

**Serena Nelson**

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Jasper Park Lodge

Interviewer: Winston Gereluk

Q: Talk about your background.

SN: I was born in Wadena, Saskatchewan. I lived on Fishing Lake Reservation with my father and mother until I was about four. Then we moved away. We moved away to Saskatchewan and I went to school in Swift Current, Saskatchewan right up until grade 6. Then I moved to northern Saskatchewan to Shellbrook, Saskatchewan. I started school there and I went on through high school at Shellbrook. Then we moved to Big River, Saskatchewan, and there I finished my schooling, and pretty much was there until I moved away, met my husband, and moved away.

We moved to British Columbia. My husband is from British Columbia. So we moved to B.C. and we lived on Vancouver Island and various places, Williams Lake, various places across B.C. At this time I was about 20. I was fairly young when I met my husband. I had two children, and we moved to Lloydminster. That's where I got involved with the Union, was in Lloydminster. My first involvement with the Union was when I got hired on at Superstore and it was a union company. So that's where I was introduced to the union and what the union was about. I started off as a grocery clerk, worked my way up to grocery manager. I was the grocery nightshift manager there. So I did have an understanding on how management works with the union and how the relationships shift and go different ways. I got to learn a little bit about that, and that's where I met Rick Schneider. He is a representative for the UFCW 401. So we chatted a bit about it. I was a union member when I first started there. So he was encouraging me and talking with me and telling me more about it, and suggesting I should be a shop steward.

I took the other avenue, and that's where I became a manager. So when he came back, he was disappointed that I'd changed to the management position and didn't go and join the Union, because at that point I became non-union. There was a strike at Superstore; I forget what year the strike was. Our workers walked off the job and left out. So we as managers were left behind to pick up the pieces and continue working. I had a hard time dealing with crossing the picket line, even though I didn't really know much about union involvement. I wasn't really involved in the union, but I still at that point knew about the solidarity and crossing the picket line. I really felt awful doing that every day. I had a hard time keeping my head up. Lots of times, I sat with my head down because I was kind of ashamed at the behaviour that was going onto my coworkers that I had worked with. At that point, they came back. We worked while they were away. I think they were out for two or three days, and they came back. At that point they came back; we all got back into working. The issues kept coming up with the management and the union and all the employees. I never had a complaint, I must say. As a manager, I never got a complaint from the union or from any of the members against me while I was a manager for five years. I worked with them closely and did what they did, because that's how you get to know and get to be a part of people and get to be a part of a group.

On that part, everybody was getting along and I could voice opinions for other employees that were there. My manager didn't take to it too kindly, and he was kind of on my case about things. He'd be like, "Serena;" he would see what I didn't get done instead of what I did. He came in one day and said to me--we'd just finished cutting a 5,000 piece order; there was six of us. He came in and looked around, and I got called to the office. To the office I went. He said to me, so I see you've never got the store faced. I said to him, yes, but we just cut a 5,000 piece order and we got it done. I was very proud of my coworkers, my employees, and their accomplishments. He said, but you need to face; they need to get that done. There was always something more to get done, always something more.

At that point I thought about the situation, handed in my keys, and said, obviously I've done more for you than I should've. You can only see what I don't do; you don't see what I did do. So I passed the keys back to him and left my \$60,000 a year job. I went over to Safeway and started out at \$15 an hour, back at the bottom of the totem pole. I became just a general clerk. When I was hired there, I was doing the nightshift stocking. Everything was great; the work conditions were much better. When I was working there, I met a lady named Colleen, and she was a shop steward. She also was of Native descent. We were having a conversation one day and she said to me, Serena, I think you should be a shop steward. I said to her, I don't really know; I just want to mind my own business, not everybody else's. She was like, "No I really think you should think about it, because there's strength in numbers."

She said that to me; there's strength in numbers, she said, and we have the power to be a voice here. I thought about it and I thought, you know, she's right. We were the minorities; so I joined and became a shop steward there. I went and got trained. I took my shop steward course and found that it was like kind of the people weren't really aware of what the union was about. They were the membership, what they were paying dues for. They weren't really aware of it; they weren't really involved; they weren't a part of it. We came down to our contract expiring; so we had to negotiate a new contract. They negotiated us a new contract. So I took it upon myself to campaign, to go to every employee and tell them, you need to vote; this is what's going to affect you, and if you don't make these decisions, somebody else is going to make these decisions for you, and you're going to have to live with them for four years. You need to be there.

We had a high success rate, I just say. They said it was one of the highest votes they ever had in Lloydminster; I think 65 percent came for the vote. So that was success to me. That was success, just getting the people aware of our union and to be a part of that. There was no pride to be part of the union at that store. Now I do have active members that are happy that I'm a shop steward, that we have a voice. I see it as my duty to make sure that it's a fair and equal workplace for everybody to work, and able to go to work and earn their money and go home and be happy. Not to hate, not to dread to come to work. It's your right. So that's what I have been encouraging through my coworkers since. The place has gotten much better, I must agree.

I found that it was very hard, kind of hard. I struggled a bit, being Indigenous and trying to enforce the union. Okay, so some of us would want to follow certain rules of the CBA [collective bargaining agreement], like scheduling and certain rules. But the other rules - they just kind of bent them, and that's when they were cheating the employees by not scheduling properly by

seniority, cheating them by hours, giving the favourite one the shifts, stuff like that. I had to bring that all back into play. I had to literally start from the start and be like, listen, you guys are members. Let me take you back to the sign outside of our store that says, this is a union workplace. We need to abide; everybody needs to abide here. We need to have respect for each other and treat each other with dignity.

So that's where we are right now at our Safeway store in Lloydminster. I feel that I have been successful. I do have members that aren't as much engaged, but when it comes right down to it, when it comes down to your benefits and vacation and stuff like that, they tend to get back engaged. It's just a matter of how you approach them to get them engaged back. That's where I come from and that's how I've been in the union. I really learned a lot of how to teach people that their voice matters. Just not one voice – we're part of a big voice. They should be proud of that. At first there wasn't a lot. A lot of people were like, yeah, the union, what do they do with our dues? I know what they do; they just go to parties. They pay this, they pay that, and that's where our dues go. I corrected them on that when I was leaving for Jasper. The one lady said to me, oh I know what they do at those; you're just going to go there to party. I said, pardon me? I'm taking a course. I'm taking a course and I'm going to come back here and educate you on what I've learnt. So we will have this conversation when I come back, and I'll be sure to enlighten you with what I've learned. So, on that note she said, I hope you have a great time, Serena. I said, thank you, I appreciate that.

Q: What does your Indigenous heritage mean to you? Do those values have anything to do with your participation in the union?

SN: To me what it means to be an Indigenous person is proud, proud to be who I am. I consider myself as a part of the whole nature, the whole spiritual being of our earth. I feel very blessed to be Indigenous, to have that and to be able to share that knowledge spiritually with what I have and what I've learned on my trail as being an Indigenous person. That's what it means to me.

Q: Do you share any of that with being a union person?

SN: As being a union person, it did mean something. Like I said, when I met Colleen, she is no longer with our union but she was very vocal. She spoke out, and they did listen to her. When she said that to me, that we need to be a voice, we need to be heard as Indigenous people, we need to take our power and we need to speak, and if it's speaking for the people, let's do it. That's what encouraged me to be a shop steward. She planted that seed in me.

Q: Have you noticed discrimination either against you or your brothers and sisters who are also Indigenous?

SN: I have experienced that all through my life, right from the time of going to school. When we moved off the reservation we moved to a white town, Swift Current, and it was all white students at that school. We were called 'wagon burners,' we were held up against the wall, throwing rocks at us. We weren't allowed to go down for lunch. They picked on us all the time. We skipped school when we were little kids, me and my sister, because we didn't want to go to school. We didn't want to be picked on and ridiculed, because we were tired of it.

Growing up with that kind of gives you that defensive attitude. You grow up with that and you become - I guess it was growing up all the way through school until I moved northern to Shellbrook and Big River where there were more Indigenous people. It wasn't nowhere near; it was pretty much kind of gone by that point. But where it came back is when I came to Safeway. Being a shop steward I came across that a couple of times where they would say, my colleague, my co-shop steward would say, oh well look at her; look at her eyes. She's always bloodshot and I'm sick and tired of talking to somebody that's always been drinking and stuff. To me I was like, wow! - how do you know this? Can I ask you how you know this and can I ask you how you can say this about Colleen? Our coworker-- how can you say this about her?

But it was that stigma. It was that stigma that Indians are just there to get drunk. That was really strongly there. When I started the nightshift, the guy that I was working with when I first started there, he was the guy who was like, the one day he said to me; I was moving a case of cider and it was glass bottles; so it jangled. He was like, "Oh I bet you like the sound of that." I just said to him, pardon me? He goes, I bet you like the sound of that. He goes, hmm, do you know where your kids are? I said to him, as a matter of fact I do know where my kids are. My son is dead and gone, if you must know, and my daughter lives with me. But he just kind of gave that stigma that Indians, you hear that bottle rattling, and you're just going to be so happy. So I dealt with that at Safeway and I dealt with that with a few of the managers there and the people that have been there for 45 plus years.

I've got to tell you I'm a minority there, other than migrants that have come from the Philippines and stuff like that. So it makes it a challenge to be the voice that everybody has to hear. When other people come to me and other workers, I'm the voice that has to go to the management team and say, "Hey you can't treat them like that. You can't be like that. You can't bully them, you can't be like that." So when I'm saying that stuff, it's like, because I used to be bullied; so that's where I get that. No, you're not going to do that to them people; you're not going to do that to anybody. Being bullied is not fun for anybody, not a kid for no how. But I gotta say, it kind of backfired in a way, because it made me a stronger person. It made me who I am today, to be able to help be a voice for a lot of people. I think you take lemons and you make lemonade.

Q: What do you think about the reconciliation process that's now in place? Is it working? In your mind, what's it supposed to do?

SN: I was totally appalled, totally appalled by the whole scenario, the whole situation. It brings back a lot on your childhood. The reconciliation - you think about it and you're just like, so is that going to be to heal the people? Or will it be to make us stronger as a group, as a minority group? I'm not really certain on how it's going to affect us. I hope it has a positive effect on us to some extent because, like I said, some things do come out and goodness does come out. It may not go in as an intent of goodness, but it does sometimes reverse itself and come out as a good outcome. So I'm hoping that it's going to come out as a good outcome for the people, for everybody. But I don't think it's going to, not for everybody.

You run into a lot of people that are resentful, and there's a lot of that at my store. I had one lady who worked at the deli and she walked right over to me and said, I don't give a damn whose kids died; I didn't have no part of that. I don't give a shit they died. I just looked at her like, do you

know what colour I am? She goes, I don't give a damn, it's not me who did it, and I won't pay for nobody. So you still run into those groups even though we're in 2023. I ran into that probably with a good four or five people out of 150 that still do not to this day feel that they have any part of that. It wasn't them who did it, and "I'll be damned if I'm paying for that and I'll be damned if I'm respecting that."

Q: Maybe that's the major outcome of this reconciliation process; maybe it should be mainly directed at people like me, my people. You're my sister. My parents were colonial settlers, and they didn't know that. They were poor exploited peasants who they took advantage of, and brought them here to open up the land so that certain interests could make big profits. They cleared the Indigenous people off the land first and put my people there – just a few years after, the Northwest Rebellion people were hanged in North Battleford. It's our people that mainly need to be educated. Do you think that's happening?

SN: No, I really don't think there's enough spent on that education, to educate people to know that we are part of this earth. We're part of a movement, we're part of a group, we're part of the world. We're not going away. We just want to belong and we want to be a part. I think that the more we educate people like that ... and I don't believe we're ever going to reach certain people. There's just this group of people that refuse to let even a grain of light into the darkness. I feel sorry for them; I really do. You live in a world of darkness when you don't expand and broaden your mind and open it to other things and to other people and accept. Acceptance is a huge part of our world. Indigenous people have been trying to be accepted forever. Will that ever change? I don't know. I don't think I'll see it in my lifetime, I really don't think I'll see it in my lifetime. But that does not make me lose hope, because by speaking about it and talking to as many people as I can, by telling my story, it's out there and you can't ignore it.

Q: Is there anything you'd like to add?

SN: I'm satisfied with that.

[ END ]