

Interview: Lyle Pona (LP)

Interviewer: Ken Novakowski (KN)

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Transcription: Natasha Piccolo, Jett Bogart, Ryan Shachtay

[00:00:06.25] - KN

Good afternoon.

[00:00:07.24] - LP

Good afternoon.

[00:00:08.18] - KN

We're here with Lyle Pona, longtime activist in the IWA [International Woodworkers of America], and we're at the Labour Heritage Centre on April 13th, 2026. So Lyle, we'd like to start by asking you if you could tell us what year you were born and where you were born.

[00:00:31.10] - LP

Interesting, interesting a little bit to start with because it's a bit controversial actually within the family. I was born on June 6th, 1944, which was D-Day in the Second World War. My birth certificate, however, says I wasn't born until the 7th. From anecdotal evidence and some family stories and that, the suggestion was that because it was such a small town in Saskatchewan that didn't have a hospital, it had basically a made-over barn with a—what do you call it? Not a handmaiden, but a lady in town that helped with birthing [midwife], you know, and a doctor would, would come through every once in a while. And like one of those small Saskatchewan towns, every 5 miles, you know. And, and in this case, because of the day that it was, I guess there was, there was a lot of activity and the pigeon carrying my birth certificate didn't get over to Regina for, till the next day, you know [laughs]. So I was, I'm registered as June 7th, 1944, but that's controversial, eh. So, could have been D-Day.

[00:02:01.27] - KN

And what was the name of the town?

[00:02:03.09] - LP

Rose Valley, Saskatchewan.

[00:02:06.14] - KN

Okay. Did you grow up there and can you talk a bit about your family and your early life?

[00:02:12.00] - LP

Well, we were apparently living in the town—we weren't living in Rose Valley, we were living in an even smaller town just north of it. I don't remember too much about that other than my father was a—he did various trades, I guess, or jobs. When he—story is when he met my mother, he was a cattle buyer, and my mother had 13 siblings in the family, and she—my father being a cattle buyer was able to trade a cow for my mother. So the story goes [laughs]. I guess cows were more valuable than young girls were at the time on a quarter-section farm. So, but that's the story. And then from there, we—I don't have a lot of recall from that time, that early time. But then we—where I started most of my recall was when we moved from there, my old man bought a hotel in Simpson, Saskatchewan. Down in the southern part of Saskatchewan. And that's when my sort of memory started about, you know, from childhood. And we were there for a while and they bought this hotel, which was mostly in those days a beer parlor. They didn't have a lot of visitors coming through other than in hunting season there was some visitors there.

[00:03:56.15] - LP

So I was there up until half of Grade 1, and that's the last elementary public school I went to was that first half a year in Simpson. That's when we moved to Saskatoon, and I was entered into a Catholic school from half of Grade 1 at that point all the way through to the rest of my elementary years, which concluded in British Columbia here.

[00:04:28.28] - KN

That's right, your family moved here actually to New Westminster in 1955.

[00:04:34.06] - LP

Correct.

[00:04:34.23] - KN

And then later to Vancouver. So can you talk about growing up in the Lower Mainland and your school experience?

[00:04:39.23] - LP

Yeah, sure.

[00:04:40.14] - KN

Also, what were your parents doing work-wise once they moved to BC?

[00:04:45.16] - LP

Well, he, my old man was kind of a jack-of-all, I guess. We moved to New West. We moved to a house, I remember it was right across the street from St. Mary's Hospital on Agnes Street in New Westminster. And my school was half a block down the street there. And for some reason my old man thought I should be in Catholic school because I think it appeased his mother because nothing much else he did appeased her. I think he had me going to Catholic school. So I was in there and then we moved around, we moved around a lot actually. We were in New West until I finished Grade 6 and then from there to when I finally finished school—at the end of Grade 10, I had gone to three different public high schools. We had gone from New Westminster High School to—we had moved to East Van then, and I went to Templeton, and then moved from there up to John Oliver, to South Van. So I learned how to get religion in my early years, and I learned how to get tough in the later years.

[00:06:17.27] - KN

One of your early memories that you talked to me about was returning home from school on June 17th, 1958, and you heard a massive noise that was clearly more than an automobile accident. Can you tell us about your memory of that day and what it was that you heard?

[00:06:36.13] - LP

Yeah, yeah, it was, and I didn't recognize it, of course, for what it was at the time, but I was coming home from school a little bit late, as I recall, because teachers always wanted to keep me a little bit longer than the rest of them for some reason. But I was walking home—we lived at Charles and Lakewood, and Templeton School was just sort of downhill towards Hastings. And I was halfway home, I guess, and I heard boom, crash, boom in the distance. And it sounded like it wasn't—to me, it sounded like it wasn't one single crash. It was kind of a boom and then a rumble and then another crash. It was sort of like it was multiple noises all but stretched out a

little bit, eh? And so I thought, well, okay, it didn't sound like a car crash, but I never thought much of it until I got home. And then later on, of course, it's all over the radio that the Second Narrows Bridge had collapsed. And then, you know, the whole city and country was then focused on that incident for the rest of the day and week and month, eh? So I think for at least the next week, Canada was living that incident, eh.

[00:08:08.19] - KN

Okay. So you went to work at McMillan Bloedel Vancouver Plywoods in 1961, I guess after you finished Grade 10, and after their big 1959 strike. It was shortly after that, so there was obviously a lot of talk about it. And then there was a short stint before you got laid off and then you were called back to the mill in 1962. But what do you remember of that experience overall? That's been your first union experience, union job.

[00:08:40.04] - LP

Yeah, there's a little stuff in between that, that because when I was still going to Templeton, we didn't have much, we didn't have much money in the house at all at any time. My old man was an abusive alcoholic, and so he wasn't a great provider, and he wasn't a great father either. So I had to go from school, had to find a job right away, and I wound up working as a lot boy in a car lot on Commercial Drive at 4th and Commercial, going there every day after school and that, and buffing cars and that kind of thing. So I worked in the car lot. As I remember, I was getting 50 cents an hour. That was my first job as a car lot boy. We moved to, at that point, to move to John Oliver or up to Fraser Street, and then I was still taking a bus to the car lot at that point, and then I caught on at, I caught on a job at MacMillan Bloedel Plywoods when I was, then I think I was 17, maybe just barely. I had to lie about my age on my application because they didn't like to hire until you were 18.

[00:10:24.13] - LP

So I had—it was interesting because for a couple of—or for many years actually, the federal government had me registered as 2 years older than I actually was. So I guess theoretically I might have been able to collect my pension a couple of years earlier. But I eventually had to correct that. But anyhow, that's how that kind of evolved. And then I started going to John Oliver High School at that point. And then we went there and I became a Fraser boy then. Instead of an East Ender. But I still hung out and still went down to the East End and still went back to Saskatchewan in the summers and worked on the farms and that kind of thing. Probably what kept me out of trouble was the summers back in Saskatchewan working on the farms. And then I went, and then '60, '61, I went to work at, I caught a job at MacMillan Bloedel. And I'll never

forget that taking it from, I went from 50 cents an hour in the car lot to, I think it was \$1.70 an hour at the mill. So I hit the jackpot, it was a lottery [unclear].

[00:11:58.13] - KN

So as you became active in your union local, you got to know Syd Thompson, who had actually married your mother's sister. So he was your uncle, effectively.

[00:12:10.19] - LP

Yeah.

[00:12:11.03] - KN

And he became a mentor to you as you got more and more active in your union. Can you tell us about that?

[00:12:16.26] - LP

Sure. Yeah. Well, I got to know Syd. Yeah, because he—my mother's youngest sister, which she was actually the baby of the clan, she came a lot later than, because there were so many of them, they had my grandparents, actually on both sides of my family emigrated from Ukraine. And so my grandfather was in Sturgis, Saskatchewan, had, by the end of his life, he had three wives and thirteen offspring. And Elaine, the youngest one that married Syd Thompson, was only a few years older than me, so we were almost more like brothers and sisters than we were aunt and nephew. She was working in the plywood industry also when he met her. She was at J.R. Murray Plywood on Marine Drive, and Syd was working at Wellwood Plywood. He got politically active. After his win as the president, he got to know her, or maybe through the process, I'm not sure. He met her, they married, and then subsequently I sort of came into the picture. I'm sure it was helpful to have him put a couple of words in for me to get hired at MacMillan Bloedel. It was not too hard to get in if you were white in MacMillan Bloedel.

[00:14:18.26] - LP

They were very racial in terms of their hiring, MacMillan Bloedel was. We had 1,300 employees in that plant, in that plywood plant. It was the largest in the world. Out of that 1,300 employees, there was one of each of the other races that were not white. And they made sure, I think he made sure they kept it that way so they couldn't be accused of being racial. But they did have quite a few women that were there as a result of the war. When the men went off to the Second World War, they had to be replaced by the proverbial Rosie the Riveters kind of thing. That mill

was built in 1937 and it was used through the war years as making plywood for the Mosquito bombers. And so a lot of the women were not young when they started. They were probably mothers and that, and then they were hired on the basis of when the soldier came back to that job, they had to go back to the kitchen, eh, you know. Course, some of them, a lot of them didn't come back for one reason or another. And so those women, by then they were established, they stayed on, they were making good money, and they stayed on until they retired, many of them.

[00:16:11.18] - LP

And so it was interesting because I was a kid, 17, working, and later on I got active in the union, I got to be a shop steward and I was trying to represent people that could have been my grandmother, you know, kind of thing. So, but anyhow, that's how that part of it went. So yeah.

[00:16:38.23] - KN

One of your experiences when you were shop steward was, as I recall, to fight for the right of a woman to drive a forklift on the basis of her seniority.

[00:16:53.20] - LP

Yeah, yeah. The IWA was, as far as I know, the first industrial union in Canada, maybe in North America, maybe in the world, I don't know, but the first union to establish, to get rid of women's rates in the industry, and because women were hired at a lower rate even though doing the same job. I guess we've made progress, but that still goes on today, I think, to a certain degree. So we got rid of it, they got rid of it, it was gone. By the time I got hired, that part of it, but there was still a hangover from it because what they did was there were certain jobs in the mill that they were the kind of the lighter, considered the lighter duty jobs with veneer and that kind of thing, and women were contained to those jobs. They could post for those jobs, but only those jobs, so they couldn't post for the men's jobs, you know, the higher paying. Yeah, the higher paid ones.

[00:18:12.00] - LP

So, so, on one day, one of the women who I had gotten real chummy with, she was, she was quite a bit, I mean, she could have been easily my grandmother in terms of our ages, but, but we got real friendly and, and we used to go play, I'd take her to bingo and we'd go to the horse races together and whatever. But she come to me one day and she said, 'I'd like to drive a forklift and there's a posting but they say I can't have it.' I said, 'Well, I don't know why.' I said, 'It looks to me like our collective agreement doesn't restrict it in any way,' because it was silent in the collective agreement. and this just seemed to be company policy. But it was a company

policy throughout the industry, I found out. So anyhow, I said, 'Well, let's grieve it.' Hell, I'm 17, I've been told about grievance procedures, so I figured out how to write it out. And started arguments on it. Well, I caught a lot of hell from some of my senior union reps on the job, because they were catching hell from some of their senior members that, 'What's that gonna do? That's gonna open up the whole shebang here, and all those goddamn women are gonna be taking over our jobs here.'

[00:19:54.24] - LP

Well, I haven't thought about it that way, but all I can—well, the only thing I consider is they have seniority, and that's all that matters to me. Seniority is, as far as I'm concerned, is the most important thing in that collective agreement, you know. So anyways, they—the plant chairman, as we called them, (a lot of unions, you know, use a different vernacular for positions and that, but some unions call them, would call them the local president or whatever. We call them plant chairman and plant grievance committee and so on.) So plant chairman, he said, 'Yeah, well, you know.' Hemming and hawing. I said, 'Well,' I said, 'I'm determined this is a grievance.' And he said, 'Well, you're going to catch a lot of hell.' I said, 'Well, I guess I'll take it.' So it went to management and it never did get to arbitration. They backed off and I guess they looked at it and said, 'Yeah, we're probably not going to win this in legal terms, and so it's probably easier for us just to, at this point, to back off and we'll—hell, that woman doesn't even know how to drive, let alone a forklift.' She didn't ever drove a car in her life, but in our agreement, we had to—any posting that you got, everybody was eligible for posting, and you had to have a reasonable period of time to train on that posting, whether you had done it or not. So that was part of what was within our agreement.

[00:21:37.00] - LP

I think, and I have a lot of pride in what the IWA, who the IWA was and what we did. I think we had the best collective agreement in the world, really, you know, because we had stuff like nobody else ever thought of having. We probably had advantages because we got strong during the war years. And so, you know, but yeah, so anyhow, I had learned a few years ago actually that I never thought much more about that after that, but I learned a few years ago when I had a significant birthday party at my house and my daughter asked who I wanted there and I gave her some names and one of my close friends from when we were in the local was our friend Gary Wong. And so Gary actually came out and attended my birthday party and I told that story about that and Gary says, 'Yeah,' he says, 'I remember that.' He says, 'We had one that was similar that went the same way after that.' And so I said, 'Yeah, well, I think I it just kind of boomeranged across the industry following that one.'

[00:23:05.21] - KN

That's great.

[00:23:07.05] - LP

Yeah.

[00:23:08.17] - KN

Okay, as your uncle Syd moved on to become president of Local 217 as well as the president of the Vancouver and District Labour Council, you decided to get more politically active in the union. Can you tell us about that?

[00:23:22.21] - LP

Yeah, I was certainly not politically active at an early age. As a young teenager, I grew up with a framed picture of John Diefenbaker on the wall in my house and never thought much of it. But when I got involved in the union, of course, I became more interested in union activity, political action, and what was right and what was wrong kind of thing. I had a few years there. I got hired in 1961, got laid off six months later because of the cyclical nature of the industry, the forest industry. In and out, and we were going through some of the same stuff industry is going through now in terms of the market and tariffs and everything else. So I had about a year in between when I got laid off in '61 and '62. So I bounced around, I did some different jobs. I think Hurricane Freda was in the middle of there somewhere, and I did some roofing jobs after that, and then I got talked into going into the Army. It was during that Cold War period, and Pearson [Diefenbaker] was the president, or the prime minister, and everybody was building bomb shelters.

[00:25:12.29] - LP

And the Canadians had a—we had a high unemployment rate, and I guess the federal government figured, well, we'll kind of cure that and do this kind of—make it look like we're doing something to defend ourselves. So they created a military training program to take care of some of that, and they called it Survival Military Training Program, SMTP, and it was basically what you did to all the people who weren't working or looking for work. So instead of them going on welfare or whatever, you went into this training program and basically we signed up for 3 years but did 6 months basic training and then we were supposed to stay in the militia for a while after that. But anyway, so I went into that and did that for that period of time, and then I got called back to the mill, thankfully, eh, but, 'cause I don't think I would have been a very good

soldier. I wasn't that obedient, you know, and that, so I went back to the mill and yeah, and then I became pretty quick after back in there. I became a shop steward and then I got active.

[00:26:40.28] - LP

Then I got to know Syd a little bit more and spent a lot of time with him. Syd became—I spent a lot of time with him because he became, as you said, my mentor. I didn't have a good childhood. I didn't have a great father. He became not only my mentor, but he became father-like to me. Whatever he said, I listened and pretty much mostly agreed with him. All the time I knew him, I don't think I ever argued with him twice about a difference of opinion. I just accepted that his views were what mine should be too. So yeah, and then yeah, it just got stronger. Our relationship just got stronger after that.

[00:27:37.15] - KN

You eventually got married and had a family and then you moved out to the community of Brookwood in Langley Municipality and you continued to be active in your union. I think in 1983 you did participate in the Solidarity protests. And also, during this period of time, you also attended the Labour College of Canada. Can you tell us about both of those experiences? First of all, Solidarity and—

[00:28:07.17] - LP

Yeah. The '80s were probably the most significant decade for me and where I was going in life and my career and whatever else. I mean, there's something out of each decade that determines some of that. But the '80s were really significant in terms of—I started in—actually, it was '81. I was called—I was doing some organizing. I had been doing some organizing. Mostly political organizing. I became active in political organizing after—in 1962, you know, the New Democratic Party was formed and it was formed in the basement of IWA Local 217's hall, in the basement. Tommy [Douglas] and the group from back east, they wanted to put together the coalition, but they couldn't do it without the Western labour movement. The Western labour movement was controlled pretty much by Syd Thompson, who had been not only the head of IWA 217, which was the largest IWA local, we had 7,500 members at that time, just in one local. But he had also become the president of the Vancouver and District Labour Council, which encompassed all of Vancouver, the Fraser Valley (because there was no valley council then), it was all one. So at that point, Tommy and I think I showed you the picture of the office, in our office where Tommy was meeting with Ar—

[00:30:23.00] - KN

We're talking about Tommy Douglas.

[00:30:24.07] - LP

Tommy Douglas, yeah. And so that's where actually the agreement was made in that room, in that office in 1961 and then the first 1962 was the first election that the New Democrats ran federally. And so I knocked on doors in 1962, the first election for the NDP, for a guy named Norm Levi, who ran against the guy that has a bridge over there right now, a Liberal called Art Laing, you know. And then that became sort of my interest. Organizing became my interest at that point, and in particular political organizing, because I went on and did quite a bit of political organizing after that. I was everything from every level of political organizing from door knocking to running campaigns. And then I started doing that. I guess the party knew who I was by then, and so if there was an election between here and Ontario, you know, I'd get the call or whatever, you know. And the local would pull my leave for the mill and that. But yeah, the '80s, and then the next thing that happened in the early '80s was in '82, I think it was. Forgive me, time can erase a few things, including memories here and time.

[00:32:23.12] - LP

But I think it was '82 that I got a call from Syd actually and said, you know, we got a thing going on here within the BC labour movement here with the Hotel Restaurant Employee and Bartenders Union. I didn't know too much about it, but—

[00:32:45.18] - KN

Must be Local 40?

[00:32:46.24] - LP

Local 40. I didn't know too much about it, but anyhow he says, 'We're going to have to do some—we're getting involved, the Fed's [BC Federation of Labour] involved and this and that.' He says, 'I've been appointed the sort of the overseer of it or the commissioner or whatever it's called to look after it.' It had been taken under trusteeship by its international 'cause there was a series of mis-events within the local, and so the International had trustee'd it, and it was under attack by various other unions within the BC labour movement, including a couple or three affiliated Fed unions. That were also attacking another affiliate, which was probably the cause and effect that caused the BC Fed to say, 'Okay, well, we're going to do something about it.' So the Fed put it together. I didn't realize—and we talked about this—I didn't realize its significance as much then as when I thought about it in later years. That event could have split the entire BC Federation of Labour up because of the involvement of two affiliates attacking another affiliate in

terms of raiding it and that. And, you know, it could have had a devastating effect on the solidarity of the BC labour movement.

[00:34:36.17] - LP

Anyways, we got—the Fed put a team together of organizers to defend and try and keep the union together. And they had—it was interesting because I was on that. I was chosen for, one of the people that was chosen to be an organizer on that team. It was interesting because the employers were on our side on it. The employers looked at it as, 'We have a master agreement covering all of these larger hotels and that, and we don't really want to be bargaining with this one and everybody else.' It's better to have, to bargain within the master agreement than it is to be, you know, hodgepodge of bargaining and that. And I think the other significant thing for the Fed was that besides the affiliates being attacking each other, CAIMAW [Canadian Association of Industrial, Mechanical, and Allied Workers] became involved in it. And of course, we were in that period of time where we're waving the flag against international unions and they became verboten. Our main objective was to keep CAIMAW out, but as a secondary objective was to keep the Fed together too.

[00:36:27.20] - KN

What was the result?

[00:36:30.23] - LP

The result was pretty good. We had—our team included, I think, three of us from the IWA, was headed up by one of our national organizers at the time, Nick Worhaug. Who did a good job. I was sort of second-in-command, I guess, worked with him. We had the marvelous Marie Decaire, who we got to know her really well over the years. We became great friends. She was, of course, one of the—she had worked for Local 40 at the time, so she was a business agent or whatever they're called there at the time, prior to the blowup. Then another friend in a small way was another Sister Currie, Kathie Currie, which is—Kathie's still kicking around, I think. And so there was, heck, there was 6 of us, and the result was that we, I think, I think CAIMAW might have gotten one or two up in the interior somewhere, some joint that was probably—it didn't matter much anyhow, but that was the—we were able to protect it all and the rest went away, eh?

[00:38:12.22] - KN

Local 40 continued.

[00:38:13.28] - LP

Local 40 continued. It continued under the trusteeship for a little while and then they had elections and then it's been solid ever since, as far as I know. And yeah, it was—that was, I think, as I say, one of the more interesting times in—even though it wasn't as violent as some of the other labour incidents throughout the province that I had a little bit of involvement with, but that one was significant in terms of the solidarity of the movement itself in that, you know, I think it could have been—

[00:38:55.24] - KN

And basically defeating the raid.

[00:38:58.15] - LP

Yeah, defeating the raid, yeah, exactly. And the raiding parties, affiliated ones, were the BC Government Employees and their affiliate, the Brewery Workers. They were the two affiliates that were involved. And so I can imagine what the BC Fed would look like right now without the BC Government Employees in it.

[00:39:23.14] - KN

So one of the other things that you did for a while, largely with the encouragement from Gerry Stoney of the IWA in New Westminster, was to take on a role working at the Lower Mainland United Way and encouraging unions to become involved in the work of the United Way and so forth. Can you tell us a bit about that experience?

[00:39:46.17] - LP

Yeah, that came after Solidarity. But Solidarity was in '83. And I think that came in '84. Solidarity was—I'm actually in the archives somewhere about Solidarity. We got a call one day from CBC, and my wife Diane [Pona] and I and the kids had moved to Langley then. And we got a call from CBC about Solidarity and wanted our views and if they could do video travel with us and that, because they knew we were going to the stadium and that. So yeah, so anyway, it was interesting because they came out the house in the morning and watched us say goodbye to the kids and get in the car. Travelled to the stadium and leafleted at the gates.

[00:40:56.29] - KN

That was at Empire Stadium?

[00:41:00.09] - LP

Yeah.

[00:41:01.25] - KN

In August, I think August 10th, maybe.

[00:41:03.23] - LP

Yeah, and so they did a pretty good job. Diane had been active and started getting active in the school systems at that point, too, in Langley. And we had started a political movement out in Langley regarding the schools, as you know. So anyhow, she got the best of the interviews on that one there. She did a good job because they interviewed her going and they interviewed her in the stands and it became part of the CBC News coverage that night.

[00:41:47.17] - LP

So, but yeah, there was all that and then after that, then as you mentioned, in '84, we were kind of surprised, awakened by a phone call from Gerry Stoney. I hadn't been working for the National at that point yet. I was, I had been appointed a vice-president in Local 217, and so I was appointed to the vacancy of Walter Pooghkay, who had been—who passed away and that, eh. And Gerry, anyhow, Gerry says, 'We got a little chore,' he says, 'go check it out.' And I said, 'What's that?' And he says, 'We're involved with the United Way here, and we're thinking of getting involved,' or we were. And he said, 'We need a union rep at the United Way.' And my reaction, 'Gerry, really?' You know, like I'm still kind of sleeping.

[00:43:02.17] - LP

And I said, 'But Gerry, I don't believe in organized charity.' So I said, 'I don't know if that's a good fit for me.' He says, 'Well, I know,' he says, 'but go check it out and see what it was and see what you think. If you don't want to do it, okay, but go check it out.' So anyway, I did and I learned that it wasn't exactly what I thought it was in terms of organized charity and that the money that was taken in was all used to the various agencies, and that the staff and the administrators were not paid from campaign funds. They were paid from a longstanding—what do you call it, bursaries or whatever that was there, you know. And so it started to make more sense to me there than to maybe pool it all and then have somebody to administer and spread it out as far as in terms of charity dollars and that. So I said okay, I agreed to it, and I became the labour loaned rep for the United Way of the Lower Mainland for two consecutive years. And yeah.

[00:44:30.29] - KN

Okay, and then sometime after that, I guess while you were still vice-president of 217, Jack Munro approached you and wanted you to take on a job as a national organizer for the IWA. That would have been a few years later, I think in 1987.

[00:44:49.09] - LP

Mm-hmm.

[00:44:52.12] - KN

Working out of Thunder Bay.

[00:44:55.06] - LP

Yeah, well, I was kicking around here and doing a little bit of organizing here and there and, you know, trying to pick off a few places here and there, but, and doing some office work too. I was in the, doing some service work, some little bit of appeals and stuff like that, eh. But I knew, I had already known in my heart that I wasn't an office guy. Organizing was just, it became who I was and it's a whole different cat than being a representative. Being a rep is, to me, it's kind of boring, you know. It's kind of, you know, every day is the same as the next one, even though there are downs and ups and victories and stuff like that, eh? But organizing is exciting because you don't know what that knock on the door is going to be like the next time, you know. Might be a friendly one, might not be a friendly one, eh. And when you're out there in the middle of northern Alberta or wherever, you know, what the hell's on the other side of the door, you know, kind of thing. But it is exciting and that's just where I felt my heart should go and so that part of it was good.

[00:46:32.01] - LP

So anyway, Jack approached me one day and John Smitty was our director of organizing at the time, our national director, and he had—the lumber and sawmill workers in Northern Ontario, there was two locals there, 2693 and 2995, and they were affiliated to the Carpenters local and they were not very happy. The membership there were—some of them were not very happy. We were getting calls that they wanted us to come and raid them. The CPU were getting—the Canadian Paperworkers Union were also starting to get involved. And so we were kind of always kind of natural enemies to both of them, you know. And so, and we always considered ourselves to be the better of the—we considered ourselves to be better than any other union,

actually, because we were, and I still believe today we were. We were the most democratic, we, you know, in every way and that, you know. But so anyhow, Jack said, 'John's out there with a couple of the organizers and he's having a bit of trouble with our organizers because they want to raid and John's not sure if we should raid or not.' And so he says, would, he asked me, he said, 'Would you, would you be willing to go out and assess it?'

[00:48:25.05] - LP

And I said, sure. So I took off and went out to Thunder Bay and they had already set up an office there as a centre for a raiding campaign and so when I got there, it didn't take two days and I got back to—John and I sat down and talked to each other and I said, 'I agree with you, John.' I said, 'There's no raid here.' I said, 'These people are in a minority. They're not ready to get raided. They may be ready for some improvements, but they're not ready to become part of another union, especially another union like the one they got,' you know. And I said, 'They're doing not a bad job. They're like every other union, they're falling off here and there in some of their servicing and that,' but I said, 'they're not doing terribly, you know.' And they had a pretty good history of, and a good lengthy history of protecting their rights and that. And they were totally different than us. Like even in the terminology and that, like here our loggers are loggers and up in Northern Ontario they're not, they're bush workers, you know, they do the same job but smaller trees.

[00:49:57.26] - KN

Different terminology.

[00:49:59.06] - LP

Yeah, different terminology. So anyways, it came, when it came to me and Jack, 'Well, will you stay there for a while?' Yeah, staying there for a while was nearly two years, you know. So I wound up, everybody came home. We started working with the local officers and the two locals from Thunder Bay to Kapuskasing and even looked into Quebec a little bit there. And we got an agreement from the Carpenters to bail. And we had then become—the IWA had then become a national union because we'd, in '87, we had split from International Woodworkers to the IWA Canada, which made us more palatable to the members there, especially during—we were still going through all of this flag-waving stuff, you know. And so we decided we would stay and we would work on a campaign of—rather than a campaign of raiding we were still going to have to kind of go out there and do some of the similar kind of work, but we're going to campaign now on getting them to vote for a merger. So that's how we approached it, and we wound up merging with most of them.

[00:51:47.26] - LP

But in the meantime, there was a bunch of the certifications that had been—got enough signatures and had been applied for by the CPU. So we had to fight them off and go through the Labour Relations Board in Ontario for those ones. So that's why we had to set up and establish. And at the same time, we were in the bush organizing the non-organized because, it was interesting because there was a lot of non-union bushworkers in there. And there was a guy named Ken Buchanan who had owned a company called Buchanan Forest Products who was considered to be the largest forestry employer in Northern Ontario, and yet when asked, he said he didn't own a single employee, he didn't have a single employee. He said every employee was a contractor, it was a contractor, they weren't his. But there, you know, so, and all of the, it was mostly the trucking. He owned some sawmills. But yeah, it was mostly the trucking. And so we had some of the trucking with some of like with Abitibi and some of the larger ones, but these were contractors that were—and it was kind of almost a mafioso setup there because he had—what he'd do is the truckers wouldn't last very long, he would recruit them from Quebec mostly.

[00:53:42.09] - LP

Most of them didn't speak English when they came to Thunder Bay, but he'd recruit them from Quebec. They'd come in, he'd say, okay, this is—we're gonna let you haul this block, but you're gonna need a truck and a trailer, so you're gonna go over to Winnipeg and there's a Ford dealer over there. He's gonna set you up in a truck and trailer. And it happened to be this guy's brother-in-law in Winnipeg was that, and so it was a family triad thing going on. And so these Quebec recruits would last about three years as a rule because they would be hauling out a block, but then a new one would come in, so they would have to give them a closer block and push these guys further back into the bush. So they could, instead of making two trips, they could go on, or three trips, they could make two trips. And instead of making two trips, they could make only one trip a day. And so by the time they were, by the time 3 or 4 years was over, their trucks were breaking down and they were, and they're out of business, you know. They're back going back to Quebec broke. Kind of thing.

[00:54:55.11] - LP

That's the way he operated the industry there. So I remember sitting in one of the hearings and we were waiting in the waiting area and he's sitting next to me and he's a diminutive guy and he says to me, 'Why are you guys, you big shots from out west there, you know, harassing me?'

You know. And I said, he says, he says, 'I'm just a little guy, you know?' I said, 'Yeah, so is fucking Napoleon,' you know [laughs]. But anyway, that was the Thunder Bay experience, yeah.

[00:55:39.27] - KN

Okay, how about your experience in Newfoundland while you were a national organizer?

[00:55:44.25] - LP

Yeah, that came—during the time I was there, the Carpenters had locals in Newfoundland too with the bushworkers. So we had historically, we had the IWA had organized the bushworkers in Newfoundland back in the '50s. And there was a strike. That occurred in 1959 in Newfoundland and [Joey] Smallwood was still the prime minister there, er, the premier. And it was a nasty strike, turned out to be the companies, the pulp companies got goons in with bats and whatever else, turned out to be a nasty strike and each of the lines. And on one occasion, it got nasty enough that one of the constabulary, as they were called, got whacked in the head and died as a result of it, eh. So, Joey, being the guy that he was, decided that the IWA would be abolished in Newfoundland and they could not return for 20 years. So we were kicked out of Newfoundland and couldn't hold a certification for 20 years in Newfoundland. Just legislated gone, you know. And he turned it over to the—he turned the certification over to the Pulpers, eh, and the Pulpers were mad as hell, 'cause, and what didn't go to the Pulpers went back to set up a deal with the Carpenters again, eh, you know.

[00:57:46.03] - LP

And we got calls when we were in Thunder Bay, and one of the things that, one of the attractions that we had in Thunder Bay to them was that first of all, we were now a Canadian union, and also that it had—our 20-year expulsion had expired, and so we could go back and organize. But we didn't know what the atmosphere was going to be like, so John and I, we decided to take a trip. When we got there, I think it was the first day we got there and we were sitting in a coffee shop and one of the older fellows there, you know, they're very friendly there, the Newfies, they're the friendliest people in the world, you know. And anyway, we got chatting and he says, 'Well, where are you from?' 'We're from the west coast'. He says, oh, he says, 'that's over, I forget the name of the place where the ferries go there, they call it the west coast there.' And we said, 'no, no, we're from the west coast, Vancouver.' Oh, he said, 'Oh, that's a far, you know'. So anyway, he said, 'Well, what you up to?'

[00:59:16.27] - LP

And I said, 'Well, we're from the IWA.' 'Oh, IWA,' he said, 'yeah. I used to be a member of them,' you know. So we get talking and he says, 'Oh, we love the IWA.' He says, 'Well, you coming back?' He says, 'Please come back.' So he says, so from then that it just seemed to ricochet from there. He went on and he introduced us to another one and all of the old guys 20 years prior to that, they all wanted to have us in for dinner and whatever else, and so we travelled all the way from Deer Lake up to Badger where the incident occurred, and I don't think we bought a meal the rest of the time we were there. And they're just great people. What I'll never learn about them too is that they're social. They all go to church, but not because it's church. They go there because it's 'cause it's a good place to get together, you know. It was just a great place. So we come back from there and we looked at it and going in there and met with our board here, our national board, including Jack, and told them, we gave them our report and told them what we thought.

[01:00:42.05] - LP

And to my disappointment, our board said no, it's too far away, kind of thing. Because we hadn't—our closest certification was in Ontario at that point, in Southern Ontario.

[01:00:54.22] - KN

So you never did?

[01:00:55.21] - LP

So we never did go in. But it's—I'm sorry we didn't. I think we should have, but it wasn't my decision.

[01:01:05.27] - KN

Well, Jack Munro actually eventually appointed you as a national organizer, during which time you developed a particular class on training union organizers, and he eventually saw the potential in you, I guess, or he liked you, and he appointed you to be the national director of organization for the IWA.

[01:01:24.09] - LP

Yeah, that was after I came back from Thunder Bay. John had developed dementia.

[01:01:41.04] - KN

John?

[01:01:41.24] - LP

John Smitties, the national director of organizing. And he had developed dementia and had to retire, and then he didn't last too long after that. And we became great friends over that period of time, and I was actually asked to do his obituary, which was tough, tough to do because we'd spent a lot of time together. But then Jack—actually, I was sort of second on the list at that point. Another organizer, another senior organizer, a guy named Benny Lum, was set up for the job, and he was just about taken, and he dropped dead over a pool table somewhere. So I got the job by default. So anyhow, Jack says, well, 'I guess the job's yours if you want it.' And I said, 'yeah, okay.' So anyhow, I became the national director of organizing.

[01:02:41.00] - LP

And then during that time, when I wasn't organizing—when we went organizing as a national director or as a national organizer, we always tried to rein in one of the local guys that knew the way around town, knew a little bit of that. So we had to bring them into some of those campaigns. So I had an idea that because we were bringing them in green, why don't we set up a program of like a school every once in a while to train local organizers.

[01:03:20.22] - LP

Instead of having to bring in a national organizer all the time to do some of that early leg work, we could have guys who—people who knew the lay of the land, you know, where everybody lived and knew who they were.

[01:03:38.12] - KN

They were right there on the ground.

[01:03:39.18] - LP

Yeah, so I had written and developed an organizing class for that. And then it probably was a good thing and a bad thing because we had developed some local organizers, but the worst, the bad thing about it is it cost us some national organizers in the end, you know. But anyways, and then as a result of that, I started doing some shop steward courses too, and so then I got a dual identification. I was director of—national director of organizing-slash-education. So I got them both then. So I wound up doing all of our leadership stuff at Harrison and Winter School and across the country, eh, you know.

[01:04:42.25] - KN

And you, Lyle, at some point after that I guess, or while you were doing that, you had a serious motorcycle accident that resulted in nine different surgeries?

[01:04:55.19] - LP

Yeah.

[01:04:56.08] - KN

So it required you to go on medical leave. Can you talk about that and its impact on both your work life and your personal life?

[01:05:03.13] - LP

Yeah, yeah, we had some—it was bad. Those are bad times because both my wife and I were getting hit pretty badly with medical stuff. Diane had developed Parkinson's and then she—prior to that, we were on—she loved to ride the back of the bike. My free time, I was on a motorcycle and like I was back in the early, early days. But we were out on a trip to South Dakota and we come back and it was actually that trip we were on, started, we met up with Jack Munro and Barry O'Neill and a few other ones that came up on that same trip, eh? And we met up with them down south and Diane and I were on the road for six weeks on the bike and I come home, first day home and come downtown Langley to pick up my daughter from—she had a summer job there. I got hit and wound up flying off the bike and wound up basically pretty much out of business for a few years after that. I didn't get any broken bones, but I had all of my soft tissue was tore right across the back and then the tailbone down there.

[01:06:54.27] - LP

Because it was interesting, because my job in the union was primarily sitting. It was sitting like we're doing right now, or driving sitting, or sitting on an airplane or whatever, right? And I couldn't sit, so I couldn't—crazy, couldn't, you know, a desk job that you can't do a desk or whatever, right? So I wound up having to go on short-term and besides I was going through a hell of a lot of painkillers too and that even, and so I couldn't function and so I wound up, wound up pretty much, that was pretty much it, I went from short-term to long-term and then in the meantime Diane got Parkinson's and then later on I got diagnosed with—because of the anti-inflammatories that I was on, they took out my kidneys, so I got kidney disease and so I was on my way out of the picture with kidney disease until I got a transplant. So I wound up getting a

transplant. About 15 years ago now. And yeah, and I had both knees done, both eyes done [laughs].

[01:08:16.00] - KN

Oh, wow. Yeah. New person.

[01:08:16.26] - LP

Yeah. Yeah. Bionic.

[01:08:20.08] - KN

You referred earlier to your involvement in municipal politics in Langley. I know that you ran for municipal council, and also Diane was very active in the school board. She actually was a school trustee for a number of years. So can you tell us about your experience being politically involved in the Langley community?

[01:08:41.20] - LP

Yeah, municipal politics wasn't too much in my background at that point. Although I had did some work for—I'd worked on the Mike Harcourt campaign against Vander Zalm, I think before or after that, I'm not sure. My memory is not sure on that one, whether it was before or after the '85 Langley campaign.

[01:09:09.04] - KN

'86.

[01:09:10.05] - LP

Was that in '86, the Vander Zalm one?

[01:09:11.28] - KN

Langley one, yeah.

[01:09:12.10] - LP

Langley was '86?

[01:09:14.05] - KN

Yeah.

[01:09:15.02] - LP

So I remember when we moved to Langley, we moved in '77 to Langley. We've talked about this before, but my New Democrat membership and activity had preceded me from East Van to Langley. We were only there for a few days in our house there when I got a phone call that there was a local teacher that had a cross burning on his front yard and whether I would be interested in going out and being a support group for him. That teacher, of course, turned out to be Ken Novakowski, who was the head of the Langley Teachers Association [LTA], as they were called. And going through some stuff. And it was interesting because at the time it was reported that the KKK were active in the area. And as I remember, that particular cross was no—wasn't teenagers. That was put together, creosoted.

[01:10:40.01] - LP

That was the real deal, you know. So that's when we went and then we got to know a few other people from the LTA and that, mostly your acquaintances and people you worked with. Then Diane got interested in education. I not so much because I was doing other stuff, organizing. However, yeah, we decided that we would—we joke about this actually because when we moved out there and I couldn't believe the politics in the Fraser Valley, it was—if you remember the TV, the running TV show at the time was the "Dukes of Hazzard." And we had, the council was a little pudgy little Boss Hogg and the Good Ol' Boys were running council. And when we moved to Langley, we found this little pudgy little farmer, pig farmer out there, his name was Bill Blair, and he had his good ol' boys were running council, you know. And so when people would ask about Langley politics, I'd say, 'oh yeah, well, we got Boss Hogg and the Good Ol' Boys out there, eh?' But anyhow, we decided that it wasn't so much council as I remember it was, we were after the school board because the school board were pretty right-wing and then of course the hospital board was an anti-choice hospital board too.

[01:12:31.01] - LP

And so we got, we decided we would collectively try and put together some stuff to go after both of them and I know our dining room became kind of the centre point or the meeting room for Langley politics for a few years there. And then you had started I think one before for us, but then we created a couple of—we created a slate. Maybe it wasn't the first slate, but it was the first, I guess, recognizable slate when we put together—was that IDEAL or REAL? IDEAL first of

all, I guess. And then REAL—Regional Electors of Aldergrove and Langley. And that was when all of the old Socreds were on there. And yeah, and yeah, it was so—

[01:13:45.19] - LP

An aside on that one, I remember. I don't know if you remember this, but we were sitting there at our table and somebody said, 'Well, we're going to get, we gotta get with REAL, we're going after the school board spots, but we gotta actually legitimize and put together a couple of candidates for council.' And nobody around the table, they all looked at you and I for some reason. And we became the two council candidates in '85, I guess it was. And then another side to that is somebody else said, because we were living in Brookwood, we thought, well, we should have some side organizations that support us. So somebody jokingly said, well, what about the Brookwood Ratepayers Association [BRA]? And, 'BRA supports REAL' [laughs], you know. So we didn't go ahead with that one, but it was a good, good thought.

[01:14:52.10] - KN

Okay, so you retired in 2004, and what did you do after you retired? What was your life mostly like? Did you travel? Did you have hobbies? What have you done?

[01:15:07.01] - LP

I recovered from the motorcycle trip eventually. Recovered from this and that, and we bought another motorcycle. We bought another Harley and climbed back on again, and we made another trip to Sturgis. And then it was after that, Diane didn't want to ride anymore, and I didn't want to ride without her, and so I became a caretaker and her caregiver, and so not much happened for a few years. I couldn't, you know, I was still hurting and she was getting worse. And so she started up a group of Parkinson's, I forget what it was called now, basically Parkinson's support group. And then she didn't want to do it anymore, so I got roped into doing it. I didn't really want to, but I said okay. So then I became looking after the Parkinson's support group, and then I thought, you know, there's a group here that are taking the brunt of it here. And interestingly enough, it's not the people with the disease, it's the ones who are looking after them that are getting the worst of this here. Ones with the disease, [shakes head] it's not a good thing, but it's really rough emotionally on the survivors and the caregivers.

[01:16:57.29] - LP

So I set up a side group for them and as a result of it I got a little bit to know more about disease and the drugs and the timing and that. Jean Clarke, who was the head of BC Parkinson's at the time, found out, come out and seen what we were doing in Langley. Said, 'Would you agree to

be a Parkinson's ambassador?' And I said, 'Yeah, what is that? What do you want me to do?' And she said, 'Well, just what you're doing. Just go around.' She says, 'What we found out is that nursing and care homes don't have—they don't have a clue of the disease and how it affects them in terms of the timing of the drugs and that.' Parkinson's is a disease that the timing of the drugs is crucial. Parkinson's are either on time or they're off time. That's how they refer to it. You're on time or off time. And the drug has to be right there on time or else you're off. That's when you get people that seem to be stable but then they'll be right off. So I started to—I worked with them and we developed a kind of a presentation program on doing that, and I started to do that, and then that was working out okay.

[01:18:40.29] - LP

I was starting to get asked to do it in hospitals and that. And then something else happened. I got a heart attack, and then I got a second one and a third one, and then Diane got—she got completely immobile. So we had to call an ambulance one day for her, and as we were loading her in the ambulance, the paramedic asked me if I wanted to ride with them, and I said, 'No, I'll come along later.' He said, 'Oh, well, come with us here now.' 'Oh, okay.' So, as we were all heading to the ambulance, I just mentioned that I was getting these muscle stresses and that from when I was loading her or unloading her. And he said, 'Well, why don't you get it checked out when you're at the hospital?' I said, 'Ah, I'll be okay.' He says, 'No, no, just go and check today.' He says, 'Come in.' And yeah, we get in the hospital and he says, 'Look, I got a bed. You can lay, you're gonna be here all night anyhow. You can be right with your wife.' And I said, 'Yeah, okay then, sounds good,' instead of sitting in a chair.

[01:20:02.08] - LP

So I sat, I laid in the bed and they come and check me out. And they said, 'Let's go downstairs to the treadmill.' And I said, 'Oh yeah, I've done that one before. I'll fail that one right away.' So anyhow, I did. I went down there and I wasn't on it for 30 seconds and they shut it down and they said, 'Okay, you're off to Royal Columbian for angiography.' So I'm in Royal Columbian getting an angi. They're telling me that I've got 5 blockages and if I don't do something I won't make it through the day. And so, and I got, I left Diane in Langley Hospital. So anyhow, by the time I got out of Royal Columbian with open heart surgery and three bypasses, I got back to Langley and I only got to see her once before we lost her, eh. So yeah, and that's sort of the end of our story. Except political action is still in the family, you know. Our oldest daughter, Candy, is currently the chair of the Langley School District.

[01:21:19.11] - KN

Right.

[01:21:21.20] - LP

And chair of her bargaining unit. With the Government Employees.

[01:21:28.07] - KN

Okay. A union activist.

[01:21:31.22] - LP

She's an activist. She's involved with the New Democrats. And so now she's off to the Winnipeg CLC [Canadian Labour Congress] convention, I think, in a couple weeks. Yeah so, it's just stayed in the family.

[01:21:48.27] - KN

That's great. Yeah. Okay, well, thank you very much.

[01:21:54.23] - LP

I just want to say that this is a fine finality, maybe. You know, the IWA, I owe a lot to that union, and in my view, it's the best union in history. It's the most democratic union that I know of. Every single position in the IWA is there by ballot. Every agreement is there by ballot. It's unfortunate that it didn't survive as a union. I don't think we were—as good of a union as we were, we weren't forward enough looking to look beyond our own industry in that. We should. We once said that, well, 'If they use pencils, it's IWA,' kind of thing, you know. But we didn't really live up to that. We should have looked elsewhere instead of just focusing on that industry. And I think it cost the union ultimately by just focusing on that industry. Some of the other unions that did expand and that they expanded because they went out and branched and got anybody and everybody they could. We could have done the same thing, but I don't think we—for some reason we didn't. Our heads weren't in that direction. But it was certainly—it modeled not only me, but a lot of people, in terms of how they lived and how they think and the progressiveness that the IWA left behind and that. So yeah, so that's it.

[01:23:57.01] - KN

Okay, well thank you.

[01:23:58.15] - LP

Alright.