

Interview with Elizabeth Kusugak
May 11, 2004, Rankin Inlet

Interview took place at her office in the CBC station at Rankin Inlet. We began our conversation by talking about how many of the negotiators involved with the Nunavut Land Claims Agreement (NLCA) either began their public life by working at CBC or worked at CBC during the times they stepped away from the table.

That's what we do all the time. Just take them off the street and train them here. But everything is in our language, and it's easy enough for them to learn the CBC policies somehow.

How do you find people? Are they good storytellers already?

We know a lot of the people in the communities, and we look at younger people in the summer, and if they speak Inuktitut, then we say, 'She or he has a pretty good chance!' We'll train them for six weeks and then give them a summer job. We look for kids who can speak both languages very well. Once they get into CBC, we train them to do an interview. It has to be in their language. I have noticed a few who have worked here have learned more Inuktitut because you are made to do it. I say, 'Look, think about the old guy or the person who is listening to the radio who doesn't speak any English at all!' Because they are the people who are listening all the time, and if you say something like science, they don't know what that is, you have to tell them what it is, you have to say it. Sometimes we'll do some interviews that are mixed. When we interview young people the interviewer will speak total Inuktitut, but the interviewee will speak broken English and Inuktitut mixed. We go ahead and use them, because that is their language now, but I try to tell these guys to try and speak Inuktitut only. That happens to me in English all the time, so that's just the way it is...

How did that tradition get started? I've spent an awful lot of time with Jonah Kelly and Simon Awa and Paul Quassa and many others who have gone through CBC university and they tell me stories about Annie Pudlat and many of the first people who got it started. So many amazing people have come from having this experience.

Yeap. You have to talk to real people, that's who you have to go to, that's who you have to listen to. They also have to know what's happening in the political world, because you can't leave that out at all. No matter how much you try and do that, you can't.

Because its part of public life.

That's right, and some people think that they don't need to have politics in their life, but everyday their life is run by politics and some don't realize that.

I think the CBC and especially the Inuktitut broadcasts played a very important role in the shaping of Nunavut. Because communications were so bad, that's how they managed to talk to people, through the call-in shows and so forth.

That's right. There are two kinds of shows. There are the network shows and that's all the Southern radio stations, CBC, the national stuff and then there's us, the local radio stations. When something major happens like a war in Iraq, I've argued with CBC so many times a lot of Elders will see this on TV, and watch it in English so they don't understand a thing. What's happening? What's happened to them? Something brought down to us from headquarters will have to go on-air, and it's all in English. I say, 'No, no, I want my show on.' And we'll do some translations. We take the news and translate it.

How did you get started?

My husband and I were living in Repulse at first, and then we moved here. I was looking for a permanent job. I looked for anything and it was a secretary at CBC, and it didn't pay much, but it was someplace that I wanted to work because the majority of the workforce was Inuit, not to put Qallunaat down or anything, but I work better with Inuit.

Tukisijunga.

We kept getting operations managers who could come and go, come and go, come and go, and I am sort of working along, and I kept taking over the financial situations and I kept moving up. I didn't mean too. But, that was what they wanted me to do so I just ended up being an operations manager. Then the manager left and I took over. I didn't want to do it, but they thought I could do it, so I went ahead and did it.

Sometimes other people know more about what you are capable of than you do.

I was worried about that and I explained to them, 'If at any time you think I am not doing my job, then tell me.' I don't want to work at a place that it's just tokenism. I want to work at a place where I feel that I am doing some good. I think I am now. I didn't used to before, I didn't have my confidence, but I believe the Inuktitut language has to be first. If I could do away with the half hour English, I would do that, but I can't because I realize that there are not just Inuit, there are also Qallunaat here and we have to give them what they want also. We didn't realize there were a lot of English listeners, and even the young people listen to that half hour too, so I said ok. That's how I started.

When was it that you moved from Repulse Bay to here?

1981.

When did you first become aware of Inuit coming together to get a greater voice for themselves, like when Tagak Curley and Mary Cousins and others started?

When I first moved back here I would listen to all these people, my brother Jack Anawak, and I am going, 'Who wants to live in a political life? Oh, they are so boring, boring people!' I just found them so boring and I never listened to radio at all, I never did. Only when we moved back here and I started listening to it and I realized, 'Hey! There is

something to that.' It would be fun to help out if I could. I think it was around the 1980s that I realized that politics is not so bad after all. It was in the late 1980s when I realized these guys are doing a lot of things, Louis Pilakapsi, Tagak Curley, Jack Anawak, Peter Irniq, they are doing something for their own people.

Was there a particular moment when it clicked for you?

It was when they were signing of the Nunavut Land Claims Agreement (NLCA). I am going, 'What are you guys getting us into?' I was angry with them at first, but I realized afterwards that they have to start somewhere. Whether it's good or bad, they have to pave the way somehow, and make it better. People think it can change overnight, when it can't. You have to work at it to get it better. I thought they did the wrong thing by signing the agreement, but later I realized, 'They are right, they are right after all, they are doing something for their own people.' I am proud of them, I am really proud of all those people who have done so much and some of them aren't even here anymore.

That's the hardest part of doing this work, because I have to ask people to create the stories of people that aren't here to speak for themselves.

That's actually when it really hit me. My brother, I am adopted to a different family, Louis Pilakapsi was my brother, and I was angry at him for signing that agreement. I thought he was doing something really wrong. 'Aren't you scared of disappointing thousands of people, Inuit?' But he said, 'Well, what's wrong with it? We have to work at it to make it work.' I had to put my trust in him. My trust in other Inuit leaders became stronger when I realized that it has to start somewhere, we can't just let the government run things forever. We have to do it on our own. I am really proud of Inuit that start out like that, start their own business and are the head of some corporation or some organization. They have worked at it for years, and they deserve to be there if they are doing a good job.

What about the women> It took me awhile to find the women that have been involved because they are not spoken of at all. You have people like Meeka Kilabuk who were there in the beginning and you have the people like Betty Brewster and Leah Idlout who worked as translators, people in organizations and back in the communities holding the communities together. Are there any women who stand out in your mind from that time?

I don't think any woman ever stood out for me. I am an old traditional Inuk woman in some ways and in some ways I am not. If the women can do it, then good for them. I am glad for them. But, I always have a problem with women in politics. I am not saying that it is bad for them, if they can do it, then good. I think Veronica Dewar is doing an excellent job, I am proud of her. Meeka, I think she did an excellent job. But, sometimes I think that some women have been held back for so long, and then they are given this opportunity to be the head of whatever, and then it runs to their head, and they are higher up than anyone else. That's when I say, 'Forget it, I don't want to have anything to do with it!' I think that they have been held back for too long, if you know what I mean. They can do a lot of good, they are more sensitive. I think you need to have more

sensitivity in some workplaces. For instance, here, we have two men and four of us are women. I am sensitive to the men also. I have a husband who also lived a traditional life by hunting and fishing and whatever else he has to do. I know and understand they have their needs. I know the women carry a lot of load by their working, their taking care of children, making their lunches, I do it all the time. My kids are grown up, but now I have my grandchildren to worry about. I make sure they have enough food on the table. Those women are very strong. I see these two women working here, they are providing for their family, but they are also providing for their husband, who may live a traditional life, and you have to give them some kind of credit. These women are doing a lot more than some men will ever do. There're certain things that I will do and I don't expect my husband to do. I think I am more traditional than other women, but sometimes I say, 'Hey, I've been working all day, why can't you do certain things.' I ask him to cook, and he will do it. We share. You have to make certain that we share, and that's part of survival. I think you have to have a good family togetherness to survive. I think a lot of women mold and shape these guys.

I was talking with Catherine Pilakapsi the other day about how these guys were gone, some of them for years, and that left the women not only to care for and provide for their families, but to keep the communities going.

I've seen that with my sister-in-law and my brother. I think you have to have a strong family in order to survive that. My sister-in-law survived that with Louis Pilakapsi being gone all the time, all the time. We tried to be there for my sister-in-law as much as possible, and we didn't just leave her alone when Louis was away. My mother made sure that we didn't do that at all. That's part of a woman. Our mother made sure, and that's going back to culture again, you made sure to take care of other family members. If they were left behind, you didn't just leave them alone. You always, always helped them and provided for them and do things for them. That's part of survival – Inuit survival. Family means more to them than anything else, more than a job. My family means more to me than my workplace. You know they always say, 'You have to make your job number one' and I am going, 'No. No. No.' You can argue with me, you can tell me, you can fire me if you want to, but family means more to me than anything else. I think that's how Inuit survived, by family. I've tried to explain that to somebody in Ottawa, when I had to be there for a meeting. 'I don't want to be here because I had to go out fishing with my family.' They are like, 'Well, don't you have all year to do that?' I said, 'No, we are inside all winter, so in the springtime don't ask me to come down here again. I need to spend my time out with my family.'

One of the things I am doing is trying to chart out for people who was doing what and when, even before the Inuit Tapirisat of Canada (ITC), who was in the co-op movement, who was in the Indian and Eskimo Brotherhood and so on because I want to learn where people learned what, so I have all the Inuit organizations year by year. Another thing that I have learned is not only do all these leaders come from leadership families, but they are also related to each other. Someone made the comment to me that in Inuit culture, Inuit are used to working together as a family.

Yeap.

When they said that, all of a sudden all of this [the list of Inuit leaders and their relationships] started making even more sense to me.

If I look at like Tagak Curley, his father was a leader in some camp they had. Jose (Kusugak's) grandfather was a leader with my father. I'm adopted. My grandfather was Dick Kumojuk from Wager Bay. He was the first Inuk manager of Hudson's Bay. He adopted me, and he married Louis Pilakapsi's mother. He was a leader in the Wager Bay area, and Jose Kusugak's grandfather was always with them, and my real father was always with them. They are like family, they are all from that area, and they are well-known in that area.

And their names were?

Pudjut (Jose Kusugak's grandfather). Donat was adopted out too, to a different family, but they are real brothers those two. And their mother was married to my grandfather. My grandfather's wife was Tuta who is also Cathy Towtongie's grandmother. They have a different grandfather though. They have a Qallunaat grandfather. My real father's father was Qallunaat also, who was a cop I guess. I always felt that Louis Pilakapsi and Teresa Taktak, they were my real family, not the Anawak family, because I grew up with them. But if you look back, they were leaders also.

So this makes sense to you?

Yeah.

I knew there were some exceptions, some people got involved precisely because they never had a voice.

Yes, most of them came from there. It does carry on.

When I was talking with James Wah-Shee, his family comes from a Shamanic type of leadership family and Tagak Curley comes from a Shamanic type of leadership family. These guys were the visionaries that got it all started. But they didn't have the kind of leadership that it takes to keep going, like the Isumataq. Tagak says that himself, 'I have the vision, I get things started and then I step out.' Do you think that the kind of leaders that people are descended from makes a difference?

I think it varies from generation to generation. If you go back up here [to the chart of leaders], I bet you a million bucks, they are Angakoks. I don't know whether that has anything to do with it. I know my father (my grandfather) was Angakok. I know he was. And, going back here, somewhere [on the line of forefathers] there's probably one too in each one of them.

The kind of wisdom that comes from that?

Yeah. I don't know if it has to do with them being Shaman. I have to get away from that somehow, because maybe it does? Maybe it has to do with that, maybe they visioned that and it was going to happen that way. I don't know if they were the ones that made sure that something was going to happen. Unless they passed on words from one family to the next family to the next family to make sure that it was going to happen. Inuit like to follow what their parents have told them. Our parents always told us to be good to others, and to help others. My mother always told us, 'Always help somebody who is hungry or anything like that.' And don't ask for anything in return, it will always come back to you in other ways.

There are women who stand out, kind of leaders, not only making sure that their own family had clothing, but anyone else who needed it. Or, bringing the women together when the men were out to make sure that everybody was doing alright and give advice to the younger women.

I am always listening to the radio as much as possible because I know some women who go on local radio and say, 'I don't have any food. My kids go to school hungry.' When I hear that I go, 'Why did I have to hear that? Now I have to!'

You are compelled to do something about it!

Yes! I always have to do something about it. My son was on a hockey team, and it was his last year to go down South. I have so much respect for this coach, Donald Clark, because he has coached my son ever since he was small. I asked him if they have enough money to go, because I knew they were going to spend so many days in Iqaluit and then go down South and it would be a two-week thing. I said, 'Well, why don't we have a bingo?' 'We don't have a license.'/'Let's work on it.' 'Did you ask the Hamlet?' 'No, do you want to do that?' 'Yeah, I'll do that, we'll work something out.' I am going, 'Why do I get myself into these things?' Why? It's to help these younger people. They need to have more things going for them. They need to have a lot of things, especially right now when suicide is so strong in the North. There needs to be a lot more because they are living in a world that is not really theirs. They are Inuit, but they are living in a Qallunaat world, because we are bringing them up that way, because they are living in houses with TVs, with radios, with games and everything, and they don't know any other world unless you take them out onto the land. My husband did that this spring with his brother and my son, took them out to Wager Bay and my son was just in awe. It made them catch their first wolf. It was like two worlds for my son. Hockey, that was his world, but we pulled him out, just for a little while, and made him live the traditional way, for three weeks, even though he was like, 'Mom, send somebody else here, and I'll go home by plane.' He can do that with me because he knows that I can make things happen. I tell my husband, 'Don't leave me alone with our son!' Because he knows he can get away with things with me. But he stuck it out, and he did it! He caught his first wolf. I think it is something that every young person has to do. They may live in such a world that they don't know anything about traditional life and you have to take them away and make them do it. They realized their identities; they are Inuit. It's something to be proud of! It's

their land, and they have to be able to survive in their land. They have to be able to provide for the future. They have to continue it on somehow. I don't know if that makes sense to you.

Perfect sense.

It's really strong for me. I love living out on the land, and I can be angry at it, but I respect it because it has taken so many people. You have to respect the land.

All these guys [the leaders], they had to have that, one foot in both worlds. They may have leaned a little heavier on the Inuit side, whereas the younger kids today may have leaned too much on the Qallunaat side. Some of these guys, their parents and grandparents prepared them for that with amazing foresight. I remember Leah Idlout commenting on her father who told her, 'You are going to have to learn to live in this world and you are going to learn this and this, but not this.'

If you look from here to here [pointing at list], these people, these individuals, I can bet you they were the most, I don't like using the word, but the most loved in their family. Because there were 13 in this family and 13 in this family, and this kid was the one that the father and mother groomed better or something.

Sent to school or something?

Yeap.

Sometimes parents hedged their bets and sent one kid to school and taught another traditional life.

Yeap. Like Jose, I know for a fact was the most loved by his mother and his father and the grandparents and the aunts. He was it!

Was he the youngest?

Nope, he was the second. Mike was first. Jose and then my husband, Cyril. Cyril was adopted by his grandparents, so he is the only different Kusugak you will find. You will never find him in the news. Louis, my mother kept him, but because of starvation he ended up being with priests and then he ended up being with my mother-in-law, Jose's mother, she sort of adopted him. I know they are the most loved, the strongest ones, they are always like that. I can see that here right away [looking at list], they are the strongest ones in their families. Cyril will never go into politics, I know that. He is much more the physical worker, and Jose and Mike and Lorne and Johnny are paper-leaders, whereas he is a physical worker. He needs to do that.

That has been the biggest discovery for me in doing this, I think. Inuit, perhaps more than other Indigenous Peoples even. We tend to ignore the value of seeing our parents and

grandparents doing these things. Inuit also had more leaders, living in smaller bands, but I still think these are extraordinary people.

My mother, her second husband was my grandfather, and then she moved to Churchill to get closer to him because he was in the Winnipeg area, and Louis Pilakapsi was in Churchill and we lived with him. Then when they left, my mother didn't speak a word of English so Joe and I lived with her. We survived living there. She survived living in a place where she couldn't speak the same language, but she worked for a few dollars and she survived it. She was an artist, a sewer, she did everything. She did what guys did or what women did, she did all that. His strength came from her, not from the father because he died at an early age.

How should she be remembered?

A giver. She gave to anybody. She took in women who were battered. She helped a lot of people. Even here, even in Churchill. Women who were beaten up, she would hide. She also carved, she also sewed, she provided for the Tatty family because they were my father's children. She always wanted to be sure that Tatty had a pair of kamiks every year because my father, my grandfather, took her in and they helped her. Tatty was my father's son. She made sure that my sister, Eva, continued that tradition so even though my mother's gone, she will do that for Tattys because it's something that you have to keep continuing when you are asked by certain people. Like the other day, my husband said, 'Make sure you bring some fish over to this woman because my mother always gave her some stuff.' I said, 'Okay.' It's something that you carry on. I would say she did a lot of things for everybody.

She is well spoken of. I have been doing this for about three years, and her name came up probably in the first year I was doing this.

Yeah. She came from the Igloolik area. Mark Evaluardjuk's wife is her sister. She is from that area.

There are a lot of Igloolik people.

Yeap. That area, Wager Bay, Repulse Bay, that Igloolik area, that was the strongest point. I kept thinking about that. It's a very strong region, strong leaders.

And it's unusual. You'd think they would come from everywhere.

Yeap.

And it's also Churchill Vocational School.

We all went there.

Here's the list of folks from 1966 to 1967.

There's a lot. I have a yearbook also. My husband also went there, too.

It's all the same family.

I know a lot of these people, too.

When did you go?

1969, but I was made to quit school because my sister Eva had cancer and I had to help her. But it was the most fun time I ever had at school.

Who do you remember the most from those years?

Northern Quebec people because I made friends with them a lot, and us doing all the sports events. I remember my husband also playing sports a lot and we couldn't team up with the NWT team because we were living in Manitoba and they said we couldn't be a part of it. But, I remember a lot of us being good friends. We made lots of good friends with people who were from everywhere. It was a nice place. There was nothing bad happening there. It taught you to become independent, and taught you to make your own money and provide for yourself because you were getting \$2.50 a week, that was your allowance. My mother hardly gave me any money. In the three years that I went there, I hardly got ten bucks.

What made Churchill so special? Why did so many leaders come from there?

I think it was because it gathered so many different people from all over the NWT, all Inuit from all over, it wasn't just one region. It got all Inuit together from all regions into one little hostel and you had to be friends with everybody. You got to know people from different dialects. You had to learn them all. That really provided Inuit strength I think. I really believe in that. Inuit – different dialects, different ways of doing things, but we all got together and became one, and that's what Inuit have got to do in order to become a good territory.

You don't have that kind of place anymore, something to replace that experience.

I know some places didn't like to hear from a different region because they had a different dialect, but I also know that CBC also opened that up to other people because people had to listen to people from other places, even though they couldn't understand each other, we made sure that we played them on our shows and they had to learn that and now they can understand each other. I think that CBC had a big role in that, in communications. I believe that CBC is a good provider of Inuit culture, because it keeps it alive and we archive everything...Community meetings, ITC meetings, Nunavut Tunngavik Inc. (NTI) meetings.

I keep hearing horror stories of places throwing things away, old newsletters and meeting minutes and notes. They don't understand the value of what they have, or record over them because resources are so slim.

Oh, that makes me nervous too.