



# **GABRIEL DUMONT INSTITUTE**

of Native Studies and Applied Research

**Interview of Elder Julie Pitzel**

**Conducted by Amy Briley**

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**1. Could you please tell me your name and your home community?**

My home community is Buffalo Narrows, and I live in Prince Albert, and I was a Cummings before.

**2. Where were you born? Where did you grow up?**

Well, I was born probably in Buffalo Narrows, and at that time, they used to baptize children in Île-à-la-Crosse. So, on most of the baptismal certificates, it will say Île-à-la-Crosse as the place of birth. I was raised in Buffalo Narrows

**3. Where have you lived most of your life?**

I left when I was about 19 years old, I think. I was married and that's how I roamed around for a while because my husband was a carpenter.

**4. Who were/are your parents and grandparents? Where were they from?**

My parents were Adelaide and Charlie Cummings, and my grandfather, on my dad's side, we used to call him Mr. Ross. My grandma on my dad's side was Madeleine. My grandmother was raised in a convent since she was four years old till she was 18. When she was 18, she married my grandpa, Mr. Ross. My grandpa and her met, and I imagine it was somewhere in Île-à-la-Crosse because that's where the convent was, and she knew of Sister Sara who was Louis Riel's sister. She used to tell us that he was our uncle, so they must have had some kind of relationship. On my dad's my mom side were McKays, and Henry McKay, my great-grandfather, was the Hudson's Bay manager at La Loche. He then married my great-grandmother. He was Celestin McKay's dad. And my grandma Lucia, from my mom's side, was originally an Aubichon—those Aubichons who came from Green Lake, and they originally came from Willowfield. On my dad's side, there is some Dene, and on my mom's side, there were Cree people. All of our people in Buffalo Narrows spoke French, Cree, and Dene, and we spoke the

Michif language really well, but now I've really learned how to speak the Cree language I use it quite often and I've taught it to. I'm using Cree more, but I still remember some of the words from the Michif language. In our family, it was whenever we were stuck for a word that we used another language. So we were never short of expressing ourselves. My grandfather, on my dad's side, when my mom married my dad, she came into a Dene family. We went trapping and hunting, and were fishermen, and we helped with food gathering and different things like that. In the family group, we worked together so that's who my people are. My grandmother was from Patuanak, on my dad's side and she was a daughter of the last hereditary chief there. She ended up in the convent all those years. We just recently found that out. On the McKay side, we can trace right back to Orkney Islands. We haven't contacted family there or anything like that to see if we had relatives. It would be interesting. However, my grandfather would always tell me when I was leaving the door after a visit, he would say to me in Dene or Cree whatever language he was going to use that day, "Do not forget who you are." (Speaks Cree language ...) I really do the traditional roots more than I do the other language groups that I belong to.

**5. How did you spend your life as an adult regarding work, family, or in any other ways you'd like to share?**

I would teach about who you are. When you are a teenager, you wonder who you are. Every teenager goes through that. "Who I am" was not taught in schools. What I had to learn was about where I came from, which people were my people, and that's how I get a sense of who I am. It's important when you are growing up. You don't belong to the status people, and you don't belong to the white people. You are a Métis person. But what does it mean to be Métis? I think that we are realizing more who we are, and that's important because it has something to do with a child's self-esteem. It's very important to know your history, your language, your people, and where they came from as well as stories about your people and your family. We belong to both First Nations and white people; Irish people, French people whatever nationality. We blended two cultures to be who we are, and it's like someone told their child when they were leaving, you know you were going out and you pick the good from every nation of people and you use that. That's what that is like when I tell stories to my children about who we are, and where we came from, and the things we did. They treasure those things because those are the stories of who I am. Regardless of what nationality you are, you still have to know who you are, and it's important to know where you came from, and where your people lived.

Where was the trail that they came on to live where you live now? I grew up with my extended family. We had a big family group on my grandpa's side. On my dad's side,

my grandma Jeannie had my grandfather Cummings from Napoleon Girard who was from around the Prince Albert area. He was a Pony Express mail delivery person, and Jeannie and Napoleon had my grandfather. My grandfather was raised by his grandma who had a traditional name, but when she became Christianized, she took the name Nancy. My grandma Jeannie married Tommy Bekkattla and so she had children there as well, there that are Bekkattlas. They are half-brothers and sisters to my grandpa. Tommy Bekkattla died and she married a Le Maigre from La Loche. So my grandfather had half-brothers and sisters from the Montgrand family and the Le Maigre family. So, when you look at the big extended family, we also have a big family on the other side, the Aubichons, the McKays and on that side we also have McCallums. There was a time when some people took the name McCallum and some took the name McKay. I am still learning about whom I am, even as old as I am, I am still looking to see who we are because I want to leave that history with my children. It's so sad that that some young people don't know the history of where they come from because when they go to school in Grade 4 and do the family unit it's called "The Family," and one of the teachings that we had was that we had a lot of grandpas and grandmas, and we had a lot of uncles and aunts. So when I came home one day, and I told my grandpa what I found out in school, that my Grandma Carlene is not my grandma, and I said, "Why is that?" My grandpa looked at and said, "That's their ways and our ways are different. So, you don't have to worry about that because Grandma Carlene is still your grandma and all of your aunties and uncles are still your aunties and uncles." So, the relationship within the system that we lived in was the way it existed, and when you look at the whole thing, there are a lot of relationships like when I look at the Girard family tree it's big. It goes a long way. It's the same with the McKays side. It goes to the Orkney Islands, but where your people travelled, and their way of life, they helped with the history of our people. As Métis people there are very important things that we did. I guess, because of my grandfather's teachings, I relate more to being Dene and Cree. Somebody asked me that, and that's what I would say. I belong to the Dene and the Cree people. I am a Métis, and by the way, I have a little bit of French. I worked in different areas. I raised my family; we have four children, two girls and two boys, and now I have 10 grandchildren and six great-grandchildren, and I feel really fortunate to have lived that long. I worked in different areas. I've worked in family counselling. I've worked with teenagers for seven years as a guidance counsellor. I worked in what they call an employment area I forgot what year it was, but we took over the outreach programs, and I was the first director for the La Ronge out-reach program for unemployment. I learned a lot, and I also worked with the concept of a cultural college that came to exist. I worked there as well in education. Education has become very important to me, and books are also important

to me. When my children grew up, my last child was in Grade 12, I went back to university. I went to university, and I went to the SUNTEP program, so I am a SUNTEP grad. I have worked in various places and did a lot of different things, mostly in the areas of helping with young people and families. I volunteered for friendship centres for over 30 years. I belong to the Métis Locals in Prince Albert. At that time, I helped to develop different things that were around there. I built the first shelter for women in Prince Albert, and I don't talk too much about all the other things, because sometimes it sounds like I am bragging. I do not want to do that. I think it's important for us to continue working on the concept of the Gabriel Dumont Institute to continue to support institutions because education is part of fighting poverty, fighting homelessness and fighting domestic violence. That's really important to continue to support those things and also educating people. Right now, I am teaching some young people who are going to be childcare workers. We talk about First Nations people. That's the teachings that I do, and also the Métis people, that's my part in that program. They are amazed what we talk about, and especially this Idle No More movement. Why because a lot of people don't teach that in school. Sometimes, I'll use the books and the stories from here. I use some for insight, such as, "What is being Métis mean?" There has to be a lot of education done, and we still have to continue doing that. The other part of my employment, I worked in the area of domestic violence for 15 years and had the opportunity to work with ah police services. Sometimes, I would sit there and wander, "What am I doing here?" But I realized that they needed me. That's the education part that they needed. We all have to live in this world, and we have to appreciate each other, regardless of whatever you're First Nations or you're Métis or any other person. One of the teachings that is very important in the family is the teaching of respect. We all have that teaching, and we need to have it because our societies have changed so much. At this point, our children are in crisis because some families can't parent. They don't know how, and society changes where each person decides what they're going to teach in their family. We need to help each other to be better parents. I don't know what else I could say.

**6. What do you enjoy about being Métis and what is the most challenging?**

Being Métis means being strong and being able to survive in any kind of situation. Being Métis means that you have a great sense of humour, and that you can make a commitment to whatever you're doing for your family. We're also survivors. When you look at us, we're survivors. It's not only from the different nations that came here that we survived. We were able to adjust and build our home environment to the best way we knew at the time. There are a lot of other things that relate to art, music, and good storytelling, and a lot of other different things.

**7. What is the most important thing that you want others to know about the Métis?**

Well, I want them to know that we have a language. We have our own way of having art. Some of the greatest artists were our women, especially for the work that they did with leather. They were able to adjust. I remember my grandma being able to make fishnets and being able to fix fishnets for my grandpa. Like when they'd go fishing and they would tear, she would then fix them. I remember in the wintertime, she mostly did this in the wintertime because they did a lot of fishing in the summer, kohkum would be making nets for my grandpa. I am still amazed at how little you take to the trap line because all the food that you eat is from the land. The relationship we had with other people, especially the relationship to the land, was important. My grandpa had a trap line, and the people respected him. They would ask before they came, and would do any food gathering in there because my grandfather knew how many beavers, they had and how many muskrats they had. In the family, they had different areas that we would go trapping in, and when we wanted to fish. We would take the family and would go and fish. I want people to know that we were a distinct group of people, and that we have a lot to be proud of. At one time, when the status people wouldn't except us and the *môniyâwîwak* people wouldn't except us, there was a sense of not knowing who we were. Also, not admitting who you were, and we hid the fact we were Métis, especially after the resistance. You didn't want to know who Louis Riel was. You didn't want to know if your great-grandfather fought in the resistance. It all has to do with land regardless of what nation of people you are; you can be from Africa, and they still have a relationship to their land. Other people should know that we have a right to our land and that we have a right to fish and hunt. As well, I want the world to know that because now communication is a lot better with other countries and I think other countries are going through the same, their culture was not recognized, and their values and their traditions were not recognized. That's my role in this country to help educate other people. I am not ashamed of whom I am and I don't want my children to be ashamed either.

**8. If you were advising yourself as a Métis youth, knowing what you know now, what would you tell yourself in a sentence or two?**

Find out more about yourself, and once you find out more about yourself and your people, then you have a sense of who you are. We have a colourful history. We knew what was going to be happening to our land and to our world. We knew what was going to happen to our world, and we had a worldview as to what was going to happen.

In order to understand yourself as a Métis, you have to find out how you are Métis. Which lands do you live on? What happened to those lands? What's the system like? Educate yourself. What are the justice system and the welfare system? What are they like? What's going on? Educate yourself. Once this is done, then you will have a sense of yourself because nobody can take that away from you. When you have a sense of yourself and you are going to be less mixed up. I talk to young people and ask them who is their family, and they will tell me, "Yeah, this where they used to trap. This is where they came from." I say, "Did you know your people were from there? They said, "Yeah." There are things that we need to know that are not in the education system. When a child goes into that system, they feel that their culture is of no value, and that they have nothing to teach. That's not true because when we learn about our culture and our traditions, I really believe we will be one human race. We then have to respect each other. We still face discrimination. One of my granddaughters is blond and blue-eyed and my daughter was too. She faces reverse discrimination from our own people, and they tell her, "You're not even Indian!" She says, "I am Métis," and she can recite where she comes from, and then she says back, "Why don't you tell me where you come from? I can tell you where I come from?" That is for them to defend themselves. Just because you're Métis or whatever nationality, doesn't mean you don't belong. My grandfather was loved by everybody and had a very good sense of humour. Both the status people—some of our family members are status—the Métis people, and the white people respected him. That's why they called him, "Mr. Ross." It was something out of respect, and he was proud of who he was because he was a good trapper and hunter. Get your education. Find out about your family and where you come from. Learn as much as you can about your people. You should be proud of who you are. Look at our role models and see where they came from. There are musicians in our families who are well known all over. There are artists in our families. We are not an inferior people. I don't know how this worldview came about, but I used to feel it. When I told my grandfather about what the teacher told me about our family relationships, I was really traumatized to learn that my extended family was not related to me according to the teacher's concept of the nuclear family. It erased all the relatives that we had. All my heavens.