

Aisha Amin

Date: October 3, 2019

Location: Edmonton

Interviewer Donna Coombs-Montrose

Q: Where were you born?

AA: I was born in Dire Dawa in Ethiopia in 1983. I moved around a lot when I was little, to Italy and then Canada. We lived in Montreal from '87 to '92 and then Toronto from '92 until I moved to Edmonton in 2007.

Q: So you were immigrants to Canada?

AA: Yes.

Q: Why did you move to Alberta?

AA: My parents moved here first and then I got pregnant and showed up on my Mom's doorstep pregnant at 24. I was 24 years old.

Q: Was this your first and only child?

AA: Yes.

Q: What happened after that?

AA: I worked for a very long time as an insurance agent. I was in claims for a long time, and then I found out that girls can get into the trades. I had no idea that girls could get into the trades until I moved here to Alberta. The Women Building Futures program was all over the place at the time. They had just started up around 2010 I think, and I had just heard about it. I didn't realize girls could get into the trades, and then I found out what boys get paid in the trades. I was like, I can do what boys can do. I went and applied, and the rest is history.

Q: Prior to that, your schooling was wherever your family lived?

AA: Yes.

Q: So how did you get into the trades program?

AA: I contacted the program. I got laid off from my insurance job because they were deneutralizing, so I had the time to look into other options. I had heard about Women Building Futures so I contacted them and asked them what it would take to get into the program. They gave me the rundown and I qualified to do the unemployment program. When I started there I did the journeywomen class of 54; there was me and about eight other girls. We got the opportunity to learn eight different trades, and whichever one you liked the most you'd go pursue.

Q: Tell me about the journeywomen class.

AA: Once you get in there they teach you everything from how to swing a hammer like a guy, they teach you to blend in. You don't want to be wearing makeup, you don't want to stand out. So lots of etiquette stuff, how to shake a hand. Apparently psychologically fellows are expected to handshake first, so little things like that were really interesting to learn. The classes itself were just basic maths and science, and the rest was all hands-on experience. They had shops and you'd go in there and get a project that you'd have to make. I made a lunchbox and I also made a transformer out of metal; I made one of those for my first project. I was a natural at welding, so I chose welding.

Q: Did the project inspire you to choose welding?

AA: Yes, I would say so, because I was good at it. They had carpentry, they had sheet metal, they had plumbing, welding, pipefitting and electrical. Going through the program and trying different things over time I realized that welding was what I liked doing. It reminded me of painting, it's like painting with hot metal. I loved it and my work was really nice, so I decided to just do that.

Q: Did the program then send you on an apprenticeship?

AA: No, the apprenticeship program starts with you going out to find employment and convincing an employer to sign you up a blue book. But they would give you leads to employers open to hiring women in the trades.

Q: Was the journeywomen class of 54 all women?

AA: They were all women.

Q: Were you the only minority woman?

AA: No, there were Indigenous girls, three of them. I was the only black woman in it, and the rest were white I think.

Q: How big was the group?

AA: There were eight.

Q: What is the reference to 54?

AA: I'm not sure actually, I'm not sure. I think it's the number of classes, I'm guessing it's the number of classes that they've had. It's a two-month course, no it's a three-month course – it was 12 weeks.

Q: And this was under the Women Building Futures program?

AA: Yes. We were the class of 54, so I think that must've their 54<sup>th</sup> program. But I'd have to clarify that to make sure.

Q: So you approached employers to get an apprenticeship?

AA: On my own, yes. I would go out and pound the pavement, make the phone calls, go to employment resource offices. I was lucky enough to find employment at a 'mom-and-pop' shop close to my house, it was on 99<sup>th</sup> Street, called Inline Flow Products, where I would do a lot of apprenticing. They would show me how to do basic welding of little nuts and bolts for these giant big caps that would go onto pipes. I was very fortunate that the journeyman that I started with took me under his wing and actually showed me how to weld. I welded every day, so I got pretty good at it. It was a great experience. Different people have different attitudes about girls in the trades. When he left to go to a different job I got another journeyman who did not want me to weld at all. It was interesting that some would let you weld and want you to weld, and others were no, just move things around, sweep the place, clean up the shop.

Q: How did that make you feel?

AA: Honestly I was so happy that I was actually in the trade. My blue book was a major milestone, getting your blue book signed is a major milestone. So I was on the high of that and didn't really want to look at it from a negative perspective, but just do it. If that's what my job entailed, just to stay there I would do it with a good attitude and just hope that eventually I would be able to weld.

Q: So he just told you to sweep, and then signed your blue book?

AA: Yes.

Q: Did you feel this was a compromise?

AA: I didn't have any reference point. Everything was brand new to me, so I didn't have anything to reference what I should do or how to feel about something. I just figured, okay this is what I gotta do, so I'll do it to get my end result. My end result is to get my journeyman ticket. If I have to start sweeping to get a start, then that's what I'm doing.

Q: Were there other welders on that site?

AA: Yes, there were four welders total – the supervisor, four welders, and a labourer. I was the only apprentice. I was also the only girl, the only black girl. I'm usually the only black girl at most jobs I've been at.

Q: Was there any human rights affiliation or consciousness at that workplace?

AA: Not at my first job, no.

Q: How long did you stay?

AA: I was there for a year and a half.

Q: Then what?

AA: Then I went to school for my first year of apprenticing. When I finished school – I went to NAIT for the first year – I had to look for work because they didn't have any work there. That's when I went to Local 488 to see if I could get work there – the local union here, pipefitters union. They sent me out to Fort McMurray to work in the field. It's interesting, because in the field as an apprentice you're not allowed to weld anything at all. You don't touch nothing, all you do is hand rods to the journeyman welder. I found, looking back, that I was very fortunate to get to weld for a good eight months of my first year, because I welded every day and actually learned how to do it. Most of my apprenticeship, I didn't get to really weld too much.

Q: Who was that employer in Fort Mac?

AA: Suncor.

Q: How long did you stay there?

AA: I was doing a shutdown, so I was there for 21 days straight three times in a row, so 63 days.

Q: What was that environment like? Were you still the only black female welder?

AA: No, I saw one other black girl. Her name was Merlin. There was another couple of female European girls or white girls. But I would say out of the 400 guys, there must've been maybe eight or ten of us girls total. This was in 2014.

Q: How did you find that environment? Was it supportive?

AA: The first time, not really, because you don't really see girls there. Guys kind of don't give you any tasks to do, they just think you're just there because you're a girl and the company have a policy of hiring women. You're not really trusted with any real tasks. So I felt pretty useless for the first little while. Once I got to know guys and they could see that I could hold my weight, then they would have me help out. I watched them do the weld for high pressure pipes, and get my input, like let me practise on something that's not the actual job. I'd be there for a good 14 days before anybody would be like, okay let me show you something. The first couple times not so much. The last couple times, because I made friends, it was better I would say.

Q: Did you feel isolated?

AA: Oh yea for sure, totally.

Q: Did anybody call you names directly?

AA: Not onsite. I was called stupid a couple of times at the 'mom-and-pop' shop, when the second journeyman didn't want to teach me anything. He seemed like a really angry person. I don't know if he hated me because of what I did, or his overall look on women in trades. Only a handful of times I've been called stupid. It's more like screaming. One time I remember lifting a piece of steel on the crane and I didn't rig it properly and it had fallen and went boom. People came running over and my journeyman was like, what are you, stupid? You don't fucking do it that way. I was like, oh sorry, I'm sorry. He's like, you fucking stupid people, I don't know why they have fucking stupid girls working here anyway. Then he stormed off. I felt like a jackass. Now I always double check my rigging, I even ask if it's right before I go lifting it. The first year I didn't even know anything, I was totally green. But he was not having any of that. This was at the 'mom-and-pop' shop. At Fort McMurray it wasn't really blatant, it was more like they would just kind of shut you out. They would talk amongst each other and not include you, or send you to do things that really had nothing to do with the job per se, things like that.

Q: But you recognized it.

AA: Absolutely for sure.

Q: How did you feel?

AA: I don't know, I tried to just brush it off and pretend like it didn't bother me. I was there alone, I didn't know anybody.

Q: Did it bother you?

AA: Absolutely, for the first little while it bothered me big time. But I've learned that as I got better in my trade instead of learning and being more competent in what I can do, now I have no problem calling it out. If it happens today, I would call them out on it. If a job needs to be done and I'm feeling excluded, I would say so – hey guys, tell me what I'm supposed to do,

because I don't know what I'm supposed to be doing; or, what's my part in this? I would assert myself into getting the job done and being included. I don't take that stuff anymore.

Q: Did you have any support?

AA: At work, no. At home, yes. I was around a lot of trades guys, tradespeople, so I would talk to them about it and they would be like, forget that, don't bother with that. Or they'll tell me, next time speak up, guys respect people who speak up. They'd give me pointers in that direction. Also the girls from Women Building Futures, I'm still in contact with them to this day. We kind of share stories, good and bad. That's pretty much how I cope.

Q: You're still in touch with Women Building Futures?

AA: Absolutely. Even when I'm out of work, I'll still call them and see if I can get a lead for a job. They're very receptive.

Q: Where was that organization based?

AA: Right downtown here by Grant MacEwan – 104 and 102<sup>nd</sup>.

Q: Women who have taken the program stay in contact with them?

AA: Yes, they encourage it. They're very happy to hear from you whenever. They'll invite you to speak to the women in the new classes that are going. You're considered an alumni. I've been asked to come and talk to some of the girls there. When I got my journeyman ticket I went and showed it off to them. They encourage you to come back and talk about your experiences and share your achievements. It's a wonderful environment.

Q: In Fort McMurray, were you working 12-hour shifts?

AA: Yep, it's always 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. I always worked the dayshift, 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. every day for up to 21 days straight.

Q: You'd leave your family in Edmonton?

AA: I would, yep.

Q: How did you handle childcare?

AA: I'm very fortunate that I have family members that helped me with my daughter. She had lots of supports, lots of cousins. It was difficult to leave her so long, because I'd never done anything like that before. But at the same time, it was the best way I could get the experience I needed to get my certification. I kind of felt like it was something I had to do to get done, and I would only do it for a short time until I could find something steady within the city.

Q: What happened after the Fort McMurray stint?

AA: All the work for shutdowns was done through the union hall, and that was mostly my second year and part of my third year of apprenticing. Nearing the end of my apprenticeship where I was going to get my journeyman ticket, I started to look more seriously in the city. I had the experience, I had the safety tickets required, I understood the trade a bit better, so it was easier for me to go out and interview for jobs in the city. So that's what I did. In my third year I started to look in Nisku and Fort Saskatchewan or anywhere that would have jobs.

Q: Not through the union?

AA: Not through the union, no. The union always had jobs out of town, almost always, and I didn't want to be out of town anymore because I was away from my family for so long. It pays better for sure, it pays a lot better to be out of town. But it's also very isolating and lonely, and I'm around guys all the time. It gets too much after a while. The food's not good and it's not an existence that I want to continue for my entire career.

Q: Tell me about your successes finding employment in the city.

AA: I was lucky enough to get a couple of jobs in my third year. When I got my journeyman ticket in Nisku, the first job I had was welding truck troughs, the actual frames of semi trucks. That was a cool job; I learned a lot there, but it didn't pay very well. Then I started at Gemini. That was an interesting job, because it was very hot. I've never welded so hot. Your boots would melt, that's how hot it would get. You'd have to heat everything up. The dozers and diggers, the big buckets, they would get cracks and those would have to get refilled with weld. But you can't



just weld it, you have to heat it up first to 350 degrees and it would have to stay hot like that for the entire shift. So it got really hot all the time, it was always hot, it was so hot. I didn't really like that, so I started looking. I'm now at the MakLoc Buildings, I've been there for over a year. I'm much happier there. We do a lot of beams and structural work. The Henday, the big beams on the Henday, I had a hand in one of those. The Rogers Centre, the ceiling, I've had a hand in one of those. Cool stuff like that.

Q: This work environment was normal?

AA: Yea, it's so hot. You take precautions. You have to lay what they call wool down to protect you from the heat. But oh boy, if you got your boot on there, your boots would melt.

Q: Did that actually happen to somebody?

AA: Me, that's why I know.

Q: Were you injured?

AA: No, I wasn't injured. I had to get new boots, though. They had a pretty good boot program. They would reimburse you \$350 for your boots, which is awesome. It's part of your PPE, your personal protective equipment. Every shop is different, every place is different, but most of them have to have ear plugs, eye glasses, steel toed boots, and gloves.

Q: Do you come to the job with your own package?

AA: It's impressive if you do, but because gloves and ear plugs are consumable and wear away quickly, they will continue to provide it for you. But it looks good when you show up with your own tools and personal protective equipment for the first day. I did have to go out and get my own tools, like my welding clips, hammer, squares, grinders. If you don't show up with your own tools, you end up using the company tools. If it's already being used, you end up standing around, and that looks bad. It's just better if you just show up with your own toolbox with your own tools.

Q: How much does that cost?

AA: Over the years I've probably spend a couple thousand bucks.

Q: Is it an advantage for you as a tradeswoman? Does it make you look better?

AA: Yea, it definitely makes you look better. You get a whole lot of respect a lot faster if you show up with your own stuff, because it shows that you have experience and that you'll take the initiative to be prepared for the job.

Q: As a tradeswoman, do you find that you have to constantly prove yourself?

AA: I think it depends on where you work. I've definitely felt like that before. I'll even use the example here. I've worked with this company for the past year and they've had three supervisors. One supervisor, even though I was employed longer than he was, when he came into the job I had to prove myself all over again. The things I was allowed to do before, all of a sudden I wasn't doing anymore, because he thought that I had to show him I could do it. We had lots of conversations about the way he was treating me, and I did feel a little singled out. I definitely felt singled out, and I even said so a few times. But I think it really depends on who you end up working for.

Q: What would you say?

AA: I would say things like, I've done this before. Why can't I do this? I've done it before. When he's handing out the tasks. He'd be like, oh I don't know that you can do it. I'm like, well it doesn't matter what you think I can do, I'm telling you I've done it, and I've done it just before you even got here. He's like, well you have to prove that to me. I don't want to give you this task until I know you can do it. Or he'll stand and watch me do something, like micromanage me and stuff like that.

Q: Did you complain?

AA: Oh I would complain, yea. I think over the years I've learned that it comes down to the specific person and how they look at workers. I've met some awesome people who will teach you. Even if you don't know, they'll teach it to you and let you learn it. I've worked with guys that will show you once and be, you got this. Then I've worked with guys who completely look at me like, you don't know anything so we're not going to task you with anything. Then I end up feeling singled out and really upset. My personality is the type to say something, but I've talked

to girls before in the trades who are much more timid than me, and they would just end up losing the job or quitting the job. One girl even quit the trade altogether because she didn't want to have to deal with that. It really depends on your personality type.

Q: Do you have other family members in the trade?

AA: Yes, I'm fortunate enough to have supports that guided me in knowing that it's okay to say something. I think I have a large personality as well. I'm usually very well liked and known pretty quickly at a jobsite. I kind of learned that guys are just naturally more aggressive. They have jokes that aren't appropriate, and will respect them if you call them on it, and kind of flip it on them and make fun of them for saying something inappropriate. They'll respect that kind of dynamic with somebody. But women aren't so much like that. Women are much more subtle and think about nice and dainty things, the nonconfrontational. They'll try to have humour in it so it doesn't feel confrontational, but it completely is confrontational. I think I can recognize that and it's never really bothered me too much. I'm not offended by a lot of the stuff that is said in jest. Really what offends me is belittling jokes, like oh girls can't do stuff like that. If they talk about boobs or penises – because they talk about that stuff too – it doesn't really bother me per se. But it depends on the degree of it. I don't like it being drawn on the wall, but they'll crack nasty jokes. Depending on how it's said, it doesn't really bother me too much. They'll talk about the Sun's sunshine girls and stuff like that, and it doesn't really bother me. But a lot of women would be very bothered by that, very bothered. I pick and choose my battles wisely, because you don't want to be the girl that gets offended by everything, but you also don't want to be the girl that puts up with everything either. You have to find that balance.

Q: You call them on it when it's not appropriate.

AA: When it's not appropriate, yea.

Q: What responses do you get?

AA: Depending on the people. Some guys will be apologetic – I'm sorry, I didn't mean for it to be offensive. Other guys will just brush it off like what I said doesn't matter. For the most part over the years, it's a big difference from when I started in 2012 and now. Guys are much more conscious about what they talk about and how they talk about it now than when I first started.

Q: Did they have some training, or are they now more accepting of women?

AA: I think it's more accepting of women, because there are more women in the trades now. We're still not in huge overwhelming numbers, but you'll come across a chick at some point now more frequently than when I started five years ago.

Q: When you first started, did you meet any older women in the trades?

AA: Older? No, they're all about my age. I think Gemini had the most women I've ever seen in one place – there were four of us. I was the only one on the nightshift but there were three girls on the dayshift. That was the most I've seen in one workplace. But I was the only black girl, and on my shift. Very rarely do I see black women in the trades. There was one woman, but I've never come across another.

Q: Was there anything in the union experience that disappointed you?

AA: Not really. I was applying through the union for a few years and I just found that because I wasn't a full-on member yet they would just send all the permits to out-of-town jobs. After the fourth or fifth time and it was going on my third year, I just figured it would be easier if I just apply on my own. That's what I did, and it was. I got into jobs much easier.

Q: But the jobs you got into are not union jobs?

AA: No, they're not union jobs. It would've been nice to get a union job, but they just never catered to that. I was always going out of town. My kid was getting bigger and I already missed a big chunk of her life. I'm just like, you know what, I'll take my chances. I'm glad I did.

Q: How old is she now?

AA: She's going on 12 now.

Q: So your working life has been for about half her life.

AA: Yes, she was about 6 when I started.

Q: When did you become a journeyman?

AA: I became a journeyman May of 2017.

Q: Did that make any difference to your working experience?

AA: Yes, you're held at a higher standard when you're a journeyman status. You have to go in there knowing something. When you're an apprentice you have room to make mistakes, lots of mistakes actually. They'll yell at you, you might get scolded a bit, but they at least allow you to make that mistake. Journeymen, not so much. You get maybe one mistake, and if it happens again or you cause another mistake and it costs the company money, you're gone. You gotta be on your Ps and Qs all the time. But getting the journeyman ticket was awesome, it was a major achievement. I did all of my schooling at NAIT. They have a huge welding shop at the campus on Gateway.

Q: Did you get to practise there?

AA: Yes.

Q: At any point along the way, did you have second thoughts about welding?

AA: Yea, I'm thinking about getting a second trade now that I understand welding. The challenge isn't in learning how to weld. Once you actually know how to weld, it gets boring. It's really hand-eye coordination, and once you understand how to do it, you're not deviating from that too much. So I feel like getting another trade. Plus it's really dirty work, you're always dirty.

Q: What are some of the environments you actually worked in that were dirty?

AA: You're covered in soot by the end of the shift anywhere you go, just because welding creates ashes; it's called slag. It creates ashes and you're always dirty, dirt all over your face, all over your coveralls. Just dirty all the time, and you stink like metal. I really do love welding and I'm very good at it, but it is very hard on the body as well. It's strenuous, because you are in one position for a long time. Once you're in the middle of a weld, you don't want to stop even if you're uncomfortable. You want to finish that weld off, because there's a whole bunch of work that goes into stopping and getting going again. If I have to weld safe, I have to be covered from head to foot. I want to be able to weld the whole thing. If at any time I'm uncomfortable – there's hot rocks, it's probably burning my arm – I don't want to actually stop, because if I

stopped I'd have to clean the whole thing off, grind it smooth, and then start again. Over time, it does cause strain on your body. I think I want to get into something that's more calculating or something like pipefitting where you do a lot of measurements. I'm not sure, but I think I'm leaning towards pipefitting. We'll see.

Q: Do you have to go often for medical attention?

AA: I have to go for massages very often. Massages are a huge health thing I do. It's very hard on my body, I find – bending, crouching, welding over your head.

Q: Is welding more dangerous than pipefitting?

AA: I don't find that it's more dangerous, no. It's harder on your body being up at night. Right now I'm working a job where I work 4 p.m. to 2:30 a.m. You end up sleeping only four or five hours because you want to be up by 10 a.m. so you can get your stuff done before you go off to work. So it's hard in terms of I don't see my family too much other than the weekends. I don't get enough sleep during the week because I want to make sure to clean my house and make lunches, cook dinner and stuff like that. Working nightshift in general is not good for your body. Things like that I struggle with.

Q: Do you communicate about your work with any organizations or people outside of your family?

AA: Just Women Building Futures is the only organization I really keep in touch with. I build costumes for the Caribbean festival; I build the big floats. So I usually am the one that will weld the frames. Other people will come out and help me, and it's a good time. It kind of reinforces the joy that I find in it. I'm an extrovert naturally but you're by yourself when you're welding – it's just you and that weld. I kind of like that. There's no judging, there's no people watching. It's just you and your work, and you get it done. I like that about it.

Q: So you might move into pipefitting as an additional trade?

AA: Yes, it's an additional trade, a journeyman ticket of its own in that trade. I'm very happy that I made the decision to get a trade. It taught me confidence, the ability to logically look at a material and turn it into something. I didn't have that before, I learned that through the trade. I

can actually build something out of materials laying around. I wasn't able to see that before. Understanding how things fit, like measuring and squaring things up – it's kind of cool. I could build a house if I wanted to. Very cool stuff, and I never saw it before working at the desk of an insurance agent. I'd never looked at material that way. I find that insight very rewarding.

Q: When you visit Women Building Futures, do you inspire them to join the trades?

AA: I sure hope so. I think more women in the trades would be awesome.

Q: Why?

AA: It adds some variation to the work environment. Girls are very methodical and they like to take their time when they go to execute something. Guys will just do it, then if it's messed up they spend time going back and having to fix it. Girls don't want to have to go back and fix it, they'll take the time to make sure it's done right the first time. That's where I get a lot of praise too, because I very rarely have to go back and do my work over again. I think that would be beneficial to see more of. Sometimes I've gotten in trouble in the past for taking too long to figure something out. It's because I don't want to have to go back and do it again. I think if there were more women in the trades, it would become more of a norm and they wouldn't be so singled out for taking extra time to figure it out.

Q: Have you ever been told you're taking over a man's job?

AA: Not yet, no, I haven't been told that. Just that it's not a place for girls – I've come across that. Girls aren't as strong and they can't carry things.

Q: Do you have loads to lift?

AA: I don't like lifting loads.

Q: Are you required to?

AA: Oh yea. It's easier to just pick something up and carry it to your station than have to get the crane and pick it up and carry it to your station. Sometimes it's just too heavy.

Q: Can you drive a crane?

AA: I'm a crane driver, yes; I'm certified to drive a crane. Some things are just too heavy. There's lots of guys that can just lift it and go, but I'll have to take the other route. I'm not really sorry about it, because if the job gets done at the end of the day that's all that matters. No job pays me enough to break my back, so I'm not doing that.

Q: What's involved in becoming certified to drive a crane? What's it like to drive a crane?

AA: At first it's scary. Cranes are scary. They're probably the most dangerous tool in the trade to use, because you are lifting usually very big stuff. But it is cool, it's very cool. Once you actually get it all rigged up, it's properly done and it lifts up and you move it and place it, it's very cool. You've got to do a crane course. A lot of it is theory. You watch videos, you talk about how it all works, you learn all the parts of it and how they all work, and the rules behind using it. There are very serious rules – you can't lift over a person, you have to make sure your path is clear, things like that. Then at the end of the training course you'll go and actually demonstrate how to use the crane. Once you do all that and you pass it, you get a certificate that you carry around with you and you're able to use a crane.

Q: Are there different kinds of cranes?

AA: Yes, there's big overhead ones and there's jib cranes. Jib cranes are usually in a shop stationed in a bay. They don't move, they only pull up and down. The big overhead cranes can go east, west, and up and down.

Q: Are you certified to drive both?

AA: Yes, absolutely. It's pretty cool. I've done skids. Skids are usually the flooring of electrical huts; they go on the floor. That floor is made out of metal and they're called skids. Those skids could be anywhere from the size of this room, 12 feet, all the way to 108 feet, humongous. You flip them up and flip them down; it's very cool.

Q: Do you have any other certification of any kind?

AA: For crane certifications? You have to renew them every three years. Most of the tickets are every three years. There's fall protection, so learning the mechanism to wear when you go up on heights, lanyards and stuff. You have to get that, which I have. There's confined spaces, so



every time you go into a small space, because you are welding and creating fumes, you need a ticket for that; I have that as well. CWB has a certificate for welding, saying that you understand how to weld that specific metal, and you have to renew that every three years as well. There are other stages to welding, like B pressure, that allows you to only weld high pressure vessels. I don't have a B pressure, and I'm not sure if I want to get it. I'm kind of afraid of high pressure stuff.

Q: What's different about high pressure?

AA: Because it's high pressure, your welds have to be solid. If anything breaks, you can literally cause a catastrophe. It's very stressful and it's tested regularly. As a B pressure you get tested, your welds get tested regularly, almost all of them. It's a lot of pressure, a lot of stress, to do that kind of welding. Pays well, though.

Q: In confined spaces, do you have to have oxygen?

AA: Depending on what kind of confined space you're in. If you're in a confined space that has ventilation holes, then you don't need oxygen. If it's completely confined and there are no holes, there's only one way in and one way out, you'd have to use Scot air. I don't like that kind of welding at all. They always get the littlest person to go in there. I hate it, so I try to stay away from the confined spaces. I'm not a big person, I'm only 5'4", and I can usually fit. Guys are usually 5'10" or 6', so if it's a six-footer or me, guess who's going in there? I'm not a fan of confined spaces at all; I much prefer to be out. That's why I like structural welding to beams, so columns for buildings and skid with a wrench in and stuff like that.

Q: What is a skid again?

AA: It's the flooring that a building will go onto. It's transportable, you can move it. It goes on a truck. You can have an electrical house on it, you can put it on a truck and it can actually move from one location to another. The skids is the actual flooring of it.

Q: As a Canadian citizen now, have you gone back to visit your home country?

AA: I've never been, I've never gone back. I plan on going back this year in January. My mom visits there regularly and my grandma is still back there. I'd like to go and check it out. I haven't been back since I was born. I was raised in Canada.

Q: At what age did you come to Canada?

AA: I was three. I've been a Canadian citizen since 1993 officially. Best country in the world. I love Canada.

Q: Do you have siblings?

AA: Yea, I have four siblings – four sisters and a brother.

Q: Are any of them in the trades?

AA: No. My oldest sister is a homemaker and my younger sister is a criminal defense lawyer and my younger younger sister is kind of figuring it out, and so is my brother.

Q: What does your daughter think about you being a welder?

AA: She thinks it's very cool. She thinks it's very cool that I'm a tradesperson. She brags about it apparently, I've heard. I think she thinks it's very cool. I don't know if she would want to get into the trades herself. I've asked her and she said that it's very physically demanding, so she's not sure if she wants to go that route for a career. She's looking more at being an engineer. But she says what I do is very cool, which is awesome.

Q: So you think that you are contributing to building your city?

AA: I think that's what's great about Edmonton, because it is still developing as a city. It's very cool to say I had a hand in building it, an actual physical hand in building it. Very cool, I'm very proud of it.

Q: So your current employer is not a unionized environment?

AA: No, they're not.

Q: Did you ever think of going back to the union hall to see if they can post you somewhere in the city?

AA: I would consider going back to the union for sure.

Q: Are there benefits?

AA: There's tons of benefits working for a union in terms of pension, healthcare benefits, just the brotherhood of it.

Q: In your current work, is there any pension?

AA: No, it's terrible. They have an RRSP program there, but that's not very good. Healthcare benefits are okay but not as good as the union. The union is like 100 percent covered or you'll get twice as much stuff for the same amount of benefits paid that you pay into. Non-union jobs are more every man for themselves. It's not as good, is what I'm saying. It's still good, but it's not as great as the union benefits, because they kind of pool stuff together and it pays more to the individual members. You don't get that at a non-union shop.

Q: Who would look after your interests in getting an additional trade? Would the union environment be more beneficial to that?

AA: Yea, because they usually have training programs within the union, whereas as a non-union member I'd have to go out and get those and pay for it. Usually it's free through the union as a member, where as a non-member I would have to go and pay the full price for it. It's not cheap – it's all the way up to \$3,000 for some programs. It can be costly. I know the B pressure program through the union, as a member you don't pay for it, but as a non-member it's \$400. It gets pretty pricy. It's kind of a deterrent in terms of going and getting extra certificates and upgrading a trade, because you do have to pay out of pocket for all of those programs.

Q: In the years you've been working in the city, you haven't tried to get a local posting through the union?

AA: I have many times. One of the downfalls of unions is they work on seniority. Me as a brand new person coming into the trade, I wouldn't get any of those perks that long term members have.

Q: So if you just got off a job, then you'd wait. Is that what you mean by seniority?

AA: Yes. Seniority in terms of whoever has been there longer than you, like if you just got a job and someone's been waiting longer they would go before you. When I was a second year looking for something in the city, there were 1,400 guys in front of me. I can't compete with 1,400 people. You don't have the time to sit around and wait. Work is scarce, so that could be up to a year. Some guys are waiting two years for a job. Once you're a full-on member, they frown upon you going and working for a non-union shop. They don't like to hear that; they'll fine you as well. If you do it, it has to be hush-hush, from what I've heard. Those are things I didn't want to have to put up with. I don't think I can go hungry just for politics.

Q: What arrangements have you had for childcare over the years?

AA: You definitely need somebody who can commit to picking them up if you can't. I've put her in lots of programs just so that it takes longer, because school will be done at 3 o'clock but most people don't get off work until 5 or 6. I've had to put her in daycare and make sure there's somebody to pick her up as well. Usually it's my mom or my sisters. I've had Dez, my long-time boyfriend, pick her up. Most people will have one emergency contact, I would have three or four.

Q: It's great that you've used your welding skills to benefit the community.

AA: Thank you. I love contributing my skill to the art of mas, which is what it's called, so it's my pleasure to make it as grand as possible. Being able to weld frames together and pieces together to make it even more grand is just awesome. I'm not sure if you saw the elephant this year. I built an elephant, it was probably 15 feet high and 10 feet across. Only by welding can you make things happen like that. Back in the day, they'd use hose to tie it together, but welding is much easier. I'm very happy to do such awesomeness.

Q: What's the importance of the blue book?

AA: The blue book is very important. You are responsible for your blue book, so you have to take it with you from job to job and it's your responsibility to make sure that it's completed with all the tasks that you've learned apprenticing at those jobs. Once you go to school and the

school signs off on completion and your book is filled out by your employers, you then go to the apprenticeship office and get the stamp to elevate to the next year of your apprenticeship. You do that three times, and on the fourth time you do the journeyman exam and then you are certified. Your apprenticeship does not start until you get that blue book. That blue book is not provided until you find an employer willing to give one to you.

Q: So the employer gives you the blue book.

AA: Yes.

Q: Over the course of your work history, have you seen an increase in the number of black employees in the trades?

AA: I've seen an increase in women in the trades, but not specifically black women. In the city, I've been at four different shops so far, and I haven't seen any. I'm usually the only black woman. I would say in the last year or so I've seen more women in the trades, more than I've ever seen actually. I see more than just me, but before that it was just me; especially in 2012 and 2013 I didn't see any women welding.

Q: What about other trades?

AA: I've seen women in construction, like carpentry and electrical. A few electricians, but never in welding.

Q: Do you think that's due to the circumstances or difficulties of the job?

AA: Possibly. I know the fumes, when we did a tour at Women Building Futures, out of the eight of us there was only two of us that kind of liked the smell of welding. Most of them were like, oh I can't breathe that stuff in at all. They would never get into it.

Q: Could that be harmful, especially if you're pregnant?

AA: I think so, I think that's definitely one of the components. Fumes can't be good for you. I didn't mind the smell. Some people don't like the smell of it, the burning of metal, they don't like it at all and refuse to go near it. I kind of liked it when I first smelled it. I was like, oh I don't mind this, I'll try this out. I still wear a mask at work. I take all the precautions I need to take so

that I'm not breathing those fumes in. But just the smell, I've seen girls like, no way, I'd never do that.

[ END ]