Interview with Rhoda Karetak, Charlotte St. John, Interpreter
May 5, 2004, Arviat

Interview took place at Rhoda's house with her daughter Charlotte participating and interpreting. Interview begins with showing Charlotte and Rhoda the charts I have put together of people who were at Churchill Vocational Centre (CVC), as well as who was working in what organizations when, the history of the Inuit movement I have been able to trace.

So all of that I am trying to put into the story, who was in the co-op movement, who was in the church, who was in the Indian-Eskimo Association, and then when Inuit Tapirisat of Canada (ITC) was formed and the other organizations, I try to follow them year by year until the Tungavik Federation of Nunavut (TFN) was formed, and then I follow them.

C: Wow. This is great.

I am doing it for three reasons. One is my dissertation, but another is so we can have a book that will include all of these voices, so that people can know their history, so Nunavummiut, and other Indigenous Peoples can benefit from the experience of Inuit. And then finally, because NTI just passed a resolution this year stating that they wanted an oral history of the negotiations, since I have already been doing this for three and a half years, I am working with them now, too.

C: Can I explain some of this to my Mother? Your birthplace?

H: Alabama. My people are the Tsalagi people (Cherokee) and I am a storyteller. [To Rhoda] I have wanted to meet you for years.

C [For Rhoda]: She said that it is good to be heard. She just heard on the radio a person talking about when they were coming to the change from tradition to government controlled society, and it was interesting to her because the same thing happened here. She said it was like watching a movie, the progress.

Growing up in Alabama at the tail end of the Civil Rights Movement, my parents marched with Martin Luther King Jr. My father was a rocket scientist, who helped build the Saturn V that took us to the moon, and my mother was an artist and we lived on a mountain. On one side of me I had the city, the space age, and on the other side I had the mountain and traditional ways so I kind of understand.

C [For Rhoda]: She understands a lot of English.

I don't know if you know Lucien Ukalianuk from Baffin? He's supposed to be unilingual, and I have talked to him many times through an interpreter, but when she would go away, he and I would continue to talk to each other quietly in English. The reason I wanted to talk to the two of you is because you went through the whole Churchill

experience and you went to school with everyone who later got involved and became leaders, and Rhoda, I think the story that has been ignored the most is the story of the women. This year I have been lucky enough to spend time with people like Meeka Kilabuk, Mary Cousins, Leah Idlout, Betty Brewster and others, hearing the stories of the people who were translators and interpreters and the people who supported the whole process so I wanted to talk to you to get your stories of what you thought of it all, and what you supported and how you advised and what you did.

C [For Rhoda]: Yeah, she went to a lot of meetings during that time because she would be chair of a lot of organizations so she would be going to a lot of meetings.

What organizations were you a part of at that time?

C [For Rhoda]: At that time, she was chair of the Inuit Cultural Institute (ICI) Board. It was in that capacity that she got into all of the other ones.

How did you first become involved? When did you first become aware that Inuit were coming together to get a greater voice in government?

C [For Rhoda]: 1952? 1958-59. She said she moved here before there were any such organizations and I think it was 1952 or so. The first committee she was in, she was appointed when they first appointed the hamlet council. Late 1950s, early 1960s, once they constructed all the houses for people, and then built schools, they started needing councils for people.

At first advisory, having no power, and later gaining authority?

C [For Rhoda]: They were an advisory council and were gradually given more power to control the funds and projects.

Then what happened?

C [For Rhoda]: One of the big accomplishments was a big community center. When they got it, it was such a big satisfaction to know it was their efforts that made it possible.

When did this happen?

C: 1965?

It was proof that you could make things happen?

C: By being on that committee.

C [For Rhoda]: When the hamlet councils were given more work, they were sent to Fort Smith for a 10-day workshop, how to be a counselor, not that it really helped. Inuit always assumed the land was theirs and didn't think someone else owned it. That was

strange knowledge that they had come to, land that someone else said they owned, that they had assumed was theirs all along. She says even if they accepted this situation, imagine trying to tell other people that this was so. The concept was not there!

Interesting that you say that because all the younger guys I have talked to, people like Tagak Curley, Paul Quassa, John Amagoalik, have all said one of the most difficult things they had to do was to go to communities and talk to Elders to explain this concept.

C: That the land was not theirs? Land claims, funny thing! She says they felt very compassionate for the people.

When did you first become aware of what Tagak Curley, Mary Cousins and Noah Quoamak were doing because it started in 1970, a little earlier?

C [For Rhoda]: Probably right from the get-go because Tagak is her brother, and he would come and talk to her and throw things back and forth. Her awareness was always there.

What did you think of that? Did you give him ideas?

C [For Rhoda]: She supported it from the start and it was hard to convince other people to support it because they didn't understand. But it was the hardest thing to understand that you were down here and the government was up here and you were hitting a wall here. At the beginning, they didn't understand what they were up against. Tagak, having access to other Aboriginal people, what they went through with their land claim and coming back with information, that really, really helped put us on an even keel.

It helped to explain because he had learned from others?

C: Yes, because we weren't dealing with something that was never done before.

Is that when he went to Alaska?

C: She went up there, too.

What was that like?

C [For Rhoda]: They had people from Greenland who had gone through the Home Rule thing so when people understood more, they would get more strength. The people who didn't understand would put up a lot of resistance.

How was that overcome?

C [For Rhoda]: Tagak would go literally from house to house, over and over, visiting the Elders, and Tagak would explain, and would get their support. Once you got the support of Elders, it got easier to convince the rest of the people and give them hope.

I heard stories from people that used to work with him during the days when he was an adult educator, and they would tell me that as soon as they touched down in the community the Qallunaat said he would disappear. There would be an evening meeting scheduled and Tagak would show up for that, but the Qallunaat wouldn't know where he was during the day. It turned out that was when he was visiting the Elders.

C [For Rhoda]: Not to just give information, but to get information from the Elders.

The Dene said the same thing. James Wah-Shee and Stephen Kakfwi said Tagak respected the Dene Elders and earned their respect, too, and would visit them when he was in Yellowknife.

C [For Rhoda]: Even when he would go to Labrador, he would visit the Elders, even that time their plane flipped over. They weren't on it. I think a big wind storm took the plane.

There're a number of stories like that, the 1975 meeting in Pond Inlet. Joanasie Salomonie, John Amagoalik, Peter Cummings, Meeka Kilabuk were all on the plane. There was only one copy of the land claim, and when the plane crashed, there are three things that everyone remembers. Somehow Joanasie Salomonie got outside first so everyone remembers him walking outside the plane, as if by magic. They remember Peter scrambling after the pieces of the only copy of the land claim, and they also remember that the only thing they had to eat were a package of Smarties that Meeka had in her purse.

C [For Rhoda]: When Inuit first started coming into settlements, they were majorly intimidated by the RCMP and the Qallunaat so the self-esteem of the ordinary Inuit was very low. They were very scared of the Qallunaat, and the moral of the Inuk was not very good. Once you were finally proud of who you were, once you became proud of whom you were and could stand on your own two feet, there was strength in that. Tagak doing the Elder thing, was to resurrect these people who had become nothing and brought them back to the light, reminding them of who they were and what strength they had. One person by respecting the other got the respect back and became strong with the other one.

And you were growing up through this time? You both come from leadership families.

C [For Rhoda]: She said there was one big hurdle to cross before she could be of any help to anyone, and that was to deal with her anger because of the downfall of Inuit and her anger to Qallunaat because of what they did to people. It prevented her from being a help so until she dealt with that she couldn't help anybody. She had to talk to people who knew how to deal with her anger and her frustration, and deal with her own feelings before she could help somebody else. She said the help she got with the healing was from the Indian people because they were the first that dealt with it, and knew how to help other people to deal with it and to start going again, to be strong again.

The Dene?

C [For Rhoda] They came and talked and taught healing.

Are there any persons that you remember in particular?

C [For Rhoda]: There was a guy from here and a lady from Inuvik.

When was this?

C: Early 1980s? 1970s? We're not good with dates. Early 1980s I think.

Were you a part of or did you get any ideas or did you know what was going on with the 1975 Women's Conference in Pangnirtung?

C: What year?

1975.

C: 1975? I went to that.

You were there?

C: Yeah. I went, and my aunt from Rankin.

So what was it like?

C: It was just a very basic beginning of trying to be part of something, it was a totally new concept. At the time, women's liberation had a bad connotation. That was linked with that, and you had to separate it.

Pauktuutit was in 1984. It sounds to me like you were talking about doing what Rhoda had already been doing for years.

C: Yeah.

C [For Rhoda]: There was a conference in Alberta where all the artists from different regions were brought to express something they could not express with words, but could with art, wall paintings, marble, or clay. She was a speaker at that workshop and it really helped her. At that place, an Aboriginal person, she couldn't remember from where, South America or Australia or something, their land had been taken, but they didn't want to be annihilated, taken over. They would talk to themselves or tell each other, 'We exist so let's prove it by continuing our traditional way of sewing. We control it so we will show this to show that we are united,' and so, she took that home here to start producing the traditional clothing.

Wow. Did you also bring back the knowledge of the parts of the animals and the spirits they represented? One of the things Leah Idlout taught me was some of the meanings behind the clothes.

C [For Rhoda]: They wanted to keep their tradition to show who they were although sometimes their work was taken over and mass-produced. She finds it strong and good when she sees people who hang on to their way of life and their heritage.

The interesting thing about the Maya, and it is also true of the Saami, and also my people, you can tell by the pattern of the clothes and what they wear, where they are from.

C: Not just by their accent, but you could tell by their clothing, even in our circumpolar world you could tell.

C [For Rhoda]: There was an incident where they built an igloo and if you didn't have traditional clothes on, you weren't allowed to go in! It was a very prideful, very happy thing to do. Even the old people weren't allowed in if they didn't have their traditional clothes on.

I think it speaks a lot of women because in this, women are the preservers of identity.

C [For Rhoda]: She has to go to a lot of meetings for healing purposes and she did this drawing a couple of years ago and it symbolizes if you treat a woman well, she can produce a lot, at her highest capacity to be a mother, to be a mentor, to be everything if you don't hurt her.

C: I call myself an Inuk, but I like having blonde streaks in my hair. But then we also came from mixed, and you have blue eyes, so you're a blue eyed Indian.

Yep! That's one of the things I try to teach in Native American studies, what does an Indian look like? That is one of the things I most admire about Simon Awa, the way he looks at the world. He says, 'If you look at a picture of my father, people might think that he is more Inuk than me. If you look my children, you might think that I am more Inuk than they are. But I am as Inuk as I can possibly be. And my children are as Inuk as they can possibly be, and what it means to be Inuk will be different from generation to generation.' That is what I try to teach, too, because you don't find people from France or from Germany living the way they did 500 years ago either.

C [For Rhoda]: She has probably explained the difference between traditional Inuk and Inuk today, it has to do with what you eat. Plus, we have whalers, we have Hudson Bay people, we have RCMP, my grandfather was probably from Connecticut, whalers from back then, and you mix that with Irish people.

I remember when I hosted Mary Cousins and Leah Idlout for dinner, and they had not seen each other for awhile and they were talking and talking. They tried to figure out how they were related and they found out it was from Captain Bernier.

C [For Rhoda]: Let's get back to where we were. She knew all about Martin Luther King and what he was doing, and when he got shot, she could feel all that.

I think that is why the whole Inuit movement touches me, so to go from this whole RCMP dominated world to Nunavut, that I think is what it was all about.

C [For Rhoda]: My father worked with the RCMP all his life so she was glad that none of her kids wanted to become one. When she was in Iqaluit in 1999, April 1, when we became Nunavut, the RCMP is now a servant to the people, the Inuit. That was so good!

ICI was created almost immediately after ITC was created. What kind of things did you do then, how long were you there?

C [For Rhoda]: The objective of ICI at the time was to collect all the information of the Inuit heritage, the stories, ways of life, the tradition, the skills, the language, preservation of the whole culture, and then to teach it. Because Inuit history was never written down, it was oral. She was born in an igloo, she traveled by dog team, her friends were dogs! She is a dog person.

Lucien, when he first got involved, the Elders told him 'You've got to be a dog. A dog when he pulls a qamutik across a crevasse, he's got to keep pulling as long as his master tells him to, no matter what the consequences, so you are a dog for your people.'

C [For Rhoda]: The dogs kept the people alive because they always knew the route. It could be storming and you can't see, but the dogs will always take you home. In a traditional sense, the traditional dogs were never tied, they were always loose and completely controlled by the lead dog. That lead dog was beautiful and he knew he was dominant. The lead dogs patrolled the other dogs and kept them from wandering off or beating up on smaller dogs. She remembers her grandfather forbidding someone from killing a dog who had gotten too old. They didn't want them killing him. That dog was the dog that had saved him from the bear.

It took a long time from the founding of ITC to the signing of the agreement. What were the most difficult times for you during that whole process?

C [For Rhoda]: She thought the government didn't think Inuit were capable of looking after themselves. And there was also some resistance in Inuit, what little right we have they want to take it away, are we going to starve and go back to a nomadic way of life. Those were some of the things that were difficult to overcome.

What about Churchill? Where were you before that?

C: I was in grade school here, but it only went up to Grade 5 or 6. I didn't start school until I was nine because we didn't have a school. I was not a Catholic so I didn't go to Chesterfield. I wished I could go in those days. I could remember kids coming back from Chesterfield, they had new rubber boots and new clothes and they had new duffle bags filled with all the things they had done all year! It wasn't to be. I went to a little summer camp that was run by the Lions missionary just for a couple of weeks or a month. I was about five or six years old. I didn't go back to school. I learned to write in Inuktitut from my older brother. I think I was about 14 or 15 when I got to go to school in Churchill. I am thankful to my parents for letting me go. I was the oldest of the kids. My mother had ten so I was lucky to get away. Our parents really believed in education because that was our future.

What was that like? It was the first time that you left?

C: It was the first time I left. I think I had gone to the hospital before. I had the mumps and that was not fun! That was the only time I had been out of town. It was very hard the first three months, trying to adjust. I missed my family. I went into depression. I didn't know how to deal living in a residence and getting up and having a meal.

Did anyone help you get through, anybody guide you?

C: No, there were a lot of kids going through the same thing. Charlie Watt was one of the counselors at the school, so he talked to me because I was depressed. I couldn't learn because I was depressed so he talked to me. After that, school was fun! Guys, boys! And it was fun, the Beatles!

And the Harpoons! Don't forget the Tagoona boys! And the Kusugaks.

C: And the Harpoons – all the great heartthrobs.

And then you wound up on student council?

C: Uh-huh.

How did that happen?

C: I guess as the years go on, you got used to being in school. You knew what to do and then you were a monitor. We were seniors after a while, and you would help people with problems, not so much psychological things, but with sports. They would assign monitors.

I know you were there with John Amagoalik and others. Who else do you remember?

C: Meeka Pudlat, Veronica Dewar, Meeka Kilabuk, Larry Audlaluk from Grise Fiord, a lot of kids from Grise Fiord.

What were they like back then?

C: They were just a bunch of kids put together!

Meeka Kilabuk was one of the first women to really talk to me and tell me about her experience. What was she like back then?

C: Well, all of us were all a bunch of naive kids coming from small communities and we sort of learned about each other and found out that we were related to each other. We were a bunch of kids and hoping that we'd learn something.

People have told me that was where people learned political awareness, but it wasn't intentionally taught. Does that make sense to you?

C: Yes. It wasn't intentionally taught, although to give us incentive to learn and to do our schoolwork, it was regimented. We had study hours. For free time we didn't have much more than two hours a day. But it was alright, we didn't know any better. At home it was stricter than that.

Were you aware back then of people working to gain a greater voice? Or when was the first time you became aware?

C: It wasn't really until after school. After Churchill we were sent to a lot of other places, like Ottawa and Winnipeg and Yellowknife. I think that was more preparation, getting us used to the civilization and learning how to live with it. A lot of times it was too hard on the kids and they had to go home. It was living and it was learning.

What had your parents done to prepare you for a lot of that?

C: Responsibility was a tradition learned in the family culture and I was the oldest one of the kids. Before we left for Churchill, the tuberculosis thing happened and a lot of people were shipped out and a lot of people ended up without parents, or with single parents so for me, responsibility started early.

Taking care of siblings?

C: And trying to survive in the city, you had to be strong.

Rhoda, how did you manage to be involved in all these organizations, and be involved in all of this and still have time to raise kids, especially kids who have become such amazing people?

C [For Rhoda]: The responsibility of the young children is easily resolved by the older kids, and my father, because he had a job he wasn't out hunting all the time so he had the responsibility of the people, and it was easier for her to get away. She had the trust of her

husband who believed in her, that she was capable of things on her own, that belief of her husband in her ability gave her tremendous strength.

That's exactly what Helen Maksagak said about her husband.

C [for Rhoda]: You can't function if you don't trust each other. In fact, it destroys. Also, sending the kids to school all day helped a lot. There was not problem in finding a babysitter. There weren't a lot of jobs around.

The most difficult part of this journey is all the people who have been lost since this began. Every year my list grows and grows of people who are gone who were a part of this. Is there anyone who should be remembered that isn't often remembered?

C [For Rhoda]: There was a lady named Atuat. She was very intelligent. She didn't particularly go anywhere, but she was a very intelligent women. She was her mentor and she was an old, old lady. Her name was Joan Atuat.

What did you learn most from her?

C: [for Rhoda]: It was wisdom on family raising, how to co-exist with other people. And she taught her how to do traditional beadwork. There're a lot of people in her life that have been greatly influential, but she always thinks of this particular woman. She said there was this story that Atuat told about a woman who lost a husband who already had children. Traditionally, they had to remarry. That means taking her away from her usual environment, taking her away from where she usually lives, taking her away from the environment she knows and her families. She compared it to a team of good dogs and you take one of them away to another settlement, it will never be happy.

What other things were women doing at the time, some were working in organizations and some were working as translators, but what other things should I be telling when I am telling the stories of the women?

C [for Rhoda]: In the traditional sense, women's words were not heard unless you were obnoxious, but back then, women's voices were not heard. Now, you can hear them. They are getting stronger. They overdid it for a while, but they are now equalizing. Inuit women are finding more confidence in themselves so that they can stand up now and be somebody, whereas before they had no voice. Put it this way, if you look at the community, who are the men? Men are sitting at home, babysitting, taking babies to the nursing station and feeding and carrying babies around. That is not a traditional role for men. To her way of thinking, that is not a good picture of a man because we are not raising them to be men anymore. We are not training them to be men. She feels that with Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit progressing, she can see the men getting stronger and finding their own place. Women had no voice, men were strong. But women are stronger right now than they were before.

Didn't women always play an important role in advising leaders?

C [for Rhoda]: Traditionally, you would hear a woman's voice if it was a leader's wife, a grandmother who had a lot of influence over her husband and everybody else in the family.

I'd like to hear what you think about this. Everybody says that there are fathers of Nunavut, but in talking to women, there were some women who told Tagak what to do so there are actually mothers of Nunavut, but they do not want to be known. What do you think?

C [for Rhoda]: She really agrees with that, that there is this mother because they were the teachers of the boys. The father was away hunting and it was women's role to teach the children the ways of life, their whole life system, the creation of skills, how to live with other people, how to treat other people, it was all taught. It stopped because we didn't have control over the education of children, and therefore you are not being raised by your Mom and society so much. Even with all her children, she tried to stay the mother and to have control over them, to give them good times as well as teaching times and responsibility. Some days it was a lot of fun. Today she can confirm that her ties with her children have never been broken. And they still have family gatherings where they have to discipline everything or nothing. If somebody needs to be reprimanded, they do it in front of everybody so you'd better be well behaved.

If you had to give advice to other people trying to do the same things as the Inuit, preserving culture, tradition and all, what advice would you give them?

C [for Rhoda]: I would not want them to look at just the hard parts, and not to be angry because it doesn't move you forward. Even if these situations are the case, there is a way to be happy and coexist with them and to be happy with them. Back then we had no voice, and now we have voice.

I was talking about how leadership families is how it all began and how that knowledge was kept alive, and a lot of young leaders in the negotiations used traditional leadership although they didn't know it. What do you think of the idea that there are two different kinds of leadership families? I was talking with James Wah-Shee and his family comes from a shamanic leadership tradition and Tagak does, too. Both times they had the vision to make it happen, but neither of them are interested in the details after the vision is begun. Then, you need a different kind of leader. What do you think? This could be completely wrong, but Angakok, the ones with vision, it takes someone with vision to get things started and then it takes someone to keep things going, to do the tedious stuff. Does that make sense because I am looking at the children and I am asking what they learned from their families that they used in negotiations.

C [for Rhoda]: She can't specifically answer, but in recognition of the visionary inheritance, you can tell even when they are children that they are meant to be these leaders. She also believes that because of the type of life that she led, her children are her blessing. Because she believes in how her grandparents lived, the blessing of how they

lived continues to move in our generation. They had their own nuna, ran it well, did the right things, I guess. No wars.

I just met Joe today, and while I was talking to him I started to draw and this was the picture I drew, and he was talking about how he went down the wrong path, and it is his culture that saved him. I believe in one's culture, one's ancestors coming up and enveloping you in a great big hug, whether you want it or not. That is the vision I had of Joe, walking on thin ice, about to fall into a crevasse, and his culture, his people, hugging him and keeping him safe.

C: Wow! He needed it!

Rhoda [in English]: Wow! I like!

It just hit me today because he talked for two and a half hours about culture and tradition.

C [for Rhoda]: She says she was raised in a Christian home. If you sit very still for a very long time, you can see a lot of things. You can see the continuation of your spirit from your fore-generations, what they were trying to accomplish. She could see what you are trying to accomplish, that it continues to work because it seems to me Aboriginal people get along with spirits, depend on them a lot at times.

I think other people do, too, but they just don't admit it as much. On my Qallunaat side, I am supposed to be a direct descendent of Sir Christopher Wren, the guy who rebuilt London after the great fire in 1666. Sometimes I imagine him, and I draw on him for strength because if he can rebuild an entire city, I can finish my degree.

C [for Rhoda]: She said even at times, your dreams can help you or a new vision is given to you in your conscious. She thinks our Creator gives us a helping hand.