

Interview with Shirley McKasey

October 9 1998

START OF INTERVIEW

Deborah Williamson (DW): Hi, this is Deborah Williamson. It's October 9th, 1998, and the time is 3:40...and it's Eastern Time. And I'm interviewing my mother, who is Shirley Shelafoe McKasey, who attended Northern Michigan University, and we'll be talking about some of her life experiences and her experience on campus as a student. Mom, what is your birthday?

Shirley McKasey (SM): I was born April 9th, 1933.

DW: Okay, and could you tell me a little bit about your family background...where you lived when you were a child?

SM: I was born and raised in Baraga, Michigan, and I lived here until I was...oh let's see...after I graduated from high school, and then 19 years old I went to Minnesota and found work there. Yeah, I lived here in Baraga, we moved to the communities. You know, Beartown and Trindale (Spelled phonetically), those little areas like that. That's where- That was where mostly Native Americans and, you know, families that lived there in those places.

DW: How many families lived together in Beartown?

SM: Let's see, I think there was about...about ten homes up there, but...Grandma and Grandpa, they had a house, and Uncle Tom and his wife and family had a house there, Aunt Marcella had a home there. They had about ten children, and my Uncle Richard lived there, and the Cardinals. Cardinals lived there. And, let's see...the Shanes, the Shanes lived there, but, you know, once in a while they'd change, but it was mostly relatives that lived out there.

DW: How many years did you live there as a child?

SM: Oh, let's see, I suppose...about twice we moved back there. We lived there maybe- well, four years the first time. Then we moved back to Baraga for a while, and couple years later we moved back out there again, and I think that time we were probably out there about four or five years, and then my grandma- my mother's parents passed away and so she inherited their home in Baraga, and so we moved there.

DW: And how old were you then?

SM: When we moved? Oh...I guess I was probably around 12, maybe.

DW: How many brothers and sisters did you have?

SM: I had- well actually I had two sisters and a brother, but we lost one of my little sisters.

DW: And what did Grandma and Grandpa do for a living?

SM: Well my dad worked in a- he worked in- he was a lumber, you know, lumberjack. He went out into the woods and he'd stay there at these camps for a week at a time, and would come home on the weekends. They had those big saws, you know, cutting logs. So that's what he did in his younger years, and then when the mines opened up here he worked in the mines up until just before he passed away.

DW: And Grandma? She was pretty much a housewife?

SM: Yeah, she was a housewife. She never did work out, no. She worked hard enough at home, so she didn't have too. Didn't have time to work out of the home.

DW: What about schooling? Where did you go to school?

SM: I went to Baraga, grade school in Baraga...the High School. Both.

DW: Did you like your experiences at school?

SM: Yes, I liked school very much. From the time I was all excited to go to kindergarten. I remember- I still have- My kindergarten teacher is still living, she's 95 years old right now, and...I, yeah, I pretty much enjoyed school. I was in the band and...choir. We used to travel- choir used to travel- from different towns, you know? We had...you know, put on different choir, you know, singing. The band would go along sometimes. We all wore long black skirts and white blouses.

DW: What did you play?

SM: In the band? Mellophone. [Laughs] I would play just anything to get in there.

DW: I never knew that. [SM laughs] I don't even know what a mellophone is. What kind of things did you do for recreation?

SM: While I was in school you mean?

DW: While you were in school, and when you were out of school.

SM: Well, while I was in school I liked to play basketball, we had a real active gym teacher that used to teach us a lot of things, you know, play different games and stuff like that. Exercises and everything. We used to sit and play jacks for hours. When we were kids, my cousins and I, we would sit out on the front porch, and we were really good at it, you know? That's why we would play for so long. We used to jump rope, you know? Do all the good fun things. Play house. We'd play house for hours, you know? Dolls and all that. When we lived in Beartown we had- Across the road in the woods we'd make a haunted house out there, you know? Put all our little dolls, and our furniture, and then food, and play all day out there.

DW: What kind of chores were you responsible for?

SM: Well, I was just talking about that today with a couple of my cousins that I grew up with, and we would- one of the chores we talked about was hauling water. [Laughs]

DW: How far did you have to go?

SM: Well let's see...They usually, let's see...When we lived in Beartown it was just between. They put one pump between two homes. Then when we moved to Baraga we had to walk outside our house, past another house, and then we would get to the pump, so that was quite a ways. We didn't mind it, we got used to it.

DW: What did you carry the water in?

SM: We used to have a wagon. We'd put the pales on the wagon and go over and fill them up and haul them back home. In the winter time we used a sleigh. [Laughs]

DW: Something to keep you busy.

SM: Uh-huh.

DW: Were there any major illnesses or diseases that you or your brothers and sisters experienced?

SM: I guess, probably the worst thing I remember is pneumonia, but we had whooping cough, and measles, and, you know, all the normal things. But I don't remember having any major illnesses.

DW: What kind of religion did you practice?

SM: We were brought up Catholic.

DW: When did you attend Northern Michigan University?

SM: Let's see, I graduated there in 1989. Then I must have started...about '86 I believe. The fall of '86. Because I went two and a half years.

DW: Did you live in Marquette, or did you commute from Baraga?

SM: I always got apartments down there in Marquette, although I came home to Baraga on the weekends. Towards the last couple months, or month before I graduated I would commute. I did have cousins down there that I would stay with in Ishpeming.

DW: What was it like for you when you first started back to school? First of all getting financial aid signed up and lined up? Did you have any difficulty with that?

SM: Well I remember I was- I didn't know anything about college, what you had to do or anything, you know, but I enquired where to go, and talked to the travel- the one who handles the educational part of the travel, so she helped me a lot too, and also it wasn't really difficult it was just knowing where to go and what papers to fill out, you know, and stuff like that. I remember it seemed like a lot of work at first, when I first went. Going here, going there, getting your books, you know. Seemed a little overwhelming, but I never gave up. [Laughs] There were times when I was tempted.

DW: How many credits did you take the first semester?

SM: Let's see, I think I took 12 the first semester. I figured to start out with that would be enough.

DW: Did you always- When you started out the area that you picked to study in did you stick with it, or did you start on one-

SM: Oh no, I stuck right with what I had chosen to be.

DW: What was your chosen area?

SM: I was being a substance abuse counselor. I found out what classes I had to take, and, you know, just stuck right with that, so...

DW: What motivated you to become a counselor?

SM: Well...I guess, well I guess I was working up at the travel center, and I was working in the New Day Treatment program. Anyway I got motivated there when I saw the people going- you know, observing the people going through their treatment program, and how they would look when they would finish, you know? You could just see that from the day they came in and the day that they left was just a total change in their personality and, you know, their life and their hopes and dreams for the future. Because they learned to live sober for- I mean it was a 6 week program up there, so I learned a lot about chemical dependency up there. Although I had quit drinking before I went in there, I began to look at areas where I had a problem myself that evidently was a problem, I was just fortunate enough to be able to stop on my own. So anyway, through there I got motivated myself, started going to a women's group in L'Anse, and Mary the [Unintelligible] counselor, and after listening to my stories and all that they agreed that treatment would do me a lot of good, and so I went to Minnesota. St. John's hospital had a beautiful program there, so I went there and...it's really, it's a wonderful experience to be able to have a month, you know, to yourself to just work out, work on things, and be able to talk people. As far as I'm

concerned I think, I wish everybody could have that kind of an opportunity, you know, if they have a drinking problem or not. Wonderful experience. So when I left there I came back home, and I guess I just kept getting motivated more and more, you know, like I said, after working with the counselors up there at New Day I wanted to help people, so I decided to go to college. At first I did have- I had some degrees from working at New Day, but it didn't work, I mean you can't just- I found out you have to have more than just a, you know, just a simple paper. That you could interview and work with chemically dependent people. So that's why I went to college.

DW: So of the classes you took, which classes inspired you at Northern Michigan University?

SM: Well, I had- I was very fortunate I had very good professors every one of them. Each class was actually was- We had fun, there were serious times and, you know, not so serious times. Because I was, I suppose because I was older, I mean I wasn't treated as a youngster I was treated more like an equal by the professors, so I guess that I shared a lot with them too. They learned a lot from me also, and I learned from the children, from the younger people too that went. It really seemed like there was no difference in age, you know, we were all friends, all in the same boat, you know? I met several women my age and made some lasting friendships in college, even young ones, younger ones.

DW: Are you still in touch with your- any of the students?

SM: One of the gals I hear from occasionally. I know where a couple of them live, it's just going to see them.

DW: Which professor had an impact on your career?

SM: Well let's see, I know Pat Tikkanen I had her for my counseling class, and she was very good. She gave us a lot of feelings, good feelings about ourselves, you know. She never ran us down, or made us feel foolish, or...you know? Some of the things that we had to do in that class I didn't, you know, give a little lecture, you know, things like that. It was scary, but we did it. [Laughs] Always gave us a pat on the back, and made us feel good, so...But I like every one of them. I learned something from all of them, you know. So, you know, I'll always remember them.

DW: What was your...I guess your fondest memory of going to school?

SM: Well...[Mumbles under breath], there are many of them. [Laughs] I guess some of the fondest memories I had are- We had this Native American...what do you call that?

DW: Children are People?

SM: No, the room where we went. Where we would meet, you know. We would visit, and talk, and help each other. I don't know what that was called, it was a Native American-

DW: The Anishinaabe club is in there right now.

SM: Some kind of, well yeah it was something like that, but it wasn't named that at the time. I remember we would go out for dinners and things too, through that. I even brought my mother one time and we really had a good time. All those nice things that were done for us like that made us realize that they were recognizing interested in going to college, and so therefore it was little appreciation things, you know, because it is a hard place to go, going to college, especially when you're older, you know.

DW: You got a lot of support from Grandma?

SM: Oh yes.

DW: How about from the tribe?

SM: Yep, I did from the tribe too.

DW: Your aunts?

SM: Oh yeah, they all supported me. My oldest aunt came to my graduation. My mother was there, my brother, my fiancée at the time... and my daughter, and my granddaughter. [Laughs]

DW: I was going to say, what about us? [Both laugh]

SM: That's what I'm thinking about, okay?

DW: We came all the way from Minnesota.

SM: I had a lot of encouragement. Every so often I think about different things from, you know, that happened in certain classes too that, you know, really had an impact on me too.

DW: What about extracurricular types of activities? Spin-offs from college.

SM: Oh golly, you mean, well there was only-

DW: I'm thinking about Children Are People.

SM: Oh, that. Yeah, I did the Children Are People program.

DW: It was for Native American kids, right?

SM: Right, Native American children, and it was just marvelous to do those classes. Another Native American girl worked with me on that, she was a lot younger than me [Laughs], but we worked really well together. And, you know, to see the children open up, you know, it was wonderful. I did a lot at the shelter home too, down there. Extra, extra things.

DW: In Marquette?

SM: The shelter home in Marquette. We had...oh we had a class on what to do in...you know, if we ran into an abusive situation where a man is abusing his wife, or whatever. We had that training too, on how to- what to do, you know, in that kind of a case if we worked at a shelter home, you know. What to do when the women called, or when she came in, and how to go to court with them. All that part of abused women. So I learned all that through there. Oh golly...the rest I can't remember at all. I was in quite a lot of...But I remember I ran a codependent group over at the hospital. I came in and was doing the internship, and also counselor. I had to- As a counselor I worked over there also, and that was just, that was really wonderful. They treated me, you know, real well. Kept giving me lots of pats on the back. So when you get that it makes you feel, you know, it gives you confidence, you know, to do, you know, what you're meant to do. I guess they felt that I was a natural born counselor, you know, because I took to it so well. Fact is they wanted me to stay, stay there and work, and they kept after me but I had decided to go back to Minnesota. Because that's where my children were, and all that. Even after I left, when I'd see Pat she'd say "Shirley, you got a job anytime" and it would make me feel good. And then I had an offer of a job at the shelter home at L'Anse, too. Down there towards Iron Mountain there's another reservation around that way somewhere-

DW: Dead River?

SM: Yeah, they wanted me down there too, so I had plenty of opportunity around here for work.

DW: People were recognizing that you had a special ability, especially with native-

SM: Native people...and that does take special ability too, because they're hard to work with. You know, they work better with one of their own counselors, but there's quite a bit of shortage around of Native American counselors, so...And when I went to Minnesota I got a job at Juel Fairbanks, and I helped open up a drop in center on Payne Avenue. I helped open it and all that, I just never really- I mean I liked it

there a lot at Juel Fairbanks. The whole staff I really liked, and I worked there two years, and I- I don't know I just didn't seem to enjoy it as well. And then I went to work at a girl's youth- a home for girls. Jane Dickman it was called. And there I worked with girls from age, probably 15-18, I don't know. They can, you know, they can be hard to work with, they can be real sweet, but they can be real tough too. That was a very good experience, and I got along well with all the girls, you know. One thing I had learned I couldn't- I had to stand up to them because otherwise they liked to, you know, to back you down. I still see, [Laughs] this one gal that was real tough, I still see her once in a while, and she just, she looks at me and she just, you know, respects me now because I had to get tough with her, and that's so wonderful to see. Once in a while I'll run into one of my past clients. Then I worked at the hospital in Hudson Wisconsin. That was good too. They would get Native Americans in there occasionally, but they didn't have very good success there with them. I know a few of them went out to drink the next day. I was running the family program there so I didn't have a one to one contact, you know. They did ask me to talk with them when they couldn't, and they'd ask me what they should do. I tried my best, but it's not like actually working with them. I knew that they knew how to come in and twist the counselor around their little fingers. I could observe all that, but I was powerless to [Unintelligible] do that. Unless they came and asked for my advice I wasn't about to jump in, you know. But anyway I did get an opportunity to work with a lot of Native Americans even in Michigan that Jane Dickman Home had a native girl or two. Whether I worked in an all Native American treatment center or not I still had opportunity to work with Native Americans. So anyway, I don't know if I did the right thing, but who knows. If I did the right thing by going to Minnesota or if I should have stayed here, but anyway... [Laughs]

DW: When you were going to school what was, kind of some of the low-points? We're talking about, you know, what you really enjoy, what you liked, but what was some of the hard points? Were there any?

SM: Hard points? I guess it was the prejudice in the schools there back, you know, there's still schools now, but it was really bad back then. I guess, like for me it wasn't as bad for me as it was for some of my cousins, you know. Especially if you were real dark, you know, them are the ones that got picked on.

DW: So this was back in, like, in the elementary years?

SM: Yeah.

DW: High school years?

SM: Yes. But we had, we had our own circle of friends, you know? We learned how to put on a front. Like "You're not gonna scare me", you know what I mean? You had to stick your head in the air and walk around and just dare them to say anything, you know, so you learned to walk around with a chip on your shoulder, you know, so I think that had a lot to do with me getting through too, you know. Then you got them a little bit afraid [Laughs], you know, to say much to me anyway. Yes, I remember, well my mother always kept- Because in her day she was- they were put into convents, taken away from their parents and put into convents, and try-

DW: Boarding schools?

SM: Boarding schools. They weren't allowed to speak their- any of their language. If they did they got really reprimanded for it. What they wanted to do was stamp out all Native American culture, and they were not allowed to have anything around the home. So therefore we never learned any of our language when we were growing up which is really sad because today they're struggling to try and learn it. My mother, she had learned some from listening to her father. She could say words, but not whole sentences, and she could understand when somebody else was talking. Evidently her mother and her father still spoke it to each other. And also my grandfather Shosa [Spelled phonetically] he spoke French, and my mother never learned that, I suppose because she wasn't home as a little girl, they put her into these boarding schools and stuff. So anyway, that- it was a problem growing up, you know, I never really let it stop me. My brother he was the same way. He got along well, he was in sports and had lots of friends. All

Native American, his cousins. The boys didn't seem to have as much problems as some of the girls as far as prejudice. We made it.

DW: What about at Northern then? Did you experience any prejudice-?

SM: No, never. That college is just- They're so interested in Native Americans and their culture, and helping to bring out the person. I wrote a paper on- about Native American women in one of my classes, and the professor was so pleased. He wrote on my paper, he says "Beautiful stories, about beautiful people", you know, and I still have that paper.

DW: Can I get a copy of that to submit with the- for the records.

SM: Sure, that sounds- I'll get a copy and send it.

DW: Maybe if there's a picture while you were in school, or of your graduation we could put along with it.

SM: Oh, sure I've got graduation pictures.

DW: I'll submit that to the archives.

SM: Sure.

DW; And if there's anything else you might have from school that you'd like to, you know, put in there too, that would be good. While you were on campus- So you didn't really have any problems, people just treated you good? It was a lot different than being in Baraga?

SM: Yes, very much. I had a lot of support from Baraga, well during my college years I had a lot of support here from everybody. But going to school there was certainly, definitely different from going to school in Baraga. Especially when I saw my cousins taking such abuse.

[Recordings breaks here]

DW: You were talking about the abuse that you saw your cousins going through?

SM: It was almost like living in two different worlds, well I guess it was, because Native American culture, you know, we were all real close, you know, we had our grandparents and, you know, they would do little things for us, tell us stories and, you know, and then we'd have bingo and things like that. We played well together. There's a closeness in Native American community, and it's still there despite the problems that Baraga has.

DW: What did you see your cousins going through?

SM: Prejudice. Being just pushed aside in a corner somewhere. They got to the point where they didn't seem to have much fight in them. They just- some of them they just walked around, got through the day and that was it, you know.

DW: Were they called names?

SM: Oh, I'm sure.

DW: How about the men, how were they treated?

SM: Well, I don't know. I don't remember. I know my brother, he never seemed to have any problems. Whether he did or not he never said anything to me. I'm sure he had some though.

DW: Did all your brothers and sisters graduate from school?

SM: Yes, that was one of the- that was one thing my father insisted on. He said “All my children are going to graduate from high school”, because in his family they didn’t have the opportunity to do that. They had to go to work from very young ages. So, that’s... he lived to see them all graduate, his children. He didn’t get to see his first- He was hoping to get to see his first grandsons, his grandson graduate. That was his dream, but he died at a young age, 57. He didn’t make it.

DW: How about you? How old were you?

SM: When he passed away?

DW: About 12 maybe?

SM: Probably. 10, 12 maybe. Something like that.

DW: There’s a question about your philosophy about substance abuse counseling. What is some of your beliefs about methods I guess of counseling people? What’s the most important?

SM: [Coughs] See, well, it keeps changing. When I went to school, when I went to treatment I liked the way they ran the program. It was a 30 day intensive care. The insurances were paying, at the time, for people to do that. And even before I went to school I noticed- I kept hearing the differences and the different ways of counseling treatment. Today now I don’t like it at all. It’s mostly outpatient, mostly outpatient, I don’t...It isn’t seen anymore as so, you know, serious problem anymore.

DW: It was treated like a disease? When you first went to school.

SM: It was treated like a disease, that’s right, and that’s what it is because...you see these people who- I worked with a lot of outpatient people and they said they came there on their own choice [Coughs], they came of their own choice, but what they failed to admit to is that they were sent there because they got stopped for drunk driving. They were given the ultimatum to either go to jail or treatment. So they would come to treatment and they would say that they didn’t have to because they were given that other ultimatum. [Coughing fit]

[Recordings breaks again]

DW: This tape is going to be- and the transcript from this interview will be put into the archives, and what I was wondering is what do you think what would be important information for a person to know about in the year 2099 about today? About life in today’s world? And probably about- in your field.

SM: I don’t know what- [Laughs] if there would be any kind of a counseling program in that many years from now, you know, because maybe they’ll just have a pill for them, because they are already talking about things like that, you know. So, I just- I see the substance abuse programs sort of just fading away. It’s not at all like it used to be. We don’t have the intensive care anymore like they did, and to me I think they need that, a person needs that. They need to turn their whole life around from what I see, you know, what I have seen. They need help for a long time afterward.

DW: It’s more than just a substance that they need to turn their lives around from?

SM: Right, it’s- Yes. You have to learn how to live without alcohol, because before everything involves alcohol you don’t go anywhere unless- If you go to the beach you have to have booze with you, you have to- any place you go; restaurant, somebodies home. It’s become such a way of life that people don’t know how to- they don’t know how to communicate without alcohol in them. So therefore you have to learn. [Coughing fit] Excuse me. Anyway, a counselor told me that. She said “After you’re sober for several years- [Coughing fit] you know, you become- Alright, what the alcohol did was to help you come out and be able to talk and laugh and relax with people.” And she told me that someday I would do that without alcohol, and she’s right. It’s more fun. [Coughing fit] So, but it takes a long time, that’s I why I don’t

agree with these quick patient groups, you know. For some it might work, but I don't think, I just don't like them that well [Coughing fit] at this point.

DW: We're going to end here, my mom is getting over bronchitis and she's having a little hard time talking right now. [SM mutters in the background] And we pretty much covered all our topics at this point anyway, so thanks mom.

SM: Miigwech. [Ojibwe for thanks]

DW: Miigwech! [Both laugh]