

## **Sandra Pronteau Pt. 1 | Discover Stories Episode 77**

### **Announcement 00:06**

Enjoy live music, want to support a local up and coming artist? The Vancouver Adapted Music Society wants you to join us on July 26 at the Blusson Spinal Cord Center to celebrate Rachael Ransom's debut album Sixty Seven Ten. Rachel and her band will be performing the album live from 6:30 to 8 pm. Tickets are by donation. For more information visit the Vancouver Adapted Music Society on Facebook, @vamsociety on Instagram, or our website at [www.vams.org](http://www.vams.org). We hope to see you there.

### **Tanya Griffiths 00:44**

Hello and thank you for tuning in to Discover Stories on Re-imagine Radio. My name is Tanya, your host and a student intern with VAMS while completing my Social Justice Practicum. Today I have the pleasure and honor of talking with Sandra Pronteau. She is a Cree-Metis Indigenous lady originated from The Pas, Manitoba, survivor of the 60s Scoop, growing up in Winnipeg. Sandra arrived in BC during the mid 1980s and as a proud mother of four adult children and a grandparent to one. She is known for her past activism work for children within the Vancouver school board and advocacy for inner city families who face daily socio-economic challenges and a fight for equal education rights. Being a young mother at the time, she learned to be proactive in various areas such as Indigenous social issues, special needs children needing extra support. Over the years she connected with the Downtown Eastside area through enormous volunteer work, and was a support worker through Union Gospel Mission within the women and family service department through the stabilization program. She is currently a part of DAWN Canada Hummingbird/Feminist Disability Coalition and serving on the Board of Directors for Aboriginal Women Action Network (AWAN) and Disability Foundation Canada. Hi, Sandra, how are you today?

### **Sandra Pronteau 02:17**

Good morning! Hello, Tanya. Thank you for having me.

### **Tanya Griffiths 02:21**

Oh, it's such a pleasure. I'm so glad to talk with you. As soon as I read your bio in the Disability Foundation's website, I knew that I just wanted to hear more about your story. So thank you so much for coming on and joining us.

**Sandra Pronteau 02:38**

My pleasure.

**Tanya Griffiths 02:40**

I was wondering if maybe we can start off with a little bit of your childhood. Can you share some of your earliest memories growing up and how they shaped your perspective on life, identity, belonging, and also advocacy work, which is a very big part of what you do right now.

**Sandra Pronteau 03:01**

Okay, well, as you know, I'm a 60's Scoop survivor. I came from a small town called the Pas, which is on the Saskatchewan River. And it's like where we live with a very reportage, it's a very remote area where it can only go there by train in the summer, or by fall. And then winter time, you have to go on the wintering ice role, which is the lake to get there. And so again, a very small community, very remote and had no water, no electricity. Plumbing wasn't good. So, due to that I was born with my birth defect. And a lot of people don't talk about it. But we know like, over the years, I'm asked to put two and two together that the water contamination is the result of many of our children have been born with various types of disability aside polio, which was like very well rapid back in those days. Many of the Indigenous children were often hospitalized. And if you were born with various types of disability, that's where you end up. So I didn't have a lot of good experience, so I had some nightmarish moments in the hospital and being Indigenous didn't really help. So people, if you're not aware, Winnipeg is known as being one of the most racist city in Canada - we have a high number of Indigenous population as well in Manitoba, too. So I just wanted to point that out, I was apparently a premature baby when I was born. I'm the 13th child that my mother had. And it was not an easy thing for my mom having to give me up, not knowing what she was signing on the dotted line when the ministry, you know, convinced her, you know, your daughter can get better proper medical care, because living in a remote community, you didn't have access to proper health care, especially if you come from a very poor family. Although we're poor, my mom and my dad were very proud. Traditional people that lived off the land, they gathered harvests, Cree with their main language. They also spoke another language, but English what the third. So my mom would did not have a lot of English or literature skills to read and write.

**Tanya Griffiths 06:14**

Because I know that you were also part of the foster care system, so do you still have a lot of the the memories back when you were with your family?

**Sandra Pronteau 06:29**

All I remember was the train ride. I mean, I remember a train ride. I remember eating Premium Plus crackers. And to us, that was like a huge deal for us kids. I remember my mom just sitting there, very blank expression. So yeah, it was probably not a very good experience, for her to go on a train ride. I did live in Churchill at one time with a temporary foster family before they moved me to the city in Winnipeg. So I was probably about three or four years old. So I did deal with a lot of bias, discrimination due to my birth defect, and I was mislabeled of a lot of things, saying, I cannot walk, I will never learn, I will not take care of myself. And I would not live long basically, I was kinda like a waste in there. They thought, well we have a, certainly, back in old terms handicapped child, that probably not going to live long. So I was labelled all kinds of things which I will not say in the radio, but in the 60s, you know, the word "retardation" was what they used back in those days. And so, we labelled most of the disabled children in the 60s.

**Tanya Griffiths 08:16**

Yeah, no, it's definitely very, especially being a child and navigating these spaces, and being labeled such harmful, such harmful words, and also just being placed into this box of have not really being given a chance to live life on your own terms. And instead being told what you could or could not do. It's just like a huge sense of injustice. And I'm sure that experience also speaks to the work that you do now and how you also empower many other families.

**Sandra Pronteau 09:02**

Yeah. And if I may add to that, you know, in the hospital, you were seen as a specimen by the doctors. I recall, like standing in the auditorium on stage, while all the doctors were sitting, watching and observing. I was a specimen. People were staring at me. And so I had memories of I remember having like electrical head scans. You know, they had child psychologist, psychiatrist, and I don't know if they ever shocked me or anything, because I was too little to remember any of that. But I do remember them putting stuff on my head. So yeah, then I remember wearing a body cast, being you know, to a bed. There is a couple of Christmas I spent in the hospital. I recall that. I recall, in the middle of the night, nurses coming in giving me IV. You know, like, that's a terrifying thing for a child. A toddler, preschooler, to experience - that in the middle of the night, ya know, being tortured like

that. And then yeah, so like, I didn't have very good experience as for the medical officials back in those days. And to that, to them, you know, it was like, you know, they figured we didn't seem to feel or anything. You know, like, we didn't have any emotions. Like we were inhumane. So yeah, later on in life, you know, things changed.

**Tanya Griffiths 11:07**

Mhm, yeah, ya know, that the absence or the presence of empathy within any medical profession, I think makes a huge difference, for folks, for patients, for folks that just need medical attention and care. And especially as you put it, being a child and being in those spaces alone is so scary and really can affect just the trajectory of life too. And I and I'm sure that the these this blends into this next question that I have for you. But what inspired you to become an activist for inclusive education and support women experiencing poverty and homelessness?

**Sandra Pronteau 12:01**

Well, okay, so for the inclusive part of education - was in the 60s-70s, all disabled children were segregated away and institutionalized environment hidden from mainstream society. It was a school for children with different abilities. When I say different abilities, I'm talking about children with disabilities. But when we talk about different abilities, all of these children were gifted, they, they learn to accept and adapt, but even then, kids can be mean, like even growing up, we were, you know, ridiculed one another's disabilities, you know. People were, you know, jabbing, poking fun or other things you know. Like I was born with scoliosis, I was born with partial hearing impairment and I was born with all kinds of bread and butter issues that affect my mobility. So again, child birth defect had a lot to do with like your insides and your body not growing properly, fully develop. Like I said, I was a premature baby on today now only I worked for a law firm now for nine I did for Polycast growing up while he brace I tell I was of age when when you hit your puberty you're trying to develop anyone show off your courage you wanna you know be noticed in that like, and that's normal for a young girl was hitting puberty right? So I basically I was a normal child going through exploring who I am as a young girl um, so yeah, I stuck it out I think graduated my Canadian five. It was not an easy time. It was really hard. And if you know when you're growing up, I'm gonna pick not only are you like the sample, but you're also brown skin. So even on top of that, your target you are like, easily targeted for so much stuff. And that's another piece I will share another time. But I think my story can tell you a little bit about gender based violence on what it was like for me growing up and how Are chip the harshness of how I'm treated? Yeah. So I did live our high risk lifestyle as a young teenager. Because again, you got to remember I was in foster care, I was exposed to a lot of things,

sadly at a very young age. And I had enough of foster care at the age of 14. So I went to an all girls home. And in the group home I was at, was with other women, women from trouble background, women that were young and pregnant. I wasn't pregnant. But these girls went there. And it was run by Salvation Army in Winnipeg. There was a good place I stuck with it until I graduated, many times I wanted to quit. Because it was so hard, going to school being targeted every day. Back in those days, I was young, I was feisty. I didn't put up with stuff. Now, even though I'm disabled, I still managed to physically get into altercation. You know, it's not the answer. But how I was able to cope. So then later, down the road I had my children I experienced was like living in poverty as a single mom, being in a socialist system, raising my kids. I think about to school down the road, I had a partner who was a building manager. And he's the father of my two youngest children. We're still good friends today. So then I learned a lot about what it's like being homeless, because there was a time in my life after 9/11 that I actually came to that position, and I actually got into the law and legislative poverty, which was a group run by our very own Jean Swanson, who, who I met back in the 80s - no, I'm gonna say no, I'm gonna say 1990, 1991 I met her. So and then I volunteer for them. And that's what I learned about low income I learned about like, the wealth and the poor, how that works in the justice system, when you're dealing with socio economic levels of classism. And then I learned about the Downtown Eastside because I had been down there, got involved with stuff down there. I have lived experience on both sides of fence. And I had seen what the homeless population can do and experience the hardship. Yeah, so poverty is huge in Vancouver, but now is sporadically all over.

**Tanya Griffiths 18:30**

Yeah, yeah. Yeah. No, thank you for sharing all of that. And I also see how even growing up there were these, it seems like there was this pocket of, of also finding some sense of togetherness with other girls, of being with other people who were experiencing what you were experiencing, and now being at the position to also support folks who were experiencing what you experienced growing up being a single mother, being a young mother and how that look like not having, you know, a huge support system. So, no, I see how how they all intersect and how they're all coming together. And, also, yeah, as you were sharing that inclusive education piece of, of just making sure that every child feels welcomed, and that they belong, instead of being othered. Yeah, I think that's a very important piece, especially when there's, you know, children, their brains are still developing. They're still trying to figure out their place in the world and many times looking for that place is really about looking for safety and looking for spaces in which they can somewhat feel themselves. So yeah, that that is that is a pursuit of making sure that there is inclusive education is very important especially to young folks.

**Sandra Pronteau 20:33**

Yeah, yeah, for sure. I then that was a part of my activism role too, was when the kids were in school. And my kids attended an inner city school in East Van. We lived in East Van, and East Van, versus like, Kitsilano or Shaughnessy are the British properties are, are no match where you can see the classes and division right there. You know, because we're seeing up the riffraff ones. And basically, we are not seen as perfect in society's eyes; we're often mislabeled all kinds of things because we don't have money, you know. And when you go to an inner city school, you're automatically targeted, as all these kids are behavioral challenged. The kids are living in poverty. These kids are exposed to like all kinds of poor conditions, not just living, we're talking about attention, hierarchy behavior. They assume the kids are behavior challenged. And so all of this was impacting the school and so the school, there was a time where they wanted to cut our funding, because they felt that our school wasn't worth it. And so there was a group of us parents who got together and advocated for the kids. And like, I know, my kids were targeted, again, being an all Indigenous family. We were not always taking a liking. And I'm not just saying my family, but where we live, we had a high population of Indigenous families, because we had a lot of native housing projects, subsidized housing, surrounding the area to school. We had some really good amazing supportive teachers who can see there are some systemic racism going on. And these kids, you know, are young, they, they often knew they were being treated differently. You know, I know my kids would come home, sometimes crying, cause they were in distress about learning. They were feeling frustrated or feeling they weren't being treated the same. Right. Yeah. So that was the beginning of me advocating for the school system.

**Tanya Griffiths 23:22**

Mm hmm. Yeah. Wow. And when was this? Was this, did you say it was like the 90s or it was the 2000s? Or 1990s?

**Sandra Pronteau 23:34**

No, that's what be like, in the 90s - from like, mid 90s up till 2000, right.

**Tanya Griffiths 23:48**

I'm just, I'm just like, thinking about that time. But yeah, I can imagine how that would also impact you, not only just a mother, but also as somebody who's felt othered growing up too and also just the lived experience.

**Sandra Pronteau 24:15**

Well yeah. It was exactly like my lived experience, you know, like, “Oh, here we go again.” Now we're dealing with the regular school system. This you notice a totally different you know, I will not deny that there is like, concerns with some families and how the children was supplied. Go to school hungry and I'm not saying my kids but in a community or they were coming from family that were grieving, you know, cuz maybe they didn't live with their mom and dad, maybe they live with their aunts and uncles or grandparents. grandparents would take care of their kids. It's no. Yeah. So at that time, I used to get a lot of kids coming over to my house, my place was like a respite kids home for kids that would come and hang out. And I will get three shifts of kids coming around to us for neighborhood kids. So they felt safe in our home. Because our place was a sober environment. And they would come around and hang out. Because they needed a break from whatever they were dealing with in their home. Sometimes they just rather play with my kids play with their game, like Yeah, and I remember I taken in two V tummies young girls who are brand new, and they were learning English. And I was helping them with their reading. And you know, the last time I saw them, they were in high school graduating, and they never ever forgot me. You know,, they always thanked me, and I would like to see, I imagined are married now maybe have kids of their own. That's always nice to run through some of the old parents. Some of the kids that are growing up now, they reconnect with my kids. It's always nice. So at least some did not make it. Yeah, but it also— There's good, there's bad. You know, there's always a trade off in life, lots of challenges.

**Tanya Griffiths 26:36**

And, and that is, is also such a testimony to the need to feel safe and the need for for spaces where children can feel like, they're not too much that they are being accommodated for. So that, that is really beautiful. And I'm glad that those kids had that space. And I'm also wondering, what changes would you like to see in the way societies and institutions support Indigenous folks, and also folks with disabilities?

**Sandra Pronteau 27:20**

Well, you know, we often overuse the word Truth and Reconciliation. And, to me, that's like lip service words. And I think, you know, you need to apply it in action. Like, you know, there's so many jobs, we're gonna do this, we're gonna do that. Well, you know, first of all, you know, teach it in the school system, get the parents to learn and understand, instead of thinking that we're all like, getting handouts, because none of that is true, that is all such a myth. We don't get handouts. We you know, so many of my my friends and allies, I know

in my the world have done amazing stuff. I have like Professor friends, I have friends that are running their own businesses. I have friends with disabilities that are doing extremely well. And I like I met some amazing people, and you know, like put aside classism, you know, like that is the worst discriminatory thing to do. And whoever invented that, and I was just unnecessary. We're all people. We're all here for a short time. Life is too short, to ponder on why should we have division. You know, I always tell people treat your neighbors how you want to be treated. You know, I try to teach my own kids that so if you want respect, you get respect by showing respect. Everyone and quality. Give a quality guy you're hungry. Give them something you know, it's all about kindness. And it's about [INAUDIBLE], it isn't about power. I mean, work that fell out of all of your life has over — nowhere, it's just this mission in the air. Again, we're here for a short time. Be mindful. Show some love, respect, and kindness. And you'll get that all back twice the length.

**Tanya Griffiths 28:56**

Yeah. Oh, that's so beautiful. That is that is very beautiful. And I and I love how you bring it back to connections — having, being in connection to other people, being in relation to other people and really seeing the humaneness in each other, and also in yourself. Because you're right, like all of this wealth that we accumulate, whether it be through health, or monetary or relationship or whatever. They're only really experienced in this lifetime, and any of that material wealth that you do accumulate, where does it go? I mean, it either passes on to somebody else. That's usually how it goes, or it goes back to the government. But really, it's really fascinating because I also I, in my personal belief, belief system I also do think that life is way more fulfilling and meaningful when we live it for other people. And we live it with other people.

**Sandra Pronteau 31:05**

Exactly. You got to make sacrifices. Like, you know, like the old saying, scratch my back, I'll scratch yours, you know? Give and take and you'll get in return. It's isn't about take take take. Stay tuned for more Sandra.