Interview: Sheila Pither (SP)
Interviewer: Al Cornes (AC) and Bailey Garden [BG]
Date: December 10, 2019
Location: BC Labour Heritage Centre
Transcription: Donna Sacuta

AC [00:00:16] We have with us this morning Sheila Pither, a wife, a mother, a teacher, a teacher and community leader. Welcome, Sheila. We're pleased to have you with us today.

SP [00:00:30] Thank you.

AC [00:00:33] I'd like you to start our interview by talking a little bit about where and when you were born. Where were we raised?

SP [00:00:43] Well, I was born in northern Saskatchewan, Prince Albert, but my family was living in a very, very small farming community. And the custom then was that women would go to Prince Albert, which was the nearest doctor, and were there until they were ready to give birth. So there was a radio program that was directed towards people who were in hospital, and they could send a message to the folks at home who were waiting to hear about the birth. And so my mother went there. And so every day people would listen. It was very interesting to hear that Mr. Brown had a successful tonsillectomy or whatever it might be. So it was fun for our family. There were homesteaders. My father had been in the Navy in Britain. And so there was some sort of a land deal. I'm not familiar with what it all implied, but they were given free land. And so my family was given land near a town called Big River. And so what these people had to do, I think really in a pioneering way, because the expectations were there, but also the very very extreme climate played a big role in the family and everybody's families. So we had a in the summer, we had a wagon and in the winter we had what we call the caboose. And it was a closed vehicle so that we would use that for travel.

AC [00:02:53] And maybe that tells a little bit more about your family. What was like what was your upbringing like? And it sounds like it was harsh conditions. There was a lot that your family had to do to maintain its claim on this piece of property. Tell us a little bit more about it.

SP [00:03:11] Well, my brother and sister were with my parents when they came from Britain. And then after they were here six years later, 1932, I was born. And so my father eventually made a decision that they had fulfilled the expectations for the land, and now he would open a general store. So he did that. And I was pre-school until my father was diagnosed with cancer. And he was told if he came to British Columbia, that would cure or at least postpone. So we did. And then he died and we couldn't get any help for my mother and me in British Columbia. So we went back to Saskatchewan and my mother got what is called a widow's pension. And it was eight dollars a month. So eight dollars didn't stretch very far. But we came back to Saskatchewan and I was enrolled in a school in Big River, except I was a little late in the school year arriving. So the principal said, no, she can't come. So we thought can't attend, I was almost seven. So my mother went to the chairperson of the school board and said, this is what's happening. I want my daughter in school. And so it's probably my first contact with who holds the power reins because of the

chair of the board arranged that I would go to school and I did that until Grade 10 when my mother and I came back to British Columbia.

AC [00:05:35] Just on your father. So your dad died. This would have been in the late part of the depression, 1939.

AC [00:05:43] So right at the... almost at the outset of the war.

SP [00:05:47] Yes.

AC [00:05:48] You're still in middle of the depression living on 8 dollars a month.

SP [00:05:55] Eventually the pension went up to 30 dollars. So that was a bit better. But I never felt poor.

AC [00:06:07] Right. What was that?

SP [00:06:12] We had money. That was a way of legitimately getting something to live off. But it didn't make me feel like a victim. I mean, I was a child anyway, but it would have perhaps been tempting to say, oh, poor, poor us. My mother wouldn't hear that line, but if I tried it, she'd say, Count your blessings, Sheila. And I've done that all my life.

AC [00:06:46] Sounds like a good philosophy. What about a little bit about your school experiences. What was the school like?

SP [00:06:56] It was four rooms, and it was staffed usually by teachers who came out of normal school in probably Saskatoon. And they found jobs around the province. In the case of our particular little school, there was a constant change in staff. Big River was an okay little town. The northern terminus, by the way, of the CN. And so they did their year there, maybe two, and then they would move on to a different job. So actually, looking back, the school, I think, was quite progressive. And nobody ever got the strap or was harshly dealt with. We had Christmas concerts. We had lots of fun. We were allowed to stay in, during in the winter we could stay inside because it was I think one year we we got the privilege, if that's a word I want of being the coldest place in Saskatchewan. So every summer we would swim every day in the lake and every winter we would skate on the ice. Sadly, my Grade 7 teacher went skating and fell through the ice and died. So that's, I guess, something that affected the whole town. But these young teachers came, they boarded out with families usually. And some of them were perhaps more successful than others. But we had expectations. We were, there were not discipline problems, people acting out. It was very much a community school.

AC [00:09:18] Just one thing on your family. Was your family, how would you describe the politics in your family? Your dad had been in the Navy obviously had a different experience in UK. What was your family politics, was it a progressive family? Was it...how did they see themselves?

SP [00:09:39] They wouldn't have used that terminology. They sort of voted probably in those days it was the Conservatives and the Liberals. I think that still after all those years. And I think that they would probably have voted more on the conservative side. Eventually, there was a hospital built that would have been late 40s, so that that was looked upon as a very worthy prize because up until then it was a hundred-mile drive on gravel roads. My mother had a social conscience. You know how they used to send out Christmas seals?

Still do and you'd put those on your letters? And my mother said that I should go around the community and charge a cent a seal and send that money to the Red Cross. So I did. I would go on, I'd say I'm selling these Christmas seals, a penny a seal, and maybe somebody would buy 10, which was good. And so it didn't occur to me that that was kind of a good thing to do particularly. But I wasn't ashamed of doing it either, was the expectation that I would serve the community as best I could.

AC [00:11:30] And so was your family religious?

SP [00:11:32] We were members of the United Church. And there again, there would be a student minister who would be sent out. And so the church would not occur during the winter. And by the time I was 13 and 14, we decided the teenagers in the town that we would keep the church open. So we did. We had a choir, we had a Bible reading. And we had the church is very much the centre of our lives. My Aunt Polly was Catholic and my mother was not. But that was because in England, my grandmother had thirteen children, but she was Catholic and her husband was not. And so the children ended up either Catholic or Protestant. And my mother was a Protestant. My aunt was a Catholic. And they had carried that model from England to Saskatchewan. So we yes, we were religious, but not in a demanding behaviour sort of way, if I can put it that way, we took a lot of responsibility, even as teenagers, for the success of the ministry in the summer. There was a priest assigned to the Catholic Church. So the town was geared towards religion, but not in a rigid sort of expectation way.

AC [00:13:29] Yes, OK, thank you. What did you do then after you finished school in Big River? This was just after Grade 10.

SP [00:13:39] I came here and went to Kits High until graduation. Yeah.

AC [00:13:46] That was quite a contrast.

SP [00:13:48] It was indeed. And at first I thought I can cope with this. I was coming from four rooms to this big school. I didn't know which rooms were where. And I thought by now I was 14, I thought, well, pretty soon, if I don't like it here, I can quit school. So I comforted myself in that way. But by the time, soon I was involved in what a big school could offer, clubs and activities. So I realized that I didn't have to be frightened of this new and large world that I could fit into it. We had a club called Thirteen Fifty Club. We were graduating in 50 and there were 13 of us. And so I guess I'm sort of been acclimatized towards clubs and doing things. Yeah.

AC [00:14:59] So what then happened after you graduated? I assume you graduated from Kits?

SP [00:15:03] Yes, I did. I want to work for B.C. Electric, as it was called then, but I got married when I was 18 and so my husband and I set off on a trip around the world. We began in Britain, and we went around, but not totally. We ended up in Africa and things politically that were a little bit dangerous. We bought a three-year old car in Britain and it was a centre of attraction wherever we took it. And it was better than a motorcycle but not quite a Rolls-Royce either. So, yeah, that's what we did. We came back and I went back to the B.C. Electric in the legal division and in that particular era you usually didn't stay at work until your baby was almost due. I stayed for four months and then went home to wait for the baby. And I had four children by the time I was 26, all sons, so that was a great blessing. Still is. Obviously, my sons and I are close.

AC [00:16:48] Well, that sounds like quite a lot of activity compressed in a very short period of time in terms of seeing the world and having four children. Now, did you work during some of that period or did you pretty much quit Hydro or Electric?

SP [00:17:03] I did quit, yes.

BG [00:17:07] Where was your husband working at that time?

SP [00:17:09] He was working at Weldwood, a plywood manufacturer, as a millwright. And then a strike occurred and there was a group called the Ladies Auxiliary and that group of women would go and make sandwiches or whatever. So I joined that, seemed to me that that was a worthy thing to do. And so I did do that work for quite a long time. What we did was to visit people, loggers or millworkers in the hospital. And we would go around and say, are you woodworker? And if you if they said yes, then we would offer them cigarettes or chocolate. So at that point, cigarettes were not...there was a different social acceptance of smoking. And we also went some had in the camps, been exposed to polio, tuberculosis. So we went and we visited them in a iron lung for people.

AC [00:18:46] They would come back to Vancouver or the lower mainland to have medical care.

SP [00:18:48] That's right they were.

AC [00:18:53] Maybe they were away from their families or their own communities. They had come here to convalesce or whatever the expression would be.

SP [00:19:03] It was almost like the Big River-PA Prince Albert situation. Wasn't it really because they came to where the care was? Yes. So we would the woman in this group would go to Vancouver General, and we'd go they with really big wards. Then we would walk around and ask at each bedside, are you a woodworker or a sawmill?

SP [00:19:30] And many times they were.

AC [00:19:33] That was a big part of the workforce.

SP [00:19:35] Oh, yes. Yes.

BG [00:19:38] So this would have been the IWA Women's Auxiliary. Your husband would have been a member of IWA then?

SP [00:19:44] That's correct.

BG [00:19:45] That was such a big union at the time. Like Al said, so many people were in the lumber industry. I understand that the women's auxiliary is sometimes also kind of became like a bit sort of a social organization. Was that the case in your experience? Did you have did you ever host events or anything like that?

SP [00:20:04] We had dances and people <unclear>and they would come and have a good evening. There was beer. You could you could buy beer. So and we got a per capita fund, the union, for the women, so that we could well, we had to have money to buy the cigarettes and the chocolates obviously.

AC [00:20:32] So when your husband was on strike then, was it that was that mill in Vancouver?

SP [00:20:37] I'm sorry?

AC [00:20:37] The Weldwood mill, was it in Vancouver?

SP [00:20:37] Yes.

AC [00:20:38] Right, down off Marine Drive.

SP [00:20:41] That's right.

AC [00:20:43] So close to where we are right now?

SP [00:20:45] Yeah.

AC [00:20:46] So what happened during that labour dispute? Were women, did they go down to the picket line and give food or....

SP [00:20:56] There were some women interestingly working in the mills, not as loggers. I don't believe that we met any women loggers, but we did meet women who were working at Weldwood or Evans or wherever. Yeah.

SP [00:21:15] So, I think for me, it was a matter of seeing that that was interesting, seeing that it was assisting, in my view, the union. And so I did that. I felt then and still do that

SP [00:21:48] workers should unionize, should take advantage of the strengths that they have. So it truly is something that I've worked.

BG [00:22:04] Even with having a young family at the time you saw the value of the union and being part of it for your family.

SP [00:22:13] Yes, I did. And I wrote some articles for the IWA newsletter. And I also realized that there were some pretty heavy political aspects to the unions, that union like stacking a meeting if you wanted to take it over and... We didn't as Ladies Auxiliary, we didn't give our opinion about the worth or not worth of a particular action, but that didn't mean we didn't privately think about whether this was a useful tactic or not. And I had the viewpoint that people have the right to withdraw their employment if they're not being treated as they should be. So, yeah... I didn't have illusions about the way things were. I would look at the way things were and decide whether that was something I believed in or not. But I didn't feel that I should believe a certain thing.

AC [00:23:42] So we can kind of move along a little bit. You have your four boys, you stay at home. At what stage, then, do you decide you're going to become a teacher?

SP [00:23:55] When my youngest son, Jeff, entered grade one. And what I did ...I thought, well, what I'll do, I'll take night courses. And so I took zoology and then I took math. And then I took three more in the daytime at King Edward. Yeah. And so I consulted there with the counsellor. And I said that I wanted to take a degree of some sort. I thought maybe social work would be good. She said It's going to take you forever to be a social worker if

you're picking at it this way. She said, why don't you take a teaching degree? You can go to work after two years. And so I said, what a good idea. That's what I'll do. I'll take the two years and then I'll work and then I'll pick up the other areas that for years in summer school and etc.. But many teachers did that. Yeah. So that's what I did in the summer, I would take my four sons to a sports camp at UBC because I had these children and I always felt and I hope I lived by that

SP [00:25:39] my children came first, and that I could cope with the things I wanted to do and still be a parent, which I still am in some ways.

AC [00:25:56] You'll never get rid of that rule.

SP [00:26:01] No, no, you don't. And all of my sons are retired now. So I know.

AC [00:26:10] So then when did you start teaching then? When you finish this...

SP [00:26:17] In 1967 at Van Horne Elementary in Vancouver.

AC [00:26:22] So who old were you then?

SP [00:26:24] I was 35 then. Yeah.

AC [00:26:30] And what was your early teaching then like? What was that like?

SP [00:26:36] Oh, it was...I really liked it. I had a Grade Two class and that's what led me really that being in the school and seeing how things operated, which was without prep time and so on. But we didn't didn't really feel hard done by. That was you went and you did your work. But I really did enjoy teaching young children.

SP [00:27:10] And then the union asked... I guess it wasn't a union then, but the association asked for people to join the Professional Development Committee. And I thought well, that will be interesting. I'll do that. And then I realized there were other committees that I would like to be on. So I joined them, particularly agreements.

AC [00:27:45] So when you say agreements, what was involved in that?

SP [00:27:49] Well, that time there were the rules were that if you couldn't make a settlement between the teachers and employer, which was, of course, the school boards in all districts of the province, if you couldn't do that then you had mediation or arbitration. You were told what your contract would be and so that was the pattern.

AC [00:28:26] So then when we talk about your teaching. What were the challenges? I'll get back to your union role in a minute. What were the challenges in your teaching at Van Horne then or when you were aching?

SP [00:28:41] Well, for me, it was an extremely busy life. I was doing my best to be a good mother and I hope that I achieved it. But I also made a space in my life for other things that I believed in. I was the secretary of my board at the church, for instance. So, yeah, I felt it wasn't an obligation as much as an interest.

AC [00:29:22] You're just not a joiner. You're a joiner because you see some interest of whatever that endeavour is, there's something to learn, there's something to be gained or something to get a sense of what's going on.

SP [00:29:38] Something to offer as well. Yeah.

AC [00:29:42] So tell us a little bit about now that you've got professional development, you've got agreements, anything. You did other things in the earlier part of your work in the local. What did you do with agreements. What were you doing on the Agreements Committee? How did that work?

SP [00:30:02] Well, in Agreements I realized then that the union, that the teachers had a structure, I hadn't known a lot about the structure, but I realized that there was one and that it was quite well coordinated.

SP [00:30:28] And I realized if I hadn't known that before, that there were opportunities for organization.

SP [00:30:40] Remember, I was coming from a background of assisting, not leading. But now I felt that I could be part of an executive. I could maybe be the Agreements Chair which I was and working conditions that we had the professional development. I was genuinely interested in how it all came together.

AC [00:31:20] So in Vancouver's case, they had a very active Agreements Committee which mostly dealt with salaries, bonuses, group benefits, maybe leaves, leaves of absences, sick days. How that was handled. Maybe sabbaticals, different kinds of topics. But the main criteria that main screening was they had to somehow fit into the salaries and bonuses in order to be resolved at arbitration. So on the other side, then we had learning conditions. Talk a little bit about what that was about and what that committee did, and what you did.

SP [00:32:02] Well, what the committee did was to identify the needs and learning conditions, for instance, the inclusion of children who had special needs. And we agreed with that, that they should be included with proper care, with proper assistance.

SP [00:32:34] So then I realized that there was work to be done on the agreements. Even though we could not achieve them through bargaining per se in terms of the provincial rules, but we could still do them because we would approach the boards. And so Vancouver, for instance, had a very substantial learning conditions agreement.

SP [00:33:10] And there are mutual advantages to that for the board and for the teachers, because at the bottom of it, in terms of why, the why is that they were children having their education, they only had one shot at it. You can't come around and say, well, I'll do that again. So we laid pressure on, not unpleasant, but just things, if we cooperate will be better and we can make decisions even if they're not legally acceptable, perhaps to the government or to the boards.

SP [00:34:05] But nonetheless, we could make agreements.

AC [00:34:10] Those agreements then were enforced internally but not referenced to third parties, in some ways.

SP [00:34:17] That is true. Yeah.

AC [00:34:19] Nonetheless you had an agreement and so you could point to the words in the contract or the agreement and say, here's what we've agreed to do and therefore we need more resources for this school or we need more resources for this or that, often it was resources. And so, so okay, is there anything else needs to be said about that?

SP [00:34:40] Well also realize that we weren't the only district that had this kind of way of getting around what we did and what we were entitled to. So we became quite adept at the whipsaw, Al. I think that we used it to our great advantage because we'd say, well, if it's good enough for teachers in Kelowna, it should be good enough for teachers in Vancouver.

SP [00:35:19] And I do believe probably that's because we were such good whipsawers that a of of the legislation attempted to curb us.

AC [00:35:32] That it got conditions because you're in the political arena and you could persuade people because it was a bigger political discussion about whether those resources should be there or not. It wasn't the self-interest...it was, it helped the teacher, but it wasn't strictly out of self-interest. It was as a political matter for the community to discuss.

SP [00:35:51] Yes.

AC [00:35:53] You could move it along, in all kinds of varieties of ways. OK, I just then when did you then become involved with the BCTF, the provincial organization?

SP [00:36:06] My first involvement was on...at that time there were agreement districts sort of where there is ones, and in our case, the Lower Mainland would come and compare what we had, what we needed, that kind of coming together of people with similar needs and abilities to achieve them. Because boards differed.

SP [00:36:39] So that's probably when I first became involved at the provincial level. I was on the Provincial Agreements Committee, and I was the second woman to be there.

AC [00:37:01] So was this mostly a male encamp throughout the province or were there women involved in agreements, or was that pretty much the exception that women were involved?

SP [00:37:14] It was very rare that a woman would be on a committee.

AC [00:37:21] What were the attitudes behind that? What was that a reflection of?

SP [00:37:26] Well, I think that it was a recognition that locally women well, I mean, the teaching force was more female than male, still is. And so at that point, I think that the Status of Women work that was happening really did contribute to the acceptance of women at the table. And the world didn't end. You still had your team. You still had people working towards achieving...

SP [00:38:12] And the Status of Women said there should be equality, and so gradually there was. I was the second woman. Others came along.

BG [00:38:30] Did you feel that you were treated just as equally as anyone else at the table when you were doing the agreements?.

SP [00:38:40] I didn't come in and say ha-ha here I am, second woman in the province to be at the table. One doesn't behave that way. You go and you're part of a team. And I've never identified very well with the differences that people see in various ways.

SP [00:39:09] I say this is our team let's hone it and work with it, get the best that we can together. I never I never felt any sense of a triumph.

BG [00:39:27] Just doing your job, right. What needs to be done.

AC [00:39:33] So when you talk about the Provincial Agreements Committee, what was your specific role? What things were you doing?

SP [00:39:40] I was given certain areas. For instance, I might be assigned to Delta and Surrey or wherever. And I was expected, as were my colleagues, to stay in touch with those particular areas, to, if it was bargaining season to find out what was happening at the table. Was not a hands off kind of role. It was very much involvement.

SP [00:40:16] And if one of the areas said, well, we're going to sign for 2.3 and the going rate was 3.4, we were going to say, what are you doing? Don't do that. Please take our advice. This is etcetera. You would go, and you would express your opinion. We knew, though, that there was the autonomy of a group of teachers to make an acceptance of... but it was our job to coordinate all of that. Know what was happening and keep it the rules from falling off because somebody saw a deal and took it. We tried to extend the wisdom and the influence of the provincial body.

AC [00:41:19] So that was through a variety of processes that the organization used and so tell us a little bit more about how did you evolve the objectives and the strategies and the thinking.

SP [00:41:29] We'll studied the contracts as such they were. We also had meetings. We were probably fortunate in the Lower Mainland and not having distance and weather as part of the equation usually. But we would gather people together.

SP [00:41:53] We would say to them that this is what happened in Burnaby yesterday. So we were sure that our particular groups of teachers were aware of what was happening around them. And then we would meet as a provincial committee and we would report all of what we had found. There were written reports that we would submit. So there were, as I recall, about ten of us on that committee. I don't know, exactly the number, but around that. And not frequently, but there were plans to come and people did come from other areas in order to look at the bigger picture.

AC [00:42:54] One question I was going to ask is at some point the organization decides to put together agreements and learning conditions in what was referred to as a scope of expansion, the scope of bargaining campaign. Were you involved in your local discussions or provincially?

SP [00:43:14] Yes, I was.

SP [00:43:20] I realize that there was not just I, we realized that there was strength in numbers and that and for me, it wasn't frightening I as an individual, felt comfortable in that arena that I expected to be there, maybe not me, but that there would be an arena where people would come together. So I thought, why can't we buy them anything we want to buy them? It's for the welfare of teachers and it's for the welfare of those we teach, because I believed that working conditions and learning conditions are twins.

AC [00:44:25] So that became both a bargaining and a political campaign to try and move it in to those issues that had been in the learning conditions contracts, moved into agreements contracts to form a collective agreement.

SP [00:44:40] Kind of gradually, because at the same time, we need to remember that there is a big public out there.

SP [00:44:50] And so we wanted to assure them that we were not wild-eyed radicals, but that we were working for the betterment of the learning experience for the children. It sounds awfully goody-two-shoes, I know, but it happens in my view to be the case. For instance, let's say some prep time. Well, like I'm not applying polish to my fingernails during it. I'm trying to make better plans. I'm using that for my professional role.

AC [00:45:39] So that particular campaign was sort of early 1980s, so we became quite involved in 1981 round of negotiations and there was the campaigns and resources, so we tried to pool those resources together.

AC [00:45:59] What was your experience in Vancouver then with that when you went in to bargain and you're dealing with the board and trying to put those other issues into your agreement so that there would be one agreement for all those issues.

SP [00:46:12] One of the big advantages, I think, was that the federation really did assist people to understand people like David Yorke, for instance. We've got good advice, not rhetoric, but good advice about what it meant when a document would come along. What we should do with that or could do with that. And I think it is then probably that I really began to understand more about the BCTF than I had done.

SP [00:46:54] And to have really the feeling that I could contribute. But it's not that kind of intention for me. It's not just good intentions, and what it is, is that looks like it will be interesting.

SP [00:47:30] Can I do that work? Should I do that work right? Is that worthwhile that work, some analysis before I would try to enter any particular level of the work.

AC [00:47:52] Well, hold that for a minute, because we'll come back to a little bit more about that when we talk about your role in the BCTF staff. In terms of your other involvement in BCTF, well, aside from being about the learning conditions and agreements, you also served on the judicial committee of the BCTF and what attracted you to that work and what was happening? What was the scope of that work and what did you do in there?

SP [00:48:22] I very much respect the code of ethics and I felt that I could assist with people understanding it and living with it.

SP [00:48:43] My major at university was psychology. I felt I understood a little bit about how to approach people who were in crisis, and we did have at that time a hotline for teachers who could phone in and say that I'm having a bad time. What can you do to help me? So I had been sitting on that, and I don't know the chronology really very well of what happened when. But my feeling was that I had developed some ability to work with people who were wondering whether their choice of career was what they really wanted. That kind of problem was brought to us and I was on a mediation. Also, I forget the actual name of that group.

AC [00:50:01] Well, there was inter mediation service.

SP [00:50:03] Yes. Right. Right.

AC [00:50:07] And there was there was different groups, it developed over time and took on different names. There was a judicial council and there was panels we set up there was other things. There was a kind of later iteration of it. It kind of copied what the Labour board was in terms of how it dealt with people who sat on the Labour Board. The attraction to mediation, talk about that for a minute. What was, tive us a little bit more about your experiences in there?

SP [00:50:41] I felt that sometimes people just didn't know about the expectations. So there was an educational component to it. But there was an also a component of going where the people were experiencing the problems, not at the end of a phone. But actually going to maybe Terrace. I think that was perhaps the first one I went to and people would come and they'd be a team. People would come and the team and try to understand the problem and mediate out of it. So it had lots of elements of I guess I looked for.

AC [00:51:39] So it gives that if we take the Terrace example, what...who is in conflict and what was going on.

SP [00:51:46] As I remember that one, there was a woman counsellor who had decided she was going to brought in the sex education of her students. And there was a parent who didn't appreciate that was a good thing to do. She felt that at home they should speak with their children, but that they could handle that thank you very much. A fellow teacher.

SP [00:52:23] So that was a bitter one.

SP [00:52:27] They were, we did them together and they hadn't been together face-to-face before. We brought them together and we went away, my partner and I thinking that we have a deal while we didn't have a deal. The emotions were too strong, the beliefs on both sides and the unwillingness to accept the efforts of the other person interestingly enough. And yes, you say you'll do that but you won't will you? Etc. So they had lost belief in each other's professional obligations or way of looking at the work. So there are all sorts of things that would occur as people feeling that a colleague had gone maybe to the principal and complained about their work when that's forbidden to do that without going to the person first. Clause 5, probably still the same number, I don't know.

AC [00:53:49] Same number.

AC [00:53:52] So there is administrator-teacher disputes of various kinds.

SP [00:53:55] There were.

AC [00:53:56] Teacher-on-teacher disputes, there was teacher-and-parent disputes. That was kind of...

SP [00:54:02] There were all sorts of players in these scenarios.

SP [00:54:07] Sometimes it was a dispute at the local,

AC [00:54:14] Local teacher organization level between two members of an executive or...

SP [00:54:18] Right.

AC [00:54:20] The president and somebody else. Or the president and a teacher.

SP [00:54:25] Oh yes. Yeah. A couple of times it was a provincial president who had somehow ruffled feathers somewhere and we would go and smooth them if we could. But there was training involved. We didn't just go, there was training involved about how to conduct ourselves, what to do once we arrived. Very interesting work and delicate work as well. You couldn't thunder in there and say smarten up folks, we're both professionals now. Just don't be so ridiculous. You couldn't, you didn't want to. You wanted to come away from the table with everybody feeling good about what had happened.

AC [00:55:24] When we talk about the administrator-teacher relationship, how did the administrators view your role? How did you build some level of confidence on their part to participate in a process like that?

SP [00:55:43] We just told them. We interviewed each separately and we told them that we were not there to judge them. We understood that they had been under pressure and would tell us about it. We did that on both sides. And sometimes we would come away and say, we can't help you. There's no willingness to want to alter this situation really. So there are no, or were no magic bullet type things that you could go and say, oh this is what we do.

SP [00:56:30] You had to go and you had to analyze, but you went with what I thought were proper motives, which was not to prove that I had these skills to bring people together, but was that people now were together. Didn't massage my ego to go in from afar, parachute in. My role as I saw it was to go and do what

SP [00:57:09] I could to help. If I if I couldn't, I'd say so. And that happened at least one occasion that I recall.

AC [00:57:19] Mm hmm. So moving on a little bit then.

AC [00:57:23] We've had on the bargaining side a scope of bargaining campaign. Teachers did quite well. Tell us how they did in the first major scope of bargaining campaign in 1981. What were the results like and...tell us a little bit about that.

AC [00:57:42] What were the results like of the first scope of bargaining campaign in negotiations?

AC [00:57:49] What was achieved in that round of negotiations?

SP [00:57:52] Well partly it depended where you were. And where we should be.

SP [00:58:01] So do I think that really what happened was that those of us who were assigned to those locals or associations would say there are other contracts that have such and so, do you think that you can do that here? And sometimes they'd say we're a long way off, but other times they say, yes we can. So it was a process of analysis. It was a process of saying this is a possibility, because that's where the whipsaw kind of came in, because people didn't have the obligation to say, oh, well, in the other nine associations in this zone, they have. But it was our duty to say the other nine have this. You should be able to get it, that kind of persuasion, but also teamed with understanding and possibilities, because if you go in with twenty-five objectives and get one, not a good ratio there. If you go in and get twenty-four, then you come away feeling somewhat victorious.

SP [00:59:32] And you have to remember that are the people we were working with many didn't have the union or bargaining background. Somehow they got the working conditions that they had. They weren't sure how, but this is what it was. Sometimes they felt that it was because the board valued them so much and you didn't want to shatter that illusion that somehow it was because they liked you and felt the value of you that you had a given privilege or word contract language. It was because maybe there was a meeting of minds that the time had come for such and so. Maybe the boards in in their backrooms were saying, hey, look, folks, you're holding out there on whatever. Probably time for you to write that in. You have to remember there was somebody opposite us at a table. And the assumption was at least mine always was that they were there with good intentions for the most part. Maybe their intentions were not exactly what ours were, but that aren't vicious, horrible people either. So....

AC [01:01:16] So gradually these gains did come together as a result of that hard work. What happened subsequent to that whole set of negotiations was that in the spring of 1982, the Social Credit government under Bill Bennett launched a major restraint program. And this, of course, was in a slowdown in the economy at the same time that included both cuts to school district funding as well as wage controls under the Compensation Act, Compensation Stabilization Act. And then in 1983, the Compensation Stabilization Act was made harsher, extended indefinitely and combined with 26 other pieces of legislation, called the 26 bad bills that included the axing of the Human Rights Commission, the abolishment of the Rentalsman's Office, the elimination of tenant rights, the ability of public sector employers to fire workers without cause, that became, developed into what we would call the Solidarity Movement, Solidarity Coalition. And the teachers joined that particular action of both citizens and workers in opposing the legislation. And Vancouver teachers also worked with other, joined with other workers through protest strikes. So we're now talking about 1983.

AC [01:03:00] Tell us about your role at that point in the Vancouver teachers and the challenges you had in that role dealing with that very broad political campaign that had both political action as well as a job action involved.

SP [01:03:17] Tough time, really tough.

SP [01:03:22] We had a very significant opposition in Vancouver. My role in the Solidarity Campaign and job action was to communicate with and coordinate all of the schools in Vancouver, and there were 108 of them. My particular role was to somehow be sure that they got the information they needed "are we going back to work today?".

SP [01:04:06] So I thought, that's a lot of schools. What I did was make a tree. I chose somebody strong, a strong union person if I could find one in a group of let's say 4 schools and I would ask that person to be the contact one. So I did that and I had this huge tree and it really did work quite well. But there wasn't unanimity about the worth of what was happening.

SP [01:04:40] There was bitter opposition and we didn't have time to say to them, look at clause 10 of the code of ethics. It says you have to abide by what your union is doing, that you don't wildcat sort of thing. So that really manifested itself later as well when that particular element in the teaching force was better organized. Anyway, we got through that one and it didn't last terribly long, if you recall. Yeah.

BG [01:05:29] During when the teachers actually went on strike, I heard stories about how because teachers had been injuncted, got injunctions against them, that different community organizations and other unions like the BCGEU helped to picket outside schools to help support the teachers with their picket lines. Were you involved in any of the kind of coordination of where people would go or making sure that there was picket lines set up?

SP [01:05:57] Yes, we had a central committee that looked after all of that. Many of those groups, those unions had people inside. I don't mean they crossed the line. I mean, there have workers inside the school. If I recall correctly, and I'm not sure of the exact number, but the board chief negotiator said he had 27 contracts to bargain. So we had already had a core of people from perhaps, I don't know, BCGEU, or whomever. So they were told by their leaders, don't cross that line. And so we had that support. But we went out and every day. We would go to the offices of the other unions and say, look, how are things going? Showing that we understood that they were supporting us. And that's not easy.

SP [01:07:07] Not easy at all. So we relied on what we call our brothers and sisters in other unions. But we also believed quite passionately in our worthy cause. We have big rallies many times, we had smaller coffee meetings. We had reports from the school, we've got a weakness here or there or whatever. Some teachers, unfortunately, were very very much opposed and would arrive at 4:00 a.m. in order to go in the back door. Very few did that kind of thing though. Anyway it was not an easy sell necessarily, but we brought it off as best we could and felt a certain camaraderie, I think. I think it did a lot to unite the unions that were in the schools because previously we hadn't particularly thought "oh, that custodian is a member of whatever". And now they did understand that better.

AC [01:08:45] Okay. Well, moving a little bit then, in the fall of that building of solidarity, we also had to live with the legislation of the days, the legislation of the day, had wage controls. What challenges did they pose for those people who were negotiating?

SP [01:09:08] Well, I almost wonder whether they tried to be, tried to be too tough. I mean, if you have, unless you have enormous power and if you have a situation where everybody's onside, the more draconian features are a really difficult sales pitch.

SP [01:09:45] But an analysis, I think, of the strength of your own side is a good place to dig in and say, well, we can explain how awful that is, how awful it would be. So it's not just a matter of saying those devils, it's a matter of saying this is what we can do to show that they're devils if they're acting like that. And they were.

AC [01:10:23] Eventually, the federation adopted a strategy of boycotting arbitration because they found that the arbitrators were just as inclined to follow the rules as anybody in terms of what the wage limits would be. Tell us what happened as a result of that boycott. Was that successful? Did that seem to be fairly widespread?

SP [01:10:52] Well, we had varying success with arbitrations. I won't name names, but still remember them and not with admiration. Right. But I think there is a sense of outrage that they felt that they could just do anything. Even the national rules that were sent down, I still remember a summer conference where we were all together discussing whatever and they dropped certain legislation like a bomb there. I mean, we had visits from that man who later became very prominent in Vancouver. Brian Bradford. Yeah.

AC [01:11:59] Yeah. You're thinking of the federal legislation from '76. And I'm thinking where the provincial legislation.

SP [01:12:05] So we go later on.

AC [01:12:07] Yeah, but it still was the same kind of impact in terms of its impact on bargaining.

SP [01:12:13] Yeah. Yeah. I didn't know.

AC [01:12:15] OK. I was thinking a little bit later on then there was a boycott on which was very widespread, but it was trying to force the school boards to agree to terms without having to go through the wage control legislation. I think it was the concept.

SP [01:12:35] Well, I think when you have to rely on our members and you also have to rely on the work that you've done to have the public faith in your recommendations and your needs. You have to make them realize that the children are affected by what's happening.

AC [01:13:02] In 1985, the B.C. Teachers Federation launched a charter case against the scope of bargaining, the regime of teacher bargaining under the equality provisions of the Constitution, which were made active in April of 1985. That kind of went on as a legal case for quite some time. And then in 1987, the then Bill VanderZalm Social Credit government introduced two bills that had a profound impact on teachers. The first one was Bill 20, which was the one that created a teacher's college. It gave teachers a choice in their bargaining regime as to whether they wanted to have voluntary consensual arbitration over salaries and bonuses, or whether they wanted to form themselves as a teacher trade union. And that's what it was referred to under that under that Act. And it seemed to them that while that was going on the first thing <unclear> there was amendments to the Labour Code itself, just to back up for one minute. The Bill 20 also eliminated or removed the administrators, specifically the principals and the vice principals from the teacher bargaining unit and left open them this wide sea of you now choose whether you want to be a teacher professional under a model of having a College with this idea of consensual arbitration. Or you could become a nasty teacher trade union and choose to join with the with that part of the labour community.

AC [01:15:00] So first of all, I guess what challenges were posed by all of this? Because it was pretty broad in its impact.

SP [01:15:13] Yes it certainly was broad in its impact.

SP [01:15:17] We ended up in court because we did have a very well-organized opposition to becoming a union.

SP [01:15:29] And the effort was to make people understand that they were still professionals like as not like we're out there doing <unclear> or whatever, we're teacher with the same social status if we can put it that way, though I don't believe we used that phrase, but some people felt stripped of their professionalism. Somehow, if they would be a member of a union, perhaps all their lives they had been proud of the professional nature of their family or their work. Now all of a sudden, they were asked to be a union. Come on. We sent people to every single school. That's what we did in Vancouver. People on the bargaining team and we assigned them and they would go and we would ask for a staff meeting. And at that meeting, you would present the reasons why we felt we should be unions. In some cases there was a member of the other opposition. It was kind of strange at times. I remember going to a school when I walked into the staff room where the meeting was being held. I just walked in and stood there and the teacher immediately began to question me and I'm still standing. I just said very calmly. Would it be alright

SP [01:17:19] if I sat down? And they telephoned the office later in the day at my school and said, thank you for being so patient and gracious with us. So the emotions were very very high.

AC [01:17:42] So at this stage, what role are you and what were you doing? What was your role at this stage?

SP [01:17:48] Well, what year was it, Al that you said?

AC [01:17:52] That was 1987.

SP [01:17:55] I was vice president. Yes, sorry. I wasn't exactly.

AC [01:17:59] That's fine. So you're the vice president of the Vancouver Elementary Teachers. And was that a released position at that stage?

SP [01:18:10] It was. Yes.

AC [01:18:12] You were a released officer you were seen...you were a primary leader of the local level. You were seen as a person in an important position in terms of helping this campaign be successful.

SP [01:18:25] Well, I believed pretty passionately in it too. And when I'd go, yeah, probably that conviction was evident because look at my background. It was...

AC [01:18:44] Right, so what was your pitch? Well, give me your pitch.

SP [01:18:47] I'm sorry.

AC [01:18:47] What was your pitch? How did you how did you kind of, apart from, saying teachers, they were still professionals. How did you convince them that becoming a union would be a good idea?

SP [01:18:58] Well, I went in wearing my professional hat, so to speak. Like I'm not Jack Munro. And so I went in respectfully with it, perhaps. And by then, I was pretty sure which schools had the more radical of the non-union. And I would try to explain that being a union was a professional possibility for them. So I always went in as a colleague I think who not as a union person who would say you should do such and so. But I went in more as a colleague, and I would convince them, if I could, about that. I believe there was even a sign saying a union of professionals provincially and this banner would show up at rallies and so on. And that's true. Nothing awful happened, but we went and there were people on the other side which they had a perfect right to do. But one night I was chairing actually one of the big meetings, 3,000 people if you can believe it. So we had really big rallies as well.

SP [01:21:01] The main thing I think is for me as an individual trying to make people believe in what I was honking on endlessly about. I think for me, it was part of my philosophy that if people understood, they would support, but that they had a right to understand. And I had the obligation to tell them exactly not to try and fluff it over somehow, but to tell them exactly as truthfully as I could report what was happening, why it was this way and not that way. All of that. I made up my mind as soon as I became an officer inside on relief from my job that I would never be untruthful or try to mask things over. I felt total security that our members would be supportive if they understood, not that we perhaps were always correct, didn't pretend that, didn't pretend we had more power than we had but didn't lessen that either. We hired an airplane in the middle of one of these great big meetings where I was chairing. We hired an airplane, I went to Victoria to see, if you'll recall it was an NDP government that we would call upon, if I'm correct.

AC [01:22:56] No, this was still the Socreds in power. So this was 1987 and we're thinking we're trying to convince the teachers to unionize.

AC [01:23:09] They would have a full scope of bargaining. They would have a dispute resolution mechanism which was strike. Arbitration could still be consensual. Administrators were out by virtue of the legislation. You had the powers and protections of the Labour Board, which is a way of administering contracts. So I don't remember, maybe something did happen I was unfamiliar with.

AC [01:23:34] But I think you may be thinking a little bit later on around your own contract in Vancouver?

SP [01:23:40] No, no. You're thinking about that? Yeah. Anyway, we hired this airplane.

AC [01:23:47] This was to go to Victoria and sit across from the legislature.

SP [01:23:52] It turned out we were sitting opposite an NDP person who sat in his chair, leaning back with his neck on his back of his chair seat, legs sprawled out. And I thought, how disrespectful.

SP [01:24:18] Nobody sits like that when somebody's come to speak with them in a sincere way asking for support or whatever. I won't name the person, but I've never forgotten that lack of respect. Anyway we did whatever pitch we were giving and then we went back to the harbour and the plane had gone back to Vancouver. So then how are we going to get home? And it had been so glamorous, the plane. Right. Anyway, funny stuff happens to you along the way.

AC [01:25:02] That's right. That's right. That was actually a special representative assembly meeting, as I recall, and included representatives from teacher organizations across Canada. That then led to the lobby of MLAs to go and talk to them about the legislation and where they were on the legislation, particularly on the other side, the changes to the Labour Code as well, which were negative from the perspective of the rest of the labour movement in a variety of ways. One of the big meetings you had, and I think you probably were just referring to it, was a joint meeting of Elementary and Vancouver teachers, which occurred in early April of 1987?

AC [01:25:45] Almost right after the legislation was dropped and there was a resolution put on th3 floor and it said that we the teachers of School District 39 at a meeting held in Vancouver, B.C. on 1987 April 7, reaffirm our commitment to maintaining the BCTF in schools and purposes and confirm our determination to continue the BCTF as a united organization that represents and acts for all teachers, in all professional educational matters and in their employment interests.

AC [01:26:20] And that had some strong support from that meeting. That was, do you remember any details about the feeling of teachers right around that meeting because the legislation had just been dropped a few days, a week earlier and your meeting of all the teachers, which was, would be quite acceptable because unlike most of the districts under like all the other districts, you had both a secondary group that was separate from the elementary group. And so that having a common meeting wasn't too common. And what was the mood of teachers and how did they, how did you get support for that resolution?

SP [01:26:58] It was a feeling of, sorry I'm getting a little bit hoarse here, it was a feeling of unity and standing ovations for the president came to that meeting. There was a feeling of strength.

AC [01:27:21] And the President being Elsie McMurphy.

SP [01:27:29] Yes and she did a very fine job of being cheerful and strong and I still admire that. Anyway there was, it was almost like a rally, that and I guess it was a rally. As it. Yeah.

AC [01:27:58] It was hard. It was a double-edged sword. It was exciting. And it was also challenging because it was you could see we're going through a significant change and those people had to figure out what they stood for.

AC [01:28:12] Well, we did get support for them.

SP [01:28:15] But we had done a lot of groundwork in that we had sent people to the schools. We had discussed the matter. People felt reassured that the hands of their profession hadn't fallen in, you know, to people who would sell it out and be next on the BC Fed or that...nothing was wrong with the BC Fed...but it's perception sometimes that we had to explain that no, those horror stories aren't going to happen.

AC [01:29:01] Maybe I'll take a quick break.

AC [01:29:09] The next item we come across is April 28. So the legislation's dropped. The teachers are working to build support amongst the membership for this, how they're going to meet this changed legislation. As a result, they decided to have a walkout on April 28,

1987, to protest Bills 19 and 20 and then started an instruction only campaign and a withdrawal of extracurricular activities.

AC [01:29:37] What was the support in your local around the April 28 walkout and the actions in protest of the legislation? How did they feel about that?

SP [01:29:50] It was really quite strong in support?

SP [01:29:57] Well, for one thing, it wasn't a four-week strike and it was and so we worked very, very hard again to have frequent meetings, zonal sometimes for 4 or 5 schools, other times for the whole district. So we had this bear. Somebody gave me a bear.

SP [01:30:34] We called it Shock and Dismay. And we took this bear, shopped it around and took this bear and on one visit he somehow got knocked to the floor. Our rep said, on, sorry, Shock. It was so cute. Really.

AC [01:30:59] Teachers had that little bit of humour along the path to deal with a major serious problem.

AC [01:31:05] The teachers at the time, were they able to kind of see once they got past some of the debate and some of the discussion that the path to unionization was easier to get, not easier, but it was a more viable option in terms of...was that seen in the membership.

SP [01:31:29] Oh, definitely. But we had had experience of a more militant sort of possibility. And so a change over the years was very very positive. I felt that somebody out there was not pulling the wool over their eyes somehow. They felt that what they saw was authentic and impact at the school level was well handled. I think they felt more empowered. Yeah. It was stronger.

AC [01:32:24] The other piece of legislation that was also under amendment was Bill 19, which was impact on the Labour Code of British Columbia, and the Labour Code was changed in name to the Industrial Relations Act. And while teachers were protesting around Bill 19, the rest of the labour movement was protesting Bill 20 and the weakened Labour Code. The BC Federation of Labour opted to boycott the Industrial Relations Council Act, and the Council, and called for a general strike on June the 1st. So we still supported both the boycott and the general strike. Why did the BCTF take this position? Because they were in a different place. They weren't under the labour code. They were still talking about that. But at the same time they support the... They did support the actions of both the boycott and the walkout. Why was that?

SP [01:33:28] Well, looking back I think that they could hear both, why both, and found them acceptable. That they now, and it took effort. That's what we were paid for. I mean, they had full-time people in the Vancouver offices and I think a lot of other locals by then did. And so people had learned that they could rely on us. And so there isn't the some tension, and fear would be too strong a word. But there wasn't the same anxiety that there had been.

AC [01:34:33] You earned their trust by virtue of the actions you've taken.

AC [01:34:42] Right after that walkout then, as we move into both the summer and the fall of 1987, the legislation is enacted and proclaimed. And we started membership sign-up

campaign because membership in the BCTF, while it had been compulsory, effective January 1st, 1988 it was no longer compulsory and effective January 1st, 1988 you had to have made some decision around well, you had to have made a decision around where you were going on the bargaining side, where you you're going to be a voluntary union with voluntary arbitration as a means to deal with your employment interests or whether you were going to certify as a trade union under the labour code or under the Industrial Relations Act and conduct a vote and do all those sorts of things. So describe some of the challenges you faced at that part of the exercise where now you had to go out and get people to sign membership cards in a certification of a union.

SP [01:35:57] Well, it was one of the big struggles for Vancouver, but it was now Vancouver Teachers Federation. Right. So with some exceptions, we did feel much stronger, much less at risk. And so as I recall, we didn't have a horrible struggle getting people to sign up. And if they did on their particular staff, and we asked the staff reps to be active, we felt that we could rely on our network in the schools.

SP [01:36:58] And we tried to focus on the strength of the union and also the strength of each staff, because as I recall, our staff committees were beginning to blossom.

SP [01:37:20] I can't remember the exact year that they were written into the contract, but they were, we expended a lot of time training the staff rep.

SP [01:37:37] Some schools had hundreds teachers. It's not unusual in a Vancouver school. So we want to be sure that when you go in and try to have a certain campaign or a certain level of support, you have to be sure that the seeds have been planted ahead of time and that you don't talk down to people. You say we realise that this is a concern for you. This is what we believe in terms of that concern. So I don't remember being a really difficult struggle.

AC [01:38:30] Just to mention something further. There were benefits in BCTF membership too, that wouldn't be provided if someone chose not to belong. Professional development, income security can you say a little bit more about that, was that an issue?

SP [01:38:47] Well, it was moving from compulsory membership to other forms of membership is not easy and one isn't significantly more powerful than another or so.

SP [01:39:14] I think that people.. I hope this is true.

SP [01:39:21] I think that people believe that their welfare was in good hands and they could feel that they could come for help if they needed help. That if we said, would you please do such? And so it's important, that they would. We send out a lot of written communication in a bulletin kind of way so that they would have something that they could look at. But we also held meetings in a great many schools.

AC [01:39:59] OK. We're going to get around to the next thing which we would sign all the teachers up, they're certified as a trade union to become the Vancouver Teachers Federation and they have to now plan their bargaining objectives. So what were some of the major objectives that teachers set for themselves in the first round of/ bargaining under the Industrial Relations Act of British Columbia/Labour Code?

SP [01:40:27] One of the biggest was an inclusion...we...there's...

AC [01:40:36] What do you mean by inclusion Sheila?

SP [01:40:41] Previously, we had had no special classes that somebody with a particular need, let's say, vision or hearing or perhaps mobility problems had been sort of looked after elsewhere. Now in Vancouver, we had a passionate person at board level who said those children should be included. And we said we agree. We didn't fight that concept. We wanted that. But that there ought to be proper levels of support. So what we did, we gave various weightings to particular needs. I do not remember the details of how whether mobility was 2.5 kids, but what in effect it was, was saying that if you place a child of a certain need in an environment, that child is not just one child.

SP [01:42:04] That child is representing 2.5 staff.

SP [01:42:10] So we're actually...

AC [01:42:13] 2.5 students.

SP [01:42:14] Sorry? That child is representing 2.5 students or 2.5...

SP [01:42:19] No sorry. Yeah.

SP [01:42:22] So when the staffing was figured out for a school, there should be that level of staffing there. There should be a support level that was there. We worked out there's a Lodi, California, you're probably aware of the rating formula that they had. And so we relied on that and other jurisdictions as well. We were doing very, very well with that. And I had over the years, I think, accomplished a lot with it. And we made it clear right from the beginning that we believed in having children of special needs in a regular classroom, but that it was not acceptable to expect the teacher to somehow magically deal with all of that those needs as well as 32 other children. So class sizes was very big, a very big factor. Had been for a long time. When I started, I think in '67 I think I had 40 Grade 2's. Yeah, I know. But it was almost looked upon as a badge of courage to cope with a big staff. That was the feeling that we had. Yeah.

AC [01:44:17] So <unlcear> you had the staffing formula, you've had class size, you had money.

AC [01:44:24] You had membership.

AC [01:44:28] You had all the issues, compulsory membership, which is brought back again. Professional development issues. Things that have been in the previous contract. Things that have been lost in the School Act when it was stripped of its sick leave provisions and various other things that occurred there. All the issues around discipline of teachers, over matters of representation, rights, built into the contract, quite a long list there, including dues deduction.

AC [01:45:01] Those are some things. So there was a sort of a standard package. And then from that standard package Vancouver teachers added in a more sophisticated wav

AC [01:45:10] various kinds of staffing any that weren't necessarily ones pursued by the groups for different reasons.

SP [01:45:16] Well, yes, and we had a joint committee composed of board and union members, and that was a co-operative effort to fashion how things should be in our district.

AC [01:45:38] And what were the challenges in achieving that agreement?

SP [01:45:45] Sometimes it was a disagreement on the board. Well, there would be a certain trustee who saw things in a different light and was a powerful influence on a given board. So we also over time, had two strikes in Vancouver of varying lengths. I don't remember the lengths now, but we did. And this time those times, there was the understanding that we were not going to cross that line. Teacher, would I use the word forgiven, it's not probably the best word. We had forgiven transgressions of that nature as before, where the 4 a.m. arrivals were not disciplined or.... When we had the strikes, we made it quite clear that the expectation was you do not cross that line. And in all our big big districts nobody crossed it. Though it wasn't always pleasant. Since I was on the bargaining team, my job was to visit picket lines every day in case all of a sudden we'd be back at the table. So I'd start off at 6 a.m. and then I would go around to wherever. I went to one of the big high schools and the picket captain said, this is Sheila Pither, she's on the bargaining team. And one of the picketers, the teachers began to snarl at me like an animal. Just well, I'm not going to attempt to show you how. But just like a mad dog type of snarling thing, I mean, I could hardly, I mean, it was not civilized behaviour at all. But at the same time, I had to kind of I had to be amused by it because it was so outrageous. Anyway there were differing points of view. Let's put it that way. But we did have a lot of discipline. I don't mean disciplined. I mean that we did. And our picket captains were there at 5:00 a.m. and you weren't going to sneak in somehow. The administrators were very supportive. So a friend was telling me that he was in Prince George at the time. There's a little town called Giscome. And they had four teachers, three of them crossed the line and then they had a principal. He was the one walking the line while the three others were in the school. So different experiences around the province, different levels of acceptance and ability to pull it off, so to speak.

AC [01:49:21] So that gets us around to the same time that you were negotiating the first agreement and the second agreement. You were also the president, of the local. So you're released full time, but you were also the primary leader. You manage to juggle all those responsibilities and go into bargaining, also look after the day-to-day activities in the office, which usually involved members needing help or needing information or needing benefits or whatever they needed because there's a big task there and a big local. Tell us about that.

SP [01:49:58] Yes, it was. And we had grievances, obviously, that we had to pursue, wanted to pursue, wanted to win. So there were a great many variations on the theme. We were there and somebody could bring whatever to us. We made it really clear that this was not a sort of cushy job. I remember being there at 11:00 a.m. ... 11:00 p.m.

SP [01:50:37] One night and the phone rang and I answered. "Oh, hi Sheila," said the caller. "Just thought I'd tell you..." I can't remember what, but there was no surprise that I would be there working at 11:00. No, I mean what are presidents for? Yeah, it was. It was.

AC [01:51:01] So what were your what would you say your highlights were of the period of time when you were the president and the primary leader? What were the highlights in that period?

SP [01:51:11] For me, it was a variety of not knowing when I got up in the morning how what would happen necessarily during the day. It was also a feeling of great support. I trusted out members. I felt that I didn't have to call upon resources that weren't already within me. I had, I believe, fervently in what we were doing. So it was a struggle of conscience at all. It was an enjoyment of my fellow executive because I did feel that it was a team. If there were other points of view and there were. Interestingly when they were around the table, you wouldn't have been able to tell who was there from the other side, the side that wanted not to be a union. And the union supporters, there is usually no particular quarrel at all in terms of ideology.

AC [01:52:43] After your service as local president, you came to work at the B.C. Teachers Federation provincial office. You became a member of the Bargaining Member Services Division, which helped in the coordination, work and negotiation of local collective agreements. What challenges did you find in that new role now that you're operating full time at the provincial level as opposed to doing a little of both? How did that change?

SP [01:53:15] Well, there were geographical challenges because I was given the East and West Kootenays. I wanted them. And so I was very pleased to be given them as my responsibility. But there were lots of locals in the Kootenays. And so I did a lot of travel. And had to learn about what was in there in their contracts in terms of possibilities, particularly when there were grievances that were going ahead. I had to be with them and to advise. Also at the same time, I was looking after the code of ethics work that the Federation was doing. So I think I've never worked so hard in all my life as I did, but it was a fulfilling and joyful time. Al was

AC [01:54:29] was leading that division at the same time and I felt that our lawyers were very, very supportive. And you could go and say, look, I've got this. What would your advice be? So I felt that the underpinnings were there in terms of what the Federation was providing and felt that we listened to each other. I cared about what was happening in Prince Rupert or wherever, because to me it was very much a provincial body. Yeah well it is.

AC [01:55:19] So the challenges, the challenges in the bargaining side. What were they?

SP [01:55:24] Well, there were different levels of militancy in terms of upholding the contractual obligations. And so sometimes you'd find out that you were fighting precedence because such and so practice had gone on in the local for five years. All of a sudden somebody comes along and says, hey, what's happening here? And you're faced with five years of precedence. So there was that challenge. There were also a lot of differences in the view of administration in the schools that I was in, the districts that I was working with. Sometimes the local president felt a certain superiority. Let's put it that way because of the prestige of that job. My view of it was more of an opportunity to be of use, but that there were no special privileges involved in that or no need to be on a first name basis with the superintendent. But others took a different view, and sometimes you went up against almost a team.

AC [01:56:58] The team was against you.

AC [01:57:03] OK. So kicking it to the next phase, after you finish a four-year period at BCTF, you retired?

AC [01:57:16] And quote unquote retired. I wonder if you could describe some of the activities that you're involved in now, post-retirement, post-,teaching and maybe start with the activity that you've done that has the greatest impact on you in terms of your thinking if you get a chance, a few of the others.

AC [01:57:43] So what what do you think the activity that has the most impact was?

SP [01:57:47] Probably the work done in Namibia, in Africa.

SP [01:57:52] I've been there five times.

AC [01:57:55] So how did you end up in Africa helping Namibian teachers?

SP [01:58:00] My friend [01:58:01]Don Reider [0.3s] was going. The Federation was looking for people who would do that kind of overseas work. And so I decided that I would go and ended up going all that many times with two basic themes. The first was working with the Black Teachers Union, about how to handle grievances and ethical concerns. So three times when I went we'd travel the country from one border to another, driving with a armed escort on occasion, because there were internal and external troubles.

SP [01:59:00] They had the highest ideals in terms of their written constitution and expectations of people in the society.

AC [01:59:11] As a new government independent from...

SP [01:59:15] What they had done, they had studied various constitutions and practices in let's say Britain and English was the language of instruction. So they wanted to live up to those high ideals, but it wasn't necessarily already a custom that they had within the country. So we went and we took our code of ethics with us. And that was also very high ideals. We had good

SP [02:00:05] relationships with the head office of NANTU. And when we went twice, it was because the government had announced that the language of instruction was English and you'd better get on board because that's what you're going to teach in. Well, worked fine are with those who had English language skills and opportunities, but there were many who did not. So we went and wrote a curriculum and trained people to train others.

SP [02:00:45] I don't think that the outreach has been as good as we had hoped, and I don't know how stern the government has been in terms of saying this is what you're going to do or you're out. But those are the two times I went and probably in terms of the work I've done, it's the most exciting work, but I've done a lot of other things as well.

AC [02:01:25] Tell us a bit more about that.

SP [02:01:27] OK. Right now, I'm first Vice President of COSCO, the Council of Senior Citizens Organizations, and we have a workshop that we're inundated with. It's called 'Stay on the Road'. And I don't know if you know or not, but when you turn 80, you have to have your driving assessed and every two years thereafter.

SP [02:02:00] Well, we work closely with the superintendent of motor vehicles in terms of the practice of this particular obligation.

SP [02:02:14] And people were quite terrified.

SP [02:02:19] You can imagine, because they introduced need to be able to not use the computer, but to react on a computer like they would be, where you had to poke the screen. Well, people who'd never had a computer, been near a computer. They were terrified because if your Driver's License is going to go if you can't pass this test. Anyway we developed a workshop called 'Stay on the Road' and we said if we can get cooperation from ICBC with the driver examiners, that's their employees, if they will accompany us, that's going to be very powerful. Well, it has proved to be very powerful. We've got some funding from New Horizons. And in our application, we said that we would conduct fifteen workshops and the perception would be that there would be about 30 people there. We're getting crowds of 70, 80. The downside of that if there is one, is that the lunch is free? Well, providing lunch for 70 people is quite different from 30 in terms of cost. But it's in our deal with New Horizons. So we're pretty much out of money. We're asking the provincial government to get on board. BCRTA, retired teachers have assisted. So, it's my obligation to set the dates of the workshops, to find people who will look after the catering and the hall and etcetera, all the details that go into it.

SP [02:04:35] So I'm busy with that.

AC [02:04:38] A program defeated by own success.

SP [02:04:41] Unless we get money Al, we can't. We just can't. And you're going to let's say you've got 70 people there and lunch is fifteen bucks a head. That's a lot of money. And we've got to get there. We've been all over, but requests are coming in from all over as well. So that that's...I'm not complaining. We're very pleased that it's been so successful and we know that it's helped a lot of people to not be terrified because you don't drive your best when you're frightened out of your mind. If, in fact, you end up having to take a on the road test. So there's that. I'm doing, we're doing a lot of advocacy in terms of provincial government and we're also doing a lot of leadership of the National Teachers Federation, which, as the name suggests, is national body. It's my ambition to really improve that coordination across the country because I don't know where best practice necessarily is. But I do work very hard, but I do believe that the work I'm doing is not frivolous. I think that it's important work. I do feel that the team that has gathered and serves in this committee, in this organization is strong and talented, strong is good bit the talent is helpful as well. So I'm never, never a dull day.

AC [02:06:53] No. You're not looking for more work.

SP [02:06:57] Depends.

AC [02:06:59] So to turn back to public education. Any thoughts about the current state of affairs in public education in terms of our school system?

SP [02:07:12] I have a lot of sadness about it. We had, of course, a court challenge. And one, a lot of the language that had been stripped was our language. I did an affidavit for the lawyers because it was hard-won. Nobody said, oh, I'm too nice, we'll give you this. It was hard-won. And all of a sudden it's not there, not the coziest feeling in the world. So I don't see a rush towards settling the present situation. I don't know what it ... I don't feel on the inside of that. Why should I be? I'm not an active teacher, but it's not...

AC [02:08:23] It's an important issue.

SP [02:08:24] It's not shaping up well.

AC [02:08:26] So when you talk about the stripping of the language, you're talking about the actions of the Gordon Campbell government in 2002 to strip all of the class size provisions out of the collective agreements, all the staffing formula, anything that drove money or resources and was subsequently challenged. A decision was reached in 2016 by the Supreme Court of Canada saying that the government had acted inappropriately and inconsistently with the Charter of Rights and therefore the language was restored. And now we have a circumstance where the teachers are back trying to improve that language and make sure that there's effective means to enforce it. And at the same time, there's major challenges coming from the other side about whether they want to do that or not. Any advice for young teachers starting teaching?

SP [02:09:26] No, not a lot of advice. I think it's a...if a young person came to me and said, what do you think I should do?

SP [02:09:46] I couldn't in all good conscience say, I really think that being a teacher is something that you should tackle. I think that the atmosphere in many schools has altered. And I know that the support is not there for the expectations. It may mean <unclear>. So it is just I guess feel that you can if you're a teacher starting to feel that, you can move on it. It's your life you're spending and, ours and my view, is a profession where it's... Those are psychological as well as monetary reason for being there doing that, but the expectations of what you're going to be able to do without a feeling of the board is there to support me. I feel that the atmosphere could turn into the board doesn't care about me. I hope.

SP [02:11:10] I don't know. But that could happen that way.

AC [02:11:19] Thank you, Sheila.

SP [02:11:21] Oh, pleasure.