

Athabasca Area Seniors' Memory Project

Shirley A'Hearn – Interview Transcript

Narrator: Shirley A'Hearn
Interviewer: Irene Fitzsimmons
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Select "Eric & Ethel Brown Family" > Select "Shirley Eva A'Hearn" > Scroll down to "Audio interview" > Play ►

[START OF INTERVIEW]

Irene: *This is the fourth individual interview from the Brown family. It's Irene Fitzsimmons, the interviewer, and it's Monday, September 16th. I'm here with Shirley. We're going to start from when you graduated high school, and you can take it from there.*

Shirley: Sure. I remember, in grade 10, going to a career fair, trying to decide what to do and business administration and commerce kind of caught my eye. I liked the idea of wearing nice clothes and I liked something that was mathematical. Mom wanted one of us to be a nurse, because she wanted to be a nurse, and that wasn't allowed. So, I did work part-time in a nursing home in Athabasca and decided no, I wasn't made out to be a nurse.

So, I went into commerce. Mavis had changed from computing science to commerce at that time. So, yes, accounting was a really good fit for me. I enjoyed university. I lived with Mavis and Leo for the first year and a half when I went to Edmonton. She said, "You know, we're coming from Athabasca. We're coming from a country school. We don't know as much as those city kids know. You have to work harder to be as good as those city kids." Well, that's wrong. We knew just as much as those city kids. But you start working hard, and you don't really stop, so you kind of set that standard. So, certainly, both of us worked pretty hard in university. In fact, I did my university in three and a half years rather than four, because I went to Finland one summer on an economics and business students' exchange, which was wonderful. So that was a great experience.

I went right into articling, and again, it's hard work articling, writing those exams. I was married to Andy Hladyshevsky then, and he was articling as a lawyer. So, we really just studied and worked, and, yes, certainly had fun on the weekends. Andy really pushed me to get through my CAs quickly, so I did that. I doubled up and did it very quickly, and articulated at Deloitte's. They were going through a merger, and that can always be difficult for an organization, so I went to a small accounting firm, Woods and Company, and they were very flexible. That was great. I had my son, Gregory Hladyshevsky, in 1983, and I

worked part-time, worked the hours I wanted and just made a nice wage doing that. That was an easy, a good life.

Then Andy and I split, and I decided, well, okay, I better work full-time if I'm going to be on my own. I was bored being in an accounting firm. So, I applied to large companies. I saw a lot of small businesses that really struggled, and I didn't want the stress of having my own accounting practice. I didn't want the stress of being a controller for a small business and worrying about payroll or taking vacations, that kind of this lifestyle with little work-life balance. So, I only applied to larger companies and thankfully I was interviewed by Alberta Power. Mavis was doing her MBA at the time and she honestly had a case study on Alberta Power, so they were amazed by what I knew about the company when I was interviewed. I even knew their rate of return, and they said, "How in the world would you know our utility rate of return?" I just said well, I did my research. So, they hired me, even though it was a downturn and they had many, many applicants.

I started in finance, then they said, you know your technical stuff, now prove that you can supervise staff. So, they gave me a staff of about 20 women in customer accounting and, oh my gosh, supervising young women compared to stoic men, accountants, was quite different for me, you know. The Kleenex box was always on the front of my desk, and I heard all kinds of stories, but it was actually great training to become a manager.

They were also doing a new customer information system at the time, and they found out that I would make decisions quickly. So that's why I got pushed into the information technology [IT] area, because I would make decisions on how the software could be programmed and then move forward. So, I did a lot of information systems project management, and actually led IT people, even though I was an accountant. IT people are kind of like accountants. They just want you to put the pizza under the door and let them do their work. They really don't want to consult with you very much. So, I actually find accountants and IT people very nice to work with. They're very easy to work with. They just say, what do I have to do, and they go away and do it.

So, I learned a lot about customer service and IT, and then I went back to finance for a while. Then I did all of the ATCO implementations for their new financial system. That was great, because then you get to know all the ATCO companies, and do work around Alberta and a little bit around the globe. Then I had the customer care team with the call center.

Irene: *Tell me about a little bit around the globe.*

Shirley: We would implement our system for Australia. That wasn't too bad, Australians think very much like North Americans. We did it for Chile. I found that very difficult because we had to do it in Latin American Spanish. You learn, that to do a project in a different language – I remember, I hired a firm to be that go-between for me, and then I realized – you really need someone on the ground in that country that reports directly to you, to really get it done the way you want it done. Otherwise, they're working for the people who stay in Chile, and taking orders from our firm that was in Chile. It was still

ATCO, but we wanted it to be done more of a corporate way, rather than the way they operated.

Irene: *Did you have to spend time in these countries?*

Shirley: No, generally you did it long distance. Yes, I did go to Australia, but that was business development after the fact. I did go to England when we were looking at a business there, again, all about how our financial system operated. Yes, so a little bit of that. Then, when we had call centers in the Philippines, I did go to the Philippines a number of times. Indeed, we'd figured it out then that you really have to go to these countries to work in those countries. You need a presence in that country. You need a country representative there. So, that was a really good eye opener for me to work with the customer service people, and how the voice of the customer matters and how you need happy people to do a good job. It's a much more touchy-feely type of aspect of the business that was new to me, being an accountant. Then I was interim president when they sold one of the businesses in ATCO. That was very difficult to wind up a business.

I've been involved in starting a business in ATCO, and that's much more joyous. It was a much more wonderful experience when we started the retail energy company. I ended my career back on the financial system when we moved it to the cloud, which is the way to go now for information technology.

I retired in January of 2019, and we traveled, which was great. To replace the intellectual challenge of work and the social part of work was very difficult. So, I ended up back, when they called me to do some consulting, and I've done that for six months now, and that's been a very good transition for me. I'm going to take my second attempt at retiring here very shortly, and we'll head off to do some travelling.

I'm married to my husband, Gary A'Hearn, and we've been married for 25 years. Gary has a daughter, Aleesa, who is now 30. She's a beautiful young lady. We've got two sons, Trevor, who's 24, and Colin, who is 22. They're both figuring out their career paths.

Irene: *Do they live close to you?*

Shirley: They live with us, the two boys do, but Aleesa does not. Then Gregory, our oldest, is now married. He works for Enterprise and manages two of their retail outlets in Edmonton. His wife is Melissa. She was Melissa Barnes, and she's a music teacher. They've got a beautiful little daughter, Caydence, who's two, and another one on the way. So, we're very delighted to be grandparents. I think that's my life these days.

Irene: *What's this been like, getting together with your siblings, and a little bit formally, talking about your family life?*

Shirley: It's very touching. Yes, very special, I would say, for all of us, we still feel very close to each other, but not necessarily involved in each other's lives on a daily basis. Yes, we're all very grateful to have been raised in Athabasca, in Meanook, in a small

town with the support system that comes with that and the community around you. You don't see that in the city to the same degree. I think that's wonderful, and to be close to each other, geographically close, is wonderful, as well. But yes, it's been a great experience.

Irene: *I want to thank you, Shirley. I know you've come the farthest to participate and just even scheduling all the siblings to be able to do this... I really appreciate it and I know the richness of the story is certainly enhanced having all of you a part of it, to be able to be part of the taping and the individual story. So, thank you so much for doing that with us.*

Shirley: Oh, it's a great pleasure. Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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