

Desmond Thomas

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DT: My name's Desmond Thomas, 38 years old as of June 5th; 1983 was the year I was born. So yes, 38 years old. I am full status. My band is Sturgeon Lake Cree Nation. It's roughly five hours north of Edmonton here, in between Valleyview and Grande Prairie, Alberta. I'm the oldest of four siblings. I have two sisters and one brother, single mother. I was born in Grande Prairie. My mother moved my sister and I here shortly after she was born. So, when I was two years old, I moved to Edmonton. We grew up here. Later on I had another sister and brother who were born shortly after. We're all within five years of age. I've lived in Edmonton ever since. I think I moved back to Grande Prairie when I was 19 years old just due to some conflict in my early teenage years; had to get out of Edmonton. But yes, so grew up in Edmonton.

I went to a few different elementary schools, moved around a little bit. My first school was called St. Paul; the second one was Norwood, actually a few blocks from where we are currently on the north side here. Finally we settled down in Mill Woods when I was ten years old, attended elementary school there for two years, Sakaw Elementary. Then I'd gone to Ellerslie Junior High School just for the three years, and I had high school at W.P. Wagner. I think I lasted a year and a half there before I was expelled, just due again to some conflict. Unfortunately, I got expelled and I ended up at this place called the Learning Store on Whyte. It was sort of like a correspondence-based school; I attended five hours a week. It was all module-based. I found I really thrived there. Unfortunately, I didn't graduate.

A couple months before I was to graduate or we'll say finish Grade 12, I'd gotten thrown in jail for almost a year for, again, we're going to call that 'conflict.' When I got out of jail I was still a pretty destructive individual at that time. But you know what, thank Creator for a mother's love. At 19 years old, she cried at my feet and begged me to move out of the city. Those were literally the only two options for me; either go to jail for the rest of my life or die, because that was just the pattern that was happening around me. So I reluctantly listened and moved to Grande Prairie, and that's actually when I started working. I started working as a young man, 19 years old. My first job was on the pipeline. There I actually met another gentleman named Cameron Sullivan. I'm 19 years old; Cameron Sullivan was, I'd like to estimate 35 at the time. This man must have taken a liking to me, because he took me right under his wing. From then on, we finished the pipeline. Then we went to work at a pulp mill in Grande Prairie called Weyerhaeuser.

Q: In camp?

DT: No, not in camp. Because Grande Prairie and Weyerhaeuser are minutes away from each other, it was in town. So I became a labourer for probably a couple of years at Weyerhaeuser. But again, at a young age I had alcohol issues. I drank a lot. Unfortunately, alcoholism has always gotten in the way of not really staying employed. This is what would happen. If I missed one day of work, okay, not a big deal. I missed two days of work: it may not be a big deal; I'd never know. Literally I'd be so full of shame from missing a second day, maybe a week, maybe three or

four weeks later I'd quit. I couldn't face going back. That's something that I repeated throughout my life until I was 26 years old when I decided to sober up.

I've always been in the construction industry or labour industry, whether it was working on a pipeline, as a labourer in a pulp mill, I did flat roofing for a bit, did a bit of foundation concrete work building high rises, put in foundations for houses and stucco for a few years. All of these different trades - there's usually a time frame of 18 months to two years I was in each trade, but never aspired to do an apprenticeship. That was simply due to lack of self-esteem. In my mind, I was already going to fail before I already started. Whenever I was offered apprenticeships, "I'm okay where I'm at, I'm fine, thanks for asking though." But it was all due to fear, just insecurities.

When eventually, 26 years old (sorry to backtrack), I moved back to Edmonton when I was 21 or 22 years old. I had major alcohol issues. Fast forward to 26; that's when I went to rehab. When I'd gone to rehab, my mind started to clear up. I started to learn some new things about sobriety, and more importantly, I was introduced to different opportunities to move forward in life once I got out. One of those opportunities was a program called Tradewinds to Success. One of the liaisons at the treatment centre I attended, which was Poundmakers Lodge just north of Edmonton here outside of St. Albert, she approached me and said there's this Aboriginal program called Tradewinds to Success, and they help Aboriginal females and males get into the trades. There were probably half a dozen different trades at the time; there was plumbing, electrician, ironworkers, pipefitters, boilermakers, carpenters. I'm sure I'm missing a couple. But I was like, all right, which one makes the most money? These boilermakers do. Regardless, I got out of rehab, got myself into a recovery house, but once I was in the recovery house that's where life really started to change for me. But thank God again for Tradewinds, because I instantly had something to start attending and moving forward with in my life.

While I was in Tradewinds we did something called a trade streaming process, where we sort of dived into each trade to see what they do. I'd seen what boilermakers do, and you can't pay me enough to do that. So I will go pipefitting. What really attracted me to pipefitting was that it looked like it was really meticulous work, took some skills, some really good hand skills. A lot of mathematics involved in pipefitting, I guess it depends on the type of pipefitter you are. But anyways, a lot of different mathematical skills, just things that I already had and stuff I didn't mind using. So I did the Tradewinds program to Success, and I think at that time it was a six-month program, which was absolutely incredible.

So I didn't finish high school. One of the first things on the agenda for the students was to make sure that everyone had the minimum requirements to get into the trade, which was Grade 10. I believe I did some type of high school equivalency test, not quite a GED, but just something that you can prove to the Alberta government that you're capable of being in this trade, that you have the basic educational skills. So we worked on that for a month, I believe. I wrote some exam, passed it with flying colours. The Tradewinds to Success instructor, Don, really prepared us for the class; so all of us passed with flying colours. That's when we started learning about the trade itself, about what pipefitters do, how they do it. Thank God, I just want to say a shoutout to Local 488, the Plumbers and Pipefitters Union, because they had graciously, I don't know if they

rented or just let Tradewinds to Success use a classroom, but that's where we'd attend classes, at Alberta Pipe Trades College. The advantage to that was or still is that they have the shop downstairs that is strictly dedicated to pipefitting and learning practical pipefitting skills.

Over the next four months I was learning what the first-years learn when first-year apprentice pipefitters attend school. I'd gone through the entire curriculum. Then there's a lot of shop training again to learn what pipefitters would learn or what they do in their first year of apprenticeship while in school. The other advantage of the Tradewinds program being in Local 48's college is that I started to meet the instructors from the college, I started to meet the men and women who were in charge of the educational department there. I actually met a gentleman named Rod Mackay. Once I finished Tradewinds to Success, this guy Rod Mackay, I started going to the hall to try and pull work slips. So I went for a week, day in day out, never got a call. But Rod had seen me showing up every day. I made it a point to meet him, actually, while I was in Trade Winds so I could get a job with the union. But Rod Mackay had pulled me in his office and he had some connections to some possible job opportunities out there for apprentices. We go into his office and he made a phone call, called this other man named Oliver Ripley, who was a superintendent at a shop that was formerly known as Abraxas, which years later would transition to Clearwater Fabrication. He called Oliver Ripley and said, "Hey I've got this young man in here, Desmond Thomas. He just finished the Tradewinds to Success program and takes it very seriously, been coming to the hall every day looking for work. Do you have something for him?"

Well he said, yes send him in, send him in. So again a few days later, I started my first day in the trade. If I remember correctly, that was June 10th of 2011. So June 10th, 2011 I started in the trade of pipefitting as a first year apprentice. I did, regardless of my past addictions and the way I may have grew up very destructive. I've always had a very strong work ethic. I've always taken pride in small things I've done, just things I did as a kid; shoveling the sidewalk, mowing the lawn. Lines had to be perfect, every bit of snow had to be shoveled up and the edges had to look nice. I've always just had that. So now, I'm a 27-year-old male at this time, entering pipefitting and walking into this hard work ethic, I just did what I was told. I listened, had a smile on my face, typically a good attitude.

I finished my first year of apprenticeship there. In my first year of apprenticeship all I did was work as a rigging apprentice. Every fabrication shop has overhead cranes, these cranes that run on rails, I'll say. It's funny, I should know this and I do, but I can't think of it right now. Tracks, we'll call them tracks. It runs along a track, overhead crane that goes back and forth, drops a hook. That's all I did for the first year, just rigging inside of the bays, outside on the craneways, moving pipes and spools from out of the bays into a craneway or vice versa craneway into the bays, loading welders, welding wheels, these wheels that welders use to weld the spools that we build for them, and load trailers once the spool is complete. Again, first year that's all I did.

Again I'm going to bring up this man named Oliver Ripley. In the first two weeks of my apprenticeship he pulls me into his office. He's like, hey Des, are you registered for school? When are you going to school? Two weeks into the trade, what are you talking about school? I've been here for two weeks. If you're not registered by the end of the week you're fired. I'm like, what? He's like, you'd better be registered for school; we're not playing around here.

You're not going to be an eight-year apprentice, so get registered. Alright, 'ten-four, roger'd that all over. So needless to say, I was registered for school within three days. I told him. Good job, good job. I finished my first year, I go to school. The only reason I believe that I even succeeded at passing trade school was because I was sober. I just believe that sobriety had, more important I'm going to say the 12-step fellowship and the men that I met and became really good friends with within that fellowship that really guided me and mentored me on how to focus, how to do things with integrity, how to approach life honestly.

But most of all again the hard work ethic - like just try! Again with alcohol out of my life I was really able to dial in and focus for trade school. So I did trade school for two months, I passed with a 70. That was pretty good for me, I was really happy with that. So I finished school. I call Oliver back, my superintendent. He's like, yes come back, we're waiting for you. That was a pleasure to hear - waiting for you. I'm like, alright, great. So I go back to Abraxas.

Now that I had proven myself, I had gone through the grind, no complaining, did what I was told, great attitude, they put me on what we call the fabrication table. It's actually a pretty big deal for apprentices to be on these tables, because that is where the real skills, that's where apprentices and journeymen as well learn the skills to build what we build to install in refineries or the pipelines. Maybe it's an exaggeration when I say this, but it's sort of like a pipefitter's dream to learn the things that I started learning there within my second year of apprenticeship. When I started my apprenticeship second year, got put on the fabrication table, I had gotten this journeyman, Jose DeSilva. He was my journeyman I would estimate two and a half years. He's a Portuguese man who's probably early 50s when I first met him, 53 or 54. Extremely good shape and extremely hard work ethic, but most of all this man took pride in what he did. One of the first things he told me is, Des, I don't ever want to hear the words out of your mouth, that's good enough. Good enough is never good enough. It's gotta be right, it's gotta be perfect. We're tradesmen, we are not just pipefitters. We're not just journeymen, we're tradesmen. We take pride in what we do. He told me, I'm going to develop these skills within you, something along the lines of that.

So I worked with Jose for the first year of my apprenticeship. I kept learning and learning and learning and learning. I did my second year of apprenticeship at the fabrication table, I'd go to school, I'd come back from school. Guess what, I'd call the superintendent, who I believe now is an individual named Mark Pritchard. Mark Pritchard is like, alright Des, we're waiting for you, see you in a week, finish my second year of school, same deal. Succeed at trade school because, again, sobriety, I can't emphasize enough how much that had really changed my life in order to succeed. Why? Because everybody mentioned that I was always too insecure to approach an apprenticeship. But again, the men that I met in sobriety really built me up to believe I could do anything I wanted to do and be anything I wanted to be. So I go back to Clearwater, formerly Abraxas but Clearwater now, to begin my third year of apprenticeship. Right back at Jose DeSilva's table, kept learning. Kept grinding, literally grinding the pipe away, so kept grinding. And just learning, learning and developing and honing in these skills. By the time I finished my third year apprenticeship, I went to school again to finish up my third year, and I came back as a journeyman. So I've been a journeyman in the trade I wanna estimate since 2014 or 2015. It was a three-year apprenticeship and I'd done the apprenticeship in three and a half years. So I came

back as a journeyman, again back to Clearwater. It's crazy, because I was an apprentice and I just feel like you're so protected as an apprentice. Once you're a journeyman, alright man, you're out there. You're not on your own, but go and build what we taught you to build. I made so many mistakes, so many. When you make a mistake you gotta cut pipe or fittings apart. They call it, I wanna say reclaiming, but I know that's wrong.

Q: Refurbishing?

DT: Not refurbishing either. We'll just call it a cutout. I made so many cutouts, and sort of when you grind the pipe or the fitting back with a bevel. So you've got a pipe and a fitting and have these bevels on the ends so when you bring them together it looks like a little valley. I got really good at that.

Q: How did you get the bevel? Did you put it in a machine to lathe it back, or did you have to do it by hand?

DT: I had to do it by hand with the grinder. So I got really good at that; I am so good at it to this day. Anything that has to be cut out and reclaimed, I'm your man. But again, first three months I had so many. I was getting frustrated with myself. The self doubt started to creep back in: am I even meant to be here? Am I just a good apprentice, is that all? I was really debating on quitting. Again, that low self esteem was creeping back in with vengeance, not even creeping back in, it was flooding back in. But I've always felt blessed to be around good men who saw something in me that sometimes I would lose sight of. My superintendent at the time, again who was a man named Mark Pritchard by now, he had pulled me in his office. He's like, hey Des, I see you're out there and you're having troubles. He's like, look, relax. We know you know what you're doing, we know that without a shadow of a doubt. We know you are a good pipefitter. We think the problem is that you're coming in here and trying to produce as much as journeymen who've been in the trade for decades. You've been a journeyman for a couple of months. I was setting the bar too high for myself. They told me to dial it down, back up, don't worry about production. Just do what you do, bring it back to basics, and just slow down. Your job isn't on the line. We're not expecting a lot from you, because we know you know what you're doing. What was the word they would always use? I can't remember it, and just remember that at the end of it was, and the speed will come. Just do what you do, and the speed will come eventually. Everything will just sort of be second nature. So Des, relax, go and do what you do. We trust you, we believe in you.

That's exactly what I needed. I walked out of his office and I didn't feel as stressed. I felt alleviated, but most of all I felt supported. It's insane when an individual goes in to the workforce and they feel supported by the men and women that they work with, how that'll change an overall morale, overall through an entire crew, but then again on a one-on-one basis too just from worker to superintendent or worker to foreman. When you've got great supervision, it's a huge difference. So I went back out onto the floor, I slowed down, I did what I knew I knew how to do, and the rest is history. I stayed employed with Clearwater for probably six years, which is an extremely good run for pipefitters, extremely. As the years went on, again I'd always call Rod MacKay, the guy who got me the job. I'm like hey Rod, I wanna thank you again for getting me this job. If it wasn't for you, I wouldn't have been employed this long. He's like, Des, I just made the call, you did the rest. I still call Jose DeSilva to this day. Hey Jose,

thank you for being my journeyman and teaching me everything that you've taught me. If it wasn't for you, I wouldn't be employed. Same thing. Dez, I just showed you the skills, you did the rest. I know what they're saying, and they're right. But honestly if it wasn't for those two men, and of course there's a whole bunch of men in between too, and women, that really contributed to me being the tradesman that I am today. So Clearwater six years, I got laid off.

There's another fabrication shop down the street called Academy Construction. They're in the southeast area of Edmonton. My foreman at the time said, Des, Academy is hiring right now. If you drive down there, go and meet the superintendents. These are their names, tell them that I sent you. Hopefully they can help you out. So I'm driving down there. Right away I call Rod MacKay, because he's a good friend of mine at this time and a business agent with the union. When I first met him he worked in Education but he became a business agent. So I called Rod, I'm on my way to Academy, what do you know about this place, what do you know about the superintendents? I don't know them that well, Des. I go, okay cool, well I'm going to go in and introduce myself and see if I can get a job. Walk into Academy and that's where I met two men, Jessie Hudson and Ken McDougal; I sure hope I'm getting that right, but we called him Kenny. There were these two men in the office and I introduced myself. I'm like, my name's Des, just got laid off from Clearwater and wonder if you guys have any jobs, you guys looking for any pipefitters. Laid down my experience. Wow, that's pretty impressive, but unfortunately we're not looking for anyone right now. I gave them my number, they asked for my number. Here, give us your number, you sound like you know what you're doing, we can probably use you eventually. Okay great.

I left the office and was driving home, when I got a phone call from Jessie Hudson. Hey Des, can you start Monday? I believe this was a Thursday. I'm like, yes, absolutely. He's like, alright, go to the hall tomorrow, go grab your work slip, you start Monday Buddy. But as he's saying this he's like, so why didn't you tell us you knew Rod MacKay? Well I don't want to start throwing out names, I just didn't. He's like, yes, Rod called us and told us about you, so we want to see what all the type is about. So again I just believe having a good attitude and especially showing gratitude for the people in your lives makes a huge difference in an individual's life that practices these. So I got off the phone with Jessie super excited, because at the time I had had a baby.

By this time my baby was probably 18 months or two years old. I really needed a job. I had a family, I had three kids total, sorry we have to back up here a bit. Three kids who are now 6, 11 and 13: Mia, Jade and Romeo, and my wife at the time, Savana. So I had a family. So I called Rod right away and I'm like, so you called Jessie. He's like, yes right after I got off the phone with you I gave them a call just to let them know that you were coming. Again I just said thank you man, thank you for making that call, because they weren't even going to hire me. They said there was no work. So again, thanks for making a difference in my life.

So I was at Academy and I've been Academy off and on for the last four years. There was a little lull in between here and there, so I want to estimate I've been in the trade 10 years going on 11. Eight of those years have been strictly in pipefitting fabrication here in the city. I've done a little bit of new construction. There's a project called NWR north of Fort Saskatchewan in the Redwater area. And I've done a couple shutdowns with Shell Scotford with a company called

Edmonton Exchanger. The first time was in 2018. Now I'm currently working at Shell Scottford with Edmonton Exchanger again. I just finished doing a shutdown with them. I started August 27th on my first nightshift, so I've been on nights for the last eight or nine weeks. Just wrapped that up on Thursday, I completed my last nightshift on Thursday. I start days on Monday doing what's called decon, meaning we build this piping system, a decontamination piping system that we install and hook up to the existing unit that we will be doing a shutdown for next season in March. So we're preparing for the next shutdown season in March.

But regardless, regarding my pipefitting career, I've been extremely blessed, always employed, always had good men and women teaching me the trades. Right now I've been at Scottford for the last two months, but I locked into Scottford with not very many skills regarding shutdown or fieldwork, because I've always been in welding shops. But just like the welding shops I've worked in, I was surrounded by excellent tradesmen who again I found really took me under their wing. I had minimal skills, but they showed me how to perform the work effectively and safely, most importantly safely, because it's a dangerous trade. The result is that shutdown is done, 98 percent of the workers have been laid off, but I'm still there. Not only am I still there, but they transitioned me over to days, which is definitely a blessing. I feel too that it's a privilege, because there's some men and women who work so hard to try and get to the current position that I'm in. I was able to get to the position I'm in with this company in a matter of two months, again one hundred percent attributed to the men and women that I work with who keep teaching me. All I do is show up with a good attitude.

So like I'd mentioned before, I'm a part of Local 48, the Plumbers and Pipefitters Union. I just feel extremely blessed to be part of the union itself. I feel like in the past it really paved the way for tradesmen. If we go back to as early as the 1900s, a lot of tradesmen, a lot of workers didn't have a lot of rights, basic things such as coffee breaks and lunch breaks and days off. You had to work extreme amounts of hours just to remain employed. I believe it was a good group and strong group of men who just simply united together and said, enough is enough. The whole purpose of that was so then we can enjoy the basic things that we have today that we have no idea we didn't have a hundred years ago, again such as coffee breaks and lunch breaks and days off and taking statutory days off. But more importantly, a set rate, getting paid a good wage to make a decent living to provide for your family. Unfortunately, what I have noticed – and this is only since I've been in the trade, 10 or 11 years – is that the province that I work in, Alberta, doesn't seem like a very union-friendly province. I feel like a lot of, I'll use the word power but it's not really what I mean, but a lot of the power that unions had even 30 years ago we really don't anymore.

Q: The Union has influence?

DT: Influence, okay I like that. A lot of influence we had, we're losing a lot of influence out there, and it's affecting us. Unfortunately, I don't think you really see it. There are other organizations out there that do what we do, like hire plumbers and pipefitters and ironworkers and every other trade under the sun. They don't really see it. They don't see what the common tradesperson out there is losing. I feel like we're fighting tooth and nail just to keep the wages that we currently have.

More importantly, beyond the wages and the workers rights that we do have, unions really pave the way of working safely. As I mentioned before, it's an extremely dangerous environment we live in. My first year of apprenticeship I did a lot of overhead rigging. Sometimes you're rigging pipe as small as half inch to one inch from 12 inch to 24 inch, two 36-inch pipes; 36 inches is three feet, or 42 inch pipe. Imagine standing up and you're five feet tall and you have this pipe that is up to your shoulders, gigantic, and it's all steel. If you aren't taught well enough how to safely rig this piece of equipment up, where to safely stand, and anticipate what could go wrong – 42 inch pipe, 48 inch pipe, four feet tall, it will literally crush you. You will die, and if you don't die you're going to be severely injured. Or with grinding, you deal with these little hand held pieces of power tools where the disc spins so fast and aggressive that if you're not holding, even if you're not holding it right – I was taught how to hold this right – it can kick back into your face or down into your leg and just slice right into you. You could bleed to death, or again, you could lose some limbs. We deal with welding and oxyacetylene cutting. To cut pipe with oxyacetylene you deal with extreme temperatures. You've got this flame that will literally cut through pipe if you want to, an inch thick. You're holding it with your hands, this piece of equipment that cuts through steel. Again, the men and women that I work with always emphasize this – work safely, stand here, anticipate what could go wrong, put measures in place to protect yourself. At least then you go home with all of your fingers, you go home in one piece, you go home walking on both feet instead of waking up in hospital with a missing leg. More importantly, that you wake up the next morning, that you return home safely and you're still alive.

Working in the field, that's a whole new ballgame. Sure, you're working in a unit that's shut down so you're doing a shutdown, but these pipes can still contain dangerous gases such as H₂S. If you breath in H₂S that is more than two parts per million of H₂S I think is how it goes, you will die. You will literally die on the spot, you will fall and lose consciousness and die. To work in environments like that, we use a system called SABA, Supplied Air Breathing Apparatus. The SABA is sort of like a backpack with a cylinder on the back of supplied air, and you wear a full face. You have to go through numerous tests just to make sure that the mask fits you well enough that you're well equipped to prepare to use the equipment itself. You have to understand the dangers of your environment that you're in. You can't get complacent. Why? Because you can die. We have families who just simply want to go to work and provide for our families. It's funny, I'm saying you could die and it's super dangerous and this and that, but it's also a lot of fun. When you're working with professionals, you stay on guard but you feel okay. Again too, we work with mobile cranes and cutting torches and grinders.

We work with these hand tools called come-alongs and chain falls, again these sort of hand rigging tools. They all serve a purpose, but if we're not taught how to use and perform these duties safely, there's so much on the line. More than my own life – my partner's life, my crew, the people I work with, anywhere to half a dozen men; their lives are on the line. Again, pipes that are full of H₂S. Other trades, their lives are on the line. I feel like with unions you have generations and generations of pipefitters who have already made every mistake possible. These past generations of pipefitters and welders and every other trade, that all started off in unions. They kept passing on this knowledge from generation to generation until it ended up in my lap so

now I know and understand how to work safely and effectively in the field, in fabrication shops. The only reason I bring that up is because we emphasize the importance of safety. It's actually unions themselves, it's our number one goal, work safely so we can all go home safely to our families in one piece and keep providing. I just wish that the province of Alberta was more union-friendly, but unfortunately it's not. The Plumbers and Pipefitters Union had provided a safe place for me to be employed, to work with topnotch men and women, individuals who take pride in what they do.

Q: What's the difference between working on a fabrication table to working on a shutdown? Do you now work at heights, or are you still on the ground?

DT: Lots of heights within the field. You can be anywhere from ground level to two, three, four or six stories up in the air. When you're up that high in the air, it can be intimidating of course if you're scared of heights. Take for example these vessels. They'll have ladders and grating around the vessel. The gratings are full of little holes, little slits, so you can see the ground below you. When you're six stories up and you can see the ground below your feet, it doesn't take long for vertigo to kick in, if you're afraid of heights. Am I afraid of heights? No. Am I a hundred percent comfortable? No.

Q: A hundred percent comfortable would be too complacent.

DT: There you go. At least then you stay on your toes. So we'll just stick on the topic of transitioning from a fabrication table over to working at heights in the field. It's such a different ballgame. Why? Because at a fabrication table all your tools are there ready to go all day; you know exactly where they are. But when you've got work at heights, ok well now I need this rigging, I need this set of bolt up, I need this blind, I need these wrenches and that torque wrench. I probably will need some fire blanket to put down on the grating so that when I'm unbolting this flange none of the studs or the nuts fall through the grating and act like a bullet going downwards. That is just, in my opinion, good quality tradesman work where you're not just thinking about yourself, you're thinking about the surrounding people. So again you're working at heights, now you gotta go gather all these tools. Guess what? If you don't have access to a mobile crane at that moment, you're carrying all this stuff. You're not carrying them through the ladders, because that's simply not safe. So then you'll have ropes dangling over every railing and you connect the ropes to what you call a coony bag that's full of these iron or metal tools and you're pulling them up. If there's stairs, then you're carrying them up over and over and over again until you've got all your tools six stories in the air.

Q: On this site, how many people are you working with?

DT: I was on nightshift and there were a few thousand. There were multiple units shut down.

Q: How many in your unit?

DT: In my unit I would estimate 500. But again, that's different trades. We are full of insulators, labourers, boilermakers, pipefitters, electricians, crane operators, and I know I'm missing a few, but multiple trades.

Q: Do you guys ever 'bust each other's chops?'

DT: Unfortunately there's a lot of sensitive people out there today, so what could once be considered busting chops and getting along is now considered harassment. It's a sensitive world out there. I wouldn't say sensitive, that's not really what I mean. But you know what I mean.

Q: It's just a cultural shift.

DT: Yes, a cultural shift, and we don't want to cross any lines and insult anybody. So I don't know, we sort of stick to each other. But busting chops comes into your own particular crews when you know who you can joke around with.

Q: When you have to communicate with individuals, do you feel like you're always on the same page with other union people when it comes to a job at hand?

DT: I will say that when it comes to different tradesmen encountering each other in scenarios like that, we really don't get into each other's business in that aspect. When it came to a shutdown, electricians did what they did, pipefitters did what they did, and boilermakers and so on. None of us had really gone around to give our opinion and say, well maybe try doing it this way. The only times that we would really communicate would be if our jobs would intersect with theirs, and how were we going to approach this. If we had to do something in the same vicinity or area as electricians, our foremen were always communicating with each other.

The tradesmen doing the actual work, we rarely discussed that. It's sort of a pecking order. Foremen are always talking to foremen, superintendents were talking to superintendents, and then the information would get relayed down to us. An example could be, alright Des, the electricians will be over there installing some lights so we're just going to hang tight here, or go back and we'll go on a different task while they complete theirs, then once they're done we'll come in and complete our task. That's the most important thing about these shutdowns, and I'm glad you brought that up. It's communication. Without it, we would constantly be bumping into each other. We'd be overlapping each other's work, and then frustration would happen and insults would probably start getting thrown. By this time in the game, and I mean in 2020, we all know what's going on. We all know that we're just there to work safely and provide for ourselves and our families or whatever an individual's living situation is. It's not worth getting bent out of shape over like who was here first or whose work is more important. Let's just go to work, do what we can, go home safely, and we'll leave the communication up to the foremen and superintendents. I'm not quite at that level yet.

Q: Have you ever been involved in a walkout or anything like that?

DT: No, I haven't. The companies, I've only worked for a few. But let's say Edmonton Exchanger in particular, I just feel like they're a very strong company, and of course they hire union labour. They just know how to set boundaries, they know how to set rules. I'm not too sure who's in charge over there, but whoever they are they're doing a great job out there for us. . . .

They're a gigantic company and the shop you were talking about, same deal. I'm pretty sure that one you're talking about has a pipefitting shop. But that's where I wouldn't mind ending up at some point, because I sort of miss. . . I've only not been fabricating for two and a half months, so it's not like I miss it quite yet. But I do appreciate where I'm at because I'm learning a lot. I feel like where I'm at now is contributing to me being a more well rounded pipefitter.

Q: Your fellow students in Trade Winds, do you keep in contact with them?

DT: I haven't been in contact with any of them for probably six or seven years, six years. The first few years I was in contact with a lot of them, and they were doing well. My friend Jeremy became a boilermaker and he succeeded. I'm sure he's still doing well. The first four years he was in fabrication working new construction. It's funny though, I can't think of any of the men or women in that class who became pipefitters, so I have no idea about their stories. I just know about my friends who became boilermakers, ironworkers and plumbers, and they're doing well last I heard.

Q: How would you characterize the relationship between union and management in the jobs you've been a part of? It sounds like it was fairly amicable.

DT: For the companies that I have worked with, absolutely. Whenever fellow tradesmen that I've worked with have had any issues regarding the companies that I've worked with, they'd be brought up to the superintendents. The superintendents would call the business agents at the union, they'd discuss the issue, and it would always be resolved. I've never been involved in any type of walkouts or big discrepancies or conflict between management of the companies I've worked for and the union itself. I feel pretty blessed about that, now that you bring that up.

Q: How would you characterize the relationship between union members?

DT: I think, like any family, there's always conflict. I've worked with fellow union members who believe the union ain't doing nothing for us, that the BAs should be doing more, they could do more, they're doing it wrong. Then I've worked with other union members who are grateful for what the union has provided. I am, I'm extremely grateful. But again I feel like I'm, I'm going to say the word lucky again, I'm one of those lucky individuals who have always stayed employed and worked with great supervision. That's not everyone's story. I also know there's so much more to it than just, I'm not just lucky. I know that I have proven myself and I've earned my spot and spots of where I've been. Again, I just think I just come from simple gratitude and always emphasising that to the people I've worked with and for.

Q: Has that difference of opinions in the workplace caused antagonism, or is it just a live and let live attitude?

DT: Live and let live, for me. Of course that's on an individual basis. There's a lot of antagonists I work with. I'm not one of those individuals. I was always, each to their own; if that's your belief that's your belief, if that's your experience that's your experience. I've had nothing but good experiences.

Q: Do you attend union meetings?

DT: I haven't attended union meetings in a couple years. I don't feel good about saying that out loud, I do not. In my first four or five years I attended a lot of the union meetings, and I'm definitely going to get back onto that.

Q: How are the meetings structured?

DT: The meetings are structured. We walk in with an agenda, we walk in with an itinerary. We use Roberts Rules of Order. We deal with old business, new business. There are many different agents within our union, whether it's business agents, the health and safety committee, the political committee. Everyone will relay their reports, and if there are any concerns about the reports or questions on any report or about new business or old business, then the members themselves get a chance to walk up to a mike and voice their opinion or concern. Extremely structured, extremely.

Q: In the past, the unions were made up of "white men". Do you see any change in that nowadays?

DT: I'm happy you brought that up. In my opinion, Local 488, the Plumbers and Pipefitters Union, I believe that they have gone above and beyond to support indigenous communities', right down to having Trade Winds to Success, this aboriginal program, having a classroom within their college. I believe we also have, I'm going to call this individual an indigenous liaison, but I know that's not the correct term. I believe it's like that across the board with all the unions, that they're putting an effort to try and get more indigenous men and women into the trades and support them. Same deal with immigrants, people who have just moved to this incredible country of ours. I've seen a lot of different ethnicities on the workforce. I've seen a lot of Filipinos, I've seen a lot of Somalians, Ukrainians. The Plumbers and Pipefitters Union is extremely diverse today, including other trades. The boilermaker trade is extremely diverse, the electrician's trade union is extremely diverse.

Q: Are people entering the trades at a later age now?

DT: Yes, absolutely. I've met a couple individuals who were instructors or teachers in universities or had transitioned over from the police force or from being a fireman, things like that, get into the trades. At the end of the day, we do have the potential to make a really good living. I use the word potential only because unions themselves are losing a lot of the work out there. There was a time when we were thriving; unfortunately, it's not like that so much.

Q: What type of industry are you typically working for?

DT: Oil and gas, 100 percent oil and gas here in Alberta. But if you're in Ontario, you could be doing stuff for nuclear plants and things like that.

Q: Has that affected your outlook on the resource?

DT: On the oil and gas resource? Like as opposed to the damage or something that we're doing to the environment, you mean? . . .

Here in the province of Alberta oil and gas is the biggest resource we have. We have the oil sands, we have the bitumen, and the result of that is that it employs thousands of people here in Alberta. I'm grateful for that. But of course, like with anything else on this planet or within life, there's good and bad. So what's the result? We're destroying our province here, up in Fort McMurray and things of that nature. Do I think that there's alternatives? No I don't. We burn fossil fuels, that's just what we do. We could take more of a green approach, but I don't think it

would ever replace what we're currently doing. It's such a hard question, because I'm so conflicted. I wish it was black and white for me, but it's not.

Q: Have you ever experienced discrimination in the workplace against yourself?

DT: No, I have not. Again, I think that speaks volumes to where the trade industry itself has gone. My father grew up working on the rigs, working construction himself, and he faced discrimination on a daily basis. Even just simply going to the store, he would face discrimination. I can personally say I've never faced it, so I feel blessed to have grown up in an era where, I don't know how to say it right now, but it's like that's not acceptable. I've never faced discrimination; if anything, I've always felt supported as an aboriginal make in the workforce, 100 percent.

Q: How did this change come about?

DT: Conversations, I think it started with basic conversations between, okay, awareness from the government. I believe the government itself is just starting to take responsibility for what they have done to the indigenous communities. With this taking responsibility, there has been major awareness of what our people have been through. The discrimination my father had gone through as a young man and again even as an old man was that we were drunks, we were bums, and we just weren't able to function. It sort of transitioned to, well this is what happened to his parents, this is what happened even before his parents. We were put in a position 100 years ago that we were not meant to survive through. With this awareness that has been brought out since the early 2000s or maybe 2010, there's a lot more empathy out there for the indigenous community. A lot more conversations have been sparked because of that. Because of that, there's zero tolerance for discrimination out there now. Not even just against the indigenous community, but against women, because women had faced a lot of problems as well in the '70s and '80s and '90s, a lot of sexism and harassment. Right down to men and women who have immigrated to our country. We're always told, they're taking our jobs. I'll just leave it to those three. Conversations 100 percent, awareness.

Q: Is there a chance there might be more discrimination in non-union workplaces?

DT: I can't speak to that, because I've never worked in a non-union environment.

Q: Do you have anything else to add?

DT: No I don't. I think this interview went extremely well, and I can't think of anything else I need to touch on.

[END]