

Michelle Robbins – Audio Transcript

(Interviewer) So, just to begin. What is your interest in history and family histories?

(Michelle) So, my interest in history, specifically in Black history, because I come from a very historical family. So, my family came to the Elgin Settlement in 1852, um, and they were into people that came to Canada for their freedom. So, I think that gives me, um, a bit more desire to learn a bit more about Black history and history in general.

(Interviewer) Yeah, that's- I mean that's so great. That personal history is super cool. I mean, yeah, I feel like, you know, passions sort of derive from that personal connection. That's great. So, I'm thinking about these stories and sort of how they're translated in schools and about how people learn about these things. So, I wanted to ask you taught about, say, the Underground Railroad, um, in school if at all? Um, and maybe you were taught about it elsewhere in some of these larger stories.

(Michelle) Yeah, so I did not learn about the Underground Railroad, um, within a school that I attended. Um, whether it be elementary or secondary. I learned about the Underground Railroad from my family. Um, family stories, family history. Um, you know, I grew up in the Buxton area so I learned a lot of that history that was right in our own yards um, essentially from the museum or from people that worked there as well. So, a lot of those family stories were shared generationally and I'm continuing that um, you know, with my daughter as well teaching her about our family history, about the Underground Railroad, about Black history because it's not taught within our schools. And it's unfortunate that, you know, growing up, a lot of people missed that. So, for myself, that's where I learned a lot of Black history and Underground Railroad history was directly from my family.

(Interviewer) Yeah, and I mean, it seems to be there's a strong oral tradition in Black history. And you were talking about archives and how, you know, the archives for white people are different from Black people because I mean the oral archives is something that is like strong.

(Michelle) Oh it is absolutely. And you know, the stories, the untold stories that we just don't know about yet that are still kind of coming into fruition that we're learning about on a daily basis where people are coming to our sites to learn about their family history, you know, uncovering where their family were coming from, and family trees, and lineage, and all of these things. It's just powerful. And it really goes to show that that's one thing that we're really missing in society – it's learning about all of these things.

(Interviewer) Yeah, and uncovering those histories, those unwritten ones. I mean that's like, that's I think something that we're trying to do with this exercise. It's you know trying to speak to contemporary voices and maybe these voices have connections to these histories that are relevant and have not even been discovered, right? So, just on that note, um, how do you personally prefer to learn about Black history. I mean, there's

exhibitions, there's podcasts, there's books. Is there a certain mode that you think is good, um, for people today or for yourself?

(Michelle) Um, I think you know, podcasts are a fantastic, um especially for younger demographics where you know reading isn't as popular as it once was, right? And then you have those avenues of social media and the internet where, you know, a lot of that knowledge and those types of things are out there as well. Uh, but still for myself, I prefer to read, um, I like to read all of these amazing books. And they were written for a reason – for us to read them. Um, and that is a way for us to really connect visually, um, really having to really read them, and then visualize where these people were coming from and learning about their histories and their stories. And I think it's the most powerful thing to have to visualize that as well, what they were going through and learning a bit more. Because, you know, yeah you can hear a story, but you can also read it and really, um, have that connection as well.

(Interviewer) Yeah, I mean books really are a great resource because you can take it at your own pace and you know, I mean another thing with books is authorship and proper sources and things like that.

(Michelle) Absolutely. Yes, the sources! The sources are the most important because anybody can write anything on the internet and people will delete it.

(Interviewer) Yeah, right? Exactly. Are there any books that you might recommend?

(Michelle) I mean, well, personally our, um, *Legacy to Buxton* which is kind of like near and dear to my heart because it was written by my great aunt. Um, so that really gives a lot of background about the Underground Railroad and people really coming into our settlement. It tells a lot of family stories about people that settled there and continued to live there, and so on and so forth. So, that's the heart one right there.

(Interviewer) Yeah, we'll have to check it out! That's so great.

(Incomprehensible)

(Interviewer) Um, so, just sort of shifting gears, I know we were talking a little bit about the Underground Railroad. I'm assuming, but have you heard about the Coloured Corps and the Black Militia?

(Michelle) Yes.

(Interviewer) Yes. Um, so what do you think about this event and their role and how it's shared in history today or in exhibitions, in schools?

(Michelle) Yeah, I feel like it needs to be shared more, um, certainly. And I think that goes across the board with any of these stories because if you don't hear about them- Like, this is a new story that I haven't heard about in a very long time, um, so it's still pretty new to me. Where, somebody newly learning, or coming into the school system necessarily wouldn't hear about it. Um, so I think being able to share those stories and

tell those stories um, you know, it plays such a strong role in society where people need to learn these stories and they're not hidden under the rug and people aren't going to talk about them. And you know, I think they're powerful stories. You know, it shows resilience, it shows all of these factors that people still do today. Um, resilience is so common in our society where people can connect to those stories as well.

(Interviewer) Yeah certainly. Is there anything about those stories that you see presented in a harmful way, or is there things about it that could change?

(Michelle) Oh... Um, I think. Ooh, I don't know. That's a tough one because I don't think we should, um, sugar coat anything. I think these are real stories that need to be told in a way and fashion that they, you know, happened. You know, whether it be, whether it's circumstances, um you know that people don't necessarily want to talk about. And we see it so often especially now where, you know, and I'll say this: We do activities at the museum where now we're told that we have to, um, issue a disclaimer or like a trigger warning because of the mental health and capacity of the people who might be effected by the stories, and I think that this is reality. This is what people went through. People were in shackles. People were in these situations. And I think hiding those things back or taking those things away isn't going to- They're not learning anything from it if you don't show it.

(Interviewer) Absolutely. And it's challenging especially when you're trying to communicate things to, like say children because it's like, sugar coating might be more problematic, you know?

(Michelle) Exactly, because they're not getting the real stories of things, and you know, nowadays, people don't want to talk about a lot of these things because you know, "Oh we shouldn't be affected by it, or we can't just, um, be so upset about it. It's history, it happened so long ago. Why are you affected by it?" But, these are our ancestors. These are people that we look up to. These are the people that if they didn't do that they did, we wouldn't be here. So, you know, we have to continue to tell those stories because if not, they would just get lost and that's the unfortunate part where if they're not told now, then where are we? Where do we go from here?

(Interviewer) Yeah, I mean you were talking about your ancestors. Maybe I could ask you about your personal connection with the Black community and Black histories. Are there any stories from your family that maybe you could share?

(Michelle) Yeah, well I guess my family came to Canada from Tennessee in 1852. Um, and my, I guess seventh great-grandfather- Yeah, seven generations. So, I'm a seven generation descendant. Um, so they were- he was told by his slave master that he could buy his freedom by taking his last name. So, he actually took the slave master's last name which was Robbins, and he was able to marry his wife, and then eventually found freedom in Canada. Um, so that is the story that kind of has, you know, continued on through generations, that, you know, our ancestor bought his freedom by taking the last name of his slave master which is now our last name. And it's hard you know

because you feel like our identity has kind of been lost a little bit, but knowing what her did, you know, to get his freedom and to be able to marry his wife, and you know continue on his family, um, that's what he had to do. And that's kind of just been the story that's stuck with me for eons.

(Interviewer) Yeah, I mean it must be so challenging at times to carry that name and know that it has history. But, also at the same time, it's this exercise and liberation and you know you can feel proud about it.

(Michelle) Yeah, and showing that you know, being a proud seventh generation descendant of you know the people that went through all that they went through for us to be here and to honour them and to continue their built legacies and you know, we want to continue... (Incomprehensible) But we are, you know, our ancestors wildest dreams and those are what we need to continue to really appreciate them and what they did for us.

(Interviewer) That's an interesting sentiment which I've never really thought about actually. You are their wildest dreams, like everything they fought for.

(Michelle) Yeah, everything they hoped for as well. We can't take that for granted.

(Interviewer) Yeah, certainly. Yeah, so these stories. I mean, these personal stories, these larger stories that are well known in our country like the Underground Railroad. Um, you see them presented at the museum regularly, um, maybe not enough. Um, how do you think they are presented these days? Is there something you might change about how museums handle uh, these stories and um underrepresented histories in general?

(Michelle) I think that specific Black historic museums do a fantastic job at highlighting the you know, the stories and the Underground Railroad storytelling um, of these people. But I do think that certain aspects of certain museums don't showcase it enough. Um, and maybe they just don't have that connection to these stories, but I do think they are underrepresented. Like, I think Black history is history. It's all of our history and it needs to be told that way, um, whether it be in this museum versus another one, because I don't think it's showcased enough and the stories are not told. And that's another part of it. So, how can we continue to tell those stories if they're not put out there to people. Um, you know, if I go to Yukon and go to tour a museum there, am I going to see Black history? Not likely. Um, am I going to hear those stories about people coming to freedom? Not likely. And I don't think it should be specifically based within the communities that those stories are. I think it should be showcased in different areas as well.

(Interviewer) That's great, yeah. That's sort of the point of this exercise. To speak to people with contemporary voices, and to take stories from elsewhere and bring it back to Pickering.

(Michelle) Yep, exactly. Exactly. You know, and that's fantastic what you're doing because a lot of people wouldn't necessarily do that. You know, hearing, you hear about local history, but there's also people that live within our areas that have never come to our streets, that don't even know that we exist. That, you know, that we're known as a "raceway" and not the Underground Railroad site. That we have an 1861 school house, we have an 1852 log cabin. These are things that are here, but we are known as the raceway. "Oh, there's a racetrack there!"

(Interviewer) That's amazing. I mean, the more we speak about it, the more these stories will come about, and ultimately, you may be known as something else, right? And that's the goal. And that's really great. And I think the work that you're doing is good.

(Michelle) Yeah, and there's a lot more work to be done.

(Interviewer) Yeah, right? Um, okay, then is there something about Black history, like an event or a tradition, or story that you would like to see the next generation learn? Something maybe that isn't spoken about.

(Michelle) I know for us, I guess vocally, we have our homecoming celebration which is in Buxton. And, this year we're celebrating our 100th year celebration. So, it started in 1924, and it was mainly a celebration of, um, Blacks coming back to the settlement and reconnecting with each other, um, reconnecting with descendants, reconnecting with the land, reconnecting with the areas in which their family lived on – they have family homes there still. Um, and that for us, um, is a way to celebrate you know the people that were there, how successful they were, how self-sufficient they were when they came into the settlement. And I think, um, for us, we would like it to be more so on the history based on what it is. Um, it started in 1924 under a pear tree in my grandparents' field. Where now, it's turned into a four-day long celebration which is amazing, um, but I think sometimes the story of how it started gets lost in translation where we need to dive back into what the meaning of it is and not make it commercialized I guess you would say. Go back to the historic value of what it is and what it was because now we're celebrating a 100-year celebration so it is a big year for us and we want to be able to share those stories of the families that came there and the sunshine club that they were cooking meals in the church hall. And I think those small stories- or the woman that were playing baseball under the pear tree. Because you know, in a lot of cases we did have a women's baseball team, and you know, that doesn't get showcased, you know, at all as well. So, I mean, having those untold stories of historic value I think would be amazing, especially you know, knowing that we're going into a big year of celebrating, you know, I think that would be amazing to have that story retold in a different factor, per say.

(Interviewer) Yeah. It sounds like, you know, grounding yourself where it was formulated is like the most important thing. It sounds like an amazing event. Is it like a pilgrimage of sorts?

(Michelle) It's like a big four-day kind of family reunion with like 5000 of your closest family. Yeah, and we welcome anyone to come to the event. It's not everybody that comes there has to be a descendant from Buxton. It's not that at all.

(Incomprehensible)

(Interviewer) Yeah, and I mean these events and like museums, it's the whole point of talking about these things is to get these stories out and have people like come across it randomly, right? And then, slowly these stories will be shared more and more into our everyday vernacular. That sounds so great.

(Incomprehensible)

(Interviewer) Okay, just to shift gears a little bit, um, I wanted to ask you to think about yourself and personally, what might be the hardest thing for you when you talk about race?

(Michelle) Um, for me, personally it is hard for me because I have been told that I'm not Black enough to tell Black history or to talk about Black history because of my skin colour. Um, so that's hard for me because a lot of people don't understand that we all come in different colours and it's hard to hear that, you know, why I as a person am talking about Black history and my history. And it goes both ways, you know, white and Black. I get it from both ends. Um, and you know, it's definitely- and I had it a couple days ago. It's just like, "Oh my gosh", you know? It's hard to do that. And then especially with my daughter, who's mixed race, I think it's hard for me to, not to tell her about our history, but I want her to also understand her other side too. Not just the Black side or the Black history side. I want her to understand that she comes from all different backgrounds. Um, so I think that is a bit of a struggle, you know really sharing that sometimes, where she might not necessarily feels like she relates because she doesn't look like my grandma, or my dad, or whoever we're talking about. So, um, that's a bit of a struggle for me.

(Michelle) And then, the hardships that people went through can be a bit daunting as well, because you're talking about your ancestors coming and arriving on a slave ship, being held captive, being put in shackles trying to escape. You know, that horrificness of it is hard because you know, we definitely take our lives for granted so often, and then fail to look back at what our ancestors went through. And I think that is a bit of struggle for me sometimes where I try to put myself in their positions or their shoes and what they would have went through, and the resilience that they showed to come to settlements like what we have here. So, that can be a little bit, you know, difficult. You know, and especially when people don't take the history seriously either, where they you know, they laugh, or they think it's not a big deal, or you know, "They were put in shackles? Oh, that sucks." Or, "That would suck to be on a slave ship.", or "That would suck to be put in [incomprehensible]". And I'm like, yeah, but this is what people went through. So it's really truth-telling. So, I think a lot of people- That's hard for me to, you know, not people have to really grasp it or to understand what we talk about on a daily

basis. It's hard because you just get so frustrated like, "Oh my gosh, this is hard. Why do you think this is just a joke? Why do you think it's funny? It's not. These were people." Yeah, I think- These are the struggles that I face talking about Black history.

(Interviewer) Yeah. I mean, thanks for sharing. The work that you do is educational. It's here. You're there. People can learn, and that can always bring up contention and issues and I'm sure that's a very difficult part of the job.

(Incomprehensible)

(Michelle) It's unfortunate that people don't really grasp it as much as they should. And I think that's where we're failing in society, where we're just making it acceptable.

(Interviewer) Yeah, well thanks for sharing. Um, I'm thinking about those sentiments and our audience, children ages 6 to 12. Is there a sentiment or something that you would share to these children when they go through their day to day lives, um, that they can carry forward in their education with Black history?

(Michelle) I think just being open to learn about it. Being open to learn the stories, or to hear the stories. Um, I think that age demographic is a huge age range, so you know, really showing the honesty and they are the changemakers. They are the ones that can make these changes. We don't want to relive history but we still want to share the history and I think that's really important for them to really understand the history. Um, and I guess just... Oh my gosh. That's tough...

(Interviewer) Yeah, that's a great point. Just like listening and being open and taking your time with things.

(Michelle) And I mean, history didn't happen in one day. So, you're not going to learn about it in one day. Like you said, um, you know, and being able to go along those stories and you know, evolve from those stories as well.

(Incomprehensible)

(Michelle) But really just having that understanding and not feeling shame to hear about these stories. Or not feeling, you know, any animosity towards any people. I think people are people, and we want to be mindful of that as well because we have a lot of people who are just wanting to share the stories, and we don't want them to feel any guilt or shame or those emotions just because of what one race did to another. Um, so I think that you know that age group is for that. We have kids that come [to the museum] that say, "Oh, I'm so sorry for what my family did to yours." That's not what we're there for. We're there to share the education, and to open their eyes to what happened.

(Interviewer) Of course, right? Placing that blame is an interesting one.

(Incomprehensible)

(Interviewer) Since we're having this conversation and this will be in the exhibition, I want to ask you, is there a certain way that you would like this to be presented in an

exhibition? Like, say text or things like that, you know. Because we are- I mean, I'm recognizing my positionality as a white curator. And like trying to give you the space to talk about the (incomprehensible).

(Michelle) Um, I guess just... Like in what context?

(Interviewer) Like, maybe like, um, how it's presented. Like, we could have text panels or...

(Michelle) That would be cool! To really get that like, um, piece of it, you know? Because kids are visual learners and they will grasp reading a lot whether it's pictures, whether it's texts. Um, cause then they would have that connection. So, reading I think for them. Um, we can tell stories and we can talk so often, but it goes kind of in one ear and out the other, right? So, I think having it in a text format would be ideal. That would be amazing for them to really see it as well as listen, then it gives them that additional piece of this is what it is. Driving it home.

(Incomprehensible)

(Interviewer) Just to wrap our conversation up, um, I'm curious if you have – and this might be quite challenging – but, uh, just to preface, maybe just one sentiment you could leave us. Um, and this could be for any Canadian, any age, is there one thing you could leave the museum goer with when they're in this museum exhibition?

(Michelle) I mean, I go back to our ancestors' (incomprehensible) and that sticks with me always. And that can go with anybody. Whether you were an immigrant, whether you are Canadian but you still have that ancestry, you know. So, um, you know we really want to have people really understand the struggles and the ideology that a lot of those people really wanted for themselves and for their families through generations. So, I think that kind of works for everyone. Realistically. Um, not just myself, but it could work for you, it could for everybody, right?

(Incomprehensible)

(Michelle) Oh, and there was a quote from Michaëlle Jean and she said, um, "Black history is not just Black history. It's all of our history. And we should take pride in that history and that we can continue to share it whether it's me or you. Anyone can share Black history, however they see fit."