

Collette Cullen

CC: I am Collette Cullen, 14<sup>th</sup> December 1967.

Q: Tell us about how you grew up.

CC: I grew up outside of the city in a little town called Spruce Grove, which is now a city. We would spend the school year in Spruce Grove, and as soon as the summer holidays arrived we'd go to the Peace country, which is where my mom is from. She's from the Lizotte clan; she's a Metis Cree. We would spend our summers up there with our Indian relatives. What is the correct term nowadays? First Nations, Metis, Inuit, Indigenous – all the things. So that's where we would spend our summers, and we'd come home in the fall in time for school.

Q: Where did you attend school?

CC: I attended school in Spruce Grove, except we did live a couple years in Peace River. But my mom didn't like the family always watching over her shoulder. So I spent grades 2 and 3 in Peace River, and the rest were all in Spruce Grove. I graduated Spruce Grove Composite High School in 1985.

Q: What was your job experience?

CC: First job I think, I graduated high school at 17 but my first job I think was a paper route, saving up to buy a minibike. Which we never bought, but we bought a lot of comic books and a lot of chocolate bars. I think I was probably 12 or 13. Then I worked at a place called Jack's Drive-in in Spruce Grove. I was a hamburger flipper, and we wore blue polyester suits and it was terrible. But if you flipped hamburgers, you got to wear a T-shirt. So I was all about flipping those hamburgers. I did that through high school. Then I worked at the Grove Motor Inn for my last year of high school, as a server. Then at 17 I graduated high school. At high school graduation my parents were also the town drunks. So it was really easy to get them a little intoxicated and sign off so I could go join the army. I joined the army at 17 and did my basic

training. I stayed in for just under 12 years. Did a couple tours of the former Yugoslavia, Bosnia, whatever you want to call it. I was there in 1993 with the 2<sup>nd</sup> battalion of Princess Patricia's Canadian Light Infantry. We were in the largest battle since the Korean War, which was the Medak Pocket. We lost a couple good men there and probably a few more after. Then I went back in '95 with one service battalion, and got out shortly after that. By that point, I had my own kid and she was two or three. I knew if I stayed in the army I would end up probably dead or severely injured. So I knew that, as a single parent, probably it wasn't the best place for me to be for my kid. So I got out of the army. I worked a little bit in oil and gas while I was going to school to become an EMT. I did my First Aid and Advanced First Aid at St. John's in Edmonton, then I went to NAIT and took my EMR, then I went to NAIT again and took my EMTA. I worked full time in the oil and gas industry, like everybody does in Alberta at some point. I used to do hotshots, run parts for this oil and gas company. I'd do that during the day and I'd go to school at night. Then I became an EMT. I did my hospital practicum at the Grey Nuns Hospital here in Edmonton, and it was awesome; I loved it. But I hated being an EMT because I hated that there's a lot of indigenous people that experience homelessness and are marginalized and experience addiction. I hated seeing all of that and I hated how we treated our people. It was probably too close to me getting out of the army as well – I probably had a little bit of PTSD, maybe a lot of it. So I was an EMT for about year in the city and I just pulled the pin and got out of that business. Then I worked in the oil and gas some more. I was a cementer for Weatherford and I ended up being a lead hand, which was almost unheard of then, especially as a female. I learned how to cement downhole equipment, and that was pretty fun. It was pretty hard on the body, but it was still fun. . . .

Talking about the army, I was 17; I knew everything, absolutely everything. Any 17 year old will tell you the same thing – they know everything. I didn't even know my social insurance number. I don't even think I had one yet, and I got that when I got in the army. When you join the army you think it's going to be like on TV. It's not. You learn how to dress differently, you learn how to iron your clothes; you learn how to shine your boots. One of the first things you receive is your weapon, which is a rifle. At that time it was an FN, which is an old wood stock rifle. Takes a 7.62 round, puts a little hole in the front and a bit hole in the back. You name it and you become one with that thing. You learn how to clean it and take it apart blindfolded and put it back together blindfolded. You learn how to throw grenades; you learn how to fire rocket launchers and blow

stuff up. It's pretty fun when you're in Canada. You learn to dig really deep and find spaces in yourself that you didn't know existed. Maybe you ran a 10K in high school. That ain't nothing in the army. You need to learn how to run longer, harder, faster, with a whole bunch of shit strapped to your back. Your rucksack weights about 50 to 60 pounds. When I joined the army I weighed about 120 pounds, give or take. So my rucksack was well over half my body weight, when you add your rifle and helmet and all that good stuff. You get to go for nice long walks in the woods with that on. You learn to camp in holes in the ground, called trenches; you dig those. You learn about section attacks and you learn how to drive different vehicles. In my case, back in the day, they still had the Willies Jeeps, which were circa Korea war. That changed, obviously over the years. But a five ton old deuce and a half, same stuff you see on TV carrying around troupes – you learn how to drive all that kind of stuff – tracks and wheeled vehicles. You learn how to fire the 50 cal, and that's all really fun. And you go on trades training, you get promoted, you go to battle school and learn how to lead troupes, or you don't and you wash out. I retired as a Master Corporal, which would be like being a sergeant in the American army, if you were watching TV, same kind of thing. You have a section of men that you're in charge of and you take care of everything from when they wash and eat to when they go to bed. Somebody tells you all that. But in the Canadian army, you're expected to be able to think and not just follow orders. You're expected to be able to perform battlefield first aid from a guy out of a tank or out of a burning vehicle. You learn how to direct people in the right places so that hopefully they don't die, and you can take out the enemy. Hopefully they don't end up injured or stepping on landmines or things like that. It's a very busy life. When you take your basic training, they break you down and kind of make you nothing, and they rebuild you back up into a soldier. When you graduate your basic training, you think that you are Rambo and you can do all the things. Then you go to your unit, whatever battalion you're posted to or assigned to, and then you discover that you don't know anything. You train some more, and it's all about training, training, training, hurry up and wait. The evenings are spent working on uniforms or working on your various kits or cleaning your room, making your bed, and most importantly, going out with all your mates and drinking a lot of beer and flexing a lot. My first tour, workup training was about three months long here in Edmonton. There were maybe 100 individuals on that, and by graduation there were about 40 of us left, and I think I was the only female left at that point. Then they send you to whatever battalion or regiment you're attached to. In my case

it was the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion Patricia's in Winnipeg. So we flew to Winnipeg and we did another three months workup training of tons of PT, tons of infantry training tactics, shit like that. Then you get on a plane and you go to the warzone, and everything changes. Everything you thought you knew doesn't apply. The people that are around you change; you change; you don't realize it when it's happening. Day to day life there is a lot of hurry up and wait. We were UN soldiers on my first tour. So you couldn't fire back if they shot at you. Well, you could, but you had to say things like, I am cocking my weapon, I am loading my weapon, I am aiming my weapon, I am firing my weapon. Well by then the guy's gone. If you were stopped at a checkpoint for the Serbians or the Croatians, they would lay big landmines across the road and in the ditches, have a tank sitting there waiting with the big gun pointed at you until you can't cross. So you'd get on the satellite phone and call New York and the United Nations and try to get clearance through that, which never worked. So you'd spend a lot of time trying to get through those checkpoints to get to where you needed to go to to help different refugees, reunite families, maybe stop at cleansing. Cleansing was a very real thing on both of my tours. If one faction didn't like the other faction, they would just simply cleanse a village or town. Sometimes we could get in and help; sometimes we couldn't. It mostly falls to the troops, not so much officers. They are there and there are certain field officers that go with you, but for the most part it's the troops dealing with all of that kind of stuff. We would hire locals to cook for us, make bread, and stuff like that. But it wasn't very safe for them. They didn't like the UN there, so if locals were working for us, mostly women, they would become targets. You'd have to escort them home and make sure that they got home safe. Sometimes you returned fire and sometimes you didn't. But they were always very generous. They would always share their tea or their coffee, and they had nothing, which was pretty amazing. When we were being shelled or mortared, they were terrified. They'd been at that point in a solid year of war, and they were terrified. So you'd take off your flak vest and give it to them, and your helmet and give it to them, knowing full well it's not going to help anything. But it would calm them down and they would feel safer. We had these great big fuel bladders, 10,000 litres of diesel and gas. They could hear all of our radio communications, because we're United Nations--so you have to keep it all open. So when they would shell us, we would call it in. So you're calling on the radio back to headquarters and say you're being shelled, and tell them how far away it was. They would walk in the artillery and mortars to about 100 metres of our location, and then walk it back and start again. The first

time it happens, you're scared. But you're also pissed off, because you had another hour to sleep; why are you shelling me so early in the morning? What the hell. Yeah, you don't think about the scary parts until after it's happened. We spent 10 days during the Battle of Medak. We took 55,000 rounds dropped on us. We didn't lose anybody to that. There were some injuries, but there were no deaths to being shelled. We were pretty lucky. War is hard to describe. There is gender there, but there isn't. When it comes down to the big stuff there's no race, there's no gender – you're just part of the big green machine. People call you chief; it's probably a compliment. We probably wouldn't look at it that way now; it would probably be a racist term. But in those moments and in those times, I did not experience any kind of racism from the troops that I worked with in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion. Even being a female, once you proved yourself and you did the same things as the men did, it took you a couple of months but once you were there you were part of that group. If you washed out, you washed out. I was lucky enough to stay with the battalion. I think there were 840 of us in the battalion, and 13 of them were women. Some of them were medics; some of the women were clerks. I was in Adam Company, which is like an administration company, and I belonged to Transport Platoon. We did logistics for the battalion within the battalion. When we started running convoys down into Sector South, that was my job – Convoy Commander. We'd just run convoy after convoy down there, and on my second tour we would run convoys up into Sarajevo bringing out supplies. We were pulling the Canadians out of there. That was fun, because you'd have to go down Sniper Alley every three days. It was kind of fun. Looking back, maybe not so much, but at the time you're in your early 20s, you're fairly indestructible, until you lose somebody. When you lose somebody, things change; your perspective changes. But once you just sort of accept you can't control any of that, just do your job, the fear kind of gets set aside and it turns into a little bit of anger and a little bit of bitterness. Then you just want to go home. But when you get home you feel like you need to be there still, because you didn't do enough. You didn't save enough people; you didn't do enough. So you volunteer and go back again. Then you realize, hmm, I can't fix this. Some guys did four and five tours, then also went to Afghanistan. A lot of guys come home and they don't make it. You're stoic and you're a soldier. So you don't want to admit that you have trauma. If you're Indigenous on top of that, you already have trauma and you already have intergenerational trauma with it. You're always stoic already; so it's already built into you. When you come home, you think you're okay; but you're not. Then you realize, hmm, I

need some help or whatever. But some guys never get there and some guys, I think the stats are 22 veterans every day in North America die by their own hand. Many veterans experience homelessness and experience addictions, similar to our people that suffer traumas over the years. It changes perspective for people when you can start to tie those things and relate. But that's not a conversation that really started happening until probably Kamloops and the first 250 or however many kids were found: Things that we as Indigenous people already knew, but now the rest of the world gets to know because western science says so. As a soldier, I missed most of the Oka crisis because I was training. At that time Indigenous people were not well looked upon. There were a lot of jokes about Oka, a lot of jokes about what was happening there. As an Indigenous soldier that's fairly white passing, I would just ignore it and not engage. Pretend it didn't happen – that's the way to go about that, at that age anyway. The army provided many things, and mostly broke my body. But it probably made me grow up really fast and probably made me more resilient than I knew I was already, if I'm honest. But I didn't realize that for probably a decade after I got home and got out, because it's a lot. It's a lot to work through; it's a lot to get through. I don't often talk about it. So that was the army side of it, I guess, in a very Coles Notes kind of whatever.

Q: What recollections do you have about your work in the oil industry?

CC: I was fairly fresh out of the army. I don't even remember how I actually got that job. Somebody I knew, anyway. There was a company in Sherwood Park called Klaus Enterprises. They made valves or something for the oil patch. My dad worked in the patch for all of his life, mostly way up north in Norman Wells and stuff. So I felt like it was in my blood. I figured I should give it a go, and it was also going to pay for my school. So I would do different hotshots out to different places. Hotshots, when you pick up a part that's got to go out immediately to one of the rig sites or gas sites for whatever needs to happen, it's a big rush. So you throw it in your truck and drive it out to whatever and drop it off. You get to see a different side of the oil and gas side. You get to see when things are broken and when things aren't making money and costing money. You get to see the panic in all of their eyes. I played the girl card pretty hard, pretty good – that way I didn't have to unload my truck very often. It was a good experience; I just knew I wasn't going to be doing that for the rest of my life. I knew it was a means to an end

to get my school paid for. I didn't really learn a lot, if I'm honest, other than where the weirdest places in the province are by a grid square. That was my first stint in the oil and gas world. Then I EMTed for a little bit.

Q: Was there a similar camaraderie in the EMT work?

CC: Yeah, the camaraderie in uniform is one thing that you kind of search for for a long time after you get out of the military when you've experienced that kind of camaraderie. You can't really share that with a sibling or a parent, because they don't have that lived experience, the same lens to look through, so to speak. And you don't want to talk about it. So that camaraderie that you have in the military is very similar in any kind of first responder role. EMTs are the same. They see things that most people don't see unless they're rubbernecking at an accident, which I still do to this day, I might add. But yeah, that camaraderie is similar. You end up sort of in the same groups and you end up in the same therapy sessions. By therapy sessions, I mean sitting in a pub somewhere drinking a beer and talking about whatever happened on shift, whatever that might be. That was a time when we didn't have separate ambulance stations here in the city; we shared a space in the firehalls with the firefighters. So you had another view to look through their eyes as well when there's a fire. In Edmonton, fire, police, and ambulance all respond to the calls. So you start to have all these different – sort of like kinship in the Indigenous world – you have all these different connections out there that stay forever and ever. People I took my EMT course with back in 2000 I still talk to to this day. It's the same with soldiers. That camaraderie is something you don't find anywhere else I don't think, than in frontline workers.

Q: You mentioned it was difficult to see how Indigenous people were treated.

CC: Yeah, I can expand on that. You see, even in the military, Indigenous soldiers are different than white guys. We all like to say we don't see race and whatever, but warriors in our culture are very different than warriors in the white culture. Warriors in the white culture are always divide and conquer. But in our nations and our cultures it's not about that. It's about protecting our communities and protecting the matriarchy, protecting our children, protecting all our

relations. The value of life is just different. It's a different lens. Indigenous soldiers react different, and it's the same in EMTs. I don't think I ever encountered another Indigenous EMT in my time. It's very rare to see. I don't know why. Then when you're out on the streets and you're in the ambulance and you have an overdose or whatever it might be, and if there's a white kid and an Indigenous kid and you only have one Narcan kit to save, hands down every single time it'll be the white kid that gets saved first, which is unfortunate and wrong. How do you make that decision anyway? You call people that are frequent flyers, frequent flyers are green tags, because you see the same people over and over again. It can get infuriating. You get a call, you go out to St. Albert and pick somebody up, and they really just want a ride downtown. They have a right to stop the ambulance and refuse care and get out. Often it's Indigenous people that are experiencing homelessness, addictions, marginalization, all of the things. But instead of our society going, why is that happening or why has this happened, we just tend to get bitter and twisted, and take the stereotypes that are woven into our society, take those stereotypes and run with it. I've had partners ask me, well why when we go to the reserve, why are there no numbers on the houses? Why don't they care about those houses? Well I don't know; they were penned there like animals; why would they care about that? That isn't our lifestyle; that isn't our culture. So why would we give a shit about it? Just simple things about knowing about the culture 20 years ago even compared to now is vastly different. Seeing that as an Indigenous person, it's really hard to sit next to a partner that you know doesn't think that they're racist, doesn't understand what white privilege is and doesn't think it is a thing even. But they are racist and they are riding the white privilege card and they don't have to experience all of the other things that exist. They just have that stereotype that Canada was founded on. It's part of our society; it's woven into it. It's hard to watch that. At that time I don't think I could articulate the words even to understand it, and it just pissed me off. I wanted to do more. I wanted to try to change the system from inside, if that makes sense. I think a lot of Indigenous people want to do that through art or music or through being in the system as a lawyer or a scholar or various things. It doesn't always happen that way, unfortunately – or fortunately, depending how you look at it I guess. So for me as an EMT just watching that, you could see the disgust. But you're not disgusted at the 16 year old white girl who had a perfectly fine upbringing, or at least we think. Which also brings you to why is that person there. Why are we not looking at all of the people the same? We don't, though.



Q: So after the EMT job, did you do a second stint in oil and gas?

CC: Yeah, so then I went back to the oil and gas world. This time I got hired on at Weatherford as a cementer, and I cemented downhole equipment. There's equipment that goes down the hole of the rig, and it's called float equipment, and it has a valve in it and pumps cement and shit down into the hole. I actually don't know what happens when it goes in there. It cements the hole so they can bring up the oil or whatever, but I don't really know. I just know how to make that float equipment. That's a man's world one hundred percent. I somehow ended up being a lead hand with Weatherford in their cementing division here in Edmonton. I worked with another Indigenous guy; his name was William. We just laughed a lot and made a lot of jokes that the white guys didn't get. It was kind of nice to turn the tables a little bit, because it just was. There was a lot of banter back and forth. But I definitely work on a crew with some pretty rednecky Alberta boys that had very set ideas about how the world should be, white culture. Even then they spoke of don't erase white culture, blah blah, and we would just laugh. But for the most part I had a fairly good experience. I didn't stay as a cementer, maybe a year and they moved me up into safety and into management, which was great. I took a few courses through that company for OH&S and safety, but I also hated that. It's super corrupt. Nobody in Alberta wants to have a WCB claim. Nobody wants to have any of that on their record because it makes the insurance rates go up and it's very political. So they ask you to hide things. People die on the job, people get injured on the job. A lot of people in the oil and gas industry on the labour side, on the lower end side, they're making good dollars but they're also working 18, 19 and 20 hour days. They lie about those hours, and then people get hurt, and they lie about that. So I just couldn't do it morally. I just could not sit and watch that kind of shit over and over again. I couldn't fudge the stats. So I moved to another company in the oil and gas world called Topco. I think they still exist, maybe under a different name. I did safety there. It was in the city and it was kind of great, because I was busy and it was good. I was never treated--at least I didn't feel like I was treated any differently. My boss was an old white guy, an old white settler that was in his 60s and used to work for Cat. He was very set, and I think I challenged him daily on what his perceptions of females and Indigenous people were. We started out butting heads a lot but by the end I think we respected each other and it was okay. I stayed there for a couple

years at least. It was during my time at Topco that I really started to percolate the idea in my head that I wanted to work with the police or in the jail system or both, and try to find a path for Indigenous people. Why was that happening and why were we so disproportionately represented? That's when things changed for me on lots of different levels; that was an eye opener for sure. I started working with commissionaires, of all places. They hire veterans. They put you through a security course and they send you off to wherever. I worked with Edmonton Police Services in West Division in their cells, and that's where you really get to see the underbelly of the policing world. There are a lot of really good cops out there but there are also a lot of not so good ones. There's a lot of racism; there's a lot of old boys' club. They bring guys into cells and they strip them and search them and do whatever, and they get their phone call. Your job in cells is to watch them and make sure they're fed and watered, make sure they don't kill themselves or die from whatever, if they've had an overdose or whatever. But it's also your job to turn off the cameras if they're going to beat the shit out of somebody.

Q: I just wanted to say this transcript will never be released without your permission. . . .

CC: One of the most memorable moments in cells, West Div has the street team and they go out and try to stop prostitution, drug dealing, and what not, down in the seedy area in the West End. It's fairly effective and it's not always meant to be big sting operations. Some of it is trying to help some of the people that are on the streets, but the vast majority of it is certainly law enforcement. But you can also hear everything. You have a radio down there and you can hear everything that's going on in the city. You can hear the choppers and what they're doing and whatnot. There were these kids at Westmount Mall, three white kids and one Indigenous kid. They were around 16. They were up to whatever kids do, screwing around in the parking lot, and I guess they robbed somebody, and I don't know, whatever they did. So they brought these kids in. The three white kids are celled up and they take this poor Indigenous kid. He's losing his mind, and he's clearly had interactions with the police before that weren't good. So they take him into the cell that doesn't have a camera, and they kind of give him a little bit of a beat down. They handcuff him to the floor and put a helmet on him, because he's banging his head and losing his mind. He's got big old baggy skater pants on, and his pants start to slide down and you can see he's urinated in his pants. Then you can see he's clearly been abused. He's got

cigarette burns all around his genitals and all around his legs. Even the cops stopped and they were like, holy shit, what has happened to this kid? What's his story? Then they start calling Social Services and whatever. The three white kids were gone within a couple hours; their parents came and they got the, you're bad, we'll deal with you at home kind of thing. But this kid stayed overnight. He was gone when I came back for shift the next night, but who knows what happened to that kid. He was treated very differently, like he was the ringleader and he was the whatever. But they were just kids being kids. They maybe were a little badder than most average everyday kids, but when you see that, I just will never forget all of the burns in various stages of healing that this poor kid was dealing with. Did it happen in foster care? Did it happen on the rez? Did it happen in the city? Who knows? I never did find out his story, but I do remember the cops that were on shift that night stopped everything and tried to treat him with a little bit more dignity. But it took that for them to realize he was a human being the same as the other three kids that were there. I've never forgotten that, and that lesson and that teaching in that moment. I didn't really want to be a cop after that. I stayed with them for over a year, maybe longer, but by that point I had applied at the Edmonton Remand Centre to work there. Somewhere in that timeframe I got accepted and did my interviews and actually passed, and I got hired on at the Edmonton Remand Centre and started working out at Fort Saskatchewan, the first jail I started at. The jail is a funny place because provincial correctional peace officers don't go on training right away. You go to the jail and start working. You start working and don't have a clue what you're doing. It could be a year or two years or three years; then you go on your training. It's ass backwards. By then you've learnt all the old jaded guards' bad habits and how to be bitter and twisted and how to dehumanize people that you're supposed to be caring for. These are remanded inmates, so they're not actually convicted of anything at this point. But that's not how we treat them; that's for certain. I don't know how the feds work but I do know how the provincial jail works, and it's not that great. We are very disproportionately represented there, and it's very archaic and very backwards. I went from Fort Saskatchewan to the old Remand Centre downtown. It's a messy place, very traumatic, full of a lot of violence. It's funny, because when they realize you're Indigenous, you get treated a little bit differently. They're like, you're one of us. You're like, yes I am. But it could go either way. If you're an asshole guard that treats them with disrespect from day one, then they're going to treat you the same way. There's a very unspoken set of rules that happen there. You know when

a remanded prisoner is coming in that they're coming off all of their addictions cold turkey without any help. They're losing their home or their place to stay, probably their girlfriend or wife, maybe their kids. They haven't been sentenced; they don't know what their future is. So they tend to act out; they tend to be quite violent. The first week is rough for them, and then they start to settle in. You usually scrap or have a code with them in the first couple days, and almost always though you can reset the clock with them. They'll come and talk to you after and say, hey, sorry. I'll just say, not a big deal, we're starting fresh; today's a new day; wasn't worth it. Not all guards work like that, and if you did try to help the inmates you'd be ostracized by your mates, by your coworkers. You'd be called a con lover. They're just Indians; they don't matter anyway; or they're just immigrants; they don't matter. They get called a lot of names; so do you. It's disturbing. I was just 40ish when I started in jails. So I at least had some life experience and a different lens to view through. But kids that start there at 20 or 21 years old, it changes them and it breaks them. If you stay there longer than four or five years, you're scared to go to the mall; you're scared to go out in public, because you might run into a former client. I never feel like that. I didn't feel unsafe in the jail. I think part of it is because I could relate to a lot of them. My siblings were on the other side of the law. So I was the exception in my family, which was weird. I did have relatives come through when I was working at the jail. You never spoke of that. You didn't say if you knew somebody there, and they knew not to say that they knew you, because they would get labeled and probably beat up as well. So there are all these little fine lines you have to work there. In my case, I ran a program called Positive Outcomes. It's a program that I wrote with the inmates, and I used my drug dog Marley as the go-between. I'd walk her into a small room probably as big as this room. There'd be 15 or 16 gang bangers, all of them hate each other, in the same room. They don't even know why they hate each other. They're almost always all Indigenous. I'd bring in my dog and they'd be like, what's that dog doing here, that's a dope dog, and they'd be all mad. I'd be like, hey, whoa, that's Marley; she's a dope dog; you're right; she works for the cops. She's black, she's tattooed, she comes from the rez too. Then they would laugh and joke. We'd just do these programs. If no one teaches you how to go into the 7-11 and say, could I get a package of Players Lights Smooth please, versus I need a fuck pack of cigarettes – if nobody teaches you how to speak, nobody teaches you manners or teaches you that you're worth something, then that's what you believe of yourself. If you treat people like animals, then they will respond like that. So I tried to work it in different

ways – here’s how you do a budget; here’s how you do this. I would use Marley as my go-between, how to stop violence. On the third or fourth session I’d come in and pretend to kick the dog and they’d be like, what are you doing? By then all these big tough gang bangers are like, oh Marley, we love you, and they’re using little baby voices and it’s very cute. You can see the humanity, and it’s all very cute. But you bring her in, you take her off leash, you’re locked in this room, and then you pretend to go kick her. They’re like, what are you doing man? I’m like, whoa, what are you doing? Didn’t you beat up your wife or girlfriend? Why did you do that? She didn’t do anything; neither did my dog. You have to find those bridges so they can connect and make those connections. Then they would start to write their stories down for you. They’d show up in your mail, 10 or 12 pages of these handwritten stories of what happened to them in day school, residential school, on the rez, at home – all these different things and how they got to where they got to. Where do you take those stories? You can’t share it with your coworkers, because they don’t think any of those people are human. So you maybe talk to your dog, I guess. It gave me a really huge insight into where a lot of our people have been for decades and how they end up in jail. At least they get three squares a day and a bed, and they get to clean up for a few months at a time. Then they go back out, and inevitably the cycle starts again. Sometimes they make it out, but for the most part it’s very difficult. The supports aren’t there. There’s violence, and often you hear about them dying on the streets, or dying on the unit even. Sometimes they’ll ingest copious amounts of drugs in balloons, and they’ll open up and they’ll die. Or they carry them in other suitcases in the body, and things happen. It’s awful. It’s the guards that have to deal with it. So you can understand somewhat how they also become dark and jaded and don’t want to become close to anybody there. It’s a vicious cycle, because it’s hard to lose somebody. Then you come home and maybe it’s Christmas Eve and you’ve got to pretend with your family that everything at work was fine, and maybe somebody just died that night. You don’t hear about it in the news, and you don’t hear about it anywhere. When you bring in EMTs and paramedics to bring somebody back, you know you’re never going to bring them back. You have to get them through the unit that’s on lockdown and through the centre, and by the time you get to them, somebody’s been doing CPR or whatever; but they’re not going to live; they’ve been beat that bad. It’s sad to watch. Kids come over from EYOC and they thought they were gang bangers. Then they get on the unit and realize they’re at the bottom of the chain again, and they’ve graduated to the bigs. How do you stop those cycles from

happening? It's very difficult. As a guard, you want to help but you also have to do your job and you also have to protect your partner and you have to protect the vulnerable on the unit. But there's 72 of them and two of you. It's very difficult to do. It's difficult to stop a lot of things from happening in there. For me I think it might've been easier, if I'm honest, because I understood where a lot of people came from. I could see my brother or my sister in a lot of them, and I could see my cousins and I could just understand. Some inmates, when you're Indigenous and they know you're Indigenous, particularly females, will kind of imprint on you and hope that you'll protect and help them. We had an inmate; I'll just say her name was Amanda. Her mother and her brother pimped her out since she was six or seven. She was definitely on the spectrum of various things. They beat her so badly when she was a young teenager that her hips were shattered and her spine was screwed. She would act out often. She had some fairly significant mental health issues. But instead of getting her help, she remained on the units. But I would often get a call, because I would be the only one that could calm her down, because of that Indigenous connection. I was never afraid of her. She was big; she was a BFI, very big. But she was the sweetest woman ever when you just took that time to find her, and she would calm down. But she died in jail. You see that kind of stuff. You see her brother and you want to be mad at him, but you also know he was pimped out at whatever age. Sometimes you get parents come in at the same time as their kids, and that's sad to watch. It's hard to watch all of that, just as a regular everyday person. So when you're Indigenous, I think it's a hundred times harder, particularly if you care and you have traditional values and feelings about our peoples. For me, I think I spent five or six years in the system and I had to get out or I'd probably be jumping off a bridge. That happens anyway in our business; probably one of the highest suicide rates as far as frontline workers go. But it's way worse for them. You're doing time with them; it's just at eight-hour increments. We had a young girl come into the Edmonton Remand Centre; she was 18. She'd never been in trouble with the law before, had no youth record. She was a passenger in a vehicle that had a rollover just outside of Enoch. The driver was a 16 year old boy; he was drunk. She was also intoxicated. He was arrested; he was in EYOC. She spent a week in cells with the RCMP before she finally made it to us. She got to us and she got on the unit and that's fine. What happens is they go through admissions and discharge. They get a medical and they see the nurse for the centre and they get assigned to whatever unit they go to, and the females are all on whatever unit. They get there; you get their file; you take

a look to make sure they're not part of a gang or whatever; they're not going to get beat up or whatever. Then you assign them to a cell. She was fresh as fresh could be. She came on the unit; I assigned her to her cell. Then a couple hours later one of the older inmates, probably in her 40s, came down and said, Collette, this inmate's got bugs in her hair, not lice bugs but something's not right. She's really smelly; her hair is coated in blood. What's going on? So I said, whatever, bring her down. So they bring her down and you could tell she was wearing a hat, because she's got hat head. But upon closer look, she's coated in vomit and blood. When she rolled the car, she'd had several lacerations on her head and had no medical attention given to her whatsoever. Keep in mind she's been in custody for over a week with the RCMP at this point. You can see there are maggots and flies, and that's actually probably what saved her from getting an infection on her head. She had this beautiful long Indigenous hair. I was close to the end of my shift; so I worked a double that day. Had to put on a bio suit, take her into a dry cell, and then had to talk to her about cutting her hair off and showering her. She showered, and she's showering and it's so thick and it's been in there for a week; there's no getting it out. It's just this coppery disgusting whatever coming out of her hair. So we have to shave her head, and she's devastated. She's traditional, and she's made a mistake and got in a vehicle with a drunk kid and done what probably all of us have done at least once in our life, and bad things happened. So we've got to shave her head. I get clippers and I'm cutting and shaving, and she's just in tears; she's devastated. All she could talk about was her grandma's going to be so sad, because her stories were in her hair; her strength was in her hair. She was very traditional and whatever. So we cut all her hair off. I gave her a nice little set of bangs. But when we shaved her head, you could see these lacerations that hadn't been attended to. We took her to the medical and I lost my shit and probably got into a bit of trouble, because how do you get all the way through admissions and discharge and nobody's picked this up? Nobody's seen that she's in distress and something's happened. So they take her and now they're worried that there's going to be a lawsuit and whatever else. But then they realize she's Indigenous and that's not going to happen. Nobody's going to complain; nobody's going to say a thing. And they're right, nobody did. She was released within 24 hours after they stitched her head up and sent her back to the rez. That's how we treat Indigenous people, and that was one of the last shifts I did. How do you keep going to work day after day when you see that? It's just fucking wrong. Why is that still happening in 20-whatever it was? Why is that still happening today? This is not 1876; this is not

1976. None of it should've happened ever, and it's happening today every day in the jails that nobody gets a chance to see. When you have those knowledges in yourself, you kind of feel like a coward when you leave. But if you stay you're not going to live yourself. So I got out of that business.

Q: Does that bring us to the present day now?

CC: When I got out of the jail, I resigned or whatever and got out, I didn't know what I was going to do. My wife made the joke, oh you should go sell cars. I never sold a car in my life and I knew nothing about cars. I'm like, yeah okay. There's a huge corporation here called Go Auto, and they're huge. I went to the interview and next thing you know I'm hired. I'm like, okay, I don't know a truck, van – they're the same to me. So I sold cars for a few years. But again in that world, same thing. If you're Indigenous, if you're an Indigenous customer and you walk in, immediately they see dollar signs. They know that Indigenous people have a very different relationship with money than the rest of society. They know that if you sell them a car you can gross a shitload of money on those cars. They don't care if the Indigenous guy is stuck in that car for the next eight or ten years, because you've grossed them so badly that they're never going to get out of that car. They call them Rez Rockets when they pull in in their Caravan or whatever from the rez. Like oh yeah, we're gonna make some money. So I think year three my boss let me open what's called the pod. So I basically ran all my deals front to back and I specialized in indigenous people. I didn't do that to them. I would show them everything that I was doing. I'm going to make this much money; you're going to save this much money; and here's what we're going to do. Here's how we're going to get you out of this car into this truck and build your credit or whatever. Here's why you need to do this. I know you don't care about that shit, because neither do I. But in order to live in the world that we live in, this is what you're going to need to do to get to where you need to get and to make whatever money you have work. So then next thing you know I've got Indigenous people from across the province calling me because I'm Indigenous, they're Indigenous, and I'm not screwing them over. Sometimes they're a little bit tough nuts to crack – they'll come in very stoic and they don't want to tell you anything. But once they realize you're there for them, it's different. But most of the car business does not work like that. They see Indigenous people and that's just money, big



money. That's very unfortunate. I haven't sold cars in probably four or five years, and I'll still get calls from people from the rez: hey, can you help me out, I'm still stuck in this truck. I'll be like, how many kilometers you got? Gee, you can't use that one as a rez rocket; you gotta use the other one and run that one into the ground. But eee. So that's the thing that the white world, the settler world, doesn't understand – that kinship relationship that we seem to all have. Once you're a part of those communities you're a part of those communities. In the white world it's always every man for himself. It's such a different view, and we exploit that a lot without anybody realizing it. It just ties into all the other issues that come with it. All the lines of work I've been in, I've just seen it over and over again. I don't know how I feel about it at this point. I'm 55, a university student now. I went back to university because my body decided I'd lived long and hard, and I broke it a little bit and I've had a few hip replacements, two thumbs up, and various things. So the Veterans Affairs has pensioned me off, so I decided to go back to school and learn more about my own culture, taking a major in Native Studies and minor in Anthropology, and maybe take some of that narrative back. And maybe go about it from the other side – archival, historically, giving the matriarch its voice back. It's all there but white scholars don't acknowledge any of that. So that's why I went back to university. It's just opened up a million more doors and a million more question boxes for me. I don't know where I'm going after today or tomorrow or the next day. But hold my beer; it's gonna be a ride.

[ END ]