

Interview: Michele Alexander (MA)

Interviewer: Patricia Wejr (PW) and Donna Sacuta (DS)

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Transcription: Jane Player

PW [00:00:04] Michelle, can we just start with a bit of background information about where and when you were born?

MA [00:00:12] Okay. I won't tell you what year, (laughter) but I was born in Winnipeg, Manitoba, actually St. Boniface, I guess, a small part of Winnipeg. Yeah, a little while ago, we'll say that.

PW [00:00:35] Your family in Winnipeg, was there anything about your family that would have predicted that you would become a union activist in the future?

MA [00:00:43] Wow. I don't know what year it was because it was before I was born, but my great grandpa ended up dying on the job. He was—I guess he fell in a big vat of something like oil or something that burned him to death. Funny enough, I just found out about that not too long ago. I never knew how he died. A cousin of mine, that's also in the union movement, just happened to mention and then sent me the article from this newspaper in Winnipeg. I don't know. My mum was born in '41 so way before my mum. Yeah, so I think that might have had something to do with it, but I didn't know about it. I guess that was in my destiny, right? You know, back then probably my grandma probably got no money, and she had 15 kids. Yeah.

PW [00:01:51] When did you leave Winnipeg?

MA [00:01:53] I left Winnipeg. Oh, so now it's going to date me! In the early sixties (laughter) my parents divorced. Both my parents are born in Canada, and my mum married an American in the U.S. Air Force, and so we moved to the U.S. I had a green card. I lived there 'till basically '92. I came back to Canada for a year and a half to go to high school and then I went back to the U.S. Basically, I lived my whole life in the U.S. up until I came back here in '92.

PW [00:02:31] Was that to B.C. that you came?

MA [00:02:33] I came to B.C., yeah. Both my brothers lived to—all my families is in Canada except my mum. My mum refused to come back to Canada. She left in the sixties and only came back for funerals. Everybody was here except my mum. My brother said, 'Move here, it's a better life'— and I did. I was a single parent and the job that I had in San Francisco went bankrupt and the guy didn't contribute to EI, so there's no EI for me to access and I ended up being on welfare. Welfare in the United States is not a fun place to be. It was like \$250 while I was pregnant. That's what I got a month. Then once I had my child, it moved up to 350 and so my brother said, 'Move here, it's a better life'— and so I did. The goal was to get a government job. I didn't care if it was municipal, federal or provincial. I just knew that I needed a job that was going to give me a pension and wasn't going to go belly up. I said, 'When my daughter turns one, I'm going to go to the city of Vancouver.' She turned one in January '93. I went in March and interviewed and applied

and I was working by May. I've been at—was at the City of Vancouver up until the end of May this year, and that's going to be 29 years.

PW [00:04:08] What was your first job?

MA [00:04:10] Oh, my goodness. My first job was working at the Equal Employment Opportunity Program and that department was specifically to get more of the four equity groups into the City of Vancouver, being women, people of colour, disabled people, Indigenous people. They felt like there wasn't enough people, but it was really just a front. Before I was there, it was a woman from Peru, very dark skinned. You could tell that she was obviously a person of colour. Then when she—and because everybody else in the office was Caucasian except one South Asian woman, but she sat in the back, so nobody ever saw her. The office was all white. Even though I had got in the temp pool, I had to re-interview for that job. Years later I figured out it's because, you know, they needed that visual of somebody in those four groups. I fell into three as a woman of colour and a woman, and also there's Indigenous to my family. I hit three out of the four markers. When I left, then they brought in a guy that was visibly disabled. It's all just to—what's the word I'm looking for?

PW [00:05:38] Tokenism?

MA [00:05:38] Thank you. Yeah, exactly. Just tokenism to show that, 'Hey, yeah, we've got people from the four groups here.' That got my foot in the door, right? Then, you know, I moved all over the city. I bounced around for six years until I got permanent.

PW [00:05:56] What was your permanent position?

MA [00:05:57] Bylaw enforcement, so I've been pounding the streets of Vancouver, spreading love wherever I go. (laughter) Making friends.

PW [00:06:06] You know what they call those people in Victoria? Parking Ambassadors.

MA [00:06:12] Oh! (laughter) We're definitely not ambassadors. Yeah, it's been a—I like the job because you do your thing. You're alone. You don't have, besides the public (laughter) [unclear] management in your ear and stuff. You go out, you do your job, and it's—I like working outside. I don't care if it's raining or not. It's better than being inside. For me, it was it's a good gig, and it gave me a good pension. It gave me the opportunity to raise my daughter as a single parent. Now she's a teacher. It's come full circle. Now, if I could just get her active in the union, that'd be yay! Hopefully she sees this, and then I'm going to get the phone call. (laughter)

PW [00:07:04] Speaking of active in the union, so how did you become active in the union?

MA [00:07:10] I had a problem that wasn't resolved to my satisfaction. I bounced around for six years trying to get full time in and couldn't figure out why I wasn't getting the jobs. I went to the union, and they tried to help me, but it wasn't to my satisfaction. Of course, I got mad and said, 'I'm going to start learning about the union.' I just was like most people, I was like, 'Oh, yeah, I'm a part of the union,' but that's all I knew. Then, once I had this issue and decided to become a shop steward and start taking workshops and stuff, it's just been very valuable. Now I've been facilitating for CUPE [Canadian Union of Public Employees] for 15 years. I quite like it. It's also another way to get out from work, but it's

more about helping people learn about the union and what the union can do for you and what your rights are. It's important that everybody knows their rights. My co-workers said to me, 'Oh, you should leave a list of all the things we should know.' I said, 'Well, what you should do is learn your collective agreement. Everybody needs to know what's in the collective agreement. It's your rights. You shouldn't need me to come and tell you. You should want to know just because.' It's been great in that respect, so I'm going to miss that for sure.

PW [00:08:41] Basically, you go out to union workshops and—

MA [00:08:44] Wow, since—I Zoom. We've been facilitating online, but thankfully it's opening up. CUPE is going to have their weeklong school in person in Kamloops, so I'm going to go do that. That'll be nice to actually facilitate in person with real people to see them and even touch them. (laughter)

PW [00:09:07] This made me think I'm not sure that we actually said that you were in Local 15.

MA [00:09:11] Oh, I am City of Vancouver, CUPE 15. We were the Vancouver Municipal Regional Employees Union before we joined CUPE, and that was just after I started with the city. Yeah, been around a long time. Twenty-nine years is a long time. It's a lifetime, actually (laughter) to be with one employer. The only time I haven't been with them is when we went on strike. I had to go find a temp job in an office because \$50 a day wasn't enough when you're a single parent. Otherwise, I've been with the city this whole time.

PW [00:09:53] If we could just, as they say in COVID pivot event, I'm just interested in your community activities as well. I understand you're quite active.

MA [00:10:05] I'm trying to be. I sat on the national—okay, I always get this name wrong—the National Congress of Black Women Foundation and been very active there. It's been very good. Since COVID hit we haven't done a lot and there's a bit of restructuring going on. I've just now gotten on the board. We're trying to restart the Junior Black Achievement Awards and we're looking at trying to do that in 2023. This year is going to be quite busy. We've got a good group of people together and we're just trying to engage the community and get black youth involved. We're looking at a bunch of different things like scholarships for black youth. Very excited about that and hopefully that all goes well.

PW [00:11:10] How have you found basically that any changes over time with diversity in unions and have, in your experience, have they become a little more proactive and in terms of like partnering with some of these organizations just to tackle the racism that is still around? [unclear] in unions, unfortunately.

MA [00:11:39] I was the diversity vice-president for racialized members for 12 years on CUPE BC's executive. There has been a big change that if I'm being 100 percent honest, I feel like it's just a little bit— it's like okay, we get up and we do the equality statement and now four diversity, vice-presidents get up and speak and we do it. Yes, CUPE gives money to organizations and whatnot, but I feel like there's so much more that can be done. It's kind of—we're walking the walk and we're talking the talk, but we're not walking the walk. There's always a lot more they can do. They just spoke about whatever happened yesterday at this diversity and inclusion audit study and somebody got up and said something really inappropriate. Obviously, people still aren't getting it, and I don't know

what can be done for people to actually get it. I guess all I can say is there's just a lot more that can be done and there's a long way to go to, making everything equal for everybody. Not just saying it, and sugar-coating it; get actually physically doing something like what Desmond Cole said this morning. Don't just honour the land—actually think about the land and what you're doing to honour the land.

PW [00:13:30] What about in your job and interaction with the public. Did you experience—

MA [00:13:36] Oh my God. The public loves to drop the N-word (laughter) or I get called the Black B a lot and, whatever. I grew up in the U.S. It's not like I've never been called the N-word before, and I'm sure I'll be called that word again. It's just a word. It's a horrible, nasty word. I try to rise above it. My daughter is biracial, and I remember her saying years ago, 'Why is everything always about black with you? Everything's about black.' I said, 'Well, because that's how I grew up.' I grew up in the U.S. in the sixties where people were discriminated against a lot. I came back to Canada in '75 for a brief minute. I went from Arizona where the majority of people are blacks and Mexicans to—where did we live—Stoney Mountain, Manitoba, where we be the only black people. It was just like, 'Holy cow!' In the way I grew up, and watching what my mum went through in the U.S. is racism oppression. I tried to explain to her that this is the reality of it. She may experience racism in different ways because people will look at her and say, 'Oh, is one of your parents black?' Who asks that kind of question, first of all? It was asked by a black woman of all things, and she said, 'Yeah.' She said, 'Oh, your father.' My daughter said, 'No, actually, my mum.' 'Oh, you don't hear about that a lot, she said. 'Black women and white men. Oh, no, you don't hear about that a lot.' Like it's taboo, but it's okay for a black man and a white woman. Nobody—It's like, okay, whatever. (laughter) Flip the switch and it's something completely different though. I don't know. I digress; I'm sorry. You all might have to cut this part.

PW [00:15:59] The one thing I know you've had a message specifically for your daughter earlier but what message would you give to young people, in general, about unions and why they should—

MA [00:16:11] Unions are important people. I would just say that if you're in a union, or if you have a union job, you have stability. You have people that are there for you, backing you. It's a solid force of people and we try to get things done. We try to do the right thing. It's important that if you are a member of a union, get involved because it's important. It's important work and it's valuable work. You'll get a lot out of it. I've learned so much, not just union wise. Doing all of this union training has made me a better person and made me think more and made me think outside the box. Especially with young people, you're a whole new generation with technology and stuff way more advanced than us older types and that goes a long way. They can get the message out way more like with this Instagram and stuff. My daughter says you're too old, you won't get it— and I don't. For the younger people, spread the message, get active. That's all I can say.

DS [00:17:35] I just wanted to back up a bit to when you were born in Winnipeg in your family, and I know you're related to Warren Williams, [unclear] the connection with the black sleeping car porters. Is that in your family as well?

MA [00:17:49] He was I think—a Lane. Why do I want to say he was a Lane? I think he was a Lane. My great grandparents are Lanes, so I am from that side of the family. Yeah. On my dad's side, they're all from Nova Scotia. My parents divorced young, and I grew up

in the U.S., I never met anybody from my dad's side of the family. Nobody. I had his one brother that lived in Winnipeg when I was there and his two kids and one of them are deceased. That whole side of my family, unfortunately, I wish I knew, but I don't. The Lane side, I kind of know. Growing up in the U.S., I could pass somebody on the street, and they could be family and I wouldn't even know it, right, because I didn't grow up in Canada. That's kind of sad in that respect.

DS [00:18:40] You said that there's some Indigenous.

MA [00:18:44] From the U.S. side, so Apache and Cherokee. I don't know any of that story I know, [clears throat] excuse me, that my great, great, grandpa came up from Nebraska and ended up in Maidstone, Saskatchewan. There's still a little church there and a cemetery because my cousin has gone to see it. It's still there. It's obviously quite falling apart, but there's still a physical building there and I'd love to go see it.

DS [00:19:21] Here in Vancouver, have you connected with the Black History Society people or—

MA [00:19:26] I haven't. I wanted to get active with the whole Hogan's Alley thing, and I've gone on their tours, and we did a—and by we, I mean the Racialized Members Committee—did a Black History Month event and held it at the Strathcona School where Barbara Howard taught. It was just so inspirational being there. Then the Hogan's Alley set up like a ten-point walking tour. We walked all around and saw Jimi Hendrix's grandma's house. It's quite—you can just go online and Google it and then walk the ten points yourself. It would be great to get involved with that society because they're doing really good work.

DS [00:20:22] You did that as part of the union?

MA [00:20:23] Yes, as part of the union committee.

DS [00:20:25] We have tried in the Labour Heritage Centre for Black History Month to always tell some kind of Black story in unions. There are some things that we found out that—normally you hear the sleeping car porters [unclear]

MA [00:20:40] Yes.

DS [00:20:41] Some pretty tragic.

MA [00:20:44] Yeah. [unclear] funny that I saw—I didn't know about the whole—about Oppenheimer Park, but I was walking down there doing metres one day and whenever I see a plaque, I have to stop and read it. Then I found out about, you know, there was a whole Japanese baseball team here back in the day. I was like, 'What?' I didn't even know that because it's not well known.

DS [00:21:12] Yeah. The reason I asked you yesterday whether you were from the Alexander family, because they're a very famous Black family.

MA [00:21:19] That's what I hear. So many people ask me that. I'm like, 'Oh, no.'

DS [00:21:24] I did a blog post about Abe Mortimer, who was a Black man in Vancouver, and he was a coach for the IWA (International Woodworkers of America) union baseball team.

MA [00:21:35] Oh, stop it.

DS [00:21:36] I know he served in World War One and came back to B.C. and he was a real athlete. He was from the Alexander.

MA [00:21:46] Oh, wow. I'm going to have to look him up. Abe Mortimer. Okay.

DS [00:21:51] He was an umpire, too.

MA [00:21:52] Oh, wow. Okay.

DS [00:21:54] I think the press called him everybody's favourite umpire.

MA [00:21:58] Aww, well done.

DS [00:21:58] He sounds like a character.

PW [00:22:02] Okay. That was great. Thank you very much.

MA [00:22:04] Well, thank you, guys. Thank you so much.