

Athabasca Area Seniors' Memory Project

Mavis Jacobs – Interview Transcript

Narrator: Mavis Jacobs
Interviewer: Irene Fitzsimmons
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Select "Eric & Ethel Brown Family" > Select "Mavis Angeline Jacobs" > Scroll down to "Audio interview" > Play ►

[START OF INTERVIEW]

Irene: *This is Irene Fitzsimmons again, and I'm with Mavis Jacobs, the 5th sibling of the Brown family for the individual sessions. So, Mavis, we're just going to start from wherever you would like to pick up and continue, and move forward with your individual story for us.*

Mavis: Okay. Well, I'm Mavis Jacobs and I was Mavis Brown until 1974. But we'll back up 20 years. In 1954, Santa brought a real live baby to our family for a Christmas gift, as I was born on Christmas Eve. The night before that, my mother attended the Meanook Christmas concert.

Throughout my preschool and elementary years, Santa always arrived at the Christmas concerts. I began to wonder why, even though I had been a Christmas gift, why his shape, size and voice changed from year to year. Right through to the end of high school, though, he redeemed himself, as his notes with our Santa gifts always had the same handwriting, and the cookies and milk were always gone in the morning.

Thinking about my preschool years, four things that I vividly remember were: getting dressed in the winter in front of the wood stove, which was in the kitchen/dining area, or the oil heater in the living room; taking the hot coals out from the stove, and once some fell down one of my boots, that hurt; getting snow to melt for laundry; and, playing crib with Dad while he ate his breakfast before driving the bus.

Even before going to school, I liked counting and number patterns. That has continued through my life, and I love playing scales on the piano and became a Chartered Accountant. Career-wise, I worked in Edmonton, Athabasca and Montreal, spending twelve years in public accounting, especially working in tax, ten years as an accounting professor and ten years in university administration.

While Athabasca is and always will be home, my family spent six years in Montreal. Living there was a holiday and culturally eye-opening, as we enjoyed many festivals, parades, special events, French Canadians, Jewish friends and work associates. In Montreal, the 1995 Quebec referendum was a nail-biter, and fortunately Quebec stayed

in Canada. The 1997 Quebec ice storm was a different kind of nail-biter – from shivering – as we had no power for three days. Following the ice storm, we decided to move back west. I'll tell you about my family in a bit. Thinking of the ice storm, in Alberta, my family members, especially siblings and their partners, have generators and wood-burning stoves should we ever again freeze in the dark. I also realized I would never be proficient in French to practice at the level that I expected of myself as an accountant and tax specialist. So, in 1999, we returned to Athabasca, and I returned to work for Athabasca University until I retired ten years later.

Going right back to when I first started university, I had married Leo Jacobs, who is First Nation and was raised in Calling Lake. We had met in grade 9. He said he was taken with my red hair, and soon after gave me a Valentine card for a red-hot momma. Leo was very charismatic, creative and capable, becoming a mechanic and teacher. Eleven years after we were married, our delightful daughter Elena was born. She is also First Nation and very passionate about working with and making life better for First Nations people.

Leo integrated well into my family and was especially fond of my mother. After she passed away, he was very depressed and turned more than ever to alcohol. I often wondered if it had something to do with Leo's mother dying when he was young, and losing a mother a second time. At that point, Elena was almost finished high school, and as his socializing and lifestyle wasn't for me, we divorced very amicably after 30 years of marriage.

Now, every month or two, Leo and I take turns helping Elena and her husband Ralph in Fort McMurray, as in the last year they became foster parents to two young children, Katani and Tyler. Some of my friends asked if the children call me kokum, which is grandmother in Cree, but I think it is easier to say grandma, so that is what I am.

Talking about friends, I am still close with three friends I went to school and university with – yes, right from grade one through to the completion of university. Now, after our families have grown up, for sixteen years the four of us vacation each year together, often hiking in the Rockies, but we've also cruised and hiked in Alaska, and enjoyed a seaside stay in Cornwall, England.

Following my retirement ten years ago, travelling became a passion of mine. Together with Andy Woudstra, a former colleague at Athabasca University who became my partner and soulmate, we travelled to 45 countries. My very favourite trip with Andy included a 2010 safari in Botswana, where we saw hundreds of elephants, hippos, crocodiles, antelopes, packs of wild dogs and several lions. Other similar wildlife safaris in Tanzania, Kenya and Namibia, along with a mountain gorilla trek in Rwanda, three tiger safaris in India, and a small mammals and bird safari in Costa Rica, were similarly stunning to our Botswana safari, but never quite made that impression on me.

Considering, though, all of our travel adventures, that Andy and I took, and a few risky excursions, I am lucky to be alive. In 2010, Andy decided we should raft on the Zambezi

River in Zimbabwe. It starts right under Victoria Falls. It was a close call. Our raft flipped going through 12-foot rapids. While I had a life jacket and helmet on, I thought after the flip that I would crash into one of the many big boulders and drown as I was free-falling down this crazy river. Somehow Andy and I were saved by our raft pilot, but I will never, ever again raft so cavalierly, and definitely not in a country with lax safety regulations. That day, of all rafts on the Zambezi River in Zimbabwe, our raft flipping was the video highlight of the day.

But that didn't end the adventures. I had another close encounter riding an elephant in the golden triangle in northern Thailand in 2015. This region was once known as the heroin capital of the world. Well, my elephant seemed like it was on heroin, as it was rogue, and wild, and did not follow the pack very well, went off trail, ripped down trees, and I was on its back, bare-back, holding on to the elephant's ears. At the very beginning, the mahout, the elephant trainer, asked if I could swim – and this was in broken English – and I said “Well, yes.” Well, when my elephant and I got to this small bathing hole, sort of a watering hole where there were several other elephants squeezed together and they were bathing up to their ears, mine came near the end and just dove right into the middle of them, and went completely under water. I was still holding on. My whole life flashed in front of me, as I thought I would be squeezed to death, but somehow my head stayed above water and I hung on, but I was very wet, dirty, shaking and lucky that I lived.

Now another risk that I knowingly took, again in Africa, relating back to the Zimbabwe River, was in Namibia when I went tandem skydiving. Now Namibia is another country with questionable safety regulations, but, what the heck, it's warm here, and the views of the Namib desert, the Atlantic Ocean and the Erongo mountains will far exceed those than if I were to skydive in Westlock, Alberta. My brother Phil and my nephew Dion had skydived in Westlock, so, you know, I have this chance in Namibia, why not. The night before my jump, I reconsidered going, but decided it was okay as my daughter Elena was finished university and independent, and I had my personal affairs in order, so I gave my partner Andy instructions on what to do if I didn't live. Basically, call Phil, my brother. Before jumping out of the plane at 10,000 feet, I paused a second or two, but jumped anyway, and the two-minute fall was fabulous, and I lived and I am glad I did it. Further, that reflection liberated me to continue to travel, take reasonable risks, and always keep my will up-to-date and affairs in order, but it was a life-changing jump for that reason

Andy and I continued to travel extensively, right through to 2018 when we travelled for four months in Costa Rica, China, Japan, Alaska, BC, Ontario and Nova Scotia. I am very glad we did, as unfortunately, Andy was diagnosed with colon cancer in July, had surgery in September and passed away on December 12, 2018.

While I am sad I lost my adored and adventurous partner, I am thankful we travelled around the world a few times, we had many adventures, we ate many delicious gourmet meals and we drank much wine. There will always be a special place in my heart for

Andy. Life without him is quiet and lonely, and I am moving on. This year, I bought a condominium in Athabasca and continue to be very involved with the Rotary Club, Athabasca United Church, family, a book club, a dinner club, aqua aerobics, and walking and snowshoeing with friends on our many beautiful trails and in the Rocky Mountains. I am beginning to travel again, and look forward to more adventures and probably some risk-taking, too. Stay tuned!

Irene: *Thank you very much, Mavis. That's a lovely summary of where you've come from to where you're at today. I asked your siblings this question to end each of the individual interviews and want to do the same with you. How has this experience been for you, thinking about and then bringing all your siblings together, and talking about your family both as a group and individually?*

Mavis: It's been positive. It's fun reflecting and it's fun connecting. I think we need to share these stories among ourselves and also record them for our families. But I think the greatest benefit is for us – it really is – and the joy that we feel with life and with each other.

Irene: *Well, thank you very much. Thank you for helping to organize all of this for us and for participating yourself, both with your family and your individual story.*

Mavis: Yes, and thank you Irene.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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