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Interviewer: Marshall Watson
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MARSHALL: Cool. So why don't we start. And again given that this will be used in a bunch of different places. Assume that I know nothing about you who you are what you've done where you've worked or even the sector as a whole, how things work like government contracting et cetera how things have changed over the decade. So why don't we start at the beginning of your beginning—your early life. Where did that start, where did you grow up? What was your formative years like? How did that go?

GEORGE: Well I grew up in Montreal in the 50s. My parents had just arrived from a refugee camp in Germany where they'd been held really since the end of the war. So they spent a couple of years in the POW Camps and then subsequently another four years in refugee camps before having an opportunity to be resettled in Montreal. So that's how they arrived on one overcrowded boat with people falling all over one another.

MARSHALL: That's super interesting. My Grandparents experienced the exact same thing. My aunts were born in the camps before they moved [inaudible].

GEORGE: Well the interesting thing for me is I just was in Montreal looking after my 94-year-old mum and I just discovered that my own brother was already in her as she made her way to Montreal because you couldn't actually go to Montreal with a child. So she sort of hid the fact that she was pregnant and then brought him to Montreal.

MARSHALL: There's all sorts of hiding going on.

GEORGE: Yeah yeah, no doubt. So my upbringing was pretty strict. My dad was very strict, kind of a strict Roman Catholic so it was a no nonsense kind of household. And as far as what they aspired for us, it was quite simply, either you had to be a doctor or you had to be a lawyer or you are a bum. That's basically the only options [inaudible]. I had really very little interest in either of those two. And of course then I fell into the bum category and my brother paved the way for me by essentially defrauding two years of university tuition. And getting my parents to pay for two years of university [5:00] tuition that he barely attended school. Eventually, they found out that that really did it for me.

He was the golden child and if he was a bum then the child that followed had to be even worse. So in some ways, he did me a favour because they disinvested in me at that point—it really opened up my options. My options became anything I wanted because they really weren't invested anymore in seeing me go this way or that.



MARSHALL: There were no strings attached so you weren't pulled.

GEORGE: That's right. It's only, you fund your own education, you go wherever you want to go.

MARSHALL: This is you and your brother?

GEORGE: No, my brother was by then was kicked out of the house and he was a persona non grata in the household. So it stayed that way for quite some time.

MARSHALL: Did you have other siblings?

GEORGE: No, just the two of us.

MARSHALL: Just the two of you. OK, so with those strings removed, how did that change your own trajectory?

GEORGE: Well they changed immediately because I, you know, the things that I really wanted to pursue in college were the things that I then did pursue. So, for example, I was really interested in sociology. I was interested in social justice. I'd been exposed to some social justice issues in high school.

MARSHALL: Such as?

GEORGE: I was working with a part of a volunteer group—overseen by the local chaplain of a Jesuit run high school. So I was exposed to... big movements to try to organize and bring money in for homeless. I also worked in a terminal case hospital tending to people sort of on their last legs.

MARSHALL: While you were in high school?

GEORGE: While I was in high school, yah. So that's where I got my, kind of, early exposure. It was one of those strange kinds of things where I was still tossing and turning in terms of what I wanted to do. I thought doctor, lawyer forget about that but you know maybe... architecture. I had an interest in architecture at that time. And it was this one experience that really changed my mind. I was just sitting in a park in Montreal in the Plateau area where I lived.

MARSHALL: When was this?

GEORGE: I was just out of high school at that point. So it would have been in the early 70s. So I was just sitting on a park bench and this fellow with a trench coat came and he sat next to me and he started to talk to me. We talked for about an hour and he just talked about life. He talked about his life and, you know, I didn't have... was only 16. I didn't have a lot of things to share about my life but we talked a lot about his life and his challenges especially with addictions and whatnot. And by the end of it- I mean an hour passed—and he said "You know kid you're pretty good at this". And I said, "What are you talking about". He says " I really feel like I've been able to unload a



lot of stuff for the first time and you know you're just a kid". And that sort of gave me that first tweak of—can I do this for a living?

MARSHALL: Something I'm good at?

GEORGE: Well, you know, it kind of relates to the issues I'm interested in and, you know, somebody is recognizing that maybe I have something to offer in that regard. So then my college education started to really shape around social justice issues. I was also interested in psychology. I was interested in gender differences, emerging women's issues. A lot of those things kind of coloured my early education in college. So a lot of that became just getting a bit more aware of what was out there in the world. Because I really did grow up in a very sheltered kind of environment in the sense of, you know, you didn't really have a right to say anything, you know, that it was a very physically restricting kind of environment.

My Dad was really a powerhouse of a person and that's the context in which he raised both of us. So it's not like you could say "Hey Dad, what do you think about this particular issue to do with... How about your oppression. Your boss only gives you like five cents every year. Like, what do you think about that?" There was nothing—that was the kind of thing that would just get you into all kinds of trouble.

MARSHALL: Say anything or react?

GEORGE: That kind of conversation is just done. 'Who the hell do you think you are? You know bringing up something like that you don't know where we came from. You don't know what we had to go through.' You know that sort of thing. So as it was a large [laughs] large kind of issue to confront each and every time. So that was not a place where I got a lot of dialogue about my thoughts and stuff. That was more things I did with friends, things I did when I was hooked up in high school with these various experiences.

MARSHALL: Experiences, that is where you got those... kind of learning.

GEORGE: That's where I started to dialogue about these sorts of things.

MARSHALL: The issues that were going on. And so did the... How much of the Roman Catholic faith imparted to you from your parents?

GEORGE: Absolutely none.

MARSHALL: It was one of those strings that was cut [10:00] and you...

GEORGE: Yeah absolutely. I was forced to go to church, and I was forced only up until the age of 12. At the age of 12, I was on my way to church—begrudgingly—creating a situation where my dad and I were running late and we had to walk to Mass. And he got so pissed off he threw me right down the stairs, suit and all. And it was like, that was sort of... It was a breaking point for both of us. For him it was like I'm not taking this



flunky with me to church. And for me it was like well if I don't have to go I'm not gonna go. [laughs].

MARSHALL: Right. [Laughs].

GEORGE: I don't see anything that really makes a lot of sense for me here. I mean I'd had exposure to Catholicism throughout my entire high school. I went to Polish school on Sunday, run by nuns. So I mean I was inundated with religion. But also watched my mother who was a Russian Orthodox. I watched her being oppressed in terms of being able to express her religious beliefs and ideals and whatnot.

MARSHALL: As you were growing up?

GEORGE: As I was growing up. So my appeal for contemporary religion within the Catholic Christian sense was, you know, pretty limited.

MARSHALL: Based on what you experienced.

GEORGE: Based on what I experienced. Yeah. Yeah. And you know if you're in a culture where—Polish culture is very much like this—children are meant to be seen and not heard. So there wasn't really any opportunity to voice anything. You were just there to make your parents look good or at least not make them look bad to other people who were, you know, devout parishioners. So that was the sort of, you know, institution that I witnessed just turned me off completely and I never really got back into it. And unfortunately you know in some ways I look at it now and I'm looking for something more spiritual to bring into my life at this juncture. And I realize that even though I've rejected that it also, you know, made me or left me in a place of being suspicious about organized religions in general.

MARSHALL: There's a theme of potential threads or like religious threads in early years that aren't followed and then people end up doing compassionate care giving work without having that be the inspiration or the foundation for it. And then kind of returning to the principles that would have been there without actually the practices of it because they came at it from another side.

GEORGE: Interesting.

MARSHALL: In a lot of these conversations. It's a very interesting theme that keeps coming up.

GEORGE: Interesting. I never looked at the church as a benevolent institution. I never got that sense growing up that there was anything good the church was doing other than trying to promote, you know, faith and sort of a system of belief that people could anchor their daily lives.

MARSHALL: That's true, that's true.

GEORGE: I didn't look at them as you know... Except when I met this chaplain in high school. He



actually was... he had a social mission other than delivering mass and whatnot and, you know, espousing his Christian values.

MARSHALL: [inaudible]. That's interesting. And so, where did you go to university? When would that have been and where?

GEORGE: I entered university in 1976. So that was Concordia University. I attended the school of Human Development and Community Organization at Concordia. And I did my first degree there. That was probably one of the most influential programs insofar as the way it was organized especially the first year you got to spend learning about yourself. Doing all kinds of interpersonal sort of exercises to get a bit more of a handle on who you are.

MARSHALL: Through the courses? They were kind of built around the way?

GEORGE: Absolutely. Interpersonal dynamics. And so, year one was focused on you. Who the hell are you? Why do you communicate the way that you do? What are your core values? How do you communicate with other human beings and why do you communicate the way that you do? It was all focused on who you are. Which was really interesting because you generally don't think that much about who you are. You don't ask those kinds of questions.

MARSHALL: And did you have a sense of that given some of the things you were involved in high school or compared to your classmates?

GEORGE: No, what I liked about that particular program is I really did have a belief that if I didn't really understand how I was built I'd have a hard time kind of you know being useful to other people. That premise just made sense to me at that time. My friend, my close friend who became a social worker. He went to the McGill School of Social Work. He said you're an idiot. He said, you know, this is the pipeline right into this incredibly important work, you know, where you get to exercise [15:00] this tremendous power and actually make social change. You on the other hand are navel gazing in some other, you know, some stupid laboratory University and what not.

MARSHALL: [laughs].

GEORGE: So we had really diverse perspectives about, you know, what we needed to do to get to where we, we both wanted to get to the same place.

MARSHALL: But you were taking very different paths.

GEORGE: Yah, we took different paths, right. But he really did see that as a flunky path. And in retrospect I look at it and say wow, you know, what a gift. I'm so happy [inaudible]...

MARSHALL: But at a time what then did you think of his path? If he felt that way about the way you were approaching things.



GEORGE: He was definitely both feet in as far beginning to explore the vocation, beginning to learn about child welfare. I mean I was still, you know, why do I look this way? Why do I have this kind of body language? I'm in this kind of phase and he's in social welfare, social justice, you know,, the sociology of law. So he's, you know, I see his stuff and I see my stuff and that there's a real difference in how we were approaching it. But I was so enamored with discovering not only who I was but who other people were that it was like 'ok let's just play this out and see how it happens,' right.

MARSHALL: And then how did it happen over the following three years?

GEORGE: It was fantastic. It was devastating at the beginning because what I learned about myself early on was that I was a bullshitter. And it was only in the second year, which was focused on sort of interpersonal group dynamics. So your first year was about you. The second year was about you in groups. And the second year was also learning how to supervise groups and then the final year was about taking all those skills and doing the social intervention in the community. So what I had learned in that second year was that I was trying to get influence with people and not being completely honest with who I was, what I believe. I found I had a way to talk to people that would get people interested in what I had to say. These things were not always genuine. There were genuine pieces mixed in with sheer bullshit. All roving in there. And I, you know, my thinking at the time was... well... there wasn't anything, it was automatic. It was who I had become—part bullshit, part genuine.

And then I had a real pivotal experience. We had a class one day and we were learning about sociograms. And the one question was, you know, here's the classroom of 16 people. Who would you preferentially want to go out for a cup of coffee and have a conversation with? You had to pick your top three. And then you plotted where all these answers lay in these concentric circles. The ones in the middle are the more popular people and the one on the outside or more of the outsiders. Where did I find myself? On the outside. People were able to see through me even though I didn't know they were able to see through me. They were able to see through me and say this is not a guy I want to have coffee with. This guy is not genuine. Right? So it was that feeling.

MARSHALL: And that clicked for you as like early 20s George?

GEORGE: Yah, early 20s. Maybe 20... 19...20. And I, you know, I looked... I was devastated. I would never have predicted that in a million years. That's how much I didn't really understand what was happening around me and the influence of what I was projecting, thinking it was all this savvy stuff.

MARSHALL: Right, but not being able to see what that looked like from a different perspective.

GEORGE: When I saw it, you know, when I have such feed back from people, then I realized that, you know, there was a disingenuous part to try to engender sort of favour and support and attention that was driven from the wrong place. And I spent a good part of the



summer really trying to think my way through. Uh...

MARSHALL: Well that's a pretty profound realization. Especially...

GEORGE: Well it hurt like hell.

MARSHALL: Yeah, [inaudible]. There are people who, you know, will have never reached that point in their adult lives at all but to like have that kind of realization while you're still in university, I mean. That's in some ways, like I can see how that would be a bit of a mindfuck. But that's also kind of a gift to get it, you know, early on in life.

GEORGE: [inaudible] Ultimately it was, ultimately it was a gift because it really did give me an opportunity to, you know, see what I was projecting for what it was. [20:00] And then say is this the person that I want to be, right? And of course it wasn't the person I wanted to be at all, right? So I wanted to be that person who does connect. That person that does offer good relationships. My vocation is built on being able to develop trust and engagement and, you know, like in the future and here I am sort of sitting on the outside of the circle. It's contraindicated in that, you know, it's not getting me where I need to go.

MARSHALL: So after that summer of, you know, dealing with that, how did that change things? What was the rest of your...?

GEORGE: So then I came back and I came back like bitingly genuine. Like genuine to a fault but also not histrionic and attention seeking genuine. But just, you know, willing to give feedback when feedback was asked. Being present when people were talking. Engaging in terms of body language. Cutting out 100 percent of anything that wasn't genuine. Off the table. And, you know, we repeated the experience at the end of that school year and I was in the middle of the circle.

MARSHALL: That would have been your third year?

GEORGE: That would have been my third year. And so the next sociogram, I was right dead centre, right.

MARSHALL: As a result of adjusting.

GEORGE: As a result of just, you know, taking that feedback that I got from people and trying to understand what it was that—how I was contributing to it. And why—not sort of sure why it was happening—I can understand why it was happening because, you know, I grew up in a culture of bullshit. We all bullshitted each other. You know this is the way it was in the community that I that I grew up. Everybody was walking on water. Nobody wanted to...

MARSHALL: There's a lot of things that bubble below the surface that are never discussed or rationalized in religious communities and families. We don't have the time or energy



to get into unfortunately. But there was something there that the man in the park saw and then it sounds like you have this gift of being able to find the core of that and being able to do that in a more honest and authentic way after you had this kind of realization. And so then you finished university.

GEORGE: Then I finished university and I took my first job working at an emergency youth shelter outside of Montreal. And that was just a fantastic eye opening experience. It was not run by government, it was run by a society. And so it was a place that kind of fostered learning and engagement and there were no real restrictions in the sense of like edicts coming from high upon above.

MARSHALL: So it was like a community society.

GEORGE: Yeah exactly. It was a great place to kind of, you know, learn to cut your teeth and then, you know, the kids I found so very interesting. Where they were coming from and kind of issues that they were bringing to the table and the fact that we had seven days, you know, to build a relationship and organize some kind of a discharge plan so they can move on to kind of another phase of life. Very much like what Kiwanis does.

MARSHALL: Right, right. [inaudible] So this would have been around what year?

GEORGE: It would have been '78.

MARSHALL: OK. And so then the types of issues that these kids were coming with or things like.

GEORGE: Well, you know, there was a lot of domestic violence. There were some addictions issues. There were, there was a lot of family conflict. Conflict that I never openly engaged in my own home because you know there was this under the thumb kind of context that I lived in and I didn't really buck the system when I was at home. But I'm looking at these kids and they did, right?

These kids just couldn't tolerate the kind of environments that they were living in. I said they pushed back up against these sorts of things and consequently, you know, they ended up in a lot of trouble with their parents, inside their schools because this didn't just stop inside the home it then [inaudible] cascaded to other places, right. So they, you know, they got to—there was a lot of kids with early diagnosis mental health, kids that were suicidal. Just kids that were distressed. And that's not the kind of environment that I grew up with. I did not grow up with a lot of kids in distress. They may have been in distress, but you sure didn't know it.

MARSHALL: But you didn't see it or talk about it. Right. So your role there was...?

GEORGE: Just as a child and youth care worker. Pure and simple. A lot of it was about developing those primary relationships and then trying to work with them and the social workers to come up with some kind of a transition plan to get them out of an emergency shelter [25:00] and into whatever the next phase might be. Might be home, might be a group home, you know,, might be independent living if they were of



that age. Something along those lines.

MARSHALL: And how long were you there?

GEORGE: [Inaudible] I was only there for a year not because that's what I wanted but it's a society. So at some point when I came back there was no funding, the program was shut down. Eventually it rebooted and it did run again. Yeah but at that time..

MARSHALL: It was that kind of on again off again nature of...

GEORGE: I came back it was done. It was all over.

MARSHALL: Do you remember the name of the society, the organization?

GEORGE: It was called AMBCAL. Amcal was the A Ma Baie Community, uh, Community Association League or something like that. Something strange...

MARSHALL: We can have a researcher figure that out.

GEORGE: You can give that a try. [laughs]

MARSHALL: [laughs] Or we'll just put [inaudible] question mark.

GEORGE: Anyway the interesting thing for me was that, uh, so I had no job and I had applied to another place a year earlier and hadn't been successful and that was called The Mount Bruno Boys and Girls Club. And it was not a Boys and Girls Club actually it was run by a different organization called Youth Horizons. And it was essentially an open custody therapeutic community for housing 12 kids all sentenced to open custody on this massive, you know, 3, 4-acre property outside of Montreal. So I applied there the first time and didn't get in.

MARSHALL: To do?

GEORGE: Child and Youth care. So this time I came back, of course I didn't have a job at that time but I had one year of working at AMCAL. So I had a bit more experience. I had my degree and this time I did get through so I was hired as a child and youth care worker. And that's pretty well where I stayed till 1982.

And that was, that was a fantastic experience because but also horrifying in some ways because of what we were allowed to do with these children. We were essentially solely responsible for not only being the custodians and making sure they don't run away and making sure that they behave, do their chores, and blah blah blah. We're also responsible for their psychological well-being and their ability to sort of engage more productively with others, with their families, with the justice system. So, you know, in some ways, you know, we had the responsibility of being their, almost like their counsellors. And we were child and youth care workers. It's like nobody was really qualified to be a counsellor.



MARSHALL: No you had a much bigger plate than you probably...

GEORGE: So there all kinds of different approaches, right. Nobody really had a real handle on how to support these kids properly.

MARSHALL: And was that because of the organization or is that just how the like funding was coming or how things existed at the time given the lack of other options?

GEORGE: There was... I think there was just the view that you have what they referred to as milieu therapy was something that was okay to, you know, was kind of the best approach to support these kids. But... it was also encouraged to get kids to cathart emotionally. You often had to create a lot of tension and conditions of resistance and emotion. So it's like we had to essentially blow kids up.

MARSHALL: To build it all up so it gets to that point of, yah...

GEORGE: And then, you know, once they were blown up we actually had to restrain them in quiet rooms.

MARSHALL: And that was kind of how things were expected to go?

GEORGE: So you blow somebody up, they are physically going crazy, you restrain them and transport them, you know, 300 yards across into a room with lexan glass and, you know, completely sheltered and soundproof. But during that period of time that they're in, you are then responsible for bringing them through that experience to the other side. Where supposedly you can begin to build some of those necessary skills and understandings that they needed to succeed in that environment.

MARSHALL: Yeah, and how prepared or trained were you to do this very intensive and exhaustive process?

GEORGE: Not at all and nobody was properly trained for it. All right. So I'll tell you my first orientation day they took me through to show me the entire property and I walk into this building with these eight cells in there and there's a carpenter [30:00] and he's putting in doors and repairing windows and there are two or three children-teens lying on the ground with big bodies on top of them while the carpenters are doing the renovations to the quiet rooms. And this was the orientation. I was like what is this thing? Some kind of war zone or like I mean that's how crazy it was.

MARSHALL: That is... Yeah that is an odd orientation day. And so you were there for a while. You said until 80'...

GEORGE: I was there for two years and then I had an opportunity to...

MARSHALL: How did you do at that role over the two years, given the lack of training and the nature of the program?



GEORGE: Pretty good, pretty good.. I never hurt anybody. I mean I did eventually, obviously, have non-violent crisis intervention training along that time. So I learned how to physically restrain which was something that had to be used fairly often but also how to de-escalate, you know, and kind of manage heightened emotions and aggression.

MARSHALL: So you had enough to be able to get through...

GEORGE: Yah, but not at the beginning. At the beginning, you know, nobody had anything really. And the..., you know, we each had our primary kids. So two kids in each cottage were considered our primary kids that we would spend more time with and have more to do with their plans and their families, if there were families involved. So I think I did fairly well. I ended up meeting my... the person I married who was also a Child and Youth Care Worker in the same unit that I was in.

MARSHALL: Oh wow.

GEORGE: So that was kind of cool [laughs] to meet her there.

MARSHALL: That's also a funny sidebar is getting to learn how everyone met their partners at some point along the line.

GEORGE: [Laughs]

MARSHALL: And it's always just like—it was just this weird little [inaudible] It was the most unexpected weird thing [inaudible].

GEORGE: That was very cool but I can tell you what wasn't cool was knowing that she was working in the same place that I was working with the amount of physical and emotional danger.

MARSHALL: Right.

GEORGE: Being there sometimes overlapping on shifts was very difficult.

MARSHALL: Knowing what was going on and what you were dealing with. Also...

GEORGE: I had to be, you know, I had feelings for this individual but those, you know, couldn't have a bearing on how I was supporting, you know, those kids because things can get pretty dicey if the lines get blurred.

MARSHALL: Absolutely.

GEORGE: So that was really difficult and at some point I said to her I don't want any crossover with you any longer. We need to stay on separate shifts because I can't stand the angst of knowing that somebody is trying to beat you up in that room and, you know, I'm supposed to...

MARSHALL: Right, because that complicates how you do this already very complicated job. It's a



whole other extra layer that you're probably not trained for.

GEORGE: Exactly. Exactly. Training was very inadequate. But it was a learning on the spot kind of environment where, you know, at the end of the two years you felt like you could do anything., you know,.

MARSHALL: I bet.

GEORGE: That you had withstood a lot of different challenges, you know,—emotional challenges, physical challenges, group challenges., you know, Sometimes how to manage a group of youth who are essentially rioting and trying to take over the entire property. Like how to actually pull some kind of semblance of control together and it was just a very powerful experience.

MARSHALL: Yeah and everyone was kind of learning as you went. No one was really prepared or...

GEORGE: There was nobody that I could see that I would say yeah that person really had it together.

MARSHALL: [inaudible].

GEORGE: Some people are lucky enough to be, you know, six foot 11 or something like that. They can just boom the voice and everybody [laughs] everybody would just... Yeah I would even [laughs—slamming noise] I would just shut my mouth too. But I didn't have that.

MARSHALL: And so then after two years you left because the funding disappeared again or..?

GEORGE: No no not at all. Not at all. I had an opportunity to move to another facility. So it was an assessment and diagnostic unit that the same society was running in another part of the city. So on one hand I didn't have to travel all the way out to Saint Bruno, which was quite a commute for me. And on the other hand I actually got to spend more time learning about assessment. Assessment, intake—things which I didn't have much to do with. The social worker generally handled all of that at the Boys and Girls Club. So we got a lot of exposure to that kind of testing. And all of it still really... It was an emergency shelter but the difference is there was a lot of assessment that was done during that period of time and we had much more involvement in the triage [35:00] of where these kids went afterwards. So that was kind of interesting.

MARSHALL: And that was just that because it was a different place or different...

GEORGE: It was just, uh, it was a different...

MARSHALL: A different approach to similar work?

GEORGE: Well it was, I mean it was more similar to the emergency shelter from a few years earlier except the difference was we actually did some some physical testing, you



know, and then tried to make sense of what these things actually mean. What did they say about, you know, kid's aptitudes? What did they say about the type of structure that they would thrive in or not thrive in? You know those sort of things. So the environment was of interest to me and my wife to-be ended up going there at the same time. Staying off... again...

MARSHALL: Right, so you have your separate spheres.

GEORGE: Separate shifts. But we did work in the same environment again.

MARSHALL: You both moved over to the same environment again and you stayed there for..?

GEORGE: Stayed there for two, three, yah three years till 85'. Yeah till about September 85'.

MARSHALL: And then what happened in September 85'?

GEORGE: So in 1985 we left Montreal. We left Montreal and moved to Newfoundland—to St. John's.

MARSHALL: And that was because?

GEORGE: That was because I had developed a real interest in psychology. You know first at college and then more so into the first university degree. I took quite a few psychology classes, became really interested but the thing that really interested me above everything else was schizophrenia and autism.

MARSHALL: Okay. Based on your experience in the two worlds in between? And just seeing what it was like in practice?

GEORGE: Based on a couple of things. One was just learning about, you know, when I took a behavioural psychology course. Just learning about individuals that were struggling with schizophrenia and then having had an opportunity to work—do a volunteer stint—at a local psychiatric hospital for a number of months. That was kind of, you know, the two and two came together and said yeah I'm really interested in that. And then while I was taking psychology I just stumbled on another course which was neurochemistry and that sort of really appealed to, you know, my scientific interests. And so then there was the, you know, the schizophrenia/autism/ neurochemistry—that whole relationship between the brain and behaviour and presentations like that. That completely sold me at that point. So then I went back to university and in 83'. Did a second degree and this time specializing in psychology but more oriented towards neuroanatomy and neurophysiology and neurochemistry...

MARSHALL: Sorry, You did the second degree in Newfoundland? You moved to Newfoundland to do the..?

GEORGE: No. No. [inaudible]



MARSHALL: [inaudible] You did the degree in Montreal?

GEORGE: Yah, while I was working at the emergency shelter. While I was working in the...

MARSHALL: [inaudible] Ok, and then you finished and then went to?

GEORGE: And then I applied to grad school to programs that were like neuroscience programs across the country. And we had... or I had offers from Ottawa, Manitoba, and St. John's. And so Sandy was just dying—my wife Sandy—was just dying to get the hell away from Montreal. She had a longstanding sort of conflictual relationship with her family and whatnot. So, you know, I said look to me it doesn't make a huge difference. Graduate school is going to be graduate school. I don't have any particular leanings one way or another. I said where do you want to go? She says as far as possible.

MARSHALL: [laughs].

GEORGE: How about that rock in the middle of the ocean there. How about that one there. So I said fine and...

GEORGE: You went to Newfoundland for grad school.

GEORGE: For grad school.

MARSHALL: And you were there just for grad school or did you stay after?

GEORGE: No, I was there for grad school. I actually left prematurely. So I was not actually finished my graduate degree when I left. And this is where the picture gets really complicated because, uh, Sandy... While we were there I did my graduate degree, Sandy did a BSW, and we had the birth of our first and only son all at the same time. And by the time Sandy graduated she could not find any work. There was a job freeze from the provincial government and there was no work to be had in social services for a social worker.

MARSHALL: Right.

GEORGE: So she, you know, she tried to find all kinds of different odd jobs and what not—she was very unhappy. And as luck would have it we had an acquaintance in Victoria who we had met in Newfoundland. And that person was living in Newfoundland and decided she wanted to go home to Victoria. And then she wrote to Sandy and said, you know, I'm just so depressed. I haven't been able to, you know,...

MARSHALL: After she came to Victoria she wrote...

GEORGE: I haven't been able to get, you know, get myself back in. I don't know what's going on. If I sent you a plane ticket, would you come and, you know, just try to [40:00] help me out. So Sandy is on a plane like it's nobody's business and within the first week she makes her way to a Ministry of Social Services and Housing office and just probes as



to whether there may be an employment opportunity and then calls me in November of 1989 and says "Hey guess what. I can be hired as a social worker in Victoria". And I says oh crap...

MARSHALL: She flew here and within a week there was a job offer?

GEORGE: Yah yah.

MARSHALL: Oh wow.

GEORGE: Yeah yeah. I don't know if you remember Riley Hern but he was one of the team leaders in the Ministry of Social Services. Then he passed away probably about five or six years ago—pancreatic cancer. But he was one of the—sort of—one of the best sort of mentors and team leaders that this area ever saw. Well, ever in my tenure. So yeah, he offered her a job. He had this new idea that people who have social work background and child youth care background, make the best social workers. I'd say he was more than happy just to throw that on the table right then and there.

MARSHALL: Absolutely. And so she took that?

GEORGE: She... there was a little bit of a discussion but really not that much. I mean the reality of it was that I was already doing my data analysis at that point. The only thing I had to do was finish the data analysis and write the thesis up and then I was done.

MARSHALL: Right.

GEORGE: And so I said well, you know, let's head here and then we'll see what, you know, what the future brings in so far as I'll finish my degree and then, you know, we don't have to make Victoria our permanent home, right? You'll have a job. You're getting experience. I can finish...

MARSHALL: This isn't forever. You'll have a job. I can finish when I finish. And you have a young child?

GEORGE: Sasha's got a great place to grow up. He was all of 2.5 years old.

MARSHALL: At the time?

GEORGE: Yeah. It just seemed like an interesting idea. [laughs]

MARSHALL: Yah. Sure. And so you...She had that job. You followed shortly.

GEORGE: I followed shortly towards the end of the year. Yeah.

MARSHALL: Okay. And not quite finished grad school?

GEORGE: That's right.

MARSHALL: And then you got here and what did you do when you arrive?



- GEORGE: And then it all turned to shit. Then I lost my ambition for finishing my grad work largely because I had to work. So I took a couple of jobs as my first introduction to Child Youth Care work in Victoria, which really blew me away. It's like, what? You hand somebody a contract, you tell them how many hours and what they're supposed to do and then off they went [laughs] to the community. I'd never heard of anything like that, you know. All the programs I was with were part of a larger agency and they were sort of, you know, part of a program. Here you kind of go out there like some kind of a foot soldier and you know you do your shtick, whatever that happens to be.
- MARSHALL: Given the terms of the government contract?
- GEORGE: On a contract, you know, it says how many hours. It says "and I would like you to work on such and such" and, you know, you get the yellow copy and off you go.
- MARSHALL: Go check those boxes.
- GEORGE: Just like whoa that was pretty weird but so I started there and then I also took a job...
- MARSHALL: Fairly quick after you arrived?
- GEORGE: Oh yeah, immediately.
- MARSHALL: Immediately?
- GEORGE: Yeah, immediately I think it was about a month later that I was doing that job and then I went out to Jack Ledger House and I got a job there as well working in a psychiatric facility. So I was working in the children's, the adolescent, the response units.
- MARSHALL: These were over overlapping?
- GEORGE: These were overlapping.
- MARSHALL: Yeah OK.
- GEORGE: So consequently I'm working a lot. My master's thesis is not going anywhere. I'm actually still trying to earn some money to buy a computer because I can't run my data analysis without a computer. I need a \$600 statistical program to analyze the data and I need a \$600 graphing program to graph all the data. So by the time all of this came together I was really, you know, I began to lose my incentive. Until...
- MARSHALL: While working to get the money to finish your grad school you were just lost the desire to do that part of it.
- GEORGE: I was getting, yah, I was getting a little bit disillusioned with, you know, am I ever gonna get this finished? But, you know, happily the Dean of Graduate Studies, he helped me out by sending me a letter that says—you're gonna be out if you don't finish this degree. You've got a handful of months here. If you don't finish this degree



you're out of here.

MARSHALL: And did that light a fire under your ass?

GEORGE: Totally, totally. I took a leave and I flew to Newfoundland. I wrote it up in six weeks and then it passed and that was it.

MARSHALL: And your jobs, your contract?

GEORGE: By then I had changed jobs. By then I was now in charge of a mental health program, which is now called Mental Health Outreach Team. Back then it was called the Professional Support Program. It was like one of—I don't know if you know the history of this but the—back in I guess it would have been 1989. [45:00] The Ministry of Social Service and Housing carves aside a million bucks and says—okay there are these 99 kids in the province that we don't have a clue how to support them. I mean these kids have addictions issues, significant mental health issues, huge family disruptions, criminal activity. These are the 99 kids we don't know what to do with. .

And so this woman who was in the Ministry of Health—Cinder Woods—she wrote a proposal called The Professional Support Project and she proposed that to the Ministry of Social Services. And basically she said look if you if you take, you know, just take out an individual who can be, for all intents and purposes, a coordinator, a therapist, a child and youth care worker and mate that person with a psychologist—somebody who could do data analysis and assessment and what not and within a short period of time you can actually have a pretty good idea of what's happening for these kids. If you focus heavily on assessment, if you focus heavily on in-home training, and then if you actually spend a reasonable amount of time in post evaluation—or evaluation really. So she made this proposal. And so Professional Support Projects sprouted up all over B.C.

MARSHALL: Oh wow.

GEORGE: All trying to do the same thing for these 99 kids.

GEORGE: And so we had one year.

MARSHALL: And that's where you moved?

GEORGE: And that's where I—I took that on... towards the middle of 1990. It was August of 1990 that I took that particular role on. And so it was during that time that I had to take this leave to go...

MARSHALL: Took a break, took a leave, finished.

GEORGE: That's right [laughs].

MARSHALL: And you were there just to finish and then you came back?



GEORGE: That's it. Just to finish and then I was back.

MARSHALL: Working at the same?

GEORGE: Working at the same—doing the same job. Yeah. Yeah.

MARSHALL: And how long did that last?

GEORGE: That lasted a very long time because when I was there I had a very unique opportunity to revive a suicide prevention program called Project Alive. That was—it had been running in 85' and it had been mothballed for lack of funding, lack of interest. I'm not sure what it was. So while I was doing this professional support project, I actually had an opportunity then to bring out Project Alive and try to run it again. And so I had half my caseload...

MARSHALL: As part of your work or as like a new..?

GEORGE: This was all done under the one umbrella.

MARSHALL: Okay.

GEORGE: I mean, this eventually—the whole thing kind of morphed into a much broader mental health program. But at that point 50% of it was a professional support project and 50% percent of it was Project Alive. So I did that until—What would it have been—about 1998.

MARSHALL: Oh wow.

GEORGE: Yah, so quite a long time. And during that time I had, you know, as I got better at doing this and the programs got more, sort of, more busy and a higher profile, I ended up doing more coordination. So I had a caseload but I also had a Coordinator/ Program Manager responsibilities. I had [laughs] this is really funny. I had an opportunity to run—well you know who I worked for right? They used to be called the Nisika Community Services. So they used to have three group homes—2 for boys and 1 for young female teens. And I had an opportunity to be put in charge of those three programs along with what I was doing and I had that job for a day [laughs]. I went to meet with the Ministry to tell them about my plans for these three homes. At the same time they said we're cutting your funding. So it was a million [laughs] it was a million dollars worth of group home funding that just disappeared on my first day on the job.

MARSHALL: [laughs].

GEORGE: It was a hell of a thing. Now something that I think rarely happens but happened in this case—and I don't know why cause I was not inside, kind of, the power base of the organization to really know what exactly happened—but the government offered an alternative. They actually said this is what we need. We need a program that supports



caregivers. We're willing to reinvest \$250,000.

MARSHALL: And do that instead of this?

GEORGE: Yeah they were saying these group homes are gone. They're just gone. But if you can come up with a proposal that we like, we'll give you back \$250,000 for a caregiver program. So that's what we did, we designed a caregiver support services...

MARSHALL: So you did that.

GEORGE: And added that because it was a [50:00] mental health support program for caregivers. So these kids would have had significant mental health struggles but the support was largely aimed for the caregivers to build [inaudible] capacity.

MARSHALL: To do...right. And this would have been in the middle of those 8 years or...?

GEORGE: That would have been in the middle of the 8 years.

MARSHALL: In the middle, yeah. Okay. And so then you did that... That kind of just changed your role halfway through.

GEORGE: No, well it was just another... So instead of being in charge of the group homes, now I had this, you know,—it was a smaller portfolio—so then I had the Professional Support Program, Project Alive, and this Caregiver Support Services.

MARSHALL: Right. Ok.

GEORGE: So then my role began to change a little bit in 2000 with the announcement that accreditation was going to be, kind of, a big ticket—mandatory ticket—for any agency over I think it was a 100,000 back then? I can't remember what the threshold was. So then, I mean, I didn't...I wasn't really interested in accreditation per se. That kind of stuff was mind numbing to me. But what I did know is that I spent about a year and a half in these mind numbing meetings in my own organization talking about accreditation and getting absolutely nowhere. And so the plan was to try to accredit in 2004. It was just like blah blah blah blah blah. I'm getting absolutely nowhere. So I think in the interests of survival, I basically... I just... I made a proposal. I said look, I will profile accreditation using my own programs. I'll run through the programs—all of the program standards—and I'll report everything back to you—to the larger agency—on a regular basis. Including creating all the templates for all the different assessments and intakes and transition plans and whatnot.

MARSHALL: This was 2000 and...?

GEORGE: This would have been 2002.

MARSHALL: 2002, so a little after the accreditation came in and it was, and you still had the three main programs?



- GEORGE: I still had the 3 main programs. And I kept all of those programs right up until 2004 right when there was some significant cuts in the sector.
- MARSHALL: Right.
- GEORGE: And the whole thing....
- MARSHALL: But in 2002 you were like I'll show how this could work essentially?
- GEORGE: Well I just... I think maybe for my own sanity... like we were just getting, you know, I was thinking this is going to be dangerous for the agency. We were talking about this for two years [laughs] without any further ahead. Nobody seems to have a grasp on these standards. So it was just like, you know, I asked the Executive Director. I said can you—are you okay if I just you know do a mock accreditation essentially of my own programs? And at the same time just build all the materials that would be necessary to become accredited and share all that information with all the other departments to try to...
- MARSHALL: Get everyone up to speed.
- GEORGE: Get everybody getting somehow engaged in the, you know, in the minutia of it as opposed to the high level conceptual conversations would just seem to go...
- MARSHALL: Weren't going anywhere. Something had to actually be done.
- GEORGE: They were maddening, right? So... like I say, it wasn't because it was really interesting. It was more survival, I thought. It was survival for the agency and really my personal survival. I couldn't stand any more of those kind of meetings. And so that was a really...
- MARSHALL: So you did that and how did that go?
- GEORGE: It went perfectly well. It went really well. And again I never...
- MARSHALL: Until 2004 when the cuts...?
- GEORGE: No, 2004 was when the cuts occurred which resulted in, you know, some of the Child Family Development programs got shrunk and the Caregiver Support Program—that I was responsible for—it was completely cut. And the Project Alive position that we had was also cut. So at that point, you know, I had the Mental Health Outreach Team left and I had that role as, you know, accreditation support and I maintained, kind of, more of a formal role around accreditation support at the organization. And then I also had an opportunity to do some quality assurance—sorry not quality assurance—cultural competency. That was kind of interesting that the agency just, you know,... Would you be interested in being a representative for cultural competency for the agency?



MARSHALL: And where did that come from or why?

GEORGE: Because it was one of the accreditation standards, right. You had to have a cultural plan. You had to show that your agency was... kind of had an orientation towards cultural practices and whatnot that reflected the population that you were supporting and your staff population.

MARSHALL: Ok.

GEORGE: So it was essentially—well, you know, you're Polish. You think you can do this? [laughs]. And I said... [55:00]

MARSHALL: And it is still 2004?

GEORGE: This is 2004. And I said—I says yeah sure. I'm actually very interested in being the diversity rep. And so that's what I started to do.

MARSHALL: And so between? Sorry, just to backtrack quickly. Did other things substantially change at the organization between -, you know, this is a long span of time -, you know, six, eight years in terms of growth or your [inaudible] role?

GEORGE: Well the organization had grown significantly. I don't know if you remember the big—the arrival of the youth migrants from Fujian Province, China. This boat arrives and eventually the agency is the one that takes that contract on and starts to support the migrant kids that had come off that ship. So I mean it was doing well as far as, you know, it's business side until the cuts. The cuts were just the beginning of eventually, you know, more and more and more and more and more over the years. But that really was the beginning. 2004 when the cuts started in earnest. So sorry what was the question? I missed it.

MARSHALL: Just in terms of your role or the organization overall in terms of changes other than, you know, up until the cuts. There was—was this a period of growth overall? Or just dealing with, you know, accreditation as things came down that you had to deal with?

GEORGE: There was a period of growth and that period of growth really began to change when the Liberal government came in. And the Liberal government ordered a core review of all of the services that were being provided. And that was the first time that, you know, essentially everybody's service was put up on a blackboard with a little yellow sticky and we would have conversations like—so, you know, how would you feel if I took over that piece of work and you just went and cried in the corner. You know there were these kind of conversations and jockeying for position but a lot of it was because the government had announced at that point that there would be significant cutbacks. But those cutbacks didn't see the light of day till 2004. They were just constantly talked about -they're coming, they're coming. And then when they were announced they were actually quite devastating. And then there was a sort of a rebuttal from the sector and our old Executive Director, Jim Fisher. And he was one of



the key mouthpieces for that rebuttal and...

MARSHALL: After the 2004..?

GEORGE: Before those cuts even happened.

MARSHALL: Before those cuts even started coming down?

GEORGE: I think those cuts ended up being—I think they might have been at about a 12% point after their successful appeal to the government because before that they were anticipating a 30/40%. Huge.

MARSHALL: Huge, it was much bigger.

GEORGE: Yeah yeah yeah yeah.

MARSHALL: OK. And then after those you just had Mental Health Outreach Team, accreditation supports...

GEORGE: Yeah. Cultural Competency.

MARSHALL: Cultural competency came onto your desk.

GEORGE: Yes. And then I did one more piece which was—I was the executive directors consultant to a Mental Health Crisis program that they were running for adults with developmental disabilities.

MARSHALL: Ok. This was shortly after... same year? 2004/2005?

GEORGE: It was all happening at the same...sort of more like 2003/2004. Cause in 2004 everything fell apart. Everything went to shit. [laughs].

MARSHALL: And then how long until things were put back together? What did those years look like?

GEORGE: Well it was more like, you know, one day of trauma after the other, right. Because the owner of the company essentially, you know, was charged with a couple of sexual offences involving a former client of the agency. And it also came to light that he had a drug addiction.

MARSHALL: Oh wow.

GEORGE: And that all happened around the accreditation survey. So as soon as the survey was done—we'd been given the green light that we were accredited—this came to light.

MARSHALL: And everything came to light.

GEORGE: Everything went to shit at that point. From investigations, police, forensics, newspaper reporters, and on and on and on. So the next while was very very hectic. Of course



the owner, kind of, vanished into obscurity as many of us tried to work to get him into an addictions program. And his wife essentially took control of the company as the other shareholder. And she agreed to do that. And once she was in place, [1:00:00] we had a stable person with which to, you know, to talk to and to continue to manage the agency. But by then nobody trusted who we were or what we were about. We had 120 employees at that time. A lot of government business at that point and a very uncertain future. And so we, you know, we kind of thought what— how are we going to survive this?

MARSHALL: How do you bounce back from that?

GEORGE: Yah, one of the things that we decided to do—in some ways, you know, it was important for me to, you know, to honour the wishes of the owner even though he was now a complete mess. But originally before he became that complete mess, we often used to talk about, you know, what his legacy would be when he finally did retire. And he did talk about, you know, perhaps gifting the agency to it's employees, if the employees can find a way forward.

GEORGE: Not that it—whether it was his to gift or not remains to be seen.

MARSHALL: Right. But...

GEORGE: That's the legacy he wanted because, you know, it was very difficult to work in a for-profit agency. Very difficult.

MARSHALL: Oh yeah.

GEORGE: In an environment that was, you know, by and large non-profit, it was very very difficult. And staff, you know, they wore that and they, you know, would come back and say why does it have to be this way? Why can't it be that way? It's not under our control and... So we made a petition to the owner's wife.

MARSHALL: And... to do that? To make that happen? And did that happen?

GEORGE: That happened.

MARSHALL: How long did that take? What was that process like?

GEORGE: Oh well, we had to convince the government that we were somebody that could be trusted to take this on. And that all of the contracts from CLBC and MCFD could be transferred over to us. So we're talking about over five million dollars at that point so it is a large amount of money.

MARSHALL: How many years later was this in terms of investigation and she transferred...?

GEORGE: How long did it all take? So the investigation started pretty well in June/July of 2004 and she was in place by, um, probably by the end of the year. So into 2005, then we



started in earnest our negotiation.

MARSHALL: This process in 2005?

GEORGE: Yep yep. So that included negotiating with the government, including negotiating with the union, making a petition with labour relations to become a succession organization. And then finally we spent six months recruiting a Board of Directors, like interviewing everybody in a very formal kind of way to try to get our inaugural board to sign off.

MARSHALL: Establish...

GEORGE: Which eventually happened in January of 2006. And then the official transfer happened in February.

MARSHALL: Right, 2006.

GEORGE: Yep.

MARSHALL: And did your role change in all of this?

GEORGE: Yep. Yep. So in June of 2005 the Executive Director said I'm out of here. He said I'm going to Castlegaar, I've got family out there, my wife is from there, and frankly, you know, this whole experience has just kicked the shit out of me and I don't feel I want to be here any longer. So we kind of worked out a proposal to... Well, we could have posted for an Executive Director at that point. I and one other individual in the agency were the two senior-most employees. One was a financial manager and I had been a manager of whatever it was I had described to you.

MARSHALL: These programs, yep.

GEORGE: And so, you know, that was one of the proposals that was put onto the table that we do have co-directorship and then leave the board of directors to decide whether it wanted to continue with the co-directorship or, you know, work out some other model or post the position or whatever the case may be. And, you know, for us, I didn't really have that much of an interest in administration, I really didn't., you know, I love mental health. I loved the work of it. I have since I was a young kid. And I love supporting people who are doing the work. As long as I had a foothold in that, I was fine but as soon as I was an administrator that was—that didn't feel right. But then there were 120...

MARSHALL: So was part of it just like thinking this was the best thing to do given the circumstances? And then...

GEORGE: People knew us. They trusted us., you know, Was this the time to kind of bring a [laughs] a brand new person into the organization?



MARSHALL: Given all the other changes, right.

GEORGE: Exactly. So we opted to give that a try. And so we did that till 2008. November 2008—that's when the Board of Directors decided to make one Executive Director position and they offered it to me. [1:05:00] So from two co-directors...

MARSHALL: Right, to one. And did the other co-director stay on.

GEORGE: The other director stayed on as the Director of Finance and Operations, which was what she had been right up until then.

MARSHALL: Before and then so it was like—How much of this was the board's decision or your proposal in terms of the best or right thing to do?

GEORGE: It was both. It was both. The workload distribution was completely one sided and I looked at my job responsibilities and said well yes on paper we're co directors but, you know, I've got 90 people now that I'm responsible for everything and all of these programs and the Director of Finance and Operations—I have to be responsible for all the finances and operations. So I don't see where there's an upside here really. So I made the proposal to the board and the board agreed in 2008.

MARSHALL: In 2008.

GEORGE: To make that change, yah.

MARSHALL: And how did that change go for you?

GEORGE: It went well. I mean it uh.... [Laughs] I say it went well. When I got into the position—even the previous one was called Director of Programs and Personnel—that co-director position?

MARSHALL: Yeah. Yeah.

GEORGE: Even then I remember like six months in—so probably in the summer of 2006—I already put a proposal for my withdrawal from the organization.

MARSHALL: Oh wow.

GEORGE: Yeah. Which was sort of like...cause I didn't see myself in this role.

MARSHALL: OK.

GEORGE: So I put this on the table in a management meeting and of course, you know, no surprise everybody freaked right out.

MARSHALL: Yeah.

GEORGE: What the hell? People were significantly traumatized, right. They were traumatized they needed some security and some assurance.



MARSHALL: Stability in a time of, right...

GEORGE: Exactly, exactly. So I really had to rethink what, you know, what was going on for me and so I, you know, I just decided at that point to make a longer commitment to the organization. Just in the interest of providing that kind of sure footing, even though it was not exactly, you know, I didn't feel like it was a great fit...

MARSHALL: A perfect fit.

GEORGE: For who I was. But what fit me was the loyalty, the need to be there for the people that needed the support, for the tremendous work that was being done by the organization. Like so you know I...

MARSHALL: The organization needed you in the position.

GEORGE: A lot of people kind of tried to get my head around this because it was like, you know, I'm having a hard time with this.

MARSHALL: And they convinced you of it?

GEORGE: Well they are saying, you know, are you honouring your core values? Right?

MARSHALL: Right.

GEORGE: And I, you know, I'm kind of thinking it through and yah I'm honouring my core values but crap, you know, can't I honour my [laughs] core values and feel like it's my second skin. You know, I'd like that part too. But at the very least once I came to terms with the fact that my core values were being nurtured by virtue of the decisions I made, I felt much much better, much much better to take that on.

MARSHALL: To take the role?

GEORGE: Even though it was insanely difficult. Sandy always jokes, you know, every time she ran into somebody she says "I haven't seen him for five years, I haven't seen him for ten years, I haven't seen him for twelve years", you know, it was that sort of thing because it's an all-immersive kind of role. But, you know, for me I think... So number one it resonated with my core values but secondly there was a lot of things to learn—there's a lot of new things to learn. All these different negotiations and trying to acquire equity and purchase property and start-up programs and get funding and fundraise and on and on. Like there was a lot of new stuff for me. That was kind of...

MARSHALL: To wrap your head around in that role.

GEORGE: So I kind of enjoyed those things as long as I was getting fed in some kind of positive way. I wasn't like completely shell-shocked with the whole thing but I always knew that this had to end, right. It had to end because it was not, it still was not in the grain of my, you know.



MARSHALL: So what does that look like? Doing that new role for however many years knowing that it needed to end—maybe in a certain way rather than at a certain time?

GEORGE: I knew I needed to end it well, right. Whatever that was, I was not going to pitch, you know, a really articulate proposal [laughs] to people for people to freak out over. So I made my announcement in 2014 after we had accredited for the fourth time and I said that... I said, you know, I think this is it. I think I've reached a point where I need to be thinking about moving on and then invested a lot of time and energy into succession planning. So probably in that first year and a half I was spending a lot of time talking [1:10:00] to people about it, reading a lot about succession, making no headway whatsoever. So a year and a half later I went back to the board and I said I need help. I said I don't have, I don't have yet another edge of this desk to grow this process because it's not going to happen. And they're just a great bunch of people so they said we totally get it. We know you need some help. And so we hired an organization to take over the succession.

MARSHALL: The succession planning part of that.

GEORGE: Yes, the succession plan was a chunk of it and then subsequently finding somebody to replace me became the secondary part of the process.

MARSHALL: And what did that process look like for you? Were you kind of still kind of feeding both worlds—like setting up the future while still being in the E.D. role?

GEORGE: Yeah well what I was trying to do was to keep the organization as stable as possible, number one. And to make sure that everything that was in the strategic plan was being honoured. That there was movement kind of forward on the prescribed areas that staff had indicated were priorities going forward.

And that, you know, there was good accreditation infrastructure so the next person coming on wasn't coming on to kind of a glut of information and capacity around the accreditation. So just trying to make sure that some of the key elements were looked after for when that person kind of came in. So, you know, it was still a, you know, it was a very very busy time. Just the same, you know. But this time, you know, I book a meeting with somebody from Engaged H.R. and they would come and sort of, you know, pick your brain, do a few questions, get you to fill out an assessment or two, and, you know, and then we had these regular dialogues about succession—succession planning throughout the organization. So I felt like it was all moving in the right direction.

MARSHALL: Right. And that process lasted how long?

GEORGE: That process lasted for a year and then the search for the Executive Director began at that point.

MARSHALL: Which would have been in 2016ish?



GEORGE: They started looking in 20—what the hell year is this? 2018? 2019. So 2017.

MARSHALL: 2017. Cause there was a year and a half before ok...

GEORGE: October 2017 I think was uh... October 2017 was 1 round of interviews and then February/March of 2018 two more rounds. Hiring in April of 2018 and then subsequently unhiring whenever the hell it was [laughs]. And apparently somebody new there now, yah.

MARSHALL: Yah, so I mean, I'll just backtrack a little bit. We kind of glossed over a number of years like 2008 to 2014 before you made that announcement. What did those six years look like? Were you... I mean... there was Liberal governments over and over and over. What was that role like? Were you kind of just, you know, steadying the ship? Were you growing? Were you struggling to keep your head above water...?

GEORGE: I wouldn't say we were growing. I think we were losing and we were gaining.

MARSHALL: At the same time, yah.

GEORGE: So we were really kind of at like a net zero kind of a situation. Some, you know, what I had noticed is when we had the opportunity to take over there were programs running with a lot of staff. And, you know, you're looking at that period between 2008 and 2014, we had way more programs and way fewer staff. So that's how it became that programs became much smaller. The capacity became much smaller. But there was way more work. I mean, you know, accrediting a program that's run by a .75 FTE. Yeah that's a lot of work to do for a program of that size but, you know, mandatory because it's within the funding framework.

MARSHALL: Yah, so those changes weren't necessarily intentional. That was just the nature of these accreditation processes and the kind of ecosystem of, you know, the social service sector at the time.

GEORGE: Yeah. Every, you know, that... The South Island Contracting Review that's the one that really changed the landscape of everything. That's really—that took these larger programs and decimated them and in their place left a much smaller capacity sector. And it happened on both ends. MCFD did it with the contracting review and CLBC did it with their own kind of restructuring when they came into power and they—sorry, not came into power but—about three or four years after Community Living British Columbia formed, they kind of looked at their budget and said well we can't deliver [1:15:00] the mission that we've been legislated to deliver without considerable amount of money. And that money, if it's not coming from the Treasury Board, has to come from the existing sector.

So the sector was subjected to almost like—I would say—almost like Gestapo techniques. Where people were interviewed and then reinterviewed and reinterviewed with the sole purpose of identifying available money. There was a mentality there



that there was, you know, there were bundles of money that people were sitting on that they had in their desk drawers.

MARSHALL: Just hiding, lighting their cigars with it.

GEORGE: Exactly.

MARSHALL: That was close because the South Island and then [inaudible]. That was fairly close together. Those were...

GEORGE: Yeah... The beginning of 2008 is when—or actually December of 2007 was the first of the big cuts from CLBC. And it really continued all the way through. This mining for additional money and programs just contracting at that point and then it intersected with the South Island contracting process which really started to roll out in July of 2010 and continued.

MARSHALL: Yah it was 2 years later. And then, yeah. And that had a fairly big impact?

GEORGE: Yes it certainly did. I mean talk about the timing. We had just finished our second strategic plan which was a beautiful switch from, you know, moving from... moving from kind of the SWOT Analysis -you know the traditional—to the SOAR model, more of an appreciative inquiry. One that we homespun. We built it up all on our own. We owned it. We owned the ownership of writing the plan. Everything was done in home. And then as soon as all of our initiatives are moving forwards [laughs] all of the...

MARSHALL: Then it all just blows it up.

GEORGE: And, you know, people were, you know... They were worried about their jobs. Many many many were laid off and being a union organization there was bumping up the yinyang. So, you know, it was it was very very disruptive, very devastating for staff and for management alike. And, you know, we took a very specific and intentional approach, which was to do all of these processes as honourably as we could. Like all the information totally above board. Everything had to be transparent with respect to how it was going to run because...

MARSHALL: And how things were going to go within the organization. What would happen, yah...

GEORGE: There was nothing that was not disclosed with respect to what people's rights were, what their opportunities were, what potential consequences were for the decisions that they made. And each and every manager was essentially, you know, we said the number one—the most important role in your job right now is providing support for these people. These are your biggest assets and this is where your focus needs to be. And that really was a period of about two years of trying to help people move through whatever. Whether it was leaving the agency, bumping into something they're completely unfamiliar with but still under union regulations -potentially qualifying—



and all that sort of thing.

Yah, so there was a lot of disruption to programs, to clients obviously. Massive disruption to clients who, you know, one day they have, you know, seven people that are working with hundreds of people all of a sudden those seven are gone, right. And those new relationships, they don't know anybody from anybody, you know,. You have to start all over. That happened time and time again.

MARSHALL: Yeah. A lot of different people. And had things... I assume things had been kind of settled down by 2014 when you made your announcement. It seems like you would have made sure things were in order before you left.

GEORGE: They settled down but there was also, there was also a real fractiousness. So you know it's like when is the next thing coming? When's the next wave coming? And I think, you know, in retrospect I may have perpetuated that next wave unintentionally. And I would still have done it even if I knew that the consequences would be hard. This was just simply the right thing to do. Brian Hill and I talked many times about potentially merging the two organizations but we ran out of time. We ran out of time to really have a proper merger because they became insolvent. They knew it was only a handful of months that they had to survive. So then it became a matter of [1:20:00], you know, is there something you can take on from us that could continue and that our legacy can live on. And so that's what we did.

MARSHALL: For the legacy or for the programs that needed to keep?

GEORGE: For both.

MARSHALL: A little bit of both, right. Then this was 20...

GEORGE: That was 2011.

MARSHALL: 2011. Yeah.

GEORGE: That was December 2011. So, you know, our staff have gone through this whole thing and then all of a sudden, you know, they've got a new influx of people coming from another organization. That transition was very difficult because they're walking away from an organization where their heart was intertwined.

MARSHALL: With the, with work...

GEORGE: With CAFCA. So they were traumatized, you know, that their beloved agency was gone. All these people that they saw on a daily basis and had loved dearly were gone. Their work remained the same essentially because they're, you know, ...we... the continuity for client care was maintained all the way through but clearly they were no longer working inside CAFCA. And they were also many of them were quite senior in terms of their seniority. So there was some threat to the seniority of the Phoenix folks.



MARSHALL: Given how the...

GEORGE: So you know... So like I said... It was that they were already shaken, they're already looking for something to happen, and then we do the CAFCA sort of merger/acquisition during 2011 and it was hard. It was hard for them to be okay with having a threat to their, you know, their well-being, their job, their seniority...

MARSHALL: That's a big change in a lot of different ways and a lot of different aspects.

GEORGE: And for the CAFCA folks too, right. It was very difficult to call this new place home. So a lot of resentment, you know. And it was not resentment because we were Phoenix, it was resentment because of what had happened.

MARSHALL: What had happened and how things had... It's harder to see the bigger picture of the historical [unclear] of why that happened the way it did and then being able to also separate, you know, the who I am from the what I do or the where I do it which is tough. So there have been a couple times where things have seemed gone to shit or been blown up. If, you know, looking back—if you had to do things over or with the benefit of hindsight—was there anything that you, you know, maybe that wasn't the right call? Or things that could have gone differently? Or something that you maybe failed to see coming down the pipeline at a certain point given how things have changed so drastically in a couple of different ways?

GEORGE: I mean I definitely, you know, when I think about the South Island contracting review, I do think about the fact that that process began a while back and we didn't really appreciate how big an effect it was going to be. And part of it was, you know, because sure we were going to lose some programming. But the other part of it was that the services were going to be delivered now in community-based facilities with communities being defined in some specific ways.

So all of a sudden you're a regional provider. What is our community? You know what I mean like? And so in some cases we couldn't make an argument that the Central Peninsula was our community—for example—because we didn't have enough of a presence. And initially we were told that the West Shore was not going to be a community for us—that we could not apply for any of the RFPs up on the West Shore. And we ended up writing a rebuttal once the decision was made and the RFP awarded. We filed a complaint and said we've had a 15 Year presence in the West Shore. We had a physical office in the West Shore for 15 years. I said I don't see how that disqualifies us from being a community agency. And ultimately they did relent and we did win the RFP. When we, uh, when it was resubmitted and we had to do it again.

MARSHALL: The second time around.

GEORGE: The second time around. Yeah. But it was that kind of thing where what—I couldn't believe that, you know, that a regional service provider with this kind of longevity,



this amount of programming was going to be decimated by virtue of this kind of new model that was coming out. That surely, you know, if we've been serving the peninsula for 15 years—even if we're doing it here, you know, this... I mean how hard would it be to actually physically relocate into the peninsula. If you told us we were losing 500,000 and I said well do you mind if I just...

MARSHALL: [inaudible].

GEORGE: Do you mind if I just rent something over there? Are you ok with that? Now can I submit that? If we could have done [1:25:00] that then I think it might have been a different outcome.

MARSHALL: Right. But that's also not the type of thing that you can see coming. Where oh there's this, you know, so and so change in terms of the government's leaning towards austerity. We can expect that there's going to be a bit of this. That's like a complete restructuring of something that's kind of fundamental to how you organize what you do. It's kind of hard to predict.

GEORGE: Yeah, but there was a long enough process of, you know, all of the different directors around the table. We don't think this is going to come to pass the way that, you know, MCFD thinks it will...

MARSHALL: It's not going to happen the way they think it's going to happen. It can't happen in the way they think it's going to happen.

GEORGE: They can't dismantle everything in this way. I mean it's just like CAFCA. Thought there's no way they can ever lose youth services. They were so entrenched in that service provision stream. They were so good at it. They could not imagine for one second that this RFP would have gone to Youth Empowerment. Didn't believe that for a second. And there it was.

MARSHALL: And then it did.

GEORGE: And then it did, right. Yeah. Yeah that was a, that was a tough one for sure.

MARSHALL: That was a tough one. And so then the other side of that coin. If you had to, you know, shine a spotlight—maybe not necessarily. I mean you can interpret this how you want. Honestly think of our line of work or this work in terms of victories. But if you had to shine a spotlight maybe on your best work or your most satisfying work, what was that? When was that?

GEORGE: Well I mean it really was throughout that entire period of, you know, probably from the early 2000s right through till the end of my tenure and that was the collaborations, right. That was the spotlight. The spotlight was you know not thinking that you were an island—that there were lots of incredibly capable and talented people having strangely similar experiences to you.



And there was really, you know, the government in some ways did us a favour. By creating a culture of austerity, they also opened the door to a tremendous amount of collaboration. Because some things became really obvious for us, right. That, you know, if for example the, you know, in order to create a functional stream of services for First... for Aboriginal Indigenous individuals—but doing it, you know, using funding from the non-Indigenous organizations.

Well, you know, that required for us to have some cross communication with organizations at a much deeper level than we have ever had before. And the formation of the Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal Coalition—which ran for many years—was just that. A dialogue between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal organizations about, you know, sort of sharing our culture—our work culture, you know, our aspirations for the future, for children. You know with some of the richest kind of periods of time that we had. We had a training consortium with South Island Training Initiative. We collaborated for -what... We just dissolved that last year. That was a 14-year collaboration with agencies who said who's got money to do all this training and this and that and accreditation and blah blah blah. Well, let's pool our resources and try to do something together. And then that collaboration then became well let's offer it to the rest of the sector because everybody needs this kind of stuff not just us. So there were lots of opportunities for us to get together with other organizations.

MARSHALL: In a way that starts kind of like we have to do this because of the nature of how things are changing but also then there's actually a—this is actually a different way we could be doing a lot of things.

GEORGE: Totally yeah. And then everything became, you know, everything subsequently became, you know, what can we do as a collaboration? Who can we talk to? And it's no longer that, you know, we don't hold all of the troubles for the sector. We don't hold all of the answers for the sector, right. It's out there.

MARSHALL: And there's this kind of how we actually should be or have to do what we need to do? In the same way that you're like thrown into those early programs without the training you need to when you like here's what I have to do to get through this job. But in an unexpected way you learn how to do it and what needs to be done. And then from a different level and a very different context.

GEORGE: Those really are the richest.

MARSHALL: Experience the same thing.

GEORGE: Yah.

MARSHALL: This has been great. I think that's a great wrapping point. Is there anything we missed? Is there any final thing you want to add?

GEORGE: I didn't throw anyone under the bus.



MARSHALL: Is there anyone you wanna throw under the bus?

GEORGE: No, I didn't have... I didn't, you know, I didn't have any angst about anyone in particular over the years. I think where I came to was, you know, it's not a very healthy [1:30:00] system that we work with and it's changing constantly. There are a host of characters kind of winding in and winding out and some of them are just very difficult to work with. Others are a lot easier to work with. But that juggernaut of a ministry, you know, it's troubled. It's significantly troubled—almost no matter who ends up being at the head of it. But, you know, our role as organizations is continuously to try to get the best for the people that we're working with and that means working with people who may be unreasonable. Working with people who piss you off. You know it's just, it's a fact of life right.

MARSHALL: Because in spite of how things change at the top—or in terms of the elected officials—a lot of what's underneath that does not change at all. And you have to keep doing what needs to be done.

GEORGE: So in some ways, you know, when you reflect back on your role, you think that I spent an awful lot of time trying to negotiate with people who really I should have driven over. But the bottom line is that ultimately, you know, the relationships that we developed, the trust that we restored with the entire service system, you know, we did ok. We did ok. But of course would I have wanted it differently? Would I want to speak to somebody in a very common sense kind of way and negotiate something in a very fruitful and productive way? Of course, who wouldn't want that?

MARSHALL: That sounds great. Let's just do everything that way. It's a shame it can't be like that.

GEORGE: Who wouldn't want that? But the interesting thing is hearing all the stories, right. You hear all the stories you realize. Yeah you know what, it doesn't matter. So it's in Victoria. Somebody else is telling you about this experience in Quesnel, you say—you know what? Same same. Same same. We've all got the same kind of thing. Some people are blessed from time to time and they, you know, they talk about team leaders walking in with a bag full of money and just plopping it there and saying—would you like to run this program for us? Yes.

MARSHALL: Ok.

GEORGE: But, you know, I think that's rare.

MARSHALL: That is very rare.

GEORGE: To live that kind of blessed life.

MARSHALL: Do what you need to do with what you've got. That's great. Marshall Watson and George Klukowski. It is March 26, 2019. We are in Victoria. Thank you so much. This has been great.



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GEORGE: My pleasure.

MARSHALL: So I'm going to stop this.

[end recording]