

L'NU

Stephen Jerome Sr.

Daniel Grenier: Can you tell us a little bit about yourself, Stephen?

Stephen: I'm from a little First Nation reserve in the Gaspé peninsula called Gesgapegiag First Nation and I am a black ash ancestral basket maker. I use the black ash tree to work. It's a part of my life. I live off the tree, I live off the land. Through my culture, I am able to provide for my family, for myself. You know, I go and help as many people as I can. I go to the schools, I travel all over the place. Because this is a dying culture. We still have a lot of basket makers out there, but we don't have anybody to prepare the wood for them. So I get contacted by many Elders. They tell me, *Yes, I'm a basket maker, but my husband can't prepare the material anymore, he can't go into the woods.* I'm there for them. Some of my students are eighty-nine years old. Ninety years old. I am able to provide for them, the material, etc. I fix the material, I prepare it. It's ready to go. Sometimes, you know, the life of a ninety-year-old can be pretty boring.

So right there, now they have something to do. They're making baskets. Living life to the fullest. 'Cause it's a pastime that they need.

Daniel: You're talking about teaching, but you were once a student yourself, right?

Stephen: When I was crawling around, I was already learning. We were a big family, you know. Seven boys. The whole family, grandmother, great-grandfather, everybody, we're all basket makers. I have footage of my great-great-grandfather, in 1939, he was eighty-two or eighty-five years old, right there on film, making baskets. It's in our family. It's what we do: we make baskets. That's all we do. A lot of people, they see me go and they say, *You were born with a basket in your hands*. Like a carpenter, born with a hammer in their hand. I've been making baskets for forty years now, and it was never forced upon us. We just grew into what my father was doing. You know, my father was in a wheelchair. He had multiple sclerosis, and he still managed to teach us everything that he knew, and passed it on to us. It's a real passion. I wake up in the morning, I go to work, smile on my face. I have my own shop, right next to my house. Every morning. My wife doesn't even have to ask where I am. I'm next door, I'm in my shop. Sometimes I can be in there for thirteen, sixteen hours a day, just doing my thing. My father always said, *Keep it going, keep it going. One day, maybe nobody's going to be around to do this*. He was right, you know. My father died about nineteen years ago. I've never stopped. I went to school, but I was making baskets after school.

Daniel: It's never been just about opening a business...

Stephen: No, not at all. That came later. Now, we sell in many stores all over the place, but the main thing has always been to provide for the family, clothes on our back, food on our table, paying the bills. We were also there for my father. We were there all the time for him. We were his legs. We used to put him in the Jeep and bring him out in the woods, where he would send us out looking for trees and bringing back samples. There was this smell in the trees, and my father used to say, *Don't ever forget the smell of this tree right here.* He knew the smell of a rotten tree. He memorized it. Never picked that type of tree. He also knew what type of tree was growing near the black ash. Cedar's no good for it. It's those skills that I learned from him that allowed me to master the techniques. Picking the ash. Choosing it. Where it grows the best. What happens when there's too much sun, when there's too much water, not enough water. Watching for acid rains. Etc. We're always looking up at the trees, looking up at the branches, checking if there's anything wrong up on top. If there's something up there, there's something wrong down below for sure. Even the vibration of a tree is important: if you hit the tree, there's a certain sound that can alert you. *Oh, this is a dry tree, I'm not going to touch it.* If it sounds like a thump, boom, oh, that's a good one. Nice area, nice sandy bottom... Fiddleheads are crucial too, because they grow in the same area as the black ash, where there's a lot of water and sand, in the swamps. Stuff like that had to be learned before I could even call myself a master

basket maker. And I'm still learning a bit here and there, you know. Whenever I have the chance, I'll talk to the Elders and I always have little questions for them.

Daniel: You spoke about the family side of basket making. What about the community side?

Stephen: I've lived my whole life on this reserve. They contact me, everybody, the schools right down to the alcoholic centers, kids with problems at home, and I'm always there for them. The band contacts me when there's something that has to do with the culture, anything. Because they know how important it is for somebody to learn how to prepare the black ash. You know, making a basket is the easiest thing. And you can order material from anywhere. They sell that bamboo stuff and all that. But it's different when it comes to black ash. You have to start with the tree. There are so many things to do before starting to make the basket itself. Some kids, they say to me, *Hey, can you teach me how to make a basket?* And I say, *No, I can't teach you, you have to start from the tree, straight from the tree.* Then I take them out in the woods, and they learn how to cut the tree. Be it winter or summer, I'll take them out there and teach them how to identify the tree. They can be as young as twelve or thirteen years old. I went into the woods with my niece a lot in the last couple of years. She's studying right now at Bishop's University, and she grew up off the reserve. So she's trying to learn how to speak the language again, speaking Mi'kmaq, through me, with my help. Little stuff, you know, *How are you; It's a nice day.* You have to start off with things like that.

Colours, the word for a chair, for a table, etc. The most common sentences of our everyday language.

Daniel: It's interesting to listen to you go naturally from basket making to language learning.

Stephen: Yes, it's all interconnected. I speak my language fluently. We all learned it when we were babies, that's the only language we used when we were growing up. Back then, there were no video games... Well, there were, but they were not allowed in our house. [Laughs.] My father was against computers and stuff like that. Let's say that I grew up old-school. Even today, I talk to my kids in Mi'kmaq. My wife is from Massachusetts, so we have to make an effort not to speak only in English around the house. She's learning. I'm teaching everybody. Lessons at the table. *Pass me the salt, Can I have a butterknife?* The word for bread. All the important little words that connect everything together. Here, in the Mi'kmaq community, we have a rate of about 60% of the people who can speak our language fluently. We speak French too, and English also. The younger generation, those under forty years old, they have some difficulties. But for the old ones like me it's an everyday language.

Daniel: Do you feel pressure about being considered a model, or a leader for the community?

Stephen: It's not about pressure, no. It's simply that I know how important I am to my people and my culture.

I know how important it is for me to keep it going. I used to work for the windmill industry. For ten years I was employed by a company based in Saint-Georges-de-Beauce. I was a foreman on the big projects. Four years ago, I said to myself, *I can't be here no more*. I told my boss, *I can't go on*. He said, *We'll raise your pay*. No, it's not about the pay. It's about my culture. Looking at my culture, knowing that it's slowly dying, I said to myself, *I got to stop, now. And I got to start, now*. I always promised my dad that I would keep it going. I'll keep it going. You know, I would look at my paycheck and think, *This isn't enough to keep me away from home*. I got to go home, and here I am.

Daniel: One of the most fascinating things about you is your sense of humour. Can you talk a little bit about that? After all, you named your shop The Ashole...

Stephen: [Laughs.] Yes! I get that from my father. In the family, we all have that sense of humour. We all love to laugh and to joke around. He's in my shop, my father. He's with me all the time. There are signs, all over the place, that he's with me. I once met a woman who said to me, *Your father would be so proud*. I thought about it and I told her, *You know what, my father and I, we're making baskets today*. I get the chills right now talking to you about it. The hair on my arms standing up like a porcupine. Actually, he's patting me up the shoulder right now. I feel him all the time. Sometimes, I'll be there talking to myself, saying, *Hey, have you seen this?* I'll see something twitching in the corner of my eyes. Three or

four in the morning, making baskets. I get up real early, you know. I go to bed early, I wake up early. I find it weird that some people would say my shop is haunted. No, no, these are my visitors. They're my ancestors. You come in my shop, you'll see baskets from the past. Baskets that were made by people who passed on years ago, decades ago. It's like a museum. I talk to them, I say, *Come on, guys, let's make a basket today. Let's see what we're gonna do.* I get help from them, you know, they guide me. I remember, there was a certain basket, one that I was trying to make twenty or twenty-five years ago. It was tough, I was saying to myself, *I can't do it.* So I put it down, and it stayed there for all this time. One day, I just picked it up, and I thought about my dad. And you know what? I finally made it just as good as my dad would have. My father was one of the best basket makers I've ever seen. He had big shoes to fill. He used to be my mentor, and he still is. Still teaching me today. Everyday. He's in here with me. I dream about him all the time. See him walking around. Telling jokes. Talking. Oh, he loved talking. I remember the six of us, the whole family, all together in that big room, talking all the time, no TV. You don't see that kind of thing anymore. So, today, what I do is I take the place of six people in that room of mine, in my shop, to work on that one basket. I see my mother, she's doing this. And my brothers are doing that. There are two more brothers in the shop, preparing the wood, bringing it in the house. We switch places when we get tired. We are providing for the farmers, for everybody. Once, my daughter was telling me about those people, those companies that cut trees, they clear-cut the forest. And then she said,

Dad, you cut down trees, too. Yes, but when I cut the tree, you don't see me, but I'm talking to it. I'm telling it, Look how good you've grown. Look at you, you're perfect. I choose you. You're gonna make so many people happy. You're gonna be on somebody's wall. You're gonna do so many things. You're gonna help me provide for my family. When I was done explaining this to her, she said, *Wow, I didn't see it that way.* And I said, *Well, that's how I think all the time. I'm not saying it out loud, but, still, I'm talking to the tree. I'm giving thanks.* Sometimes, I'll offer tobacco to the woods, to give thanks. Thanks for offering your life. Just like we do with the moose. It's a kill, so we offer tobacco. With the black ash tree, I'll put tobacco on the stump so that future generations will be able to enjoy the fruits of the forest. I'm not taking from the land without returning. All of this, it's good for my sobriety. It's been seventeen years, now. Almost eighteen years of sobriety. I'm using all this as therapy. The Elders too, they have used this as therapy. It's not about making money. They don't care about money. It's all about therapy. Keeping your hands busy. Creating stuff. Being happy. Not just waking up and staring out the window all day long, watching TV, or whatever. Making something. It's powerful. There's so much that goes into it. Into the making.

Daniel: So what does the future have in store for you?

Stephen: Right now, the big projects are with the schools. We'll work the tree, do everything, right down to the finish. From A to Z. Some people are coming

over next week. The week after that, I'll be in New Brunswick. Some high schools next. Actually, I'm booked until next February, I guess. I go all over the place, in Mi'kmaq communities, Maliseet communities. I'm going to Michigan to talk with people over there who have problems with the emerald ash borer that's eating all their trees. All the trees are dying up. Here, we don't have any problems with the black ash. We have a healthy stock, in my neck of the woods. I'm always keeping an eye on it, too. The ministry of forests, they ask me, once in a while, *Have you noticed something?* I'm always on the lookout, out in the woods every other day. I go out, get what I need. I only get what I need. That's good therapy, also. If I feel anything negative, I go walk in the woods. You're not gonna hear me, but, still, I'm talking to the trees, confiding, *Hey, I'm having this or that problem at home...* I know they hear me. Then a bird passes by, and I have my confirmation: message received. I feel blessed. And it's good for anxiety. Medicine. It's all medicine.