

**Vancouver Island University Cowichan Campus: Institutional and Cultural Memories  
Interview #2**

Interviewee: Ruth Kroek

Interviewer: Patricia Geddes

Date: February 2, 2015

Place: Vancouver Island University Cowichan Campus - Traditional Territory of the Cowichan Tribes, Duncan, BC

Transcriber: Patricia Geddes

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Time span from full interview edited recording: 00:00 - 01:54

**INTRODUCTION BY PATRICIA GEDDES (INTERVIEW 2)**

**PG:** The date is February 2<sup>nd</sup> and the time is 9:52 a.m. We're located in the traditional territory of the Cowichan Tribes at Vancouver Island University's Cowichan Campus. This is the second interview for a project that aims to gather and share the cultural and institutional memories of Vancouver Island University [ 's Cowichan Campus]. My name is Patricia Geddes and I am here to discuss with Ruth Kroek, a photo album from the First Nations Studies program and its beginnings at VIU. Would you care to start discussing the album and the photos?

**RK:** Okay. Thank you Patricia.

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Time span from full interview edited recording: 00:41 – 4:40

## **WE WERE DOING SOMETHING GROUND-BREAKING**

**RK:** This first photo that we're looking at is a group photo taken at the Cowichan campus that was located at 222 Cowichan Way in Duncan. That campus was quite special because it was located on the traditional territories of the Cowichan People. To have Arts One First Nations delivered at that campus was a very special program academically, emotionally, spiritually for students, staff and faculty. It really tied the program to the land. We knew that we were in the traditional territory of the Cowichan People and that meant a lot. It was special, because we were doing something new. The Arts One - First Nations program was the first of its kind in BC [British Columbia] in the sense that 90 percent of the students or more were Aboriginal. And that had never happened in a public post-secondary institution prior to the delivery of this program.

**PG:** Were the Elders involved in the classroom at that point too?

**RK:** Yes.

**PG:** Right from the beginning?

**RK:** Yes. Right from the beginning.

**PG:** Would you say that's a fairly unique characteristic too?

**RK:** We were one of the first institutions in BC [British Columbia] to bring Elders into the classroom. It was thought that Elders could assist in guiding instructors and students in the cultural pieces, some of the historical pieces that weren't written, and to also give support to students who may need it, or may want to follow up with the Elder-in-Residence after class. And that happened at our campus quite a bit and in Nanaimo as well. Our first group of Arts One at Cowichan campus had thirty-one students. The first group of students in Nanaimo had sixty students. We had a completion rate of ninety students overall. So ninety of ninety-one students completed that year.

We also had attached to the program, program managers. And I was a Program Manager for the Arts One program at Cowichan campus. I worked alongside the Elder-in-Residence, Louise Underwood and the instructors, Richard Atleo, Mélody Martin, and Ian Whitehouse. In my interaction with the instructors, I was sort of a conduit between instructors and students. Part of my job was also to do a touch base with students during the week. I would go in for the Morning Prayer every morning with the Elder-in-Residence and you know, try to be upbeat. I was excited. And I think what we were doing with the instructors and with the students, that excitement just overflowed into everything that was being done. Everybody knew that we were doing something new and unique and ground-breaking, historical -- not just for Malaspina at the time, but for

post-secondary education, and Aboriginal post-secondary education in Canada. And it was very invigorating. It was. Every day was exciting. Every day was, what's going to happen today, you know?

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Time span from full interview edited recording: 4:40 – 13:45

## **ABORIGINAL VOICES IN POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION**

Often, Mélody and I would be laughing, because we, [Mélody, Richard, Ian and I] would be scouring periodicals and things, for students to read, because there was so little written by Aboriginal people. There was very little written for students to read from an Aboriginal voice. So we were reduced to photocopying things from magazines and newspaper articles for students to read and have as handouts for class discussion. I remember thinking, this is crazy; I mean there isn't even a book. There's nothing. We need to find more Aboriginal authors.

Then I was thinking, that's what we're doing. We're part of this bigger picture of promoting Aboriginal voices in post-secondary, and encouraging people to go on, and finishing a Bachelor's degree, a Master's degree, maybe a PhD. We didn't know. We knew that what we were doing was very, very important and that it was magical. I don't even know how it was. It was. I loved going to work every day. I loved it. Often, I would go home, and then sometimes, I would phone Ian or Mélody, because they were the two main instructors at our campus [and we would go over the day or the week]. They would rotate coming to Cowichan campus. Richard was one of the main instructors for Nanaimo campus.

It was very interesting in the sense that we just, there were no rules, I guess. So whatever we were doing, we're like, okay that worked. Okay, that didn't work. Okay, let's try this other thing.

I look at this picture and I see some people who've passed away. I see people who are leaders in our community. This one, Maureen Tommy, she is our Cowichan Tribes Band Manager right now, has been for a number of years. There's this fellow back here, Andy Robinson. He worked with Children and Family Services as assistant to Mary-ellen Turpel. I'm not sure if he's still doing that, but really important work. Important work in the sense that they're making changes within their own personal lives, but in the lives of Aboriginal people. Just knowing that our program was a small part of [something much bigger] that gives me great joy. I'm not sure if we underestimated [the changes that were going through]. I'm not sure. But we knew that we were doing something big. It gave life to us. It showed in everything that the instructors did and the Elder. Our Elder and the students, they knew they were doing something great.

**PG:** It sounds like such an amazing experience, so valuable for the students, and hard to almost articulate in words, you know the memories of it.

**RK:** It is. It is because you don't know what you don't know. But you know that there's something really great. If that makes sense at all.

**PG:** It's like you can sense it. Is that it? You could sense that there was something great happening and you'll see what it is.

**RK:** It took a number of years for the Arts One program to get off the ground. And Cowichan Tribes had supported the program. We had to get a letter of support from Cowichan Tribes in order for the proposal to go forward for us to be able to deliver this program. And other First Nations organizations also, like Nanaimo First Nations and others had to support at the time what Malaspina was doing. So once we got the money in May, we had to have students to start and be ready for September.

**PG:** That's pretty quick. That's a pretty short timeline for an entire program start-up.

**RK:** So I was already a program manager in it, because we were doing the program development and implementation, and that was part of me being hired. Carrie Reid was in Nanaimo, and she was a program manager there. So we were basically knocking on everybody's door and, "Why don't you come in and take part in this amazing program? It's new. It can open all kinds of doors for you. It's exciting. This is going to be the first time we can actually talk about Aboriginal people from an Aboriginal viewpoint." We ran with it. You know, we made it happen.

I don't think I had any holidays that summer, maybe a week or too. I'm not sure. I don't remember. But I do remember, I think in July, I went to career fairs. I went to canoe races. I went to powwows. I phoned cousins. I phoned other relatives. And then I would also [ask] students who had registered, "If you know a friend or a family member who you think might be interested in this program, ask them to call me." So then it was like you tell two friends, and they tell two friends. So then it was that kind of grassroots movement.

It was exciting in that sense, because we had never had a place in post-secondary like that before. There was this program inviting Aboriginal people to be there, and it was very exciting. So once we were up and running that September. We had notification from our Elder, [Louise Underwood], who had been told by then Chief, I can't remember who was Chief. It was either Dennis Alphonse, or just recently passed, Philomena Alphonse. They were a couple; they were married. Often, he'd be the Chief. Or he'd not run, and then she'd run. Then she'd be elected in. They used to take turns being Chief.

It might have been Philomena. She was very, very adamant that the Aboriginal voice, or Aboriginal voices be in post-secondary, that we not be forgotten. That people need to hear, not just our sorrows, but our Aboriginal way of knowing and doing things, how important that part of our culture was, how we would ready ourselves culturally, and be prepared for the future, how we would stay together, and stand together when we needed to stand together. I think that was really one message that she wanted us to carry on.

She actually just passed away a few days ago. So maybe that's why I'm thinking about her and talking about her. But she was very much a support for the program, and sort of on the sidelines. She was a very good friend of Louise Underwood. They were really good friends and supports for one another.

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Time span from full interview edited recording: 13:46 – 21:30

## **THE ELDERS SPOKE TO US**

**RK:** So this next set of pictures that we're looking at. Oh, Dennis was the Chief. Okay. I wrote that. Dennis and Philomena made Malaspina take part, have all the students, all the 91 students, all the staff, all of the faculty take part in a ceremony to honour everybody. It would be like a traditional welcome into a territory, and where everybody here, all the students, all the faculty, they were identified and all the administrators who were associated with the program were part of this. They were all identified as so important and that the community came out, and basically raised their arms to our students, staff, and faculty for doing this, for being part of this, and they were. The Elders spoke to us about how important it was for us not to forget who we are, and not forget where we came from, and that we were charged with having to work in both worlds, the Aboriginal world and the non-Aboriginal world, and try to balance that as best we could when need be. They were adamant. They were so.

Their words were of encouragement, but also of [caution], they [implored us to] be careful. Be careful in what you're doing. Be careful how you go forward and not lose yourself in the world of academics. So those were things that we needed to hear. The words to Malaspina folks were you can't just take, take, take from the Aboriginal world. You have to allow places for sharing. It has to be a give and take. It has to be a place of respect for students. It has to be a safe place for students to be. And I think that was, it was an amazing day. It was just, it was pretty special. I have never been ever part of anything like it since, or before then.

**PG:** It sounds like it sort of fostered the spirit of that program. You know, it bore witness to the important lessons that persist in the program to this day, who you are, where you come from, being careful, being respectful. It's just amazing to hear you talk about all of this, and how much it still, I hope it still continues today.

**RK:** I do. I hope that it continues, and I hope that it will continue to be the foundation of First Nations Studies and that somehow, we can write it into some kind of the purpose of the program. That when people come and see, should I take this program? That they can actually see the underlying values that have been created by the people of the land, the Hwulmuhw Mustimuhw, the people of the land. That they have given, and they want to be acknowledged and respected for that, because as we know in past educational experiences, residential school took [Hwulmuhw Mustimuhw] children, took culture, [and] took away people's lives. We were hoping as Malaspina people, and post-secondary people, to give back something.

I don't think we'll ever be able to give back what has been taken. This is just a drop in the bucket. It's just so much of our culture has been taken, so much of our ways of knowing, being, and doing has been eradicated from the everyday life of an Aboriginal person. We are

unrecognizable to many, right? I don't speak my language. There's a lot of things I don't take part in culturally. I do know [some] cultural protocols and [the] teachings [through] my child development, and adolescent development with my parents. But all of that has been layered and impacted by residential school, and it shapes each person in a very unique way.

My mum used to say, "We can cry and bellyache about that all day long. We still have to live. So you smile, and you go forward, and you take what you can, and you use what you can." So that's my teaching in all of this is that, okay yes, we have had a tragic, horrible past; what can we do for tomorrow? You know ... what can I do as one person? How can I impact, support, help people obtain their goal? So that has been sort of my role or my philosophy in working in Aboriginal post-secondary positions. It can't be about me. Even though some days I feel like I want to say it's all about me. It's really not. It is about [our] people.

**PG:** It sounds like your role in this program really was about, it wasn't about you. You went to work invigorated every day. It was about the students and the work that you were doing. What you were doing was supporting them, offering your energy, and what you've learned to them, to the students.

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Time span from full interview edited recording: 21:31 – 29:22

## **ARTS ONE - FIRST NATIONS: A PROGRAM THAT CHANGED THE INSTITUTION**

**RK:** I was. I had to laugh, because Mélody and I were in a social setting with [Ian Ross]... And he said, “How do you keep students in class?” He taught Aboriginal students in some of his programs, and not had the same success.

And I said, “Oh well, I phone them at home. Or I go to their house, and I knock on their door to see if they’re okay. And sometimes I’ll see their parent, or their grandparent, or sibling on the street in town and say, ‘Oh, I haven’t seen Patricia in class for a couple of days; is she okay? I haven’t heard from her.’ ”

He’s like, “You can’t do that.”

And I said, “I do. I do do that, and I follow up.” I think that’s where the shift was is that someone cared whether or not they were in class. They cared. They noticed when Patricia was missing from class or behind in class.

**PG:** Each person’s presence was valued in the class.

**RK:** Everybody.

**PG:** As a part of the community created by that class.

**RK:** And we had a student, a couple of students who were clearly being challenged. The instructor, the Elder, and myself made it so that it was a class responsibility to support each other. For those people who needed extra help, others needed to reach out, and assist that student in finishing, in doing the work, in whatever was happening for them. It worked. It worked.

We never had another cohort like that. I’m not sure if it was because we were so determined in getting those students through and finished. Maybe the next year we were so exhausted. I’m not sure. But it was a magical group. It was. We did it. Mélody [Martin] and Ian [Whitehouse] spent hours with students. Like I said, I would do a check-in with each student. We had guest Elders come in and speak about different historical pieces that had happened. We had students bring in their parent, or grandparent, or uncle as [guest/observer]. It really was a big oral tradition, because of the lack of written materials. We had different guest speakers and panel speakers. It was something. I’m not sure exactly the word for it. But it was a program that changed the institution, along with the Child and Youth Care First Nations program. We had the Arts One - First Nations program, and at the same time, development of the B.A. First Nations Studies was being developed.

**PG:** Okay.



**RK:** We had Arts One first, the B.A. had not been offered. We weren't offering it yet. We didn't have a program yet.

**PG:** If you were struggling for readings, I can see why it was a challenge to continue on from Arts One.

**RK:** It was, because we need the library resources to support that program, right?

**PG:** Yeah.

**RK:** And I think I have a list of the readings for Arts One in the first year. I can share that with you next time, because I do have it.

**PG:** Okay.

**RK:** And things in it were, *Robinson Crusoe*. We looked at it from a colonization viewpoint.

**PG:** Okay. Getting creative.

**RK:** I know. Well, you did what you could, because we really had to look at a lot of what we considered traditional readings for other programs, but sort of turn it around, and spin it so that we could see the colonization pieces, or how colonization could happen or occur. That was sort of a less invasive way of showing colonization than having real people being looked at under the magnifying glass. It was easier to show a fictional person, rather than, "That's me! I'm being colonized. My family's been colonized." So there was a lot of talking, lots of discussion. Mélody Martin, Ian Whitehouse, and Richard Atleo would take the seminars and lead those seminar groups. I didn't get to sit in on those, but I would have liked to.

They also read *Terror on the Coast*. They read *Indians at Work*. There were a couple of other texts. I'll pull that together for you for the next time.

**PG:** Maybe we can include it as an appendix.

**RK:** Sure.

**PG:** Something with the interview and the transcript.

**RK:** Sure, because you're looking like, "You read what?"

**PG:** Yeah, but anything can be looked at from other perspectives. So I really appreciate how you guys did that, you know working with what you had at the time.

**RK:** It was very, very difficult, because they had to be creative. You know, it was Carol Clutesi was the first Program Manager. Not Carrie Reid, because this is Carol, Carol Clutesi. This is an event where we had a guest. We had a Maori guest, I think.

This is an event where Louise was teaching students how to sing Bone Game songs.

**PG:** Oh fun.

**RK:** So much fun. It was. And there's Auntie Ellen. Auntie Ellen White.

**PG:** So she was involved with the Nanaimo cohort?

**RK:** She was the Nanaimo Elder-in-Residence.

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Time span from full interview edited recording: 29:23 - to end

## **ABORIGINAL PRAYER**

**RK:** And this fellow, I should remember his name. I'll get it. [Caleb Child], he is Kwakwaka'wakw. He has an amazing singing voice. Just one of those voices so powerful that when he sings, the music goes through your body. It's just so deep, and you feel every note he sings.

I think one of the things that Arts One did was that it brought Aboriginal prayer, which was controversial, into class, and song into the campus. It never had been there.

We actually had people comment that, "You're doing a morning prayer?" People had a connotation of a religious prayer.

I said, "Well, it's asking the Creator for help for the day."

"But you're praying." We had to sort of. Some people really kind of tried to do a pushback. We would say, "But we're still doing it. We are doing it every morning. We are starting our day off every day with a morning prayer. And you can be part of it, or you can be late."

**PG:** Oh, so are you saying there was pushback within the class?

**RK:** With some students.

**PG:** Oh, interesting.

**RK:** But what happened with those students who were late, people were saying, "You missed the morning prayer." And it goes back to community, right?

"So why don't you just stand in the room? You don't have to pray, but you can be in the room. We know that you're not agreeing with this, but just stand with us. You don't have to pray." By the end, everybody was part of the morning prayer. Everybody was accepting of the morning prayer. It was almost the best part of the day.

Because I think when we do a morning prayer or a song, Auntie Ellen White, she had prayer songs and a short morning prayer. She would also teach songs in Nanaimo to those students. I'd get them to sing, and learn how to do a prayer song, and learn how to do different songs. I think that part of the morning was so important for people to ground themselves in the readings, in the discussion that was going to happen, and remember who they were, and where they came from, and that they had an important role to play in all of what was going to happen.

I think that prayer, and prayer is probably not the right word, it's the translated word for asking the Creator for strength. Auntie Ellen would say, "We're going to talk. We're going to pray to the Creator, ask the Creator for strength, and thank the Creator for the things that we have." And she would say, "You can pray to whoever you want to pray to for these things, and thank whoever you want to thank for these things." So she would sort of open it up for those people who had more of a Christian ideology linked to prayer. For those people who weren't linked to Christianity as much, having the idea of a Creator sort of opened things up. So it moved things from the religious to the spiritual, and it allowed people to open their hearts and minds to that.

**PG:** Right. So it really included them as who they were, and where they were coming from, wherever that may be. I could really feel and remember how she used to talk to us when I was in class when you were describing that. Wow. I miss her.

**RK:** I miss her too. She was so much fun. So much fun.

*-end of interview-*