

Dwayne Nemlander

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Interviewer Winston Gereluk

DN: I'm a conventional transit operator for the City of Edmonton

Q: Tell me about your background.

DN: I come from the Athabasca Chipewyan First Nations in Northern Alberta, but I've lived in Edmonton my whole life.

Q: So, you don't have any relationship to the people up there anymore?

DN: No, I was actually adopted from birth, from three days old. I was born in Charles Camshell Hospital here in Edmonton and was put up for adoption from birth and adopted by a family here in Edmonton. I lived in West Edmonton for a good majority of my life. Travelled around a little bit, but most of it has been here in Edmonton.

Q: So, you're an Edmontonian.

DN: I am an Edmontonian.

Q: Has your Indigenous background been a factor in your life at all?

DN: It is a factor in my life. I'm a proud Indigenous person and I do a lot to learn more about it, as much as I can, and promote it, and try and teach my kids what I've learned. Within the City of Edmonton, I've taught the Indigenous awareness program with the City employees for about the last five years. We've done thousands of City employees. We've talked about the residential schools here in Canada and taught them a little bit about that and what happened with the history of residential schools, the truth and reconciliation of it, and just teach a little bit of our part so they have an understanding of where we come from and who we are as peoples.

Q: How is this accepted by the people you're teaching?

DN: It's been really accepted. A lot of the employees actually had no idea of really what the residential school system was and how it worked and how it ran, and just how the last school closed not that long ago. In 1996, the last residential school in Canada closed. So it wasn't all that long ago.

Q: Which school was that?

DN: It was in Saskatchewan, the last residential school in Canada.

Q: Do you teach a bit about the history of Indigenous peoples?

DN: We talk about how the residential schools that started in Canada and what their mandate was of what they were to do. Ultimately the mandate was to kill the Indian in the child and make them assimilate to the white culture. They were taken from their homes and sent to a residential school to stay for however long. Most were six, seven, or eight when they first were taken to go, and you went until you actually turned 16. Once you turned 16, that was it; you were just kind of out the door and left to go on your own. They had those ten years that they were there to try and teach them to lose their language and lose their culture and their ways of who they were, and to

try to assimilate them to the white culture, as you would say, to make them not know their culture and their teachings and their ways.

Q: How did you learn about the residential schools?

DN: We had a lot of teachings and talked to a lot of people. Some of the people that came out were residential school survivors and we talked first-hand with families. Even some of the instructors have history in residential schools. So, it was more just kind of giving our own stories and sharing. We found that a good population of the people had actually never known anything about residential schools. We had a lot of people that came from communities that have residential schools and had no idea what was going on, or that their family members had worked in residential schools, but had no idea what was going on or how they worked, how they ran. They just knew it was a school. So, we kind of shared the stories and the truth about it all.

Q: What is the effect on these people once they tried to get back into society after that?

DN: Once they've hit 16 years old and they're out the door, that's it, you're done! A lot of them were not in their home communities. They were sent far away from their home communities and just left out on the streets to fend for themselves. Because you were taken away from your family, you're not knowing who your family is or who you are as a person. You're kind of left out on the street to fend for yourself. So a lot of these people turned to drugs and alcohol to kind of mask the pain of what went on in residential schools and what happened to them there. They really had no place to turn or anyone to turn to.

Still to this day, there aren't a whole lot of resources for a lot of these people to turn to. A lot of them were just left on the street. That's kind of what it was; the drugs and alcohol to help them deal with their pain. If they did go back to their communities, even their parents themselves were residential school survivors and weren't taught and don't know who these kids were; they didn't get to see a lot of them, don't know how to be parents themselves. So, a lot of it was they didn't know; it was just them trying to kind of navigate the day day-by-day, not knowing how to deal with the pain and anguish from it all. A lot of it is they had turned to whatever they could to help deal with that pain, whether it be the drugs or the alcohol or whatever it was to help them deal with it. As a society, that is a big thing in the Indigenous community, that a lot of people don't know how to deal with it and they do turn to drugs and alcohol to help them deal with that. There's no place to turn to talk to or any outlet for them.

Q: You're helping by at least educating some City employees. What else is being done? Are there any government programs that are making a difference?

DN: The City of Edmonton was definitely a leader in recognizing and doing this as a part of the Truth and Reconciliation, from the calls for action. The city was a definite leader in doing the education process. The Government of Alberta and the Government of Canada are starting to get into that process, but there is definitely a long way to go. There definitely needs to be more resources for these people. But a lot of people are very reluctant to turn to these people, even just to open up to them, because of the past trauma from these people that they thought they could trust. There should be somebody you could be able to turn to for help, and with the stuff that has

happened they haven't been able to. So, there is that reluctance there for them to open up and trust someone or seek that help.

Q: So, you didn't go through residential schools; you were raised by foster parents.

DN: I was raised by foster parents. I did go to a residential school, but only for a short time. Just my own struggles with going to school. I'm just not comfortable talking about it.

Q: Are you optimistic about the process of Truth and Reconciliation? Do you see it making a difference in the lives of your people?

DN: I see a little bit of it but there's a long way to go. There's a lot to do to get to that point. There still is a lot of that stigma out there towards the Indigenous people, and they have a long way to go. They talk about it and they say that for them to get over this or for them to move on, the healing journey of this could take seven generations. Some places are only two generations into it. It hasn't been that long since the last residential school closed, and we're just starting that healing process now. So there is a long way to go. It's gonna take a long time for that and a lot of resources. There's still a lot of work that needs to be done to start that healing process with a lot of people.

Q: Do teachers now know enough to make a difference? How is it working out now with all the children going to school?

DN: I know a little bit about the school system, and just even with my own kids in the school system. The school that my older two have gone to, they're still in the learning process and don't know all about residential schools. They're learning and trying to deal with that. I previously had conversations with the school about how they see it from the family standpoint and them trying to work with that. For example, the school would be given tickets to a hockey game or a football game, and they would try to offer it to these families, and the families were reluctant to take them because of that previous trauma and that trust part - what are you gonna want from me if I take these tickets? So, that was one of the things that was kind of brought to light was that these people are not going to be trusting, because of what happened. So, it's going to take time; it's going to be slow. But it was one of those things, and it wasn't all that long ago, that a lot of people didn't know about. There are still a lot of people that don't know about residential schools, and they're still trying to deal with that and the understanding of everything that goes on. It's going to take some time to get everyone to know our story as a people. There's still a lot of people that I would say are not accepting to hearing our story or believing what the truth is; but the truth is there. We're trying to get that out there and let them know this is what happened, and this is what it's gonna take for us to heal.

Q: Tell me about your own occupational history.

DN: I've been a city bus driver for 16 years, and before that I drove coach and before that I drove school bus and before that I drove truck. I've always had kind of a driving job pretty much since I was young. I've always enjoyed driving. I started when I came back to Canada; I'd moved away to Texas for a few years, came back, and moved into the Cold Lake area and started driving school bus on the reserve there. I came back and drove school bus here in Edmonton and drove highway coach for a few years; drove an entertainer coach for some musicians. Then I

started with the City of Edmonton. So, I've always had that driving career. Something that I really enjoyed doing was driving. It's kind of second nature, and I enjoy driving. It's not a big thing. I'm comfortable driving.

Q: Why didn't you stick with driving a coach?

DN: I drove coach for a long time and every once in a while, I still drive a coach here and there. But I did enjoy it; it was just being gone. When I drove entertainer coach, I was gone for a long time, and having a family, it's not an easy thing to do. It was a great job, but it was not being home, gone for long periods of time. So, we kind of came to that point in our lives where it was like, well I kind of got to get a job closer to home. That's how I ended up at the City of Edmonton that gave me that option to still be able to drive and a great opportunity, a great career, and just having that to be home with the family. It was tough sometimes when my one daughter was just new and I was gone for quite an extended time. Just even coming home for a little bit, and her not recognizing who I was made it a little tough. It was kind of where we had to figure out. It was a great career but it was being gone too much and it was tough on the family being in that. So, it was to come work for the City of Edmonton and drive bus and just be home every day.

Q: Describe what it's like to be a bus driver.

DN: I would say it's a great job and I love it, but it has its challenges. You're definitely having to not only watch for passengers, people, and bus stops, what's going on in your bus, what's going around, all the traffic, maneuvering a large vehicle throughout the city or wherever it is. It can be challenging. When you start off, you're not always going to get the good shifts and you're going to have to work nights, and you may have to work weekends and split shifts. It can be tough dealing with the public, depending on which part of town you're driving through and depends on the clientele you're going to get. You may not always get the best, but you're dealing with the public. So you gotta kind of take that with a grain of salt. You're gonna have those people that rely on public transit. So those are the people who are gonna be on your bus.

You have people from a wide range: people going to school, work, and those that are just going through life and need to get somewhere. That's their mode of transportation is you; so you have all those things. Some days are fantastic and you may have those bad days. You've gotta find that balance to help you get through those bad days, to keep you there. You have those bad days, but we have the resources of people that we can talk to. We have some great supervisors that I can just go into their office, close the door, and yell and scream for five minutes and get that off my chest and leave it on the table in their office, then walk out, and that's it. But sometimes you need to do that: you need to have that group of people that are there to support you.

Q: Do you experience any discrimination because of your Indigenous background?

DN: Yes I have; I can't say a lot, but I've had my fair share of discrimination. Most times, it's if someone has a disagreement with you, and that's when it comes out. The funny part is, if there's a disagreement, they always tell me to "go get a job, you lazy Indian." I'm like, well I'm pretty sure this is not a volunteer position. I have a job, I'm here, and if I didn't have this job, you

wouldn't be able to get to where you're going. That's kind of a big chunk of what it is: I'm lazy and I need to get a real job. I've got a job; I've got a pretty good job.

Q: Have you noticed changes in the public since Covid?

DN: Oh yes, Covid was a big game changer in how people dealt with everything in life. It changed everybody; it changed us all. We had to social distance, we couldn't see our friends and family. We had to wear masks, and we had to sanitize, and we had to do all this stuff. There is a lot of that, I don't want to say – anger - but it's definitely shifted how everything is with how people deal with a lot of things. We talk about the discrimination and the anger and stuff that people don't deal with, us following the rules that are set in place for us in public transit and this and that, and there's a lot of that. There's a lot of that social disorder on transit, because there's a lot of people that didn't have a lot of places to go. During Covid everything shut down. These people didn't have the places they could go to all the time: the libraries and the malls--everything was closed. So, they kind of moved into that downtown core and they still don't have anyplace to go. So they're still there.

When they want to move around in the wintertime, you see a little bit more where they want to get on the bus and warm up and be warm. It's tough to have that. What do you do? Do you let them stay on because they're cold? They're hanging at the transit centres because they've got no place to go, and here's a place that's out of the elements and it's safe per se. But then there are the few that wreck it for everyone. There are those that use it as a hangout and a home, and do the illegal stuff – the smoking, the drugs, the alcohol, and the social disorder that they have. It's those few that are in the transit centres that are just wrecking it for everyone. It's just small, but it's one of the places that's always open.

Q: And the public library.

DN: And the library, yes.

Q: What are the differences between the Indigenous peoples and the settlers in the way they relate to the world?

DN: As a people, it goes back to the start of this even with the treaties and the core of community. The women actually were the leaders way back then. When they were signing these treaties, they actually would not talk with the women. The men were the warriors and protectors and hunters, and the women were the lawmakers. They had to change that, because they wouldn't deal with them back in the day. We have that role of going back to that and getting back to the way things were, how we as people were as a community; we are a community-based people. We get together and share. That's a big thing I enjoy is that sharing and being together.

Q: Do you have any sense of Indigenous peoples' view of the environment?

DN: There are some teachings about looking after Mother Earth and how things happen, that it's just the circle of life in what happens in our environment, and how we need to take care of all that: how things are a certain way in our environment that we need to care of, and why we have some of these fires. It's just kind of renewing the land, so you have that new growth. When there is a fire, you get the fireweed out and it's green right away just coming back, that new life that's

coming. Sometimes it happens that Mother Earth is just shaking off and we need to fix some things and change, and it needs that new life brought back into it, and take care of some of that stuff and clean it up. We live off the land, per se, in some of our traditions, the hunting and fishing and all that. You see certain things, the birds and all the animals and all that: that's very strong in our culture. They all have a meaning in themselves and they all mean something. The Indigenous people are very environmentally conscious, you could say. That is a big thing, because we live off the land.

Q: I see that you're wearing a Turtle Island T-shirt. What is Turtle Island?

DN: Turtle Island is the earth. I learned about it quite a few years back that we're all from one, earth and itself, and we're all from that people. There are so many different cultures around the world, but a lot of our stuff is the same. Some of the language, some of the words that we use in our culture have the same meanings in different languages and cultures all come back together into that whole big group where we're all from planet Earth; Turtle Island. We're all from the same place. We have a lot of the teachings that over the years I've learned that have the same meanings; the Mayan calendars, the language: a lot of the words have the same meanings. They're similar to some of the things we talk about. Different things that we have in our day-to-day lives and the meanings of them are the same in different cultures. It all goes back to that circle of life of who we are as peoples here on Turtle Island.

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

DN: As myself, I always want to share more what I learn and just share it as much as I can to those people who want to learn. I've met a lot of people throughout my careers and my path and my journey, and I always like to share a little bit of the knowledge that I have so you have a better understanding of who I am and who we are as a culture and why we do things the way we do. If you're willing to listen, I'm always willing to talk.

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