Interview with Michael Kusugak
May 10, 2004, Rankin Inlet

Interview took place at a coffee shop. It began with a discussion on the nature of my work, gathering stories on the creation of Nunavut.

My dad worked for the Hudson's Bay Company and so did my mom. My mom cleaned all the furs. There were a couple of women and my mom would clean all the furs, every spring, before the ships came.

That's part of the fur trade industry that a lot of people don't hear about, what the women were doing.

They would clean all the fox furs, hundreds and hundreds of them, and seal skins, and polar bear skins. They would send them out on the supply ship that came every year. We stayed pretty close to Repulse Bay. In 1960, my father wanted to work in the mine here so we moved here. We lived a very isolated life because there was no contact with the outside world. The only radio we had was the one at the Catholic mission. We used to talk to each other all the time over the radio. We didn't talk to anybody outside. When I was a little kid, I first started to learn to read with syllabics. We didn't know anything about the outside world, and nobody owned any land, nobody owned anything. There was practically no theft. That was in the days when you could leave a five dollar bill on the table and come back the next day and it would be there. We had this code that you don't steal other people's things, but everything belonged to everybody. There was no ownership. Your family was yours, your sled was yours, your dogs were yours, but the land belonged to everybody, the water belonged to everybody, the sea ice belonged to everybody. We had no concept of owning land, you know? When we finally decided that we would go for a land claim, I had really nothing to do with it, it was always Tagak Curley. Tagak Curley was the first one that I knew who had anything to do with land claims around here. We had really no concept of government because we were mostly oriented toward family groups. There were huge family groups that were closely knit, and that's the way we were. I'm related to half of Repulse Bay, and I'm related to three-quarters of the people here. We had no tribes, we had no tribal experience at all. We were having a meeting with a man called Ted Carruthers, he's the guy who was commissioned to come up here and develop some kind of a government system for Inuit. We had a meeting with him in Vancouver. I was the only Inuk in the whole group. I was a member of a group called the Science Advisory Board of the Northwest Territories and there are always old scientists from all over, university professors and people like that. We were all sitting there listening to Ted Carruthers talk. He said he had this huge problem that he went traveling all around and Inuit had no concept of government, like they didn't have tribes. A tribal government is a form of government, Inuit didn't even have that. He said he had to try and bring across this idea of government to the people, and he said that everywhere he went he had to hire a different interpreter because they didn't understand the last interpreter's dialect so he had to start all over again. He said that he doesn't know whether he was understood or not. We all sat there and listened to him, and when he was finished there was a silence in the room and nobody was saying anything and they all

clapped because this was his presentation. I said, 'Well if nobody understood what you said and Inuit had no concept of government and you were having trouble understanding them and they were having trouble understanding you because nobody spoke any English, and the few who did had no concept of government, then what did you base your recommendations on when you went back to Ottawa?' There was this long silence, like an embarrassed silence, and he didn't say anything. He didn't answer the question, he had no answer. That's what it was like. What we ended up with, government in Yellowknife, was all Qallunaat, or white people. When we were going through all this business of land claims, I had a really hard time with it. I worked for the Government of Canada for four years and I worked for the territorial government for another 11 years.

What were you doing for them both?

For the Government of Canada, I was working for the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development (DIAND) as a land use inspector. We gave out exploration licenses and went around exploring land exploration camps. We went around meeting with people all over the place to make sure that there was no conflict between the Inuit interests and the exploration interests. It was around the time that the price of uranium was really high. There was a lot of uranium around here so there was a lot of exploration going on around here. One summer we had at least 50 exploration camps in this region. We had two helicopters flying all the time, seven days a week. I would get on a helicopter and be gone for four days flying around and inspecting the camps.

I understand that you were one of the first three Inuit helicopter pilots – after Chretien came up here and looked around and said, "I want Inuk helicopter pilots!"

When Trudeau was elected, he appointed Chretien to be the DIAND minister. They decided they wanted to give Inuit whatever education they want and it was right after I had graduated from high school and spent a year at the University of Saskatchewan. I thought it would be nice to learn how to fly. I was accepted right away!

So you found out about it, and you applied to it?

I don't remember how, but I went! Somebody said what do you want to do? I want to fly! Ok.

Had you known the guys before that you learned with?

I knew one of them, Thomas Suluk. First of all, we went to Camp Gordon, Ontario, and learned how to fix airplanes. We spent a year at the military base. We took airplane technician training. We took airplanes apart and put them all back together again, and taxied them around. We went to Stratford, Ontario, and learned how to fly them and then went to British Columbia and learned how to fly helicopters.

So you were flying planes before you learned how to fly helicopters?

Oh yeah, I got a commercial pilot license before I did.

How old were you then?

Twenty-one! Yeah, 21, it was the most exciting job I ever had. We weren't training to be helicopter pilots all the time. When summer came and it was a very busy season for helicopters, the company that we were training with would hire us on. I was hired one summer to drive a truck all through the B.C. area and the Yukon chasing forest fires. We had this huge, huge helicopter and it had this big bucket that was flown underneath. We had two buckets because it was breaking down all the time, and I had this other bucket in the back of my truck. Whenever we pulled up to a fire, the helicopter would take off with one bucket and I would take off with the other bucket. One day, I drove for almost 40 hours straight with another guy going from Prince George to Mayo, Yukon. When I wasn't driving the truck, I helped out the engineers. We had two engineers at all time and at least three pilots because we were going at least 24 hours a day. I would be co-pilot the rest of the time so it was great, great fun!

When you got to DIAND, did they also have you flying the machine?

No – oh no. Vietnam had ended and this country was flooded with pilots with so much more experience than I had. There was no point in continuing on. That was the end of my helicopter training anyway. When I was working for DIAND, one day we were inspecting some camp. Walking around I found this bar, it was the handle from some old ice logger. We flew back to Rankin Inlet and the next morning I had to fly halfway to Yellowknife with this pilot and he got lost. I had to navigate for him all the time, as soon as we took off from Rankin Inlet – he was lost!

This guy worked for DIAND?

No, he worked for the helicopter company. The next morning when I climbed into the helicopter there was this extra control on the passenger side and I said, 'I got it, go to sleep. I'll wake you up when we get there.' After that, every time we took off he would fall asleep and when we were coming down to land, I'd wake him up. It was great.

So you worked for DIAND doing that, and then you said you worked for the territorial government for 11 years?

I did all kinds of different jobs for the territorial government. I was working for the local government, which is municipal affairs now, supporting all of the municipalities around here, all the hamlets of this region, working with headquarters in Yellowknife. There were all these meetings, needing municipal trucks and all that kind of thing. My job was to make sure they got it, whatever the politicians promised. It was my job to find the money and get it for them.

You like the easy jobs, don't you? When did you first become aware of Inuit coming together and trying to get a greater voice in their own affairs?

When I was working for the territorial government, we always had these problems, because the government was hiring people from down South all the time! I was never a politician, I was always a bureaucrat, but one day all the politicians and all the bureaucrats decided there's 84 per cent Native people in this region, so the government has to be comprised of 84 per cent Inuit. I think the number was 38 per cent or something like that. It was always that problem of the politicians saying something, but the people in the not doing what their politicians said had to be. These people came up from down South and they made lots and lots and lots of money and their friends wanted to come up and make lots and lots and lots of money too, and so they encouraged them to hire them. If you have a pretty high up job in the territorial government, it's not hard to get someone hired. That's how people would wind up here. It has always been like that. I think we are still going through that. It's getting maybe a little better, I don't know. I think we had a great problem with the idea of ownership because we had no concept of owning land. The other thing about the land claims process is that Inuit had no concept of negotiation, and that was a great problem. When you're negotiating for land, you have to have an idea of what you're negotiating for because it's not just land, it's all the mineral wealth and all the other things. For example, the federal government has had a Department of Energy, Mines and Resources. It is their job to take stock of what is in Canada in terms of mineral resources. They had all kinds of maps, they had the geological survey they send around so their negotiators had access to all those maps and information showing where all the mineral wealth is. Inuit negotiators didn't. But it's all public information, but they didn't know that.

There was a learning curve?

But the negotiators didn't go through the learning process. It was like you're a farmer in Alberta and I sit you down and I say, 'Okay, negotiate me a land claim!' It is the same kind of thing! These were all hunters, and they sit down to negotiate a land claim for me. That's how we ended up with 18 per cent of the land and that's how we ended up with $540 million to be doled out over 14 years, and that claim went through. I looked up the finances of the territorial government because the territory was being divided into two territories and so was the money. $540 million was half what the territorial government spent on operations that year, to operate the Government of Northwest territories (GNWT) for one year cost $1.2 billion. We negotiated our way to half that to be doled out to us over 14 years. They added in all the interest that would accrue over 14 years. I think in the end, it has come out for the better all the same, but I think we are going to have a hard time. Everything settles out you know, but I think we are going to discover that we went to give away a little too much.

Your family was very involved in it all.

I don't think they were really active in the negotiations though.

How did you go from being a bureaucrat to being a storyteller?

I just have this position in the government where they pay me lots and lots of money and I would go to all their parties and they were really, really boring because they would talk about these government things that I had no interest in at all. I drank a lot, and didn't really enjoy it very much. But I like to read. I read all the time, and I used to listen to these stories when I was a little kid. I absolutely loved traditional legends and I had an uncle who was probably the best storyteller I ever heard. He used to make the stories come to life. You were right there. He sounded like he had only one lung. That's what made him so good in a way because he had this raspy voice, and the way he told the stories. I was watching a movie one day, Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid, and the two of them were up in the hills and all these rocks and the possy was following them, and Paul Newman turned to the other guy and said, 'How'd they do that? I can't do that, can you do that? That is exactly what my uncle used to say, and he would make the stories come to life because he would say, 'Can you do that? I can't do that!' One day I was up in Repulse Bay and I took a bunch of kids to my uncle's house and sat them down. They had followed me there, and there was nobody home! When we got into the house, there was nobody around and it was a big house and we were in the living room. I didn't know what to do with all these kids, so I told them all to sit down and I would tell them a story. One of the kids actually fell asleep. I thought, I'm pretty good at this. You know it is so much more fun telling stories and now I get to meet some of the most interesting people in the world and they're all artists! Singers and songwriters and storytellers and artists, they are all the most wonderful people and they never talk about politics.