

Pauline Cardinal

Interviewer: Don Bouzek

Q: Where were you born?

PC: I was born in Jamaica, West Indies.

Q: Which part of Jamaica?

PC: Parish of St. Mary in Jamaica. It's a rural area.

Q: What was it like growing up there?

PC: When I was growing up it was like normal going to school but it wasn't like here. We had to walk to school about three miles or more. We did not have the opportunities like Canadians have. I walked bare feet to school, because my parents were very poor. My dad had passed on when I was much younger, so I was raised by my mom. There were five children, and I think she did a pretty good job in raising us. We learned to know the value of things. There were certain things that we did not have, but we managed to cope with whatever was available.

Q: Did she have a little farm?

PC: Yea, just a little garden or something like that. She used to work in a home as a domestic helper.

Q: What kinds of things didn't you have?

PC: Our house was a small house. In Canada each child has his or her own bedroom; we didn't have that. We all used to sleep in one bed. My mom was very poor. She would make her bed on the floor. But we were comfortable. She did the best she could. We were raised properly. She

always made sure we had clothes and food. One thing, she made sure we were in school. We went to school, regardless of what happened.

Q: People here take school for granted, but for you, that wasn't the case.

PC: I have never been to high school, because high school back home is if you win a scholarship or a common entrance then you would be able to go to high school, and part of your tuition would be paid by the government and things like that. Or if not, you have to pay to go to high school. So I did not get a high school education.

Q: How much would your mother have had to work for even one of you to have high school?

PC: Oh she'd have to work very hard. I had one sister that went to high school, a younger sister. She had won a common entrance, so she was a little better off than I was.

Q: When you finished elementary school, what did you do?

PC: I had to work, I went to work. There weren't opportunities for me, because without money it was very hard. So I started working in a factory where they made brassieres. It was an American company, and I liked it. But life wasn't that easy, because I got pregnant and had my daughter. I had my daughter when I was 19 years old, and had to raise her all by myself.

Q: Once you got pregnant, did you lose your job?

PC: The rules were if you got pregnant before you had done six months in the factory, you would be laid off. But I managed to hide my pregnancy, because I was so desperate for my job. When they found out I was pregnant, I was about seven months working and my pregnancy was in its fourth month. At that time you had maternity money but they said, well you just won't get your maternity money, because I had to be there a year to get that. My baby came about two weeks before I was a year, so I did not get that money. I had life really hard. I had no father

because the father is not like here, he did not acknowledge his responsibilities. It happens. I have a beautiful daughter to show.

Q: How did you end up coming to Canada?

PC: Before I came here I started working, because I went to the big city looking for opportunities in Kingston. I was working as a domestic helper in a home. But I had a girlfriend, she's a nurse, and she always tried to help me out in whatever way she could. I would visit her on my days off. She said to me, Pauline, she's a relative of mine, the lady that she recommended me to. She said, her daughter's in Canada and she's looking for someone to come and help her raise her children, and the first person I thought about was you. I said, good. She took me to her house and introduced me to the lady, and we started from there. I got my passport and they went to immigration and applied. I was successful, so I came to Canada as a nanny. I came to Canada as a nanny in 1979. I lived in Ontario. I was working for \$40 per week, but I was so grateful for the opportunity to come here that I didn't let that bother me. They told immigration that they were paying me a lot more, so I had to tell them that too when I went there to get my extensions. She said, if you told them you were getting less, they're going to send you back, which was not true. But I did not let that stop me, because I had my daughter to take care of at home. I made good with that \$40 per week. Every two weeks I would get \$80. I would wear hand-me-down clothes so I could buy things for my daughter and my family. I took care of my family with that small money. . . . I stayed with them for three years, and after two years she put \$5 more on so I would get \$90 every two weeks. I had a small bank account, and every two weeks I would buy that money order and send it home to my mom. Then I would go to downtown Toronto and do a little shopping, buy the things and put them down that I know they need at home. Her mom would come and visit from Jamaica and when she's going back home I would pack that box and ask her to bring it home. I had to give her money to clear it when she goes home, because she had things for herself. So the little money I saved in the bank I had to take out to give her to pay.

Q: You were at the mercy of your employer and what they told you.

PC: Yes and I really didn't want to go back. I come to this country and see all the opportunities, and it's a better standard of living. You can make a future for yourself, and there's nothing to go back to. So I stuck it out.

Q: Did you have regular days off?

PC: Oh yes, I had my weekends off. I took care of the kids in the house. They did the cooking, because apparently she thought I was not good enough to cook for her, although I'm a better cook than her. But they were good to me. We were related, distant cousins. But somehow she thought she was better than me. We were talking about school days and family and she said, once a family passes first cousins, it ends there. So I think she thought she was better off than me. She had a good education, I didn't have one.

Q: Education is so important.

PC: It is. You have an advantage when you're educated.

Q: How did you get from Toronto to Edmonton?

PC: What I found out later on is I could've applied for my stay after three years, because I had stayed with them. But they decided they wanted to try to get me out of the country. Because of all the things they'd done, they thought I would get them in trouble I think, if I had gone to immigration to tell them I was just making so much. But since I came I started looking for pen pals, because I was so desperate to stay in this country. At night when they were sleeping I would check the paper. I see this pen pal thing and said, oh I'm gonna write this. So I wrote this pen pal place and then they sent me forms for registration. I can't remember how much the registration fee was, but it wasn't that much. I would be on that list and each month they would send me a list of the names of people. But to get to write someone, you had to pay I think \$2 for the names. I had three pen pals. I had one in Ponoka, one in Nova Scotia, and one here. The one in Ponoka, he wasn't saying much, and the one in Nova Scotia no. But my pen pal here, he would phone me sometimes. I would say, well you know, this is my situation and I would like to

stay here. He said to me, if you come to Alberta I'll marry you. He said, I'll marry you so you can stay. I was going for the opportunity. Then they tried to get me out. They said they went back to the immigration and got three months, and the immigration said after three months I had to go home. So I said, I have a pen pal and he said if I go to Alberta he'll marry me so I can stay. She looked at me and said, hah, you're having a dream. But I took my chances and came. When I was coming to Alberta I did not even have the fare, because I had no money. I had a girlfriend, she had her husband had moved here. I had lent her a little money. I wrote her and said, this is the situation. They said, okay we'll buy you the ticket, and I came here. When I came here I had nine more days left in the country. I did not like my husband – great big Indian. When I saw him I said, oh my god, this big red man. What choice did I have? We got married in my girlfriend's apartment; she and her husband were witnesses. There was no picture, because he tried to take a picture and the camera wasn't working, so I have no wedding picture. The minister came and we were married, and then we went to immigration. My husband didn't have any money, because he wasn't even working at the time, because he did seasonal work. But we went to immigration and they said I had to bring my plane ticket to show them. My plane ticket was outdated. I said, well I'm not going back. The lady said, yes you have to go back. So we went back and started the papers. But there was an immigration officer, and some of those people exploit immigrants. He did not like me. There was a lady that interviewed us separately; she was very nice. She said, there is no preparation for you to stay here and get your papers, but you being in Canada for three years, it's in your favour. The gentleman interviewed me and said, you have to go home, you'll have to go home and do your papers back home. He said, you have been here for three years. How come you've never gone back to see your daughter? How can I tell him that the people were paying me little than nothing and I had no money? He insisted that I had to go home, and he gave me one more month to stay here. He said, when you go to Jamaica your papers will be there waiting; that's the application. So I went back and tried to get another month to stay here to see if I could get a little money.

Q: It's expensive to fly.

PC: Yes. My husband managed to buy the ticket, so I went home. When I went to Jamaica and I said to my mom, did a letter come here from the embassy, she said no. So I went to Kingston

and inquired and they said, your papers are not here. So I phoned my husband that same day and he said, well I'm gonna phone immigration and give them shit. Today's Monday, I went to Kingston, next week Monday I went to the post office and my papers were there. They wrote and told me if I go back and make inquiries at immigration they were going to put my file to the very back. So I phoned my husband and told him, and he got in touch with the MP, Marcel Lambert. Then my papers started rolling. I spent seven months in Jamaica, which I did not have to do because I was never illegal here. People are here illegal and they stay here and get their papers. What he told me was that the immigration officer had told him not to sponsor me because I was just using him. Yep, that's what he did. And he said, no I don't think so. I had a hard time. If he didn't get in touch with that MP I would probably still be there. What he did, everyone said they'd never heard of anything like that before. My husband had to send a police record to Jamaica. He thought I was checking him out. I said, I had nothing to do with that. Because of that, he just about went to jail, because there was another guy matching his description. Everything was almost the same, same name. The guy had a record that long. The fingerprints were so close. The only way he got away was they said it was so close they had to send it to Ottawa for closer check. So if they made a mistake, I would be still in Jamaica and he would be in jail. I stayed with my husband, we were married for ten years. Life wasn't all that good, but I stayed with him and did what I had to do. . . . People are coming from other countries and they never give them all this hassle. I was just someone trying to make a better life for myself and my daughter. But good things came out of it. I brought my daughter back with me. I got my citizenship. I've been working, I've never been unemployed since I came to this country in 1979. Never collect unemployment, never been on welfare. I've always worked, sometimes three jobs. Then I brought my family over; my mom and my brothers and sisters are all here.

Q: When you first came back from Jamaica, what kinds of jobs did you get?

PC: My first job here I worked at Relax Inn. That was my first experience working in a hotel. You are paid by the rooms. A single room would be \$1.65 and a double room \$1.75. Yes, the Relax Inn. My first cheque for two weeks was \$165. The first thing I did when I got my paycheque, I went and I lay away on a piece of furniture at the Brick. I started there. You can do it if you want

to. That was my first job, so I needed the experience. Then after, I went to work at the Mayfield Inn. I worked at the Mayfield Inn for ten years. I started as a chambermaid and then I got promoted to floor supervisor. During that time, I started working doing subcontracting. I had a subcontract all the way in Redwater at Esso Chemical. I worked there for three years. I had to be at work at 8:30 in the morning and then sometimes I'm pulling in from Redwater at 2 o'clock in the morning. It was tough. Then my husband died after, because even before then he was sick. He had cancer and diabetes and everything – he was finished. He had to collect Canada pension early, so there was a little money coming in. I had bought my home. When my husband died, I had a hard time. I had mortgage of \$1,000 a month, van payment \$500 per month. I had loans, credit cards, I had it all. But I pulled through somehow. God was on my side.

Q: People have the illusion that it's easy for people coming here.

PC: It's not, but you have to make it work. When my husband died, because his name was not on my house when he died, because he had gone bankrupt before. So I could not put his name on the house, but I was making good money, so I got my mortgage on my own. Everybody was saying, are you going to sell your house? I said, when I sell my house, where am I going to live? It was hard, very hard. I was in my 40s when my husband died. No money for funeral, because my husband was not a person that would prepare for tomorrow. He made all kinds of money and had never given me his money. He spent his money by himself. If I wanted something, he treated me well, but to give me money because I like to save. If I saved the money, he'd be working up north and would come into town and take all the money out of the bank and put it in his pocket. Even before he died, he had an RRSP and he tired desperately to get the money out. He said, when I die you can find a man to give you money. He said, when I die, go to the bank and tell them, and they will give you the money to bury me. If I was waiting on that, I would be waiting until now. When he died, I had no money for the funeral. I went to the funeral parlour and said to the gentleman, I said, mister, you're probably going to have to keep him, because I don't have the money for the funeral. He said, Mrs. Cardinal, I'll go ahead with the funeral, because I know when you have the money you'll pay me. He was on the AISH program, so they gave us a simple little casket. I said no, because in our culture we like something a little better. He said, well you'll have to pay the difference. My difference was \$1,900. That gentleman

never called to find out when I was coming, because I'm always calling him – I'll be there soon. He said, that's alright. When I got the money I took the cheque for \$1,900 and gave it to him.

Q: How did you get into working for the school system?

PC: I'd been working for a company in the city who subcontracted. I started my own little business on my own, didn't go far. I made one contract from that on my own. I left the Mayfield Inn because of too much pressure. There was a supervisor, very mean. She was telling people, when you're in Canada you do it my way or you take the highway. When my husband died I could not cope with the stress anymore, so I walked away. I said, if leaving the Mayfield Inn means I'm going to lose my house, it will have to go. That's how bad it was. I started running a day home in my home. The children just about drove me crazy, so I gave that up. But then the company I was doing subcontracting for, they had contracts in Alberta Hospital. I phoned and they said, yea you can get a job. So I went and worked at Alberta Hospital and still had some contracts going. I got sick. I found a big lump in my breast. Got scared, run to the doctor. He said, oh my god. So right away he got me to see the specialist, and I had surgery within a month because they were so afraid. I had surgery and I'm home and don't have benefits. So I said, I might as well be self employed, because I have no benefits. Because of that, my mortgage went in arrears and everything went upside down. I said to my mom, you know what, I'm going to apply at the school board. This company that we were working for at the hospital, they gave us the course in building service and maintenance and things like that. After the surgery the doctor gave me one week at home. I said, I do physical work. She said, you'll be fine. I have never seen that doctor since. I said, will I be seeing you again? She said, no, you'll be fine. I'm an animal now, okay. I was supposed to go back to work at my job. I went back to the doctor and the doctor sent me to her. He gave me one more week. He said, did you tell her what you do for a living? I said, yes. He shook his head and gave me one more week. I went back to work and everybody was, how come you come back to work already? How can you work? But they put me on light duties. But before that, I was supposed to go back to work Monday. Friday and went and applied at the school board, and I went to work Monday. When I got home Monday there was a message on my machine saying, would you like to come for an interview? Yea, and that was it. I went for an interview, but I made a mistake. On my application I said I had Certificate B.

When I checked I said, oh my god, I don't have that. I had Building Service and another one and WHMIS or whatever. But when I went for the interview, I even said stupid things at the interview because I was so nervous. But I got hired anyway. I said, right, this is it. So I kept working at the hospital still, because I'm a spare now. In the mornings I would phone for my assignment, and I've been working since. The only time I remember now working two days, because I could not find the schools. I kept phoning and I got lost. I knew nothing about finding my way, I cannot read the map. But I try to find my way out, and I found my way. I've been working since, because when I go to schools I do a good job. I do my job, so I always have work. I got hired in '89 as a spare and then I got hired as permanent staff in '92. There are people who've been on the spare board longer than me and they're not hired. But I never refuse a job. Wherever they send me, four hours or five or whatever, I never say no.

Q: Do you go to different schools?

PC: As a spare you have to go all over, wherever the job is. I was lucky, because when I started I had a long term job. I was at one school for about three or four months, then I stayed and did my cleanup there. So I got lucky; I had the same job for about three or four months.

Q: Does having a union make a difference?

PC: It does make a difference. You have protection against certain things – protection against racial discrimination, unfair treatment in the schools, things like that. In some schools, some custodians can be very mean. Principals too, depending on who they are. I find some custodians take advantage. The first thing the custodians do when you go to the school as a spare, they ask how long you've been with the board, and they give you excess amount of work. At least with the union, you can go and complain. Things will not always happen the way you want them to, but at least you have a voice.

Q: Have you encountered racial discrimination?

PC: For the school board, not too much colour business, maybe because I haven't been to those kinds of schools. But unfair treatment of issuing the work. But I've never come across that, not in the school board, like racism for myself. I know it's there because people talk about it, but I've never been faced with something like that.

Q: Do you like Edmonton?

PC: I love it here. People say, oh it's so cold. I would never live anywhere else. I love it here. It's cold, but I like it, because it's not overpopulated. They have too many people in Ontario. I couldn't live in that place anymore.

Q: We were just talking about how Canada has this mythology about being a place without racism.

PC: There is racism here. The only difference about racism here and in the States is there they tell you plainly the N word. But Canadians, when it comes to things like that, they're hypocrites. They give you a plastic smile. I was working at the Mayfield Inn and a little kid about this size went by with his parents. I'm cleaning, and the little kid said nigger. The parents laughed. You tell me what part of that is not racism. I was on the bus one day and there were two little boys on the bus going home from school. One said to the other, don't look in their eyes, you'll get sick. Racism is very much here. Anybody saying that we don't have racism in Canada, that's a lie. Some certain kind of jobs, you get the job because of the colour of your skin. There are people that are overqualified for certain jobs and they go for the interview because before they phoned. But they see the colour is different, so everything changes. Racism is here. As immigrants and coloured people, we have to fight hard for whatever we have. Most of the time when you have something they say, how did you manage to get that? But we take the odd jobs because most of the time non-immigrants refuse taking those jobs. I came here and worked for \$4.50 an hour, after I worked at the Mayfield Inn, cleaning office buildings and things like that. Yet you achieve your goal, and they're jealous. They wonder, how did you get that? Nothing is being given to us for free, but there are jobs that they will not take because they think they're above doing those things. We come here and we do it, because we know why we come here.

Q: Have you been active with the union in fighting some of those issues?

PC: Well I'm active with the union to a point. I'm very busy, but in the school I try to educate my partner and things like that. My work partner is from another country, she's Polish. Her English isn't all that good, but I'm teaching her a lot of things. I try to educate people as much as I can.

Q: You're taking some courses with 474?

PC: Yea I was sent to the union counseling course, very good course. There's a lot to learn from that course. You learn how to deal with people, to help your fellow men, things like that, people in crisis and all that. We are not counselors but we can educate those people. If your partner or whoever has a problem, you can make referrals so they can get some kind of help. Some people are not going to be willing to talk to you, but if they lighten up a little bit and things like that you can say, well you know, I think you can find help. You give them a number that they can phone and things like that to help themselves. A lot of people are under great stress and pressure, but they're reluctant to open up, especially to their coworkers.

Q: Does your experience in Jamaica make you feel strongly about the education system here being under attack?

PC: Well yes. Canada is a big country where education is very important, whether here or anywhere at all. When the government is cutting funding on education, what are they telling the younger generation? Those are going to be the people ruling the world later on. We cannot have dummies ruling the world. We need enough funding for education. If teachers are under stress the kids are going to be under stress. When you take a classroom and pile 30 or 40 kids in one classroom, what are they going to be learning? Education is very important in a country. You cannot be taking money out of education. It's bad enough as it is that a lot of kids just take it for granted here. But if they keep doing things like this, this country is going to go down. This is a beautiful country and we really don't need this kind of problem here. Some of the schools are already in shambles; they need upgrading or new schools or whatever. Teachers are doing

whatever they can. We need a voice and we need to fight this government somehow. We need a weapon, because this government is not listening.

Q: Some of the same things apply to healthcare. How would things have been different for you if you'd had your surgery in Jamaica?

PC: If that had happened in Jamaica, I probably would stay with it until it killed me. In Jamaica, if you have surgery you have to pay for it. I had surgery years before that, and I had to pay. You have to have money. The situation back home, I remember the hospital in my area, it got to the point where you had to bring your own toiletries in when you're going there. Nothing is free. You can go to a private hospital if you have money, but how many people can afford to do so?

Q: So you think it's important that we keep fighting for this?

PC: Yes. Look at the States. You don't have insurance, you die on the street like a dog. Some people do abuse the system, but what about other people that really need to see the doctor? My mother is a diabetic, she has to go see the doctor every so often to check on her blood sugar and things like that. Healthcare is important in every country. I don't see why Canada has to be in that situation where funding has to be cut. If you're cutting funding, how can you cut education and healthcare? What is this government thinking? I cannot understand why people still decide to vote for a government that doesn't care anything about them. If he cares about people, he would never be doing this. But Albertans on the whole, I think, like punishment. They like punishment, they do. They like punishment, they don't like what's good for them.

Q: People might be afraid the alternative will be worse.

PC: How can you tell if you don't try something? If you don't try something, you cannot make a decision and say, well it's not going to be any better anyway, so I'm not going to vote any way different. This man has done everything to us, and he's laughing in our faces. He doesn't care. I read documents about the learning minister and there was a story in the paper, and he was not willing to talk to reporters. I think even teachers like what they're getting, because teachers

went and voted back for him. He cut spending in education before the election, and then he went and put the money back in. He's just playing them, that's what he's doing. He has them at his mercy. Then he came in with the rebate, so as soon as an election is near again there'll be another rebate and they're gonna fall for it again. The only thing I can say, some of these people are brain dead.

Q: How old is your daughter now?

PC: My daughter is 34 years old and I'm a grandma. I became a grandma for second time last Monday. Two girls, two granddaughters.

Q: Is she here in Edmonton?

PC: No, she lives in New York with her husband.

Q: When you look at young people today, what kind of place do you want this to be for them?

PC: A place of safety, somewhere where they can look and say, this is where I want to be. We come here as immigrants, we come here for one thing, looking for better life. We don't want to return to what we had at home. We need to know for our next generation they'll be able to cope with the situation. Right now we are barely coping for ourselves, because it's too much pressure. We know cost of living went up, yes. But if you don't have education, it's like returning to slavery, and we don't want that anymore. The government is just rubbing everything in our face and saying, well what are you going to do about it anyway? That's not good enough.

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

PC: I think I've said it all.

[END]