INTRODUCTION BY PATRICIA GEDDES

PG: Okay, so the date is Thursday, December 3rd. The time is 2:14pm. We are located in the traditional territory of the Cowichan Tribes at Vancouver Island University’s Cowichan campus.

This interview is the beginning of a project that aims to gather and share the cultural and institutional memories of Vancouver Island University. My name is Patricia Geddes, and I am here to interview Ruth Kroek, who currently works in the role of Education Counsellor in First Nations Student Support at Vancouver Island University’s Cowichan campus.

Ruth, as an employee of Vancouver Island University since 1989 [1982], you carry valuable memories and experiences about the development of First Nations programs at Vancouver Island University Cowichan Campus. Thank you for agreeing to share some of your memories and stories by taking part in this interview.

RK: You’re welcome. I’m glad to be of help. Here we go.

PG: Okay, we can start anywhere you like. If you want to talk a bit about yourself, that’s good, or if you want to just start.
RUTH'S CAREER WITH MALASPINA COLLEGE BEGINS

**RK:** Yes, I’ll start with, I actually did a small contract with Cowichan campus in 1982 with Malaspina College. I taught upgrading, a basic literacy program. In a program for a year, I did that. It was a contract program, and it was a request for additional courses through the federal government. At the time, Malaspina College put their proposal forward. I was hired to teach alongside another woman. We were teaching basic literacy. In my mind, I had no business doing that. But they seemed to think I could.

It was an all Aboriginal cohort. There were 16 students. We were teaching that program out of the old Catholic school rectory on Tzouhalem Road. It doesn’t exist anymore. It doesn’t stand. It was condemned then.

**PG:** Oh wow.

**RK:** You know those sort of horror movies where the shutters are flapping in the wind and you know, this big old house on a hill. That was sort of what it was like. It wasn’t on a hill. But you would get in there and it was creepy. So anyways, I taught there for a year, an academic year. Then I went off, did something else, and came back in 1989 as First Nations Student Support.

Linda Love was the Cowichan Campus Principal at the time or we call them Administrators here. So she hired me. It was a funny hiring committee.

**PG:** How do you mean it was funny?

**RK:** She asked me to come in for an interview. And I was like, how do you interview for this job you have never heard of before? We were really writing the job description as we were doing it basically, as we were actually doing the work.

So I said, “Well I can’t really come in on that day. We’re camping up at Lake Cowichan during that time.” She said, “Just come in the morning and then you can go back.” I was thinking, oh okay, I’ll do that. So not thinking that I’m going to smell like campfire smoke, because we were at these campsites where you don’t really have running water. You don’t notice that until you get in the car by yourself, and you’re like, oh my gosh, I smell! In those days, you didn’t have a cellphone. You couldn’t just say my car broke down, or I need to go home, have a shower, and I’ll be there later.

So I went and I had the interview. We talked about the need for someone within the institution to guide students, Aboriginal students through the post-secondary processes [of] how to apply, how to get information for courses and programs, and how to be ready for the next steps of their post-secondary education. She said she sort of wanted me half-time. I just had a baby, and so I said, “Well, I can really only do three mornings a week. Okay?” And I started, I think, the following Monday.
COWICHAN TRIBES AND MALASPINA COLLABORATION

RK: And I shared the office. I shared an office with three other people. Two other people in an office this size. We were all there at the same time. I don’t know what was going on there.

Anyways, it was fun. It was a new campus as well, at 222 Cowichan Way. It was a pretty new campus. There was a lot of new things happening. People were trying different things, and there was an openness to well, let’s try that and see if that works. Then okay, that didn’t work, so let’s try this other thing, and see if that works. In a lot of ways, we were breaking new ground in terms of Aboriginal support.

Money did not come from the provincial government until 1991 for my position. It was all soft money before then. At that time, it was still somewhat soft money. We had to apply for it. So at that time, I became half-time First Nations Student Support. That was fine. I was thinking it was. You know, my young son was still not ready too. I wasn’t ready to be full-time.

But shortly after that, money became available to work with Cowichan Tribes and Malaspina. I can’t even remember what my title was. But I was working the Child and Youth Care First Nations. It was called the Child and Youth Care First Nations Laddering Project.

PG: Oh, I think I read about this, the Child and Youth Care Career Ladder Program.

RK: Yes, and that program involved a lot of community consultation. It involved working with an Elder. There were lots of different committees that were part of that project. It took about two years for the pilot to actually get off the ground. So in 1993, I think, the Child and Youth Care First Nations pilot program began. We had twenty-five students registered. Twenty-four finished. It was a brutal program.

PG: How so?

RK: They had two years. Five semesters. The students had to do their Early Childhood Education certification, and then do their first year. Actually, the requirements to finish a Child and Youth Care Diploma. There was some overlap with the ECEC [Early Childhood Education and Care] courses and Child and Youth Care, but they had to do it in five semesters, and there were three practicums that they had to do. It was exhausting. It was exciting. It was exhausting. We still had twenty-four at the end. They still talk to me some days.

It was exciting, because we were doing new things. We were working alongside with Cowichan Tribes and the University of Victoria, our ECEC program, and Child and Youth Care program. We had a community group that we would liaise with for the First Nations pieces that would sort of, okay, we’re going the right direction in working with children and youth, in doing guiding, developing our curriculum so it would actually be Aboriginal focused, and focused with Coast Salish people in mind, and the Cowichan people particularly in mind. It set a framework for
other projects further down the road. At that time, we weren’t sure what we were doing really. Maybe people will say they knew. I know I didn’t know for sure what I was doing. I knew it was exciting. I knew it was an opportunity for us to be part of something bigger.

When students were reading their texts, which were really, the writers were making it up and firing it off to printing, so they would get it before the classes began. Each semester, weeks before, we would get the work and go over it. The instructors were madly trying to. They had drafts, but you know, things change in the final copy. We were really running on barrels. Just trying to stay ahead of the curve, and trying to get reading materials that would support the Indigenous Knowledge that was being shared by our community members who were part of the development of the curriculum. They would share that.
ELDERS-IN-RESIDENCE

RK: The program writers and developers would go into community, and be part of that with one of our Elders, Louise Underwood. I would assist in doing promotion and recruitment, and look at the curriculum to see how it all fit together in the credit matrix pieces, so that it flowed together. I worked with John Rogerson, Jim Anglin from UVic [University of Victoria], and others. We were working on those pieces. They did most of the transfer pieces and the curriculum. My job, basically, was to promote it and get students in. We did that. We got enough students in, like I said, twenty-five students in.

It was the first time VIU or Malaspina had an Elder-in-Residence. That position never existed anywhere, for sure in BC [British Columbia]. We think there might have been a position at Trent or another institution back east, but we’re not sure. Louise had applied and filled that position. She was full-time. She was a full-time Elder, thirty-five hours a week.

PG: What was her role like in the beginning?

RK: Louise’s role was to work with the instructors and the students in vetting questions for guest speakers. She would also invite other Elders to come in. She would look at the questions with the Elders, and with the instructors and students, and see okay, what is it that you really want to know? How is this going to fit with what you are learning for Child & Youth Care or for ECEC [Early Childhood Education and Care]?

So maybe it was guiding children, right? What kinds of Elders would you need to come in? People who work with kids, people who have a lot of traditional knowledge about children’s stories, and maybe, in their own experiences being Elders, in their own life experiences of what games that they had played, or how their parents had taught them to do certain things.

Of course there wasn’t Monopoly, you know those kinds of board games, and any other games like that. But there were other games that people had played traditionally, and without marketed, heavily marketed store-bought types of things. They would share that experience with students.

Also, guiding young children, how that was done. So students would also look at the reading material that they had. They also had some questions of their own about what they wanted to know, whether it was traditional knowledge, or contemporary knowledge, and what the changes were. There were lots of questions.

Often, Louise would ask two or three Elders to come in for an Elders session. They each would have a set of questions ahead of time very much like today. People would have an idea, okay this is sort of what we want from you. It provided a framework. Often, the Elders would bring their own information that they wanted to speak about. So it may not even be what the students had originally thought that they wanted. But they ended up with other knowledge that they really
appreciated. They didn’t even know. They didn’t have a question for that. They didn’t have the words to formulate those questions to get that piece of information.

It was really an exciting time and students really were active in the learning. They all had different roles. Weekly, different students would take on the role of making tea and coffee. Other students would take on the role of greeting the Elders and seating them. Others would take on the role of providing snacks for the Elders and for the class. Other students would have to get a thank you card and make sure everyone had signed it. Everybody was sort of orchestrated into being part of the proper thank you, and part of welcoming Elders into the classroom.

It was new for Elders too. They had never been to a post-secondary institution and had been asked for their information. Nobody had asked them before. It was really ground breaking, because you kind of go, why do you want to know this? But it was just like, we need to know. We need to know how this was part of our culture, how we are going forward, and how we are in a contemporary society. There were lots of questions about working with children and youth and families. I think it did open the doors for a lot of people to recognize that they did have a lot of knowledge. Now we have nine Elders-in-Residence for VIU.

**RK:** Plus, we’d have all our other guest speakers who come in, as Elders or guest speakers. Then what’s happened as well, that other organizations in community have also hired Elders-in-Residence in community to work in their programs, whether it be an education program or a health and human service program. The model has allowed doors to be opened for people and to go forward, and to take that knowledge from the home, or from one family to share it with a larger community, and many communities. I think it’s been a great model.

Then First Nations Studies, they began the year after. Their model was different, because their focus was less applied, in the sense that for Child & Youth Care, the Early Childhood Education and Child & Youth Care Worker, they need to take that information and apply it to a child or young person, and be able to work with those young people in a professional way. I think in First Nations Studies, and I could be wrong. Our Elders also had applied knowledge. Auntie Ellen White, her knowledge was based on her own experiences in the political realm supporting her husband in the provincial arena, in allowing Aboriginal people to get the vote in BC, in treaty, those kinds of things that refer to governance, and historical types of information. That is just a different piece. I think a lot of the Elders have their own area of expertise. I think that’s what has happened is we’re bringing these folks in based on their knowledge base, and what they can bring to us, and share with students, staff, and faculty.

So it’s been an amazing transformation of post-secondary.
MALASPINA HAS BEEN A BIG PART OF MY LIFE

RK: I was a student at Malaspina College in 1973.

PG: Oh really.

RK: I was, I did secretarial program, and then I realized that I am not a very good secretary. But anyways, I think they gave it to me just to make me go away. But I did go. I did get that. I didn’t really enjoy working in an office that much. I always felt like I needed to do more. So I did start doing university courses. I was heading down the road to become an elementary education teacher. I did two years of a three year program, and then from the second year to third year, you had to go to UVic [University of Victoria]. There were only limited seats, and I couldn’t get in. I also lost my status after my second year. I married my husband who is not Native.

So under section 12(1)(b) of the old Indian Act, because I, a Native woman marries a non-Native man, then she would lose her status. So I was no longer considered an Indian under the Indian Act. So I stopped my education for a bit. Then I started doing courses, course by course. I was just paying for it on my own.

Then in 1989, I started working for Malaspina again. Malaspina has been a big part of my life either as a student or as an employee, employer. It’s just a part of my life. In ’89, I began as an employee and then also began taking courses again. And then along the way, ’93. I think it was ’93, I started a Master’s program with SFU [Simon Fraser University].

PG: Which program?

RK: It’s in Education, Master’s in Education. It was a Leadership program in post-secondary. They don’t offer it anymore. There were too many people in the program that questioned. We were questioning curriculum. We were questioning the services that they were giving us. They were questioning why some things were not in place for us. They would question, because we knew how much things cost. Why are you doing it this way? Why don’t you do it this other way? They never offered it again.

It was fun, because I was also doing it alongside other people from our campus. We would study together every other weekend, every other Friday night. Saturday, we would go to class in Nanaimo. They delivered the course, the program in Nanaimo in the fall and the spring. In the summer, we’d have to go to SFU. For two years, we did that. It’s a blur, because you’re working full-time.

PG: Yes.
**RK:** You are like, I have no life. I have young children. My husband works shift work. You just jumped in and did it. I don’t regret it, because that part of my education also gave me more credibility within the post-secondary institution, or the post-secondary world, because you have a Master’s degree.

**PG:** So what do you think you brought back to Malaspina from doing that degree?

**RK:** Well, I think that’s a good question. I often thought it was quite funny, because I was working in program development, writing curriculum, and doing work that was at a Master’s level before I did the program. So what I did get was that credibility with the letters behind your name. I also had a better understanding of research and that academic writing that is required at a certain level. It opened doors for me to be able to teach. So I finished.

When I finished my Master’s program, I had an opportunity to teach in the First Nations Studies program in Arts One. I did that for a year. Somebody was on leave, so I applied. I applied; it wasn’t just given to me. It was a gruelling interview. I have never been in such a long interview. It was almost two hours. Lots of information, lots of going back and having to do this. Here is a lesson plan. I was so nervous and I was thinking, I knew all of the people. I knew all of the people in the room. But I was so incredibly nervous, I almost made myself sick.

**PG:** Sometimes it can be harder to know them, because you can’t just walk away.

**RK:** No, and I wanted to do it right. I wanted to go into the room like I didn’t know them. So that they wouldn’t assume that I knew things, or I wouldn’t assume that they knew things about me. I had to make it clear to them, this is what I was bringing, because maybe not everybody knew my background. They knew parts of it, or pieces. You had to be really clear in your answers about how your experience, your knowledge base would be beneficial to the Arts One program, and what kind of instructor you would be, and those kinds of things. And I did it.

We were team teaching at Duncan and Nanaimo. I was going back and forth. It was interesting. I learned a lot. I learned that I could teach. I did that one year and then I went back to program management for Child & Youth Care and Arts One.
FIRST NATIONS WOMEN’S STUDIES

RK: I also had an opportunity to team teach with Mélody Martin in First Nations Studies, First Nations Women’s Studies. Something happened to an instructor who had been hired. She taught in the fall, and then she could not continue on in January. It was the second week of January. Can you teach? Like, um. So it was decided that Mélody and I would co-teach. Then we did that for a couple of years. Two years, I think. I really liked it.

I really enjoyed teaching in that program. One, I was teaching with Mélody Martin, who is a skilled instructor, demanding in many ways in what our outcomes will be, and how we were going to present things, and how we would get information from the students. I think I learned so much from students in teaching those courses.

I was doing that and a full-time job. So I was teaching. So I was in overload with again, young people in my family, young children. I think some days you go ahead, because the opportunity is there, and we didn’t want it to go away. You know if you don’t do it, who is going to do it? There is not enough people who can teach this and we don’t want this to go away. So we did it like crazy people. I really enjoyed it. I really learned a lot, learned a lot about myself, learned a lot about people, learned about how resilient people are, not just now, but historically.

We taught First Nations Women’s Studies, an autobiographical and a biographical course. So we did one coming from the person, and the other coming from stories about other people. We talked about how Aboriginal women are viewed in a variety of different ways, in academia, in community, the stereotypes of women in advertising.

It is quite tragic on the most part, and still today, we see that Aboriginal women’s lives are still devalued in many ways. I think we will see more changes. But it takes work. If there is ever a proper Royal Commission on women who have lost their lives, who have gone missing, I think that will put a spotlight on what goes wrong when Aboriginal women go missing. You know, policing, and families, and people, “Oh well we thought she was out partying, so we didn’t really take that report very serious.”

I had an opportunity to work and become friends with Christine Welsh. She did a film on the missing women. So that put a lot of light on things for a while, but it didn’t stay. It sort of laid some groundwork. That twenty-four hour cycle goes, comes and goes, and then we just get shoved to the side. But I think the power that Aboriginal women have in terms of staying on task, becoming professional people, being more political, being in a variety of different places, not just within our home communities, but within a larger scale on a national scale, or international scale where we are bringing issues of inequality. I don’t even know where to start. And how things have changed, but they are still not where I think they should be in terms of equality within the Canadian fabric, political fabric, or political communities.
RK: Racism still is there. It is still underlying. As Canadians, we are good at hiding it, and sometimes not good at hiding it. It comes out when people want us to see it. It is hidden when they want it to be hidden. I have seen it in my own community. It can be tough. But I think with education, you are given tools. Okay, I can focus on this one thing and I can work on that. Maybe I can go onto the next step, and focus on the next thing. I can give my children tools on how to deal with people who are being racist towards them. There’s a number of different things that you can do when you have an education behind you.

When you are bullied or pressured into things you don’t want to do because of racism, or prejudice, or stereotypical kinds of thinking, and you don’t have the background, or the words to fight it, then you stay in that one place. Or you don’t get any further ahead.

So I think, when I see the thousands of people who have gone forward, have come through our doors, their goal was to finish grade twelve. That was their goal. Because you know, “What would you like to do when you’re finished grade twelve?”

“I just want to finish grade twelve.” Okay, so that’s what we would do. Get them through and get them to that place. And often, they wouldn’t just finish grade twelve, they would go on to the next step. They would do a certificate, or diploma, or degree, or a Master’s degree.

It is heartwarming to see people who have come through right out of high school or mature adults, and finished whatever the credential is that they were seeking. Often, they would be so surprised at their own ability. Why I say that is, for many Aboriginal students, school education has not been a positive place for them. Residential schools, public schools, Methodist day schools, there’s a number of different day schools that were running.
ABORIGINAL LEARNERS

**RK:** Locally in Duncan, there was an Indian day school on Boys Road. Two of my brothers and my oldest sister, they went there in their early elementary years. Really, they pretty well were self-taught. The teacher would sort of give them some work and she would go off. They don’t know what she was doing. Just leave, she would just leave and then come back. Maybe she had another job, I don’t know. And they were like, so then they would form their own little groups. Some kids learned a lot more and other kids didn’t. Some kids were self-taught. I was looking at one of my brother’s reports and he had an A in everything. Just an A in everything. He was wonderful. I asked him about it once. He said, “I don’t know why she gave me an A; I never did anything. I showed up.”

School was not the best place for a lot of Aboriginal learners in our history. You know it’s a dark history. I think about my dad. My late father went to residential school. He forbade my mother to speak Hul’q’umi’num’ when they got married. So they did not speak Hul’q’umi’num’ in the house. I lost my ability to understand my culture in a very particular way.

Through language, you get that connection to land in another way that is not. It cannot be conveyed any other way through English. It’s not the same. I think I am not alone in that. There’s so many of us who have lost our language. I am a terrible Hul’q’umi’num’ language speaker.

**PG:** Well, there’s no need to say that.

**RK:** I try.

**PG:** Everyone needs to try. They’re trying, right?

**RK:** They’re trying it eh. I just can’t get my, wrap my tongue around the way it’s supposed to. So maybe in retirement, I’ll have more time to focus on trying to learn more. There’s no. I don’t believe I’ll ever. I don’t think I am at a place in my life where I’ll be fluent. But I do understand certain. I understand, so I’m somewhat of a passive speaker, because I can understand phrases.

My mum did speak Hul’q’umi’num’ later, after my dad passed away. She would speak Hul’q’umi’num’ with her friends and relatives. They would. She would speak Hul’q’umi’num’ especially when she didn’t want us to understand what was going on. Especially if she was talking about us and we knew she was talking about us. It’s pretty funny.

I think Malaspina, Malaspina University-College, Vancouver Island University is a platform for a lot of Aboriginal, Indigenous, First Nations, whatever we want to call ourselves these days, in developing or incorporating Indigenous ways of knowing. I am still uncertain what the definition of that is and how people are Indigenizing their curriculum. I still have questions about I don’t understand what that means completely. I think it’s a still a work in progress. I think we’re still
defining what that is, and how we are to do that in a respectful way, in a way that doesn’t take away from Aboriginal community, and non-Aboriginal people will walk away with a better understanding of who we are, and where we came from.

My mum used to say, “Unless you know that, unless you know who you are and where you came from, you can’t go forward. You’ll just be lost.” I think that’s the piece that we need to ensure that this is who we are as Aboriginal people, and have a better vision of where we want to be, or what we want to do. There’s a million of us in Canada. We should have a better vision. I think people need to understand, we’re not going away. Like I think, there was a paper somewhere. There was a.

PG: Oh, the White Paper.

RK: There was a.

PG: That one maybe.

RK: That talked about Aboriginal people not being part of the landscape anymore. You know, just meld into this big melting pot. And you just can’t. You cannot stop being who you are. If you’re Native or Aboriginal, you have that heart and your mind, and you think a particular way. You talk a particular way, and you interact with Aboriginal people in a very particular way apart from non-Aboriginal people. It can be very comfortable. I actually really love it. I love working with Aboriginal people. I love working with Aboriginal students, because there is a sense of humour and wit that I think is missing in the larger community.

In the larger community, everything is so serious. It’s exhausting some days. I just want to, can we just laugh some more? Can we have more laughter in our day? I just think, I think that teasing or the joking, or whatever, Aboriginal people. When I am working with Aboriginal people, I am energized by the levity, because we are often on the other side of this scale way down so deeply with deep and heavy issues in our life that if we are not laughing, we’re crying. I think that’s really important for us to maintain the levity. For non-Aboriginal people to understand that, it’s like lighten up. I think sometimes people just take that, whatever the topic, well that’s such a serious topic and we should just stay in that deep, dark place. We can’t, because I think if we stay too much in the past, and too much in the darkness, we emerge broken.

PG: Okay, do you mind? I think maybe we should end it right there.

RK: Yeah, that’s enough for today.

PG: Yes.

-end of interview-