

Constance Thomas

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Camera: Don Bouzek

[This transcript consists of excerpts from a transcript of an interview carried out by the Alberta Labour History Institute. The full transcript is available here:

<https://albertalabourhistory.org/constance-thomas/>]

Q: Tell me about yourself.

CT: I was born in Dominica, and Marigot is the village, to be specific. That's the Commonwealth of Dominica situated in the Caribbean Islands in the West Indies.

Q: Did you come to Canada directly from Dominica, or did you have any stops in between?

CT: Yes, there was an in-between stop. I attended nursing school in Jamaica, the University Hospital of the West Indies, in Mona, Jamaica.

Q: When was that?

CT: I started in January of 1971 and finished April of 1974.

Q: What did you obtain there?

CT: A diploma in nursing. We were given a diploma. I remember we were trying to get a basic degree. It was easy for us to say, but it wasn't so easy. There was one college that's the Adventists that had a bachelor's, but that was a private university in Jamaica. But we were diploma.

Q: So this was a Caribbean-wide credential?

CT: Yes, well it's worldwide. That's your basic entry to be a registered nurse.

Q: Was it accepted wherever you went?

CT: After Jamaica I came here. But the culture of nursing was developed in a slightly different way. They were specializing more; we were more generalists. We were doing general work, and now it's become totally special in every way now. I worked in Coronation when I first came, that's on the eastern border, November of 1974.

Q: So that was your first entry to Canada?

CT: Yes. I came from Jamaica to Coronation.

Q: What made you decide to come to Canada?

CT: I wanted to move on. I wanted to do more. I knew there was a lot more to learn. In the Caribbean parents push for education and moving ahead. But also in Dominica they were very restrictive about giving you jobs. You couldn't get work as a nurse like here where you can go in, have your credentials verified, and then you can pretty much get a job that's available. That's the way it was. We were getting magazines. The nursing magazine is a worldwide magazine, and they were advertising in Alberta. They were calling for nurses, begging for nurses. A friend and I decided, why not? I went from Dominica after I graduated, because I had fully intended to work there. But the difficulty I experienced getting a job was not worth it. I had been out and I knew there were other things. So why bother yourself over a year or two years waiting for a job? So I went back to Jamaica and back to a job. They called me and said, you can come back, you have a job. So I went back to Mona and worked there. But they were getting a little bit more specialized too. You had your midwives, you had your ICU nurses – it wasn't so much being a general nurse anymore. There was a lot to learn. So I figured out I would do midwifery and I would go to England to do midwifery. But in the meantime, my friend said, she was reading the nursing magazine and they were asking for nurses, headhunting they call it, for nurses for Alberta. We phoned; it was difficult in those days to get a phone call, but we did get through. I was hired right away. So I came; why not?

Q: To Alberta?

CT: To Alberta. Landed in Toronto, then Edmonton, the two of us, my friend and I, Yvonne Morris.

[.....]

Q: Was there a stream of nurses coming from Jamaica to Edmonton?

CT: Not to Edmonton. There were not a lot of black people in Edmonton. Edmonton was really small compared to Kingston. You wouldn't believe it, would you? It wasn't only small in size, it was small in the way people thought. People didn't travel in Alberta a lot. When I lived in Coronation there was nobody who had gone out of Coronation even. There was one lady, I think she was Polish, and as a result of the war she was a displaced person. That's what I heard. She had never left where she landed, where she came to. It was a struggle even to go to the mountains. Dominica is mountainous, Jamaica has a lot of mountains. There's a sea. I would look out and see the horizon almost and thing, that's a sea. No, it's not the sea, it's just flat. So we wanted to go to the mountains. It was hard to even drive or get anybody to go anywhere. So it was a total 360 that happened in Canada. When I went to the embassy to get my traveling papers, passport, not passport but the permit to come, the guy who was interviewing me, the officer, he was a white guy in Jamaica. He said, why are you going to Alberta? Do you know where that is? I said, no, but I'm going. He said, do you know how cold it is, how hot it is? It meant nothing to me at my age – hey, I can breach the world. The papers were stamped really quickly, that was a process that was extremely fast, and we both came out. There's a family met us here, a lady, Mrs. Butterfield, or I think it's Butterwick. She owned a farm and a ranch out in

Coronation. She picked us up at the airport. We stopped in Stettler to buy coats, because it was getting cold already; it was November. And we went on and went there.

[...]

Q: So you were arriving as a nurse?

CT: Yes, I was a registered nurse.

[...]

Q: Did you start at the hospital right away?

CT: Yes, Coronation Municipal Hospital. We lived in the residence; they had a residence there.

Q: What was the staff composition there? Were there any people of colour?

CT: There was somebody from the Philippines, but not a nurse. She was an x-ray tech. The doctor was Dr. Kula; he was Indian from India. There was another girl from India too. But the other doctor was white, from England; he was British. There were a few other staff from around the area. I'm trying to think of the name of the towns around. But there were no other black people; we were the only two. Now they say black and brown, okay so we were the two black. There were some brown ones.

Q: Did you immediately join a union?

CT: No, there was no union. When we came in '74, it wasn't Alberta Health, but it was a municipality. The town, I think they got their funding, not that I cared about it then, but they got their funding from the general government. You remember at that time Alberta was Social Credit, was it Manning at the time? It was a little bit of a different setup with healthcare. But the municipalities got funding from the government, from Alberta.

[...]

Q: How was the work environment?

CT: It was good but it was almost prehistoric in a way. Because we were educated in a hospital that was forward thinking, university, they had a lot of things that were very advanced. In Coronation there's no way, no there wasn't. You did everything. You help the tech, you help everywhere. It was a good experience to know how the rest of the world lives. At least there's variety in life.

Q: How long did you stay there?

CT: Six months. As soon as we got there, I think we were not as needed as we were when they requested the staff. You know how you want something, it's like being hungry, and after a while you're not hungry anymore. Well, I think that's what happened in a lot of places. But further to that, I was looking to get a BSN – BSCN or BSN or whatever they call it now – to go to university to get a degree. My intention was to get a PhD eventually, so I had to think where from. There was no long-distance education, there was nothing like that. I may have stayed there longer if it that was available. I started applying to places like New Brunswick, Newfoundland, everywhere, Nova Scotia, in all the universities. It was always a university I was looking for.

Q: A university teaching hospital?

CT: Yes, to get further education.

[...]

Q: Where did you move on to?

CT: We moved to Lacombe, so worked in Lacombe. It became tight in Lacombe because the doctors lived far away, so they depended on the nurses to do a lot of their catch work. If a woman was ready to deliver, you'd better be able to do it. That concerned me, in particular with deliveries, because that was one specialty in Jamaica. You did not touch a woman if you did not have the training. So from Lacombe I moved further looking for something, and went to Red Deer. [...] I did not work in a hospital in Red Deer, I worked at Ash/Deerhome. Have you heard of that? It was a place for ones who couldn't look after themselves. It was the elderly, it was people with challenges, serious malformations, mental illness. [...] My friend Yvonne worked at the hospital in Red Deer, but I wasn't interested in that. I didn't want to, because I was moving on. So I did some courses in Red Deer, some basic courses which would help with the BSN and so on. After that I went to England; I went to England to do midwifery.

[.....]

Q: So you stayed in England six months?

CT: About a year, a year and a little bit. I did a little bit of traveling around to Netherlands, Germany, and places. It was so easy to travel. Then I decided to come back, mainly because I felt Canada was paying better. That's why I came back.

[...]

Q: Did you go back to Lacombe?

CT: No, I came to Edmonton.

Q: And you started job hunting?

CT: I didn't need to hunt, I got something right away. But the problem was somewhere to stay. There was a lot of – well I don't want to call it what it is – but you could not... I was on the West End and I lived just a little bit over from where the Mall is. The mall wasn't there yet, it was a big pasture there. The last place you could get a bus from was, what's the name of the mall there? Just off 87th Avenue.

Q: Meadowlark?

CT: Yea, Meadowlark Mall. That's where the bus stopped, regular routes. There was nothing on the weekend and nothing after 6, so I had to get a car. It was no problem getting a job. I worked at the Misericordia.

Q: When was that?

CT: Let me see, 1977. I got a job there fairly easily.

Q: What position did you have?

CT: I worked in Labour and Delivery because I was then trained; I was then an educated midwife.

Q: Were you an RN?

CT: Yes.

Q: Is that when you joined UNA?

CT: No, UNA joined me. Remember all this time there was no UNA, there was just an association. Actually, when I came to Canada there was no labour union for the nurses. We had a loose organization but there was nobody to represent you. I don't think it really came that way until... what happened is, I think the University of Alberta Hospital and one other joined and made a nurses association. I don't think... anyway, it must've been the Alex. No, the first UNA president was from the Misericordia, Heather Smith. They had an association and there was another association for the University. But eventually when they had the big strike, that's when they kind of solidified and came together.

Q: Did you know Heather Smith at the Mis?

CT: I knew her as a young lady at the Mis. We were both at the Misericordia together.

Q: Did she involve you in activism?

CT: No, it was something you could choose. But remember, you're working, and I did not have the privilege of being able to go to meetings and those things. I have attended a few of their AGMs but not as any involvement.

Q: What were your barriers?

CT: One, I had a child. I was studying, I was going to school. I was working two jobs.

Q: What was your other job?

CT: I worked at Canterbury Court.

Q: While you were nursing at the Misericordia?

CT: Yes.

Q: Did you need two jobs to survive?

CT: Yes, I needed the money from both of them because I had to have a car, I had to buy something. And that's what the problem was. Because you can't rent, you have to buy. Nobody would rent you a house if you had a child. Double jeopardy – you have a child, you're a woman, and you're Black. So you walk up and down 87th Avenue at all the apartments that were there then. They would advertise it in the paper, in the Journal or wherever. You would call, "Okay come and see it." When they saw you, the apartment was taken. I didn't realize how prevalent that was at the time because I'm not concentrating on prejudice or anything like that. I didn't think I was different to that extent because I had never been treated that way until Edmonton – never. When I came to Edmonton and couldn't find a place, I had to buy a condo. So now you're committed. All the time I have been in Canada I always walk with my passport. I think any time I don't like it, I will go home. That was my MO, so it didn't bother me. But after I got into school, I'm working, I have a car, you have commitments, I have a daughter.

Q: Did you find Edmonton to be more backward than Coronation?

CT: Oh yes. In Coronation I did not need to worry about housing. Not in Coronation, not in Red Deer, not in Lacombe I did not need to worry about accommodation.

Q: Was it attached to the job?

CT: Some of it was the job, but even in Red Deer we rented a place. But in Edmonton it was a no-go, a lot of barriers of that. When I was at the Mis too, I think there was a little bit of a... what they did to the nurses in particular was that, at the Mis they would send you to clean. You would go; and I don't mind cleaning, but you're not going to assign me to clean when there's work to do as a nurse. I'm not going to do it. Not only that, I had another job and I did not need to go there to clean. We'd converted into 12-hour shifts, and I didn't live far, and I think I

worked the dayshift or nightshift or whatever, I worked my shift. Then they called me to come in to help out because they were swamped. When I got there, my assignment was to go and clean the rooms. I said, "No. I'll go home, and when you need a nurse, call me." All hell broke loose after that. First, I decided not to go back. Well, it's maybe pretentious to say that it didn't really hurt me, but I was upset. It didn't hurt me financially because in that year I was ready to go back to school fulltime. Mentally I could leave that job because I had already kind of quit it in a way. So I went home and there was an action – what do you call it – a job action. The hospital kind of sued me, for want of a better word, for abandoning my post.

Q: Who was the employer?

CT: The Misericordia Hospital.

Q: And who owned the hospital?

CT: Well, remember it's the nuns. It wasn't Covenant then. What did they call it? They had another name, but it's the same thing; they just changed names.

Q: So it wasn't Alberta Health Services?

CT: No. Alberta Health Services is relatively new, from my point of view.

Q: So we're in the '70s and you're in the Misericordia Hospital.

CT: Yeah, 1980.

Q: And they're trying to force you to do the cleaning job as well as nursing?

CT: Well, they were trying to set a precedent with me, because I was maybe, say, bold enough to walk out. They were trying to send a message to the other nurses that you cannot do that, so the action was to fire me. But it was kind of a useless firing because it was to send a message to the other nurses.

Q: Who were the other nurses?

CT: On the unit. All mixed up, it was all mixed up.

Q: Were there other nurses of colour?

CT: Yes, there were. I think Zeta was working there at the time. [...] Who else was working there? Mainly white nurses.

[.....]

CT: So they had an action and they went to a trial or whatever.

Q: Who took action?

CT: The hospital.

Q: Who defended you?

CT: It was the union. It was a grievance, that's the word. It's a grievance, yeah.

Q: Because you took individual action?

CT: Yes. They said that...

Q: How did your coworkers respond?

CT: They were sympathetic but it's a typical thing you hear – everybody's afraid. You didn't get any calls or such unless it was somebody you knew. I really didn't want to hear from them, to be honest. I did not like the hospital; I didn't want to see it.

Q: Why did you not like it?

CT: Because of what they were doing, because of the way they were treating the nurses. Of course, the glitch that they used – that's not the word – but to fire me permanently was to say that I had abandoned my post. The argument was that I should have worked and then grieved it. It didn't matter to me. But the comment that was made by Olga Conman, who was the manager of Labour and Deliveries, "Now that Constance lost her case, you now can all go and clean." That's what she told the other nurses, that's what she told them. That's what they told me she told them.

Q: How did she say you lost your case?

CT: Well, the decision was made that I was wrong to have walked off.

Q: So you never went back?

CT: I never went back to the Mis for years. I didn't even want to see the hospital.

Q: Did you feel discriminated against?

CT: Not really.

Q: Because they expected everybody to clean?

CT: Yes. It wasn't only me. They were doing that to all the other girls, white or brown or whatever. Everybody was getting the same problem, and everybody was just backing out. But I may not have backed out too, I may have left and just said, oh. But I felt it was continuing too long, it was going on too long and they were not making any efforts to fix the problem. What had happened was the cleaner, the housekeeping people, had phoned in. They thought she was sick, but nobody believed she was sick. She was just tired, fed up, and the same thing, so she did not come to work. So why do they have to deal with her if we're there to do it?

Q: Was the cleaning staff under a different organization?

CT: Yes, they still are.

Q: So they tried to get you to substitute for the cleaners?

CT: Yes. I don't think they were organized either, the cleaning staff. But UNA was in the beginning throes of being organized.

Q: Did they privatize that service at the time?

CT: You mean the cleaning? No. It was part of like the food and everything else.

Q: Why was the manager mad at you?

CT: I don't think she was mad at me personally. But she was just saying, "Hey, she's lost now, so you just jump in and do the cleaning, do the work."

Q: How did people respond?

CT: Well, they told me, as far as I know. But my attitude is, if they want to stay and stick it out, then they stay and stick it out. People stay in jobs for different reasons. I did not have their reasons, so I made my options.

Q: What did you do next?

CT: Well, I was already registered at University of Alberta, so I continued on to my BSN.

Q: When were you fired?

CT: It would've been 1980.

Q: What was the working climate like for nurses in the '70s?

CT: As I look back, maybe I wasn't as woken. The doctors would touch your hair. I had an afro. I didn't like it, but I didn't feel abused or used or discriminated against. It was a discrimination

because why is my hair so different, why are you going to touch anybody else's hair, really when you think about it. That kind of thing. And they'd call me Brown Sugar.

Q: The doctors?

CT: Yea. But I didn't take it to be anything.

Q: Did that happen to you in Jamaica?

CT: Oh no. Oh no, everybody is brown sugar I guess. I didn't have any of those things in Jamaica.

Q: What about in Lacombe and Coronation?

CT: Not so much Coronation, but definitely Lacombe.

Q: That you were called names?

CT: In retrospect, yes, it was inappropriate. But I think in a way it gave us... Because I was not alone, my friend was there, Yvonne was there like a backup sounding board. You laugh about it and you give back as much as you can. We did our share too, in the sense of we would talk Patois. Somebody would come and say, what are you talking? We'd say, oh we're speaking Finnish or something like that. So there were ways that we were able to break down those things. But it is a continuing way and I think they're feeling it more directly now in the workplace. I had my own things; these are olden times. So as we come more, it got worse. I got a Masters in Health Services Administration and I was working at the Alec. My direct opinion and feeling was that as long as I was working as a midwife and helping them with their proper diagnoses and helping, it was fine. But then a job came up on one of the antepartum units where they needed a manager. Everybody said, Constance you should apply, you're ready for it. I had Health Services Administration, I mean what more can you get?

[...]

Q: Were the nurses at that point united in UNA?

CT: No, UNA came a little bit later. I think '76 was still... they were kind of loose still. I think it tightened up after we had the demonstrations at the Mis.

Q: What were those demonstrations for?

CT: It was for working conditions, hours of work, pay.

Q: When was this?

CT: In '76, I'm pretty sure; '76 strikes me as being the year we were tramping out there at the Mis.

Q: Were you involved in that?

CT: Oh yes. I picketed during the day and I worked at night. Isn't that terrible? A real scab. I couldn't afford, well the union couldn't support you. They'd give you \$25 a day.

Q: So during the day you'd be with the strikers and at night you'd work. Did you sneak in another door?

CT: Not at the Mis. Maybe Canterbury Court. There was a group that looked after home visiting, and I worked at them. It wasn't the Victoria Order of Nurses, but that kind of thing, Edmonton Nurses something.

Q: You didn't cross the picket line?

CT: Oh no, I didn't cross their picket line.

Q: How long was the Mis on strike?

CT: It was weeks. They couldn't manage the hospital after, they could not. It wasn't just the Mis, I think all the hospitals were just coming together and they were all on strike. But I remember myself being up there.

[...]

Q: How long did you live near Meadowlark?

CT: I never lived in Meadowlark because they wouldn't rent me an apartment in Meadowlark. I lived in Belmead, further on. There was Meadowlark and there was the mall place, but it was just this big morass, like a swamp place next to the Mis. I lived near the side of 178th Street. But it was our stomping ground.

Q: How long did you live there?

CT: Let me see, '77 until '86, about nine years.

Q: What was the area like? Were there other Black people in the neighbourhood?

CT: There were a few of them. There was my friend, then my mother came up here when she retired, to help me with my daughter. So I had family. And oh yes, there was a girl from Jamaica who came up here to work with a psychiatrist and a lawyer. They liked her well enough, but on her day off they wanted her out of the house. She had no friends, nobody, no car, she didn't

know anybody. But she had to get out of their house on her day off. My mother didn't drive, so she met her on the bus, and she took her home, and there she was in the family. In the complex we lived, there was our complex across from that Catholic school, just across 178th Street there. My daughter went there forever. We lived across there and next to us was an Edmonton housing project. There were people there who had a rough time, they had a rough time. The people who were not educated...

Q: Who had a rough time?

CT: The Black people there that I knew. Everybody there had a rough time because they were all on welfare and had children. The bus was difficult; the bus only ran at high times, rush hour, and nothing on Saturday and Sunday. So those people were limited. If you didn't drive, heck. Gas was cheap but you've got nothing to put the gas in. We talk about that with them. My friend, she's a social worker, she became a social worker after that. She talks a lot about Belmead and living around there. She had a bag the size of, oh god, maybe ten times your size. She had to take her son with her, and she had to make sure she had everything in that bag. My mother used to laugh at her. But the one street was 87th Avenue really, because 178th did not come right through. It stopped at Stony Plain, 100th Avenue there by the Sandman Inn. So Edmonton, one thing that was very nice about here was the pool in Jasper Place, Jasper Place Pool. It's now a big complex and they've got this high school and everything. But at the beginning it was basically just the pool and Jasper Place High School, JPS. That was it. But the pool was always very welcome. That's where my daughter learned to swim. My mother would take her on the bus whilst I was working.

Q: Were there grocery stores nearby?

CT: No. There was one. If you were to go down 87th Avenue and then turn left at the intersection with the mall, what would that street be? Anyway, you'd go around behind there, and there was a post office there and a Safeway. That's where St. Justin School is, St. Justin and another school, just on the corner of where they're putting the thing through now, the railway. If you turn left and headed west before you reach 178th, there's a little development there. That's where the Safeway was. When I'm talking about living, I'm telling you, even if I worked and felt I was doing fairly decent, there were people... it was a big divide. You would go into the supermarket and some people would have two carts of groceries. You'd look at it and say, what the heck are they doing? You wonder, what's wrong with me? But that was our grocery store, was Safeway. And the post office, I think they still have a post office in the mall there.

Q: Was your daughter around when you were living there, or did she come later?

CT: I had to get a house, the condo, because she was coming.

Q: Where did she go to school?

CT: St. Benedict's. That's the name of the place, she went to St. Benedict's. We were right across the street from St. Benedict's. At that time, St. Benedict's was a church. That's where the Catholic church held their masses. It's not the big thing it is now; that was it, the West End was. Desmond and I, when we drive, we marvel to see how different it has come, how absolutely different the West End is. We were on the last street.

[...]

Q: How was the bus service? Was it hard to get downtown?

CT: Yes, and it wasn't just downtown, it was Jasper Avenue you had to go. I took my orientation to orient myself based on Jasper Avenue, so I knew I was going in the right direction depending on how the streets were increasing. So it was always Jasper Avenue I had to go to: immigration concerns, traveling concerns, everything was downtown. But I had to get a car, I had no choice. When you work shift, can you imagine, minus 40 at the Mis?