

## Personal Narrative Essay

My name is Stephanie Jones and I was born in Small Town, MB in August 1971. I am the eldest and my brother is three years younger. The two towns where I have resided most of my life are Small Town and Middle Town, Manitoba. Different events in my life have directed this path depending on the circumstances I found myself in. Small Town is a small town with a little over 3000 residents. However, Middle Town is larger with approximately 155 000 residents.

I grew up in a northern Francophone family where the provider, my father, was susceptible to layoffs every year. I quickly learned about the powers of an employer and a union's visions. Unemployment insurance, as it was called back then, was a subject of discussion over many dinners. This way of life, caused a great deal of stress for the family. I remember my mother limiting certain foods or extras such as outings to make ends meet.

Later as an adolescent, I was an active member of my high school's student council. Despite my future visions and good intentions to pursue post-secondary studies, many decisions and circumstances influenced my path. When I did not receive financial assistance to attend a post-secondary institution right after high school, I had to rethink my strategies. I was devastated that I could not pursue my dreams of obtaining the education I had always desired.

Another event, which shifted my life forever, was accepting a marriage proposal at a young age and marrying in 1988. I made it clear from the beginning that my education was very important to me and marriage would not stand in the way of my pursuing post-secondary studies or even completing high school. When I announced my engagement to my teachers, some were puzzled, others were against it and the most significant was the reaction of my guidance counsellor. He told me if I married prior to my graduation, I would receive significant financial support since married people were more likely to receive additional financial assistance than a single person. Nothing could have been further from the truth. When I was approved for a \$500 student loan, I was unable to take on my quest for post-secondary education. Given that I lived in a small town with no opportunity to attend a post-secondary institution locally, I had to relocate to engage in the pursuit of higher education. Needless to say, my dreams were crushed.

Seeing no other alternatives, I continued to work odd jobs in our community. One of these led me to be self-employed with the local day care. I was a private home care provider, caring for as many as five to seven children at a time. Having children in my care every day since September 1989 made me yearn for my own children. This decision changed the course of my life once again. I became a mother in May 1991 and continued to work as a private home care provider until my husband, who had been unemployed since our marriage, found work.

When he secured employment, it gave me the financial flexibility to pursue my dream of attaining higher education. In September 1992, I moved from Small Town with my one-year-old daughter to attend a college in Middle Town, Manitoba. One thing led to another and in February 1993, I had health complications which required me to be hospitalized during my exam session. Without the compassion of my teachers, I failed a course with no opportunity to retake the exam. Thinking nothing could be done to reverse this horrible failure, I felt I had no other choice but to quit my program (X-Ray technician). Having some money left over from my student loans, I decided to take an aesthetics course and moved back to Small Town to open my own home-based business, Stephanie's Nails and Tanning, in March 1993. Since most of my work was from home, I also began working with day care again.

In March 1995, I had my second child. In September of the same year, my eldest child began school. By March 1996, I secured part-time employment with the French Catholic elementary school that my daughter attended. In the same year, I attended instructors' training to teach adults firearms handling and hunting techniques. This was a seasonal self-employment opportunity which I continued until January 2003.

In 1998, the Manitoba Ministry of Education decided to amalgamate all school boards and as a result worker decided to unionize. I subsequently became a member of the Manitoba Secondary School Teacher's Federation (MSSTF) and at my first Annual General Meeting (AGM); I was nominated and elected as a negotiator for Bargaining Unit (BU) 101, District A. Involvement with MSSTF brought new direction to my life and was a huge turning point for me. My life has continued to evolve in that direction over the last 12 years.

Since the signing of our first collective agreement in June 1999, I have worked and occupied various union positions at the local, district and provincial levels of the Federation. In 1999, I was elected to a two-year position on the Educational Support Staff Sector at the provincial level. Since I was a part-time employee with the French Catholic School Board, I applied for a full-time position as an educational assistant with the French public secondary school in the fall of 1999. As the principal pointed out to me during the interview, I was chosen because I was the only person with qualifications in Small Town. As a result, I took a leave of absence from the Catholic board and retained all my rights. This proved to be a wise decision because in February 2000, the principal fired me a day before finishing the three-month probation period. I subsequently filed a grievance and just before the arbitrator heard my case, the board settled.

While an employee of the French Public-School Board, I bid for a position on the executive of BU 102, District B. I was subsequently chosen as their communications officer. I occupied the post until the end of the school year because my case was ongoing; I remained an active member. At the AGM, members nominated me for the position of President. The secretariat liaison from the provincial office took time out of the meeting to talk to me and indicated I could not accept the nomination. The reasons were because of my grievance and that there were no guarantees my case would be won. I was being forced to decline the nomination. It seemed my rights were taken from me and this gave me a bigger drive to

become an advocate for the rights of workers. I was determined to educate myself about the laws which govern workers, employers and unions.

During the grievance process, I found myself without employment and therefore, I returned to work for the French Catholic Board in a temporary position (50%) at an elementary school in Middle Town. I was a regular member of two bargaining units within MSSTF. By September of 2000, I was employed full time with the French Catholic School Board and my grievance was settled with the French Public-School Board.

My involvement with the union has continued since occupying positions as workplace representative, area representative, chief negotiator, negotiating officer and communications officer for BU 102. I have been an active member on local committees such as finance, collective bargaining, grievance appeals, political action, constitution, anti-harassment and pay equity. As part of my duties on the BU executive, I participated on joint union-employer groups such as the education, policies and procedures, leadership framework steering, professional development organization, United Way of Canada and employee profile committees.

At the district level, I have occupied posts as district secretary, delegate and substitute to the Annual Meeting of the Provincial Assembly (AMPA), provincial councilor and member of the Northern Caucus committee. Provincially, my involvement extends to the Educational Support Staff Sector and currently to the Parliamentary and Constitutional Council which requires me to act as part of the steering committee team for AMPA and Provincial Council.

This year has been an active one, since I applied twice for positions at the provincial office of MSSTF which took much of my time but educated me to the fact that I will never have a chance at such positions if I have no experience as President/Grievance officer. As such, in June, I was elected as Vice-president of my BU moving closer to the rank of President. Despite many members wanting me in the post of President, I did not feel this year was the right time. I strongly believe that in two years when the election occurs, I will have more background as well as being closer to completing my BA - Labor Studies Concentration degree at Athabasca University.

As I document all the labor activities which I have been involved in, I realize how much advocating for workers' rights is important to me. I have enjoyed seeing the membership grow since the amalgamation of the school boards and the ratification of our first collective agreement. As I progressed in my learning process of workers' rights, the members were also educated through the strong leadership of our executive. I am confident that continuing my education with Athabasca University is the best route for me. The members of MSSTF can only benefit from the knowledge I will acquire.

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