

Interview: Elsie McMurphy (EM)

Interviewer: Al Cornes (AC)

Assisted by: Ken Novakowski and Lesley Harrington

Date: March 22, 2016

Location: Vancouver, BC

[00:00:11] AC: It is March 22nd, 2016; Al Cornes (is) conducting the interview; and present with me today are Ken Novakowski, and Lesley Harrington, who is our technical person. And, today we're interviewing Elsie McMurphy. Elsie McMurphy is Past President of the BCTF and was President from 1986 to 1989; and following that she was the Executive Director of the BCTF from 1989 to 1999. Good morning, Elsie, and welcome.

[00:00:55] EM: Good morning.

[00:00:57] AC: We'll begin by getting introduced in this interview, by just getting a little bit of background on you, and where it all started. So, where were you born, and where were you raised?

[00:01:08] EM: I was born in New Westminster; I was a fourth-generation British Columbian. My great-grandfather was one of the Royal Engineers, who came during the Gold Rush. And about when I was 6 years old, my family moved a very small ranch in the Cariboo. So, I grew up in the bush, with animals, without any electricity or telephone, or running water, except what we made ourselves.

[00:01:38] AC: Tell us a little bit about your family, and their political

[00:01:43] AC: views.

[00:01:56] EM: I wouldn't have said that my family was particularly left-wing, but when I think about it in the context of subsequent changes in society; I think, maybe they were among the original hippies, in the back-to-the-land movement, even though it was 1953 that they went back to the land. My dad was a pharmacist, and my mom was a mother-of-three; and yet, she became basically, the person that ran the ranch, because my dad, as a pharmacist had to work away from home.

[00:02:23] AC: So, what do you remember then, about your school experience? Of going to school, and...

[00:02:31] EM: I mostly liked school. Mostly, because I did fairly well at it, but it certainly had its ups and downs. One of the things, that happened to me, was, I skipped a grade, went from Grade 3 to grade 4 at Christmas time, and I remember being devastated, because right after I got into my Grade 4 class, they had a Social Studies test, which, of course, I did abysmally at,

so... It was quite disconcerting. But then, throughout my school career, I was—my elementary and secondary career—I was about two years in age behind the rest of my classmates, because of having a late in the year birthday, and then, skipping a year, so I felt like I was always running to catch up with the big kids.

[00:03:23] AC: Right. And so, these were small schools?

[00:03:25] EM: Yes. Well, small schools, until, in Grade 12 I went to Kamloops High, it was at the time, KamHigh; and stayed—boarded with friends for a year, and at that time the school had a dormitory attached to it, so I was able to stay at the dormitory for my Grade 13 year.

[00:03:45] AC: Oh, so you were away from home quite early...

[00:03:47] EM: Yes. I, essentially, left home when I was 14.

[00:03:52] AC: And, the smaller elementary school you went to, is there anything that sticks out in your mind,

[00:03:56] AC: other than this test that you mentioned before?

[00:04:14] EM: Well, I don't remember all that much. I mean, it was school. It seemed to me, an ordinary school. We got on a school bus in the morning, and got on the school bus to go home in the afternoon; and in between, you learn things, and it was interesting. It was entertaining, I did not necessarily always get on well, with my teachers, but I found that, as the years went on, they—my teachers—matured and became much more intelligent (smiles).

[00:04:33] AC: Tell us a bit about your university years, then.

[00:04:36] EM: Well, as I said, I did Grade 13 in Kamloops, which at the time was the equivalent of the first year university. My family was very poor, and really, couldn't afford to send me to university, which was why Grade 13 was a real gift. And then, I discovered, that if I could get myself through a year of university, I could do the methods year in teacher training, which I did at UBC, and was able to go out teaching on the basis of that, after two years—the equivalent of two years of university.

[00:04:53] AC: So,

[00:05:10] AC: going through the institute was something you could see as a doable thing in your circumstances.

[00:05:17] EM: It was doable; it wasn't my first choice, although I did belong to a future teachers club in high-school. My first choice would have been to become a lawyer, but partly because I was so young when I graduated, and the thought of trying to finance 7 years, plus a year of university to become a lawyer, was just beyond comprehension for me, in terms of the time-frame and the financial burden. And, by the same token, I had an affinity, I thought, working with kids, because my family, actually, had a dude- ranch, and I've been working with kids all my

teenage years. And, also, if I could get through that second year of university, then I could become self-supporting. So, there was a big incentive to become a teacher, and not a lawyer.

[00:06:12] AC: So, how old were you, when you came into teaching then?

[00:06:16] EM: I was 18 when I started teaching. Grade 6.

[00:06:22] AC: And, can you tell us a little bit about that? Where did you start teaching?

[00:06:25] EM: I went back to Clinton, I was teaching in my home-town, for that first year. I remember clearly, getting my cheque—my first cheque at the end of September; and those were the days, when the principal came around and handed you the cheque, there was no self-depository, no payroll deposit. And I'd been hired on for the magnificent sum of \$3,500 a year, and I divided it by 10, so I knew I was going to get \$350 at the end of September. And, when I looked at my cheque it was far less than that. So, I was horrified, because I had no idea that there were all these deductions, including one that really surprised me, was something about union dues. And I said, what's this "union dues", I don't belong to a union! And they said, yes you do, you belong to the BC Teachers' Federation. And I said, what's that? Because, clearly, nobody had mentioned the BCTF in my teacher training, and I knew nothing about it, so that was my introduction to the BCTF; was a deduction on my first cheque at the end of September.

[00:07:32] AC: Which was a shock, just like your Grade 4 test.

[00:07:35] EM: Yes!

[00:07:36] AC: So, tell us a bit about the attitudes that the teachers had in your school. What was it like to be teaching there? What were the other teachers like?

[00:07:43] EM: Well, it was a little bit strange, because, some other teachers in the school were teachers, who had taught me. So, learning a new relationship, an adult relationship was a challenge. But it was fun, because they were very gracious and very helpful; and I appreciated that. And, also that whole year was just a blur. My first year teaching—it was just survival. Just getting through the days, getting the lessons prepared, getting the work marked, figuring out what to do, and how to do it. Of course, we had very little in the way of extra resources, or anything, and I think, I had almost 40 kids in my class. Let me tell you how excited I was about the class-size campaign, that the BCTF started in later years. So, I just remember that year as being a huge blur.

[00:08:37] AC: And so, what happened in the subsequent years then?

[00:08:40] EM: Well, then I went back to university. I just taught for one year, went back to university, got my third year, and then, went teaching again.

[00:08:57] AC: And, where did you go?

[00:09:14] EM: Then I went to Kamloops. And I taught for a year in Kamloops, at Lloyd George Elementary; and that was, again, a seminal experience for me. It was formative, because, my classroom was right across the hall from this hither-to, unknown to me creature, called a school library. And, the possibilities that I discovered as a teacher, in accessing a school library, changed my way of teaching, changed my way of thinking about education and changed my career, because after that experience, when I went back to university, I changed my major to become a teacher-librarian.

[00:09:32] AC: So, the importance of libraries, and librarians playing a critical role in learning. Tell us a little bit about that...

[00:09:41] EM: Oh, it was at the time, when school libraries were really getting off the ground. Kamloops school District, 24 at the time, was the leader in establishing school libraries. And during that same era we had people, like John Church writing his report, called Personalizing Learning, if I remember correctly. And, what I found with access to the library, was you weren't limited to a textbook. There are just so many more resources that you could access, and you could have groups of children off, working in the library, and you can have groups of children working in your classroom, and it felt so much more like learning, than instructing.

[00:10:30] AC: So, the challenges and joys then, of teaching. By that time you had kind of gone through some of the early experiences, and you've had more training, you became a librarian at your school, I

[00:10:42] AC: gather.

[00:10:43] AC: So, tell us a little bit about the joys and challenges of those early years at that?

[00:10:50] EM: Well, after the year in Kamloops I moved back to Victoria, and I got a job in Saanich. And, for the first two years I was in Saanich, I was teaching intermediate grades. But then, I was able to get a job as a teacher-librarian. And Saanich was just starting their school libraries at the time. And so, I ended-up working in about 10 different Saanich schools, establishing their school library, which mostly consisted to sweet-talk teachers out of their classroom collections, to establish a common collection for the whole school to use. And, of course, nothing was catalogued, so you had to do a lot of cataloguing. And the other aspect of the work, which I found really exciting, was I got to work with all the kids, I got to work with all the teachers, and also, a tremendous support team of parent-volunteers. So it was a really... I found it a really exciting time to be on the forefront of establishing what I thought was a great educational asset in the schools.

[00:12:07] AC: Yes, and I think most of the school librarians would agree with your view... So, when was the first time you became involved actively in your teachers' association?

[00:12:19] EM: Well, I first became involved with librarians. First, in my local and then provincially. But what I found was, things that seemed patently obvious to me from an

education point of view —like, of course, it makes sense to have a school library, and, of course, you should be spending money on resources, and, of course, you should have this kind of flexibility, that allows teachers and kids free access to the library, not just the rigid in-out-in-out; take a book; bring it back in a week type of library programs. What, I found was, that the very sound educational arguments that you were making to the school administration or to the school board, or whoever was making the decisions, seemed to fall on deaf ears. And I began to realize that these were political decisions that were being made about the allocation of resources, basically. And, if you wanted to influence those decisions, you had to get involved at the political level. Small “p” political, but you had to influence the decision-making process from the point of view of not just “it makes good sense educationally”, you had to go to another level, and show why it would make good sense politically, environmentally, economically, and whatever it might be.

[00:13:48] EM: And, so I found, that one way to do that, was through my local teachers’ association. At the same time I was getting involved with the consciousness-raising that many of us were at the time, about the Status of Women. And so, that was sort of, another avenue of access for me into working with my local association—was through the Status of Women.

[00:14:10] AC: OK, so what jobs did you have then? You were working with the PSA of the school librarians, and then in addition, you were doing the Status of Women job at your local...

[00:14:22] EM: Well, in the different locals I was doing different things.

[00:14:27] EM: I was President of the Teacher-Librarians’ (Association) in Saanich, but I wasn’t President in Kamloops, I was involved with the Status of Women, so I was kind of going back and forth.

[00:14:35] AC: So, I guess, these were fairly early stages of the Status of Women Program, that you were involved in. Can you tell us a bit about what kinds of things were there in your area, and what kinds of challenges were

[00:14:46] AC: there?

[00:14:47] AC: And, the rewards?

[00:14:48] EM: Well, the rewards were... that sense of individuality and competence and being a woman. I mean, it was... and I shouldn’t use language, like “being free from the oppression of men” because I never felt really oppressed, but by the same token I could see around me—and had seen all my life, actually—the differences between the sexes in terms of how they were viewed. It started when I was in high-school; I was on students’ council, and I was the Secretary, and the boy was the President. The boy tended to be not-too-organized and not-too-much of a hard worker, so, being a Secretary I ended up doing a lot of it, but at the end of the year, he got the big-block letter, and I got the little-block letter, and I remember that. SO, it was little things like that, that stay in your mind, and spur you onto seeking a more equal structure, and I think

that notion of equality and fairness has been something that stayed with me all my life. And still is.

[00:16:07] AC: So, then, in addition to those roles locally then, what about the BCTF; how did you become involved with the BCTF at the provincial level?

[00:16:19] EM: Well, I ran in 1977. I ran for GR from Saanich; GR then—LR now.

[00:16:36] EM: Local representative.

[00:16:38] EM: So, I guess, that was one of the first official experiences at the provincial level. I'd been an AGM delegate before that, but...

[00:16:54] AC: So, tell us a little bit about that, and that kind of work. So, you ran for GR and that gave you a whole new arena and find out from other people about what was going on provincially...

[00:17:10] AC: Tell us a little bit about that.

[00:17:36] EM: Well, and it helped that I'd worked in at least two different districts. I had the Interior perspective, as well as the Lower Island perspective. And all through those years, I think, it was a bit of a—I don't want to say, a tumultuous time for the Federation—but the Federation was in a state of flux, a state of change, like the rest of society. And there were tensions in the Federation, and issues, and, you know, conflicts; and I found that the Federation was just full of people with fabulous ideas and energy and commitment; awareness of the world around them; and for a little kid from the Cariboo, all of this was pretty heady stuff. I lapped it up.

[00:18:03] AC: So, OK then, early work in the local, early work provincially; then what do you think your motivation was to run as the GR for Saanich? What was going on there?

[00:18:19] EM: You know, I was trying to remember as to why I decided to run for the GR. I think, it might have been because I had been an AGM delegate; it might have been because I didn't want to be a secretary. I wanted to do something, but I didn't want to be a secretary. And I think, at the time, the GR in Saanich had been there for a long time, and I thought, it was time, that he—he was a man—and I thought, it was time that a woman represented Saanich. And, so, I put my name forward, It was the only contested election of the annual meeting at the time; and I won. But I won because I got "blessed" by one of the leaders in the local. Can I diverge into a dumb story?

[00:19:07] AC: Sure!

[00:19:16] EM: Well, anyway—I had been married, and I was separated and I had gone back to my family name. I had a different last name. So, I was running as Elsie McMurphy... And, we were at the General Meeting, and it was very informal, like, there were no speeches, no literature, it was just a... you know—this is the name, this is the name, and they're running.

[00:19:45] EM: Anyway, this man, who was just a stalwart in the local and had been a well-respected principal, and an activist, leader, just a gem of a person—anyway, he said, who is this Elsie McMurphy? So, I stood up and said, I'm Elsie McMurphy. And he said: "Oh, THAT Elsie McMurphy!" Because, of course he had known me as Richardson, but he didn't know me as McMurphy, because I had just came back into the local. And it was like a benediction. It was just the way he said it, it was like, oh, she's OK. And I'm sure that's why I got elected (laughs). Because I was just back in the local. I had been away and just came back.

[00:20:25] AC: A powerful campaign.

[00:20:27] AC: Orchestrated.

[00:20:29] EM: [Laughs] Yeah.

[00:20:30] EM: Well, actually, that's not true—it was orchestrated to the extent that I had phoned around to a lot of my women friends and said. I'm going to run, I hope you'll come and vote for me, and they did. So, that, and the benediction from...

[00:20:34] AC: So, a multi-faceted campaign.

[00:20:39] EM: Yes (nods).

[00:20:45] AC: So, you got onto the provincial Executive then—so you're back on that.

[00:20:50] AC: Tell us a bit about running for that office and your service on the Executive Committee.

[00:20:55] EM: Well, I've been inspired by, of course, the likes of people like Linda Shuto at the provincial level, and the Status of Women Program. And, I remember, you know, how powerfully Linda spoke, when she encouraged us to get active in our local. Like, don't let the men do it. Take over. Bring women's leadership to your local, and to the Federation whatever way you can; and I took all these lessons to heart. And I really knew nothing about the Federation, and how it worked, and the internal dynamics, I guess. I didn't know there were movements within the Federation; I didn't know that there were "parties". And I just thought it was a great organization, and I was proud to be a teacher, and wanted to be involved. And I wanted to be involved as a woman. And I remember coming to, I guess, it was the Representative Assembly; before the AGM, and I ran into Linda; and I had decided then, that I was going to run; and I told her that. I said: "Linda! I'm going to run for Member at Large on the Executive!"

[00:22:23] EM: And her face fell. And I was so taken aback, because, I thought, isn't this what I'm supposed to do? (laughs) Why is she not happy? And then I found out that she was a part of a movement called Teachers Viewpoint, and they had their slate of candidates, and didn't want, you know, competition. And, I guess I should have taken it as a compliment, that I was perceived as being competitive in the run for the position. I did get elected, I did find out about the

Teacher Viewpoint, I became a member of the Teacher Viewpoint, but my first election was as an independent; on my own; and I don't remember correctly, but I might have topped the polls; I'm not sure.

[00:23:18] AC: OK—we can go back and check that record.

[00:23:20] EM: Yeah.

[00:23:21] AC: So, you got yourself onto the Executive. So, what was that like, how did that go? What doors did that open

[00:23:31] AC: and what challenges did that bring? What year was it?

[00:23:33] EM: 1981. I went onto the Executive in 1981. Two years as a Member at Large; and then in 1983 I ran for Second Vice-President, and I was a year as Second Vice-President; and then ran for the First Vice-President, which I was from 1984 to 1986.

[00:23:51] AC: So, on the Executive—tell us about what sorts of things you saw there?

[00:23:59] EM: We had the Solidarity movement at the time with all of the strife and struggles that were associated with that. I had the opportunity to work with fabulous people, like Larry Kuehn, and many others on the Executive. Larry was the President at the time. That's one of the fabulous things about the Federation, is, you get involved and you get to have the opportunity to learn so much from other people, and you gain a much broader perspective, because you learn about others' perspectives. And I learned a lot about Robert's Rules (laughs). And, I think, everyone at the Federation learns a lot about Robert's Rules. To this day, I still use those lessons. But I learned of the importance of story-telling to convey a message. I learned the importance of solidarity among your own group, be it small or large. If you're working in these political arenas, you really have to know who your friends are and who you can depend on. So, the politics of the organization, I guess, I began to learn when I got on the Executive.

[00:25:55] AC: So, you talked a little bit about Solidarity. Give us a little more of the flavour of that period, when you were on the Executive. Can you tell us what was happening in terms of broader political and social environment of the day? What was going on

[00:26:14] AC: then?

[00:26:17] EM: Sighs) Somebody else should tell that story (laughs).

[00:26:21] AC: Well, some of the experiences you referenced it a little bit already.

[00:26:32] EM: Yeah. We had the teachers' strike that fall, over Bill 3. And Ken Novakowski was instrumental in getting some exemptions negotiated for, I think, Richmond, and North Van, which the government, subsequently, refused. And then, Jack Munro went back to Kelowna and got a deal, to end the strikes, to end the walk-outs, and Larry Kuehn came as close, I think, to exploding as anyone I've ever seen. It was a sad day for the leadership, I think, at the BCTF, at

that time, and for teachers, generally, because... It wasn't actually, I shouldn't say that—it wasn't a sad day, it was heroic. It was heroic what teachers had done. And they'd done it together, and they had stayed out longer, than anyone thought they would. So, in that sense it was a monumental event. It was pivotal in the organization. And that's one of the things, I guess, I've learned over the years, is that it's not necessarily useful to assess an event the day it happens. It's much easier to see how successful it was from a perspective of time.

[00:28:16] EM: So, we could say, that, on that day we were not successful at what we were trying to achieve. But when you look at it in the broader picture, when you look at what teachers did, and how that experience was, I think, one of the major ones in changing the way the Federation operated; I think it was a success from that point of view. It had definitely, definitely, changed the organization, I think, in a way that made it stronger.

[00:28:40] AC: So, talk to us just for a minute about that strengthening. It was strengthening internally. What was the external relationship like, in terms of Solidarity and the building of alliances, and troops that came together around that?

[00:29:01] EM: Well, again, that was another... I think... Sometimes governments bite off more than they can chew, I think they underestimate people in many respects. And, I think, that was an example of a government going too far, and as a result the union movement and a community movement came together in a way, that I think, has worn in places over the years, but I think there's still a kind of a solidarity between the, generally speaking, working people, and community activists, that stands to this day. And, I think, it's a relationship that both sides try to nurture and try to maintain. I mean, it's not without difficulty, but we tend to turn to each other.

[00:30:03] AC: OK, so let's come back to your role at the BCTF. It is 1986, you are elected as President. What were the factors that lead to that success?

[00:30:15] EM: You know, one of the factors was, that I had had the opportunity for two years as First Vice-President, to be very active. I was in Vancouver on my own; my family had stayed on the Island. So, I was at loose end, so anything that came along, basically, I either volunteered, or was volunteered to do it. So, I had a lot of opportunity to travel the province, to work within and without the Federation; dealing with media—that was when we filed our Charter challenge—the bargaining rights challenge under the Charter of Rights. And, Pat Clarke was President at the time—another great person to head the BCTF. And I was happy to fill-in where I could. He had a young daughter at the time, and where I could give him a break, I would do it. And I think, that's one of the reasons why I became fairly well-known as Vice-President; and then, when I ran for President, there was and still is a certain momentum that develops, when you get on the Executive, and you start moving up. It's not inevitable, that is that sense of, now you've done this, and now you're going to do the next step,

[00:31:48] EM: and I just did the next step.

[00:31:51] AC: You were the fourth woman President of the BCTF. How did the organization treat you in your role as a woman? What was the support? Were they supportive of women?

[00:32:16] EM: I don't quite know who "they" is. Some always are, and some always aren't. You never have 100% of anything, I don't think. I always felt, that I had a huge majority behind me; which was always reassuring, particularly, going through the tough times. I say that deliberately, because it was never in my game-plan to become a teacher-politician. I didn't set-out to become President of the BC Teachers' Federation; it was, as I said, once I got onto the Executive, it just seemed logical to go to Second Vice, First Vice, etc. I never felt as if I were doing it for me; but because it was such a powerful organization it was easy to be President in a sense of having that support.

[00:33:21] AC: So, the challenges that confronted you then, during your presidency—so we heard a lot about Solidarity; we had wage controls at the same time; and you became President. School board budgets are still being reduced; teacher salaries were still being reduced and what were the challenges then, as you enter the office; and then as it does progress—can you talk about your first year of presidency?

[00:33:56] EM: Well, yes, we had Ed Peck and the Compensation Stabilization Program. Did I get that name right? And there was a lot of pressure building up, a huge amount of pressure building up as well as teachers seeking the right to full, free collective bargaining. And, with the passage of the Charter of Rights, we thought that we would have a very good case to make for that as one of our legitimate rights as a trade union.

[00:34:19] AC: What was that piece then?

[00:34:42] AC: Can you take a minute to talk about the Charter of Rights? What were the teachers seeking?

[00:34:49] EM: Basically, full, free collective bargaining. We were limited in our bargaining to salaries and benefits, really. We could not bargain the terms of our employment, we could not bargain our working conditions. We could not bargain processes for lay-off or hiring, or assignment, or numbers of students in our classes, or supports services; basically, we were limited to wages and benefits.

[00:35:24] AC: So, the Charter was going to provide...

[00:35:59] EM: Full, free bargaining rights for teachers. And, I think, partly as a result of us bringing that challenge forward—and I just want to emphasize that one of the things that I think, has helped the Federation throughout my experience, has been some just excellent legal advice that we've had along the way from lawyers in-house and outside counsel as well. And people like Allan Black and David Yorke were just marvelous in helping us pursue these rights. Anyway, when the Charter was proclaimed—(I'm) a little bit unsure on the date, I think it was April 15th, and, I think, we filed on the 16th. And, the following April the government brought

down Bills 19 and 20, which ostensibly, gave us what we were seeking for in the court, which was free collective bargaining.

[00:36:34] EM: Now, it being Social Credit government, it didn't come on a platter, it came with a lot of fish-hooks attached to it, and the Federation was essentially dissolved by the legislation; our membership was erased; locals could bargain, but only the local could bargain, not the Federation; and the local had to choose either being a unionized local, with full, free collective bargaining rights; or the association model it was called, which the only resolution they had for disputes was to go to arbitration. But then, only, if the employer agreed. So, it was really just the case of the government getting a bit too greedy. They thought—some of the people, who were advising them—I guess, said, oh teachers will never unionize. Teachers will never choose that union option; they'll stay professional. And, one of the strengths of the BCTF is that it has always been a union of professionals. I don't know if it's always been called that, but it's always acted that way—both, caring for the professional side of teaching, as well as the economic and job security factors as well.

[00:37:56] AC: So, teachers lost some rights in the result of these

[00:38:02] AC: Bills 19 and 20.

[00:38:06] EM: Didn't really lose rights. The BCTF lost membership.

[00:38:10] AC: We lost membership. Fiscally, we lost dues deduction, BCTF lost recognition of their role in collective bargaining; and so it meant that, whatever model you chose you had to go back and secure those basic needs before you got started.

[00:38:29] AC: And that was one of the huge challenges of bargaining, this, sort of, a blank slate versus maintaining what we've already got. And, the position that Federation took, was that, no, we already had "these", and we will build on "that"; and the school boards took the position of, no, no, no, no, we're starting from zero. Plain sheet.

[00:38:52] AC: So, what did you think, when you were President about all this legislation? What is your personal thought as you suddenly saw all this?

[00:39:02] EM: It was devastating to see... We knew that we weren't best friends with the Social Credit government, but that legislation was so mean, so punitive that—again, half the time our government does our work for us. They go so far, that nobody can believe that they're being that categorical and that blatant in their action. And so, when people realize what they were losing or the protections they were losing, if they choose A, or B over A, in the final analysis, our job became easy, but in those first days, we were reeling, because it was so far-reaching, and it had such an impact on our organization. The creation of the College of Teachers, which was particularly offensive to us in that it tried to separate teachers from their professionalism; which, again, you know, it just angered people immensely.

[00:40:30] AC: So, tell us a little bit about the College of Teachers. What it was designed to do, and how that took away from the Federation?

[00:40:38] EM: Well, the legislation, essentially, said that the professionalism of teachers would be determined by this College that would be set-up by the government, there would be government appointees on the college, as well as some of elected teachers. And in the beginning they were even going to be determining the professional development opportunities of teachers—which was something that the BCTF had done for years. We have done it through our professional specialists' associations and a whole number of other ways; but that all was going to be taken away from the BCTF too. So, the college was going to set standards; it was going to be responsible for teacher discipline—it was going to handle the matters of teacher discipline—and certification, decertification, and, not only that, but the teachers would have to pay for it! So, it was a government body that teachers were being told, that they will have to now pay for, and that they would not be able to effectively control. And so, one of the first challenges we had as a Federation, was to make sure that we elected to the Teacher College Council, a group., which was sympathetic to goals and objectives of the BCTF vis-a-vis the college.

[00:42:26] AC: So, organizationally, the BCTF had two choices. And, what was the provincial thinking there, as to which choice we would take, either to be a teacher trade-union, in the words of the legislation; or an association at the local level?

[00:42:51] EM: There were many debates, but there was no difference of opinion on which was the better avenue for teachers. Clearly, it was the union model, because (under)the association model the teachers had no rights. At all. Literally. In the final analyses it would be the school board that would determine what their agreement said. And, so, in that sense, everybody had agreed, that the union model was the preferred one. Where the debate developed in the organization was whether or not the BCTF, as the provincial organization would continue to represent all the teachers in the province, whether they were in the union local or in association local. And that debate raged heavily for a few months, but in the final analyses it was a moot point because every single local voted to choose the union option. And virtually, every local negotiated compulsory membership, but they had to do that by getting members to sign-up, and we had a huge, overwhelming sign-up of members, in the nineties (percentage-wise) almost everywhere.

[00:44:23] AC: So, in the process then, the teachers went through the sign-up; they were certified at a local level, as well as the bargaining agent for teachers; and then, they had to start a round of first collective agreements under the labour code. What was that like? And what challenges did the organization face with that?

[00:44:48] EM: Well, that was huge. We had a lot of training to do; because we had 75 locals at the time, and everybody had to learn how to bargain the terms and conditions of employment, which they hadn't had the opportunity to do before. We now had strike and lock-out options

available to each side; so had to learn how to handle those; and there were many instances of strikes and lock-outs; we had to develop a strategy around how we were going to get those agreements, so there was a lot of training. We adopted some sort of base-line approaches, which is why I mentioned earlier, that we were not going to start from a blank slate, we were going to put on the table, what was already there and build on that. There were a number of slogans, which were very useful. One of the being “Why not here?” because we were able to get a couple of key locals to get an agreement and establish a framework, a pattern, and then it made it a bit easier. And I think, the other thing in the game—the other side underestimated our ability to move into this new realm;

[00:46:35] EM: some would say that the BCSTA, the school boards were overwhelmed by the teachers, and that may be true—I think the teachers were so eager to finely get a collective agreement, a framework for employment, that recognized their rights as employees. That there was this huge penned-up desire for this kind of equality, and basic rights. So, our negotiators went to the table with that kind of power, and support behind them, whereas a lot of the school boards just sent-in hired negotiators, who, maybe, and I am not sure about this, but maybe they didn’t have the same kind of emotional, gut-level commitment to the process and the outcome, that the teachers did. And plus, the fact, that is was... if I could quote a current politician, you know, “It’s 2015”—at time it was 1987, it was time, it was time, for the employment relationship to grow up .

[00:48:05] AC: So, of that first year of your experience, you see, all the locals signing-up and certifying as trade unions; we see quite a number of collective agreements achieved by the time you reached your second election; what was the high point of that first year you have in all the sign-up and certification and the collective agreements? Is there any one event, or sense you have of that?

[00:48:49] EM: It was just that profound sense of commitment on the part of the membership to re-making the organization; and this huge, the overwhelming support for the sign-ups and the fact that everybody chose that trade union model. If you’re asking me, personally, I mean, I wasn’t personally responsible for any of it, so I don’t personally, take any credit for it; it was people like Al Cornes, and Ken Novakowski, and all the Local Presidents and all the people in our bargaining division, and all the members that went to the meetings, and carried the picket signs, that clearly, did accomplish all this. I had the, in many respects, easy task of speaking for those members. And, because there was such support, I felt really confident in being able to convey their wishes, their needs to the media, to the public, to the government.

[00:50:13] AC: So, what—when you went out to speak—what response did you get from the membership?

[00:50:24] EM: Really warm, very warm receptions.

[00:50:29] AC: What did people say to you?

[00:50:30] EM: Thank you for coming,

[00:50:32] EM: thank you for speaking for us; you sound like a teacher; you speak for us. I don't know—you have to ask them.

[00:50:54] KN: Elsie, can we just go back a bit, back to the introduction of the legislation in 1987? Later on that month there was a day of protest. Of the teachers. Could you talk a bit about that and your experience around that?

[00:51:13] EM: Again, there were huge rallies in all over the province, but two particularly big ones in Victoria for the Lower Island; and in Vancouver, for Vancouver and the Lower Mainland. I had just come out of a meeting with premier Vander Zalm; and it was a really discouraging meeting, because it appeared there was going to be no movement, and not only was there going to be no movement, he thought it was quite alright for government to actually, dictate what every teacher was going to be teaching and how they're going to be teaching it. And, I remember going to those rallies, which were huge rallies. The one in the AgriDome had thousands of teachers there, I don't remember how many; and the one in Victoria, you know, not as big, but filled the arena. And, I remember feeling the energy from the teachers, and feeling their anger, and hearing their cheers; and their disdain for what they thought was being done to them. And I could characterize that for them in the way I described what was happening. Again, that story-telling, this is what's happening and this is how we're dealing with this, and this is what we need you to do—and they would do it.

[00:53:28] AC: OK.

[00:53:29] AC: SO, in the same time period, just to pick up on the second attempt that occurred about a month later, June 1st, 1987, you had a walk-out not only of teachers, but of other workers. Tell us a little bit about that.

[00:53:46] EM: By this time, teachers had walked out primarily over the Bills 19 and 20, on April 28th, and then on June 1st there was a province-wide walk-out over the Bill 19, which affected everybody; not just teachers (Bill 20 was just basically, the one that affected teachers) and, again it was another kind of watershed for teachers in BC, because not only had they walked out on the 28th, but on June 1st, they, in fact, were in some other communities picketing-out other working people; and so, again, beginning to take a lead in the union movement in the province, without having that, really, as a part of the plan. But that's how it happened; and, as a result of not just that, but a number of different issues and media interviews, and statements, and actions, the President of BC Federation of Labour, Ken Georgetti, and I, both were served with charges of civil sedition from the then-Attorney General of the day, Brian Smith. That was a bit of a (shakes her head) shock, yeah, to us, and my first reaction was to laugh, because it was so silly; and then my second reaction was, wait a minute, this is serious! Fortunately, I think, saner heads prevailed in Victoria, and the charges were dropped. But that was, the province was in quite a bit of turmoil at that time; and rightly so, because, again, those two pieces of legislation were so far-reaching; so hard-hitting.

[00:55:56] AC: We haven't talked too much about the BCTF's role in professional development in the period that followed the College of Teachers. Tell us a bit more about why that was important for the organization to re-assert its role, or assert its role as the key in professional development. What things did the organization do to make sure that was happening? [...] I'd like to take a step back from professional development and ask you about one of the other effects of Bill 20, which was the removal of principals and vice-principals from local bargaining units and their role in the Federation.

[00:56:43] AC: So, tell us a little bit about that, please.

[00:57:33] EM: This was something that Principals and Vice-principals Association had been pushing for as we understand, behind the scenes with the government. We had attempted to accommodate the special role that the administrators have in the schools, by recognizing their need, for example, during a strike to go in and make sure the schools were safe and secure on the first day; if more time was needed there was a provision for special arrangements to be made with their local for them to stay in the schools for longer if they needed more time, than just the first day; but, nonetheless, when the legislation came down, it said that principals and vice-principals were to be excluded from the collective bargaining unit. So, the Federation was faced with a decision as to what we were going to do with regard to membership; whether we would continue to allow them to be in the Federation in some form of membership, without having the full membership; or completely sever the ties; or work out some kind of arrangement, whereby they could have access to things like the Salary Indemnity Fund (SIF). So, after there was a great deal of back and forth,

[00:58:23] EM: it became obvious that principals and vice-principals, the leadership of their PSA it was at the time, was not interested in maintaining a relationship with the Federation, and were, in fact, seeking to take a substantial portion of the Federation's assets with them, as they left. The Federation finally, adopted a position that said, they would be eligible for membership in the Federation, a special kind of membership that would allow them to still access our Salary Indemnity Fund that had been established by all the members as a form of income protection. So, that was the position that was adopted by the Annual General Meeting, but it turned out to be not sufficient to please the principals and vice-principals, who did go ahead with their law-suit, in which they were successful in attaining some of the Federation's resources—and I can't remember how much...

[00:58:39] KN: Three million.

[00:58:55] EM: Three million. Out of twenty, roughly?

[00:59:11] KN: A-ha.

[00:59:27] EM: So, percentage that was equivalent, roughly, to the size of their membership within the organization.

[00:59:43] KN: Elsie, I'd also like to go back, if you could, just for a minute to what happened in the fall of 1987. So, the certification and sign-up that occurred, it was very, very significant in the history of Federation, probably, the most, or certainly, the most significant in my lifetime; and yet, very little is known about it by teachers today. So, can you tell us a bit about what actually happened in that time through the certification and sign-up; and then, secondly, can you talk about the kind of preparation the Federation did to get the locals ready for bargaining, because that was huge, I think.

[01:00:23] EM: Well, that's what I was referencing earlier, when I talk about all the training and essentially, basic introduction to bargaining, that did a number of workshops and training sessions provincially, regionally, locally, that Federation sponsored. And we also hired a number of people, like Sharon Yandle, an experienced bargainer to help and advise us; we had some great people on our staff that knew about collective bargaining and how to make it work. And, again, with our lawyers they were invaluable in helping to set the stage in knowing what we had to learn and what we had to teach. The legislation came down in the spring of 1987, but in the fall of 1987 we had to, essentially, re-create the BCTF. We had to have a Special General Meeting to change the objects of our organization, and make some decisions about how we were going to go forward. And, so that was, again, a key point, because it was at that general meeting, that we made the decision to go forward as a union of professionals, keeping the both facets of our organization together, as well as taking on the additional responsibilities of collective bargaining. And, making decisions on what kind of membership, for example, we would (have)—different types of membership, including the membership for principals and vice-principals.

[01:02:15] EM: But it was, probably, one of the most significant aspects of the Federation's history—even and although I haven't lived it, I do have some knowledge of the past of the Federation's activism and challenges—and there had been several instances, where the Federation has been seriously threatened—its existence has been seriously threatened. But, I think, this one was, probably, the biggest. And it's one that, I think, whether consciously, or not, in the intervening years, has almost been erased from the fore-front of our consciousness because it has worked so well; and, maybe, that's the reason why it is not featured in the laurels of the Federation as much as, I believe it should be. Because the work that went into organizing all those locals, getting those collective agreements, and the support that came back from the members, I think, was unheard of. When you talk to people in other organizations, other trade unions, other teacher organizations, I don't think anyone had gone through something like that with the level of success that we had.

[01:03:35] AC: I think, that's true. We had asked the earlier question about the role of professional development, and the threat that the college posed, because the college in the scheme of the legislation was given all the authority over professional development, and it was a way of destroying the organization—or an attempt to destroy it—tell us a bit about what the Federation did in, both its messaging and in its programs around professional development.

[01:04:09] EM: Again, that was another challenge, which is a word I probably, used way too many times. Because we had to put so much of the organization's energy and resources into the sign-up and certification campaign, that we were, I think, running a risk of losing our ability to be that union of professionals; and so, for me it was really important—and not just for me, for the organization—it was important that we make sure that, that side of our nature as a union of professionals was protected and advanced. And we worked really closely at that time with all the PSAs to make sure that they knew that they were part of the organization, that they were strengthened within the organization, to the extent that we could provide more money to help them do their jobs as a part of the BCTF in representing the professional interest of teachers. That was significant. We had a strong professional development division, and they were a part-and-parcel of the move to get teachers to re-sign and to choose the union option, because one of the aspects of being a union is that you can protect your professionalism in a way that you can't if you don't have rights.

[01:05:44] EM: And so, there was a huge movement to try to make the links for teachers to show, that it was important, as a professional, to have the rights and protections of a collective agreement. And with the college, the government attempted to take that professional side of the BCTF's work away, by giving it to the college. We were successful in controlling what the college did, or, more importantly, didn't do in the field of professional development; so we could maintain the kind of services and programs, and PSAs that were offered and are still being offered. We had a great system of PD associates... I don't know... we don't now?

[01:06:43] AC: I am sorry, that is not the question I could answer.

[01:06:47] AC: Just as another question, related to this—if you could just tell us how the organization used collective bargaining to reinforce our role, that is the BCTF's role in professional development?

[01:07:03] EM: You may have to help me on this, but, surely, the professional development funding was—or attempted to, and was—negotiated in all of our collective agreements: release time for the professional development activities, and the rights of teachers to be a professional in their classroom were all goals that we had for the collective agreement.

[01:07:24] AC: Along with local input and PSA, and professional development days—

[01:07:29] AC: those kind of provisions.

[01:07:33] EM: Yes.

[01:07:46] AC: OK. I just wanted to touch on another significant event that occurred during your presidency, which was the Royal Commission; and how the organization saw that and the role that played in some of the transformation in the schools?

[01:07:59] EM: Yeah.... The Royal Commission... was... how to describe it (sighs)? It started well and then ended-up, really, just petering out. Largely, probably, because of lack of resources

attached to the changes that the commission was proposing. A lack of political will—I think, the government got frightened and backed away from some of the really progressive changes that the Royal Commission was proposing. Some teachers weren't all, or necessarily completely comfortable with some of the multi-grade family grouping, non-graded approaches that were being suggested. Ask the next president (points at KN). Because that came in just at the tail-end of me.

[01:09:18] AC: So, Elsie I'd like to just ask you, in summarizing your role as an Executive member and as a President, what were your most satisfying accomplishments, and, maybe, why?

[01:09:35] EM: Well, I think, it's probably the accomplishments of the organization, which, looking back on, I think, were the most important in my term as President, and that was the response to Bills 19 and 20. And the re-organization of the organization, development and re-signing of all our members, getting collective agreements in all our locals, getting full collective bargaining rights for teachers; and getting the collective agreements that reflected those rights: they weren't just hollow agreements, they had substance in them. And, just the solidarity of the membership, the huge numbers that came out to support the decision-making in their locals, whether it was to ratify an agreement, or to go on strike, to support the Federation, or whatever it may be—but the organization really came together in a very, very strong way over those three years, and that was, I would say, certainly, the highlight looking back on my time in the organization. For me.

[01:10:48] AC: Ok, from President you moved onto being Past President. And then you became the Executive Director of the BCTF, which was a role you carried from 1989 to 1999. And, I'm wondering if you could describe your role as an Executive Director, and your greatest challenges, and how did you deal with them?

[01:11:15] EM: Essentially, the difference is, in the role of an Executive Director, is that you're implementing policy. Whereas, when you're on the Executive, you're making policy. So, clearly, it is an administrative organizational leadership role, rather, than a membership, policy, direction-setting role. I mean, clearly, there are advisory responsibilities, but, really, the decision-making is no longer in your hand when you're Executive Director. You take the policy or the decisions made by the Executive, or the AGM, or the RA and implement them. So, it's very different and I must say that I was glad to fade out of the public eye; and become the non-face of the BCTF, if you like. It was a relief to pass that responsibility onto another person. There were, again, some really significant events, while I was Executive Director, and one of them was building of, and a move to the new building, which in terms of the membership, probably, has little or no impact, but for the people, who worked for the BCTF, and who are in and out of the affairs, the operations at the BCTF, it was significant. And it was nice to be in a new accessible building.

[01:12:51] EM: Our old building was non handicapped-accessible, and this one, the new building was, and it was bright and clean; and healthy, so, I think, it was a relief for everyone. But the

transition, the move, the re-organizations that, kind of, went along with that, were all major issues that needed to be managed. At the same time we were trying to, sort of re-deploy our resources and re-deploy our organizations so we could meet the challenge of provincial bargaining, which had been imposed on us also by the provincial government. So, those were, trying to keep our budgeting clear, and defensible and understandable, and live as much as we could within our means. The organization did keep going back to the members for fee increases, which allowed us to meet the many demands that were brought to the organization; but still, trying to manage the flow of resources so that we didn't forget all of the other major aspects of the Federation's work other than collective bargaining, which was to make sure, that we still could support our professional development programs and initiatives, and our social programs and initiatives; and member services, like, pensions advice, and salary indemnity, and all the other auxiliary services, that our members have come to expect and enjoy and rely on.

[01:14:34] AC: So, just to pick up on a number of things you said, provincial bargaining... So, teachers go through three rounds of local bargaining, roughly, between 1988 and 1992. And, the government, now an NDP government, introduces the provincial bargaining. So, what was going on at that stage that lead to that, and what challenges did that create for you in your new administrative role?

[01:15:07] EM: There were a number. Many of them fell to the decision-making bodies of the Federation, the Executive, the RA and the AGM in a sense of how we were going to respond provincially, to provincial bargaining. But within the organization, once those decisions were made by the decision-making bodies, then we had to organize staff, and to meet those needs. Of course, there were divisions, as there always are, as to what is the best approach, the best way to go and many locals were very protective, understandably, of their rights to bargain, and the Federation valued local bargaining in being a healthy strong community-based way to make a deal with your employer, but nonetheless, we still had to deal with what had been imposed on us provincially. And, looking back on it, it was relatively easy to see, why the provincial government of the day did it, because there was the perception, that the Federation had been altogether too successful in the local approach, and of whip-sawing one local's successes against another's. But, by the same token, the government, having centralized bargaining, felt, I suppose, that they would have more control over the financing of it, which I'm not sure if it was in that day and age proven to be the case, because it subsequently brought in more and more controls over bargaining and financing of education, etc.

[01:16:50] EM: So as one case-in-point most recently, is school boards have been ordered to reduce their budgets by \$384 million province-wide, I think, it is, over two years which is supposed to be just administrative savings that cannot affect the classroom. But that number is strikingly similar to the funds, that the government will have to pay for the collective agreement that they had negotiated for the teachers; so... Even though the government is supposed to be funding these kinds of increases, they find a way to not fund them. Anyway, sorry, I was digressing there. What was the question here?

[01:17:15] AC: The question was about provincial bargaining,

[01:17:40] AC: so what was your assessment as you look back at the two eras, the local bargaining and provincial bargaining, as to impact that provincial bargaining had on the organization's ability to respond to the members' needs through the bargaining process.

[01:18:00] AC: What can you make of that?

[01:18:42] EM: The organization set-up increasingly complex structures and processes, to try to make sure that the local voices were still heard and there was still participation at the local level. Huge bargaining teams to represent the Federation at the table, again, complicated processes for ratification and developing the objectives—again, the Federation made a huge effort to try to maintain the contact with the local level; but inevitably, it had to surface at the provincial level and some significant gains were made. It was under President Kit Krieger, that the Federation got some very valuable gains with regard to support services and class-size which was subsequently removed by the government legislatively. But nonetheless, and that's what the court case that is going to the Supreme Court in November is all about: whether or not that was a legal thing for the government to do, to remove those working conditions from the collective agreement. But, nonetheless those were the successes that we were able to get province-wide through provincial bargaining. So, that was the benefit, certainly, to teachers, even...

[01:19:24] AC: So, we tried to make the best of what was a difficult situation.

[01:19:33] EM: Yeah.

[01:19:42] AC: I'm wondering, Elsie, if you could say—if there's anything else you'd like to say about your experience at the BCTF as a political leader, or as an administrative leader?

[01:19:51] EM: Um... It's a good job (laughs). It's a wonderful organization to represent; I was honoured to receive the G.A. Fergusson award—that was certainly, a highlight. If you care about public education, which I think, does not receive, necessarily, in the public consciousness the value that it should. I think it ranks up there with public health, and I'm not sure if our society realises how important it is to have a free, public education system available to every child. So, I had the opportunity to work on behalf of public education.

[01:20:54] AC: Alright; and to bring you up into the current state of things; I'd like to ask you what you thought about the current state of public education, which I think, your last comment was, kind of, leading into that.

[01:21:08] EM: Well, we've had so many years of governments, that I think, were, not as supportive of public education as they could be. I think there was certainly a goal to support the private system at the expense of the public system; which, I think, is unfortunate, because so many of the private schools are gender-based; or they're religious-based; or they're status-based; and they don't accept all of the range of students that public schools must, and willingly

do, accept; and provide for. And, I also think, it's a system worth protecting, defending, because of its connection to how a democracy works. If we don't have an informed electorate where everybody can make their own assessments and decisions, then, I think, we weaken our democratic structures. So, I'm still committed to working for public education.

[01:22:16] AC: Do you have any advice to the young teachers, who are just starting out in their careers?

[01:22:20] EM: Yeah, hang in there. I know it is really difficult for young people to get jobs; so many of them have to start as TTOCs, Teachers Teaching On Call, or in part-time jobs. But the declining enrolment seems to be bottoming-out, and I'm hopeful that we will be able to hire more teachers soon. It's certainly, a job worth doing, and I would suggest two things: keep working to meet the needs of the kids in your classroom, but don't forget to meet your own needs as well. Keep on top of things like your collective bargaining, and how it's going; and your pension, and what it's doing; but first and foremost, get out there to support the needs of the kids in your classroom. Stick together, tell your stories.