

Rashpal Sehmbly

May 13, 2022 Interviewer Merryn Edwards & Don Bouzek; Camera Don Bouzek

[Below are excerpts from a transcript of an interview carried out by the Alberta Labour History Institute. The full transcript is available here: <https://albertalabourhistory.org/rashpal-sehmbly-2/>]

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Q: Tell me about your dad and how he came to NWT?

RS: In 1969 in the summer, my dad actually immigrated to Canada. He ended up in Mississauga, Ontario. ... Eventually he found an ad for mechanics and some tradespeople for Cominco Mines. He never knew where Cominco Mines was located or where it was, nothing. So he basically just applied for a job. He was a trained heavy-duty mechanic from the Indian army, so he had some qualifications for that. So he applied, not knowing what was going to go on or where he was going to go. I recall him telling me he applied and then, about a month or two later – at least a couple months later – he got a plane ticket in the mail mailed to him with a letter saying, “We’re going to hire you as a mechanic; here’s your ticket, come up north.” He didn’t know where up north was. I always tell people, “I think he really wanted us to go up north because he wanted us to be close to Santa Claus.” That’s the story I always tell people. It’s unique, because as a child, the very first – and it was wintertime when I arrived, or it was in the summer – but the very first winter, I’ll always remember Santa Claus as a little kid. Santa came to our little trailer that we had in Pine Point that we lived in. So then I came with my mom in 1974. My dad sponsored us and he went back home to India and picked us up and took us up to Pine Point, NWT. So I grew up there.

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Q: Did you leave when the mine shut down?

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We left actually a year before the mine officially closed, and we ended up in Edmonton. ... I moved to Edmonton, finished high school here, and then eventually realized, “Okay, I need to get a good job.” But back then there weren’t that many good jobs. I worked in the restaurant industry for a bit, I worked in light construction, I worked in a sign factory as well here in

Edmonton, eventually making my way into Canada Post. I became a member of Canadian Union of Postal Workers in 1999.

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Q: Can you talk a bit about the extended family aspect?

RS: I guess when, let's say, a son sponsors their parent over to Canada to live with them, these are multigenerational families. What you have basically is, in a household, you have the grandparents, you'll have maybe a couple of the uncles, and then the mothers and the fathers and their sons and the children and grandchildren all living under one house. Even today if you go back to India, the houses are set up that way. It's just basically large open areas with lots of rooms and a couple of kitchens. Everybody lives together to support each other, right? It's not like the traditional family here in Canada where it's the average two parents and 2.1 kids or whatever. It's not like that; it's a lot bigger. When you have more people in the family, everybody really wants to just pitch in what they can. Sometimes when they leave their own country it means coming to another country – Canada or wherever they end up – trying to still continue to help the family so the future generation, the grandchildren, will have something better for themselves. That means better education and the ability to go to college, where some of these grandparents may not have ever gone to college. Or if they did, it was a struggle to pay for those fees and stuff like that. I guess it's really about understanding that the larger family groups are there to support each other for sure, especially when you have to feed so many mouths.

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Q: Can you tell Merryn a bit about your life in Jasper Place?

RS: When you're younger and trying to find yourself, you want to have your own place. I ended up living a couple of blocks from the bus station just off of here [the Orange Hub]. It was kind of interesting because rent was really cheap – maybe \$500 and all utilities included, water, power, electricity, everything – it's like, “Great, I can take showers as long as I want.” I did live in the area for a few years. What I recall of the area was definitely, “Don't go out at night; it was kind of scary.” The bus station itself, I mean it's much better now, it looks a lot cleaner. I actually drive by it every day now because I go to work on the West End here. I can tell you it was kind

of scary at night especially – a lot of nefarious things going on and stuff like that. But I needed to be alone and be myself, so I chose to move here in this area. Luckily, I had a vehicle, so I was able to go places without having to take the bus everywhere. That was kind of good.

Q: Lots of good things about multigenerational families, but not a lot of privacy.

RS: That's true. I do remember the area was always sort of run down. There was always garbage strewn about here and there, and people at night walking around drunk and hollering and screaming like that. It was just one of those things where you stay for a few years and then you realize, "Okay, I think I need to go back. I need to get out of here, I need to move somewhere else." So then you move on.

Q: That was your first apartment moving away from your family?

RS: Yeah, that was my first one. It was just one of those things. I did it.

Q: Was it a bit like Mill Woods in that it's very culturally diverse?

RS: Actually, if I recall, I was probably the only East Indian person in the area at that time. I don't recall any other East Indians, maybe a couple of Chinese families and some Indigenous families. But I kind of stuck out as a sore thumb in the area when I did go for walks in the neighbourhood. I didn't see it as a culturally diverse area like Mill Woods – not at all, no.

Q: There was a story about the Legion not allowing people with turbans.

RS: I certainly heard about it. What was kind of interesting to me was I thought, "Well, because my dad actually served in the Indian army and, of course, he wore a turban at that time in the army." I guess part of it was understanding that India fought with the British at that time. It's like, "Okay, wait a minute, so we were all fighting the oppressors at that time. So why would you not allow the population of the Sikhs that were wearing turbans not to enter a place that we all fought together?" That was a weird thing in my mind. I could never understand that with the Legion. For me, it was a little bit different because, when I grew up in the Northwest Territories, the Legion not only was the place where I knew the men would go to drink but, during the off times, there was meetings that were being held there and stuff like that; so everybody went. Nobody ever thought about the hat issue. Maybe I was too young, but I don't recall it as being a major issue.

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Q: You're involved in a lot of community organizing as well as union stuff. Do you want to talk about that?

RS: Sure. Last year in October, there was a group of parents that approached me and said, "Hey, Rashpal, is there anything we can do to help community?" One of the parents was actually... my children and her children, they were both in Daly Grove at the time as kids, in kindergarten and stuff. We kind of separated ways because her kids went to another school about grade 5 or 6; we ended up reconnecting somehow. There was a parents' group that was doing a bottle drive at the Crawford Plains School as well last year in July. So I connected with them. We all got together one time in October and said, "Hey, what can we do for community in the southeast of Edmonton?" So what we did actually is we formed a group called the Collective Community Initiatives. That was sort of born out of just helping different organizations. We began last year in November by doing a donation drive for the WIN House women's shelter. That was a huge success. I filled up my whole van with feminine products, anything that women needed. There was clothes and socks and anything that was required, and we dropped that off at the WIN House. They were so thrilled that we did that work and were able to collect so much from just three or four parents getting together and putting it out on Facebook. Then in December we reached out to the Hope Mission. They needed winter clothing at that time and stuff like that, so we had the opportunity to collect for them. We ended up filling up two full pickup trucks worth of winter clothing – jackets, socks, and all that kind of stuff. So that was quite the successful event. In January... actually there's a group called the Bear Clan, which actually originated in Winnipeg; they have sort of a parent sister company or organization here in Edmonton as well. So we reached out to them and asked them, "What do you need?" They said, "We need knitted items." So I reached out to them in December because we usually plan a month ahead for all our events that we do. They said, "We need knitted items." So we put it out there on Facebook. The Mill Woods Seniors Association actually came by when we did the donation drive at the Southwood Community League. So the Mill Woods Seniors Association came by and they had two or three large bags of knitted items. It was amazing, the amount of stuff we collected – there was scarves, there was toques, there was hats, there was sweaters. It was just amazing, the amount of stuff that we were able to collect.

Judith was one of the organizers with the Bear Clan here in Edmonton. She was so thrilled and she kept texting me, "I didn't realize you guys were going to do so much work." In February of this year, we took a bit of a break. It was cold and we needed to just rest and stuff so didn't do anything. Then in March we actually collected for an organization called Kids Kottage. Kids Kottage is basically an organization that, if children are taken away from say, a domestic abuse issue or some other situation where sometimes the police get involved and there's children in the house, they need a safe respite to go to. So we reached out to them, and again we ended up filling up my van with lots of bags of clothing for children and supplies and food and baby formula, diapers, and all that kind of stuff. That one, when I showed up to drop off the stuff, I asked the lady, "So, where do you want this stuff?" She says, "Well, how much do you have?" I said, "Well, I have a few bags in my van." She's like, "Okay, just drive to the back and I'll help you unload." As we started unloading, she was like, "Your whole van is full." I go, "Yes, it's full." After we finished and put everything down in the basement of their location, she was actually in tears. That was sort of like that heartfelt thing of like, "Wow, she didn't realize a small parents' group could do that much to collect that much donations for them." That was that, and in April we just finished up a food bank drive at Sobeys on 23rd Avenue and 50th Street. Sobeys was great because they had pre-made hampers of food in plastic bags with a can of beans and some pasta and some other stuff in there for \$9. They were willing to help out as well. We contacted the food bank a month prior and they brought their van out. We collected 1,038 kg of food. I was quite amazed when they told us the number because it was like, "Wow, that was quite a lot." So that was April. Then in May, we're actually going to be... what are we doing in May? May is going to be, oh yes, Little Warriors. That's an organization that helps children who have been sexually abused. We're going to be helping them in May.

Q: For Mayday they helped out...

RS: So you got to meet Judith?

Q: Yeah, she's an awesome leader. . .

RS: It doesn't take much to do that kind of work, the community work. A few hours on a Saturday once a month, and we're doing a lot of really good work with very few numbers of people. But it's really good, because we're giving back to the community. It doesn't take much.

When you see people in tears because you've given them stuff and they're just so happy, that's the best thing that a person can ever have. I say, "Create the poster, do it, and guess what, somebody will donate, somebody will show up."

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