Stennie Noel

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SN: Originally I'm from Trinidad. I don't think my dream was to come to Canada. My brother and sister were going to school here, and back home when I finished school I was just knocking around. I used to work at Catelli. My mom every day kept saying, boy, why don't you go to Canada, go with your brother. I say, okay, and then I decided and came to Canada.

Q: You landed in what year?

SN: 1974.

Q: Did you come directly to Western Canada?

SN: No, I came to Toronto; my sister was living in Toronto. My sister worked in the courts in Toronto. So I came to Toronto.

Q: What brought you to Western Canada?

SN: I had a friend who lived out here at the time and kept saying that, due to the oil, they were looking for tradesmen. There was lots of work for welders.

Q: Were you a welder?

SN: No. I did a welder fitter course at George Brown College before I came out West. Usually they had an apprenticeship program but then I challenged the journeyman test instead of going through the whole process. I challenged the test and I passed I;, so I didn't have to go through.

Q: Had you worked in the field before?

SN: No.

Q: But you had the skills to challenge the journeyman test.

SN: Due to the course that I did in George Brown College.

Q: Then you came out West.

SN: Yeah.

Q: That was what year?

SN: 1976.

Q: You came directly to Edmonton?

SN: Yeah.

Q: Were you alone, or did you have a family?

SN: No, I didn't have a family. I had a girlfriend at the time and we both came out here together.

Q: Is she still in the picture?

SN: No.

Q: Did you start work as soon as you came out?

SN: No.

Q: What was your impression when you arrived here?

SN: Cold. I came and it was cold, in the wintertime. It was very cold.

Q: Where did you live?

SN: I had a friend that I stayed at. Housing was a bit of a problem in the sense that they said vacancy but when you go there, when you get there, they tell you no vacancy. A friend of mine, he's Canadian, he said, well if they have vacancy how come they keep telling you no vacancy? So he went and there was vacancy. A few times I went through that.

Q: Was this for apartments?

SN: Anywhere you went down 117th Street or 116th Street, it didn't matter where you go. You'd talk to them on the phone, and then when they see you it was a different situation – no vacancy.

Q: What impression did that have on you?

SN: I thought it was pretty strange. You phone and they said they have vacancy, and not when I get there. I guess because of my colour. When I was working, there's a couple guys that I worked with, and one guy, I asked him to go and check the place. He came with me. I went in and asked, and they said no vacancy. Then he went right after me.

Q: Was he black too?

SN: No, Canadian. He went right after me, and there was a vacancy. So that was the conclusion I came to. Then eventually I got an apartment on 10325 – 117 Street. Then I got a job out out Mayfield but the bus only went as far as Mayfield Hotel. Where the job was, you had to walk; there was no bus that used to go at that time.

Q: So how did you get around?

SN: Bus, and then from there I walked to my job.

Q: Did you have to work shifts?

SN: No it wasn't shiftwork at all, just strictly days.

Q: Were you working as a welder or fitter?

SN: As a welder.

Q: How long did you do that?

SN: I stayed there for about a year and a half. Then I got my license and I got an old car. They were hiring people out in Nisku, and then I got a job out in Nisku.

Q: With what company?

SN: The name of the company, oh boy. The company I worked for was a non-union outfit. They built tanks. Recon was the name of the company.

Q: They built tanks for the oil industry?

SN: Yeah.

Q: You stayed there a while?

SN: Yeah I stayed there a couple of years. At work guys kept telling me about the unions.

Q: So you were in a union environment but you weren't unionized?

SN: No, it wasn't a union environment. The shops in Nisku weren't unionized. But by speaking to people, you get around. Around that time later on they were going to build Syncrude.

Q: When was this?

SN: I can't remember when they started to build Syncrude.

Q: How did this impact you? What did you do?

SN: At that time the operating engineers did all the heavy equipment that they were building, like the draglines and the bucketwheels – they were putting those together. Draglines, shovels.

Q: The operating engineers built those?

SN: Well at that time they used to have welders, and that union put those together.

Q: So the operating engineer and the welder were the same person?

SN: The operating engineers actually worked heavy equipment, but even though they did all heavy equipment, they had welders too. I was hired on as a welder.

Q: So the operating engineers built the draglines and bucketwheels.

SN: At that time, yeah, in the beginning. They did the bucketwheels and shovels.

Q: What is a bucketwheel?

SN: It's a mechanism; they call it a bucketwheel. It's a wheel and there are buckets and it picks up the tar sand.

Q: What did you do there as a welder?

SN: The dragline came in parts. Sso we welded them together.

Q: What is a dragline?

SN: The dragline digs out the dirt first and then it digs up all the tar sand.

Q: And deposits it somewhere else?

SN: Yeah, and then the bucket wheel picks up the tar sand and it goes on a conveyor belt and goes to the plant.

Q: So you went to Fort McMurray to perform that function?

SN: Yeah, Fort McMurray.

Q: Who was your employer?

SN: Operating engineers.

Q: Was there a company name? How did you get the job?

SN: Actually the one guy who was an crane operator, I met him and he introduced me. His name was Oliver Leptz.

Q: From Guyana?

SN: Yeah.

Q: He introduced you to the company?

SN: No, to the union. That was 955.

Q: Not 146?

SN: No, 146 was after.

Q: 955:

SN: Yeah, I think that's the operating engineers. I might be wrong on that, but I think it was Local 955.

Q: So you started working in Fort McMurray?

SN: Yeah.

Q: Were you on a rotation?

SN: No, we worked in the beginning every week.

Q: Did you get the job directly through the union?

SN: No, through the contractor. I can't remember the name of the contractor. It was Bechtel. Bechtel was the main contractor up there.

Q: How long did you work with Bechtel on this project for Syncrude?

SN: I worked there for about two years.

Q: Going back and forth?

SN: Yeah. It was on a weekly basis, just every week.

Q: And your family stayed in Edmonton?

SN: Yeah.

Q: You had a family by that time?

SN: Yeah, two kids. I had them here.

Q: Did you continue employment with Syncrude?

SN: No, after that I came back and I was working in Nisku for a bit. I can't remember the name of those companies. It's so long ago.

Q: Edmonton Exchanger?

SN: No, that's when I worked with the union. That's when I joined the union 146 in 1988. My first job with 146 was at Cold Lake with Brown and Root.

Q: So you continued with 146 as a welder?

SN: Yeah, up until now.

Q: Has your employment always been Cold Lake?

SN: No, I worked in Cold Lake and then back and forth to Fort McMurray.

Q: As a welder?

SN: As a welder, yeah.

Q: Did you ever work as a fitter?

SN: Not too many times. Most times I worked as a welder.

Q: What is the difference?

SN: A welder, when the fitter puts whatever his pipes or structure, they put that together and you do the welding.

Q: So you continued doing that in Fort Mac back and forth.

SN: Back and forth, yeah.

Q: During the 1980s?

SN: Yeah, until we went into recession. I think that was in the early or middle ‘80s. Guys had to give up their houses and stuff.

Q: Was that because of the Klein cuts?

SN: No, it wasn’t Klein cuts. it’s just like how it happened in the ‘90s, where the price of oil went down.

Q: Did you own your own home at that point?

SN: No, still renting.

Q: Did friends of yours lose their homes?

SN: Yeah, I knew a couple guys who had to give it up because they weren't making money and unemployment couldn't cut it. So they had to give it up.

Q: Were their families impacted as well?

SN: Yeah.

Q: Did people move around to different neighbourhoods?

SN: The farmhouse that they had, they struggled for a while but then things started picking back up again.

Q: Was your family impacted also?

SN: Not that much, no. I based it on if I'm not working, then whatever bills I have if I'm collecting unemployment I can manage. So it wasn't as tough as some other people.

Q: Were you still living in 117th Street?

SN: Yeah, 10325 – 117 Street. Then I moved to the west end in 1990, presently where I live now at 16123 – 102 Avenue.

Q: So you moved to your present location in 1990.

SN: Yeah. Before that I lived out in Beverly. Then I lived out in Castle Downs for a period of time too.

Q: What brought you to that area?

SN: The west end?

Q: Yes, to your present location.

SN: Actually this friend of mine, we worked together. At the time, I wasn't driving. He lent me his vehicle to drive, and I took his vehicle for the test to get my license.

Q: At this time you're still working back and forth?

SN: Yeah and sometimes I was out on the lakes at Sundance.

Q: What is Sundance?

SN: A powerplant west of the city here. Then you had Wabamun, a powerplant at Wabamun.

Q: I think it's still there.

SN: No that powerplant is no more. I think they got rid of that plant. Then I worked at Keephills, same powerplant.

Q: So you specialized in powerplants?

SN: Not necessarily. The company that I worked, that was Allstom and they become Bastian Engineering. They did the maintenance on all the powerplants – Keephills and Genesee, Sundance.

Q: Were you hired as a welder?

SN: Yeah.

Q: You were the welder for Alstom?

SN: One of the welders for Alstom, yeah.

Q: Was it a big company?

SN: Yeah, very big. They built trains too, the oil and they built trains too.

Q: Are they located here in Edmonton?

SN: No, to be honest, I'm not sure. It's an American company but I know they have oil here. They build trains too. Actually, they're still building trains.

Q: Did you work on trains as well?

SN: No, just at the powerplants.

Q: Any oil company installations?

SN: No. I worked with Cessco, but as a maintenance when they do maintenance work out in Fort McMurray.

Q: Are your jobs arranged through the local?

SN: Yeah, 146.

Q: Does the union pay you benefits and everything?

SN: Everything, yeah. They paid everything.

Q: Have you ever made a run for union office?

SN: Once I did.

Q: And you attended union meetings?

SN: Yeah, in order to try to run you have to attend the meetings. They sent me twice to a course in labour relations within the union and companies.

Q: Are you a union activist? Are you active in the union?

SN: Yeah.

Q: What is your status?

SN: Right now? Retired.

Q: Did you ever serve on any committee?

SN: No, the only thing I ever really did was when they have elections I was on a committee that oversees the ballots and checks them.

Q: Did you work with Desmond Francis?

SN: Probably.

Q: Before retirement, where were you working?

SN: My last job was Alstom. Actually the name changed to a different franchise in Edmonton. GE bought them over.

Q: When did you work for Edmonton Exchangers?

SN: I worked for them when they were building Keephills 3.

Q: What is Keephills 3?

SN: K-3, they were putting in another boiler. I worked for Edmonton Exchanger at Envirofuels.

Q: All this is related to the oil industry?

SN: Yeah.

Q: In what way?

SN: Except for when I worked in the powerplants. Envirofuels is where the, you know where Envirofuels is on 17th Street? Out there, maintenance.

Q: So most of your career has been as a welder doing maintenance at different locations?

SN: Yeah, at powerplants, did some at Nova in Joffrey. I worked with a company called Acorn.

Q: And during all this time, you lived in this area?

SN: From 1990, yeah.

Q: So you had two children at the time and you were travelling back and forth to different locations to work?

SN: Yeah.

Q: Did you have a partner who looked after the family?

SN: Yeah.

Q: Did you treat this as a bedroom community, or how did you function in this area? Did the community meet your shopping needs?

SN: Yeah it did. Actually when I moved here West Edmonton Mall wasn't built yet.

Q: What did the area look like when you moved here in 1990?

SN: Well it's hard to say.

Q: Was Stony Plain the main drive?

SN: Yeah, Stony Plain was always here, Stony Plain was always the main drive here.

Q: Were you familiar with any of the businesses in the area?

SN: At that time, no.

Q: Was it still horse and buggy?

SN: No.

Q: Was there a large indigenous population?

SN: No. Just recently you find that they have indigenous people, but before, no.

Q: Tom the laundry man talks about servicing the area all the time.

SN: Yeah, the guy who owns the laundromat up on 152.

Q: Did you know Johnny Bright or any African Canadians who moved here from Amber Valley?

SN: All the people I really came in contact with were the Mays, only a few people.

Q: Did you have a relationship with them?

SN: I knew the girls, because a friend of mine was married to one of them.

Q: Did you know any other immigrants?

SN: No. See the problem is most time I'm in and out and I never really had time to associate. Then when I'm in the city, because I'm involved with the Caribbean community, all the activities were mostly always…

Q: Did you meet other Caribbean people when you were working?

SN: Yeah I did.

Q: Welders?

SN: Welders, pipefitters, carpenters. Most of the guys have died. There's a few that I know around still, but most died. A good friend of mine, his name is Colin Griffith; he was a welder from Guyana. Then another friend of mine name is Artie Rocke. He's from Barbados.

Q: Was there a good Caribbean presence in the area?

SN: In this area here?

Q: Or people you worked with.

SN: People I worked with, yeah, people I worked with.

Q: There were a lot of Caribbean people who worked in oil and gas alongside you?

SN: Yeah. There were specialists in all the trades. There were electricians, carpenters, scaffolders, pipefitters, ironworkers.

Q: Ashton Robert's father.

SN: He was a pipefitter. Yeah, I knew him too. He was a pipefitter before he became an inspector. Lewis.

Q: Any female workers among these?

SN: No.

Q: What do you call the area where you live?

SN: That's a good question. I forget the name of the area. I never really paid attention to that. Actually I live close to Britannia School there. So I don't know if they call that area Britannia. You have the Britannia Liquor Store and then you have the Britannia School, but I forget what that area is called.

Q: It's not Jasper Place?

SN: Is it Jasper Place?

Q: There's an area called Britannia Youngstown.

SN: That's where I live, because there's a Britannia School there and there's a Britannia Liquor Store.

Q: So you think it's Britannia Youngstown?

SN: I'm just one block off of Stony Plain Road. That whole area around me, I can't remember the name of that area.

Q: Is it identified as any particular area?

SN: Not necessarily, just Stony Plain.

Q: Do people identify with the Cree presence that used to be here?

SN: No. The only thing I know is just the cemetery that's been there for the longest while. I can't even remember the name of it.

Q: Maybe you avoid it.

SN: No, that's one of the safest places.

Q: To do what?

SN: If you want to walk through it. It's just the myth that people give it.

Q: So people from the area are buried there?

SN: People from outside, too. It's a pretty big cemetery. I forget the name of it. Not just from the neighbourhood, it's people from everywhere. I know it's hard when you live in a place so long and you can't really say the name of it, but I never really--all I know is I live in the west end just off of Stony Plain.

Q: Is there anything familiar about the neighbourhood that rings a bell for you? If you're describing your neighbourhood, what would you tell people? Does it have the best chicken or. . . ?

SN: No it didn't have all that stuff. I know it was a pretty quiet neighbourhood when I moved here. It still is.

Q: Is your daughter part Cree?

SN: No, Dene.

Q: Does she identify with any indigenous activities in the neighbourhood?

SN: No it doesn't have; you have to leave to go somewhere; there isn't anything in the neighbourhood. No, none.

Q: Does she take part in any Dene activities?

SN: She tries as much as possible. When there are any powwows and stuff, she attends. Sometimes I do stuff through my drumming, and she likes that drumming and dancing.

Q: Indigenous drumming and dancing, or Caribbean?

SN: Both. Anything to do with dance and drum. But her aunts try as much as possible when they have powwows and dances and stuff, and they take her.

Q: Does she have a Dene name?

SN: No. I think if her mom was alive she would; her mom would've made sure of that.

Q: So her aunts try their best to involve her?

SN: Yeah, and her grand aunts.

Q: Let's talk about your cultural background.

SN: How it started, my aunt's husband was a Shango and he always had feasts. I was around eight or nine. They had feasts and they always had the drum beating. For some reason, I was always fascinated by the drums. They had a break and I took up one of the drums and just started playing, and everybody was surprised. From that I started, whenever they had feasts and stuff, I started…

Q: How old were you?

SN: I was nine.

Q: Give me an example of the beat you're referring to.

SN: (he drums)

Q: What's the translation? Is it for a ceremony that's about to take place?

SN: No, that's just a song that is sung. At that time I didn't really pay attention to the singing that much; I concentrated on the drumming part.

Q: What does the drum mean to you in your culture?

SN: It covers everything: spiritual, . . .

Q: In the history of the culture, it was banned until 1952.

SN: Yeah I know. . . . I don't know what happened. All I know is the drums were playing. One guy left the room and I picked it up just like that. They didn't say anything, like no, you should leave the drum alone. When I started playing the drum, they let me continue to play it.

Q: So you brought this knowledge and spirit with you from Trinidad and Tobago.

SN: Yeah, I played a little bit of drums at home, not that much. After I came to Canada I practised with the group. Most of my drumming is when I came to Canada. The first drumming I did was in 1960 at a drummer school festival. That year… did a play called Pingpong. We did a play called No Money to Bury the Dead.

Q: Can you give me a couple of lines from that?

SN: The drum was bongo. Oh boy, if I remember.

Q: This was part of the language that you brought to Canada as an immigrant.

SN: Yeah. That year I got a special award from our then prime minister, Eric Williams, special award for drumming at Queens Hall.

Q: What's it been like being involved in your cultural community here?

SN: It's hard to explain. I don't know; it makes sort of fulfillment to do it and share it with other people.

Q: You've used your welding skills in that as well.

SN: Yes for building the costumes and putting the . . .

Q: In the Cariwest parade for many years.

SN: Still do, I still do.

Q: And you've traveled outside of Edmonton.

SN: Yeah, played at the Langston Hughes Centre in Seattle, played in Toronto at the Sheridan Hotel for the Grey Cup. We played in Victoria; we played in Quebec. Then we did festivals in B.C., a festival in Mission, B.C.

Q: As a drummer?

SN: Yeah. Actually I did a tour with an acapella group and started at Lethbridge to Creston, Cranbrook, Kaslo, Silverton Trail, Nelson, that whole area, Kimberley, in B.C.

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

SN: No.

Q: What's the name of the group that you perform with currently?

SN: Wajjo Drummers.

Q: You're a performer?

SN: I try to.

Q: Tell me about that recent composition.

SN: The fast one or the slow one?

Q: Either one. What is the message in your song?

SN: The fast song is, for some reason we have a generation gap. In my book there's no such thing as too old. So my song depicts that. Hey man, I'm not too old. As long as I have the health and strength, I'm not too old. The other one, the second song is, you know when you look around at all the stuff that's happening in the world today, due to politics we're sort of divided. We're supposed to be together. It doesn't matter what colour, creed or race you belong to--in order for the world to be a better world we have to be together. We need more love, no hatred.

Q: Do you want to give me a few bars?

SN: Which one? The slow one? It goes like this. As it was in the beginning, so shall it be in the end. Take a look my friends; that seems to be the trend. Brother fighting brother, nation fighting nation. I don't really know what is wrong with mankind. Child abuse, my friends, is on the rise. So many husbands beating up on their wives. So look I'm asking the man above, you know we have to put a little more love. So tell me what's the violence for. Make love, not war. It affects the rich and also the poor, I say to make love and not war. The world can't take it no more. Make love, not war.

Q: Did you have a good work-life balance? How did you manage to do so many things?

SN: It's something that you enjoy. To me, oh it's hard to explain. That's part of me, going to work every day and to play my drums and stuff. That's part of me. It's fulfilling. Playing the drums helps me relax. When you're going to work, there's all the stress and stuff and all the people you have to deal with. So when you play the drums, all that stress just leaves you.

Q: Was your work environment stressful?

SN: Not the work itself, the people.

Q: Were you accepted?

SN: Not a hundred percent. A couple of times I was called the N word. But the way my mom grew me up, as long as somebody don't step on your toe. My mom always say, words is wind. So I just simply ignored it. Actually, the guys that I worked with were more disturbed about it, because they reported it to the foreman. I didn't, because to me that's ignorance and I never really pay attention to it. But my coworkers went to the supervision about it.

Q: What happened as a result?

SN: Well, whatever the culprit was, they dealt with it. Even at one time I remember when I was working at Alstom they had a picnic and they invited the shop workers, and a couple of women were giving out food. Everybody went through the line, and when I went through the line they refused to serve me. That's in the

2000s. So when we went back to the job the boss asked me, did you enjoy the picnic? I said no. He said, did you enjoy the food? I said, I didn't get any food. He said, why not? I said, the women refused to serve me. I forget the name of the company, but Alstom, most of the stuff for construction they bought it from them. So my boss phoned the company and told them what happened. In two seconds they were down there, sorry, and offer me this and that. I said, look man, some of us, I put it as ignorance. So I never paid attention to it, but they apologized because my boss, the amount of money they spent is close to millions of dollars. He decided, hey man, you guys treat one of my workers wrongly, so I'm gonna pull out and stop buying stuff from you guys. They were down by that shop in seconds, and said they're sorry. I don't know what happened to the outcome of the two women, but they refused to serve me.

Q: Did they give you any reason at the time? Did they say they were out of food?

SN: No, there was lots of food; they just refused. They normally have a line and everybody passes and gets a burger and salad and everything. They just blankly refused to put anything on my plate. I didn't make no big stink about it. I just walked away and waited until everybody was finished.

Q: I'm seeing pain in your eyes.

SN: Well, it's hurtful. But then again, what can you do? The attitude, how to explain it. If I had followed my mind when things like that happen to me, if I decide at the spur of the moment to go with what I think, I'll get into trouble.

Q: So you didn't respond at all?

SN: No, I just walked away. If my boss hadn't asked me if I enjoyed the food, I wouldn't have said anything. I just left it like that.

Q: Did you have any other experiences like that during your time in Canada?

SN: Right here we did the tests, they were looking for welders. They tested us and I passed the test. The guy who passed the tests, it so happens the washroom was close by to the office. The guy who tested us went and told the boss, these two black guys just passed the test. Then the boss kept quiet for a moment then said, go and ask them, because he went to the washroom and didn't realize I was there. Go and ask them if they can do

mechanic. They wanted welders; we passed the test. But then I guess because of our colour he decided oh, he don't wanna hire us if we can do mechanic. Of course I couldn't do mechanic. So the guy came. I don't think he was too happy. He said, guys, he wants to know if you can do mechanic. I said no, can't do mechanic. I came as a welder; you tested me as a welder. Not as a welder mechanic or a mechanic welder. I just walked off. That was in the early 2000s out in Nisku.

Q: So you've had a few experiences.

SN: Yeah I do. But like my mother always says, words are wind. It might hurt you inside. Then another statement she'd always say, no bad breeze don't blow. She always said that. Maybe the job wasn't for you. Maybe something would've happened to you while you were on that job.

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

SN: Not really.

Q (Don): Did you ever encounter any double breasting in the '80s?

SN: No, not recently. But at the time they were building Syncrude and those places, just in the late '90s they have Melloy and PCL and they have union and non-union sectors.

Q: Is there a difference in how the jobs operate when you're building something new versus doing maintenance work?

SN: Building stuff is new construction. You're on a different agreement than maintenance. Maintenance is whenever some part of the plants needs repairing and you go in. For example, the boiler, when the tubes wear out, you go in to change the tubes. You have different areas of the boiler that need replacing. You go in and they shut that certain boiler down. Then you do the maintenance and then they start back up again.

Q: What are the hazards for a welder on those maintenance jobs?

SN: Dust. It depends on which plant you're in. In the powerplants they have what you call the fly ash; that's the remnants from when they're burning the coal. That's not too healthy for you. At some point in time when

they just built the plants, they had asbestos. Once they know there's asbestos, they don't let you work in that area. In the beginning in the industry, what we had was just some little ordinary masks that we used to use. But then eventually that changed where you have the ones with charcoal. So it was left up to the individual to protect themselves. A lot of guys never wear the stuff, but it's up to you as an individual.

Q: What was the residue from the burning coal?

SN: It's called fly ash.

Q: Are there claims regarding that now?

SN: There is a law where if guys get sick, there's some sort of compensation if they find out that they got sick through asbestos or things that was in the plants. I think there's a law now that you can claim, but I've so far never really heard of anybody who filed anything against them. A lot of the thing is guys liked to smoke cigarettes, and sometimes they'd take their mask off and smoke the cigarette and not realize. When you take a light like this inside the boiler, you could see all these little fine dusts all over. You need to have your mask on. They used to call me. I forget the name they called me, because I always had my mask on.

Q: So in your workplace with the operating engineers, it sounds like there wasn't a great deal of pressure on employees to follow the safety rules.

SN: At that time it wasn't as stringent as how it is now. In my time in those early days, you didn't have a safety harness. All you had was a belt around your waist with a rope that you hook up. Then they sit back and think, if you really fall from any height you'd break your waist or your back or whatever. It's only then they started introducing the harness. They introduced the harness and different masks and stuff like that. But before, it was just an ordinary paper mask. As the years go by and they get to realize that a lot of guys are dying as a result of the different dusts and chemicals in the refineries, they improved on that. Where safety is concerned, it's up to the individual too; it's up to you as an individual. Before you start any job, there's a think you gotta fill out, and you gotta make sure there's no hazards around and make sure the job is safe.

Q: Do you have to have a ticket?

SN: Whatever company it is, as the operator you have a form you have to fill out. They give you the job description and your dos and don'ts, and you've got to make sure before you start the job that the job is safe and the area is safe. If it's not safe for you to do, they can't fire you or anything for that if you think it's not safe enough for you to do. That's through the union. Non-union is a different story.

Q: They don't have to meet any standards?

SN: By rights they have to, but it all depends on the company. A lot of the companies, when they want a job done they don't really . . . Like I said, it's up to you. If you don't decide to take care of yourself, they don't really care. You're just a number. It's not a nice thing to say, but you're just a number. If something happens to you, they replace you with somebody else. You as an individual have to take care of yourself; otherwise nobody is going to take care of you.

Q: When you were working out of town, were you living on site?

SN: Camp. Some camps in the beginning were good, but then after a while they started changing and it was horrible. Food wasn't--at times I automatically became a vegetarian because of the food. Sometimes the food was good; sometimes the food wasn't good. Some people say, oh you go to Fort McMurray, you make a lot of money. But it's not a nice life. If you're not a strong person, two things – you either end up alcoholic or you end up taking drugs. When you're away from your family and stuff, it's hard. It's not an easy thing. Sad to say: but in my union you have a lot of guys who use alcohol, and drugs are a problem.

Q: At certain times, like when you were working in Nisku, were you able to just commute every day to the job?

SN: Yeah, I used to commute every day. Even with Fort McMurray when I was working in Fort McMurray, they used to have a bus that used to take you up there; you'd catch a bus. Sometimes we drove; it all depends.

Q: Did you encounter transportation problems living in Jasper Place?

SN: Yes and no. My friend had a vehicle, and because we worked together, transportation wasn't a problem for me. If he's not busy, even though I didn't have a license, he used to let me use his vehicle.

Q: Is he still alive?

SN: Yeah he's still alive. So transportation wasn't a problem, except for when the job was further past Mayfield Inn there. In that area over there, the bus didn't used to go past there. Anything after that, if you don't get a ride you had to walk.

Q: We've heard that public transportation wasn't reliable, even to get downtown.

SN: No, it wasn't a hundred percent. It was a little bit tough. It wasn't as consistent as now, no.

Q: When you moved here, was that house in a new development?

SN: The house that I was in, has been there. Most of the houses where I am is one of the few houses around there that's standing. Most of the people sold their houses and they built duplex or four-in-one and that type of thing. When I came, West Edmonton Mall wasn't built yet.

Q: Was the neighbourhood different then, before the mall started up?

SN: Yeah, it was really quiet. After they built the mall, the area got lots more traffic going through.

Q: Did your children go to school here in Jasper Place?

SN: No, actually my kids went to school on the north side.

Q: Did they commute every day?

SN: They were living on the north side with their mom. They went to St. Nicks and then they went to Austin O'Brien. Actually, presently my daughter doesn't go to school. When I was working, my son lived on the north side. So she stayed with them and went to school on the north side. Now she's starting junior high. There's Britannia School four blocks. . .

Q: Does she go to Britannia?

SN: No, she's going to Mary Butterworth on the north side again. She had a choice between Mary Butterworth and Londonderry, and she chose Mary Butterworth. Half of her class is going to Mary Butterworth. They all applied for Mary Butterworth and they all got in; so she decided.

Q: Does she have any Indigenous friends?

SN: Yeah.

Q: On the north side.

SN: Yeah. She had one kid on the west end here that was with her grandparents, but they moved. A little girl, they moved. For some reason, this area by me never really had much kids. It's only now you see little kids around, but before you never really had many kids. Some areas, like when I was out in Beverly, kids playing hockey and stuff in the street by me. But here we never had kids, for some reason.

Q: You mentioned her mom being Dene. Was she born here, or was she born somewhere else and they moved here?

SN: No, my daughter, the last one, she was born in Edmonton. Her mom is from Cold Lake.

Q: Was she living in Edmonton?

SN: Her mom? Yeah.

Q: Were you aware of a connection between the Indigenous and Black communities?

SN: No. Actually, when I met Dessiana's mom, they accepted me. I didn't have any problem with them, because I used to go to Cold Lake and their grandfather was alive at the time.

Q: Did you work with any of the family members?

SN: No. I remember when they took me to the grandfather. He looked at me and said--he used to call me Sonny Liston, to tell me I look like Sonny Liston. Then we started talking. He had cancer and they only gave him

a few months to live. But there's a particular wine he used to drink, and he stayed there for about another 10 or 15 years after that when they told him he only had a few months to live. He used to drink that wine every morning, every single day. I can't remember the name of the wine. When we used to talk, I used to say, why don't you guys all sit with him and get to learn the language, and whenever he says something you write it down? But they never paid attention. Now they're trying to learn the language, but they had the opportunity. But it's like anything else; the kids weren't really interested and it's only now they're kind of interested in it. But I used to always tell them, why don't you guys sit with your grandfather whenever he speaks? The older ones, Dessiana's grand-uncle and grand-aunts know the language. But I said, why don't you guys all sit with him and let him write down the stuff? But they never really paid attention. Then he told them stories. Him and the mom were some of the parents that they took to residential schools. I can remember him describing what they did with them when they gave them the blankets with smallpox bacteria in it. I can remember him saying the priests and nuns weren't very nice to them, the things he described that they did to them. It wasn't pleasant.

Q: That's Dessiana's grandfather?

SN: Great-grandfather.

Q: Some Indigenous workers we've talked to have experienced discrimination on the worksite.

SN: Yeah, they gave them a hard time. For some reason, the general public figures that they should just be a labourer sweeping, that kind of mentality. I remember Dessiana's mom, before she passed away she was doing a course at NAIT. They used to give her a rough time. She had a rough time because they figured she shouldn't be there; she should be somewhere on the street drinking or something. I can remember when I first met Dessiana's uncle. When you looked at him, by his features he looked like somebody who used to drink a lot. That was my perception about him. But the strongest thing he drank was Coke; he never touched it. When you don't know people and you don't get to meet them, you have a perception about them. That was my perception, and then I found out that it's not how it looks.

Q: Some people have the opinion that this area is unsafe. But has that been your experience?

SN: It's only recently that there's quite a few Indigenous people in the area. But I walk this road and I've never had any problems, never encountered any problems whatsoever. None. . . . In any area, it doesn't matter how

good an area you live in, you'll find the oddball. That's human; that's something you can't get away from. But to say I've had any problems walking in the night or whatever, I've never had no problem; none, never had any. Never encountered any problems.

Q: How did you learn the drum?

SN: Like I was explaining to Donna, my aunt's husband is what you call a shango. Customers brought through when they brought the slaves to the Caribbean that culture that stayed with them. You have a special day for Thanksgiving; at home they don't have a special day for Thanksgiving. They give thanks any time of the year, sometimes once or twice a year or three times a year, as a means of giving thanks for things being fruitful for you throughout the year. So you give thanks for that. What they do is they invite people from all the villages and they cook, sing, and dance, and they were beating the drums. I probably was about nine years old. They stopped for a bit and then when they started up again I picked one up. Normally when they have the ceremonies they don't allow people to pick up the drums, but for some reason they didn't say anything to me. When they started playing, just like that I started playing. From that I had that fantasy about drums and it stayed with me ever since. I've been drumming ever since, up until now. . . . When I go and play with people, they always ask me if I'm from Ghana. I say, no, I'm from Trinidad. I always get that problem because of how I dress. I can remember a couple of times people come talking to me in their language because I look like somebody else. I say, I'm from Trinidad and I don't know your lingo at all. It was hard to learn at home in the sense of how they had us during slavery days, where they divided you because they didn't want you to communicate with one another. You had to speak English. You would be punished for beating the drum. . . . We got independence in '62.

[END]