Interview with Bernadette Dean
May 9, 2004, Rankin Inlet

Interview took place in Bernadette's office at Kivalliq Inuit Association.

So you were saying that you were originally from the Hudson Bay Area?

Coral Harbor. I mean I have been out of the Coral Harbor area since basically I've been in high school. When the moratorium was, we were discussing that and we are all fearful of this pipeline going across our island. We couldn't really speak English or write English, but a bunch of us wrote letters to Inuit Tapirisat of Canada (ITC) saying that we don't want this. I have a copy of it.

I would love to have a copy of that! Did they print a copy of it in Inuit Today?

Yes, I think it's called Coral Harbor children write ITC, or something like that. And then when they had the plebiscite on division, I was smack in the middle of high school in 1981-82. We couldn't vote because we were underage, but we were in high school in Yellowknife because there were no high schools in our region. In the East, they were in favor of division. I remember walking down the street in Yellowknife, in downtown Yellowknife, and there were a bunch of government bureaucrats, Qallunaat, and they were telling us to go back to where we came from.

Cheez!

Yeah, we were 16, 17-year-olds who had no right to vote, who didn't vote in favor or whatever, told to go back to where we came from.

Hell of a memory to have!

Well, when you've had big white men yelling at you on the streets because of the way you looked. We still had big parkas and we stood out and everybody knew where we were from. The high school or the residential school we attended, everybody knew it was all made up of native kids from out of town.

But teachers were teaching about what was happening in high school?

Well, Inuit teachers yeah, but there were not many who were Inuk. In our last year of high school when we talked about Nunavut and Inuit in control of their own destiny, one of our teachers was a non-Inuk, told us what would happen if Inuit took control, that all the white people would leave. All the managers and all the teachers would leave, but he's still around. He's been one of the assistant deputy ministers.

It took something to get through that.

I think that it is because people can easily say that it is reverse racism because they never had the right to vote about this or that. But it has never been about racism. It's been about Inuit in control of their own lives. So, we bought into it when we were 12.

So, when you were 12 Nunavut was more than a t-shirt to you.

Nunavut was that one day, Inuit could do things their own way. I have three children, one is 17, one is 19, and one is 21. My two girls, my two daughters, they have graduated from high school and they were also graduates of Nunavut Sivuniksavut. My husband and I were talking about how many choices young people have, how many opportunities that it is hard for them to decide what they want to do or what they want to pursue. When I was their age and getting out of high school, I thought I had to have a university degree to become a secretary within a government department. My husband said there were no role models for me. All the people who worked in government were all Qallunaat. That was our reality.

How old were you when you finished high school.

I finished high school in 1984.

How old were you then?

I was 18 going on 19. I started school when I was six-years-old.

So we are really close in age.

Yeah, I am going on 40, but I had my children very young.

More freedom for you now.

I don't like it though. It's very hard. They are all so close together in age.

Tell me about what you did then. You had the plebiscite and then graduated from high school, but there is still another nine years until the agreement is signed. What did you do in all the years in between?

I raised my kids. I stayed home until my son was in Grade 3. I had odd jobs here and there, part-time not full-time.

This was in Coral?

No, no this was all over. Once I left Coral I've basically never been back. We lived in Pond Inlet. When we got married, my husband went to college for two years and after college he got a job as a training foreman in Arctic Bay and his first posting was in Broughton Island. By the time we were in Arctic Bay, we had two girls and by the time we got to Broughton, we had three of them. We were in Broughton for a couple of years,

and then we moved to Pond Inlet. We were there for about six years. Then we were in Iqaluit for a year, and then we moved here and we've been here ever since.

How did you come to get into organizational work?

I've always been interested in our culture and our history. It's always been an interest of mine. I became a court worker in Pond Inlet. I did most of the translations. I had clients and I did some youth court work. I have always been involved at the community level at some point. Then I started teaching literacy programs in Pond Inlet. My first group of people was all men and my second literacy group was all women.

When did you start doing this literacy work?

Probably 1989. And I left in 1991 I think. There was a crime and justice study, research done by Simon Fraser University, the School of Criminology. They wanted Inuit researchers who spoke Inuktitut. I was one of three. We went to communities around Baffin and we interviewed people in the community about crime and justice.

What was that like?

We were involved in developing the questionnaire. We were part of drafting some of the questions. The hard part was transcribing and translating all the interviews.

Yep! I have a little bit of empathy for you on that score. How aware were you of what these guys were doing when you were involved in community level work? Did you hear the negotiators on the radio?

All the time. We heard them all the time, to a point where we just got tired. A lot of people got tired of hearing about this and that.

Was it the same thing over and over again, or was it just too much information?

I don't know, I don't know. To tell you the truth, I was busy raising my children. They were at a totally different level. Like lights going on, we didn't just sit there and wait for it to happen. The ratification stuff, whoever they were, well I know who they were, but they traveled to all the communities to sell the way I saw it, the Nunavut Land Claims, and we weren't needed. We didn't even know what was in it. I attended one of the public meetings that they had. Not a lot of us were actively involved in the negotiations and we didn't know what was in it. I remember speaking to the panel of the ratification group about…whatever that in the past…if an Inuit man married a white woman, that white woman received all the benefits of Inuit, to be able to hunt whatever Inuit can hunt, without limit. But if an Inuk married a white man, it was not the case. That's my case. I am married to a white man, but a white man who hunts and shares with the rest of the communities. That was my mission and that was my hope, that Nunavut treats Inuit women as equally as they treat Inuit men. And the whole community was kind of behind me.

And really it's the children who suffer, because they are Beneficiaries, and it is the whole culture that you are protecting.

Yeah, it's the children.

Did they give you any kind of reassurance at that meeting?

I don't remember. Because I was very nervous and I said what I wanted to say and the whole community started clapping after I spoke because they knew me, and they knew my husband and where we stood in that community, because we were part of that community. I don't remember what Paul Quassa said or anything. He was on that ratification thing. What I didn't like about the *Nunavut Land Claims Agreement* was that relinquishment clause about Aboriginal of title. So I didn't vote, and during the three days of voting my husband was getting calls from one of the Nunavut Tunngavik Inc. (NTI) people, 'Go tell your wife to vote! Go tell your wife to vote!' They knew who hadn't voted.

They put that kind of pressure on you?

Yeah. It was a certain character.

So that was your way of protesting, signal that you weren't happy with the agreement?

Yeah, I went to vote, but I voted no. I knew the yes side was going to win. I don't know I still don't like that, relinquishing Aboriginal title to the land, but we don't really own the land. That's always been the way we were taught to think; the land doesn't belong to us, it belongs to our future or our future generations. And, it's very different from the white man's way of thinking, like that want us to invest in real estate, but who are they kidding? They are not going to take that piece of land with them! But in any case, it is a different world from the way that we were brought up.

So how did you wind up working for the Kivalliq Inuit Association?

When we moved to Iqaluit, I became an adult educator trainee. It was supposed to be a three-year training program. I did the first year in Iqaluit at the campus. When my husband was pursued by some of the people to start the Hunter's Program and to work at NTI and move our family here, I wrote whoever was in charge of training programs to see if they could transfer my training program here so they did. I was in my 30s, and a trainee, because I stayed home with my kids. I love doing what I do, and teaching Inuktitut or literacy programs because I am a strong believer that you can give a man a fish and feed him for a day or you can teach him how to fish and feed him for a lifetime. There was another job with the Department of Justice, the Crown's office, to work with victims of violence and assaults and sex assaults. I got this job working with victims of violence all over Nunavut and the Northwest territories. I just saw the worst of human

nature. When this job came up, development coordinator to work with Elders and youth and different things, it really appealed to me. I've been here six or seven years now!

And well respected, because several people told me that you are the one to talk to so, you must be doing something right.

I have talked to so many women: Leah Idlout, Meeka Kilabuk, Betty Brewster – people that were directly involved and people holding down the fort. What is your perspective of women's work during the whole time of these negotiations? It sounds like you were holding the family together and doing community work.

When you think about it, we've managed to settle a huge land claim without taking up arms or going to war for the first time in history, I think the history of the world. And, it's something to be proud of.

So much so that on April 1, 1999, I was in Australia and I can tell you how the Aboriginal communities celebrated the creation of Nunavut!

You should have seen the letters that we got from all over the world.

Some of the negotiators have told me that they had been contacted by other Indigenous Peoples as early as 1976.

It's not only the Indigenous world that has to learn, I think it's the whole world. They were fighting in Bosnia and Herzegovina over parcels of land.

We have to be able to say, yes, you have a right to your cultural distinctiveness and we have a mutual obligation to preserve it. I was going ask you about women's work and what women have been doing, what women's work has contributed to the creation of Nunavut in the last 20 to 30 years?

I wish women had been more involved, actually because all of the social and cultural stuff is not included in the land claims agreement. If it is, then it is very vague and it is not concrete. And I think it has to do with their lack of involvement. I wasn't involved so I don't know. I am probably not the one to ask. If they had pushed that, I don't know.

Were you aware of women being involved at all? Were there names and faces that you came to recognize in time?

Nellie Cournoyea was one who always was involved, but when it came to the nitty gritty of the Nunavut Land Claims Agreement, but she is one who was involved from the very early years and is still involved to some degree. And, Mary Simon. Meeka Kilabuk was one name that I saw, but there was a big gap. It was male dominated; it is still male dominated even today.

Women held a lot of important positions in the organizations, the regional organizations in particular.

Off and on, I think. I know women are hesitant to run because who wants to spend their time fighting and arguing and debating? Well, that's the sense I get from women friends, that we've had discussions on. We need more women here and there.

Did it have any affect that so many males from leadership families were gone so long during these negotiations?

Yes, I think so. It would be interesting to do a study of the adult children from single-parent homes and see how they turned out.

Did that put more of a burden on women to take care of more things within the community?

Women take care of their own families first, or their own children. The pressure to provide food on the table for their children is always there no matter what. I grew up with a mum and a dad that worked together. I know one of the men whose father was involved in the negotiations and spent a lot of time away from him and his siblings and he's upset about that. And rightly so. He feels that his father never spent the time to teach him traditional things or hunting.

Yes, one of the people that I want to meet is the woman who wrote a song about that.

You know there is always a price to pay, who pays it I don't know. I think with my daughters it has been the same thing. The jobs that I have, as rewarding as they have been sometimes my children have spent up to three weeks without a mother. I've tried to talk to them as much as I could and they are pretty good kids. One of them is running her own business, she has a hair salon, and she wants to go to teacher's college in the fall. My daughter is going to a job to teach school in the west. My son is going to be graduating this year, and he wants to play hockey. He did play hockey in Manitoba this year and we want him to pursue hockey, and we also want him to have an education to fall back on.