INTRODUCTION BY PATRICIA GEDDES (INTERVIEW 4)

PG: Okay, so the date today is Tuesday, February 23rd, 2016. The time is 1:23pm. Today we are at Vancouver Island University’s Cowichan Campus. This interview is the continuation of a project that aims to gather and share cultural and institutional memories of Vancouver Island University. My name is Patricia Geddes. I am here to interview Ruth Kroek who currently works in the role of Education Counsellor and First Nations Student Support at Vancouver Island University’s Cowichan Campus. Thank you for agreeing to share some of your memories and stories by taking part in this interview.

PG: So today I was hoping to ask you to tell me about who your mentors and advisors were when you were first starting out here at VIU.
A NEW ROLE: FIRST NATIONS STUDENT SUPPORT

RK: I was interviewed in August of 1989 and hired. I started at the end of August that year. I was working part-time as a First Nations Student Support person. Linda Love was the Cowichan Campus Principal at that time. She was one of the people who had seen something in me that she thought was worthy of taking forward and supporting. I think what she saw was somebody who could connect to community and someone who could be a support for Aboriginal learners. It was a very different time then. I was getting paid out of contract, short-term contract, so soft money. There were no regular positions available.

I was working two days per week as First Nations Student Support. We talked a little bit about the development of Child & Youth Care along with that. But I’ll focus today mostly on the First Nations Student Support side and talk about some of the people who helped me with the advising pieces, who helped me decide where to send folks when they needed additional counselling support. Basically, I was learning things on the job. On the job. I don’t know what I’m doing, but I’m doing it.

Fran Tait was working as an advisor in Nanaimo. She was one of the few visible First Nations people working for Malaspina at the time. I think there was her. There was me. There were like three or four other Aboriginal people working for Malaspina, but they didn’t publicly talk about being Aboriginal. They would say that to us, but they never told. Nobody else really knew that they were, and they weren’t in positions that were specifically for Aboriginal learners. So that was a bit of an interesting time.

I think for Malaspina, I was an experiment. We really didn’t have a similar position in Nanaimo, because Fran’s position strictly was advising. She did advising for all students. She was very good at her job. I was a little bit afraid of her. I didn’t want to mess up. I didn’t want to be, “Okay Fran, I’ll do whatever you say.”

Her boss and mine actually, was Sheila Colbert-Kerns, who was then Dean of Student Affairs, or Student Services in Nanaimo. Sheila was what we call African-American today, born and raised in the States, and moved here, and was Dean of Student Affairs or Student Services. She was very strict about ensuring that we knew the advising pieces. If we were advising people, then we should know that background, get that training. Each time I was hired to do a contract for VIU, she made me do a full day advising training with her and with Fran. At the time, Fran was I would say, one of the very best advisors. So her, Fran, and maybe somebody else would come in and train me. If there were other new people, then they would sit in on the training as well. I thought, I was trained last year. But no, I would get the training again. So she was very strict about that. It was sort of like WHMIS, it didn’t matter if you had it before, you get to do it again.
So I think that's one of the things that helped me as an advisor. Know how to look for things. Know how to ask for information. Know where to search. Be able to look at other institutions. Be aware of people’s stories and not get too far into them, because some people can get really sidetracked in what they’re talking about, and then talk about their life story. Sometimes you can let that happen. So then they get it out, and then we don’t have to go back to it. Some people will want to go back to it. But it takes skill to not keep going back to that, because I’m not a counsellor.

An advising session is not a counselling session. So we had to be really clear about ensuring that we stayed on track. But it’s hard to do that when you’re looking at the whole person. Sometimes you need the personal pieces about why this person was missing certain things, or certain things were happening to them; they were struggling. All of those things were all part of the training. We don’t do that anymore.

**PG:** Oh. Do you know when that stopped?

**RK:** When Sheila left.

**PG:** Okay.

**RK:** When Sheila was no longer Dean of Student Affairs, she stopped all of those short training. I think that was something that I was able to take advantage of and really learn from that. I appreciate it now, looking back. At the time, I wasn’t that fond of it. But I’m okay. I survived. I think a lot of people were afraid of Sheila, because she was really bossy, very direct, and didn’t really have a filter. It was pretty funny. Anyways, we had lots of good times. I have lots of funny stories about Sheila and Fran. They did really help shape my career and shape me as an advisor.
ABORIGINAL ADVISING: BRIDGING TO RESOURCES

RK: I could do the Aboriginal pieces, because I knew what was missing for me as a student. Okay, I know that this instructor should have spoken to the student in a certain way, so I will go talk to them and say, “Can we have a little chat about Sally, Joe, or somebody and talk about how we can better support that student?” I had the advising pieces behind me. Then I would have this bridging piece from the Aboriginal support piece that I could bridge to other resources within the institution [or in the community]. So those were some of the things that you’re learning on the way.

You’re picking these things up as you go along. I talked to a lot of counsellors within Malaspina or VIU and within the community. I knew a lot of folks too, from my own community. We would look at different ways to support students.

Back when I first started, the Chief of Cowichan Tribes, I think I mentioned it before, was Philomena Alphonse, or her husband. So they often were Chief. They were very supportive of education. Her portfolio often was Education Coordinator for Cowichan Tribes. She wanted Cowichan Tribes to progress. She would also promote that with her husband, Dennis, and Chief and Council members. Post-secondary was really important for her. She saw that as an answer or key to the future of Aboriginal learners. Often, she would, if she wasn’t Education Coordinator, and somebody else was, she would ensure that that person, or she would work with Malaspina quite closely in supporting those students from her Band. She was really instrumental from the community side as well.

Then there were other Bands that I would liaise with: Malahat, Chemainus, or Halalt, Penelakut. Lake Cowichan, they don’t have that many members, but we would phone and chat. Often, we would get connected to other Bands, like Ditidaht, which is out Nitinat way. Sometimes, Esquimalt or Saanich Indian School Board, depending on the program and the information that a Band wanted. It was really a sort of hit and miss kind of thing, and there was no format.

For the first couple of years, Fran and I were some of the few Aboriginal people working in post-secondary in that Student Support role. NITEP was developing and there were coordinators of the Native Indian Teacher Education Program out of UBC [University of British Columbia]. They had different field centres throughout BC [British Columbia]. But I don’t believe that there were a lot of folks in support positions in BC.

So what was happening along with me being hired, was all around that same time, there was this “Provincial Advisory Committee on Post-Secondary Education for Native Learners,” which is a very long name. It was a report that was delivered to the Honourable Bruce Strachan, Minister of Advanced Education, Training and Technology for the Province of BC in February of 1990. In
this report, it outlines all of the people who were part of the development of the report. What it showed was that, it just put it out in black and white, Native learners were not going to post-secondary, and what were the things that were missing, why was that, what needed to be done. They had a huge advisory committee from different Bands, different friendship centres, different schools, [and] different school districts. It was a huge undertaking. Also, at the end, they ended up having clear job descriptions for education coordinators at every public post-secondary in BC, which he followed that. That government allowed that to happen. So that was sort of the development of every post-secondary institution having Aboriginal support, and following this First Nations Student Support Services or Student Services model outlined in what we lovingly call the “Green Report,” because the original name of this report was so long.

The only reason that we called it the, “Green Report,” is because it had a green cover. It had nothing to do with being environmental or anything. It had a green cover. But also in there, I can’t remember the actual number of, twenty-one recommendations ranging from the development of a First Nations Student Support person at every university or college, at every public institution, to language development. There was a whole range of recommendations. Better connections between high school and post-secondary, which is still kind of shaky today, but there you go. It was really interesting.
ABORIGINAL EDUCATION FUNDING

RK: I think what this report did is that it marked a way for the Province to really commit to Bands in the province of BC in a way that was, they put their money where their mouth was. They just didn’t say, okay that’s too bad that your high school rate is really low. That’s too bad. So no, let’s do something about it. So I think this “Green Report” also helped pave the way for the development of, not just services, but programs throughout BC for Aboriginal learners. It also allowed space within post-secondary for something that was unique or different that maybe never had been offered before.

In terms of First Nations programs, it was sort of like a renaissance time. There were lots of new things happening. It was sort of interesting. In a way it was kind of, pardon the phrase, it was sort of like the “Wild West.” All kinds of things were happening and not that many people. They were saying yes to a lot of things. A lot of things were in what we call “soft money.” They were term contracts. Sometimes, they were annual and annually renewed. Sometimes they were one, two, three year contracts. The institutions would get money to develop certain things over a certain period of time. Then it was up to the institution, say for Child & Youth Care First Nations, for us to take that over, and put it into our regular base funding.

So that means that they gave us soft money to start it up, and get it up, and running. We ran it one year, one term, a two year term. Then we got another batch of money for another term. So, four years total, and then after that they said, “Okay, you need it, so you find the money to run it.” It was sort of, they gave with one hand, and took away from the other side, because then you’re taking away from your base budget [and] from your base funding for courses in say, Child & Youth Care. Say you were delivering 100 courses in Child & Youth Care, and say, there were 120 courses with the First Nations pieces. You still are only going to get money for 100 courses. Before you used to get money for 120, now you are only getting money for 100. So you had to incorporate the funding into the base budget. They’re like, good for you. Well, I want some money for that. But no. We did break down barriers during that time, but at a cost to other budgets.

PG: Yeah. Tough decisions.

RK: You can see how people would be really not that happy.

PG: Yeah. Someone must have had priorities for that program then.

RK: Carol Matthews, who was then Dean of Health and Human Services, she committed the money, along with support from the VP Academic, the late Glen Johnson. He supported the program and committed money to it. Without those people, Glen and Carol, and I would say,
Fran [Tait] and Sheila Colbert-Kerns, I wouldn’t be here. I somehow gained their support. They somehow saw something in me that they thought was worthwhile and supported me. And Linda Love, for sure, she was the first one who hired me, and just promoted the heck out of me to stay, develop First Nations Student Support Services, as best I could. So we did lots of things.

We did different events on campus. Sometimes, we did events next door at then, it was Quw’utsun’ Cultural Centre. We did Feasts and dance groups. We hosted all kinds. We did conferences. I don’t know how we got the money. We would always apply for money and we would get it.

PG: That was my question. Where did you get the money?

RK: Well partly, we were probably the first doing these things. So there was less competition for the money. But as we started developing more programs, services, and things like that, and the development of these First Nations Student Services Coordinators or Support people at all these other institutions, then that pot of money probably stayed the same. But everybody then started applying for that money, so we got less and less of it over time.
Time span from full interview edited recording: 18:06 – 21:35

BC FIRST NATIONS ADVISORS

RK: Because I think what was also happening along with my training in VIU or Malaspina was also the development of the BC First Nations Advisors’ Council. I’m still part of that as one of their longest term members, and I will be leaving that. I went to my last meeting in November. It’s a bi-annual meeting. All of the First Nations advisors from all of the institutions across BC would meet. The first time we met was at Vancouver Community College [VCC]. The late Shirley Joseph was hosting that. She was working for VCC and she was hosting the conference for us.

Really, none of us knew what we were doing. We really didn’t. I think it was 1989 October when we met. All I knew was I was going to Vancouver for two days, and that I was going to be in meetings. I just followed along with whatever the agenda was. The government, the provincial government was setting a lot of the agenda, and doing round table discussions about services for Aboriginal learners, and what was needed. I just felt like I was over my head, like what am I doing here? But I played along.

I would sit with this other person, a couple of other people. I am like, “I am not sure what’s going on.” I think all our eyes were as big as saucers, because I don’t think very many people in the room really, fully understood what we were doing. I think that was sort of telling at the time, because it was so new, we didn’t know what we didn’t know.

PG: Do you almost wonder if it’s good that nobody had a set idea of exactly how it should go?

RK: Yes, because you can make stuff up as you go along and it fit the students’ needs. It fit the institution’s needs. It fit the campus needs. It fit the regional needs. Later on, as we developed, we would always bring that back to the government and say, “Well, that works in the North, or that works if you’re in Vancouver. Or that works if you’re in Victoria. But it doesn’t work if you’re in Kamloops, or if you’re in 100 Mile House. Or it doesn’t work for Emily Carr. Or it doesn’t work for BCIT [British Columbia Institute of Technology].” Those are things that, it wasn’t a one size fits all.

PG: Right, there was no prescribed formula of this is how you do First Nations Student Support.

RK: No. I don’t know if there ever will be. If somebody tries to do that, I think they will be laughed out of the room. Interestingly enough, the first group of folks who came through, there were institutions who didn’t send anybody, because they didn’t have anybody hired. There were people who sent others who were not working in First Nations Student Services, who were not Aboriginal, but they were looking at hiring somebody who was Aboriginal. So it was a really interesting time.
Fran Tait was part of that as well. Her direction also served us well, because she’s Aboriginal, and she had been working in post-secondary for a long time. She got to be part of that inaugural group, and she stayed on in the group until she retired. That’s ten years now that she’s been retired.
MAINTAIN SUPPORTS FOR ABORIGINAL LEARNERS

RK: It’s been interesting that way seeing the development of the program, the group, what’s happened, and what’s happened with the soft money. Soft money now delivered through what we call Aboriginal…

PG: The Aboriginal Service Plan [ASP] money?

RK: Yes. Yes, so that money. There’s only one pot of money. So we kind of all put our best proposals forward. For VIU what we do is, we take all of the proposals for VIU that people put forward to ASP, to Sharon’s group. Sharon then takes that to the Hul’q’umi’num’, the Hwulmuxw Mustimuxw…HMS, the advisory committee. The Hwulmuxw Mustimuxw [Siiem] Advisory Committee, which is made of folks from Aboriginal communities in the VIU catchment area, which also includes the Métis Association. The make-up is, I think, may be changing. They are reviewing their terms of reference and things right now.

PG: Okay.

RK: It’s all online on who gets to be part of that. So, HMS looks at all of the proposals. This past year, people who were wanting to see if they could get money from it had to present their proposal idea to HMS. I think that makes a difference, instead of us you know just seeing us. I got to see what it was. I couldn’t vote on it, but I could see what was happening. You could see why people were doing certain things. People could be asked questions on why they were doing certain things asking for that money. Or why couldn’t they do things another way, or access other money? Or why didn’t VIU? So, it’s been interesting that way seeing the development. I think that’s a good way to do it, so people can be asked directly. Different departments will be asked, okay, why are you doing this? Or why are you doing that? We’ve supported this in the past; why has it not gone into base funding? Those kinds of things.

I think that’s something that is I think, has progressed. I think it helps us in First Nations Student Services, because it allows for additional support in other areas, say in ABE [Adult Basic Education]. Or in Training & Development when you’re doing short contracts, and you need somebody to work with students who are what we call, high risk students, and we really need somebody to work hand in hand with those students to see what kinds of additional supports that they need, and if they get into trouble, that they have somebody that they can contact right away, and encourage them to do that, instead of sending them off on their own, and good luck with that.

Really, I think the more support students need, and that’s with anybody, it doesn’t matter who you are, the more support you have, the better off you are academically. We just see it over and
over again in first year experiences, US college reports, and things like that about: If you get clear information out, if you have good support systems in place for your first year students and other students, but first year is really critical, the better it is for those students to succeed and complete their degree or their diploma, whatever it is that they’re trying to obtain. These are things that I believe are so important for us, as an institution, to maintain [supports] for Aboriginal learners.

In this “Green Report,” over and over again, it’s talked about that Aboriginal learners are non-traditional learners, or what post-secondary calls non-traditional learners, often not coming from families who have post-secondary in their history, in their family history. A lot of our students haven’t finished high school, or they don’t have their High School Dogwood. So they come in as mature students. There’s a lot of our students who just really did not have a good time in school, did not have a good experience in high school, or maybe their education has the shadow of residential school. Their experiences with institutional learning has traumatized them so badly, that they just can’t come here without additional support. That is really important for us to remember.

I think people may say, “Oh well, residential school was so long ago.” But that institutional learning has crept into generational trauma through all our communities, all our Aboriginal communities, large and small, in a large or a small way. Sometimes people may seem quite okay. But you have no idea what their day-to-day life is, and they just really present well as a person, and they don’t show how hurt they are, or how wounded they are. They can only go so far without additional help, and they are sometimes afraid to ask for help. Or they don’t know where to go for help. They just come, they go to class, they leave, and they don’t, kind of do anything more.

Even though, I have met with different students, and we really have a lot of support services in place for you, and please take part of them. I have actually introduced them to people. “Here’s our librarian. Here’s our volunteer tutor coordinator. Here’s one of our counsellors,” so they have a name and a face. In my early days when I was first starting out, I had time to do that. I could walk with our students, sort of shadow them a bit, and see how they’re doing.

The first year I started, we had fifty ABE [Adult Basic Education] students and five university program students. So I met with those students a lot in my first year. Often, if people were missing, I would go and I would phone them. Or I would talk to their relative and say, “Oh, is Sally okay? Because I haven’t seen her in class. I hope everything is all right.” I could get in trouble for that now, but I would still do it, because I think what happens is that families really want their student to succeed. And I would do that. I was shameless. I think it was because I wanted students to have a positive experience. I would tell them, “I’m just going to keep calling you until you come back to school.”
I think what was shocking for people was that we missed them. We knew that they weren’t here, and that they couldn’t just slip out of the door, fall off the radar, and just not be seen again. Those were some of the things I did. I won’t speak for anybody else, but I know I did them.

**PG:** You just pointed out some really important warning signs there. You know if they were slipping out.

**RK:** Yeah.

**PG:** And you noticed and followed up.

**RK:** Those were some things that I did and I could do a lot more of that. Now at any given time, we have anywhere between 250 or 225, 300 Aboriginal learners. I can’t do it. My job is two days a week as First Nations Student Support, and three days a week as an Education Counsellor Advisor and Coordinator of Student Affairs at this campus. My portfolio kept on getting bigger, and bigger, and bigger. The First Nations pieces sort of have been marginalized, or pushed to the side. We really have not had an increase in Aboriginal support, other than the hiring of Elders at our campus over the 26 years that I have been here.

We get soft money to support students in UCEP [University & College Entrance Preparation], or ABE courses and programs. But we really need more. We need somebody to shadow our students, and support them, and walk with them, and hear them. Hear their fears and their concerns. I think it’s the fear, or the anger that they feel, and they don’t think that anybody is listening to them. I think that needs to be heard in a real way. We need to continue to put support services in place for Aboriginal learners, because we’re so far away still from having a huge success rate. I think that’s important for us to remember that. It’s not going to be overnight. It’s been 26 years now that I’ve been doing it. I need another 26 years before I think that we feel that we’re making any real headway, because I think that we still have to overcome all these other social ills, things that are barriers that have been put in place for Aboriginal learners.

As a post-secondary institution, we need to take up that responsibility of supporting Aboriginal learners and communities, and also, educating non-Aboriginal learners about our past and that we’re just not a bunch of flakes who want everything handed to us on a silver platter. That we actually come from a really fragmented history in terms of education and post-secondary education. So those are pieces that we must continue to keep in our institutional memory, that we cannot forget where we came from. If we do that, then we get lost in where we’re heading.

So when people say, “Oh well, everything is good now.” It’s not. It’s not. On the surface, things might be better than they were five years ago, ten years ago, but we still have needs for our students. I think those are the things that we need to hang on to.

**PG:** Okay.
RK: So things like, places like Shq’apthut in Nanaimo. I want to talk about that quickly before we finish. That was money that was raised to build the building. They’re already out of space.

PG: They’re reconfiguring space.

RK: Reconfiguring, and they’re oversubscribed, and they’re overworked, and all those things. I think that is a good model of some of the things that need to happen, not just in Nanaimo, but at all campuses. And we had asked, “What about a centre on our campus? Can I have a room? Can I have a room with an office attached to it?” No. So that piece was quite disappointing. I was told was that not one group could own a room at this campus. That’s where we’re at right now. Who knows how that’s going to change? Maybe I’ll win the lotto or something, and be able to build a building, just a really nice building on the side for Aboriginal learners. Nice dream. So I’ll leave that for now, because I know you have other things to do as well today. But I will give you a copy of this. Or I’ll take a copy of it, and I will give this to you for the Library.

PG: Awesome. Thank you. And thank you for sharing with me today, and for letting us record this interview. I always appreciate coming here, and talking with you, and learning so much about the development of this campus, the programs, and the foundational pieces that brought together First Nations Student Support today. I didn’t know much of that, and it’s eye opening. So I am going to conclude the recording.

-end of interview-