

Shirley Romany

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Interviewers: Donna Coombs-Montrose and Colette Lebeuf

Camera: Don Bouzek

Q: Where did you come from?

SR: I came from Trinidad and Tobago.

Q: Around what time?

SR: 1963.

Q: What was it like growing up in Trinidad?

SR: Growing up in Trinidad. I come from a very poor family – a mother of eight, a father who died very early. My mother take it on herself and she said, not one of you are going to go to an orphanage or an auntie or uncle. You all are my crosses and I'm going to carry it. That's what I remember at the age of about five when my dad passed away. She have never faltered, getting up at 5 o'clock in the morning and coming home at 6 o'clock in the evening. She had a little restaurant and at our lunchtime we'd go and wash dishes and help her before we'd go back to school after she give us lunch. Growing up, my sisters, the older ones, took us and brought us up more than our mother. When mommy come home at night, we made a hot bath for her with Epsom salts for her to just soothe her feet. Then she would talk to us one by one every day: how was your day? Did you do your homework? Did you have your clothes ready for tomorrow? Things like that she would go through with every one of us. I had one sister. She took her out of school. She had finished high school and she was going to college, and my mom took her out to stay home for a while until we grew up. But she eventually went back to school.

Q: How many siblings did you have?

SR: I had 11 but I think four died before we knew them. I have seven right now. My brother, who was a doctor, he passed away. He went to Dalhousie University and he had a nervous breakdown in the '50s. They experimented with him and give him electric shocks. We thought that killed my mother, because she took everything she had to make sure he get what he wanted so he could come home and make life easier for us. But it went the other way around. He came back in handcuffs, because he was silently mad and they didn't know how he was going to react on the plane. From the plane they took him straight to the mental institute in Trinidad. As a kid, I remember it very well.

Q: So the trauma of losing your brother took its impact on your family.

SR: My brother came back silently mad, and they put him in a mental institute in Trinidad, St. Ann's. Because we were young, we were not allowed to go and see him. But every Sunday my mom would go with one of my other sisters to visit him. He had a friend who was a doctor in Dalhousie, and that friend came back to Trinidad and he was working at the mental institute. That doctor brought him back to health as far as he could. That doctor was my brother's mentor. They just clicked together again in Trinidad because he was a Trinidadian too. He helped him along the way that he was able to come back home, and that made my mom very happy.

Q: What impact did that have on your family?

SR: It was a very heavy impact. Here is a mother with eight children, no father, no income other than the one she brings in. But I had older sisters, so mom said, I'm sorry but you'll have to go to work because the younger ones have to go to school. You're finished high school already, go find a job. So my sister Jean, she found a job and she took me on as her responsibility. She was four years older than I am. So that was one less burden for my mom. So Jean would teach me when she come home in the evening. Jean types 120 words a minute and

I reached up to 30. That was good enough for me; at least I could've typed a letter. That's all she wanted: to whom it may concern. Jean went on to further her studies when things started getting better. We all started growing up and helping mommy more. On Saturdays one of us will go into the restaurant, and as one come the other one come, as one leave the other one come. So there was always repetitious, because we all have to help. Then we get big enough so in the evenings after we do our homework one or two of us going to go meet her up at the restaurant and walk down with her. That was the beginning of growing up and doing things on your own, because mommy was not always there. We had a housekeeper; in those days we called them servants. This housekeeper we had was for the three of us, the three small ones, Sheila and Juanita. The three of us are the ones that she will be there for at evenings after school, make sure that we will have dinner before mommy come home, and do our homework. By 7 o'clock you're in bed. That's the first person she called: Shirley, Sheila, Juanita. Once we're inside she know the others either they're working or doing something constructive.

Q: When and how did you decide to leave Trinidad?

SR: I loved hairdressing from [small]. I used to cut my sisters' hair and make big holes in their hair and go and hide. The last one was my sister Sheila. She had a different type of hair, really curly and tight. Here I am, straight East Indian hair. I said, Sheila, I saw this style and I'm sure I can do it on you. She said, okay. She said, don't cut much; you know Mommy. I took the scissors and went to it and the next thing you know I cut off a whole braid. So she had one braid and one afro hair. I had to hide for days from my mother. I was about 12 or 13 years. But I had to hide because I know mommy was going to whip me. But when she found out and she saw Sheila looking lopsided she said, Sheila, what happened to you? Nothing, Ma. Sheila, come here, and she went. In those days Trinidad was shillings and pence. I give her a shilling. Mommy asked, where you get the shilling? I said, that was the 5 cents you were giving us every week. So I kept my own, so I change it into a shilling. She said, okay. Then when Mommy saw Sheila hair, my hair was long to here, and she said, why didn't you cut yours? Why you go and cut this child hair? This thing will never grow back. So she had to take her the next day to the hairstylist to

get the other side cut off. I tell her, I said, Mom, why you going to pay money? I can do it. But all she did was [inaudible]. Then she took a book, put it on my head, and put me in the corner for about 15 minutes because I was bawling so hard about the wood so hard on the floor. I said, at least bring a towel and help me or something. Nope, you're kneeling there until I say you get up. So I started to cry.

Q: So that's where your passion for hairstyling came from?

SR: Yea. And then I am on evenings because most of the time you have nothing to do on evenings other than sweep the yard or talk to your friends over the fence, because you're not allowed out because there's too many girls. There's six of us and she said, we don't need any friends, we have our own friends within our sisters. So we not allowed to have friends outside the gate, because that gate was locked. Life continue. My mom bought a house in Barataria. It was a four-bedroom house in those days, and Mommy had her own room. But my youngest sister Juanita was Mommy's baby, so Juanita will go and sneak and go sleep with Mommy, and we didn't know. So how could she go and sleep with Mommy and we not getting that opportunity? My brother had his own room because he was studying. My brother work with Eric Williams, he was the aide to the Prime Minister until he left for Dalhousie. He was our pride and joy. He taught us how to eat with knife and fork when he came back from Dalhousie, how to sit as a lady. He taught us a lot of culture things that we could go out into the world – the please and the thank you. One of the words we were never allowed to say, and I got used to it, that I will tell people up to this day, don't answer me, "What?". It's something that my mother will throw anything at you if you answer her, "What?". In our country it's not nice. It's like if you say, what do you want? You're tired of me. So that was a word that we never get to use at home. The Trinidad will say, what do you want? So it's please and thank you or can I help you? These are the things we were brought up. We might be poor but etiquette was one of our main thing. On Sundays at family dinner you wouldn't have dinner unless you have the tablecloth and it's set properly with knife and fork. We're used to eating with spoon; eating with a knife and fork was a big thing. One of us will always say, it's sticking in our mouth, it's not getting enough

food in our mouth. Those are the things I remember was so funny. Because she will take a quarter of a chicken on a Sunday, half of a chicken, and she will take that half of a chicken and all of us will get a piece. But it tastes so good you wanted to leave the chicken for the last, and that is a mistake you make. Don't get up from your table or don't move your head, because the piece you get is gone – one of them grab it from the table and a fight begin. If you're starting to fight, all Mommy have to do is give you the look. She'd give you that look that you go right back on your chair that she can't see and look invisible. These are the things growing up. As girls, we all learned to climb mango trees, plum trees, all the fruit trees we learned to climb. My sister one day she wanted to pee and she said, I can't come down from this plum tree. I said, well just pee. Nobody here, there's only boys and girls, we don't know the difference. You're so innocent. So she pee and the next thing you know it's falling on this boy head. He said to her, oh you're giving me a golden shower. The poor boy. In those days we don't have shower, we have stand pipe. So he had to run to the stand pipe and wash his head and take off his shirt, and he come back without his shirt in his hand. We said, where's your shirt. He said, I can't wear that piss thing on me. It was a humorous thing for us. We learned to play bat. Cricket was one of the biggest thing for us as girls playing by the market. We played cricket, we played marbles. We had our own fun. The guy will bring the coals so Mommy could cook with the coal pot, and I remember the man leave his bike. None of us could ride a bike, we couldn't even afford a bike. The market was already closed, so we have that street close to the house that's empty. So she said, you go take a ride. I said, I don't know how to get up. She said, put your foot underneath. I put my foot underneath it and they pushed me. But I didn't know you had to look up. The next thing, the market gate, which weighs about a million pounds, the thing hit me. I saw golden butterflies. By the time they get Mommy I was on the floor there groaning, and I started to bleed. They had to take me to the doctor. Some old man come like a doctor and go, oh give her a few days, she's going to be okay, she's just going to be black and blue. And she beat me even though I was hurting. She whipped me good, because I should not have touched the people's bike, bent the man's spokes and everything. And they're killing themselves laughing, and here I am, she whipping me, a hole in my head.

Q: When did you decide on your career path?

SR: On evenings you had trade schools. They have places like community leagues, like here, and the community leagues have different things. They don't want the kids on the street, so there's always something going on after school that will benefit you later. They had sewing, they had guys teaching guys welding. At the age of 14 guys were welding. They had carpentry, plumbing, they had those little things that the skilled people were coming on evening and teach the other kids.

Q: At the community centres?

SR: Yea, that's what they had home in every village. I went to the hairdressing one. I tried the sewing for three years, and up to this day I can't make a straight stitch. I tried. I find it to be very tedious because you have to make these clothes, because everything there was with clothes. Then you have to change stitch these clothes by hand. I said no, I like the hairdressing. I just fell right into it, I had no problem. It was for about two years I went there in the evenings until I learn how to make a curl with a piece of hair. But the first few times you burn it until it get brown and crisp, because you did not know how. You have a coal pot, a small coal pot, and then you have this iron. It takes a lot to learn the temperature, when you should move it off and when you should keep it on, and you always had to have a wet pad. So that's how I learned to do hair. That was the most important thing. Then in my neighbourhood a lady had just came back from Edmonton. She came and asked my mother, she had opened a shop in her house, and she asked my mom, could Shirley come on the weekends and help me? Oh, she opened the door. She's going on 100 years, she's still living in Trinidad, and I still correspond. She said after two years or three years working with her – I left when I was 17 here – she said, why don't you go away? I said, go away? How could I go away? It costs money; my mother don't have that money. She said, okay leave it with me. There was this old gentleman who was living in England and came back home. I cut his hair once or twice for him. He said, what is your plans when you grow up? I said, I would like to be a hairdresser, but I only have one diploma. When I finished

school, I have that diploma still and they put my picture on it. Don't ask me to find it right now, but I still got it. He said, okay, how much is the school? In those days, in the '60s, Marvel was charging \$1,000 but you can pay \$100 a month until you finish. So the same lady who I worked for on evenings, she applied to Marvel for me, because she went to that school. It was on Jasper Avenue in those days. There was an old lady named Miss Albright, she was the owner of that school. We got back a reply that I'm accepted, and we would be paying \$100 Canadian every month. If we could pay more we would, because the classes was one year. When I got accepted, my mom was the problem. No girl child leaving her house to go nowhere. But when Mrs. Dillion came and spoke to her she tell her, you know, Shirley's just wasting her time here. I have girl children too and I sent them away, so I don't see why you don't let Shirley have the opportunity. But she said, but she have big sisters and everybody here, she could open her own shop here. So she said, I don't think you would want that for Shirley. If you don't let Shirley go, she's gonna fly. Anyhow you take it, she's gonna fly, the lady tell her. My mom say, what you mean by that? Well she will leave the house and go and do something that you might not like. So my mom had to discuss it with the whole family. My sisters were against it, me going out there by myself.

Q: At age 17.

SR: Yea. My mom said, whatever you all said. Because my mom wasn't that educated; she could read and write, but that was all. The brother is away already. He come back, he's in a mental institute, now you want to go away. So mommy said, well let's see. We have to find the money for this and we have to maintain her and we've got to feed her. So the lady said there's a Y[WCA] that was on Jasper Avenue, and we applied to the Y and the Y accepted me with two girls to a room. It was \$25 a month to share the room, because it was \$50 between the both of us. In those days, rent here was \$65 and \$100 a month for apartment out here. But we couldn't afford one, so \$25 was okay. That was in the early '60s when I came. Before that ever happened, by the time I was 18 I got married. I had a baby; he was three months old when all of this was going on. There was a lot of decision made by my mother-in-law and my mother. This

was more like a scholarship. I went and did a kind of a queen for San Juan and I won. Then I come and won Miss Arima, then I come and won Miss Port of Spain. When I won Port of Spain my Mom said, that is enough beauty for you. Well already I got the fever. You can't stop me now; I'm on my way. So now I got a trip to go away. You have to have a chaperone with you. Mommy said she's not letting me go nowhere unless I got a chaperone. So they got a chaperone, and the trip was to Martinique, and that's where my Mom come from. So she said no, all my sisters decide no, we're not sending her. Nope, that's it. I had three older sisters, Elaine, Eileen and Geena. Geena is the only one said, I don't know why you're so hard on her. She's the onliest one you had and everything else is fine but not her. So two against one. My Mom let my sisters who were older and smarter make the decisions, so I didn't get to go. She had \$800 or \$1,000 for the trip and room and board with chaperone, so Mommy take that money and that went to my education out here. But my problem was my little boy at three months old. My mother now say, don't worry, I got it; I'm keeping him. My Mom had a restaurant, all her kids are growing up, she have no time for babies. So my mother-in-law took him. I came out here within that seven years, I came out here, I graduate, I left here and went to New York. They never taught you anything about black hair out here up to this day. Marvel School still have the policy that might bring in somebody now, but the teachers, which are all white, still trying to learn black hair from reading and then applying it to the students.

Q: That didn't work for you?

SR: No, that's not the way it work. A black person should teach you to learn black hair. When you ask the teacher, when did you learn black hairdressing, she couldn't answer. You ask her, what is a croconile curl? She say, what's that? I say, that's the first curl you make with the curling iron. You have to take the hair and wrap it around and bring it. That's why you will see so many older white people with fuzzy hair, because the curl was so tight. And she did not answer me. So I went to New York, don't know nobody. I had one friend, one guy I knew. He was in the trade school with me, and we always talk. One day he turn around and tell me, he said, oh I'm going to Vietnam. I said, what? He said, yes. I said, I'm coming to the States. He



said, what are you coming to the States for? So I said, Dodo – I call him “stupid” – I said Dodo, I’m coming there to go to school. He said, where you getting money from? I said, I used to work undercover in Edmonton. In the evenings I used to go, there was a coffeeshop. There was a movie theatre on Jasper Avenue and right upstairs was Marvel. So I used to go and do dishes. When I go to the tables to clean the tables, whoever tip it, I didn’t care if it go in my pocket because it was going on the plate with me. So I went to New York. He said, okay I wouldn’t be there because I’m coming to see my mom before I leave. He was in Virginia or somewhere in training, and he tell me how to get to his mother place. He told his mother I was coming just for a month or less. Lord have mercy, I had to take the train. I had my grip – not suitcase, grip. I reach and look what I brought. They said, how long you going to be here? I said, I’m just going to be here for one month, because I had my Trinidad ticket. I had New York, Trinidad, so that was allowing me to get through because they had to see that I was going and the date that I was going back. So that made a difference. If I didn’t have a Trinidad ticket, I could not stay, because I’m telling them I’m staying there. All of that was in the ‘60s. I went to New York, I took the bus, took the subway, first time I’d taken subway. I thought you have to get on this way and then you have to get off that way, so I get lost. I said, the one thing I can do is ask a policeman. I show the policeman where I was going and he said, ooh you’re going a long way – Brooklyn from the airport. I said, so that’s all I could afford. He said, okay take the F train and take the G train and then go down there and go there. I said, okay. I took it, I asked a lot of questions on the subway: am I on the wrong train, am I going the wrong way? People helped me. You look for the older people, not for the younger people. I got to this place, I am hungry, I am tired. Here I am styling in high heel shoes. I didn’t know the blocks were so long; one block is like six blocks here. You have to walk those blocks with my grip in my hand, and I reach there. When I reach there it’s like you were going to heaven, the amount of steps you have to walk to this brownstone. They were on the top floor. They had about 25 or 30 people living in this building. When I reached there I take off my shoes, hold it in my hand, and walk up the steps. Nobody meet you at the airport, nobody greet you, nothing at all. When I reach there, a very nice mother he had. She said, I was expecting you but there’s nobody here who drive could’ve come and get you. I said, no problem, no problem at all. I’m here, and thank you for having me. The

first thing she ask me, how long are you staying? I said, not long. My passport is I have to go back to Trinidad in a month's time. I stayed, but while I was there in about three days I met the girl downstairs, this beautiful girl named Cynthia. She was married to [inaudible] manager. She said, what you doing here? I said, I just came from Canada as a hairstylist. She said, well try doing my hair for me. When I did her hair she said, you are a hairstylist, and she gets a few girls for me so I could make a few pennies. She said, why you staying upstairs? I said, because I travel. She said, girl come, let's go find a place. I said, I don't have no money. She said, you will make the money. Nobody have to know that you're not here permanent. Next thing I know, I got a little bedroom, everything in one bedroom: the kitchenette, the toilet, everything. And it's \$25 a month. I said, easy I can make that. Anyway, Cynthia became my best friend and she moved me out.

Q: When you first came to Edmonton, did you meet any other black people?

SR: I met one girl from Guyana. She's a doctor now in the States. I met her, and it's because of her I stayed with her. I stayed with her for the whole year, and it was very good. I had no problem.

[Pause]

Q: Did you have any kind of status here when you first came?

SR: Yes, a student visa. The student visa was for one year.

Q: During that period . . .

SR: I lived at the Y.

Q: Then you decided to go for further training in the States.

SR: Yes.

Q: How long did you stay there

SR: I stayed there for two years.

Q: Then you came back to Edmonton?

SR: No, I had to go back home. I wanted to see my little boy because I hadn't seen him since I left. My journey, all what I was doing was for him, because I didn't want him to grow up in Trinidad. But I made so many friends, a lot of Jewish friends in New York. My mom always tell me, don't go below your standard; strive. If you see this one is trying to pull you down like them, move away. So at Saks Fifth Avenue I'm meeting all the Jewish people. Three quarters of Jewish are white, doing hair, and they treat you so beautifully. I found prejudice here but I did not find it in New York with the Jewish people.

Q: What prejudice did you find here?

SR: Here?

Q: When you first came?

SR: When I first came, yes. Even at the school. One lady turned around . . .

Q: At Marvel?

SR: At Marvel's. She came in and her number was... because you work by numbers when they put you on the floor. When they put you on the floor that mean the clients are paying Marvel's

for you to do their hair. When she came in she was coming to me. She turned around to the supervisor and said, I don't want that lady to do my hair. So she said, do you know her? She said, no. So she said, why don't you want her to do your hair? She said, because she's coloured. I was watching to see what the supervisor will say. She said, well we're sorry, we can't take you because we haven't got another hairdresser for you. She said, okay I'll try her. All along, she try for me to wet her neck. She try everything to find a fault, but I went beyond that. When I was finished she asked me what is my name. I said, my name is Shirley Romany. Can I get you again? I said, sure, once I'm here I'll be with you. The woman is with me; she's 104 years old and she's still my client. You know Marge, she's still my client today.

Q: I remember the 100<sup>th</sup> birthday party you had for her.

SR: That's right. In May she had a birthday party and turned 104, and we had cake and wine and the whole thing for her again. That woman became my friend, and she's still my friend up to this day. It's not what people say to you – you take it that way – it's how you react to what they say. Killing people with kindness, for me how I was brought up, is one of the biggest thing. Don't answer your elders, listen to what they say. She was an older woman than I am; what could I say? I can't say I can't do you. I have to listen to the supervisor. I followed suit, and that woman have never left me yet. She's still with me today.

Q: I know that you normally pay her taxi fare to come see you.

SR: Yes. She don't pay no more, she cannot pay no more. When she turn 65 and her husband die, I know then all she had was her pension. So I took it on myself and I said, you have paid me enough; everything from now on is free any time you come here. So the girls know it's free.

Q: I know you've also attended. . .

SR: Yes she's a war vet and they had a big celebration down at the Winspear for all the vets. She invited me as her guest, her only guest. She was dressed in her uniform like you wouldn't believe. She looked like an angel in that uniform, as old and frail as she is. She was the last one in the fifth battalion remain. When they called them up on the fifty battalion, she came up there and she salute, and I start to cry like if she was my mother, just seeing her there so frail yet her uniform on. They honoured her. I think she was in the army for about ten years, her and her husband. He passed away. So they honoured both of them, even though he had passed away. We went for dinner. After they do their dinner and everything, we went out together.

Q: When you went back to Trinidad to see your son, did you intend on returning to Edmonton?

SR: No, I wanted to go to New York. I find New York you make the money, nobody ask you questions. Being in Edmonton it was, where you from, how long you here, don't you miss home? These are the questions they were giving you all the time everywhere you go. Some people were nice enough they'll invite you to their home. Once they know you're a foreign student, a lot of the white people will invite you out to their home for dinner. But when I saw the dinner I couldn't eat it, because I wasn't used to that. As a student, we buy our little food, corn beef and rice and a piece of liver, and we make it last, and we'll have those things. But I never had cream corn in my life. When I look I said, what kind of porridge is that? These are the things. And cream potato. And thick gravy, like I could cut it. These are the things I never had. The food was a culture shock, very much so. I got so skinny that all I had was legs, because I will not eat. I will eat bread with something or sometimes nothing. I learned to make fry bake, rice, and we'll have it all school days morning and evening, unless we get a good tip. They had a restaurant at a place called Kresge's, and the Bay had a restaurant in the basement. So we will go down there, food was cheap, so we will go down there sometimes if we have money.

Q: Was it close to Marvel?

SR: Yes, just across the street.

Q: You were on Jasper Avenue?

SR: Jasper Avenue.

Q: How did you get from there to buying your first place?

SR: My first place? Well how it went is, when I left New York all I was thinking about, when I went to New York I made some money. My money was all put aside for my son. I'm going back home and get him. But it was not that easy. When I went back, I divorced my husband because he had a baby the same time I had my baby. I found out that the same day I was giving birth the other girl was giving birth too. I talked to the grandma, I used to call her mamma. I said, mamma, what should I do? She said, don't look back. It's my son, but run, run with your child. But it was not easy, because he will not sign the consent form. He got the divorce papers and everything else. He didn't sign it, but one of his brothers signed it. But it was signed. He passed away now, so... I said, okay something have to give. I had a doctor friend, name Len, out here. He was at Glenrose; he came from England. We used to be good buddies. Him and Daisy, a nurse, good buddies. So I wrote him. You can't use phone from Trinidad that often. I wrote him and I tell him my condition. I said, the only way I can come back is if you marry me and you adopt my son. I said, you're not doing it for love, you're doing it to help a friend. He said, that's going to be hard. I said, you know me when I was back in Edmonton, you're living at Bel Air apartments in Westmount. How many times we slept over there? We slept over there lots of times because that was the biggest place for us to party. I said, you never see me doing anything or having boyfriends or nothing. You can help me. He said, I have to buy a ticket for you too. I said, yes, how do you expect me to get the money? But I had to come back to Canada, I had to marry him, because I was divorced. And then we had to apply for my son. By the time the paperwork is done and everything done, my boy was seven years old. He did not know me, and that tore me apart. The first night I went to get him he said, you are not my mommy. My mommy name is Shirley Romany and she is beautiful. Look at her picture. I said,

doesn't she look like me? I used to send him all kinds of the pictures in the booths. Every time I get a new hairdo, I'm sending it down. They had like a gallery of pictures of me, sending for him to remind him who I am. His grandma always tell him, your mom gone to make a place for you; you will not be living here long. Your momma's taking you to a better place. No, I'm not going without you and grandpa, not you and pappa. Pappa have to come. Anyway, eventually I got him and I brought him up. It was very, very difficult with him because he wouldn't sleep, he wouldn't eat, and he'd be crying for his momma and pappa. But eventually he start meeting little ABC friends in school. He already knew his ABC, he knew how to count, because they sent him to school over there at three years old in Trinidad to a private school. The grandpa used to take him for half days, so he learned. So he went straight into kindergarten. They kept him for six months and they put him in grade 1, and life began.

Q: In what part of the city were you living?

SR: On 107 Avenue. That was called the avenue of the nation. Every West Indian, everybody who come end up landing on 107, because it was one of the cheapest place to rent.

Q: 107 Avenue and. . .

SR: About 118 Street. It was easy to get downtown on the bus. When I did come back, I wasn't ready to get a job because I wanted to settle Curtis. After a month or two at 107 I didn't like it. There were a lot of native people around there, and if you're coming in late at night you're scared. They're on the stoop and they're on the step and all over, and I was scared for Curtis. So we moved to Stony Plain Road and got a basement apartment, the three of us – my husband, Curtis and myself. Stony Plain Road and 156 right at the corner there. In those days they had a few horses still running around in cart. They had old shoe stores, I mean old shoe stores where shoemakers sit in the porch doing the shoes, the men doing leather by hand with their thing. And little grocery stores you can go into one at a time. There was nothing past 149, or no not

149, 163<sup>rd</sup> by the funeral place. That was the furthest there was anything. Everything else was just bush and big trees.

Q: Were people working in that area?

SR: People come from out of town because they had small roadways one way, one lane for the cars passing. They come from the country, like Amber Valley and all these different places. Amber Valley is where the black people reside who come from the underground and who come from the States, from Nova Scotia. That's where the government give them to go and live. Today people are still living there, the black people, but they're more integrated now.

Q: 163<sup>rd</sup> and Stony Plain?

SR: Yes.

Q: Where did the black people in Edmonton live?

SR: Amber Valley. But the black people did not like West Indians. Amber Valley, three quarters of the blacks were not educated. They were farmers. The younger generation like myself then started moving into Edmonton and going to school. But they still had a [attitude] about them, they did not like us. Up to this same day they still don't like us because they felt they're above us. We are Caribbean, we are more educated. That's a plus right there. They might have education but they don't have a piece of paper. They did farm work. Most of them come into the city, they work in kitchens. They younger people finish grade 12 and try to get into college or university.

Q: Were there any other immigrants living in the area besides black people?



SR: A lot, because of the university. We had a house called West Indian House on the south side. There was a doctor named Dr. Kleep; he was from Guyana, I think. Every weekend everybody go there because there was cooking, there was an international house where everybody from all over you met.

Q: That was located on campus?

SR: Not on campus, off campus but close to the university. The university in those days was half the size. The hospital was just a wooden thing in those days.

Q: So you started off on 156<sup>th</sup> and Stony Plain Road, and that's where your residence was.

SR: Yes, and that wasn't too far from my shop.

Q: Where was your shop?

SR: What happened is, when I came back there was a lady named Delores Barker. She opened a shop. And there was Mrs. Brown; she's a black Canadian – not Mrs. Brown, Mrs. Walker. Mrs. Walker had a shop in her basement. She was the first one ever as a black. Then there was another lady, she passed away too; her name is, I can't remember. She had a shop. Then Delores came from England and had a shop. I worked with her for one year and that's when I told her I was moving. Her shop never stayed long enough to be recognized, because I think she got sick or whatever happened, I don't know. But one day a nun came to get her hair done. I was doing the nun hair, and she told me about this shop on Stony Plain Road that is for sale. I want to know, why is this nun, of all people me, she will tell about this shop. It was really strange. But I never thought of it, because I was not a Christian per se like I am now. She told me, she said, it's \$500. I said, that is big money, I can't afford that. But I told Delores about the shop and I said, I'm going to be leaving you. I don't know where the money is coming from, but I'm going to be leaving and going on my own. The lady was selling it for \$500 but she said, if you

give me \$500 down for \$500 yes. I said, how can I give you \$500 when I think about \$50 I have? She said, well I can keep it for you and when you get the \$500 come back and see me. I went to my husband. We wasn't living together; he went back to his girlfriend. He'd done me my favour already and I've got my son. But Curtis know him up to this day as his dad. Anyway we got together, and he didn't have much money but he loaned me what he had. There was a dentist named Clyde Latabedeau. I said, Clyde, I need the last \$50, and Clyde loaned me that \$50. I said, I'm going to pay you back. You will be the first to get paid back. The rest can wait, Len can wait. And he loaned it to me because he just finished being a doctor and now he's looking for a job, so he lend me the money, the \$50. I went back to the lady and she see how eager I was. The shop only had two chairs. It was an old time shop, it was no more than 500 square feet. I got the shop and I name it Shirley's House of Beauty. I don't have a car, I don't have nothing. Whatever she had in the shop, I had to take and make it used. In that shop I open a beauty school with my shop, with my hairdressing. The beauty school took off because here's a black shop teaching people how to do my type of hair. I couldn't do the hairdressing and do the school at the same time. I worked my own curriculum. The government accepted it. I did my homework. I called to New York where I was working. I asked a lot of things, a lot of questions. In New York they told me what to change up, what not to change up, and how to put it together. I did it and I presented it to the government. After three months or so they accepted my curriculum as the first black hair shop teaching. I had five students.

Q: Where did your students come from?

SR: All over. When I said all over, their Vancouver, wherever they heard I had a black shop. I had people from Jamaica, the five of them were different nationality. They all graduated.

Q: Did they open their own shops?

SR: They went back to their country and opened their shops. Every so often I'll hear from one calling me. I have one of them, he didn't work with me but he went to Marvel, and he's the

hairdresser for the stars in Toronto. Any time he comes into the city here – because his mom used to live here, his mom passed away now – he would always call me before he come, because he met Jenny too. So he'll always call me and we'll always go out to have dinner or something.

Q: Did you continue teaching?

SR: After that, no. I close it down, the teaching part, because I couldn't do both, because you have to spend quality time. Nobody know about black hair and here it is, it's quality. You can't just take half an hour for theory. Your morning is theory, your evening is practicum, and that's how it works. It was very difficult, a one man show.

Q: Did you have anybody else working with you?

SR: Nobody. Oh I had one girl. She was from Tisdale, Saskatchewan. I will never forget her name and the place because I'm still searching for her just to see what she did with herself. She was a fantastic hairdresser. I had to put a white face in the shop in those days. You could not have me out there; they would not accept me, the white people. There were a lot of Ukrainians – oh no, they would not accept me.

Q: Was the neighbourhood mostly Ukrainians?

SR: No, the neighbourhood was mostly Canadian Indians, aboriginals.

Q: Which years were these?

SR: These were the '60s and early '70s, on Stony Plain Road – 156 and Stony Plain Road. I learn about Enoch. Their aboriginal people look like my type of people, they look like my back home people, the Spanish and East Indian mixed together. So I never can fathom them when people

say, that's an Indian. In those days they call them just straight Indian. I say, how can she be an Indian? She look like me. But then I learned the history of them and then they invite me out to powwows and I became friends of them. I even have three godchildren out there. I'm going to their powwow this month or next month, they told me. They call me and tell me already, come on out. The chief was my friend; he passed away. A few people passed away, but I still have people from Enoch band coming to get their hair done.

Q: You still have a few clients?

SR: Yes.

Q: Do they live in the neighbourhood?

SR: No they live on the reservation. It's closer now, not like those days. The powwows were always good, always good, but they can't get me to eat the meat. Smoked this and smoked that. I went to a lot of different things. I liked it.

Q: So you feel integrated in the indigenous community?

SR: Yes.

Q: Was the shop always on. . .

SR: 156 Street and Stony Plain Road.

Q: How long did you stay in that location?

SR: My first shop was about ten years, Shirley's House of Beauty.

Q: And you lived just a couple blocks away?

SR: I lived right across the street not too far. In those days, hairdressing was \$1.50, perms were \$3, a cut was 75 cents. So at the end of the week, if you make \$250 you were rich. My rent was only \$75. When you go and pick up grocery for \$20, you got change. Everything was 25 cents or 10 cents for lettuce, 10 cents for cucumbers. Liver was 75 cents a package, fresh liver. You could afford to eat a good steak in those days.

Q: Tell me about the neighbourhood.

SR: The neighbourhood on Stony Plain and 156?

Q: Was there a cinema?

SR: Yes, there was a cinema just a couple years and it got closed down. It was at least two steps to three steps from where we lived. Every Sunday as Curtis was growing up, both of us went to the movies, I'd take him to the movies. He wanted to see cowboy, people like Alan Ladd and all these different stars he used to tell me about. Mom, you see, I told you, these people here are not the real Indian; those are the Indians on the TV. Because he didn't see feathers and all of that. But then I took him to a powwow once. The people came and pick us up to take us out to Enoch, and he saw what it was all about. In those days they didn't have the houses and all of that, they had teepee tents and things like that.

Q: Where did Curtis go to school?

SR: He went to school right on Stony Plain in the neighbourhood. Then he went to St. Joe's.

Q: Did his friends come from the neighbourhood?

SR: His friends come from all over, because he was into basketball and everything he was into. I remember there was an Eskimo manager named Kevin Murphy. Kevin Murphy was manager of the Eskimos in those days. So they'd come and pick up Curtis and take him to the games.

Q: Did you know Johnny Bright?

SR: Very much so. Johnny Bright and my brother-in-law were very good friends, Rollie Miles. I was married to Rollie's wife's brother, so Rollie became my brother-in-law. His wife was Marian Miles and she was a psychologist and she was at St. Francis Xavier High School. She was a teacher plus a psychologist. She was a counselor too.

Q: How was she related to Johnny Bright?

SR: They all came from the States.

Q: So you knew Johnny?

SR: I know Johnny very well, I know the school that he was principal of, the Hillcrest.

Q: Does he have family here?

SR: He was two daughters and one son. I have not seen them for quite a while so I don't know if they went back or got married or whatever.

Q: Was he an influential person?

SR: Very much in the city. He was influential, plus Rollie Miles. Rollie Miles was with the school board. Stormy Chan was one of them. These are the guys I knew. Jackie Parker, another one.

These are when football was football in those days. Everybody get together and there was always a get-together at Rollie's house or Johnny.

[...]

I was the first West Indian that they met. They always think West Indian, from the West Indies, that mean you're related to Indians. I said, Christopher Columbus discovered us; we have to go by what they say. They were very intelligent people and they used to talk to me. The said, oh you all had Arawaks. I said, yes. They said, where do you place? I said, I'm more into the Carib, I have Carib in me. They said, oh that's why your hair is so curly and straight. I said, I don't know, but I know my mom has straight hair, my dad have curly hair, and my mom is very light. So that's a Carib. I said, yes that's my mom.

Q: So you developed your business?

SR: I developed my business, my business took off very fast.

Q: What did you call it?

SR: Shirley's House of Beauty.

Q: Was that always your business name?

SR: Always my business name. Then it got too small. I only had one girl working for me because it's just two stations. This girl came to me and asked me for a job. As she walked in I said, you're hired. Then I had a Chinese girl who'd come and work for me. She didn't know a word of English; only she knows how are you, different little things. She worked for me, her name is Gina Wong, she work with me for almost 20 years. I teach Gina everything that was wrong in language, but she learned it. Today she own her own business and we are very good friends still. If my head hurt me, she'll be the first one there. Very good friend, over 40 years of friendship.

Q: So you moved around over a period of time?

SR: Over the period of time. . .

Q: Did you have any other business names?

SR: Yes. After I left Shirley's House of Beauty. . .

Q: You left it?

SR: No after I moved on. I did not know about corporation and limited companies and all of that. For me to get some money from the Chamber of Commerce, they put me through the tenth degree for \$500. I had to go back to school, I had to go to business school. I had to make up a portfolio telling me about my forecasts. What do I know about forecasts? But being there and going to school, I learn everything how to run a business: the plus and the minuses, what to look for and what not to look for. I learn how to pay taxes. But in those days you never had all this what's going on now, but you learn how you have to pay yearly taxes. If you make x amount you have to learn how. You have to get somebody or if you're smart enough you can do your taxes, and the government have to get this and you have to explain this.

Q: So you learned to manage your business.

SR: I learned to manage from the Chamber of Commerce.

Q: What businesses did you develop?

SR: I move from my small little 600 square feet to a bigger shop down the street on Stony Plain Road. I hired a guy because he was a barber from Trinidad. I said, I don't want to use my name



no more because I cannot use my name as a corporation or a limited company. This is all what I learned from the Commerce. He said, why? I said, no, if somebody sue me, they sue me on my name; that is a big problem. But if they sue the limited company, that's different; they're not suing me, they're suing the company. So I learned this through going to school, and lots more. I said, I need a name, and then he give me the name Ebony and Ivory, black and white. He said, let's stick with that.

Q: What was his name?

SR: Ansel, Ansel Elbourne. He give me that name.

Q: He worked for you?

SR: He worked for me for many, many years. He still a friend of mine, always come to the shop and see me. That's where history begins because I just move on, move on, move on. To this day I have a lot of people who know me or their kids know me through their mother. They say, Auntie Shirley who used to own Shirley's? I said, yes. My mom used to come to you; she always talk about this black girl. I said, thank you for calling me black. She said, well at least you didn't call me coloured. She said, that's funny. I said, yes.

Q: How did your clients refer to you?

SR: As Shirley.

Q: Did any of your clients show racial bias?

SR: Oh you had a few of that, especially the husbands. If the husband comes in, you would find it. I had a few of them said, you didn't tell me you was going into that nigger shop. I said to the other ladies when they heard, he's just ignorant, just leave him alone. I had guys who, I'm

parking my car when I'm going to the grocery, and I have Curtis with me. The parking is empty and I put on my signal to go in. He's waiting and he'll tell me, hey nigger, move on. If you don't know how to drive, go back to your country and pull a horse. One man came out to me once and was very abusive. I said, excuse me sir, please don't swear in front of my son. He's f you and f your son. You all come to this country and you cannot drive. People just watching him. One lady said, why don't you say something? I said, ma'am, I wouldn't disrespect this man. He's just illiterate. She said, that's the right word for him. And I left it alone.

Q: Did you have a lot of experiences like that in your business?

SR: In my business at the beginning I got a lot of it, I got a lot of it.

Q: People objected to you?

SR: People objected to me having a business. Most of them said, oh I had an appointment, but I'll come back. I'd say, no problem, have a nice day. I was the owner, not Shirley. Because Shirley tell them straight.

Q: Who's Shirley?

SR: The girl who was working for me, her name was Shirley. I met Shirley when I was working on Stony Plain Road. She was a hairdresser from Saskatchewan, Tisdale. She came down to the city looking for a job, passing out her resume to whatever shop there is. She came to me and said, hey, how you doing, in such a jovial manner. I said, I'm doing fine. She said, I'm looking for a job. I said, you know, hey, I'm the owner, I'm black. She said, so what does that have to do with it? I want a job, I want a job. I said, you got it, you're starting now. She said, okay I'll take off my coat. Then that was it. She stayed with me until she got married and move on back to Saskatchewan. She open my eyes to a lot of thing. One night we went to the bar. In those days the hotel next door – it change now – was the Saxony. They used to have bingos there

sometime. We went to bingo and one night we won \$1,000 in one-dollar bill. We went home and make up the bed with the \$100 bill. What we going to do with \$1,000? I said, I have bills to pay; you take 50, I take 50. So she got five and I got five.

Q: So she worked for you for a while?

SR: She worked for me for about 15 years.

Q: Did anybody ever mistake her for the owner?

SR: All the time. They would pass me and go to her. Then when she said, oh no, I'm sorry, that's the owner there, you will just see the shock on their face. A white woman working for a black woman? It was unheard of.

Q: How did that make you feel?

SR: I was never used to it until I got here. I started looking at New York; I never got this. When I went to Saks Fifth Avenue, the Jewish people just embraced you. We used to have little fights about religion. I said, what you talking about Jesus right now when you didn't like us? You ask Jesus questions, you don't ask and answer, and we start to fight. But they taught me a few things that I did not know, that the Jewish religion and the Catholic religion is so close. So I said, why do you all hate black people if you're so close as a Catholic? I said, you ought to condone us. We had conversation about that and they themselves didn't know what to say. They said, we're only Jews by name, okay? And the conversation end.

Q: So the conversations you had then were just around religion?

SR: Yes.

Q: But in Edmonton your conversations were around. . . ?

SR: Colour. Racism. And you find it up to this day. You go into a store and you look like a million dollar. If I have on my Spade shoes and I have on my fancy handbag and my gold jewelry and they see me well dressed, no problem, I walk in the store I get service. But if I go in there with my runners and my blue jeans looking like I just come out of the yard, the security stop you. Or if you get in, they follow you. You feel a heat on your neck; they follow you.

Q: Which store are you referring to?

SR: Right in West Edmonton Mall.

Q: So were those the kind of encounters you had running your business?

SR: Definitely. But with me know the good, bad and the ugly, I treat everybody equally. I don't care what fancy shoes you have kicking up looking at me in my face, I will compliment you on your shoes. I say, oh that's nice shoes you have on. You don't have to tell me where it come from, Europe.

Q: So these are the clients coming into your shop?

SR: Yes.

Q: So the person working for you was also Shirley, and she was mistaken for the owner?

SR: Yes, at all time. Because she was white.

Q: Did you have any other experiences like that in being a business person?

SR: Yes. I went to meetings, and for breaks everybody talking to each other and I find myself alone. That hurt many a time, so I end up stop going to meetings.

Q: What meetings were these?

SR: Hairdressing. I find that I just have to complain a lot when Hunter was going to school, Nigel was going to school, Curtis was going to school. He hadn't much friends. He went to school in the same neighbourhood, and he didn't have much friends until he grow up and he went to St. Francis Xavier.

Q: But at elementary school there was a lot more racism?

SR: Yes. They look down on you. Children learn from their parents. When you go to a parent teacher meeting, if you say hi to this person, they ignore you. So you yourself know to stop saying hi. Hey, I don't want your friendship that much. Even me right now when I was living in Glenora, I lived there for 21 years and I never knew my neighbour. If they see me in the yard and they're trying to clean up, they will never raise their head until I leave. Racism is very, very heavy right now in Edmonton, very heavy.

Q: What do you mean by that?

SR: Every second person now, even though [you] went and put \$10,000 in the bank. You have to give them your father, your mother and holy spirit name and who they have to check with and who they don't have to check with. The Chinaman just came there, he hand them the money, more than \$10,000, they just flip through and make sure it's good and say, okay thank you. That's one incident. You find it in the grocery store too. We went into a perfume place and here it was. Every time we pick up a perfume we can see her watching us. It gives you this goose pimple. One time they hold me at Hudson Bay going up the escalator. The bell ring, and he didn't look at nobody to hold. All of a sudden I felt somebody on my shoulder touch me.

When I look around he said, follow me. The person in the front must be steal, but because I am black they take me in. I went in, I strip for them. I had to literally strip for the woman. She even went through my toes, opened my mouth, dig into my hair. I made a big complain. They sent me a \$500 cheque and I'm sorry. So don't tell me about prejudice, I know prejudice out here. It's sad, it's sad.

Q: So living in Glenora, all your neighbours. . . ?

SR: I never had nobody to talk to. One lady in the back of me, she worked with Air Canada with Curtis. Because she working there with Curtis, sometimes Curtis would get a ride with her when the weather is bad and her husband's driving. I got to know them and talk to them. They would come over and I'll go over. But other than that, having anything like... we live on a block that has four houses and you only know one person in the back. It's not easy, it's not easy at all.

Q: Tell me about the experience at the birthday party.

SR: It's a sad thing. Here it was, he had black friends. They come home on his 21<sup>st</sup> birthday and then this one invite this one and that one invite this one. I said, you know what, we'll keep it outside. It was early October, kind of chilly but nice. I said, make a little bonfire. The kids are out there and all of a sudden the place is surrounded by police, the block. What's going on? Curtis, what happened? Mommy, nothing. We just laughing, we have no alcohol or nothing; you told me no alcohol. Police come and said, you're disturbing the peace at 11 o'clock in the night. Close the party down. Okay.

Q: That was similar to the experience I had leaving your house, your birthday party.

SR: My birthday party, yea.

Q: Tell me about other businesses you've had.

SR: Then I went bigger. I bought a house downtown and I turned it into a beauty shop. Barber was upstairs, nail tech in between, and we were on the main floor. A very successful business. I been there for another ten years and they wanted to buy me out.

Q: Who wanted to buy you out?

SR: The City wanted the land. But I did not realize that the land, I was leasing the land. They had an alley in the back, and any alley belongs to the City. We wanted to expand, and they said no, because the alley belongs to the City and the City would not sell a small piece of property like that. So the house was mine but the land was not, so it did not make sense to me. The land belongs to the City, and they said they won't surprise if it have oil rights on that property. So another year they going through to find out from papers and papers if they have any oil there. Then all of a sudden the gentleman next door, he was an accountant, he came over and said, how much you pay for your house? I said, \$100,000. He said, they just offered me \$3,000 for mine. Why don't you take \$3,000 and go elsewhere? So when they came to me I asked for \$350. They said \$325. I said, sold. Here it is, the land is not mine. If the land is not mine, am I keeping it?

Q: How long were you at that location?

SR: I was there for about ten years, in the days of when Rwanda went genocide. I had a big party down there and everything went to the party, fundraising for them. I had a big fundraiser, very successful, sleep over. Everybody bring their blanket and sleep on the step or wherever they can find a room. We had that, that was a big one.

Q: So you trained a number of barbers there?

SR: Yes, I trained a lot: Steve, Neville, Ansel, and a few others who've moved away. They had a play at the Mayfield Inn and this black actress, she played in the first movie Oprah made. Anyway, it was a big movie, a very black movie, the second or third black movie. She was the one who took Whoopie's husband away, who came back in that show.

Q: Was she living in that area?

SR: No, she's American but she came to do a play at the Mayfield Inn. That was in the '90s. They introduced her to come to my shop. But I am not a person who's big with people and prestige. I'm just a normal person that prestige do not get to me. You come to the shop. Oh you're an actress, that's fine, nice to hear. What movie did you make? Then when I'm finished with you I'm back to business. She had her hair done and she was so impressed she said, I will teach them to know how to do this extension, because I had lumps and now I don't have lumps. So I just explained to her what happened is your weave was on top of your hair. It should not be on top of your braid, it should be underneath the braid the same size as your braid, so when you touch it it's all one. She came to me for about three months when she was here. She send me letters thanking me and she called me once and tell me she's passing through and she'd like to see me. I talked to her a lot about the lord because she was into the drinking business. When I talked to her, she said, I just let it go off my back; then one day I was just sitting and it came to me what this young lady had told me. She said, it made sense, so I just wanted to see you. I said, thank you. A few of the passed through that. Then I worked on the south side, what's that place name again? The big where you have all the shows. The Citadel. I did Nana Mouskouri for years, and that's a long time ago. I did her for years. Every time she's in the city or she's in Calgary, they will send for me. She had her hair flipped, that's how she wore it. I did her; I was a contract with the Citadel to do their hair. Production companies would call me.

Q: Did you do Gladys Knight?

SR: Yes, I did her. She was at the Jubilee too. Yea I did a few of them.



Q: Did you save any strands of their hair?

SR: No. As I said, I am not that type of person. I don't goo-goo gaga over you. We talk, I know who you are, and we move on. I think life should be like that. When we start putting status on people, it's either they go one way or the other way. But I think if you just stay neutral, it's the best way to be. I know I'm good at my art, I'm very good at what I did. At my age of 78 going on 79, I have to say thank you to the people of Edmonton that made it possible. I have no regrets.

Q: You've always stayed in this community.

SR: Yes, stayed right here.

Q: Why is that?

SR: Because I feel like I belong here. I am part of the community. Seeing the children grow up and the mothers and the grandchildren and the great grandchildren coming to me – Miss Shirley, my mom say hi. My mom is sick, my mom say you did her in the Cross Cancer. I said, did I? She said, yes. It's after she left, days after, she said, you know, this black lady did my hair and she used to do my hair on Stony Plain Road at Shirley's House of Beauty. Then when she tell me the mother name I say, oh yes I remember her. She said, I used to be a little girl sitting down waiting for her, and you used to polish my nails. I said, oh that's nice, thanks for those memories. A lot of people who would come in now when I go there on a Saturday – Miss Shirley, you know my mom passed away. I'm going to a funeral on Saturday, one of my clients for a long time. You helped me with her too, the one who name Carol. She's a paraplegic; you helped me get her up the chair. She passed away and Saturday is her funeral. The husband asked me to come and say a few words. He said, because my wife really, really loved you. I said, I'll be there. So many other clients and so many people from different nationality. I'm thankful that this was my way. I have saved a lot of kids from prostitution, especially young girls.

Q: Tell me about the children you've embraced over the decades. What prompted you to do that?

SR: What prompted me to do that is. . .

Q: Where did they come from?

SR: Most of them were from the reserve, Enoch when I started. I started off with one little girl. She was my godchild, and they were taking her. The mom was going to jail. I said, no. Her name is Glory. I said, let me have her. Let me take her because Curtis have no sister; this will be good. I'm the first black woman that's doing this, other than Mary Burley. I knew Mary Burley very well and her kids also, because Mary came to me at the shop. Glory came to me as a kid growing up very nice, but her other sisters were all drug addicts, plus the mother. But I believed in Glory. But as Glory was growing up very beautiful and very intelligent, the sisters didn't like that. They wanted Glory to run away with them and live the life they were living. Glory did run away and live that life. One sister has passed away now. The mother is in a home. I haven't talked to them lately to see if I can go and visit or not. Of course she can't walk no more. But Glory came and see me when she was in her 20s. She had three children and married, and she's working in the band at Enoch. So she's doing very good. I had one of them again, another one. She lived in a different band. She played a trick on me when she finished at 18, you get to go. I said, you stay with me or you go back to your family. So she went back to her family. But in the meantime, she went back and finished grade 12 and everything, and became an RCMP. One night about 2 o'clock in the morning my bell ringing. Curtis is not home so when I hear that, police, I almost break my neck coming down the steps running to open the door. When I saw them I said, can I help you. I'm so scared and my heart beating, I'm thinking it's my son when I opened his door and didn't see him at home. One police in the back was standing there watching me. What's your name? I said, Shirley Romany. I said, what do you want? Is something wrong with my son? They said, no. The other one turn around and she said to him,

didn't I tell you my mother is black? I tell you, I could've killed that child with the heart attack I almost had. Her name is Judy Thomas. She became an RCMP. She told all the people out there, my mother is black. She taught me, and because of her I am here today. I said at 2 o'clock in the morning, Judy, you can try that on me. I said, I can't laugh about it, you almost give me a heart attack. She said, mom we just brought a prisoner in and we're just going back and we were so close. So I said, okay just don't do it again, okay honey? Come on in and get something to eat. When I went in I had pelau in the fridge. She said, oh you just sit down, I'll help you. So she hand the guy, the other policeman, an eat and a drink and she said, see you. Yea okay, I'm good. And they went about their business. She said to him as they were walking, I told you my mother was black. Things like that with the kids. Even with my little boy right now it's hard. I adopted him. He came seven years with me, he's going to be 30 next month. His mother was a drug addict. A little boy like that at ten years old she called him and ask him, could you lend me \$80? A ten-year-old, and he was sitting next to me. He looked at me, because I have a bank account with him. I said, no. If she was going to buy food, yes. But that is money she's going to buy drugs again. If anything happen to her, you will feel responsible. He said, that's true mom, and he told his mom no. Mom never called back or never wanted to see him or nothing. She's dead now; they found her on the street dead, overdose. But no search to see if she have family or anybody. The government just buried her. A week after they called to let us know it's Hunter's mother.

Q: What about Nigel?

SR: Nigel, I adopted Nigel from five days old, five days. Now he's 33, he's married, and he's holding a job. The doctor said that he will never be able to get a job or hold a job. But he finished grade 12.

Q: He has FAS?

SR: Deeply.

Q: Is he Indigenous?

SR: Yes, all the way, 100 percent. If he drink one beer he will kill you. He changes into a monster. I spent enough money on prison taking him out. He see people different, he see demons when he drink one drink. He calls me. He just sent me a picture of one of his school friends. He's doing good on his own, he's doing good. He send me gift for Mother's Day, the best mother in the world. Little things like that. When I was in hospital he slept on the floor. The nurse came to him and said he will have to leave or I'll call the police. He said, call the police, I've been there before. So the next morning when I got up she said to me, I'm going off duty but I have to tell you this. Your children love you. They're not allowed to stay in the hospital because the doctor said it's touch and go with your heart. Both of them decided they're going to sleep on the floor. She said, when I saw that I brought two pillows and a blanket for them, and both of them were sleeping on both sides. She said, that is true love. So I know he loves me, and I love him.

[Pause]

SR: Life is so beautiful. Life is beautiful how you make it, anything is how you make it. If you want to stay in a relationship and suffer, that's your fault. I'm not; I'm packing and running. I don't care if I live in a 2x4, I will be happier. That's how I look at life now. All this means nothing, it means nothing, because it could be taken away. I came here with nothing, with \$50 in my pocket, and I work hard. People try to break me, they try to take from me, destroy me. But you just have to...

Q: What community organizations have you been involved in?

SR: Miss Black Alberta and a lot of different things in the community that I have no regrets when I was younger. Lots of fashion show for different occasions to help. All these things I have no regrets. I have no regrets being part of everything. Now that I'm older, it's different.

Q: Miss Black Alberta was one of the pageants you sponsored?

SR: Yes.

Q: Were there any other community activities that were dear to your heart?

SR: They had one in Calgary for award nights, and I was there present. It was very nice, it was done very nice and I was proud for the awards I got for over the years.

Q: Did you receive anything in this community?

SR: Years ago, yes. I'm proud in my life the way it's going now. I could die in my sleep, anything can happen. So I don't put myself, like I can't go outside and walk. If I walk half a block it's like I'm gasping for breath. I have to walk with my inhaler with me. Different things I used to do, I can't do it no more. Sometimes I feel lonely, lots of time. You don't want to hear your doctor say that your heart is diseased. I don't know what is diseased until he told me. It's rotting, there's no cure for it. It's down to 45. It's hard. A lot of people will say, oh. I don't talk to people just to tell them what's going on. How you doing? I just say fine. I'm out and that's it. But it's okay. They said tears is a mini-baptismal. It cleanse you. When you cry, you let out something inside of you. You release a lot when you cry. You choke it back and you keep it back, it can choke you. So your best bet is to let it out, be free. That's why I told my son, at my funeral I don't want nothing, no after party to say how she was good and how she was this. No, I don't want that. Tell me now, tell me now. I just want some balloons, set me free. That's what I want, set me free. And I don't want no Amazing Grace, I don't want anything like that. I want

John Lennon, I told Jenny already, Imagine. That's one of the songs when you're sending my balloons off. That's what I want.

Q: You still have a ways to go.

SR: We don't know.

Q: We'll work on it.

SR: I'm working on it. Nobody can work on it but me. But I don't want nobody to empathize with me, because there are many who passed before me. I see my sister-in-law, Marian Miles, dementia. Just took her just like that. Anybody you talk to about Marian Miles will tell you she was one of the happiest women. She loved African outfits like you, she liked to tie up her head. When she go to a party she's the star of the party, just the way she laugh and talk like you. She said, this is me, take me as I am. That is what I want to be remember by – a happy go lucky person. I don't want no sadness. Play a steel band, play calypso, play whatever – this is what Shirley like. Nothing sad, nothing. And that's how I would like to end it. Thank you, I appreciate it very much. I freed myself.

[ END ]