting ready for the Christmas concert, the dancing and singing and so on. The next thing I knew, my mom was taking me to Mrs. Cimbiluk to get a full Ukrainian costume. My brother and I, because of course, he got the same costume, and we learned the dances. The parents made a decision to include us, because there was only four Métis families in that area, and all the rest were Ukrainian. So we were delighted, we were just glad to be included.

We learned the Christmas carols, the dances, all that. When Gene Zwozdesky was hosting a Métis dance troupe, he said to me, "you should be up there". I said, "Gene, I grew up Ukrainian." It was the way it was. It was a farming community. There were four Métis families and all of the rest were Ukrainian. To this day I know the carols, and I know the dances. I haven't tried to dance lately but I certainly knew them, and my brother did too. We were pretty happy little Ukrainians for that period of time. I felt again that the community was very welcoming. They could've gone the other way and made our lives miserable, but this way we were included. With the flowers and everything, it was just wonderful.

So that's the particular situation that I found myself in as a child, to learn that, yes, there were other cultures. Our culture was important but there weren't many of us left. I just found out yesterday, from an elder was telling me how vibrant the Whitford Lake area was with Métis people. They lived all around the lake and gradually through time moved away or left. We have, I have, a very rich Métis history. My grandfather was Philip Whitford, who was my grandmother's father. Andrew Whitford, after which Andrew and Whitford were both named.

There was a controversy one time on CFCW, that Andrew was named after Andrew Shandro. But it wasn't. It was corrected. I'm very proud of that. There's a whole story about the removal of Andrew Whitford's gravestone off of his grave. That probably is a story for another time, but it was very terrible. Once they removed Andrew Whitford's

gravestone, then all the other gravestones disappeared. I absolutely believe that those gravestones are somewhere around Andrew, buried in the ground. The reason I believe that is because Dave Cuthbert put an ad in the paper to ask for a little gravestone with a little lamb, a child's gravestone. He said if you bring it back and put it by the elevators, there'll be no questions asked. In about three weeks that gravestone appeared at the elevators in Andrew. So someone knows where those gravestones are.

In my capacity as vice-president of Métis Nation, we did a lot of inquiries into the site. There was ground radar done and there's like 150 graves there. It's a huge cemetery. I believe that all of the non-Ukrainian settlers are buried there, including my great-grandfather. My great-grandmother owned the property where the cemetery was situated, and somehow the designation as a cemetery was removed off the title. So that gave Mr. Blashko the right to put manure over the graves and run his cattle there, and so on. It's a story that has been partially told but no restoration has been made and no compensation paid, except that now the County of Lamont has put a chain-link fence around that area. But I do not believe that the area is big enough. They only had \$4,000 and they only did what that \$4,000 allowed them to. There's a story, as I said, the story has yet to be told about what happened there – the history, the rich history of my great-grandfather and my great uncle, Andrew Whitford and Philip Whitford, who lived in that area and who died in the flu epidemic that happened. So not only are there graves, but there are also burial pits. So many people were sick that there was nobody to dig the graves and bury them properly. So they put them in these pits. There are two of them; Andrew and that cemetery have a lot of story to be told yet.

Q: Was that the flu that took place right at the end of the First World War, about 1917 or 1918?

MV: Yes, I believe it is. There were two epidemics. I can't recall the exact dates, and I should come back later and put that in. So, to sum up, I felt that the Métis people were very much integrated into the society there. We were all in the same boat. We were all poor and struggling, mixed farming. You planted your crops and you had cows and chickens and pigs. You had to have them, because there was no way to really be able to buy things at the store, because we didn't have the money. I remember my dad almost in tears - well he actually was in tears. He said he was offered 28 cents for a bushel of wheat during the Depression. He was so devastated about that.

Q: You did most of your schooling in Whitford?

MV: Up until the middle of grade 8, when the family, my dad and mom and the kids, moved to Edmonton. I finished off my grade 9 at my grandmother's, my dad's mother. I lived with her in a house in Whitford until the school year was over. Then I moved to Edmonton and went to Eastwood School. By all accounts, I was a country bumpkin, because I didn't know anybody, no one. By some really good fortune, one of the girls befriended me, and I managed to get through. I guess she felt sorry for me. But I thought I was really stylish because I had a yellow dress and a little brown jacket. But that was so out of keeping with what the rest of the students had. I don't know what they had, but

obviously I was out of place. Bowen--what was her name--Anna Chomiak and Bowen, I think her name was Anne, were my friends and helped me get through. But it was strange. Eastwood, as you know, was boys came in one side and the girls came in the other side. That's the way the schools were. But they were better than Whitford. So we've only got to grade 9. However, my experience in grade 9 was pretty good. I passed the departmentals, which was really important.

Q: What happened after that?

MV: I started high school. I just went up to the third floor for the high school-- elementary, middle grades, and high school. In the middle of grade 10, I was told I had tuberculosis, and I went to the Aberhart Memorial Sanatorium, and was there a year. I was 15 at the time. At that time when you got TB it was very, very serious. You almost got a death sentence. But as it turned out it was a good time because the drugs had just come out – streptomycin and PAS, which I hated, but it helped me.

I had an army doctor, Dr. Downes, with this huge salt and pepper mustache. I was so terrified of that doctor. I'm sure that, well I know it really affected me because even years after when I used to go for a test, for a TB test, about two weeks before I'm supposed to go, I get all the symptoms, all the symptoms, and I'm gonna die. But as soon as I had my X-ray, not even knowing the results, as soon as I had the X-ray I'm walking out and I'm feeling great. So I'm just absolutely terrified of that. That experience was very difficult because it was bed rest. After three months of not getting out of bed, when I stepped out I was given 15 minutes to sit on a chair. When I stepped out, I fell to the floor because of course your leg muscles atrophy and you have nothing to stand on. But that was the cure. They say you're never really cured; you've only arrested the disease. I tried to run away once, but I chickened out. I left something in the door so I could get back in. I had nowhere to run anyhow. My girlfriends in that ward had decided we were going to run away, but we didn't do it.

Q: So your schooling was interrupted.

MV: Yes, I never finished high school. Like I was saying, I've never graduated from anything. I never graduated from university, and I never graduated from high school. So when I got my honorary doctorate degree from Grant MacEwan, I was very pleased that I'd finally got something. So the experience in the city was that my sister and my brother were also in the sanatorium with TB. So my mother was a cleaning lady. She had about 30 customers that she cleaned their houses, and that's how we survived in the city. My dad was working fulltime but with nine kids it's very, very difficult. He just couldn't make enough money. So my mom was very enterprising and she was very good at what she did. I tried to help her this one time, but if you haven't got the routine you're not very good and probably cause more trouble and lost more time than if I wasn't there. So I ended up watching the kids. I wasn't well enough to go back to school, which was very, very devastating to me, but I was good enough to watch the children; so I did. It was probably the worst time in my life, when I thought that I was going to lose track of getting anywhere in life; I was just going to watch kids.

Q: When did you enter the outside world of work?

MV: That's a good question. I didn't; I got married. I didn't work until I decided to leave my husband. It was at that point that I really found myself. I was in very bad shape, if you can imagine. In those days, if your husband beat you, you didn't talk about it. The most devastating thing – I didn't realize this until later on, because I'd obviously shut it off – was that my husband had beat me up and I had black eyes and was very obviously being beaten. He insisted that I go to this family gathering on his side of the family. I went there and what really shocked me later – as I said, I'd put it out of my mind at the time – was that nobody said anything. Nobody said, Muriel, what's happened to you? It was just as if I didn't exist.

They didn't say this was wrong; it was just not spoken about. My marriage was very devastating to me as a person. As one of the psychologists said, "I see you standing there with the chains at your feet." The chains are now gone. I tried to do everything right, which is raise the boys. I had the two boys and then we had three sons altogether and my daughter. During those years, there were some things that were very good, but most of it was very devastating to me as a person. For instance, somehow my sister-in-law and her husband and we got together and got a boat and were waterskiing. I was actually terrified that I was on those water skis, and I thought that my husband would try to drown me when I was waterskiing. There was so much animosity hidden by that time. It wasn't outright, it was hidden, and I was in a very miserable state of my life, although on the surface, things were fine. It was difficult.

So then I went back to school. I was planning to go back to university, and I took all the courses by correspondence, including French. I got my matriculation, and entered university. By that time our marriage was gone. It wasn't only me; he had found another girlfriend and I didn't want to admit it. I knew it, but I refused to acknowledge it. I thought, you've got four children; how are you going to raise them?

In the end it was gone. I had a very, very violent ending as well. I was left for dead in the back alley of our home. What frightened me so much was when he asked me, "you're still going ahead with the divorce?" When I said, yes, he said, "I have to kill you." Not I'm going to kill you, but I have to kill you. He thought he did. One time, he mistook our neighbour in the next house, who was the same build as me, for me and she got terrified. She is the one that actually saved my life, because she got after the police, and when they came, she told them what was going on. Of course, normal Albertans weren't going to tell them what happened. In those days it was kind of a friendly conversation between the guys - like she's crazy, she's just upset, don't pay any attention to her. They did not take family violence seriously at all. They favoured men, because the policemen were all men. They favoured, not so far as being a joke, but certainly a camaraderie where they say, "ya, well she's just crazy."

So I attribute the attention that she brought to the police. She said, if you don't do something I'm going to sit on the steps of City Hall until you guys do something about it.

This was in Jasper Place. Yes, it was a bad time. A lot of times what I did was survival. As you know, you just put those things aside and go ahead. You don't dwell on them because you can't afford to dwell on them. You have to survive and you have to do things and so on. So, during my university, I worked at Garneau Studios for Jim Parker on Saturdays. He gave me \$12.50, which I was meticulous in budgeting. I went to get help from Welfare because I figured out I needed \$141. That \$141 was for food. I was so humiliated when I went to Social Services. The social worker was English, and when he said that I should be grateful, he actually brought me to tears. I said, don't you understand this money is not for me? I have four children. What am I going to do? My lawyer actually helped me get some help, like the \$141 a month. I had everything, every cent allotted.

Q: I take it that your ex-husband wasn't supporting you at that time?

MV: No, but what saved me was the Credit Union. Because Albert was working in the States and wouldn't send me money for the mortgage payments, I'd always be getting letters of foreclosure. They were very prompt in sending me a letter saying that they're going to foreclose. So I went to the Credit Union, at that time the Jasper Place Credit Union. The manager, Mr. Pearce said, I could get a line of credit. I didn't need it all the time; I just needed it when I needed to make the mortgage payment. So that saved my life; it was the best thing that ever happened. I would never have gotten through university unless I had this backup line of credit that I could use when the payment didn't come through. It gave us some assurance that we weren't going to be out on the street. As I think about it, there have been really good people along in my life who've done great things. That meant a great deal to me. The Credit Union was the best, because it allowed me to relax. I know that I wouldn't get any more foreclosure letters in the mail. It's kind of coincidental, by the way, that I get this widow's pension from the U.S. government, because my husband was working in the States at that time. But he also had his other girlfriend there.

Q: So you finished university and went out to work?

MV: No, I was in my third year, and it was very difficult to make ends meet. So I said, I was going to get a job. I saw this little wee ad in the paper, which said Métis Nation was hiring. So I went over there and I got what was left; all the other positions were filled except the 'job opportunities in placement' position, which turned out to be the best thing that ever happened. There were very few people there who had any education at all, any secondary education. So I started Native Outreach and hired all the good people in the province, I believe. I was younger than all of them, but they were terrific. I asked this person from Canada Manpower to come to our staff meeting and observe. When I asked what he found out, what was his assessment, he told me something that was really important. He said, "you respect them and that's why they do such good work. You respect them as individuals and the problems that they're bringing forward were respected. They weren't ridiculed and they weren't brushed off; they were validated." I really took that as a compliment. It's helped me a great deal in my life to realize that you

must respect people. People can feel that. If you really respect the people, you're on a different plane with them.

Q: What did Native Outreach do?

MV: Native Outreach was a government program, a three-year government program. It was meant to be just a drop in the bucket, but as it turned out, it was one of the most successful programs probably in all of Canada. Of course Syncrude was going at that time, and Native Outreach was there. We held seminars and training for the workers. Mostly we lobbied with the unions to try and get our guys in.

Q: Unions. Can you explain that?

MV: I can say categorically that they didn't want the Natives in any of the unions except the Labourers. Jack Dyck (Labourers' business manager) made a guarantee that if our guys took the two-week training course, they would be guaranteed a job. That's how they got on - it's the only way they got on. He had to fight the other unions and was ostracized because they didn't want him to do that, didn't want the Native people in there. I remember being in Northern Saskatchewan in a big discussion about development there, when one of the union guys said very loudly, "No god damned Indian is going to take my job." So that animosity against the Native people was very prominent in those early days and still exists today, just in different ways. We were up against discrimination at all levels in all companies, in all unions. I guess the most hurtful thing is that one of my seven brothers is very, very prejudiced. The irony is that he was quite dark-looking; he had dark hair and dark eyes. But it really hurt me. But then I thought, why should my brother be any different than all those other people? He lives in this society and the racism is rampant. The prejudice is there; the idea that native workers weren't fit to work and didn't want to work is out there. So I accepted that and lived with it. But I don't know why I turned out the way I did. I just don't know.

Q: How did your work with Native Outreach turn out? Did these fellows manage to keep their jobs?

MV: They did stay on. There were problems. Personally I did not understand how they could complain about the food, but they did. The guys from Fort Chipewyan said that they didn't like the food. I saw those camps; there was anything and everything you could possibly imagine to eat. There was fruit and all kind of meat. I heard them complaining on the radio and I thought, oh my gosh! That I didn't understand.

I tell this story about Mike Woodward, who's from Anzac. He went to get employed at Syncrude on construction, and they said they didn't need him. Then he thought, I'm going to get on that job. So he went back and said he was Mexican, and got hired right away. I've been trying to understand that too, because it seemed to me they could exploit the workers that came into the country much easier than they could the Native people in Alberta.

I want to tell you an aside. We were sitting around. We went to a bar in the hotel to meet the guys and see how they're doing. There was a bunch of guys from Fort Chip and they were all working, pretty happy. Jack Dyck was there with his business agent. It was just a casual sit around, a big circle. Alvina Strasberg, a little Mexican guy, was there sitting next to me. He was small, and he had a greasy cap on; I think he was working as a mechanic. We sat and talked and so on, and he said, "I love you" to me. Oh, I missed a big part; his name was Jesus. All the guys thought this was the most incredible thing to have a name like Jesus and became the centre of attention, that this guy's name was Jesus. When Jesus says to me, "I love you", I said to Jack Dyck, "Jesus loves me." It was a precious moment. So we left shortly after.

Q: Were the people you were working with able to crack the other construction unions?

MV: No. This even included Alvina, who went on to work for Syncrude. By the way, I want to suggest that you interview Alvina, because she was the head native job counsellor in Fort McMurray. She was dead set against the unions, but when she went to work for Syncrude, she told me that if the union would've been active there, the workers would've had an easier time. So she changed her mind after she got into it. It seems to me that the prejudice and the resistance to hiring Native people goes right across the board – the unions, the companies, everywhere. What we're learning now is why that existed, that it was part of the government's dedication to wiping out Aboriginal people.

Q: Explain that.

MV: It began with the residential schools, when the authorities went into the communities and took away the children. You can imagine what happened to that community, once the children were gone. There was drinking, and the women, I believe, imploded when the children were taken away from their mothers. The children were put into institutions that didn't show them any love or caring, and half of them died. When the church-run, government-funded residential schools had to put down why a child died, and they didn't know why it happened, they wrote "in decline". I surmise that happened when the child simply died of a broken heart, loneliness, and lack of proper food and all those kinds of things. All that is coming out now, but it still isn't known by the general public - what happened there and that in various forms has continued to happen; they only changed the names. Now it's Social Services which takes away the children, but the effects of the policy of taking away the children has lasted and has gone from generation to generation. Willy Littlechild was just on the streets at Boyle Street receiving the testimonials of some of the people there. What he's found was the linkage between the guys on the street and what happened to them as children, or sometimes not to them personally, but to their mother and father. That effect of deliberately destroying and debasing the Indian people in this country has now resulted in terrible lives for many of them. The discrimination that I described is just one example. It was tough.

Q: What do people typically say when they exclude Aboriginal people from employment?



MV: They don't usually give a reason; they just say they don't need anybody. They don't provide a big explanation. Our biggest barrier when I ran Native Outreach was the front desk. My people couldn't get past the front desk. The receptionist was told, or thought that she should say, that there was no work. You would see--we had evidence--that as soon as a person would fill out an application, they'd toss it in the garbage. So the whole business of trying to break into a society that didn't want you is really what we're talking about. We are talking about a calculated determination that they weren't good enough, they weren't going to make good employees; there was enough of that kind of experience to substantiate it.

Some of them couldn't stand the situation on a big jobsite. As I mentioned before, I had the opportunity, when I worked for Bechtel, to examine the first aid books in Syncrude's construction records. What I found as I took random samples is that there were 3,000 men and 300 women, and the two groups were given valium in equal amounts for anxiety and then sent back on the job. I wanted Bechtel, as they were planning the next plant, to do better. For the short time I was working there, I tried to get San Francisco, the head office of Bechtel, look at a comprehensive study, when I sent in my report. They built GCOS, the big plant that was ready to go after Syncrude, and I said it should be done better. But it never happened; they turned it down. I don't know why they turned it down, because to me the better your workforce is in feeling about themselves and treated well on the job, the better production they would get. It has benefits. It's not like it's a negative thing to have good things happening on a jobsite. I remember Jack Dyck's philosophy. He stressed safety all the time. If you didn't know what you were doing, if you're new to the jobsite and didn't have the training, you'd probably be dead within a short time. I totally agreed with that, and had the opportunity to speak at his funeral. Most people don't know that he actually was one of the most incredible supporters of Aboriginal people - a most unlikely guy; he was such a character. Labour had a policy at that time that they would invite politicians to their Christmas party but they weren't allowed to speak, other than to say 'Merry Christmas and Happy New Year'. When I asked why, he told me that politicians tell so many lies, they don't want to hear them anymore. Our membership voted that we wouldn't let them speak, he said.

Q: When you worked with Native Outreach, your main project was with Syncrude. That was 40 years ago. Have things improved since?

MV: Things have improved. But what hasn't improved is that they should ask the people what they need. I sat on the Apprenticeship Board for six years and those guys were so god damned bullheaded about how things should be, that they weren't open to doing anything different. They were very rigid as far as the representation of the union representation and the company corporations and company representation. So it was difficult for me, because I accepted the position after being appointed by Ernie Isley, the Minister of Labour. He appointed me and one other woman; we were to represent the public, but we had no vote. When I left, I recommended that they either give the public members a vote or not have them there. I believed that the public had a right to be there, to scrutinize what they were doing. I did take that advantage to get one of the union guys removed because he was not representing the workers and was siding with the

companies. I said, you're violating every principle that I know of in terms of representing the workers of this province. I got him out. I provided Jack Hubler with the minutes of the meeting, and he was out.

Q: When you sat on the apprenticeship board, you spoke up on behalf [of] Aboriginal people as well as others. Were they successful in decreasing the discrimination?

MV: It just occurred to me that the same thing happened; they actually punished them for wanting to be apprentices. They didn't provide any help to them; they had to save their money. It seemed that they went out of their way to make it difficult for apprentices at that time, because they were so rigid in their thinking that they had to do it the old way, and that was that. So, nothing happened. We knew then that our tradesmen were all getting older, and that we would need to have new tradespeople in. They used the numbers of women in the beauty parlors, because they made that a trade – there were 51 trades – as boosting the number of women in the trades generally. So, if you looked at it, it would seem there were lots of women involved because there were lots in the beauty salons. But that really wasn't substantive. They were going to be there anyhow. They never really broke into the real fantastically high-paid trades until later.

Q: Your first job when you left university was with the Métis Association in Native Outreach. At that point, did you find yourself turning into an activist?

MV: Yes indeed, that's the way it happened. I was head of job opportunities and placement, and I made a presentation to Peter Lougheed when the premier was in Slave Lake. I talked about the discrimination and about our native job counsellors trying to get people jobs. As a result of that presentation I was asked to sit on the Alberta Human Rights Commission.

Q: That was the original Commission after the Act was passed in 1972?

MV: Yes, I was among the first set of seven people on the Commission. Marvin Fox was the representative from the south that represented Indian people and I represented the Métis. I believe I was the first Métis woman to be appointed to a Human Rights Commission in Canada, but it was really tough, a very, very difficult position. One of the principles I espoused was that the Alberta Human Rights Commission should report to the legislature. In my view, many and almost all of the violations against Indigenous people were committed by the government. So how could the Commission ever take a case against the government, when they only reported to a minister? So it was on principle I stayed the three years. I talked to Neil Crawford, the minister at the time, and when he asked me to stay on for another term, I said I would stay on for one year, hoping that this change would come about. It became very apparent that they were not going to change the legislation. So I simply stayed on the four years. This has come out in one of the books recently published by the John Humphrey society.

The principle underlying the Human Rights Commission was that they were to help people who could not afford a lawyer, who felt they were being discriminated against; the

Commission would advocate on their behalf. That concept is totally lost now. The Commission does not advocate; they aren't even "neutral". There is not any kind of representation on the Alberta Human Rights Commission that would reflect the people of this province, and by no means do they have now any Aboriginal representatives. Yet that's where most of the discrimination takes place. In the City of Edmonton, the Racism-Free organization did a study and what was found out was that the people of Edmonton, generally speaking, know that the Aboriginal people are the most discriminated against. They know it. So that has encouraged me, because once you know something, you're able to deal with it. I was chair of the Aboriginal Commission on Human Rights and Justice, and we did our own survey, which found that the main complaints concerned the police, the way the police handle Aboriginal people, and the educational system. Those were the two top ones – the educational system and the police.

Q: Describe the Aboriginal Commission.

MV: The Aboriginal Commission on Human Rights and Justice began as a committee. Willy Littlechild was going to the United Nations to get approval for a declaration on the rights of Indigenous people. In the long run I wanted to be sure that our committee on human rights was doing the same things as they were at the UN. So, Willy came two or three times and reported to us on what was happening there. We felt that we were consistent with the way in which the Indigenous people's rights were being presented there and what we were doing at the ground level here. We began with a committee, which later became the Aboriginal Human Rights Committee, and still later, the Aboriginal Commission on Human Rights and Justice. It has never had any money. We had a big discussion about whether we should ever take money from the government, as we certainly were not going to say the government was right in what it was doing. We have sort of 'slid along the line'; we need money to survive and do the things we want to do, but we are very careful about losing our integrity and our right to speak. So we still struggle with that.

Q: What does the Commission actually do?

MV: We receive complaints. The most recent one was Kathleen Sawdo. When she was hired by the City of Edmonton Police Service to work in victim services, she was told that she should not wear her earrings, her beaded hairpiece, or beaded earrings. The final insult was that her supervisor told her it would be a good idea to take down the pictures of her children from her office.

We went before the Police Commission to present her case. She had filed a complaint with the Alberta Human Rights Commission and settled - but there are so many problems with the Alberta Human Rights Commission that still exist. Kathleen got a letter to say that if she didn't go to conciliation they would assign – and this was in 2012 – they would assign a worker, an officer in December 2013. So there was this huge enormous gap, in the meantime, in which she had to endure the stress and distress of laying a complaint and living with it. Many people have encountered that difficulty. Even the whistleblowers find it just so devastating. Kathleen couldn't work, she couldn't think of anything, and she

accepted a pittance of a settlement. They knew that she was being pushed to the wall. I really have a lot of sympathy for anyone who has the courage to stand up against an institution such as the city police.

So just to answer the question, what do we do? We went before the Edmonton Police Commission and gave them recommendations on how they could improve their service and in effect, told them to do their job. They said that we could just talk to the politicians. However, I said, "But it's you who have the power. You have the right as a commission to direct the police service as to how they do their job. You can't get in internally and do it. You can by policy and recommendation tell them what you demand of high quality service and of respect for the people that are working for you."

Q: The police chief sits on that commission, doesn't he?

MV: He answers to the commission.

Q: What recommendations would you make regarding police brutality?

MV: I guess the worst example I can give is the Randy Fryingpan case, where this young boy was asleep in a car and two policemen, one of which was Wasylyshen, the son of the chief of police at the time, tasered him. He tasered him eight times in 68 seconds, while he was sleeping. Then he got him out of the car, and as if that wasn't enough; he beat him up, he broke his teeth, and just went crazy.

Q: How systemic is the problem?

MV: I wonder about that, and I haven't got the answer. I've seen policemen just go ballistic. For example, Joanne Daniels and I were approaching this couple who were being arrested, and I guess you learn fast. The police wouldn't let us give the couple our card. They said that was obstruction; we could've been arrested for obstruction. So we waited quietly and then the police officer asked who we were. When we told him, he just went into a tirade about how it's just a Native thing, on and on. We wrote to the chief. The irony was that this officer got the highest award for being a policeman that year. I can't explain it.

I always look for the positive, however, and have a really good positive example. Having learned that you don't interfere with police work, I saw this young woman with her baby in a baby stroller outside Zellers. I thought, well I'm going to watch this; I'm just going to observe. What happened was that this young girl had stolen baby clothes. She wanted new clothes because she had lots of second-hand clothes and she wanted her baby to have new clothes. She told me this as I was driving her home. What the police officers did in this case, instead of arresting her, was to get on their cell phone and phone Social Services to get her help. That was so good that I wrote a letter of commendation to the Police Service, telling them this is very commendable. I felt really good because I waited and then picked her up, her baby and stroller and everything, and drove her home, and she told me what had happened. That's a good story, and I believe, the way people should

be treated. She could've been arrested, she could've been charged with stealing, she could've had a record, and had her baby been thrown into the system – you could just see all these bad things that could've happened. So I've been advising the police that they don't have to arrest every time; they could use their discretion, their good will, and their ability to help where it's obviously not a criminal offence.

It is an offence, but people can learn from them. It was one of the best things, and when we had our demonstration in front of police headquarters, that's what I said. I want the police to be decent human beings and not go about arresting. In the first place, it wouldn't happen if this girl were not Aboriginal, was well-to-do, and had a good job. She probably wouldn't be stealing the stuff anyhow, and would've been treated differently--with deference--and helped along and so on, and that's what I want to have happen.

Talking about this just reminded me that we, the treaty and Métis women, got together and closed the women's shelter many years ago. We had it condemned because it was such a bad place, on 101<sup>st</sup> Street, dirty, disease-ridden, and so on. We closed it and we were looking for a new place. I was talking to a male social worker and asked him if he would send his daughter to this place. When he said, “oh no, I'd never send her there,” I said, well if it's not good enough for your daughter it's not good enough for my daughter. This illustrates how different judgments are made depending on who you are and what circumstance you're in - mainly how you are. If your skin is brown, you're obviously an Aboriginal person, and you get judged differently. What I would want to achieve is to have everyone treated as a human being, be treated with respect and dignity. If I treat you well 100 percent of the time, you'll probably treat me well too. So it's a multiplier effect that has worked, but I would say that I certainly have not used it 100 percent of the time.

Q: You started another Aboriginal organization.

MV: The Institute for the Advancement of Aboriginal Women started because there was a young law student arrested, who was truly guilty. She had attacked two men that were sitting in a restaurant because she believed that they were signing away her land under the treaties. He was a lawyer and a businessman, and she just went berserk. When they called the police, she bit the officer's hand. It was a pretty wicked scene. She turned out to be mentally ill. She was going to court and the whole community got together to go to court and show support for her. She did not get a record, because if she'd have got charged, she would not have been able to continue her legal studies. I now know that she wasn't able to continue anyway, but the principle was there that she could be saved. It was incredible because, once again, an aboriginal woman was guilty and had nobody to support her.

Q: When did this happen?

MV: In the 1980's. So I phoned to get information on what time to go to the courthouse and so on. When they asked who I was speaking for, I made up the name on the spot; I said I was with the Institute for the Advancement of Aboriginal Women. From there, we just decided to do things. It was kind of like Idle No More; we were not going to stand for

a situation anymore, and were going to do things. And we did. The extent of vulnerability of Aboriginal women is incredible in this country. We've had so many examples, like serial killers in Saskatchewan, and Vancouver, and the Highway of Tears - unconscionable suffering by families for the deaths of the women.

So I thought that I had been nominating women to be honoured in various organizations, and they never would get accepted. So I thought, if we don't honour our own women first, how can we expect the other people to do it? That was why we created the Esquao Awards, simply to honor Aboriginal women. We believe that it is the only organization in the world that is totally dedicated to the Aboriginal women in a province. It's been wonderful; it's really been wonderful in bringing us together. When we started out, we did it like other awards. We'd get about 20 nominations and pick five. We've changed all that; it changed when Jerry Goodswimmer, chief of Sturgeon Lake First Nations phoned me and said he had this wonderful woman in his community. I told him that I'd already sent the nominations through to the committee, who were the recipients from last year. However, when I put the phone down after talking to Jerry I realized we were doing it all wrong, and so I changed everything. There is no jury, the community nominates, and in effect 'owns' the award. That woman is there because her community nominated her. We didn't need a jury, because it's already been decided. What we found[is] that once they get the award they would go on to get other awards, so it works very well.

In one of their announcements, Syncrude said [it] hired one of the women, stating that she was a recipient of the Esquao awards. Esquao is the stylized version of the Cree word for woman. That isn't the way they spell it; the linguists spell it at the university. The actual spelling there is 'iskiw', which nobody would've been able to pronounce. I believe that you can figure out how to pronounce it by the way I've written it. That name is copyrighted and our objective is to never ever to use the derogatory term 'squaw'. There's never been any time or place where the word 'squaw' has been used in a complimentary way; it's always made derogatory. But, it's still being used to degrade Aboriginal women.

Q: Could you describe the treatment of Aboriginal women?

MV: I believe the deaths of Aboriginal women in Canada to be the shame of this country. Canadian representatives cannot stand up at any international forum, such as the United Nations, and talk about the persecution of women in any country until they solve and addressed the issue of missing and murdered Aboriginal women. There's been so many. The Native Women's Association has counted 562 women murdered and missing, but I believe the number is much higher, and it's higher, I believe, because of bad police work.

The Institute for the Advancement of Aboriginal Women and the Aboriginal Commission on Human Rights and Justice have come together to present social justice awards. We gave the first one to Freeman Taylor, the police officer in the city of Edmonton who solved the Joyce Cardinal murder. It took him eight years, and was a particularly horrifying case because Joyce was beaten and then set on fire. She lived for two weeks. The second award was given to Warren Golding, who wrote the book, *Just Another Indian*, depicting a serial killer of Aboriginal women in Saskatchewan, who no one had

even heard about. Goldring was so appalled by the treatment and the manner in which the police conducted themselves that he wrote the book. I can just say that in this province, the *Western Standard Magazine*, which was in all the packets Air Canada put in their airlines, stated that Ralph Klein's fishing buddy who presumably said that when Colleen Klein ceased to be the premier's wife, she'd be just another Indian. The magazine attributed this to this fishing buddy. But Winston, Ralph Klein did not defend his wife; he never said a word. When I asked Colleen why Ralph hadn't said anything, she replied, "Well I'm a big girl, I can take it." But the fact that he never defended her leads me to believe that he said it; I believe that. Otherwise, as the premier of this province, he should've defended her, but he didn't say a word.

The Aboriginal people in this province were outraged. She had a binder of letters, and we had one too, that were written condemning the magazine. We got a notice from Air Canada that they had removed the magazine and that they would not put the magazine in their seat pockets anymore. What I'm illustrating is the extent to which Aboriginal women are vilified. If they can vilify the wife of the premier of this province, what chance has an ordinary Aboriginal girl got in our country?

However, we have taken this positive way of acknowledging people who have done extraordinary things. One of them was just last year, on March 30<sup>th</sup>, when we acknowledged Robert Urbanoski, the RCMP officer who solved the Helen Betty Osborne case in northern Manitoba. He was cited for his exemplary police work, and as a result, sixteen years after the murder happened, they convicted one of the murderers. The town knew who had murdered that young student, but no one would say anything. So, the police officer put a small ad in the local paper saying that he'd received so much information that if anyone else had information, they should come forward. He actually didn't have any information whatsoever, but it worked. It was so typical of this man, who really was dedicated to treating the Aboriginal people as human beings.

Helen was a student; she wasn't a prostitute; she didn't have a high-risk lifestyle. She had come to The Pas to go to school. She wanted to be a teacher. We still have the battle to fight with our stereotypes. As soon as people hear a news broadcast talking about an Aboriginal woman, they immediately think she's a prostitute or "has a high risk lifestyle". But we've been asking the police who issue those media releases to change their wording. Osborne was a young woman, a student, a person who had a family, and her case illustrated the terrible manner in which they treat the Aboriginal community. The authorities brought Helen Betty Osborne's boyfriend in for questioning. There was absolutely no reasoning for that, but they did it anyway. When they showed him the picture of Helen murdered, he fainted; the horror of it. They not only discriminated but persecuted the community, and gave such deference to the young men, one of whom was the son of the local hardware store owner and very prominent within The Pas, Manitoba.

So, discrimination has no boundaries. What the Saskatchewan Police College did, for example, was to publish posters that were the image of an Aboriginal woman, which they used for target practice. The length to which police think they can get away with things like this is amazing. I continue to be amazed at how the thought process works. That

happened in February 19, 2000, and an image of that poster was published in the *National Post*. I have all those photos.

It seems to me that a book was written in Edmonton called *The Disposable Indian*, which discusses how it means nothing--that it meant nothing to the family, nothing to anyone, to society, that these women were being murdered and left. As recently as last year in October the remains of Amber Tuckeroo from Fort Chipewyan were found near Leduc. It just seems to never end. I get very despondent at times because it seems like there's no consideration given; we just wait for the next murder. The Care Project, which started here in Edmonton; I had great hopes for it and still have great hopes for it. When we talked to them, we talked to them and gave them the evidence we had. One of the officers, a female officer, got up and said, "Well we don't care if you're yellow, purple or blue, we treat you all the same." Before the social justice awards, I told the RCMP liaison person that if he or one of the officers ever say that they don't care if you're yellow, purple or blue, we treat you all the same, it would be justifiable homicide - and I would do it. He said, now I know what I'm going to say. [laughs] But they lie, they lie, that's what's so horrific. The system is geared towards not considering our women as human beings; they're simply 'just another Indian'.

Follow-up Q: Could you repeat the Fort McMurray story?

MV: On the Syncrude jobsite, there were 3,000 men and 300 women. When I examined the first aid records, a prescription of valium was given equally to men and women for anxiety. So our women got ten times more valium than anyone else on that job. You can understand why that would happen, but why was it necessary? Why were the women so distressed that they took so much valium?

Q: What pressures do women feel in that industry?

MV: Well the others don't want them there. . . they don't want women there. But our women were determined to get on that job, and so put up with all the swearing and degrading comments that were directed at them. It's completely understandable that they would want to take some relief from that, but it's awful that they were so distressed that they took the valium on almost on a regular basis. I've talked to many women who were on that site, who talked about the language that was used by the male workers, their derogatory statements. The best story I have is about Doreen Wabasca, who didn't want to go to Fort McMurray. She had a job in Edmonton as a labourer and wanted to stay here. She would phone me every night and say that they were calling her names, that it was terrible on the worksite. It was the Italian workers that really went after her, but she wouldn't stop. I look at her as a real heroine of the workforce, because she stayed on the job. There was a way she could apply to be foreman, so she became a foreman. So, I admire her. She gave me a blow-by-blow description of happenings on the job and how they really tried to get rid of her, swearing and calling her everything under the sun. She refused to let them get to her. So she became the foreman. She actually worked for the City of Edmonton on their labour crews for many years, then left. I just never estimate



the determination and the stubbornness of our women who say, we're gonna be here and we're gonna earn the money that you earn.

Q: What are the social and psychological reasons why people on the job would want to behave that way?

MV: That's something that really bothered me. As I was mentioning to you, we now have a project through which we can begin the dialogue on why society is so discriminatory against the very people who were here first. One incident occurred at the seminar that was held with Jinny Simms, the critic for the NDP, who was here talking about the immigration. I told her that the animosity from the immigrants is very quickly learned when they come to Canada. One of the reasons, I thought, was that the immigrants want to get ahead, and they don't want to be associated with the lowest kind of people. That's not where they want to be; they want to be people who are better than that. I believe at this point in time, and maybe for all time, that Aboriginal people are at the lowest rung in our society. They are certainly not the most esteemed; they are the most violated and defamed in this society.

So that was one of the reasons, but it doesn't account for why they would call them names and go against them with such vehemence. They really hate the Native people! They learn that, they don't come here with that, and they learn it quickly. I think they just take on the attitudes of the Canadian population, that Aboriginal people are no good, and don't talk to them. A good example was this young man from Somalia, who came up to me and said he was told not to have anything to do with the 'Natives'. He said that he went to Lloydminster and met this young Aboriginal man, and that they got along famously. So it's going to take that kind of initiative to connect the immigrant people and show them that it's not true. For our part as Aboriginal people, we need to assert ourselves and say, for example, that every time the mayor of Edmonton gives a speech in which he refers to the land, that he says this land belongs to Treaty 6 and the Papaschase reserve, which is all of the valley and the south side as well.

It's a miracle, and I still don't believe it, but the Supreme Court of Canada has just decided that the agreement and the commitments made by the Canadian government of John A McDonald to Louis Riel, who was the member of parliament for that area – but was never allowed to sit in Parliament, by the way, even though he was elected - that the land on which the City of Winnipeg now sits was promised to the children of the Métis people. That is so remarkable. Yet I must express my concern that the media has not made anything of it. I hear more about every other country in the world, and very little about the Supreme Court decisions. Three Supreme Court decisions have been made within the last year in favour of the Métis people of this country. The last one was the one I just mentioned. The other one was that the Métis lands designated for Métis people belonged to Métis people and that the registered Indians who are now occupying the lands should not be there. That is a big one, because Alberta is the only province that has designated lands for the Métis in this province. The third one ....

Q: That's OK, we could come back to it. Could you explain the issue of Métis scrip?

MV: In those days, it took a very long time to get anything from Alberta to Ottawa--six weeks. The Métis scrip, which was very generous and given out, but the only thing is that the Métis very seldom got the scrip, because they were sent back blank. The ones who took it had hired other Aboriginal people to pretend they were Métis and sign it away. All that evidence is at the University of Alberta. John McDougall, who has his statue in front of the Citadel in Edmonton, and Richard Secord, who was a lawyer, were able to defraud the Métis people of their lands. I always say that the Métis would've been the top business people of this country, had they not had all their lands stolen from them fraudulently. When this became evident, it made the headlines in the *Edmonton Bulletin*. Senator Lougheed had so much influence in this province that he got the Parliament of Canada to restrict the amount of time you had to lay your complaints to three years. That killed it, because it was too short of time to get all the paperwork done. Many of the Métis did not know how to read or write; they used an X. That's the way they were able to defraud them from their land. As I said, the Métis scrip was very generous. It gave land or money to the head of the household, to the wife. The women got land, as my grandmother got land, and to the children; a very generous settlement. The problem was it never got to them. That's what happened, another terrible thing that happened to the Métis people. Of course, they had hanged Louis Riel. So a chill that went through the Métis community. They were to hide and to not raise any issues and not be noticeable. Prior to that, the Métis were known as the peacocks of the prairies. They had the best beaded jackets and they were the guys that did all the work and just loved to be out there and live the life they had.

Q: Has anything been done to redress that?

MV: What has happened is there is now a database being worked on by the Faculty of Native Studies. I want to show you a picture of my great-grandfather, Philip, because he was quite a guy. The startling thing about my great-grandfather is that I had never seen a photo of him before Steven Bentley came over and asked if I would like to see a picture of Philip. I said yes, and almost fainted when I saw it. He looks like my son. I was just so shocked. Four generations have gone by, and my son has that same swarthy look, the same hair and nose.

Q: Like a pirate?

MV: Yes, indeed. They had to be strong. I asked an elder one time why my uncle Glovis and others fought and drank all the time. They had big fights in the bar and all that. He said that they had to fight, that they had to defend and assert themselves. And, they got into trouble. My uncle Glovis was in the First World War, very patriotic. What a hell of a guy! He was a wicked, fighting, colourful Métis who had those big, black, bushy eyebrows. It runs in the family. So my brother has these big bushy eyebrows, black eyebrows with a shock of white hair now.

[ END ]