

Interview: Teri Mooring (TM)

Interviewer: Ken Novakowski (KN) and Larry Kuehn (LK)

Assisted by: Lesley Harrington

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[00:00:10] KN: Good morning, Teri. We're here this morning to interview Teri Mooring, who was President of the BCTF from 2019 to 2022, and it's been done by Ken Novakowski and Larry Kuehn, with technical assistance provided by Leslie Harrington. The date is March 3rd, 2023.

[00:00:27] KN: So, Teri, we'd like to start by having you tell us a bit about where you were born and where you were raised for your school years and so forth.

[00:00:45] TM: Sure. I was born in Prince Rupert and my Dad was a construction worker, a tradesperson. And so we did a lot of traveling around when I was young to the Kootenay and to Prince George area. And I remember as a kid, he would get like different jobs in different places and we would take our tent trailer at that time and go and camp for the summer wherever he happened to be working. And so it was a lot of movement around. When I was in grade five, we moved to Quesnel where he was working on the pulp mill; the construction of the pulp mill there. And then ultimately he got a job at the pulp mill there. And so we ended up staying in Quesnel. And I finished my elementary years there and my secondary years there as well.

[00:01:37] KN: Okay. Can you tell us something about your parents? So obviously your father probably was in a union. And was that sort of the politics in the family?

[00:01:50] TM: Yeah, I would say I come from a very political family that always tracked what was going on, especially with labour. And my Dad was the heavily involved in the union, both locally and provincially and he was the local president at the pulp mill when I worked there as a teenager in high school. And he was the president before and after that. He spent quite a number of years doing that work. And so, you know, during the seventies, there was a lot of different day long protests and things like that we took part in. I remember being in a number of wildcat strikes at the pulp mill when I was in high school working there. My Dad would always come and get me when there was a wildcat about to happen and he would invite the other sort of workers, teenage workers there to come along. And some did and some didn't. I was one of the few students working there who had a parent who was on the union side. It was mainly the other side whose children got jobs there. And so my mother, in fact, fought a little bit for me to get hired because it wasn't a good look for everyone for all the kids to be from management families and not union families.

[00:03:21] TM: And so ultimately, they did hire me and I worked there for throughout my entire high school years.

[00:03:29] KN: So can you tell us a bit about your school years, like your school experiences? Elementary school, High school. And, also maybe about whether or not there were any teachers during that period of time that had an impact on you?

[00:03:46] TM: Yeah, I as I said, we traveled around a lot when I was in elementary school, and I was a fairly shy kid. And so that was fairly difficult. When I was in grade five, as I said, we moved to Quesnel and stayed there and I went to the elementary school where I ultimately ended up teaching, which is ironic because at the time I didn't anticipate being a teacher. I enjoyed school. I had all male teachers actually from the time that I went to elementary school there in grade five, six and seven, one from Australia, I recall, who did a lot of different kinds of things with us, like took us on, I remember one time he took us on a walk to his house to show these different angles that he was using in the construction of his house and his partner was there and she was not impressed to see 30 kids show up at the door. So it was just an interesting time to be in school. I also went to a fairly small junior high school, as it was called at the time, and I would say that was probably the most rewarding time of my education, up until grade 12, because it was a lot of young teachers that were there.

[00:05:16] TM: They did a lot of really interesting things. I remember we went through a period of time where they did kind of mini courses on Fridays, and so we got exposed to a lot of things that we normally wouldn't have. I remember being very connected to the math teacher. I ended up not doing well in math in grade nine one term, and I remember working with him a lot and just developing this really deep understanding of algebra at the time, which really took me through my high school years. It really ended up being very beneficial. So I just remember those times as being really fun. When I went to secondary grades 11 and 12, it was a school that was only for grade 11 and 12. There were three middle or not middle schools, they were junior highs at the time in Quesnel. So everyone kind of moved on to 11 and 12 from that point. And I remember it just being that, you know, not much larger and a little bit more anonymous. And I really missed the kind of smaller

[00:06:21] TM: setting of the junior high. But I graduated in 1980 from Correlieu Secondary School,

[00:06:31] TM: and while I was there, the single teacher who stood out for me was at the math teacher. But probably Dr. or Mr. Devinsky. He was the one teacher that really stood out.

[00:06:42] KN: Where did you go to university, Teri? And can you tell us a bit about your years at university?

[00:06:46] TM: Sure.

[00:06:50] TM: I have an unusual history, I would say, but probably not that unusual for a lot of women. After High School, I went to College, New Caledonia, in Prince George and I did two years there. And my intention at that point was to go to UVic after that. But I met my former partner at that point.

[00:07:19] TM: We ended up getting married. I ended up having children. And when I had one child I ended up doing the teacher education program that was offered in Prince George at the time because I was able to access it and because I was living in Quesnel; we actually relocated to Prince George so that I could do that program. And so I taught for a number of years with basically a Category three, and I job shared because I had at that point, I had my second child and my third child. And so I was working part time and I just had a series of experiences with different partners that I was working with and with different classes. That led me to the point of I was either going to finish my education or I was going to stop teaching and do something else. I just kind of came to a crossroads during that time. And so I ended up taking the summers, going to school. There wasn't a lot of other options at that point. There wasn't remote learning per se. There was correspondence learning at that point, but that was not for me.

[00:08:43] TM: And so I would hire someone to look after my kids. My parents also lived in Quesnel, so they definitely supported that and I spent five summers, probably finishing off my degree very much the hard way because I was also, you know, working during the rest of the year. So it was a very, I would say, tough time. But I always in my family felt that at the end of the day, we would all benefit from me finishing my education. And then I remember promising my kids at the time because they were my kids. My parents went to my undergrad graduation, which I was not planning to go to because it was just the way that I had done it. I didn't go through university with a cohort. And so my family insisted that we go. So we did. So I think my youngest child at that point was probably around 10 and my oldest 15, and I promised them that I would not do my master's degree or anything else until they were graduated. But then U.N.B.C., University of Northern B.C. offered a Masters Program in counselling organized for the Quesnel School District. And the Quesnel School District paid the tuition,

[00:10:13] TM: and it was a counseling and curriculum. Master's degree. And I was really interested in counseling, so I ended up diving into that for the next three years. So I hadn't planned to do that. And it just sort of was something that I could not resist.

[00:10:32] KN: That is indeed a different set of experiences. So you seem to set yourself on the path of becoming a teacher very early. Was there anything in particular that set you on that track?

[00:10:48] TM: I would say that it wasn't something I had planned. It wasn't something that I pictured myself doing when I was in high school. Certainly my mother was a teacher who at that point in time had done two years of university. And so she had a temporary certificate that expired and she didn't renew it, but she did when I was growing up. She did serve as a substitute teacher, as they were called at that time and she wasn't certified. She actually even taught for a year in Quesnel, because recruitment and retention challenges weren't new, especially in the North. And so she did that work. And I really, you know, at that point, after I finished college, I knew that it was a profession that I could do. I was interested in and

[00:11:50] TM: at that point that I could access the teacher education program close to where I lived. And I had an idea of, you know, what that job was and what that life would be. I'd done some when I was in high school, I had done some vocational assessments for a guidance counselor that they had us do. An elementary teacher came up on that though at the time. I don't know if that made me make that decision, but I remember recalling that in later years. But I grew to really love teaching as I came into the profession. And after the first two years, I did all my training in elementary, and my first job was in grade six. And so it was a huge learning curve for me. It wasn't anything I was prepared for, but it was a part time job and everything was perfect except that it was grade six and I had never pictured myself teaching intermediate. I never actually taught primary after that.

[00:13:05] KN: So in terms of your overall teaching experience, are there any particular highlights?

[00:13:12] TM: Yeah, there is. You know, teaching in a small town, you get to know your families so well. I taught at only two schools in Quesnel and you really, as a grade seven teacher especially, you really get to know the families. You really get to know the students. You know, I would say the first time I taught the children of people that I went to school with was really interesting. As I say, I didn't anticipate teaching in the same school that I went to when I was a student. So that was really interesting and I taught with some absolutely wonderful teachers. And I think the most gratifying part of my teaching was that I was on a staff, especially for the last bit of my in-class teaching time, where it was a really high-powered elementary school staff. And we were really known as being a really strong staff. And so we ended up getting a lot of principals coming through, staying for two or three years and then leaving. But I just remember that staff ran itself, literally could have run itself. And I just remember that feeling of empowerment. You know, as a grade seven teacher, I would have a conversation with the principal and say, look, this is how I see you fitting into my job here.

[00:14:39] TM: When I send a child to you, know that I've tried all kinds of different things and I will talk to you about it. I would always sort of set that principle up for how I wanted them to operate in conjunction with me being the grade seven teacher and had a lot of success with that. And personally, I taught grade seven for a long time, and Early Humans was an area where I was particularly interested. And so over the course I would say of ten years, I ended up developing an archeological dig for my students that ended up growing to be quite large at the end of it where they would actually be doing an excavation and I would teach them proper excavation techniques to uncover a scene where they then had to analyze who were the people that lived here, how did they live, what did they eat? You know, what sort of tools did they have? So it was like as a teacher, I always felt like if I was bored with what I was doing, students would be bored. And I always wanted to be interested in what I was doing

[00:15:58] TM: and so I really worked at it, I think, sort of developing real life experiences as much as you can in the classroom for my students and so I just want to say I really love being a teacher.

[00:16:15] KN: So when and how did you first become involved in your union local?

[00:16:20] TM: Oh yeah, good question. Because I'd grown up in such a union oriented household, I always knew that when you got a job and you joined a union that you worked in it, that you knew you were a part of that union and it wasn't really something I thought much about. And I had kids. So when I started teaching, I had two children. I had my third children child when I was working. And at that point it was just that you kind of did it all. You worked, you were involved in the union, you raised your family. That's just the way it was. And so my first year teaching was the first year that we unionized and we were negotiating or actually I was a Teacher on Call when we unionized. And then my first year teaching is when we were negotiating a first collective agreement. And so I always feel like my teaching career has also traced the history of our unionization. And I was the staff rep at the school because when I started out teaching, I just took on a bunch of different things to do and I, in retrospect, kind of wish somebody had said to me, "Don't do so much; you don't have to do that".

[00:17:28] TM: But I did. Of course nobody did it because they didn't want to do it. And so my first year teaching, I actually had to sign people up for picket duty. And we didn't ultimately go on strike that year. But that was my first year teaching. And so before that, I'd been the first S.W. rep in Quesnel. Then I was a staff rep, and then I just proceeded throughout my teaching career to take on different roles within the union. I think I did every single role within the union except treasurer. And I just, you know, felt like that was my role was to contribute in any way I could. So I would often take on committee work and stuff that I was interested in and, and shared some of the committee work with other people. So it was really interesting.

[00:18:26] KN: So, you were President of your local.

[00:18:28] KN: Yes.

[00:18:29] KN: Could you possibly give us the time frame and talk about maybe what that was like?

[00:18:32] TM: Yeah, I was President of the local for five years, so. 2007 to 2012 I guess. And so, yeah, I had, like I said, done a lot of different roles within the Union. I was a LR. And so then I took on the Presidency and I was a part of the leadership team within Quesnel. And so we, I knew at some point I would be Local President most likely if I was elected, obviously. But it was a fairly small leadership team, a core leadership team, I would say. And so I was President in my head when I ran for the executive committee for member at large. But for my first year, I came right from a grade seven classroom into the presidency. I had actually filled in for Brian Kinneally before that when I was Vice-President, though, and he was on the bargaining team. And so I'd already been in that role. It was really interesting because again, he checked with me, made sure it was okay with me when he took on that role for me to go into the President's role at that point. And then he took very seriously that he had no communication with the local.

[00:20:00] TM: And so it was a very fraught set of negotiations. He and Susie Mah were the co-chairs of the provincial bargaining team at that point. And I ended up jumping in and doing so many things that I hadn't anticipated doing when I said yes at first, because who knew where the negotiations would go? Of course. And I remember him phoning me when negotiations were fairly complete and the bargaining team was going back to their homes. Everything wasn't said and done, but they were able to come back for a bit anyway. And I remember him saying to me, "What can I do to help right now? What are you uncomfortable with? How can I make you more comfortable? Like, what can I do?" And I just remember saying to him, discomfort left the station a really long time ago.

[00:21:08] KN: So you indicated when you first got involved by being a Member at Large and you went from there. I'm just going to go back to a few experiences that you probably recall in terms of what was happening. Do you remember when our collective agreement was stripped?

[00:21:29] TM: I do remember when it was stripped. I was LR at the time, I believe, I remember being in Vancouver when we had that infamous interaction with Rice, the person hired to actually take those clauses out. In Quesnel we had class size provisions and a lot of really strong school based provisions that were, of course, stripped out. And I just remember that being such a dejected time in our history. And not fully knowing the ramifications at first, and just kind of that understanding growing over time, over the next couple of years. From my perspective in Quesnel, we were able to, even though we didn't have contract language on school based teams anymore, the district was really committed to school based teams. So we really carried on with that sort of thing as if the language was still there. And so that didn't impact us so much from my perspective. But certainly over time it changed. So even though we had a really strong sense of what school based teams were when that language was stripped, I would say over the number of years that language was gone, things morphed and changed and became watered down. And certainly it was obviously a huge negative impact on teachers working conditions

[00:23:12] TM: and I remember that being a really dark time. In fact, during that time, I counseled my daughter not to become a teacher.

[00:23:23] KN: What about the 2005 strike?

[00:23:25] TM: Yeah, during 2005 I was a part of the leadership team again in Quesnel and Quesnel's a really, I would say, independent local. And so we, you know, obviously had everything organized and had a lot of past presidents involved and retired teachers who came to support us and there was a real sense of pride there about what we were doing and I remember when the communications were actively cut off, it was no big deal. Like we didn't really notice that. We just already were on a track. And we just kept on going and we were, you know, highly organized. It was cold in Quesnel during that time. We were on strike. And I remember we had meeting sessions every day open to anyone. Lots of people came to those sessions. I remember we ended up writing checks to people because we had a surplus and it was sort of like don't ask permission sort of scenario where we just like cut checks and brought people in and had pizza

and gave them checks. And it was it was a time where certainly we were really connected as a local and, you know, lots of tough times, a lots of people that were really afraid of losing their houses.

[00:24:49] TM: And we had someone who volunteered to do a newspaper so that every morning we delivered a newspaper to everyone that was on strike. And I, I would go out myself and the President and a couple other people would visit the lines every single day and bring any news that we had. And so it was a very intense time.

[00:25:17] KN: So you were on the BCTF executive as a Member at Large and 2013, you were elected as Second Vice-President, a full-time position, based in Vancouver. Can you talk about those three years as Second Vice-President? Are there any highlights of three years that you remember?

[00:25:38] TM: Sure. Whatever. I remember it being very exciting when I was elected. I would definitely say that I was characterized as being an underdog for being elected that year. And I had an amazing team of people that helped get me elected. And so it was very exciting to move from Quesnel to Yale Town, Vancouver in an apartment. It was a very life changing time. I actually took that summer to settle in and kind of let myself get accustomed to all the changes that had happened in my life, which were huge at that point. And during the time that I was Second Vice-President, that's when we really did the pension plan design. And Jim Iker was the President. And I took the lead on the pension plan design. And so we visited locals. I presented all the changes to the AGM where we made the decision whether to adopt them or not. And I remember not anticipating when I was elected to Second Vice-President the depth of knowledge that I would dive into in terms of learning about our pension plan and the importance of changing our pension plan.

[00:27:10] TM: And we worked Jim and I worked with, of course, the government plan partner very closely. And I will say that I'm really proud of the work that we did to change the pension plan. I think it was monumental. I think we have an incredible pension plan now. And when I used to visit universities, teacher education programs, I would always brag about our pension plan because it's something that people don't think about when they're starting out. But it's so important, as we all know, and so that was most definitely the highlight of my Second Vice-Presidency.

[00:27:46] KN: Okay. And what about you as First Vice-President for the next three years?

[00:27:56] TM: So Glenn Hansman was President. We worked really closely and really well together. It was a really exciting time because that's when our collective agreement language came back. I remember it was so ironic because it was the November long weekend. My daughter was in Vancouver to go out wedding dress shopping and I remember we were in court. So Glenn was in Ottawa and they were, you know, he was observing the presentation of our case. And I remember I don't remember what day it was in the weekend that I got a phone call from Clint Johnston, the Second Vice-President. He just said, we won. And I was just like, Wow, I

know what it's like, "What are you talking about?" And it was like that 15 minute ruling. And I remember I was in the front room, my living room in Yale town with my daughter. I just remember sitting down on the couch and starting to cry. It was just such a monumental time to even think about now. It just brings tears to my eyes. How exciting that was. Yeah, like it was just one of those moments that, um, it felt like everything that we had fought for during all those years had been worth it.

[00:29:20] KN: So during your Full Time Table Officer years, there were changes that were made to the composition of the Executive Committee. Can you discuss those changes? And what prompted them to happen?

[00:29:37] TM: Sure. I would say that within the BCTF there became like a growing knowledge.... Of course, I was keenly aware of issues around racism that we experienced in our schools and that we experienced in our union. I was on the Aboriginal Advisory Committee and worked closely with teachers around issues of racism. And it was certainly clear to me that we needed to make some changes, which the Executive Committee was also in agreement with. I would say that it was controversial. Not everyone saw the need and I would say that we've certainly been really immersed in the work of educator folks around that are white, that are in the majority. And knowing how racism impacts Black teachers, Aboriginals teachers, Teachers of Color. And so during that time we put forward some motions the Executive Committee put forward a number of different motions was one was to make it a designated position for an Indigenous teacher, another in a designated position for a Racialized teacher and um, and those carried we also had brought forward an initiative to have the majority of, of executive members, women that did not pass. And so some of the motions that we brought forward and certainly to change the composition were successful.

[00:31:37] TM: And I would say that work continued throughout and certainly throughout my Presidency and throughout my time as a Table Officer and continues today. And so we're continuing to look at like, how can we reduce barriers within our union, how can we address issues of white supremacy within our union? And the importance of that work being led by Black, Indigenous, and Teachers of Color. And so we've had numerous ad hoc committees to take a look at what structural changes need to be done. And we have made a number of structural changes so that, as I say, that work continues.

[00:32:25] KN: Thank you. You were elected president in 2019 and during the course of your first year in that role, BC along with the rest of the world, was caught up in a global pandemic. Can you talk a bit about the challenges this crisis created for teachers and for schools and for you? And

[00:32:46] KN: how was the BCTF able to continue functioning?

[00:32:50] TM: Sure. That's a big area. Obviously. And the pandemic was starting. We were starting to understand that the pandemic was going to be something really serious as we were finishing up bargaining. So I was also the co-chair of the bargaining team during that time, our

co-negotiator and we were realizing this when we were actually at the negotiation table. And during that process that this was going to be something really serious. And so we finished off bargaining and of course, we went into 2020, the spring of 2020. So in 2019, after I was elected, really, I was, as I say, co negotiator. I started that when I was First Vice- President and then 2020. The spring of 2020 is when things got really serious. And it was during that time, of course, March, that we ended up closing down schools and teachers ended up working from home. And so I would say that was a lot of things happened very quickly. We were working very closely with government during that time. No one knew how things would play out or what we were really facing. I would say, of course, no one had any experience with that

[00:34:20] TM: and there was a lot of unknowns about COVID at that point, how it was transmitted, how serious it was. There just wasn't a lot of information. And so I talked to the Deputy Minister of Education every single day. We, the staff, had a lot of suggestions about how things should proceed. We very quickly moved everyone to working from home. There were agreements that we ended up entering into to protect teachers working from home in terms of health and safety issues and that was a lot happening in a very short period of time. At the same time, the BCTF staff, we sent everyone home with their computers and their chairs and all the stuff that they would need to work from home. And during that time there were I think there were five of us in the building, there were two of us in the Executive Offices, me and Moira Mackenzie that came to work every day. And I was in meetings 12 hours a day during that time, mostly with government, with our own folks, local presidents, we were meeting virtually at that point.

[00:35:40] TM: And so we had meetings every other day to start with and we were really problem solving, made the suggestion to government that they strike a steering committee, that they have various other committees in place, the Health and Safety Committee and Inclusion and Equity Committee, because we were really concerned, of course, that there was a disproportionate impact on our on students and families who live in poverty, who are already marginalized. And government, for the most part, I would say, really responded and in fact put those committees in place and so I was saying there was a very, very high level of cooperation at that point in June. Of course, that's when people came back and even before that, there were skeleton crews in schools set up to ensure that the children of frontline workers were able to go to school so that frontline workers could do their work and that we worked again, really closely with government around ensuring that that were staff volunteers, that people were comfortable in that role, that there were health and safety provisions in place. And I would say that was successful in some parts of the province, not in others.

[00:37:08] TM: It really depended on the cooperation of the districts. We were really pushing government to ensure that the local presidents were a part of that decision making. This decision making is I would say that it was successful in most areas, but not in all, of course, especially in the areas where relationships were already somewhere fraught. And we really pushed on the health and safety aspects of people returning. And then as we were going through July, again, we'd set up a routine with local presidents where we met twice a week on

Zoom. We temporarily suspended labor relations at that point because we were problem solving centrally, which was certainly not ideal, but seemed necessary at that point in time. There were locals that were having difficulty. Local Presidents and local leadership teams were having difficulty with the district in terms of health and safety or other decisions that were being made. The Deputy Minister and I would talk about those issues. We would both work on those areas to try and problem solve. It was not a sustainable way to operate because it was so centralized, because it was basically two people trying to solve problems across the whole gamut.

[00:38:49] TM: The Executive Committee at that point was meeting online as well. We kept our regular meetings and as I say, there was a lot of cooperation that ended at the beginning of July when government decided we had made an agreement about the health and safety measures that would be in place, that there would not be a full return to school, there would be sort of a staged return. And again, there would be masks in place, like all these safety measures that would be in place. But at that point, government was working with Dr. Henry in the Ministry of Health. And there were these decisions made to change. We thought that we understood what it would look like when teachers returned in September. That all changed. And so I informed the then Minister of Education that we, that the B.C.T.F., would be in opposition to their plan to return to school. And so from that point on, I would say that set the B.C. T.F. in opposition to government. And we continue to be very dissatisfied with the safety measures that were in place. We didn't think they were adequate. There was a really odd thing that happened at the committees that were in place, the steering committee that was in place that continued to operate.

[00:40:19] TM: But what was happening at that time is that the CDC was issuing a return to school, not advice but a framework around health and safety measures. The steering committee would look at that and would sort of amongst themselves try to strengthen, especially the BCTF was looking at strengthening those provisions in the CDC. And this became an issue that lasted throughout the whole pandemic because we were really frustrated that the CDC was issuing proclamations around how schools would look and how they would operate during the pandemic without having anyone that actually worked in schools inform those decisions. And a lot of the things that they put out, in our opinion, wouldn't work. You can't say that barriers should be available or things should happen, because we all know that means that they won't happen, especially if they cost money. And so the steering committee was really worked at putting words in those plans like must or will. And I would say that we initially were somewhat successful in that. But then there came a point in time, and I remember this so clearly there was two documents. There was a CDC document and there was a steering committee document, and there was a question about which document would prevail,

[00:41:56] TM: because the CDC document was the first document out. A lot of districts went to that document and said, look, we don't have to do all this other stuff because this document says we should try to do these things. And so I remember that we had to take it actually to the Premier's office to get a decision around which document would be the supreme document. To me, I was shocked that it wasn't obvious that the steering committee and all the work we were

doing, like why were we negotiating what that would look like if, if that wasn't going to be the document that ultimately schools must follow? And so I was really surprised when we got pushback. One, which document was going to be the one that had to be followed by school districts and ultimately we got a decision. However, as hard as we were working on that steering committee to strengthen the health and safety provisions, there were still a lot missed. Well, I don't know what misinformation there was still a lot of early information about students not transmitting the virus, students being basically not as likely to get the virus.

[00:43:10] TM: And so that informed a lot of decisions, especially around the masking, you know, masking was not required in schools. It took us six months to get it required and there was so much resistance to that. And we ended up having to launch such a strong campaign with the media around that particular issue and others. But that one as well that, you know, we finally moved the dial and it was ultimately that decision was made by government that they would require masks in schools, but the amount of pressure that that took made no sense. And so same with, you know, class sizes. We wanted to reduce class sizes. We wanted students to not all be attending at the same time so that we would be able to distance in schools and all that kind of stuff. Of course, we weren't successful with that all along. We said, "Look, we're in favor of schools opening. We agree that schools need to be open, but there needs to be sufficient and adequate health and safety measures put in place." And we never felt that that was the case. And so we always encouraged teachers to be wearing masks and encouraging other students to be wearing masks

[00:44:32] TM: and we also had barriers. There was agreement that teachers who wanted barriers would have access to barriers, especially teachers like music teachers and other teachers that were itinerant that saw hundreds of different students. So there were a lot of measures put in place. But again, in the districts that were going to be resistant to that level of cooperation, it was really difficult. And we felt like we were really, really pushing against both the CDC and the Ministry of Education and government as a whole, because we were very dissatisfied with the safety measures. And, you know, we made some gains, certainly, but we felt like we needed to be outspoken. And I think we were in terms of the inadequacy and our ideas for what needed to happen. So we always put forward solutions and always pushed for those solutions. And there were certain things that just made no sense. One example was when the CDC said that there would be cohorts of students in schools and that they would mix with other students. And, you know, we said right from very beginning and had meetings with the Deputy Minister saying cohorts won't work in schools because kids go home to families and they do other things in their communities.

[00:45:58] TM: So it doesn't make any sense to put kids in a cohort in a school. And so, you know, ultimately cohorts were used as a sort of way for government to say, look, we're doing something. But it wasn't something that actually protected anyone. And to us, that seemed really obvious. But the layers of protection lines continued when in fact there really weren't layers of protection and teachers did feel really vulnerable.

[00:46:40] TM: We were having so much difficulty in forcing districts to adhere to the guidelines that were in place for K-12 schools. And we knew that the grievance arbitration process would be too time consuming to deal with issues that were really imminent, needing to be solved tomorrow. We ended up proposing to government that there be a process set up through the Labor Relations Board that would allow us to expedite and solve problems, expedite issues that were arising in different districts, and that that process would be led by local parties, that our lawyers would inform the process, but wouldn't be a part of the process, and it would be the district and the local that would be working with an arbitrator or a mediator from the Labor Relations Board to resolve those issues. And John Horgan, the Premier at the time, did agree to that. And so it gave us an avenue when a district said no. And as I said before, it was me and the Deputy Minister of Education that were doing a lot of problem solving. And that wasn't sustainable or effective. And so this was a process that was put in place to effectively be a problem solving process place that both sides would have to agree to.

[00:48:24] TM: And I would say there were there was some success with that, certainly not as much success as we would have liked, but some success with that.

[00:48:33] KN: So during your three years as president, every year the AGM was virtual. And I wondered what particular problems this might have created for you and your ability to communicate and work with locals and teachers.

[00:48:55] TM: The governance meetings being virtual was very, very challenging for us. We'd never done anything on that scale. I would say that to the best of our ability we tried to adapt and change and grow our knowledge of how to keep the essence of BCTF meetings and our democratic structures in place virtually. It was really challenging because we didn't want to water down the importance of the AGM or Representative Assemblies and we didn't know how to work that very first one. However, I would say we the very first AGM that we decided would be virtual, which was in 2020, we made that decision one week away from the AGM. I remember the Executive Committee met. I remember going to that meeting in the morning thinking I'm not in favor of a virtual AGM. Sitting down at the table. I listened to the news and I talked to a few people and I remember sitting down with the Executive Committee at that meeting. And I remember thinking to myself, Oh my God, we're actually going to; it's going to have to be a virtual AGM, like we're going to have to do that. And so we did truncate the work.

[00:50:17] TM: We shortened the AGM. Yeah, it was certainly I would say we did the best we could in that situation. But after that AGM we did. We wanted to honor the work that we were doing. And so, you know, we had all the issues around the pandemic, of course, but we also had our work around Equity and Inclusion and the Executive Committee were still bringing forward a lot of recommendations around how to continue that work. It was really important was that we continue that work. We still had groups, ad hoc group committees working on Equity and Inclusion and we wanted to continue it. And so I would say that I'm proud that we continued on that dual track during that time. And I will also say that it wasn't easy, that virtual AGMs can be a little bit more anonymous than when you're actually in a room with people. And so we were

also debating some really challenging motions around, you know, changing our structures and reducing barriers and opening up our structures and I would say that there was pushback. There were some unfortunate things online that were racist and that we had to deal with.

[00:51:46] TM: And I think it was in part because everybody was already highly stressed from being in the pandemic and working through a pandemic. And I would say that it was people were also very unhappy with the lack of health and safety measures in place. And so I think there was a lot of factors at play that made the AGM difficult. But on the other hand, you know, we did continue to work, we did get recommendations passed. It was just what we found is it took a lot longer to do that work. We set systems up so that we gave people breaks, that we let people set up systems where people could have separate rooms, where they groups could sort of meet separately online. So there was a lot of different things that we were juggling at that point, but it was certainly extraordinarily difficult to do the AGM in that way. And I think because not all unions continued all their work like we did that we felt we felt so singularly in a difficult spot in that we were trying to set things in place where again, our democratic structures were honored, that people had voice at our meetings,

[00:53:21] TM: even though there were online, you know, for example, when you're in a live AGM, people can see who is lined up at the mic. When you're virtual, you have no sense of how many people are going to speak at the mic. You don't know how many people are planning to do that. And so there's a lot a lack of information for people. People also weren't able to talk to each other. You weren't at tables explaining the rules of order. And so we had people that didn't know the rules of order because they hadn't been as involved, you know, questioning the chairs about some of the decisions that they'd made because that information wasn't available anywhere else. And so it was a very challenging time. And I would say our chairs, our staff really rose to the challenge and we really problem solved how we can make it, how we could make it better, how we could give more information to people, how we could still train new delegates on line virtually so, you know, we did a lot of work around trying to make sure people were educated, trying to make sure people had what they needed to operate in a really difficult scenario.

[00:54:40] TM: So, you know, our staff was just incredible in terms of all the additional work that they ended up having to do in order to put those procedures and opportunities in place.

[00:55:01] KN: So when you look at your time then as president, a lot of it was taken up with the pandemic, obviously. But are there any other challenges that you had during this period of time?

[00:55:16] TM: Well, I would say, there were lots of challenges because we were continuing our work as normal. We held the Bargaining Conference virtually. So we set up for the next round up. So, during my term, a new collective agreement had to be ratified, obviously. And then we entered into all the planning for the next round virtually as well. And so that was really challenging, having people take part in bargaining at the BCTF is challenging at the best of times,

let alone virtually. And so there were plenty of challenges. I would also say, but I'm guessing I don't have any data on this, but I'm guessing that I did more media within the my Presidency than we'd ever done before. During that time we thought it was really important that we do that media because we were pushing on those health and safety measures and we wanted to be the preeminent voice out there in terms of what kids and teachers needed, in terms of being safe. And I think that we did a really good job of getting that information out there. And we felt that government would know when you hear us really loud in the press, it's because you're not listening to us when we're trying to work with you.

[00:56:44] TM: And so what happened during that time, because all of the interviews were online, very often I did interviews every single day, multiple interviews every single day. And there would be a period of time when I was in this building. I wasn't traveling. I wasn't going anywhere else. And so you can you do an interview with CBC Radio in 10 minutes, can you do Global in 15. It just became this sort of never ending cycle. It felt like of media access. But again, we felt it was really important. So yeah there were plenty of challenges and some of it was operating; it was very hard to operate, especially when we didn't have staff in the building while doing this really important work. It was almost like in this vacuum where, yes, you were talking to people virtually you were talking to people on the phone and that sort of thing, but, but you weren't with people every day. You weren't having those casual conversations. You weren't able to go into somebody's office and say, what about this? And

[00:58:02] TM: what I really realized during that time is how much our work is dependent on casual conversations that don't happen in planned meetings. And so there were a lot of, I would say a lot of communication issues, and we did a lot of problem solving that, you know, with things that we had no experience with before. And I was also really keenly aware that during that time we were becoming really centralized and the importance of that not continuing when it didn't have to. And so, ensuring that that locals took on a lot of those responsibilities as well. So just because of the nature of the pandemic, because we were working so closely with government, it felt it was definitely of necessity, but we were also really acutely aware of that. That couldn't continue, that it would not be successful if we ended up a centralized union. That was never what we wanted to have happen here.

[00:59:12] KN: You've talked a bit about your work with the government. How would you characterize your overall thoughts about the NDP government elected with the majority while you were President? How would you characterize your overall relationship with that government?

[00:59:34] TM: Well, as I say, like during COVID, we were definitely at odds with government, but we still had good communication. I certainly could talk to the Education Minister any time I wanted. I could talk to the Deputy Minister of Education any time I wanted. I talked to the Deputy Minister of Education. Like I say, almost every day, especially during the intense COVID time. But there were definite issues. For example, initially during COVID, I had many conversations with the previous Education Minister about the CDC. The CDC guidance for health

and safety measures is one thing. But we can strengthen them. We can change them. We can get government to make them stronger. They don't have to just go with what the CDC says. And so that was a conversation we had quite a bit. But then when the Minister of Education changed, when there was a new Minister of Education, it was really clear that that Minister of Education had been told that they could not change any of the advice from what the CDC was offering. And that put us really at odds. And so what I would say is there was a lot more communication.

[01:00:52] TM: Certainly teachers are on committees, there's a lot more meetings, a lot more discussing of issues. But one thing that happened is that especially in education, government kept a lot of the previous staff in place the staff that we've been working with under the B.C. Liberal government and their sort of attitudes towards education and how things should operate didn't change even though the government changed. And that was really frustrating to us. And so I guess I would say that in the relationship there was definitely tension within the relationship. We expected there to be a better relationship, and we expected more education friendly things to happen. And one example of that, I guess, is that when we were working with the NDP, when they were in opposition, we thought that they agreed with us on our stance on the Foundation Skills Assessment. We thought that when they got elected into government that they would abolish the FSAs or work with us to change the FSA to something different. And they didn't. In fact when they were elected, we were informed that their position on the FSA had unchanged. I understand why that happened.

[01:02:15] TM: I understand that there is a desire on behalf of especially the First Nations Education Steering Committee for data. But, you know, we were disappointed that they weren't willing to kind of work with us, too, because we agreed that there needs to be data available, especially for children who are marginalized from the system. But we don't think the FSA is that. And of course, we've had a couple of decade long campaigns against the FSA. Now there are still meetings going on, but there were certain education policy issues especially that we thought would be put in place that weren't. Another is the prevalence model of funding special education. You know, that an NDP government would be looking at a model like that was very shocking to us and we pushed back very hard against that. And I will say that we're not certainly not comfortable that we're out of the woods on that; it was set aside during COVID. The prevalence funding model was put aside, but it's still there. So there are still many issues moving forward that we thought we'd make more progress on, especially given the close relationship that we had with the NDP when they were in opposition and how closely our research department worked with the NDP during that time, especially on the education credit.

[01:03:44] TM: We just felt like there would be more of a knowledge base and more cooperation when they were in government than there is.

[01:03:58] KN: And so when you reflect back upon your three years as President, what do you see as your most satisfying accomplishment?

[01:04:08] TM: Well, I would say the work around Equity and Inclusion has been really important to me. And I was really proud that we were able to continue that work, even though it was really difficult. We were in a pandemic. We didn't let up on that work. And I gave a kind of a summary speech of all the things that we'd been doing in terms of Equity and Inclusion at the last virtual AGM that we had, because I thought it was important that we really take a look at the scope of the work that we've been doing. You know, starting with an Equity Audit and all the great work that we did in terms of talking to teachers about what their experiences were within our union and continued to move that work forward. Certainly the fact that we were able to really work so closely together as a union, local presidents, the locals, you know, when we were faced with was such a major challenge, like COVID like for us internally, we were working really closely with locals. There was a high level of cooperation, you know, there was a really a shared view, I would say, within the union about what needed to happen in terms of what schools need to look like, what provisions need to be put in place.

[01:05:46] TM: And there was unanimity, I would say, that I think probably only happens when you're faced with such a monumental life changing challenge like we were with COVID. And so I'm you know, I'm really proud of the work that we did to problem solve, to keep communicating, to really face those head on. At the same time as, like I say, the Equity and Inclusion work. It would have been much easier perhaps to sort of say, we're going to put that on the back burner while we're dealing with all the other things. But it felt like if that was a really important issue, of course you couldn't put it on the back burner, especially during the pandemic, when a lot of people who are Black, Indigenous and People of Color were being disproportionately impacted by the pandemic and people living in poverty were being disproportionately impacted. So, of course, that also raised the stakes in terms of the importance of the work and the importance of teachers leading that work; teachers who are Teachers of Color, Black teachers, Indigenous teachers leading that work and us listening and examining our own white privilege was really important.

[01:07:12] KN: So is there anything else that you would like to say at all about your experience, either teaching or as a leader in the BCTF that you haven't covered so far? Anything at all that you want to talk about? And what do you see as the major challenges facing teachers in BC today?

[01:07:35] TM: I think for me, one of the number one challenges is the recruitment and retention challenge. And I'm really frustrated because, you know, during the pandemic, we're also talking about it and we've been talking about it for years now, and it's only gotten worse. There seems to be such a lack of awareness on behalf of government about the recruitment and retention issues and the impact they have. So as I said earlier, it's always been an issue that there have been uncertified people working, especially in small or remote communities. In my time working in Quesnel it often was the shop teacher because there wasn't a qualified shop teacher and so someone with a red seal would take on that role. But it has changed so dramatically everywhere in terms of the impact of not having enough certified teachers and currently not having teacher education programs fully subscribed. And so the issues are around,

you know, like resource teachers and other non-enrolling teachers going into classrooms and those vulnerable students, diverse learners and disabled students that need support, not getting that is one aspect of it that is very widespread across the entire province.

[01:09:01] TM: I'm looking at places like Peace River South that probably has less than 200 teachers, 30 uncertified teachers working full time, not part time. There's more people doing that though who are uncertified; but 30 positions that are

[01:09:22] TM: that are full time people that aren't. And just the issues that bring Prince Georges the same Prince George with the Teacher Education Program there, they don't have enough teachers. And so when you get to a certain level, it's in schools where you have so many uncertified people working that don't have an understanding of how to report cards, how to properly assess kids, let alone the fact that teachers can engage in professional development like they do because there aren't people to come in to cover that absence. Our union work, having teachers engage in the work of the union do certs. Some remote areas are doing them on Saturdays because they can't. There just aren't enough teachers with certification to cover that as well. So there are just so many vast repercussions to the recruitment and retention challenge and it's very, very frustrating that's not being taken more seriously. And we have a fine line to travel. We don't want to undermine the public school system, and yet we want to raise awareness about the impact and the deprofessionalization of the profession. When you have so many people uncertified,

[01:10:40] TM: there's a lack of data also. So if you go to the teacher regulation branch and you try and look at how many teachers are teaching on letters of permission, you're going to see a much smaller number than we're anecdotally tracking. We think it's in part because accurate data is not being kept, but we also think it's in part because districts aren't bothering to go the letter permission route. They're just getting people that are uncertified and they're not about the having an LP in place because it's become so normalized now. And so having the districts in the Fraser Valley publicly state that they are now recruiting uncertified teachers is helping to raise awareness. Prince George has been very vocal for a lot longer than that about the fact that they are also recruiting enthusiastic individuals who want to be in classrooms. The repercussions are vast. And I'm concerned; there's no easy answers because you know we have work to do to ensure that there are more people being trained. And government seems to agree that there more spaces going to be opened up in post-secondary institutions and teacher education programs.

[01:11:58] TM: But if we don't have enough teachers in those roles, people wanting to be teachers and also getting into those, it's not helpful. It's also a national and international shortage. It's not just B.C. And so that is an enormous issue in my view, that is not going to be easily solved and it's not going to be solved in the next couple of years. And it is entirely frustrating that government is not recognizing it as such.

[01:12:28] KN: We are going to ask you one last question. What advice, if any, would you provide to someone who is considering entering the teaching profession today?

[01:12:41] TM: Well, I would say, you know, it's a challenging but rewarding job and it's a job that, you know, is obviously so critical, especially as schools are being tasked with a lot of important work. When you look at the importance of ensuring that schools are open and welcoming places for all children, all adults, regardless of how they identify the importance of ensuring that we are talking about sexual orientation and gender identity in schools, that we are talking about issues of racism that we are talking about discrimination, that we are ensuring that all students have equal access to education, which is a challenge right now. So I think it's really important work and it's really satisfying work. And, you know, the people that I know that are in it are extremely passionate about this work. And so it's critically important that we have people who see the profession as something that they want to do; it is something that's vitally important in society. And rewarding work. That certainly is my view on the profession. And I think that right now and given the particular context we're in, we need to work together to really ensure that people who are being recruited into the profession understand the importance of it.