

Interview: Neil Worboys (NW)

Interviewer: Ken Novakowski (KN) and Al Cornes (AC)

Assisted by: Lesley Harrington

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[00:00:10] KN: So, we're here to interview Neil Worboys who was BCTF President from 2002 to 2004. The interview is being conducted on July the 11th at the BCTF building, by the interviewer Ken Novakowski and the other interviewer, Al Cornes, with technical assistance by Lesley Harrington. Good afternoon, Neil, and welcome.

[00:00:33] NW: Good afternoon. Thanks for having me here.

[00:00:36] KN: Thank you for coming, and we do have a set of questions we'd like to ask you. And, maybe you could start by telling us where and when you were born, and where you were raised?

[00:00:47] NW: I was born in Victoria, BC and was raised there. I was born on January 15th, 1944. 9 lbs, 6 oz. And my mom is less than 5 feet tall.

[00:01:06] KN: Oh! Wow, OK! And, were you raised in Victoria?

[00:01:10] NW: I grew up in Victoria, I was there until I was 19 and, I left to go to university in Vancouver and, basically returned back to the Island in 2004, when I retired. But not to Victoria.

[00:01:30] KN: And, what can you tell us about your family—other than your mother was under 5 feet, but was it a union family, or politically progressive family? What was the background of your family?

[00:01:42] NW: Well, the family unit was—I have a sister, Sandra, who's 2 years and 9 months older, than I am; she still lives in Victoria. My Mom and Dad came to Victoria from the prairies; both of them, through the circumstances of the dirty thirties, and so on, that none of them had an education of more than Grade 6, I think. My Dad, after the war, he was body-man, which fixes bumps and dents in cars. In those days they fixed them, they didn't take them off and replace them. And he was a union guy. I remember as a young kid, I remember going with him a few times to the picket-lines, and it was in the winter and there was a burning barrel that had wood in it; and walking with him on the line. So, he was—I don't remember the name of the union, but it was with the car industry, so he was a good union guy, and I think he was the president, or one of the reps for his union.

[00:03:06] KN: What do you remember most about your school experience in Victoria, maybe you could talk about that?

[00:03:13] NW: Well, I grew up in the outside of Victoria, the family home was near where the current university is now—it was in Saanich. I often say this, we were the first people on our block to have TV. Of course, we were the only house on the block—so, we did. It was easy. Grades 1 through 5 I went to Cedar Hill Elementary School. The first years, one through three I was in the Cedar Hill Annex, with the same teacher, Ms. Girling, who was an older woman, although, in those days, as a young kid, of course, everybody looked old. Grade 6 I went to Doncaster, which was another elementary school, close to the house. Then I went down to Lansdowne Junior secondary, which was Grades 7, 8 and 9. And in Grade 9, I had to make a decision—I had played basketball all through those years in a church league; and my friends were all going to Vic High. And I was slated to go to Mount Doug, which was, basically almost across the road from where we lived. But I wanted to go to Vic High, so I pursued a transfer; and they told me, if I wanted to go to Vic High, I had three choices:

[00:04:45] NW: I could take a double-language major, I could take shop, IE; or I could take an art major. So, I have an art major. Went to Vic High, played lot of sports there, soccer, track, basketball, rugby. We won a provincial championship in high-school basketball in 1962, and I was the class president of my graduating class at Vic High.

[00:05:22] KN: Were there any teachers that you'd like to talk about?

[00:05:26] NW: Well, probably the most interesting was one was Ms. Girling, my Grade 1, 2 and 3 teacher. Because, 20 years after Grade 1, I graduated from university with a teaching degree and ended-up teaching in Kitimat, and I got a letter from her, congratulating me for becoming a teacher. So, she was special to me.

[00:05:55] KN: So, could you tell us a bit about your university years? Where you went to university and some of the things that happened?

[00:06:01] NW: Well, in university, my first year, right out of high-school, I went to Victoria College. Actually, it was a transition year, where the Victoria College was changing to the University of Victoria. And half my courses were at the Lansdowne campus, which was the old College, which was also the Normal School. And the other half my classes were at the university, out on the Gordon Head campus, and they were staggered half-hour differences. So, your 9 and 10 o'clock courses were at Lansdowne, and your 10:30 and 11:30 were at university. And so, I spent the first year there, and I took a year of arts and science. I was an average student. And the following year I left Victoria and I went to UBC, because all through high-school I wanted to be a pharmacist. So, I went to UBC and enrolled in the School of Pharmacy. And I took that for a year, and I didn't quite like the heavy chemistry, so I switched into the Faculty of Science. And so, the third year I started my science program in Zoology; and at the end of third year I took a year off.

[00:07:44] NW: I took a year off and I worked for a year—well, 6 or 8 months—in Kitimat,

[00:07:49] NW: in

[00:07:50] NW: the plant. And then, a friend and I traveled to Europe, and we hitch-hiked around Europe for 6 months. And then I came back, re-entered UBC, and took the fourth year of science, and I was probably beginning to see that science wasn't probably where my future was going to be. So I started investigating, whether I could switch faculties into Phys Ed, and become a PE teacher. And they told me, that if I got into Phys Ed, I would get an education degree, but not a science degree. So, I decided to continue and to finish my BSc in Zoology, which I continued into the next year. And the following year, I took my one year of teacher training. Did my practice teaching at the Britannia High school, and the final practicum in Kitimat. And my wife often says, I majored in the 3Bs: bridge, basketball and beer. And, probably there was a lot of truth there: I did play a lot of basketball, played a lot of bridge and, of course, as a university student, I consumed my share of beer.

[00:09:17] KN: You played basketball in university?

[00:09:19] NW: No, I didn't. I played while I was at university, but I didn't play on the university team, because in my first couple of years at UBC, Saturdays I had labs. And so, I had to attend those labs. And, so I couldn't travel. So, there was no point in trying out for the team, because I couldn't travel. But I played in an under-21 league in the city here, and I joined up with a team... Actually it was most of the guys I had played against in the BC finals in high-school, they were from Vancouver College. So, I joined up with them—I was the only non-Catholic on the team. And I played for the CYO Saints, in the under-21 league in the city here, in Vancouver. And we won the national championship in 1964. It was in Vancouver: we beat Winnipeg in the semis, and then ended-up

[00:10:30] NW: playing Hamilton in the finals, and we succeeded and became the under-21 champs in Canada.

[00:10:40] KN: So it sounds like your decision to go into education was, partly, because of your desire to be involved in Phys Ed. There was no one in your past, or whatever, who may have inspired you to

[00:10:50] KN: do that?

[00:11:01] NW: No. No teachers in my family, in my immediate family—my sister is not a teacher, and I had one cousin, who was a teacher, but the rest of cousins and aunts and uncles were not in education.

[00:11:13] KN: So, when and where did you start teaching?

[00:11:16] NW: I started teaching in 1969, in Kitimat. During university I worked every summer in Kitimat, at AlCan, and so, I made a lot of friends there. And so, when I finished my practice-teaching and got my degree, I decided I didn't want to teach in the Lower Mainland. I sought a smaller place; and I figured, why not go to Kitimat, as I had a lot of friends there, and acquaintances; I was playing basketball there and softball, so I applied and got a job. Started

with the school board in 1969, and when I was doing my practice-teaching there in May, the principal of the school was the former BCTF President, Harley Robertson, and one of the other members on staff was Larry Kuehn, who currently works here at the BCTF and was one of our Presidents of the Federation. So, I started in 1969, in Kitimat.

[00:12:39] KN: OK. Can you talk a bit about your teaching experience? What was great about it,

[00:12:45] KN: what was challenging about it?

[00:12:48] KN: And what did you teach up there?

[00:12:49] NW: Yeah,

[00:12:51] NW: well, I started at the secondary level; I was a secondary teacher and I taught science. And I basically, taught Grade 8, 9 and 10 General Science; and I taught Biology 11 and 12. And, I guess, the part I liked, was obviously, the kids and working with them; and the challenges that they presented. Kitimat has a very highly diverse population of immigrants, and also, First Nations' people. And so, to go and try to make the curriculum applicable to those kids, sometimes was a challenge, and most of the time, was a pleasure. I remember one class I had in Biology 11, and they were a cracker-jack group of kids; they were really smart and they were keen. And so, in those days the curriculum, you could interpret a little more loosely, than you can today, I believe. And so, we were ahead, so I said to them, you know, if you had your druthers, what would you take? And they said, taxidermy. So, we had a two-week course in taxidermy. I got the books out of the library, and they had brought in things that they'd found along the highway, that had been hit by cars; and we went to the SPCA, and somebody had shot a fox; and so, we got the fox. And so, we skinned them and prepared the skulls

[00:14:36] NW: and some of them are still being displayed in my old room in Kitimat, even now. And they enjoyed it, and we went back to the regular curriculum, and we continued on. But they... that was a good class. Had some challenges too—I also taught a lot of kids, who were having difficulties in science, so it was science that was a little bit less difficult. And so, I had a lot of fun with those kinds of kids, because, while not as academic, but they were much more into other things as they explained to me, such as hunting and fishing... So, it was a good experience, and throughout those years in the secondary school, I also coached soccer and I coached basketball. And we had a number of First Nations' kids, who would play, but they lived in a village, which was 8 miles away and, of course, they had to come by bus. And they couldn't come to practise. So, I said, well, if I could give you a ride home, will you stay for practice? And so they did; and I had 6 of them, and I had 411 Datsun.

[00:15:59] NW: And so, they would pile in, and we would drive to the village, and drop them off. And it was OK going, but coming home it was a bit treacherous in the snow, because I had no weight in the car, and it was snow all over the roads. But, we made it and we had a lot of fun, and they still remember that.

[00:16:21] KN: So, when did you get active in your local? Was there something that prompted you to get active—and that's why you decided to become involved?

[00:16:30] NW: Well, it was my wife, Jacqui

[00:16:33] KN: Tell us a bit about this?

[00:16:34] NW: I think, it was in 1972 or 1973; two or three years after I started teaching. I was complaining to her that we didn't get a very good raise: cos in those days you could only bargain salaries and bonuses. So, she said, well, if you're not happy...

[00:16:55] KN: Was she a teacher then too?

[00:16:57] NW: Yes, she was a teacher. She started teaching the following year: I started in 1969 and she started in 1970. And she was an elementary teacher. And we got married in 1971. Just celebrated our 45th anniversary a couple of weeks ago. But, anyway, she said, "If you're not happy with what you're doing, get involved". So, I did. I got myself appointed—or elected—to Bargaining Committee and sat on the committee for quite a few years. But it started in 1972 or 1973, and Kitimat was quite unique in those days, because we were in the local bargaining, with our employer, the school district. And funding was different in those days, because the local school district raised its own funding, and whatever it didn't use, it sent off to the provincial government. And so, 80% of the taxes in Kitimat was paid by AICan. We had a relatively good source of money for the school district to work with, so I got involved. Then, several years later, can't remember who it was, I think, it may have been Don Walmsley. He asked me if I'd be interested in doing some work at the Federation level.

[00:18:36] NW: And, I asked, "Like what?" and he said, "Well, we need a co-ordinator for the North Coast for the Agreements Committee." And so, I let my name stand, and those days it was a three-year appointment, and so in 1976 or 1977 I got appointed to the Agreements Committee and worked with the other co-ordinators of the other zones around the province. Worked with Jurd Kirby and Bruce Watson, and Jimmy Cairnie, and Ken Smith. And we would meet every year, and decide on what kind of a strategy we would use, because, like I said all we could do in those days, were salaries and bonuses. And most of the time we ended-up in arbitration. And, so we would plan on what kind of an average we would take into an arbitration, and so on, etc. And every spring we would have a session where we'd look at how well we did. And quite a few of those sessions were in the old College Inn in Qualicum Beach, which was my first experience at Qualicum Beach, and that's where I live now. I was quite impressed when I was there and now, that's where we retired. \

[00:20:05] NW: So, in those few early years of the committee, I was elected chair. I was the chair of the Provincial Agreements Committee. And so, we were continuing, and it was leading into the 1980s—and I know there is a question about that, so for now I will save those comments—then we changed the name of the committee to the Provincial Bargaining Committee, and I continued on as a chair in that committee for several years. So, that was, kind of, my beginnings

in the local. And in bargaining we were a bit unique, as I said, because there was money on the table. And so, we started to advance our bargaining rights a bit ahead of the 1980s. And in our initial agreements, other than salaries and bonuses, we started to put-in leave clauses, like taking time-off to go with the sports-teams, either as a coach or as a participant; started to work on maternity leaves, those kind of things; grievance procedures. So, we had a number of those particular clauses in our agreement—it wasn't in the collective agreement, but in our agreement with the board, before some of the other locals in the province had. Because we met with the employer and we were in a union town, and we said, "Well, why can't we have those benefits just like every other union-member in this community?"

[00:21:50] NW: Most often it was a slow process, but we chipped away at it, and, in one of the early years, we got a dental plan. Cos every other worker up there had a plan, and by this time, the Euro-Canada pulp mill was there, and so, we got a dental plan and we paid for it. It started off as

[00:22:17] NW: 60%

[00:22:18] NW: paid by us, and 40% paid by the board. And every year, we had agreed, that they will up their percentage 10% and we'll lower ours. So, after a number of years, we had a 100% paid dental plan. So, we were well on our way to expand our rights, before the Federation got really heavily involved in that in the 1980s.

[00:22:46] KN: And can you talk a bit about—you mentioned that you were a co-ordinator on the Provincial Agreements Committee. What did co-ordinators do? You weren't just a member, you were a co-ordinator. So, what does that mean, what was your job?

[00:23:06] NW: OK. I was in Kitimat, and so, my zone included the North Coast, which was Smithers, Terrace, Nisga'a, Haida Gwai'i, Kitimat and Prince Rupert. And so, as a co-ordinator I was sort of the person, that the flow of information both ways, happens. So, I would phone my guys every Sunday night; and I would give them an update of what was happening in the province in other zones: what kind of progress was being made in negotiations, what kind of information stats had been done, that people might want to use. And then, they would give me an update of what was happening in their local negotiations. What they were having success with, if anything, what they were having a problem with, what the stance of the local school-board was, how their members were being supportive, or non-supportive of the issues. And then, I would gather that information; and then I would report to my contact person. And in the years that I worked, my two contact people were Jimmy Cairnie and Bruce Watson. So, they were the staff that was assigned—not at the same time,

[00:24:41] NW: there was only one staff assigned to the zone—Jimmy first, and then Bruce. And so, I would co-ordinate with them and report to them, and then, they would report somewhere down here on what was happening in the zones. And, maybe once I think, a year, we would have an in-zone agreements meeting. And the people, the bargaining chairs, would come from the local. And we'd often meet in Rupert or in Terrace. And we would talk about

[00:25:20] NW: what we're

[00:25:21] NW: going to do, how we're going to approach arbitration, who would go first, who would have the strongest case and things like that. And so, it was all co-ordinated as best as we could. And it was done by phone—that was, kind of, before computers.

[00:25:43] AC: Neil since you were quite close to the issues of what was happening in the BC locals, in the zones, what were some of the issues, that teachers were trying to deal with, economic issues, or financial issues, that were different, than, maybe the Lower Mainland, where the majority of teachers were?

[00:26:06] NW: Well, in the North, of course, salary was important, because things cost more. And so, it was a struggle in areas like Smithers, because it was more of an agrarian community, that didn't have the big bucks that were brought into the other school districts. Like in Kitimat, they had AlCan and Euro-Can; Rupert, had the pulp mills and the fishing industry; Terrace had all the government agencies there. And, of course, the "Queen Charlottes", were quite separate and remote in lots of ways, and Nisga'a were into their treaty negotiations. And of course, everybody who worked there, lived right next to the school in the teacherages. So, it was a very small community, that didn't have a whole lot of money that they could access. And I said, they could make some case that the band would agree with. So, salary was, in those, days, quite often what we were going for, because the benefits—there weren't many. And, of course, we tried in the zone, to get people, who had the better financial situation, which then the others could dove-tail on, coat-tail on, and say, "Well teachers in Kitimat go so much; how come we can't have the same?"

[00:27:49] AC: So, in some of the boards the teachers were having housing issues?

[00:27:54] NW: Yes. Those issues would come up, particularly in Nisga'a. And Terrace had two sub-locals out in the Hazelton area, where there were a lot of First Nations bands out there: between Terrace and Hazelton there are 11 First Nations bands that we had to try to work with. And at the other end was Stewart, which was up near the Alaska border, and they had teacherages, Kitimat had teacherages—in those days most areas had teacherages, because they had to provide something to get teachers to come there. A bigger salary, than the Lower Mainland wasn't the only thing there. They had to guarantee you some place to live, so that you could teach. So, Kitimat had a lot of teacherages, so did "the Charlottes" and Nisga'a, and Rupert not so much; and I don't think Terrace had that many either.

[00:29:08] KN: So, could you go back to your local involvement for a while? And you were President of your own local for a while, right?

[00:29:17] NW: I was, yeah.

[00:29:18] KN: Can you talk a bit about your highlights as the President of your local, and what were some of the things you remember from your local

[00:29:27] KN: presidency?

[00:29:28] KN: You weren't full-time then, I take it?

[00:29:29] NW: No. I was Local President from 1994 to 2000. And in 1994, I believe the Federation had 50% release time. And I was a secondary teacher; and that made it a bit more difficult to have 50% time-off, because you have a 7 by 8 time table. So, the local convinced me to run as President, by saying that they would release me an extra 30%. So, the local, actually, paid 30% of my release time for, I think, the first two or three years. And after that, I think, that's when the Federation's 100% local release time kicked in, sometime, I don't remember exactly when and what year that was. But that's how it progressed, and so, to encourage me to run, they said that they would insure that I could get a good split from my teaching assignment. Which worked well the first year, and then, the second year I changed assignments and I went to the elementary school. And so, 80% release in an elementary school, was a lot easier to time-table, than 80% at the secondary level. So, when I was teaching elementary at 80% for the local, I was 20% PE teacher. So, I taught all the PE from K to 7 in

[00:31:24] NW: the elementary school I was working in. So, that's how I got to be President. And then, of course, then, as the Local President in a small local, I had no support-staff. I was it: I typed all my own letters and answered, and got the mail and all that. I had no difficulty deciding where to go for lunch, cos it was just me; didn't have to confer with anybody. And in the local, particularly in a time, when they were paying 30% extra, they were saying, "Well, we're paying, you can do the work", which was a bit of a problem, because I was trying to get more people involved in the local and into the committees. And by this time, in our Bargaining Committee, we had—we expanded the Bargaining Committee—8 or 9 of us. And so it was president, the bargaining chair, and there was a chair-person of every sub-committee was part of the Bargaining Committee. So, the Status of Women chair was there, the anti-racism chair was there, the social justice chair was there, the PD chair was there. So, all of those committee chairs were there, in the Collective Bargaining Committee. And, we decided that we wanted to bargain during the school-day, just like other union-members got to bargain during their work-day.

[00:33:05] NW: So we convinced the board that they should release us, and they did. And we tried a number of different types of bargaining: the conventional across-the-table opponent type; and we tried single team bargaining, where we all sat down on some nice soft chairs, where we talked about what was good for the local, and good for the school board and good for the community; and, of course in those days, we also still had money.

[00:33:38] NW: So, we weren't bucking the provincial government trying to get funding. We, had funding and the school district—many of the members of the school board were community members, who worked at AlCan or Euro-Can. And so, they understood the dynamic between unionized... Well (laughs) we acted like unionized workers, we weren't at that time. But we acted like it, and we demanded that we be treated the same. And we had a number of

interesting times. Our Local President one time was suspended, because he was a 50% president and a 50% teacher. And he was suspended from his teaching position, because of the position he had taken as the association leader. And we were not happy with that, and, we decided we'd walk out. So, we did. We took a day off school and had a big protest rally outside the school district board office; and that was when the Presidents from every BCTF local in British Columbia flew into Kitimat. And we had a big protest on the school lawn, and the lawyer for our President, who was Steve Cardwell, was Harry Rankin. And so, he came in and, eventually, through the process and through the courts, the board was found out to be incorrect,

[00:35:38] NW: and he was taken off the suspension and back to work. Got all his pay back and we didn't lose a days-pay for our protest. And that was just the nature of our local. We had some early situations, I remember—I think it was 1971 and we had the one-day pension strike. And, I think, some of our local groups said, well, one day is not enough. We should stay out. And I think, the Federation was not overly excited about that, and they sent Frances Worledge up to talk to us (laughs) and to convince us, that we each go back to work the next day. And, we saw the right light, and went back, and I think it was a number of times. Later on, there was another pension issue, and we went out, walked down the hill with our protest signs and had a big rally in the city centre.

[00:36:51] KN: That would have been 1980, I think.

[00:36:53] NW: Yeah, I think that's when it was. So, the local was a very tightly-knit group of teachers, and, of course, we had great support from our union colleagues, in CASAW, which was the union in AlCan. And we were very happy and felt very supported by the union workers in our community. And so, we continued to work on our collective agreement and, little by little, it got to be a fairly good collective agreement, before we even had the right to negotiate all the terms and conditions.

[00:37:48] KN: Thank you, Neil—can you go back a bit to what you mentioned earlier, when the Agreements Committee became the Provincial Bargaining Committee and you were chair of the Provincial Bargaining Committee? This would have been around 1980–81, somewhere around there, and the Federation has launched a very significant expanded scope of bargaining campaign, during that period of time... And I'd imagine the Bargaining Committee had a significant hand in that. Can you talk about that a

[00:38:23] KN: bit?

[00:39:26] NW: Yeah, the Yorke report—that was a time in the Federation's history, where, I think, as a collective voice of teachers, we decided that enough is enough, and the salaries and bonuses wasn't where it was at. And, we needed to have the rights of other workers, and, I think, at that time, we were the only one or two teaching groups in Canada, that were not able to unionize. So, we decided as a Federation, that we should have a campaign to go to the membership and encourage them to come to meetings and discuss broadening the scope of bargaining. And, I remember I was lucky enough to draw the long straw, and I got to go with

David Yorke. And we went to Salmon Arm, Revelstoke and I can't remember, it might have been Castlegar. But we went on the road to those locals and spent some time with the general membership, and working with them, answering their questions and encouraging them to think about broadening our scope of bargaining. And that it was not anything that would take away from our professionalism, or work in the classroom. But it was something that was a struggle, to have our rights broadened and to have them put in writing, and adhered to, rather that, you know, things that occurred in the past, which, I don't think were really beneficial for teachers. And/or students that they taught.

[00:40:29] NW: So, it was quite an exciting time, and as the chair of the Provincial Bargaining Committee, I got to speak at the RAs and the AGMs and, to convince people, that this was something, that was a benefit to public education, to teachers and to society at large.

[00:40:59] KN: Later on in the 1980s you became a member of the staff of the BCTF in the Bargaining Division. Would you like to talk about that and your experiences at

[00:41:11] KN: the Federation?

[00:41:51] NW: I started January 1986. And, I guess it was, a term, and in those days I was called the Termite, because I was on the 4-yr term. And I was very supportive of that concept, because I thought that it was important for teachers to have a different experience, but also, then take that experience back to their locals. And so, I was hired starting January in 1986 and I went until June of 1990. And I was an Assistant Bargaining Director in the Bargaining Division, working under George North, and I was assigned as a staff-person to two zones. I was assigned to the North Coast Zone, which was the zone I came from: Smithers, Terrace, Kitimat, Nisga'a, "The Charlottes" and Rupert. And the other zone I was in, was the West Kootenays, which was

[00:42:32] NW: Grand Forks, Castlegar, Trail, Nelson and the Arrow Lakes. It had the distinction of being the two zones that had the worst airports in the province. And so, lots of times, going to Terrace and to Castlegar, I would be delayed, because the plane wouldn't land. So, in the North, I would land in Rupert and then, bus somewhere. In Castlegar I'd land in Penticton, and bus to the zone. So, it was a challenging time getting in and out, particularly, in the winter. During the second year of my term, in 1987, where was our good friend—and I don't say that lightly—Vander Zalm, and he gave us the right to unionize, he said, "You can either be an association under the School Act, or you can be a union under the Labour Code". And so, it was our job, as staff, to go out into the locals and help to politically convince the membership to sign-up, certify and then bargain their first collective agreement. And, I think, that the Executive of the day, had a mixed reaction, or look at it, because, I think, some of them wanted to have an umbrella organization, that have unions, and/or associations under the same heading. Or, some thought that it should be a union of unions.

[00:44:36] NW: And there was some disagreement within the Executive Committee, but on the floor, in our job in the local, was to convince members to sign the card, pay the dollar, vote "Yes" on the vote. And then, get on with it, negotiating the first collective agreement under the

Labour Code. I think, all the discussions at the Executive level were moot, because, when the dust settled, all of the—I think 76—locals of the day—they all agreed to be a union. The Federation was the union of unions. And my job then, basically, from 1987 through to 1990 was to go out and encourage the locals to sign up, which, I spent a lot of time in the zones. And my wife can tell you that she was at home with the three kids a lot, but she understood, and she was involved in the Federation too. And so, we did, we signed them up, we certified them, and we started bargaining the first collective agreement. And we found that, as it is probably common in unions, when they first start out, we had some strikes.

[00:46:19] NW: And I know that my own local, Kitimat, had a strike and it was three weeks and it was in the winter. And I can remember Vince Ready coming, because he was assigned as a mediator and he was meeting with us and with the board. And I met him several years after, and he said, he hadn't been up to a strike, before that point, that was as well-fed as ours was—because the locals would

[00:46:52] NW: bring stuff into the office and the community was supportive. And they would bring in goodies and, of course, Vince would be there meeting with us, and helping himself. So, in our local in the first three sets of negotiations, we had three strikes. The first one three weeks and that was to get, basically, class-size. The second strike, two years later was for two weeks, and it was to keep class-size. And, the third strike, two years after that, was one week—the school district was learning—and it was, again, to keep class-size. They were always trying to chip away at our class-size and composition language that we had in our collective agreement. I know that there was a strike in the first round in Terrace, and I was involved in that. And then, about half-way through that strike I had to come home, because my father passed away. And so, I had to go to Victoria for the funeral. And so, yeah, it was exciting—I remember I spent a week in Kettle Valley, I think, the staff-person there was Wes Knapp, and he was involved in a dispute in South Okanagan.

[00:48:38] NW: So, he couldn't be in two places at one time, and most of the locals that I was looking after, had settled, one way or another. And so, I went to the Kettle Valley, and I lived in the community for a week and, eventually, we settled that one. And the local, right from the beginning, they said, all they wanted was Kelowna +0.5% more and they wanted something like \$50 more in PD funding. And a couple of other little things and the board was being reluctant. And so, we would meet every day with the board and we would say, "We want Kelowna, \$50 extra; half-a-percent, and these couple of items". And, eventually, they settled for that. But the comradery in those kinds of situations, was always good. One of my Bs from university has paid off, because we played a lot of bridge, in the downtime between negotiating sessions, or meetings with the mediator, in different areas. And it was quite an exciting time, and very enjoyable for me at the local level, meeting with the people working with them. I found my job was to assist, not to take over;

[00:50:19] NW: and so we would work a lot together and they would run the ideas past me, and we would talk about it, but they would do the work. And I would be the assistant. And it worked

out well—I mean, on the home front it was a little different, because, like I said, Jacqui was a full-time teacher in Vancouver and we had three young kids, so that was a bit of a stress on the family relationship. But we suffered through, and everything turned out well. And, actually, in 1990, when it was the time, we were both on leave from our teaching positions in Kitimat, and we decided, well, you know we've been here now for four and a half years, maybe we should make the break—maybe we should stay in Vancouver. And so, Jacqui was teaching as a Vancouver teacher, a VESTA member, so we resigned. We sent in our resignation letters to Kitimat, and so, I started looking for a teaching position. I interviewed in Surrey and Burnaby;

[00:51:41] NW: had something set-up in Vancouver, but they fell through, and I figured, well, you know—I'll go out and find a job. I'll get a job. And we went home to Kitimat to sell the house. We'd built this big house just before we left to come to Vancouver, and actually only lived in it for a year, before we came down in 1986. So, we went home to sell the house. And we got home and it was so peaceful and so quiet, and, you know a nice place for the kids, so we decided, oh, let's stay (laughs)! So, Jacqui sent a request for the leave of absence from her teaching position in Vancouver, and she got it and we stayed in Kitimat. We had our house; we had three kids, a house, but no jobs. So, we started on the sub list and we worked for 2 or 3 months on the sub list; and then Jacqui got a 40% teaching position in an elementary school. I got a full-time position teaching Grade 7. So, they were temporary and next year we both got hired on again, so from temporary to continuing. So, in our collective agreement, everything returned as if it was a continuation, right?

[00:53:11] NW: So, we retained all our seniority rights and our unused sick leave and all of that, so we were back teaching in Kitimat on

[00:53:25] NW: continuing contracts, albeit a little bit of a pathway to get there, but... Yeah, so it was good.

[00:53:37] AC: I have a question, Neil with reference to when you said, staff were assigned to locals and you were assigned to Kettle Valley.

[00:53:48] AC: Were you there when

[00:53:49] AC: the school board locked the teachers out?

[00:53:51] NW: Yes.

[00:53:53] KN: Could you tell us a little bit about that? That was

[00:53:55] KN: the first lock-out, wasn't it? First time someone locked the teachers out.

[00:54:29] NW: Yeah, they, like I said, the teachers' position was quite simple. They just wanted to piggy-back Kelowna, and just a tad more to make them different, because they were in a rural area, right? They were Rock Creek and that area out in the Kettle Valley. And so, they were locked-out and they took the position, that we're just going to continue to press for what we

want, and eventually the school board agreed. And after, well I was there for a week, I think, Wes was there before that, before he went onto South Okanagan—but the local was only about 40 or 50 members, but they were very tight. And they hung in there.

[00:55:04] KN: Neil, what about any other experiences you had in the Federation? You were the chair of the Provincial Bargaining Committee; you were on the BCTF staff. Do you have any other BCTF involvement before you ran for the Executive?

[00:55:21] NW: Not in any committee, on any committee level, but of course, but I was in the RAs from my local; I was the Local President, the bargaining chair, but I was also staff rep, and I was GR in those days. LR/ GR for a couple of years. And so, I was at the RAs and AGMS and Summer Conferences, but other than the Agreements and Bargaining Committee, I was not part of the committee structure within the Federation, other than those two.

[00:55:37] KN: So, when did you run for the Executive?

[00:55:54] NW: The first year I ran in 1996. I ran as a Member at Large.

[00:56:11] KN: And did you get elected?

[00:56:13] NW: Yes, I got elected.

[00:56:14] KN: And you were on the Executive after that.

[00:56:16] NW: Yes, I was on the Executive then. 1996 to 2004.

[00:56:23] KN: And then you were elected as the First Vice-President I believe in, 2000?

[00:56:33] NW: Yes.

[00:56:34] KN: OK, so you were full-time then, as an officer; and then you were a full-time officer when the government stripped out collective agreement in 2002 and took away our right to bargain, legislatively. Class-size, class composition and other matters in the learning and working conditions category. So, what do you remember about that, and what would you like to say about that? Can you comment on that?

[00:57:14] NW: Well, that was a pretty sad day. I mean, if I had had my druthers, I, and this is personally speaking, because you'd have to separate your personal from the Executive positions and discussions, rather—but I would have much rather, instead of the one-day strike, stayed on strike until we settled the issue. And I don't know whether we would have, but one-day is what we did, and I think, that, what has occurred in the 12 years, a whole generation of kids has been denied lots of services. Because we don't have class-size numbers, composition, we don't have as many librarians and teacher-counselors and ESL teachers, as we should have with respect to the type of children that we have in our schools today. And then, it was a double-whammy for me, because, as member of the Executive Committee, we were, as a Federation, we were stripped of our rights, hard-won rights, that we had over the years sacrificed for other issues—

maybe, salary to get class-size etc.—and then it was just taken away... The other double-whammy, was my 25 years of work in my local, building up our local collective agreement, that

[00:59:07] NW: was just totally stripped away; and our local collective agreement obliterated. And we were put under the Terrace collective agreement, forty miles down the road, which was good, but it wasn't as comprehensive as we had in Kitimat, so... It was a double-whammy for me, and, I think, on the day it was announced, I think, as First-Vice I was in Victoria. My job was to find out what I could in the Legislature and David and Jinny were on this side.

[00:59:53] KN: Can you talk about what happened in the Legislature that day? Were there other teachers there?

[00:59:59] NW: I think there were some from the Victoria local, but there wasn't a big Federation presence that I remember. I think, more it was on this side, with David.

[01:00:18] KN: So, after that experience, you actually ran, and were elected President at the 2002 AGM. And so you took office in July. Can you talk a bit about what the political social, economic climate was like in the province, overall; during your presidency in 2002?

[01:00:47] NW: Well, terrible. I don't think the political situation in the province was... if anything it did get worse from 2002, which steadily got worse. We continually faced under-funding, attacks on the profession, and attacks on the union, and we were continually attempting to re-vitalize the interest in the class-size and composition, trying to keep it on the table. We were in court with respect to our bargaining rights, and it was a time that was pretty bleak, with respect to funding and how we were treated. Of course, teachers being teachers, we rebounded and we continue to soldier on, the best we could. And continued to stay together, and working as a unit in opposition to the government in a variety of areas, but, particularly, the funding issue. But in the diverse population of students in this province, it was beginning to become quite clear, that the services, that many of them needed, were being eroded, if not completely erased. Which was not a healthy situation for the kids, or for us, because it was thwarting what we wanted to do. And, we were continually being under-funded and picked on—it is not a good phrase, but we were not being treated as the professional that we should be—and the leaders in the community. And, public education as a whole was suffering.

[01:03:17] KN: So, one of the things that you talked about, was under-funding, and, of course, one of the things that the Federation did while you were President, was—under your leadership—we undertook a major campaign against under-funding. And we did this Caravan Against the Cuts. Do you want to talk about that, explain a bit what that was, and what impact you think, it had?

[01:03:39] NW: That was, like you said, was a well-thought-out and well-implemented campaign within the Federation. I think, if I remember correctly it kind of started by... We had a meeting with the Minister, Minister Clark, and the constant topic was under-funding, and the number of librarians that were missing in schools, the schools that were closing, the kids who were

immigrants and ESL were not getting the services they needed. And, I think at one point she said something like, “Well, I’ve never seen any evidence of this”. And so, we, as a Federation decided, we would provide her with the evidence. And so the Caravan Against the Cuts was planned and implemented, and we had busses in the province, and they visited every local in the province. And at each local they would stop, and there would be a gathering. A meeting, not only of teachers, but parents and community members were encouraged to participate and the busses—cos there was more than one, I believe—were filled-up with things, with plaques, packages of goodies, with messages, with letters, with poetry. And they all started moving from the North to the South, and from the East to the West. And they came together in Vancouver and we took the ferry over to Victoria

[01:05:40] NW: and we had a rally on the legislative steps. We then took everything out of the bus, and placed it on the steps of the legislature. And, basically, the message was to the Premier, that if you need evidence, there it is. Come and get it, come and read it. And, we did get an audience with the Minister, with Minister Clark, about a week later, and we asked her if she had read any of the information, and she said she’d seen a little bit of it and she was trying to get it verified. And, of course, it was like everything else, empty promises—and we never did see any attempt by the government to fully fund public education. They were always saying, well, we’re putting in \$100M or \$50M in here and a \$110M there, and none of it was new money. And it wasn’t going to where it was needed; it wasn’t going to the classroom level and the class-composition, and to specialty teachers, where it was truly needed. So, I think, it was a great, great campaign, that brought our membership very close together, and it, kind of, fell on deaf ears at the government level.

[01:07:22] NW: Cos we never did see much of any new funding that was useful.

[01:07:30] KN: Neil, under your presidency, the BCTF members voted to have the BCTF join the BC Federation of Labour. I wonder if you could talk about what that meant to you, and also, what the feeling was, when you went to the first BCFED convention with the BCTF delegation?

[01:07:56] NW: It was a great day! I am not sure why 47 years previously we had left the Federation, and I know that, during my teaching time, we did have a—and I don’t remember the year—we had a vote one other time to affiliate. And roughly speaking it was 40% in favour and 60% against. And this time we were bargaining under the Labour Code, and so, I think, we felt it was time to re-join and so we encouraged the members to vote “Yes” to re-join and the vote was successful. It was a total reversal, I believe, it was about 60% in favour, I believe and 40% against. And it was just exhilarating, the first Federation meeting that we went to, in the convention, there was sea of blue. And every local of ours was represented there with one or more delegates, and so we, had blue T-shirts on, and I can’t remember which way it was... I think, on the front it said, “Proud to be a teacher” and on the back it said, “Proud to be affiliated”. May have been the other way around. But

[01:09:32] NW: those two were the things, that were on the T-shirt and we were all sitting in one area. And I got up to address the convention, and we got all sorts of cheers. And Brother Sinclair welcomed us back into the fold, so to speak, and it was very... I thought of my dad. So, and there was woman there, a Scott. Somebody, Lecky. Caroline Lecky, I think. She was a member of the Scottish Parliament. And she came to speak at the convention, and she basically, said that the Campbell government in BC was very close to the same Modus Operandi, that the Thatcher government had in Britain. And, that the way to enhance workers' rights was to stick together. And, I think, there was some mention made that the labour movement over the years had built bridges that we were now crossing, and we now have to be part of that movement and make those bridges secure for people behind us and with us in the labour movement, to ensure that workers' rights are supported and acknowledged and defended. And so, it was a great day—super, you know? That sea of blue, was great.

[01:11:29] KN: Thank you. Probably, the most controversial and high profile issue during your presidency was what they call the College of Teachers issue. I wonder if you could talk about a number of things related to that issue—first of all, what happened that made this issue something that Federation would take on? College of Teachers came into existence at about the same time that we were granted our bargaining rights. And it had existed to this point in time, and all of a sudden it is a big issue. Can you talk about what made it an issue and what happened?

[01:12:12] NW: Well, the history of the College, I mean, the years and years before the College, there was disciplinary actions of our members, when they needed to occur. I think that would happen at the RAs, and sometime it would take a while, but I think, the discipline that was needed, was there. And the profession was well-monitored. Well, with the legislation of the College, what occurred was, they put in a College of Teachers—the government instituted the College of Teachers—and, I think, the first one had 15 elected members and 5 appointed members. And the elected ones were from zones. And, the zones were kind of the same as the zones in the old agreements area. Geographically set. And, if you had a teaching certificate, you could run for one of the 15 elected positions. And that included teachers, principals, vice-principals and superintendents, directors of instruction. But, they were all run-for and elected and made up of, all teachers. And, I think, the government continued to think, that they didn't have enough sway in the decisions of the College. So, in 2003, I guess it was, Christy Clark decided that she would do away with the elected College and put in an appointed College.

[01:14:19] NW: And so, she dismissed all the College councillors and appointed a new College, of all appointees. And so, basically, the Federation, we took a position that if it's your College, then you pay for it. And so, we, once again, went to the members—and this was, of course, at a time when the fear was out there, because the government was saying, that if you don't pay for your fees, you would lose your certificate. And if you didn't have a certificate you couldn't teach in the province. And so, we were doing a campaign, basically, to rid the members of their fear, to stick together—there is no way they were going to fire 40,000 of us.

[01:15:18] NW: Stick together and, we won't pay. But, to show that it wasn't anything to do with the money, we decided that we would have them pay their \$90—it was \$90 or \$75, I can't remember—and we would pay it into something that we set-up as the Democratic Teacher College Fund. So, it wasn't about the money, we were quite prepared to pay the money, but, if we were to pay the money to a College, then we were to pay the money to a College that was democratic, not appointed. And so, we continued to take that position, and the government continued to put pressure on our members, saying they were going to get fired, etc. And, you know, some of our members did pay their College fee to the College, but the vast majority said, "No", and we paid into this fund. And if I might just go back to the previous topic, just for a minute to the BC Federation of Labour... One of the first motions that came up at the convention, after my introductory remarks on behalf of the Federation, a motion came up that the convention would support our position on Bill 51. And Bill 51 was the College and that we weren't going to pay to it.

[01:17:02] NW: I think it passed unanimously, so. We had the support of our union members in the Federation of Labour and that gave our members some strength in numbers, and that also our buddies from the labour movement were behind us. And so, we refused to pay. And the end result, I remember, it was either the last day of the year or the second-last day of the year; I was in my cabin in Smithers, on the ski mountain; and I heard on the radio, that "Minister Clark had decided that she was going to pay the fees for the College for the year". And so, we as a Federation, felt really good about that, that sticking together and holding our position was what we should do. And if you stick together, and plan things, then you're not easily picked-off. And, I think, the end result was that some form, or another, a democratically elected College was put in place. And, I don't think it was 15 and 5; I think it was 12 elected and 3 appointed; or... I do not know, but I believe it was another democratically elected College, rather than appointed, by the minister.

[01:18:45] KN: So, Neil, and considering all the experiences we've talked about during your presidency—and I am sure there are many others; what do you consider as the most satisfying accomplishment as President, or your most satisfying moment as President, and why?

[01:19:02] NW: Well, two of them we just talked about: one was re-affiliating with the Federation of Labour. That was very satisfying; and, like I said, I think my dad would have been proud. And the College—and I think, both of them indicate what could be accomplished if you stick together, stick to your guns, listen to your members, plan, take things as they come and plan for it. So, those two.

[01:19:45] NW: And, I think one other thing that was very satisfying to me, was a carry-over from my time on staff, and that was the time that I spent with members in their locals, working with them. When I was President and Vice-president, I think it was in every local in the province, except, I think, only one I missed. And that was very satisfying to see that the members were just regular kind of people, and if you give them an opportunity to say what they believe in, and listen to them that you can build a campaign, that will be very successful on just about any issue.

[01:20:38] KN: So, overall, is there anything you'd like to say about your experience at the BCTF; or about the BCTF overall?

[01:20:48] NW: Well one of the other things I got involved in very early in my teaching career, and throughout most of my political career in the Federation, I was a member of a caucus, called Teachers Viewpoint. And it was a group of like-minded people who talked about issues. And we would often have meetings and talk about the issues that were before the Federation, and what we thought, might be, some ways of developing plans and strategies to enact them. And, so I found that to be a very satisfying group of people from around the province, and also, you worked with them, and they worked with you. And part of being elected, and being a View-point member and later on a Coalition member, and trying to pick-up the ideas and senses of the majority of teachers in the province, because we are very diverse; and to see what best met the needs of everybody. And I found that the group of teachers in Teacher Viewpoint were very helpful and very supportive.

[01:22:25] KN: So, what are your thoughts—I guess it has been 12 years since you were President (everyone laughs)—what are your thoughts of the current state of affairs in the public education system?

[01:22:38] NW: Well, I don't think they've changed much, except they got worse, I guess. And the issues are, as I said before, I think, we have a whole generation of kids that had gone through the Kindergarten to Grade 12 without the benefits of good class-size numbers, good composition numbers, the number of specific support teachers for them, like librarians and counsellors and ESL,

[01:23:12] NW: and teachers like that. So, that whole generation has been denied something that I believe they should have had, and that the government should fund, and in the public system they need to support that and fund it.

[01:23:31] NW: And, one way, is obviously, not to be funding as much in the private system, as they do.

[01:23:43] KN: I wonder if you have any message at all for teachers, who are just starting their career now, in public education.

[01:23:56] NW: Well, I have two daughters and they are both trained as teachers. One daughter in Kitimat is not teaching currently, because there, three quarters of the schools closed, so there are no jobs. She is teaching adult literacy, so she is teaching English to new Canadians that are coming into the community. My younger daughter teaches in Surrey, and so they would probably be better able to give a message to the new teachers. I think, from my perspective, it would be great to get involved, to stand together as a group, and have fun. And have fun—as a teacher I always had fun. We had always lots of laughter, and now it seems that, with all the restraints and all of the testing, it seems that the laughter had somewhat been removed from our profession. And I think, that kids like to see a laugh, and they like to laugh with you. And, at

you sometimes, but there's got be pleasure and not so much dogma, and forms to fill-out and tests to look at etc. So, I think, they need to get involved, and they need to have fun, and they need to work together, and have each other's back, I guess, so to speak.

[01:25:44] KN: Very good, Neil—thank you very much.

[01:25:45] NW: You're welcome. I enjoyed it. ***

[01:25:47] NW: Neil wishes to add, that he is proud to be a BCTF member and to have received a G.A. Fergusson Memorial Award and the Honourary life membership. In Solidarity.