INTRODUCTION BY PATRICIA GEDDES (INTERVIEW 3)

PG: The date is February 11th. The time is 1:55 p.m. We are located in the traditional territory of the Cowichan Tribes at Vancouver Island University’s Cowichan Campus. This is the third interview of a project that aims to gather and share the institutional and cultural memories of Vancouver Island University’s Cowichan Campus. My name is Patricia Geddes, and I am here to interview and speak with Ruth Kroek who currently works in the role of Educational Counsellor and First Nations Student Support at Vancouver Island University’s Cowichan Campus.

Ruth, as an employee with Vancouver Island University since 1982, you carry…

RK: ’89.

PG: Oh! Is it?

RK: Yes.

PG: Okay. You carry unique and valuable memories of your experiences with the development of First Nations post-secondary programs and courses 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.

RK: You’re welcome.

PG: So today, I think we were going to discuss your memories and thoughts around the development of some courses in First Nations Women’s Studies and possibly, some Hul’qumi’num’ language courses.

RK: Yes, last time we were talking about Arts One First Nations, the development of the program, and the difficulty that we had gathering reading materials, and things like that. I had hoped to share with you the course outline for that, but I couldn’t find it in my own private library. I am thinking it’s held institutionally somewhere.
FIRST NATIONS WOMEN’S STUDIES

RK: Along with the Arts One First Nations Studies, the B.A. First Nations Studies was developed, and around that same time, courses such as First Nations Women’s Studies and Native Literature out of the English department, and Hul’qumi’num’ Language university courses were also being developed. We also had a Native Film Studies course on the books that I don’t think we’ve ever delivered more than a few times.

So I’ll talk a little bit about the First Nations Women’s Studies courses, and the Film Studies courses, because those were the ones that sort of were the discrete courses outside of First Nations Studies. We actually didn’t even have First Nations Studies then, but a development of courses that had a First Nations focus or an Aboriginal focus. I think it was an important time for students to see, and faculty to see how Aboriginal people were written about in Canadian culture, or not written about. And most of it was not written about.

There were a few of us, Ian Whitehouse, Bill Juby, and myself. Or Ian Whitehouse, Jay Ruzesky, and myself were talking one day at our Cowichan campus. Ian asked me, “What courses would you like to see developed outside of Arts One [First Nations] and the BAFN [Bachelor of Arts First Nations]?” Almost right away I said, “First Nations Women’s Studies.”

I had taken a Women’s Studies course, taken Women’s Studies courses, and not really seen myself there. I had seen a mainstream North American, non-Aboriginal view about what was happening for women, and the struggles women were having socially, culturally, in their work lives, in literature, and a number of different images that were, that are important. I’m not trying to discount that. But what I didn’t see was the struggles that Aboriginal women were facing and still continue to face today in mainstream Canada, and in North America, and in our own Aboriginal communities. When we talk about poverty, violence, lack of education, high suicide rates, mental illness, all kinds of other things that are happening to Aboriginal women, that have happened to Aboriginal women, that may continue to happen to Aboriginal women. It’s daunting.

I really felt that there was enough for people to come in, and let’s have this conversation about Aboriginal women in Canada, and see how we can share this information. So Ian and Jay thought it was an exciting premise, and they took it forward. Next thing you knew, we had a First Nations Women’s Studies course. And then who would teach it?
MY DISCUSSIONS WITH CHRISTINE WELSH

**RK:** So we had had Christine Welsh come in and speak about some work that she had done in her early films, and about pioneer men and country wives. Her great-grandmother had been a country wife and had been married to a Hudson’s Bay man. He basically left her. He went back to England and brought his wife home back to Canada with him and sort of abandoned his country wife and children. That was quite common then.

So in my discussions with Christine, we talked quite a bit about Aboriginal, Métis women, and how we had been treated historically, institutionally. We talked about the *Indian Act* and how women under Section 12(1)(b) of the old *Indian Act* would lose their status when they married a non-Native man, which actually happened to me.

I lost my status when I married my husband. So for a while I was not Native, according to the government. So we talked about all those kinds of things, pre-Confederation and post-Confederation. There were things that happened pre-Confederation to women, how women were used during the Fur Trade, and how Aboriginal women were portrayed in historical pictures, and how there were accounts of Aboriginal women being considered loose, or available, or sexually, just basically sluts.

**PG:** Oh, promiscuous.

**RK:** Thank you. In historical documents, there are references to Aboriginal women about their availability, and often were used by European men in settlements, and sometimes were taken, and then abandoned. There’s those pieces, the social, the view of Church of Aboriginal women, and how the not understanding of particularly, matriarchal societies. So that was a bit of a rub between Church and those societies. Then later with the introduction of residential schools, the *Indian Act*, the reserve system. It’s quite endless.

**PG:** There’s so many topics for a First Nations Women’s or Aboriginal Women’s Studies course.

**RK:** Yes.

**PG:** There’s so much.

**RK:** So much.

**PG:** So many reasons for one to be developed and for that to still exist today. You had an important role in first developing that course here.
RK: Yeah, and part of that was because I didn’t see me. That was important, because I think Aboriginal women have a huge role to play in the future of this country, for Canada to learn from us. Worst case scenario, these things can happen. They are still happening. We have women go missing. We have abuse, and neglect, and so on, and so on, and so on. I can’t even keep on talking about it without writing some kind of dissertation or something.

PG: It’s part of daily life. It is.

RK: It is.

PG: You just need to look at the comments section on a news article…

RK: Yes.

PG: …that is about Aboriginal people and you’ll see that these misconceptions still occur. So you had such a pivotal role, or such a pivotal moment of not seeing yourself. Just sitting with that, I don’t know. It’s amazing.

RK: So to see that course developed, and Christine was then, bless her, she was charged with developing a syllabus with very little course material. She used films, and a combination of literature or poetry, or again, searching through magazines, periodicals, newspaper articles, people’s own experiences just to get a real sense or depth of the experiences needed to deliver such a course. Then she got a full-time position at UVic [University of Victoria]. So we were without somebody here. It would be interesting to interview her, because we’ve talked. We continue to be friends, and talk about that experience for her, and that shift from Malaspina. It was then Malaspina, to UVic, because the majority of the students in her courses were Aboriginal women.

PG: Okay. So she was teaching other courses at Malaspina beforehand?

RK: No.

PG: Okay.

RK: So she taught First Nations Women’s Studies 210 and 211 in Fall and Spring. So she was only teaching as a sessional. Then she was teaching in the following Spring in Nanaimo, and the following Spring in Duncan. She was teaching the same course at both campuses, so half-time. She was here half-time.

PG: Okay.

RK: But we couldn’t quite get her to full-time. Sometimes we could get a Film Studies course to be delivered, but not always. So we lost her to UVic, which was too bad. But what she said was, and I can attest to that, was that when she taught these courses at Malaspina or VIU, most of the students were Aboriginal, and so you could sort of jump into the deep end, and talk about really,
a deeper understanding of what was happening for women in their communities, or what had happened historically, because people were coming from a real sense of their own story, or their own family story. When she went to UVic, there were so few Aboriginal women in those courses. There would be a handful. And you would have to explain everything. You would have to explain the Indian Act. You would have to explain Bill C-31. You have to explain on-reserve, off-reserve. You have to explain the politics of living on-reserve, and having some families be more in power, or less power than others. You had to really explain a lot of things she said that she didn’t have to do that here, because it was, we knew. Because that was our life.

PG: That would really change the tone and depth and content of a discussion.

RK: It does.
EXCLUSIONARY BY DESIGN

RK: It’s like when people are like, “I don’t understand the Indian Act. What does that really mean?”

You have to write Ottawa to see if you can go to the bathroom. There was no understanding at the depth of how much power Aboriginal Affairs has over the average Aboriginal person in Canada. It still does.

When I got married, I actually had to sign, because it was pre-1984 and I lost my status. I had to sign my status away. The Band made me sign a document relinquishing my status. I said, “Well, I don’t want to do this.” They said, “Well, you’ll be taken off anyways.”

“Well then, take me off.” They weren’t happy about it. They took me off the roll. I received a payment of $37.48, as sort of like a payout. That was what my status was worth to them.

PG: Did this payment come from the government?

RK: It came from the government. They do that. They look at the year end, and see how little money they have for the Band at that time, at the fiscal year end. They look at the fiscal year end, so that was when they pay you out. So they don’t have to pay you that much money. If they paid you out in the beginning when you have money. Anyway, it was quite insulting actually. I wasn’t going to cash it out. It was so silly.

PG: Well, it was involuntary.

RK: I know. And then when Bill C-31 came, and there was talk about it. I went to all of the meetings about how we were going to get our status back, how it was a human rights issue. It was quite nasty on-reserve, people that I know, relatives that I know. “They made those decisions to marry off-reserve. They married a non-Native person, they should live with that.” I was disheartened by a lot of the comments.

I think things have changed some. I won’t say completely. But now we have Bill C-31. So it’s another layer of acknowledging or labelling people. Because my children are Bill C-31, and if they marry a non-Native person, then I think their child still has status. I can’t remember. There was a shift a little while ago. But for quite a while. It’s a confusing thing about your status. Nobody else in Canada has to worry about that, or is labelled these things.

PG: Yeah.

RK: It is a human rights issue. Either you are or you’re not.
PG: There’s these layers of creating division. The government puts all these layers of bureaucracy, labels, and definitions. And then you spoke about the comments and perspectives, it just sounds like it created such division. You know, it excludes you.

RK: It does. It’s exclusionary by design. And you know people can shun you, because you married a non-Native person or you live off-reserve. There’s a number of different things.

PG: That are meant to what? Create more shame for being who you are, and where you come from?

RK: Yeah. And people you think who were your friends that you grew up with are like, wow, wow. And I know people who, older women who never married, but were in relationships with non-Aboriginal men, and not had children by choice. But they did it, because they knew it was going to be, they couldn’t do the work that they were going to do on-reserve if they had lost their status. So there are a lot of people who made choices about how they live their lives with the restrictions that Indian Affairs put on their lives. It is something that the average person doesn’t think about. They don’t know about; they don’t care. They do know; but it doesn’t affect them. But it does affect us.
VIOLENCE AGAINST ABORIGINAL WOMEN

**RK:** When I read about women going missing or Aboriginal women’s lives, and how little it means to so many people, it’s very hurtful. There’s a REDress presentation on February 14th in Duncan. I probably will go to that, because I think it’s part of showing some solidarity around, we do matter.

We matter, and I think that our communities, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, need to know that. Because I often get the feeling from our Aboriginal communities that our male electorate, they don’t see us as meaning as much. They don’t. I don’t see a lot of money going into social programs or fighting for those social programs that we need in our communities for women against violence.

Or when I read in the paper that Duncan has the highest amount of violence against Aboriginal women in the province, it is disheartening. We don’t get a lot of money in our social programs to support women who are trying to change their lives. And I think that needs to happen, and that is through education, [and] social programs. It’s through support from communities on- and off-reserve to understand that it’s not one thing. There is no one answer for abuse and neglect to stop. It’s our communities working together in providing a safety net in education and support to have it stop.

I think part of my passion about this is from my mother who for years, unbeknownst to us, provided a safe house for Aboriginal women on-reserve. She was quite ill. She was quite ill with cancer for the last few years of her life. Before then, she lived on her own, and she was quite happy. She was just kind of motoring along. Then she became ill. My sister would stay on the weekends. She had come up from Victoria. She said, “One night, it was late, it was like midnight, one o’clock. There was a knocking on the door, not banging, just knocking on the door.” She’s like, who’s knocking on the door? It’s the middle of the night. So she gets up, and the woman was surprised that my sister answered the door, and she had children with her. The woman said, “I’m looking for Rose.” My sister said, “Well, she’s quite ill and she’s in bed.” She was reluctant to get her out of bed. My mom was sick, and my mom could hear and say. She said, “Who is it?” The woman said who it was, and then my sister told my mom. She said, “Oh let her in. She knows what to do.”

**PG:** That’s amazing.

**RK:** My sister is like, I don’t know what to do. So they went downstairs, because we had a bedroom downstairs. They went downstairs, and they stayed the night. When my sister got up in the morning at seven, seven thirty, they were gone, and the door was locked. They had locked the door behind them. But they needed a place to stay and sleep, and she needed her kids to be
asleep and rest, and not be whatever. So, we were stunned. We were shocked, because we didn’t know. None of us knew.

**PG:** How long? Do you know how long she had been doing that?

**RK:** For years. She had been doing it for years, and just not told people. It was a word of mouth thing. You can go and you can stay there. She will put you up for the night. It wasn’t the first time that it happened, because someone actually knew what to do. She made up the bed. In the morning, she took the bed apart and had it all ready for my sister to put in the laundry.

My sister was like, wow. So when she tried to ask my mom about it, my mom was saying, “Well, where else are they going to go?” Because at the time, there was no safe house for women. That idea was just developing.

So those are things that women know how to look after women and children. It’s the other things that get in the way, the laws, or the policies, or the there’s no money, or there’s this or that. That gets in the way of what needs to be done. It’s really interesting. It’s a really interesting thing that happens when women are looking after other women. I think that’s something that I think is so important that when I look at what’s happening for Aboriginal women, I sometimes see, oh we’ve come a long way. Then there’s times when I think, oh there’s so much more work to do. So it is happening. It is hard. It’s hard to see. The stories are really brutal at times. We need to be able to support those things in order to make change. Change has to happen. If we don’t say anything, nothing happens. Nothing happens, status quo, everything is good here. It doesn’t change.
CANADIAN HISTORY IS SO SKEWED

RK: With programs or courses that focus on some of the things that occurred in our history, we learn about it, we see it, and we have a better understanding of how systemic it can be. Then those women who go out and finish their degrees, their BA, or their Masters, or their PhDs, they have that knowledge whether they are Aboriginal or not. They can’t unlearn that. They know it. They’ve read it. They’ve seen it. They’ve heard it. They can’t say that they don’t know anything about it. If they get into a position where they can make a change on the other side of the table, then they can be that voice for us. That education is important to have whether you’re Aboriginal or not, so we can work together and go out and change, because the status quo is not good.

So courses like First Nations Women’s Studies, First Nations Studies, Native Literature, Hul’qumi’num’ Language, those courses on the outside may not seem as important to a non-Aboriginal person on the face of it. But there’s deep learning happening, and I think even when you’re in it, you’re not even sure what’s happening. But you are changing.

I’ve had people write to me, because later on, I did teach Women’s Studies with Mélody Martin. We taught for a couple years a Women’s Studies course, because Christine left, somebody else was hired, and that person got hired away to do something else. So we had to step in the second week of January. “Can you teach this course?” We’re like, “Umm, I guess so.” The course outline was there. The readings were there. Everything was there.

PG: I remember you mentioning before about how you really wanted to step in and do that, because you didn’t want it to go away. It was such an important development for the institution to have these courses.

RK: I was scared. It was my first teaching position. I was lucky enough to co-teach with Mélody Martin who has amazing teaching skills. So I could kind of follow her steps in organizational things, teaching methodology, just being there, and trying to absorb all of that in the time that I had with her. So you know, it was important, because I didn’t want them to drop it, or find an excuse not to deliver. So we taught it, and I think we taught it the following year as well. Then we asked if somebody else could step in, because we were up to our eyeballs with work. Because we had full-time jobs doing something else. So we’re like, “Help.” Anyways, we did it. It was fun. I really enjoyed it.

Then later, I was a sessional at UVic for Christine Welsh, when Christine had to go on leave one year. What a contrast that was. I had spoken earlier about the non-Aboriginal classes versus the Aboriginal classes at Malaspina, VIU. And it slowed everything down. To me, it was shocking. Then it was shocking for the students, because they didn’t know. They didn’t know anything about the material. Nobody had told them. They were feeling quite, often you had to stop the
class a little bit, because people were feeling quite embarrassed, or guilty, or disgusted, or I’m not sure.

PG: There’s a lot of vulnerabilities around engaging with the topics.

RK: With the material that I was teaching, “Nobody told me. Why am I just learning this now?”

“Well, you’re learning it now, so this is good. So, let’s kind of celebrate that.” You know, I did talk to a number of students about it, because they were very upset that our Canadian history is so skewed, and hiding the injustices that have occurred to Aboriginal women.

PG: Excluding their voices.

RK: Making it difficult. So I think to stop, if VIU stopped having these other courses, that is doing disservice as well, to Aboriginal communities, because there’s no, it’s easy for people to take a discrete course in First Nations Women’s Studies, or Native Lit[erature] or Hul’qumi’num’ Language, and not have a big commitment to Arts One or First Nations Studies. They don’t have to have that commitment. They can come in and learn something about Aboriginal people that they didn’t know before, hadn’t learned, and get this understanding of: Oh okay, I should know this as a future teacher, as a future business person, as a future, I don’t know whatever, fill in the blank.

PG: Person working in this world and in society, in general.

RK: I should know this. It should be part of our curriculum in K-12, but it’s not. So we’re trying to fill that gap, and have people have the opportunity to learn the information, and ask questions in a safe way, and not be slapped down for not knowing. Because how would they know?

My late mom used to say, “How would you know unless you ask? Or if I don’t tell you, how would you know? How would you know? So I’m telling you this now, so that you can go forward and have that information.”

So there were no silly questions. Even though, sometimes I would go into my office, and my jaw would drop, because wow, really no understanding, none. And I found that more at UVic than here at VIU. But wow.
THERE’S SO MUCH WORK TO BE DONE

PG: It comes back to that piece of there’s so much work to be done.

RK: There’s so much work to be done. Then I had this one fellow at UVic. I know I’m digressing, but he was so keen. He was young, twenty or twenty-one, somewhere in there, and Japanese, and wanted to know about. He was excited about being in First Nations Women’s Studies, because he had no knowledge of Aboriginal people, and he wanted to know more. He would come talk to me after class. He wanted more readings. He’s curious. He just didn’t understand how we could be treated so badly.

I didn’t want to say okay, you should probably look at your culture and your own country. But I didn’t say that. So the third week, he comes to class, and he said, “I can’t stay. But I wanted you to know that my sponsor will not let me continue into this course.”

PG: Oh really. Why?

RK: Because it wasn’t academic enough. I said, “I am so very sad for you. However, you can continue to read the readings. If you have any questions, you can ask me.” I never did see him again, or hear from him again. He was devastated, because he felt, in a way, it was kind of a reversal. He kind of really felt oppressed by his sponsor to not do something, not be able to do, not to have the freedom to have enquiry. He was very upset, very upset.

Anyways, I think I’m tired.

PG: Okay. That’s okay.

RK: It’s exhausting just to think of all of the things that still need to be done. A lot has been done, because we have First Nations Women’s Studies. We have Native Literature. We have Hul’qumi’num’ Language. We have a Film Studies course that can still kind of be resurrected. We have a full BAFN. We have Arts One [First Nations], which is part of that.

PG: So how about I thank you? Thank you for sharing and talking with me. Yeah, it’s always such a pleasure to come see you. We’ll do this again when we’re fresh, and ready to go again.

RK: All right.

PG: So I’m going to end the recording.

RK: Thank you.

-end of interview-