

Sam Nuako

February 19, 2020 Interviewer Jared Matsunaga-Turnbull, camera Don Bouzek

Q: What union do you belong to?

SN: I belong to UFCW, United Food and Commercial Workers Union, Local 401, headquartered in Calgary. But I work from the Edmonton office. I've been with UFCW for the past five years and about a month, to be precise.

Q: What's your title?

SN: I'm a Labour Relations Officer with the union. In the old jargon they used to call us a union rep. Now it's labour relations, because what we do is actually more than just representation. Some of us end up on the bargaining team, on the negotiation team; we do advocacy, we do mediation. We also assist lawyers in arbitration and stuff like that, and then the administrative component. This is just a few of them. So it's more of an encompassing term of role now.

Q: Has it always been that way?

SN: I think it has always been, but now the focus has been on us engaging with the members more and doing things also on our own and assisting more. In the beginning--I don't know how it used to be but it's almost like what they used to call a business agent-- is you go in there, you wear your tie and coat and stuff like that. Now you identify yourself with the masses of the workers that you represent; you don't need to go in to them in suits or tie and stuff like that. Meet them the way they are and understand their language, and then you'll be able to advocate or fight for them.

Q: What kind of members do you come in contact with?

SN: At the moment, I have five Safeway stores ranging from Edmonton to Hinton. Two of them are gas bars and I have two Superstores, and the two have liquor stores. I also have International Union of Operating Engineers, not union members, but their staff, mostly admin staff. I also have CFB, the Canadian Forces Base, the military base in Edmonton. None of them is a military person, but they have the shop there, the golf course, the fitness centre, the officers' mess.

Q: Was it always there, or did you switch?

SN: We switched. I used to have other units and then they switched last May. When they switched last May I maintained only two of my previous units, which is the Calgary Trail and the military base. The military base, I had it for just over a year. So I said, okay, why not go on with that and then build the relationship we are building? The Calgary Trail one I maintain because of the diversity initiative I had put in place. The local wants to see it grow and I wanted to see it grow, so I went to the secretary-treasurer and director at the time and said, I know you are having changes, you are not ? But can I hold onto it because of the diversity piece? Fortunately, she agreed.

Q: Can you talk about the diversity thing that's happening?

SN: Okay. There's a history to the diversity thing when I came here. So maybe it's time for me to delve into that. When I was employed by the local I think there was a conference that I went to. When I went to the conference, I was struck with the number of participants of members who were there. There was quite a bit of members there, in the hundreds. I was like, okay, this is good. But immediately, because of who I am and what I've always been interested in, I started looking for people who looked like me, people who are different. I could just count people who looked like me. I could not see anybody apart from the president with physical disability that I could identify; there may be other challenges that I couldn't identify. So when I came back, my director called me and asked me, how was your experience? [*I told her that it was a mixed experience.*] I don't know if I disappointed her or something. She said, what do you mean? I said,

it was good but at the same time this is what I was looking for. Looking at a retail local like that, I was thinking I'd have a lot of people of diverse colour or race and religion. But instead, I could just count, and I kept looking every single day that I was there. That really bothered me so that was where I started thinking perhaps we should start something here, a diversity committee. I didn't jump in immediately. What I did was that I studied the local very closely, especially the leadership, just to figure out if I bring this forward who is going to be my ally. You don't want to start something and then be shot and then become the problem. I noticed immediately that the president was into it, Doug O'Halloran. He was really into it because he was very much interested in minority issues, especially the Aboriginal component of that. So I said, okay I have the president here. I had a conversation with one of the directors, Raoul, at the time and I had a conversation with my then director Rochelle, who is now the Secretary-Treasurer. I said, okay, I think when it comes to this, I have the president as an ally, I have two directors in the Edmonton office as an ally: I think I should go for it. So I went to my director in the company of Raoul, the other director, and I said, I need to start something. I told her my vision of the Diversity Committee. She said, just put something on paper for me to see, because everything we do here, every initiative has to go through the executive board and stuff like that. So I did that. The executive council comprised of the president, secretary, treasurer, and directors. They approved of it in principle but I had to do my own presentation before the executive board., which I did, and then it took off. I'm still in the pilot project because we are now second year of the committee. But it's still a pilot project; it's not a fully fledged committee for the local yet.

Q: What does it look like?

SN: Well it's challenging. The committee, we have a few members, but when it comes to meetings, it's challenging. When I did my whole writing and they agreed to it, I made it a point to say I will not need funds. I didn't ask for funding because I wanted to rely on the volunteerism of the members who would come there. That is a challenge, because we can agree to meet on this day but then there'll be a shift coming so they will take the shift because they have to earn something. So they will call and say, we cannot come because I accepted a shift at the eleventh

hour. So that has been a challenge. Apart from that, once you get the quota there, they just go into it. I feel that we are making serious strides. My whole goal is to create awareness and to enable people, and also to challenge themselves and challenge management or employers, and then encourage each other to stand up for themselves. That is what union is about – solidarity. It's a family. If we cannot stand with one another and fight with one another and for one another, then we actually betray the basic existence of our labour movement.

Q: What are the goals of the committee and how does it function?

SN: Functionally the goal mostly is to create awareness and to work with each other. Prior to that, when we had our first meeting and I asked people on their understanding of diversity and inclusion, you could see that they understood diversity but more of the traditional understanding of diversity where you talk about race and then you talk about gender, like female-male, and you talk about religion. But I would say they couldn't go deeper than that. Even there, we had a whole range of people there. The ages were from mid-20s to mid-50s, but they didn't talk about age as part of a diverse population, and they didn't talk about disability. Then I also said, we also talk about perspective that we bring to the table, because that is diversity. When we sit at the table and we talk even here among us as 11 or 12 people, we come out with various ideas about a particular subject. That is diversity. At that point it was beginning to sink in that we see all the ideas flowing and the suggestions flowing, which means they knew it but it was sitting somewhere I had to prompt them to come in. The aim or the goal of enabling the members, I think we are going there, and empowering them. I always say we not only stand up to our supervisor or manager in terms of harassment or bullying; it's more also about understanding where somebody comes from. You understand that person; you accept one person; you acknowledge that person. That is why we need to work at this. I know, say, this is Jared [*the interviewer*] comes from here; this is Jared's background. And this is what he brings to the table. It's easy for me to always communicate and always be with that person. Because Diversity Committee, regardless of how you call it, is actually member engagement. If we cannot as a labour movement use diversity, inclusion, and equity and advocacy tool to engage members, then

I don't know what tool we can engage to engage our members. That is the bottom line – member engagement. That's the biggest goal.

Q: Have you been able to engage members?

SN: Not as much as I've wanted to. I call myself a storyteller and they call me that today. I think it stems from the fact that I'm a narrator and I'm from an African background where messages are communicated through adages and proverbs and stories. So that is my strength. That is how I relate to my members. So when I communicate to my members you'd think I'd known them for about five years; but I've known them since May. We chat and do all kinds of things. So that is the one piece. Now I'm trying to move from just organizing it at the office level to actually going into the units. I'll do this with Superstore especially. Sobey's or Safeway, the relationship is a little bit different because they look at unions with a very skeptical mind. But my relationship is with Superstore. When I started, I was hired in 2015 and I started, my first meeting with two Superstore managers that I had – the Calgary Trail and the South Common – I purposely invited the HR managers and the senior labour relations officer for a meeting just to tell them who I am. After introducing myself, I said this is how I want to proceed with my work. I use the term collaborative service delivery. I said, I want to work towards that. I want to work to a point where we don't always have issue disciplines but we sit down and have a conversation and see how best we can work with the members. I told them of my background. I said, I've been in charge of office before or in management position before, and I've noticed that when you use disciplines in members, at times you don't get the loyalty from them. But when you have a conversation and get them to know that the behaviour they are putting out is not up to the level that you want, and you have that conversation with them and also respect them and come out with some of the strengths that they have, most of the time you won't get repeat offenders from there. The labour relations officer, Sean, said, I want to see how this ends. I can see here that over two years this Superstore that I've had... for close to three years we've not been dealing with grievances. Not that we weren't there, we've not been there; we've been there. But because I made that commitment and the store manager has also made that commitment, he calls me any

time and I call him any time. He can call me and say, Sam, I need you in the store at 2 a.m. tomorrow morning. We need to have a conversation with this member. That is the term we use – conversation, not disciplinary meeting. So we go in there. The person is a nightshift person, works about two nights a week or one night a week. Then we sit down and tell the person point blank. He starts very well, he starts with their strengths and how he has known them, and how things are deteriorating and what the department manager is reporting. “Is there anything we can do to support you?” So that has actually worked. At times, some of the members break down. When you call them, they think you’re going to fire them or going to give them discipline. But he asks the question, is there anything I can do to support you, or what can the union do to support you? So we’ll have that conversation, and then at the end I’ll have a conversation with the member one on one, and they become so appreciative. When I walk into the store, a lot of the things they’re saying, you saved my job. Some of them I don’t even remember. I say, oh ya I remember. I have no idea, because I’ve had too many such conversations. There were some cases where I couldn’t be helpful. For example, we had a member threaten somebody that he was going to kill the person with a gun and everything, and it became a criminal issue. That one was completely out of my hands, because the police took over. That person, for example, lost his job. There are occasions where theft, for example, will be caught on camera, taking money from the till and pocketing it. That’s outright termination. What they’ll do is they’ll put a member on suspension pending investigations. So about two weeks and they come with the decision to terminate the person. I always am able to work out something, instead of terminating that person, [to terminate that person’s record. One would be to pay that person for two weeks; that person would be off and another person resign and then go.] [*I would advocate for resignation or severance, to ‘save’ that person’s records.*] The members usually appreciate that, because they know they have been caught. In some cases they’ve been shown the clip to see that they cannot get away with that. For me, that is the strength I bring. I also have mediation background; so I would like to sit down and talk, and then do my own presentation and see where we can come to a common ground. Instead of going on positions, I’ll go on an interest-based kind of approach.

Q: Do you see the impact on workers in that store?

SN: There's a huge impact, because that is the store that has the joint union and Real Canadian Superstore Diversity Committee. When I presented it to the manager, the manager immediately worked on it. The manager is Asian and the district manager is also Asian. So there was that kind of the minority immigrant and they're going, okay. This is how I showed it. I showed that when this is in place it is actually going to help you as the employer more than helping me as a union person. If they are working together and able to acknowledge each other's strengths and advocate for each other and enable and encourage people, there'll be less conflict between them and the department manager, and that would mean very smooth running of your operations in that particular department. So I had to sell it to the district manager and the labour relations manager, and then we started off with the committee. That has been very, very successful. We have nine members now and the plan is that in June the nine members will be replaced with another nine members. The current nine members, the term I use, we are going to form a council of elders. We do that every year. In four years time we'll have 36 active members graduating through the Diversity Committee. Like I said, this is member engagement. In a way too, you're also identifying and also trying to recruit member leaders. You don't have to be a shop steward to be a leader. You can be anybody who anybody can approach. We had some who had no formal education but I could see that that is where the rest of the staff in the bakery unit [*department*] would go to when they have issues. They would go to her, not the manager. Then she would come in and present to me. I said, okay, you are doing some work there, but I want you to step it up by becoming a shop steward. She said, I don't have education, I can't write. I said, just go, train, know more about the union, and when you come to me, tell me what it is and I'll write it. You don't have to write me a statement. So she took it on and she's still a steward. The members will actually identify their own leaders there, because that is where you see them gravitating towards. Those are encouraged and empowered so they will become union leaders. Some of them become shop stewards. That particular store has been so great. Even yesterday there was some communication between me, the district manager, and the senior labour relations officer. The district manager has eight Superstores in Edmonton and we are having the initial conversation of me running a half-day workshop on diversity for some of the select few. Of the

eight stores, if he gets the go-ahead, there'll be one department manager from each store and one member from each store, making 16. Then some of the managers and some of the top brass will be there just to observe, and I'll run a half-day workshop for them. With AFL, the committee I run there and the training and workshops is called the Power of IDEA, which is inclusion, diversity, equity, and advocacy. With Superstore it's flipped, the Power of AIDE, so it's advocacy, inclusion, diversity and equity. So I flipped it. So, when I'm presenting, I'm going to present it to suit them. It's about us and them working together. Also, in some of the committees, for example in the Spruce Grove Superstore, where about 98 percent of the employees are white, we're going to talk diversity to them about working together like that. Even though there may be some lesbians and gays that I know there, the main issue there is how they relate to the Aboriginal customers there. Stony Plain has its own Aboriginal community around them. You have the Urban Aboriginals in Spruce Grove and Stony Plain and then we have the Alexis band and then we have Paul band. They all come in there, they use the Tri-leisure Centre for swimming and stuff like that, and then they shop. When I hear complaints about some of our cashiers discriminating against them and stuff like that, it's like, okay, this is why you're hired; you're literally a customer service agent. If you can't accept them, then we have a problem. So the diversity there, the focus will be on our colleagues, our members, and the customers who walk into the store, accept them for who they are. That's all it is. I have dreams for this diversity thing. I think I dream diversity every night, not just because of who I am but because if we are a local labour movement and member engagement is not at the heart of everything we do, we lose. I always say, the local that fully engages its members stays stronger.

Q: Do you see any impact on health and safety?

SN: I forgot one of the things when we were talking about this. The last meeting that we had in Superstore I asked this question, and I had this interview in mind when I asked the question, thinking I'm going to get something from them. What is the difference or what is the similarity between the Diversity Committee and Occupational Health and Safety Committee in the store? I couldn't get what I wanted; they could not relate it properly as I wanted. But what I wanted to do



is to draw their minds off the traditional notion of health and safety meaning injuries. For them, occupational health and safety, this is a hazard, this is injury; this is this. I said, okay. I said, have you thought about this whole idea? You talk to me about bullying; you talk to me about harassment. What does it create? That is when they started getting it. I said, that is a mental health issue, emotional hurt issue, some of them emotional abuse. If something comes up like that, I have the evidence and I'm filing a grievance. I'm tackling it not only from the point of bullying or harassment but also as a health and safety issue, because it is leading there. You don't have to strike me with a cutlass for me to go, okay, I'm hurt, and this is a health issue. If I'm constantly being harassed and bullied, the damage that will come on me cannot be taped with a bandage and done. It is sometimes going to be with me for months and years and is going to affect my family at home. So just look at it from that lens. I think that is what prompted the store manager and he said, our next meeting, can we include one or two of my department managers? I knew where he was going, because I knew some of the department managers had been accused of that. I said, when they begin to do that, the costs on the employee are very high. Those are things OH&S will take very seriously, human rights will take it seriously, and committee is also there. So you can tackle it from various fronts. That gave them a wakeup call.

Q: Where were you born?

SN: I'm originally from Ghana, West Africa. That used to be called Gold Coast. I always want to go to the history before it became Ghana. Before the colonization, the partitioning of Africa, Africa was mostly empires. We have the Sokoto Empire, the Ghana Empire, the old Mali Empire, the Songhai Empire – so Ghana was actually an empire. Part of the Ghana Empire was in the present day Togo. In all these countries you can hear common language all over the place. When the colonial masses came in and they partitioned the continent, they didn't care who belongs where: this is our land; we grab it. They named Ghana the Gold Coast because of gold deposits and the gold dust, and they're still there, huge deposits of gold. So at our independence, our founding fathers decided to go back to Ghana. So Ghana came back. I'm originally from Ghana, the firstborn of seven boys and two girls. We have a set of twins there; so we ended up

being nine. I always pride myself to be the eldest of the family, the firstborn. I was educated in Ghana. To bring in religion, most of my educational background is on the Catholic side of the spectrum, and I'm very Catholic; I attended Catholic education. What I got my degree in, as we stand here, is a joint Masters degree in Divinity and Philosophy. So that is what I carry along with me like a flag that I wave to the employers. My career or employment history ranges from Africa through Europe to Canada. So it's been a long, windy journey.

Q: How long were you in Ghana?

SN: I was in Ghana, for the most part, until 1989. I worked with the Catholic Church. The funny part is that my mom at one point was one of the Saint Vincent de Paul directors, which is in the diocese, and that's where I also went into. So I started like that and then came in the Liberian Civil War. My office was basically in Takoradi; it's a twin city, Sekondi-Takoradi. Sekondi is the political headquarters of the region (what we call region is what you call your province) and Takoradi is a harbour city. Where I was, the building overlooked the harbour like that. When the civil war started, the bishop in Liberia, Monrovia at the time, he was the head of the West African Anglophone Church [*Catholic Bishops Conference*]. He was the one who came to Ghana and gave them a heads up that this is coming up in Liberia. So he started bringing in refugees before the [*Economic*] Community of West African States [*ECOWAS*] started in and then the United Nations. Before that it was all bringing people here to our diocese. So, when we started, we actually had to put people with families, because there was no refugee camp. So the Ghana government came in, ECOWAS. ECOWAS is the Economic Community of West African States. They built a tent city in Buduburam. The last time I went there it was not a tent city anymore; now you have a city with tall buildings. I think about 60 to 65 percent of them have Liberian background; they settled. It is so interesting to just stop there and then say, okay I think I was part of this, not in that city, but in Takoradi. So this work actually took me to Europe on a contract basis to do some guest presentations. Part of my responsibility was also development and peace; I was also to do some guest presentations. The money would be widespread to the diocese at the time. The late Bishop Sam was my immediate superior. So part of the money was

used to fund some schools and other projects that the diocese was embarking on. Where I was was a fishing community and they had no storage facility. They would go and fish and then at the end of the day the fish that were not bought, they just buried them. So one of the projects that I had in mind was to build a cold storage facility for the community, which I'm glad I did with just one source in Germany. I went in there and came back with over 30,000 Deutschmarks. It's like, so you carried that money here? Ya, I did. It wasn't a cheque or something, it was raw cash. Back then they didn't search you so much at the airport. I was glad that I did that, and then some other fundings like for brass band music for the youth to engage in. Some boys had a brass band music. They'd go in there and somebody would come to hire them for anniversaries or something and the money was split into three. One third would go to the boys, one third would go to maintain the band, and one third would go to the office of the diocese or the church so that they could do other things with it. So that brought me to Canada. This time around, working in Europe, the first country that I went to was the Netherlands. That's where I had all my contractual shocks, in Amsterdam, the ... I'm like, oh my goodness, you brought me from Africa and this is what you're exposing me to? Then from there to Germany and then to Austria, then Switzerland and then Spain. One month here, three months there, guest presentations. I can be a storyteller and at times I talk too much; so it helped me in my career in terms of the presentations and other things. When I came to Canada it was more of a longer term, three years kind of. I was in Nova Scotia for two years and at the end of the two years I decided I'm growing old and should have a permanent address. So I moved to Alberta. Prior to coming to Canada, I had no idea where Alberta was. I knew only the principal cities in Canada – I knew of Vancouver, I knew of Halifax, I knew of Toronto, I knew of Montreal. That's it, nothing in Alberta or Saskatchewan. We used to talk about Saskatchewan just like here you guys talk about Timbuktu. It's far away. You look and say, you come from Saskatchewan? It was like, you have no idea what you're talking about. But we knew Halifax because of the connection to the slave trade. We learned that in school. So you think, okay why do I know Halifax and not know about Edmonton or Calgary? Because of the historical slavery connection. So I came here and a friend of mine from high school through university was doing his PhD here in University of Alberta medical research. He actually said to come here in February and I always move in February. I don't know

why. February '99 I came here. The summer before, I came here and he took me to Jasper and Banff and gave me all these nice tours. I fell in love with the mountains and said, okay I can sacrifice the ocean for the mountains. I came here in February and then he left to the States in July. So I came here, no family, but with two suitcases, and that's my life here. I've been here since '99. So far as Canada is concerned, I've been here for 23 years and I've been an Albertan for 21 years. I worked on citizenship just like that, 2001.

Q: What was your life experience in the time you've been here?

SN: It's a mix. When I came here it was more of a bold decision. I came here without a job, but because of my work for the international Catholic organization, when I came in and presented my résumé to the Catholic Social Services, I was readily accepted. The director then was a priest in Camrose. So I actually went there and had a conversation with him: this is my background, and I'm wondering if you can give me some job. He said, I think I have a part-time job for you because of your background. He asked me to go to the office on 118<sup>th</sup> Avenue, and I got a job. It was a part-time job; so then I had to look for another part-time job just to survive. At the time, there was an agency called Prodigy Human Services Consultants. So they gave me a part-time job working with immigrants and Aboriginal families. Even though the headquarters was in St. Albert, my clients were mostly in Mill Woods and a couple of them northeast. So when this guy went under, he decided to move to the States. Before he moved, the director recommended me to McMan Youth and Family Agency. I didn't apply for anything but immediately they said, I'll take you. But you have to work in Stony Plain. The consolation was at the time my friend's parents had an acreage in Stony Plain. So I was like, okay, perhaps after work I'll just drive here and visit them and stuff like that. But I was also working on the reserve with the Paul Band First Nations. So I was doing the youth coordinator and then the family preservation work as well, combining two roles. That eventually became my full-time job. That was there the supervisor who had a children's services office there – Tim Gilles, an Aboriginal, a very nice gentleman. So Tim Gilles and the manager at the time, Rhonda Baraclough, very nice, they called me and another lady, also Aboriginal, Gail Collins. I can remember their names because they played a

very significant role in my life at the time. They said, Sam, we want you to consider applying to work with us in children's services. How do I do that? I have no idea. I didn't have anything in mind. It's like, okay, there are openings here, this is the application process; so, when you apply, we invite you, and you write a test and sit down for an interview, and that was it. So I went through all that and I got hired. So I had to choose between Spruce Grove and Stony Plain. I'm not going to Spruce Grove. You guys, I'll work with you on the reserve. So I'll be there. People who knew me were like, are you crazy, you're going to work at Paul band? That's a very dangerous reserve. I said, I'm not seeing that. When I went there, apart from the supervisor, who was male, we don't usually go to the reserve except for meetings with the higher level. All the workers there were female workers; so they wanted a guy there. Most of them, excuse me to say, were white. The residents and our clients looked at them as oppressors; they identified them as oppressors. When I went in there, I'm not white and I'm not Aboriginal. But they saw in me a different person: He has also suffered what we have suffered before. They saw me as more of an ally. In one of the presentations I did I remember telling them, when we talk about oppression, when we talk about discrimination, when we talk about social injustice, I did not learn them from textbooks – I experienced it. What you are feeling, I felt it before. So when I understand you, I understand you differently. I think that drew me even closer to them. Anytime there was any big issue that we had to go to the families, they would make sure that I'm tagged on. I tended to be most of the time the spokesperson. So I wasn't surprised that in less than three years I was made supervisor.

Q: Were you an AUPE member during that time?

SN: Oh ya, AUPE. I was not as active, but I would be attending meetings. I'd be attending meetings just to know my rights and to know who to talk to, my steward, my rep, and stuff like that. When you are in children's services, unlike retail, you are almost, I don't want to use the word protected, but you are closed in with all kinds of regulations and rules. Those who have social work background are registered with the college; so the college of social workers has its own set of rules and policy and expectations and stuff like that. Then by virtue of being a

government employee in the public sector, you had your own set of rules that also the expectation is very high. Then you talk about the ? between the AUPE and the government, it's quite a bit. But you are dealing with people who are here in terms of knowledge. You don't get that across the board from every AUPE, but I'll talk about the ? that I know, that they are really high here. Occasionally you see fallout here and there. The union comes in and fights for us. You know that by being a registered member of the college, these are the set of rules. You do this, you'll be in trouble, and lose your license and stuff or your registration. So they know and they are very professional in that. It was only when I became a manager that I became an out-of-scope person. I remember I was accused at one point of being pro-union. I was asked point blank, are you management or are you union? *[My assessor's team came to me with a case of workload – very excessive with limited resources. We tried it but it didn't work.]* I said, okay, this is the first time it didn't work. They came to me, it didn't work; why not take it up with senior manager? So they took it to the senior manager. They were talking about workload. I said, you have a last resort; that would be to the assistant deputy minister. *[I directed my team to take up matters to the assistant deputy minister. They went to him alright but ended up saying that our Manager [Sa] encouraged us to bring our case to you.]* All this landed me in trouble; they will go and not keep quiet. I said, the manager's away. How stupid can you be? I'm just guiding you. You don't go and say the manager told me to do this. It landed me in trouble a few times, ya. Oh boy. So when I left children's services--that was in 2013, I think. For 2014 I worked with Edmonton Community Legal Centre as their social benefits coordinator. My goal there was to help people of lower income to apply for social benefits, either the provincial or the federal one, but mostly to appeal decisions made against the applications. So that was all I was doing – appeal, appeal, appeal. I was working with a bunch of lawyers and at any *[given]* time you'd have six students in that small office and about a hundred volunteer lawyers running clinics on different dates. I was stunned – a hundred volunteer lawyers, prominent law firms. They go and run clinics free of charge for clients who need help. Some of them, they may not take their cases but they tell them what to do, they give them legal advice and stuff like that. I was on a one-year coverage for mat leave. One of the reasons why I took that job was that I was also taking the program in mediation and I needed that time to complete. It was 8:30 to 4:30. So it was really good, and at the end of

the day I could also go for my classes. One month prior to the end of the contract I got this job from UFCW. It's something that I wasn't even expecting actually. We did a presentation in our mediation class and there was one guy who had worked for the union for years and was retiring and wanted to see if he could actually set up his own mediation kind of business. At the end he said, Sam, can we go for coffee? I was like, okay I've been with you for a whole year here. He invited me for coffee, why now? Okay, it's free; so let's go. He said, have you worked for a union before? I said, no, why? I said, I've been a member of a union before but I've not worked for a union. I did a presentation on behalf of the group, and he was in my group. He said, you have this whole activist mindset, the way you presented it, but at the same time too you don't present as in your face. You can capture people who ? members. [*He talked about an ad from a Local looking for a Rep.*] I was thinking if you were interested in that job. I said, well my contract ends in one month. So he pulled out this and said, this is a union, UFCW 401, and they are looking for somebody like you. So, if you want, you can apply. I was like, okay this man is giving me this. Let me apply because I don't want to disappoint him. So I applied. This was in October 2014. I applied; no call. Then December about a week before Christmas I got this call: Can I speak to Sam Nuako? This is Sam Nuako. My name is Rachelle; that's my director; now she's secretary-treasurer. You applied for this position and we're wondering if you're still interested in that. I had forgotten. So, as she was talking and asking questions, I was going through my stuff to see which one, because I'd put in a few there. I was like, oh yes I'm still interested. Okay, we have an interview for you for December 28<sup>th</sup> or something. I looked and said, it's a Sunday. She said, ya we know. I said, okay, what job am I going to be interviewing for a Sunday? So I came in for the interview, and lo and behold, I got a job. I've been with the union for five years now. So that's good news. I like it.

Q: Have you personally experienced any health and safety issues in Ghana or at any time in your past?

SN: The health and safety issues we have here are different from the health and safety issues that I know from my background in Ghana. Here you have all these acts, like Occupational

Health and Safety Act; the newest one came up in June last year or somewhere in the summer. You have health and safety committees now. They're empowered to do a lot, which is okay. Now I don't know if we have that in Ghana, but growing up in Ghana and working there, there was nothing like that. You didn't have that. Unionism in my country is completely different than unionism here, totally different. Most of the time you rely on lawsuits and threats of lawsuits and this kind of thing. Especially with the multinational companies, even though there may not be health and safety committees and stuff like that--some of them, especially the mining companies, they have the money because it's either gold or diamonds or bauxite or manganese. The money's there. So they take care of their people. Most of them also have hospitals attached to the mining company. They take care of you, take you to the hospital. Everything is free and when it's done they give you some money for compensation and stuff like that. So people's minds don't even go there to look for something like that. But if it's now as we have it here, I have no idea.

Q: What are some issues that you see newcomers experiencing when they get into the workplace here that's different from their home countries?

SN: This is where Diversity Committee comes in and the idea of empowerment and the idea of enabling. It saddens me when some workers work out of fear: If I voice my opinion on this, I could lose my job and my family may not have the income. Meanwhile, they are suffering in secret. That is part of what I take upon myself and say, you have a voice. I say, in human rights, you make a comment or complaint and they come after you – that's retaliation, and they could be fired for doing something like that. So you encourage them to open up. At times, they won't even talk. I have quite a few meetings in Tim Hortons around the city. Then members come to my office. Okay, can I meet you privately and talk about this? If they work at the southside store and members don't drive, there's no point telling the member, come to my office on the north side on St. Albert Trail. There's no point. So I'll drive and say, okay you live in Mill Woods, you have two Tim Hortons there; one is by the Millwoods Town Centre and one is by Millbourne. Which one are you closest to? Let's meet there. The Millbourne mall Tim Hortons, I went there so many times that one of the ladies that works there actually recognizes me by name. As soon as I walk



in there, oh Sam, you're here. I'm like, oh no. When you have the restaurant staff that know you that much, you're more than a frequent flyer there. So we'll sit down there and talk. At times I'll invite them to bring their spouses so we can talk and they know, okay this is a person who has been calling the house and this is the role of the person. When you're dealing with women, you have to let the men know. You have to be secure, because it's a little bit unusual in some cultures for women to receive calls from a man the husband doesn't know. Some of them, I'll actually go to the house and sit down with them and talk and encourage them, this is your rights. To date, have I been able to achieve everything? No. Am I making baby steps? I say yes, because some of them are beginning to talk and some of them would actually write statements for me and then I'll go ahead. Some of the units, I don't have them anymore, but because of that they'll call me. One unit, for example (I don't want to name anyone here), the person now is mainstream person. But the call that I got from that union, because it's very modernized now, it's an immigrant-filled kind of plant, so they will call me because they identify themselves with me. Some of them are Mexicans. I'm not a Mexican, but they could identify themselves with me, being an immigrant. Sam, this is what we are facing and I need you to help. Then they go into ? feel guilty; when you're here you turn to us and answer my call. I said, now what do I do, and I go deep into it. I find that as a duty. When I engage in this kind of work, which is more human services kind of thing, and because of my background and my religious background, I don't see it as a job. For me, I see it as a vocation. I'm called to do that. That is why I'm not rich, because I don't want to go be a doctor or pharmacist or something. I want to work with people. At the end of the day it might not reflect on what I get. The satisfaction I gain is being able to help this family or this individual.

Q: What would you say to encourage participation from employees who have fears and barriers?

SN: It's one thing talking to them about it, which I do from time to time, and also getting them there. Let me put it this way. When an immigrant family comes into the city or any community, I don't have any stats to guide what I'm saying, but from my own experience. It takes them close to about six years to get used to the system here. By the time the six years come up, the kids are

also growing up to the level that they need the family's attention or the parents' attention. So their attention is also there. At times people think, well immigrants are just not interested in the labour movement. Understand them from that perspective, that it takes them about a dozen years for them to get things around and complete; if they are lucky, ten, before they can devote their time to do this. So when I talk to them and they say, Sam, you know I cannot do this because of this and this. I go there immediately, I understand. So I don't push. Just work with them, not ignore them, work with them, and let them know that you're still there, and when they're ready, they can always come. It works better when their kids begin to grow and they can come in. Then you also have to look at the transportation piece – can they drive or do they drive to some of these meetings that we have? Sometimes when we do things I purposely promote them more when I know that the local will provide free transportation. When we look at, say, Banff, and I'm trying to push people through, I tend to be a little bit biased. I usually will put people of diverse backgrounds, not necessarily colour or race, some sexual orientation and youth, I push youth through. ? is in my cellphone there, because we have a youth internship coming and there was a course coming up in Vancouver. There's this young lady that I've been pushing but I don't have the store. So I sent an email to the rep now, and I said, could you please make sure that you have this person promoted or recommended to be part of that? He sent me an email and said, you read my mind because I was thinking about her; I'm pushing her. By virtue of race, she's mixed – the dad is Black and the mom is from Newfoundland. So when we went to the members' conference last year in Calgary, people were like, who is this ? Attached to you? I said, she's my niece. I said, you don't say anything. So a lot of people came into contact with her and were like, this is Sam's niece. She said, Sam, I'm not comfortable. I'm like, ya you are my niece whether you like it or not. The dad laughed so much. I said, in a way I want you to be comfortable because this is your first time getting out of your comfort zone; you're 21 or 22 or something. I want you to be comfortable first and then you can branch out. From there she was actually sent to Ottawa – no Sam there, no uncle there. She came back with this long e-mail to me. I said, I want you to take it step by step. I'll push you through ?? store. But my colleague, the person who had the store, used to be my buddy. So that's easy. So we're working around that and now we have a Vancouver opportunity coming in. So I try to encourage them to be part of that. As the part of the member

engagement, when I go to my source that I'm trying to recruit people to become shop stewards, for example, I look for some of the minorities too. Half of the time, they don't have the voice, or they have a voice but they don't want to raise it. They don't want to talk until somebody pushes them.

Q: Why is that?

SN: Culture is part of it. Some of them too, I think they feel like perhaps they don't matter, especially in a workplace where you have managers who lord it over the employees. There's a fear factor there: the fear that they could lose their jobs. If I begin to look into unionism and become part of a union and stuff like that, how will they look at me? The self-confidence and language are barriers too. Okay, I'm going to be in this type of position, how do I communicate when I don't even know standard English myself? At that point, that's where us as reps and leaders have to come down to their level and say, we are not looking for your education. We are not looking for how fluent you are in the English language. We are looking for your leadership; we are looking at how other people, your colleagues, look at you. They don't come to you because you are fluent in English; they don't come to you because you have all these degrees. They come to you because they see that you care and you're understanding. You see that, and build on it from there.

One thing that I want to throw in is, and I'm saying this as a matter of fact coming from my heart, is I'm glad that I have this platform in the UFCW Local 401 to do what I'm doing. The president, Doug O'Halloran, we went to B.C. for a staff conference, Kelowna. He just pulled me out of the blue. I need to talk to you. I hate that, because as soon as you say I need to talk to you, my mind goes straight to, what have I done? I was, gee, the president wants to talk to me; what have I done? So I followed him and we went to a small area and he said, I know what you're doing and from now on I want you. . . He said, from now on I want you to sit on the National Committee on Human Rights Equity and Diversity Committee. It's in Toronto. You'll be attending meetings two times a year, fall and spring. I said, okay. So I came back to Edmonton and I went to the website and e-mailed the lady in charge and said, this is who I am, what do you

expect from me? So they sent me all this information. That was really good because I got that. Okay, that is leadership. He looked at me and said, perhaps there is a strength here I need to tap. So he gave me that platform. The good part is that the leadership team, in terms of Tom and in terms of my director, who's the secretary-treasurer now, Rachelle, and the retired secretary-treasurer Theresa, they all gave me that leeway so I could be attending meetings and bring reports to them and copy them so they know where I am. When you don't have a leadership that is so understanding and open to support and assist you like that, you can't go nowhere. But I think UFCW knows the importance of diversity as a member engagement tool. So they are pushing it. The local is pushing it; the national is pushing it. That, for me, is some sort of fresh breath. It's like, okay, this gives me some belief that we can use this platform to achieve something. For me, that is good. That is my goal – member engagement. Do I have a wish? Yes, I have a wish. I wish that every local in the province will have somebody – and I'm not saying this because I want to create a job for myself – will have somebody designated to be diversity, equity, and inclusion coordinator. In that case, the person, by virtue of his or her position, can go to other unions that are not assigned to him or her. At the moment, I wouldn't be comfortable going to, say, 1547 or 1549 stores that are not mine just to promote my diversity agenda. That's not my store. I have to go through the rep first to do that. I can't just jump in there and go there without knowing. But if the person who's coordinator is given that position, you start building a relationship right there with the members and management. So when you go in to start anything, they know you already; they know why you're coming there. I'm not coming there to talk about grievances or anything like that. I'm just going to do my diversity job. So that piece. It's money because it'll be an additional employee, all right. But when you look at the investment and what you gain from that, you can't measure it in monetary terms.

Q: What do you see as the payoff in terms of health and safety?

SN: The payoff: one of them would be the awareness or the educational part of it so that they know they have a right to do this. I'll give you an example, and I didn't want to go there. I had a case with one of my sites, one of my units at the airport. I decided to go at them; so I filed a

grievance. From there, I went to the Occupational Health and Safety office here in Edmonton close to the university; they have an office in a big building. So I went there and met with the boss and two of his lieutenants. I said, this is what is going on; this is the path that I want to go on. What advice do you give me? That was an eyeopener. I knew it, but hearing it from them, oh, I said, okay. He said, I'll tell you something. The new act that is coming up – the new act wasn't in yet – the new act that is coming up actually empowers worksite occupational health and safety committees. He said, I'll encourage you, if you don't have one – and I had one but I don't think they were that strong – if you don't have one, set up one. If you have one, empower them because they will be your eye, they will be your tool. If say you do the grievance through us, it will come back to you and it becomes in arbitration, etc. If it is coming from the members, it has teeth. They'll sit down with members of the Occupational Health and Safety Committee, and they come back and present their finding to management. This is what we have, "This is too low and it can drop on somebody's head; we need this; we need this." Everything is documented. Management, that's not a ? office, in two or three months time there's injury resulting from that, we go back to the management and said, we told you this two months ago. Now we can go at them really well. In most cases they won't even challenge you. They will want to settle and stop everything before arbitration, which is good. What we need to do is use this diversity thing to bring in a lot of multicultural people so that when you go in and sit in the store that is about 60 percent diverse, you don't get all white or all black members of the committee. That is not reflective on the store. If I bring in four people or six people and management is bringing four or six, for example, you have to make sure that the people you present from the union are diverse. I do that intentionally.

Q: How are people recruited to the Diversity Committee?

SN: The Diversity Committee that we set up, let me start from the bigger picture. The diversity that we started from the local, we have an educational and communication department so it went to our worksites and then we created some posters that we sent to all the stores. So you read it and then you have Martin Luther King's picture and the sayings. Then we have a Supreme Court

justice in Canada; that's one lady that I call constantly because she's into diversity and stuff like that. Then we invited people, so there's a person that you write your name and become a member. So that's the recruiting process there. When it came to the Superstore where I'm doing this pilot project, for example, when we had that conversation I said, this is what I know. Because it's a start we'll put the names out there. But let us also target one or two individuals that we know could be very influential in this. So I purposely handpicked two people who I know could do this. One is a Filipino and then one of them is East African but is a hijab-wearing East African. The manager said, that's an unusual pick, because this lady doesn't talk. I said, I know she doesn't talk; she doesn't communicate with anybody. But I said, when I meet her at the lunchroom, guess who opens up to me? She. I want to use that. So that is how we started that. So we put out the notice there and then. Some people signed on, and we worked with that. We were looking for about 11 people to start. I said, I don't like big numbers but if we get nine, that's okay. We got nine. The East African, our hijab-wearing East African, for example, she has transferred to another store, and of course we went to the store to talk to her. She opens up very quickly. That store is not my store, but my idea is that if I need to expand, there's somebody there that I know. She was already talking about it. I knew one of the shop stewards was like, this lady came here and all she's talking about is you. What did you do? I said, she was never in trouble, I never defended her, but she talks about that visit. I said, I wish I could have somebody to help her set up something. Then the recruitment process begins.

Q: How does your mediation training come into play in the workplace when you're dealing with health and safety?

SN: I combine a lot. One of the things I did is I have this clinical pastoral background too from U of A Hospital. Part of my divinity program also had something to do with pastoral counseling and stuff like that, so all of these come together. When I'm talking to employers about occupational health and safety, I'm not a traditional union activist, because I came from the government. Like I said, I don't go with my fist on the table – you don't do this and I'm going to do this. You look at it and say, this is your backbone. This particular unit that I was referring to

from the airport, for example-- I'll mention what they do without mentioning the name. I said, you know, you prepare meals for airlines. If this is going on, don't you think it would jeopardize the health of the members, and by so doing you're also endangering the health of the passengers consuming the food? If you want me to go there, this is how the legal system or the system will look at your company. So why don't we sit down and look at it and work out things different. That issue ? been resolved. ? that grievance and they attended to it. I said, if ? this and they come in again to look at this and it becomes a media issue, look at the airlines you're going to lose. So there is that part that works for me. It's more of the interest base. I'm not going in with the position, you don't do this I'll do that. No. There's a commonality there. So if we don't do this, this is the effect on the workers. If the workers are also hurt or endangered in some way, this is the impact on the food they are preparing. It goes to the airline; they ? from you, and that is going to happen. You lose the profits and the workers may also lose their job. It is also a way of getting them at this level of conscience. I'm not guilting you, but I just want to visit with you and say, hey you are leader here; open your eyes and look at things different instead of always going like that.

Q: How did you cut through the stereotypes when you went to work for the Paul Band? How did you work with the people there and cut through the stereotypes that you were being presented with?

SN: Two things. When I came in I also did some studies in addictions at U of A. In that course, when you're talking about addictions, the Aboriginal community is the centre of almost every discussion. So that really opened me up to see, okay this is how these people are. That really helped me when finally I was working with the Aboriginal community. I have the stereotyping there, coming from my course, and why they do what they do when it comes to, when you're living in a society where you're completely hopeless. Education is supposed to be open to everybody, but you don't have that opportunity. Housing, you don't have that opportunity. Clean drinking water, you don't have that opportunity. So when you are in a state of helplessness, guess what you resort to? Alcohol. Then the alcohol puts you in some sort of frame of mind where you

feel good, because you're under the influence. But you wake up and guess where you are--you're in the same situation; so you go back again and you drink. In working with them, it helped me understanding them. When I actually became a supervisor, I had moved to downtown to start Aboriginal Initiatives with the same supervisor who was the manager. So I became supervisor under him and back to Stony Plain. This time around I was back to Alexander First Nations. At the time, Alexander First Nations unit was based in Stony Plain and we would drive back and forth. So when I came, the manager asked me if I'm comfortable doing that. I asked, can I have my office or my unit base on the reserve? I have six workers. Four of them work from the Alexander reserve and only two in Stony Plain. So I would have to stay with the two and not the four. He was like, are you willing to do that? I say, ya. So I had my office in Alexander, and I've never felt uncomfortable. That is one of my best experiences working with the Alexander First Nations on the reserve – the leadership support, the band, the support they gave me. I can't describe it. It was huge. Some of the names, like Lozelle and Melvina and others. We started what we called the Alexander Initiative. Apprehension of children was very rampant. I went on the reserve there and for 13 or 14 months straight there was no apprehension of any child, because we started the Alexander Advantage. Not that we weren't close--we were close to apprehension. But I came out with something with the team--Lozelle and Melvina as development officers and said, this is the rule now. We are not going to let any crisis worker come from Edmonton to enter this reserve. We are going to have our own crisis issues. So between Lozelle and I, we communicated. When there was a crisis she'd call me and I'd drive from Spruce Grove if it was daytime, or if I'm at home from Sherwood to the reserve near Morinville. We'd sit down in the boardroom there, she'd provide us with pizza, and I said, if I don't get the family to take these children we will not be leaving this building. I'm not going to apprehend the children. I want family members to come in and take the children. It would serve me no good and serve the children no good for them to be uprooted from here and placed elsewhere. That's when they said, this guy's heart is in the right place. So they gave me a hundred percent support. If I called for family members, they'd give me the help, because I didn't want to apprehend the children. I'm Black, I'm African, but I think part of my heart is with the Aboriginal communities. It's there. When I went back to the central neighbourhood place and



I was also taking care of the Blackfoot children who we cared for here in Edmonton, [that's why I was back and forth,] [*the manager, another supervisor and I were*] back and forth. At a ceremony here in Edmonton I was given a Blackfoot name; it translates into Many Songs. I'm proud of that. It's one of those riches. It's not a \$60 million lottery win, but the acknowledgement that we know you're helping us and that's it. I go home and I sleep well.

Q: How did the independent energy at the time you were growing up help form you?

SN: That's a very good question and a difficult one. My dad was CPP, Convention People's Party activist. So, when Nkrumah was overthrown, he had to go into hiding. That's the activist part of me. My mom also worked as a ladies' organizer for the local CPP group. So CPP has always been part of me. When I compare all these parties coming out, they don't live up to that standard. When Kwame Nkrumah was there, for example, Kwame Nkrumah didn't have one relative in his government, not one. But now we look at the government and this one is related to the president's wife, and it's appalling. The piece that helps me now is when I look back, at the time I was too young to understand what Kwame Nkrumah was doing. Kwame Nkrumah tried to set up institutions in Ghana and give scholarships for freedom fighters from other countries to come and study there for free. Mugabe was one of them. Mugabe came and taught in Ghana, actually in the city that I lived, Takoradi, St. Mary's College. It was a high school at the time. So Mugabe's wife Sally is from the twin city, and she's a twin – very politically acute lady. I always say that after her death, Mugabe went down like this. When she was there, Mugabe was this, because there was a force behind Mugabe. Kwame Nkrumah's fight and what we were taught was that you don't just live for yourself, you live for other people. That's why he made his popular statement and said, the independence of Ghana is meaningless unless it is linked to the total liberation of the African continent. That was his goal. He was arming, he was funding freedom fighters, people fighting in other countries. So Ghana has always been seen as a leader on that front. Even here within the African community, you go somewhere and say, I'm from Ghana, you are looked at very differently: okay, these are the people that are leaders. Ghana is so peaceful; you don't have any of these civil strikes before. When you go there, intermarriage is so

common, Christians marrying Muslims, in Nigeria you'd be killed. All these travel intermarriages and stuff like that, I can travel anywhere in Ghana and I could care less, because it's peaceful that way. So one of the impacts on me is just accepting people for who they are, embracing people, and then working with people. That is how I was brought up; that is how we were taught. He said, our independence cannot be complete unless it is linked up with the total liberation of the African continent. Our wealth, you cannot boost your wealth if you do not also assist other people or other countries in their suffering. I don't know if I answered that question correctly. When Kwame Nkrumah said Kwame Nkrumah never dies, at the time people thought he was trying to play God. But now we know in Ghana that when Kwame Nkrumah said he never dies, what we're actually talking about was Nkrumah's ideas. Nkrumah ideas never die, even to date. This guy was overthrown in 1966, and he went into exile in Guinea and died in 1972. To date, we go back to Nkrumah's ideas. When you look at various African leaders who sprung up at the time, they were always looking up to him. He was overthrown for two reasons. He was pushing for a united African continent, United States of Africa under one leadership and one currency. Then he was the only country's president, and being black from Africa, who Saigon accepted that he comes as a mediator between Vietnam and U.S. America didn't want that, so guess what? The Bush Sr. was a CIA director. So, when he took off to go to Saigon, a bloody coup took place, very bloody. To date, those of us of my age who knew very well what the Bushes did and America did, we don't forgive Americans easily. Now there's that kind of ? coming up again. You go in with two flags. One wears a Canadian flag and one will be American. You see people gravitating towards the one with the maple leaf T-shirt. We cannot trust the Americans because they have this mentality that they just come in for themselves. When the Canadians come in, they are peaceful. Ghana served with Canada on the peacekeeping front for a long time, and my uncle was part of them. So you see the connection there. Oh, the teacher in me is coming out.

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

SN: One of the challenges – and I'm being a little bit political here – when you live through what we lived through for four years under Rachel and the NDP and you look at what we're living through here within less than a year of election, it scares me. Not just because I'm a minority; it scares me for the labour movement. When you suppress the labour movement, the majority of these members of the labour movement are immigrants; you are literally suppressing immigrants. So this whole cultural fear is just a ? to NDP. NDP came and we had the flags open, lesbians and everybody, and you could just go out freely. Then all of a sudden you see this whole nationalistic tendency coming up. Trump is-- the schedule now is making people recoil to their old selves prior to the NDP. That worries me; that scares me. I don't know if there's anything I can do as one person to help, but I think the labour movement has a lot of responsibility. We have what it takes; that is why they are scared of us. I mentioned in our meeting last week and said, I'm seeing fascism rise before my very eyes. I've given presentations on fascism before, Italy at the time. So when they came, that's why they call it a fascia: it's a bunch of rod tied together; that is the meaning. That is how it was promoted – let's stick together so that nobody breaks us. So what he did with that name and the symbol was that they aligned themselves with corporate entities and the rich, who I refer to as the bourgeois class, to suppress the workers. They had fear of the labour movement at the time. The labour movement had the means; they contribute, like dues and everything, to do all kinds of things – educational programs or anything they needed to do. We have the people, the members, to create a formidable workforce, a movement to actually overthrow all these bourgeois and the rich class. Then lastly and perhaps most importantly, we are the conscience. The labour movement is the conscience of society. If they are able to take out the conscience of society, they can run down the society just like that. An example is the NDP government. When they came in, who started talking about minimum wage? It's us. Then it took all the provincial level, and then boom we have a minimum wage. Who started talking about the labour laws and everything? It came from us. So we have that that we can do. They don't want to listen to that. They don't want to hear us talk about minimum wage or women's issues or the right to choose. What they're doing is that they want to strip the unions, the locals, the labour movement, AFL and others, of their source of money, their source of income, so they can go on with their agenda. But the one power that they cannot take, because you cannot buy with money,

is the movement we can create. That movement is what we need to see come alive. I wish that the unions in Alberta would all come under one umbrella, AFL, so that we fight, so that it's not UFA different and Alberta Teachers different and AUPE different. When you fight on those fronts you can do something, but you can't really achieve a lot. But if you go in with unison and one voice, we would be able to achieve a lot. We'd be able to overthrow, not necessarily in terms of coup d'etat, but we'd be able to push out governments like UCP. I think we can do it. We can do it.

[ END ]