

## **Muriel Stanley-Venne (Part 2) – complete version**

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Stanley-Venne residence

Interviewer: Winston Gereluk

Camera & Interviewer: Don Bouzek

Q: What do you remember about your work with the Human Rights Commission?

MSV: Now that the Commission has actually been abolished, I'm looking back on the representation of the people on the Commission. It was really very well done. I was the Metis representative. Marvin Fox represented First Nations; he's from the south. Vince Cooney was a businessman. Max Wyman, who was the first Jew to be ever appointed to a university, president of the University of Alberta; he was the chair. Conny Osterman really what would I say, she described herself as to the right of Genghis Khan, so she was some character. And Jean Forest and one more or maybe that was all. But it was wonderfully set up, complete diversity of people who lived in the province of Alberta. I particularly was very pleased to be on that commission. I can say that, being the first, we really didn't know what we were doing. We were just going into a new era but we took the human rights issues seriously. We negotiated with employers, we went out to the community. My concern was that sitting on that commission, I made my judgments, but I had no way of connecting with our community. There were no resources. I would have liked to have workshops and consultation with our communities across the province, but that wasn't available. That's certainly one of the things that I'd like to see happen.

Q: Do you remember any instances where the Human Rights Commission was able to make some progress concerning people in the aboriginal community?

MSV: No. To the contrary, as I described the incident that happened with sending home the dead baby's body in a plastic bag and the little guts in the other plastic bag; it was very, very disturbing. Then to have it happen once, and then to have it happen again, was one of the most disturbing things, and caused me to do an outburst. The Alberta Human Rights Commission was congratulating itself on the work they were doing and they had a very nice reception and so on. I went to that and I said, you've got nothing to be proud of – you have not acted on the very serious things that were happening in regard to discrimination against aboriginal people, meaning both the registered Indians and the Metis in this province.

In fact, they had nothing to be proud of. The television was there and they recorded my outburst, and it was an outburst. I really was intensely upset about that - that I sat on this commission that allowed that to happen, and took no action against the hospital boards and the people involved. Unfortunately, the same happens today. Somehow nobody ever gets charged. When a child dies, there are numerous people involved, and there is no closing or no satisfaction to say, "Well this wrong was done." When those two babies were sent back with their grandfather to Ontario and they both died, nobody was held

accountable. I spoke to the Minister of Social Development at the time and I said, heads should roll – this is unacceptable, this is awful. And nothing happened. Somehow the government is able to get away with these terrible things that happen to our people, and with impunity. Well who's to blame? No one is to blame. It turns out in every single case that no one is to blame, that everybody is to blame I believe. Because everybody is to blame, nobody is held accountable.

Q: Forty years after the establishment of the Human Rights Commission in Alberta, it's still going on?

MSV: Yes.

Q: Going forward a few years, I notice that you published a few booklets and books on human rights. Do you want to pick up those books one by one, show them to the camera and describe them?

MSV: This is really one of the things I'm very proud of. It's *The Rights Path*. What it does, and I know people use it, is it has your rights in 15 categories. People are able to pick up this book and look at what their rights are and then on the side we have the phone numbers where to phone and find out more information. I know the very fact that this book exists puts power in the hands of the people, and that was its objective. Not only do we want to have our own people informed, but we want the government and this society to know that our people are informed. Unfortunately, the recognition of that need, I've not convinced anyone that it should happen. But I have done it and the chair of the Human Rights Council with the United Nations, Mary Robinson, former president of Ireland, held up this book, *The Rights Path*, when this was at the very beginning and said, this is an example of what should be done. So I'm very proud of that but very disappointed that that next step wasn't taken to inform the people and go around and talk to them and so on, because that's important.

It's good to have a book but it's also good to have the people understand that they do have rights. Across the board that's been the concern. When the people, for example, are testifying with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, they cry out and say, "why don't they believe me? Why isn't my word as good as anyone else's word?" That's what they're up against. The other thing of course, just to follow on the Truth and Reconciliation testimonials, is that no one had written down anything, it was only their memories. In our society if you don't write it down then it didn't happen. So it's one of the barriers that I find so often is that we can talk, we can converse, and yet it's not recognized.

Q: It's particularly bad for your community, because so much of the tradition is oral.

MSV: Yes, and understood. So we have a long way to go in understanding what human rights is, what real human rights is – the damages done to your health and your body and the effects. We want our people to be well and well-adjusted and full participants in the

workforce and in this society, and full participants in the benefits they should be receiving from this society, as other people do.

Q: Why did you choose to call it *The Rights Path*?

MSV: It seemed to be the right name because people were embarking on their path, and the rights that they owned as a human being needed to be recognized. As I mentioned before, when I went to Lac La Biche this woman wrote on her evaluation, "It's good to know I have human rights even though I'm an aboriginal woman." The unfortunate part is she didn't have human rights in the legal system. The Canadian Human Rights legislation was exempted from the Indian Act and it was just this last year that that exemption was taken away.

Q: What about the other booklets there?

MSV: Well, because we believe that the youth should be also empowered, we brought a good group of youth together at the Friendship Centre and asked them what were the important issues they were dealing with. There were three: social services, education, and justice. It was so poignant that in the circle, the young people came in and especially the guys were really quite sophisticated. They had their gold chains on and they slumped in their chairs. So the onus was on us to convince them that they had human rights.

They told us. I saw the transformation in the meeting where they didn't slump down on their chairs, they sat up straight and talked about these three concerns that they had in this society, especially the story about the social services. One of the young men was an artist and had drawn the icons that we have in the booklet. For Social Services he drew a heart and some feathers; he made his impression of the heart. One of the young men said, I think the heart should be broken. They looked at each other and they decided to take a vote whether the heart should be broken and yes, the heart should be broken. Of course we asked why and they said, because we've been hurt so badly by the social services. They'd been taken away from their families and had their hearts broken.

Q: Why did you choose that title?

MSV: *It Takes Courage*; because we taught them their rights, but when they're confronted with a police officer, it takes courage to proclaim your rights. That's why it's called *It Takes Courage*. We had examples when we just came out of a workshop at the university law centre. The security guard came by and asked them what they were doing and so on. The incident happened just outside of the workshop that we'd just come from. The workshop was handled by an aboriginal lawyer who'd been an RCMP for 24 years, stopped, when to law school and became a lawyer. Brad Angy was so appalled at the justice system because there was no justice. Anyhow he said, "Speak politely to any officer that stops you, and then if they're finished asking questions then you say, 'Am I under arrest?'" If the answer is 'no' then you're free to go. That's exactly what happened in this incident. They were stopped and they said, "Am I under arrest?" The security guard said 'no', and they just left. Later I found out that one of them had a warrant, but...

Q: I'm surprised they didn't bring up employment as one of their concerns.

MSV: It seemed like it was the police, it was the social workers, and the educational system that they were up against.

Q: Why do you think they wouldn't bring up discrimination and injustice in employment?

MSV: Probably because they were too young and hadn't really had experience in that. What the situation is, when you're 16 and been under the Government of Alberta care, you're just let go and there is no aftercare or follow-up. That's what advocates that I know have been fighting for; that you just can't drop somebody off on the street and say, thanks, goodbye. But they are doing it. I don't think any of them, I'm just remembering them by the picture of the group here, I don't know if you can make that bigger.

Q: What about the third booklet there?

MSV: Well this is a very important document I believe. It's the aboriginal perspective on human rights in Alberta. We held workshops and talked personally and we had the questionnaire online. What I'm pleased about is that it gave us the chance to talk about human rights. The recommendations again cited education and the police. In lots of respects there's a war on between aboriginal people, aboriginal youth, aboriginal women and the police. I see it. To switch back to today; we met with ASIRT, who investigate when a police officer shoots someone or injures a person; they swing into action and investigate the case. As far as I can see now, they've done a pretty good job. We're advocating that they have aboriginal inspectors on, because we have a lot of ex-policemen, ex-RCMP, who could fill those positions. We're looking at the aboriginal people understanding their role and vice versa, they understand the aboriginal people. Right now there's no element of that recognition.

Q: What's ASIRT?

MSV: The Alberta Serious Incident Response Team. I've been practicing that for some time.

Q: What is the aboriginal perspective on human rights?

MSV: I was privileged to be able to make a statement, and what I say is that the aboriginal people have been subjected to the discrimination. I'll just read it here. [reading] Human rights was never meant for aboriginal people, it was meant for everyone else. Just a minute, I'm repeating myself, I'd better start over again. Casey Eaglespeaker has stated, human rights were never meant for aboriginal people, it was meant for everyone else but it was never for aboriginal people.

This was a response to a discussion I had with this respected and intelligent elder. The lack of consideration for the human rights of First Nations, Metis and Inuit people has meant the loss of land, identity and dignity and the deliberate policy of the government of the day to assimilate, integrate and exterminate. Harsh words for the Canadian people to hear; however it is the truth.

Q: That's the perspective.

MSV: Yes, and in here we have Louis Cardinal and Willy Littlechild's statements. I believe that, of course no one would ever say that, but the humanity of aboriginal people has never been recognized. As a result, if the police view you as an enemy, they can do anything. And they do. I'm not proud to say that. I'm in Canada. I'm here because I was born here and I love this country. But that doesn't mean that we have to accept things the way they are. That's a difficult...

Q: You've sat on the boards of various organizations, including the National Aboriginal Achievement Foundation. When did that happen and what was that all about?

MSV: Well this wonderful idea that we should recognize our own people was dreamed up by John Kim Bell. He did a wonderful job. I was very honoured to sit on that board, and very enthusiastic about the work they did. Partially, not wholly but partially, the idea of the Esquao awards, where we honour our women. It came to be born and has flourished. and has made me very proud of our women.

Q: What sort of achievements did you recognize when you were part of that foundation?

MSV: Well they did an incredible job of recognizing doctors, because there are so few. If there was scientists, if there was anybody in any of the disciplines that achieved some accomplishments, they were recognized. At that time there were few, they were exceptional, they were incredible. But now we have more. More people are qualified, more people are involved, and more people are recognizing that education is incredibly important and have struggled through in many cases for years to attain their degrees. I think that is a springboard for more things to happen. So it was a job well done.

Q: What about sitting on the board of Canadian Native Friendship Centre? When did that happen. When you answer, I want you to tell me why this is such an important centre. People have heard about it, they have an idea it has something to do with aboriginal people, but what is the really important work of that centre? Start by telling me when you sat on that board.

MSV: It was in the '70s. The remarkable thing is that I picked up the native paper and Muriel Venne was on the front page and Chief Venne was on the back page, from Saskatchewan. So I was very proud of that. I have to tell you that those were the days when women, it was not common for women to be leading anything. It was not common for women to be sitting on boards. As you recall, I sat on the apprenticeship board, but the people there, both employer and union reps, did not see that as an important position.

I was able to make it an important position, but it was not meant to be; it was simply a token. But I had the privilege and the right timing to be involved.

I know in my heart things were done that nobody else could've done. I was exceptional in having an education, which was not common. I was the only person in my family that had gone as far as I had gone. It was exceptional. As I'm looking back on my life I find that things happened as they should. It was very difficult, as some of the things I mentioned before. But it couldn't have been done by anyone else. I believe that if a man would've got up and been head of Native Outreach, somehow it wouldn't have happened. I observed that our men didn't usually, across the board, did not have an education – had good sense but were overwhelmed by what they were faced with. Almost without exception they had great difficulty in coping with their responsibilities.

Q: If we go back to the Native Friendship Centre, just tell me and other people like me why it does such important work. What kind of work does it do, and why is that important?

MSV: It was the bridge. It was the place to go, meet the other people. It was the bridge between what they left in the country or off the reserve or off their settlement and now they came to the city and they needed that support and they needed to connect with their own culture and have dances and enjoy themselves and provide that intangible of just knowing someone and being able to build off of that. It was an incredible place to be. Because of the problems that I mentioned before about being overwhelmed, that was one of the difficulties they had.

Q: Did they provide a bridge towards employment?

MSV: Somewhat. They didn't have a formal program. I had the formal program, which was Native Outreach.

Q: You established the social justice award. What is that?

MSV: I would love to talk about that. As we progressed, I became aware of people who had done extraordinary work. They were not aboriginal. We had a policy of honouring our women, our aboriginal women. So we felt in our hearts that we needed to honour these people, and we did. It was the first aboriginal women's organization that honoured an Edmonton police officer for solving the Joyce Cardinal case. That was particularly bad, as I mentioned, because she was beaten and then set on fire. It took - well she lived for eight days, but it took eight years for the murderer to be found. We wanted to honour a job well done, we wanted to honour the officer that really did not give up and solved this murder case. So it was wonderful.

The police came in. My vice president told me that she watched them and they were there because they were told to be there. They weren't there willingly, they were told to be there. Throughout the evening their attitude changed. Many of them had tears in their eyes from the family who came in from Wabasca who again presented this officer with a

beautiful picture of a cardinal, which they hoped he would display. Also we gave him a beautiful soapstone award. We really wanted to set the example that this is the way we want police officers to work with the terrible and tragic cases that are happening. I should say that we've always wanted to take the positive approach. There's so many horrific things that are going on, we needed to do the positive. We needed to honour the people that did good work. We honoured other people as well. What was her name, the secretary general of the amnesty worldwide, Amnesty International? We honoured her.

Q: What did she do for aboriginal people specifically?

MSV: Well her response when a reporter asked- she said, we finally got it right. They took on the deaths of the murdered and missing women in Canada, the aboriginal women, almost 600 women. It was an extraordinary day. We had Willy Littlechild, and it just escapes me for the moment, her first name. But she was gracious, she was wonderful, and she said that we finally got it right.

Q: In 2004 you received a national aboriginal achievement award for justice in human rights. Why did they give that to you? What did they say about you that explained why they gave it to you? What did that mean to you?

MSV: I asked them after, some of the jurors - they do have a jury that examines the applicants. There were over 300 applicants on that year. They said, there was no discussion; "You were the best qualified, the best recognized." I was very honoured. I was particularly honoured for justice in human rights because that's so important. Without justice and without human rights our people are very hurt and in trauma.

Q: Who sponsors that award?

MSV: Well that's the National Aboriginal Achievement Award at the time. It's now changed its name to Indspire, to get that Indian, 'Ind.' That's what I thought.

Q: Is it sponsored by a national aboriginal organization?

MSV: Well it is. That's what it is.

Q: In 2005 you received the Governor General's award in commemoration of the 'Persons Case.' That's a good one. What did the Persons Case have to do with you?

MSV: I think it was for human rights for women generally, that it is to recognize the government's recognition of the fight and struggle that went on for women to have the right to be persons. It was a wonderful occasion. I was so pleased, awed in fact, that Michaëlle Jean had just been appointed. That award ceremony was the first one she did. That one week was an incredible week where on Tuesday, I received the commemorative award for the Persons Case, and on Friday I received the Order of Canada.

Did I tell you about what happened there? So I'm walking up to - I'm back at Rideau Hall. I was there on Tuesday and now I'm here on Friday, and one of the officers said to me, nice to see you again. I said, yes, I thought of renting a room, I thought I would rent a room. He took me seriously and he said, I think that would be very bureaucratic. So it was a pleasure and an honour. I had my sister with me, and my daughter. She came to the Persons Case, and then she went back. My sister stayed and was with me when I received the Order of Canada. I told my family that I needed the, we were only given three minutes. I said, forgive me if I don't thank you, but I've got to make the point on the aboriginal women and their deaths. So to this day I regret that I didn't add them in, but I was very conscious that the time was very short. Then to my dismay, the person after me took like probably 25 minutes.

Q: You did such important work having to do with employment of aboriginal people. Did either of these two awards recognize in any way the work that you did relative to employment?

MSV: I think they must've taken my whole resume and looked at it; I would've thought that. But you really never know what they have taken into consideration. I had at that time experience as an Alberta Human Rights commissioner and I had Native Outreach, which was groundbreaking. At one time I said, everything that I have been involved in had never been done before. Everything was new, you had to make your way through the maze, you had to do the things that you thought were right, and you had to be strong enough to do them. I believe, I hope, and I found out later that one of the most prominent aboriginal women nominated me for the Order of Canada. You don't know who does the nominating, you're never told that officially. If you find out - like Jean Forest wrote a letter of reference and she sent me the letter after. But you really don't know what happens, it's very much a secret. The reason is because some people that are nominated do not, their nomination is not accepted. So I believe that's why they don't disclose anything prior to or even after. That is a good policy, I believe.

Q: Aboriginal people are represented way out of proportion in our prisons. You mentioned the Aboriginal Advisory Council on people in prisons. Do you want to just give me the correct name for that and tell me about the work they do? You mentioned that you were involved with them recently.

MSV: Winston, I have to go get it. I haven't even had my first meeting, so maybe we shouldn't go there yet.

Q: But you've been appointed to it?

MSV: Yes. I'll get you the... it's just sitting on my desk.

Q: So much of what you said had to do with recognizing the place of aboriginal people in the history of Canada, and their humanity. It seems most of us know about people who were involved in the treaties, the treaty aboriginal people. But the Métis? Are they finding their place in history as far as you're concerned? Are people recognizing their place in the

history of our province, of our country? There's so many aboriginal people who are Métis, and we just don't hear about them.

MSV: Well Winston, after Louis Riel was hanged, Métis people went into hiding. My grandmother was not allowed to speak Cree in her own home. People kept quiet. They either moved away or were moved away, in lots of cases. The government just pushed them off their land and they lost everything. I believe this, because they found out that to be quiet would be to be safe. The laws also said that if five people got together they could be arrested by the RCMP. So the police were feared.

The Métis were very clever and strong so they got along but not because of, in spite of. Some lived on the road allowance; they were called the road allowance people. They didn't deserve that, but they were treated that way because at the time they had hanged a man, Louis Riel, for treason against his own country. So the attitude was to keep quite, work hard, make your way, but don't say anything. So it was difficult because there were really dire straits for a lot of the people in Alberta.

The Ewing Commission was created, which looked at the plight of half-breeds, Métis people, and came up with the settlements, the allocation of land, which is not evident in any other part of this country. There are settlements, there are lands that are set aside for the Métis people. Recently, Winston, there have been three Supreme Court decisions that have been made in favour of Métis people. The first one is that Métis people deserve to have all the rights and privilege of registered Indians. That was a very incredible decision. The chief of Kehiwin phoned, no emailed Audrey Putrin and said, "How does it feel to be an Indian?" The other one was that Métis lands belonged to Métis people. This was in regard to the settlements where there are registered Indian people now living on Métis lands. The third one was really incredible, in which the Supreme Court said that the agreement made between Louis Riel and John A. MacDonald in regard to land in Manitoba had never been fulfilled and now the Supreme Court said that was to be given to the children of the Métis.

Q: So what does that mean in practical terms?

MSV: That's what I'm all excited about, because I want to do workshops and it was passed at the Métis Nation Assembly that there be workshops to explain this. The people know of them but they don't know the implications. I said that I would like to do that, along with other people as well, our educated Métis people. But I think, you know Winston, I was so pleased, because I went to the Métis Nation Assembly in Cold Lake this year. I had five resolutions – all of them passed unanimously. I wondered what element I brought to the assembly. I believe in my heart that I bring the compassion, human rights, the understanding of the people and where they are. That's why everyone, not one vote against any of the resolutions.

One of the resolutions was remembering the children in society that I belong to. They are dedicated to identifying the unmarked graves of the children who died in residential school, of which some were Métis. Some were Métis, and no record of them in some

cases – that's a whole other story. The violence against women was passed unanimously. I'm just trying to remember the other two, the information seminars that I believe need to be done. So there's a great deal of, as I was saying, understanding of what should be happening and which must happen. I'm very pleased about it. I couldn't have been better pleased. I think in my prior I mentioned about the Métis men taking off their hats to me. So it's been really heartfelt and rewarding to me. I feel very good about that. I see it as kind of the culmination. The other thing I see is now there are so many other people taking on the things that I took on when there was no one. At many times I felt that I was all alone. In my acceptance of the honorary degree at the Grant MacEwan University, I said, at times I have felt that I was not at home in my own province, that I wasn't wanted. But I said, when they gave me the degree I felt that I was wanted. But still it's very, very difficult. What I've been giving thought to is, if there was another women such as me with my recognition and that honorary degree and the Order of Canada, would they have been recognized more? I don't know. I still feel many times that it's a very difficult road.

Q: You've tried a lot of things, and it must be disappointing as you go along. You once ran for the NDP; there was a time in your life when you thought that might be a place where you'd focus some of your energy. What hope did you have for the NDP at that time? First of all tell me when you ran for the NDP, where you ran, and what the experience was like. What hope did you have that made you do that?

MSV: Well I was surprised to hear that Lewis Cardinal accepted to become a candidate. He used the very same words that I used, which was, I looked at the policies of the different parties and it was the New Democratic party that fit my beliefs and my ambitions as far as the people of this province. It was in the 1970s that I ran for the first time. I must tell you, I've now totaled five times. I've run; yes, five times. I had the absolutely unique honour of running against Joe Clark and Preston Manning. I always laugh because I was just the token. But I was mystified because Preston Manning's wife said to me as we were coming out of one of the forums, "I'm glad that you're running." I took that, she said no more than that, I took that as meaning I was a women and she was glad I was running. She wanted her husband to win, obviously, but she was glad that I was there. So I believed that the New Democratic party had the right principles, the right ambitions, the right policies that I could really get excited about.

Q: I don't recall them having that many policies concerning the aboriginal people. I know that there were a few in place. But what, for instance, did they advocate that you remember being particularly...?

MSV: It was what I advocated. You're right. At that time, when I look back, they were all my resolutions. So there was nothing there. I found out later, as you probably know, that Tommy Douglas never ever touched the aboriginal issues at all. Although he's been praised and cited, that's one deficiency that is so obvious. He never made a comment, I've never heard him make a comment on the aboriginal people, and I don't think he even knew. If you could take his life as it's set out, he never even knew an aboriginal person. I'm glad you asked that question, because I saw myself as bringing the aboriginal people's issues to the New Democratic party and that the door was open. But there was nothing

there other than what I put there. When Lewis and our committee got together I looked it up and phoned Ryan and said, “You know what? These are all mine from way back.”

Q: That's kind of a sad comment.

MSV: It is. But Winston, to talk about aboriginal people was a dead issue. Nobody wanted to hear about. Any politician that raised it was in jeopardy of losing votes, so they didn't raise it. It's only now in 2013 that it's okay somewhat to advocate that aboriginal people should be involved. I heard the mayor talking about what could've been done, that there could've been an initiative where there would be aboriginal involvement on all the boards and commissions that the City of Edmonton has - that the street names could be changed to aboriginal names. All these things could happen, but it won't happen if the people are afraid they're going to lose some votes when they're running. So it's still an incredibly non-issue. People don't want to mention it because it'll lose them way, and it's that clear and simple.

Q: I want to go back to employment because in all of my experience with aboriginal people it's been my experience that they're discriminated against in two areas particularly badly. One is in the area of housing and accommodation, where nobody wants to particularly rent a place to an aboriginal person, and the other one is in employment. It's almost like a mantra – don't hire an aboriginal person. I met you first when you were doing work in this area up at Syncrude. Has any progress been made? If so, what are some of the major challenges facing aboriginal people yet when it comes to employment, and what needs to be done?

MSV: It has not been solved. I had someone give me a saying and it said, “Why drag a man through the dirt and then accuse him of being dirty? What was the other one? I've got it sitting on my table there and I'd love to get it. Why drag, why do you not hire this man and then call him lazy? Somebody said that. So why drag a man through the dirt and then call him dirty? And then, why when you do not give him a job call him lazy? I thought that was quite profound, because that indeed is what's happened. It's been set up. If you treat people badly then you expect you will get the results that you want, and that is fill the jails. That's where they are. So my appointment is going to be one of great interest to me. The isolation, the way they put people in the black hole – that is bound to destroy them. It's just so inhuman. I don't know what influence I will have but it's certainly top on my issues of concern.

Q: I just want to go back to the employment thing because it's something that I've devoted part of my life to. You would never see aboriginal people at union meetings except in the AUPE, where some of them would appear because they were correctional officers.

MSV: Yes, indeed.

Q: So I ask you the question again, have we made any progress? Are aboriginal people being hired? Are they getting hired into some of the better jobs? I know that they'll hire them to do the labourer's work, but will they hire them to do the other work?

MSV: No, they won't. We hired - I got a call from a lawyer friend of mine, woman lawyer, Pat Purdy, and she said, "I'm calling because I have a brilliant young woman who's head of housecleaning. She's the manager of this housecleaning business, but that's not what she's studying. She's got two degrees, she needs to be in a good position."

Of course we brought her over and hired her immediately, she was so good. But she couldn't get a job. She got a job in those collection agencies, which did help her in some ways because you've got to be so clever. But nothing good, nothing good. Relating it to my own personal experience, I've always said, nobody will hire me, because of who I am, so I'll have to create my own job. I mentioned that when I received the Woman of Vision, Leslie McDonald interviewed me and she said, "Muriel, I might've told you this before. You could've been a corporate executive; you could've been right, built yourself up to go into the corporate world. Why did you choose the path you have chosen? Maybe it's the rights path. I just thought of it. I said, "There was nobody there, there was no one in the position of advocating for anything at any time."

To this day aboriginal people, once their name, the aboriginal names you know, Calihoo, Calio, all those names are very identifying. They identify you, and therefore you've already got a strike against you. I don't know if I told you. In Native Outreach we had the old ladies' sewing club. We actually called it the old ladies' sewing club. The older women got together, my mother being one of them, and Mrs. Laboucan and Mrs. Auger. We had it in our employment office. The phenomenon was they referred to each other as Mrs. Auger or Mrs. Laboucan. When they were talking to each other, they addressed each other as Mrs. So this one time, my mom was talking about Mrs. Lamb and I said, mom, what is her name? She said, Flora Cardinal. So the names mean discrimination, and that's what happened in the Catherine Sawdo case. When the victims services committee looked at the names they said, oh yes, if it was a native name they didn't get any help. She witnessed that. So that ceiling, they call it the glass ceiling for women. But it's more than a glass ceiling. It's probably built by two by fours and you can't get past it. But yes, it still exists, it still hurts physically and mentally, and we have to solve it in order to be a good country.

Q: I think that's a good place for me to wrap up now. Do you want to ask a couple of questions.... Sure, I just have a few questions. It strikes me that there's an enormous number of people who are Métis who don't acknowledge that, and that if we really talked about the number of people who have Métis ancestry we would be talking about a huge number of people in this province. Do you want to comment on that to Winston?

MSV: Well it's happened. In one of the census, 6% of the people in Alberta identified as Métis. In the next census, a 91% increase in the number of people who identified as Métis. So there's a phenomenon going on that Métis now are feeling confident enough to identify themselves. The other thing is, I believe that they may think there's going to be

some benefit in being a Métis, and that's true, it may be. What am I going to do with the phone?

Q: You can shut it off. . . . [Bouzek asks about the scrip issued to the Metis.]

MSV: So it's a wonderful that's happening. People now are coming forward and saying, my grandmother – and they have to prove that there is connection to the Métis scrip – my grandmother had Métis scrip. That's the way of identifying. The Métis Nation of Alberta now has the best record of membership. They've got it on computer so you just take your card and flip it down and your name pops up; address, phone number, and you're able to receive accreditation for meetings instantly. Your picture goes on there as well, so it's remarkable. They have really struggled to make sure that it's legally verifiable. They're not taking anyone that doesn't pass the strict rules that they have about who is a Métis and who isn't. Therefore, we're getting all this influx of membership, of members into the Métis Nation in Alberta. So the impending trials and tribulation is that registered Indians living on Métis land is a big one. That's on the settlements. About 50% of the people living on the Métis settlements are not registered Métis people, they're registered Indians.

Q: And they shouldn't be living there?

MSV: That's right.

Q: Where should they be living?

MSV: On reserves. They chose, like the Cunningham case, in which the Cummings decided they wanted the benefits of the medical services. So they deliberately went and got their Indian status and continued to live on the settlement. That was the case, and the case found in favour of the Metis land people; that the Metis land belonged to Métis people. So it's going to be very difficult because aboriginal people travel around. If the real information comes out, Willy Littlechild has told me that there's about 1,000 Métis living in Hobbema - Métis people with absolutely no rights to the land or anything. So it is one of the problems that's going to have to be solved one way or the other. Either we leave things as they are and not do anything, or we can really forge ahead and make sure that the Métis are recognized.

Q: I thought that aboriginal people with treaty status had more rights than Métis.

MSV: Oh yes, indeed. You're absolutely right. They have medical rights, they have educational rights. They've got a number of things that were written into the treaties. So they do have, and with the Supreme Court saying that's fine. But the Métis are recognized as one of the aboriginal people and they are entitled to the rights of the benefits of the Indian people.

Q: Education rights and all those.

MSV: Yes. The medical was, as the people got older, I guess they made a decision to go and change their status. Because according to the Indian Act they can, again their grandmother is a registered Indian, that entitled them.

Q: The second thing is just for my information. I've been doing some work with the Fort McKay First Nation. There was a woman who was chief there in the late '80s or '90s, Dorothy MacDonald. Did you know her at all?

MSV: Yes, I did.

Q: Tell Winston a bit about her.

MSV: Dorothy. We've actually named our most prestigious award the Dorothy MacDonald Award. She was the first chief and the first woman chief who decided to stand up against Syncrude. She had a blockade; no other chief had ever done that in the province of Alberta. She led the fight against the oil companies to have a decent place to live. Fort McKay is very close to the Syncrude plant, and Dorothy is just outstanding. [phone rings again]

Q: So what were the issues that emerged?

MSV: Dorothy was the first one, as I said, to stand up against the huge element of Syncrude. Syncrude was in there to rape the land and have no consideration for the people that were living there. Dorothy just said, "This has got to stop; you're not going into the plant - we're going to stop you." And she did, and made national headlines – a woman chief, which was very extraordinary in itself. Dorothy was just a fantastic woman. The Institute for the Advancement of Aboriginal Women honoured her in both ways. We honoured her as a recipient of the Esquao award, 'Esquao' meaning the Cree word for 'woman', and for her extraordinary strength in opposing this gigantic company. Nobody had even thought of doing what she did.

Q: The oil company had rights to the land; the treaty people had rights to the land. Was it the case that the government or somebody had sold the oil company rights, leased the rights to the land that they should've have? What happened there? How come the oil company was encroaching on treaty land?

MSV: Winston, I don't know the particulars. I only know that the damage that was going to be done by the company was going to be horrendous, and she could not stand for that happening. I was there with her one of the times when I went up there to visit her and to talk to her and to see how we could work together. I don't know where she got her strength but she did, to take on that company. She had a little office, nothing at all of any note. The people there, both Métis and treaty people, lived in Fort McKay. It was just amazing. So regarding treaty land; that was true. But once you destroy the land there's nothing left, so she saw that.

Unfortunately, in later years, like when we honoured her, she was very, very ill. She actually came in a wheelchair, and the speaker of the house came to give her the award. It was very, very moving. So Winston, it's quite remarkable that the institute, IAW, was there at these really in many cases heartbreaking and significant occasions to honour people who would never had been honoured in any other way. That's the beauty of the Esquao awards. We reach out to the people in their communities. The people there in their communities nominate the women. We have no jury. If they comply with our requirements of having letters of recommendation, we honour the women. And they love it. Yes.

Q: Anything else you want to talk about?

MSV: Well, can I thank you two?

[ END ]