

Helen Maksagak
April 30, 2004, Cambridge Bay

Interview took place in the living room of her home on Saturday afternoon. Helen welcomed me warmly, and I began by explaining what work I had done in documenting the history, both the charts of the various organizations year by year as well as the people I had spoken to. She made a few comments on people, on how many people that I had met. Helen introduced me to her oldest daughter who came and left while we were speaking.

When did you first get involved in public service or government?

In 1961, we moved from Inuvik to here. I was pregnant with my youngest one, and after she was not quite a year old, I started fostering other kids. And from there it just went on and on and on.

And your husband was active in politics already?

Yeah. The reason why we came was, you've heard of Kay Gordon right, she wrote a letter, which we got a month later, asking him to come over and help her in the church. So we just moved over and we've been here ever since.

Did the church help to get the co-op things going?

I don't remember. I know that he was one of the first members, and he started that along with a few others and from there it just grew.

So you started taking in foster kids?

Yeah, foster kids first when the parents were going out on the land. They needed medical attention, so they had to stay behind so I kept them. After that, I got transit center manager for patients. At that time, there were no direct flights, so they had to have a place, so I took that position, taking patients and keeping them until they were ready to go out or go back home.

Was that in the days of the CD Howe?

No, the CD Howe didn't come here. Once a month, we used to get a plane, a DC 3 from the mainland. No fresh stuff until the boat came.

As a family you were active in the church?

Yeah, I was teaching Sunday school and my husband was a pastor there, along with Kay Gordon. My oldest son played the music part. If we didn't come this way I don't think I would have ever gotten involved with all these things.

You might have been working with Nellie Cournoyea. When did you start to notice Inuit coming together to try to get a greater voice in government?

I think it was in the 1960s when my husband got involved with Inuit Cultural Institute (ICI) and then Inuit Tapirisat of Canada (ITC) Board member. Then he kept going and became the president of Kitikmeot Inuit Association (KitIA), the first one. I started traveling with him, and that's when I noticed people getting together and talking about it a lot.

What did you think of it all?

At first I thought nothing, you know. I just thought they were having meetings and after that, I started like waking up to what is going on, what they are doing. When I became deputy commissioner, we traveled a lot.

So what was it like traveling around with them, your husband in KitIA? Did you travel around with them a lot?

I started to, but not right away. I was managing the transit center. At first I wasn't allowed to go anywhere because of the patients, and then I talked to social services. I said look, I was almost having a nervous breakdown because my husband was gone so much, eh? So they said, 'Ok, you can go.' ITC or KitIA would pay for my trip, but I would give the money back because I was not a member then. When he went to EXPO, I really wanted to go, but I wasn't allowed to go, because they had already made arrangements way ahead of time right, eh?

When was that?

Expo 1967. I couldn't go and I was so upset. Then they had this big Inuit Circumpolar Conference (ICC) conference and my husband got a call from Ottawa and they wanted him to go and he said only if my wife goes. Because he was the president for KitIA they wanted him there, so they agreed to let him take me. Then we'd go to a bible school in Rankin Inlet. January, February, March, the students are there and then toward the end of March, all the leaders in the church go. He went how many times, and I couldn't go, because you know how funding goes, eh? They are always short of funds. Finally I got to go one year, and a couple of times after that I think, to see the bible school students graduate and it was nice.

Do you think your husband being a leader in the church helped him become a leader in the other Inuit organizations?

I think that helped him open his eyes to other people because he saw their needs. The Board really liked him because he didn't drink, being a church leader.

People say that he was one of the most stable leaders that was ever a part of ITC.

Yeah, that's what Tagak used to tell me. When we moved to Yellowknife, he was retired already and I was supposed to retire, but I got into this commissioner thing.

This was in the 1990s right?

Yeah. If I was going to really retire, I would have stayed home, but I said no, I would keep on going so we moved to Yellowknife for four years. We traveled a lot with the military because some places you can't get into with a jet. We got to know this colonel and he agreed to take John and I to different little settlements as part of the work so that was really nice. We went to different places and we'd ride up to Pond Inlet, Sanikiluaq, Baffin, Keewatin.

How many places had you been to in the earlier days when the organizations were just getting started?

I'd been to most of them, except Grise Fiord and Arctic Bay. I've been to Arviat on church business, not as commissioner. I've been to Whale Cove, Rankin Inlet, Repulse Bay. I never got to Igloolik though. I've been to the South too, and the Mackenzie. I've been to Alaska as well for the Arctic Winter Games in Anchorage in 1996. Of course my husband got sick in 1998. I've been to Whitehorse and St. John's Newfoundland, Prince Edward Island. I went to Cape Breton to get my honorary degree, Doctor of Law. Then a year ago, not quite a year this month, I went to Ottawa to get my Order of Canada. That was a big surprise. I didn't think I was going to ever get that.

What was your biggest challenge as commissioner?

To travel to different places because there're different dialects in each community. We had lots of laughs because some words are just the opposite of each other, one word could mean two different things. I had lots of fun with that.

What are you the most proud of having done in those days?

I really wanted to get into family violence counseling, but I couldn't go through with it, because I've never experienced violence in my own married life. After nine months, when I became deputy commissioner, I resigned from there because I couldn't relate to the people I was trying to deal with. I said I couldn't go through with it. I was the first emergency home, like in my own house, before they got the shelter. Oh, that was hard to see these poor kids and ladies come in all beat up and broken arms and legs. The second hardest one was the young offenders, the group home for young offenders. After raising my own teenagers, and getting a whole other bunch of teenagers, that's when I really got the grey hair then.

How old were you then?

I was in my late sixties I guess. I just turned 65 when I became deputy commissioner, and from there I just moved to commissioner.

Who did you turn to for support, or who did you learn from for guidance and leadership?

I lost my mum when I was going to school. I was going to school in Aklavik, so I didn't get to know my mom that much because I went to residential school and then home for just two months in the summer and then went back. I was only 10 or 11 when she passed away, so my Dad looked after us until we got married. I was in school from 1939 to 1946 and then I met John, but we didn't get married until 1950. He was a reindeer herder before that. He traveled a lot with the reindeer and he would drive a sled with the reindeer hitched up like a horse. I was never in one place very long, we would just get settled down and then you got to move, eh? I had most of my kids at camps, no sisters, no doctors.

Was John already kind of a leadership figure in the camps?

No, he wasn't at first, until this missionary came. I don't know where this guy came from, Don Violet. That's the first one and then Kay Gordon came. Because he could interpret, he started interpreting for them, and then from there it just grew.

How did he learn his English?

He went to school. But then he said he was away from home for maybe six years and never saw his mum because they were in Chimo Point, that was before Aklavik. He said he used to cry when he got home because he couldn't understand his mum talking, and he couldn't talk to her, so he said that was really hard. He had to relearn his language. I was brought up speaking both English and Inuktitut, so I was very lucky in a way. My dad used to work with the RCMP and the old Hudson Bay. I guess he went to school too, in the late 1800s.

What was his name?

Cyril Wingnuk. I was lucky in a way that we spoke both, eh?

Did you find yourself having to be interpreter, too?

Yeah, I was for a while for the nursing station in the late 1960s, early 1970 and then with the RCMP. I was doing a lot of matron work as well, babysitting for almost three years. And then translating for social services, mostly in the court. I found the court to be kind of hard because you just have to find the right word for whatever they are talking about. You can't just say any old thing, you have to find the right word.

Do you know Leah Idlout? Betty Brewster?

Yeah, oh yeah.

I know how hard it is for them, I have seen them work.

I know when I was with the Status of Women, Leah was doing a lot of interpreting.

When was this?

I just finished last year, I was there for two years, I had a two year term.

Were you at the 1975 women's conference that Leah organized?

No, the first time I had ever been to Pangnirtung was my last year on the council, just after the Queen got into Iqaluit. They wanted to know if I wanted to stay there, but I said no, I'd seen her before. I'd traveled with her to Rankin Inlet. I said it's ok, I've seen all that, although it would have been nice to see her again, but I'd rather go to the meeting. And Pangnirtung is beautiful. Another place I really loved was Pond Inlet, beautiful as well.

When you were traveling with your husband, did you spend time with the other women there?

Yeah, if he was in a meeting, I would go and visit other ladies. If I was not part of that meeting, I would just go visiting.

He was actively involved with negotiations for awhile. What was that like for you?

Sometimes I would wish he didn't go, but I am glad he did because it came through later on. Although he was with Nunavut. I'm with Inuvialuit. Even though we are on Nunavut land, I didn't change over. I still get my benefits from Inuvialuit. Although I go to Nunavut places and get involved with different things. Sometimes I wonder what they thought this Inuvialuit was doing on Nunavut.

It wasn't that divisive?

Yeah, but they were really good to me so I didn't mind. At first when they asked me to become commissioner of Nunavut, I was kind of wavering. I said, 'I am not a Beneficiary of Nunavut, what are they going to think?' They said they had a meeting, and because they had known John for so long from the beginning, they agreed to let me go, so I went to start it off. I'm glad I did. I got to take part in it. I got to swear in the first MLAs. It was neat.

When it all started, did you believe it would really happen one day?

I never heard about it until I started traveling with my husband and then they all started talking about Nunavut.

When did they first start coming up with the idea of Nunavut as a new territory?

In the early 1990s I started hearing about it. The signing was done in Coppermine in 1992. I was a deputy commissioner then. Last summer they had a big celebration in Coppermine. KitIA and Nunavut Tunngavik Inc. (NTI) were chartering [flights] and they asked me to go. It was nice of them to ask me to go so I went for the day.

Who all was there?

There was Keith Peterson was the mayor then and there was the KitIA president, James Eetoolook was there, the Lyall boys were there, people from Yellowknife, some of the MLAs, it was nice. One year they had an ICC conference in Inuvik. I was deputy commissioner. They had their big meeting in Inuvik, John and I were both there so it was nice. Some of my relatives came from Alaska. I have cousins over there.

When you were commissioner, did people Indigenous Peoples from other countries ever contact your office?

Yeah, I've been with a bunch of ambassadors from all over. One year we had a big banquet in Yellowknife and they all came. The military had their big meeting here and I was invited to that. Commissioners have their meetings once a year in different places. The last one I went to was Whitehorse, and the very last one I was supposed to go to was in Vancouver, but I got stormed out here and my secretary from Iqaluit was stormed out there so we got to Yellowknife and we couldn't go any further. So, we just stayed in Yellowknife, we did our shopping and then went back to Iqaluit.

That must have happened a lot when the negotiations were going on.

Yeah. Lots of fun, but frustrating too, at times, eh?

When you think back on the last 20 or 30 years, what people do you remember the most? Are there characters or personalities that stand out?

Tagak was one because he was about the first one I met with John. When Tagak first started ITC, he contacted John as a Board member. John Parker was the commissioner of NWT at that time. I remember him very well. Stu Hodgson and Danny Morris. When I see these people now who were just Board members now who are MLAs, I wonder where the time went to.

Went from being activists to being members of the government.

Yeah. And if my kids were still small, I never would have gotten involved in these things, but they were grown up, in their late teens and all on their own so I just naturally took off. When I was living in Yellowknife they would come and stay with us because I had a big house, five bedrooms. That was handy so the kids would come and people would come and stay with me when they would go to the big meetings. They don't want to stay in the hotel so they would just come and stay with us. It was nice.

The whole time that John was active in all these organizations, he was still a pastor in the church? So he would do both?

Yeah, when he would go to different meetings, they always had fellowships. He would take part in those all the time. When I go to the Baffin or the Keewatin, that's what they always remind me of, the good times they used to have at the fellowship.

And David Aglukark and a couple of people followed in John's footsteps?

Yeah. My oldest son was running for MLA last fall, but he didn't come through, but he said he knows now the procedures for later if he wants to run again. But he's very musical, my oldest boy is very musical. Nobody taught him to play, he just learned to play by ear, so he plays a lot of music. My second son, John Jr., he is more of a hunter on the land. But he works in a government office on workdays at public works.

You still have a hunter in the family?

Yeah. And my girls are involved in different things. My second daughter, she's in Pond Inlet now. She's managing a wellness centre there. My oldest daughter, the one that was here, she goes to the Arctic College and does different things here in the community. And my youngest daughter, she works in Edmonton and does different jobs too. And my other daughter is a mother to her kids. She's got two teenage daughters and one seven year old son. She couldn't get into other things because she had meningitis when she was very small. But she's a really good mother to her kids.

How many children and grandchildren do you have?

We had eight of our own, but we lost two and then we adopted two boys, the first one drowned and the second one is 28. Grandchildren? Most of my grandchildren got children now. And they are still coming.

That must make you very happy.

Yeah, oh yeah. Tiring, but it's fun and that's ok.

Generations are interesting to me. I know you said your dad had been with the RCMP.

When I was growing up, he was very involved in Anglican Church and I was too until I joined the Pentecostals. He used to read the bible to us. At first I didn't understand what he was doing. He used to make us go around the table. He would read a few verses from the bible before we'd go to bed and he prayed with us. And then I went to Sunday school so that opened my eyes.

You've seen a lot of change in your lifetime.

Yeah, I've seen quite a bit since 1961. My youngest one was born here because I was pregnant with her when I came. She was the first and the last one to be born with nurses. I had one Nurse in Tuktoyaktok named Iona Blakeny. When my little girl was born, she said, 'What are you going to call her?' When she was born, I called her Iona after the nurse. The nurses here, my little one was born before the nurses could get into the room. I rang the bell, but she was already out. There was a nurse named Cathy so I called her Cathy. And Kay after Kay Gordon. And there was another nurse called Jeannie. I didn't want to call her Jeannie so I just put Janet in between Cathy and Janet came. She'll be 43 end of August.

Do you remember when Abe Okpik came around, with Project Surname?

Yeah. I was in Tuktoyaktok when that happened. We used to have these round buttons. I had them until we came here. While I was in the hospital, kids had been getting after them and either broke them or lost them. I was going to keep them for souvenirs. I had one for all the kids and John and I. When I came back they were all gone. On one of my travels, I met with Abe Okpik in Iqaluit. After that he got sick. I didn't see him after that. I've met his wife too, the younger one – his first wife.

What about the women? Being commissioner, being Inuk and being a woman has made you a role model. Did you ever meet people like Mary Cousins and Meeka Kilabuk and some of the first women to get involved?

I've met Meeka. Mary Cousins, I don't know if I have met her or not.

What do you remember of the women involved?

When I first heard about it, I used to wonder what they do, or how they got into these things until I got into these things myself. Then I understood

What advice would you have for future generations, particularly women?

When I first started traveling as commissioner, and I've been in a lot of schools, that was one of the first things we would always do is visit schools, the first thing they would ask me is how much money I make. I couldn't answer that at first, but my executive assistant traveled with me and he would answer, 'She makes more than a thousand but less than a million!' That was the answer we used to give them. I want to see people in high places, like Nellie Cournoyea, she was the first female to be premier. I was deputy commissioner when she was premier. She's got powerful position there.

Who did you learn the most from?

I think was from my husband because he was a real leader. I'm really impatient at times and he would say, "Take your time! You don't have to be so cranky and this and that about it, just pray about it and think about it." I had to slow down. He was a really patient man.

How should he be remembered?

He was a real gentle person, he never pushed the kids or pushed me around. He was always quiet. I remember one time in church and I knew he was going to say something when one morning he got up and looked down at me and sort of smiled at me and said, "Do you know I never thought my wife would be a commissioner." And that got everybody laughing! And then when we got to Yellowknife, and of course the house is so big. I do a lot of sewing because I'm not in the office all the time. He used to do dishes and vacuum the floor and sometimes he would cook and somebody would come over and they would say, "How come you're doing this?" And he would say, "Because my wife's a commissioner!"

A true partner.

Yeah! He said when we got married we promised to do things together, and so I am standing by her. It was frustrating and lots of fun all at the same time