Transcript of an Interview with Brenda Jeddore, August 10, 2005*

Interviewer: Kim Gillcrist
Location: Conne River, Newfoundland and Labrador

Gillcrist: In what ways has the community’s path to self-governance touched your life?

Jeddore: Self-government as it starts this January? Or self-governance since the day I arrived on the reserve? Because to me self-government started in 1980.

Gillcrist: You can answer that question however…

Jeddore: Yes, because to me, these people have been governing themselves since time immemorial. And the problem came to be when then federal government and the provincial government started to put restrictions on not only their monetary base, like their income and how they’re going to spend their money, but also on land… like how much land they’re going to occupy, what they’re going to do with that land, social programs they will initiate, and stuff like that. I think that they always were a self-governing people. And look at the chief today, traditional chief Mi’isel Joe, he stands apart from other leaders in the country because of course he is a traditional chief. Administrative, but one with spirituality, customs, traditions, that are part of his mandate as well as any administrative responsibilities. So it hasn’t touched my life as being something different that was not there before – it has always been there for me. Because this community is so different – if you go 40km and go to a rural Newfoundland community, it’s completely different. Because to me, this place, here, has always been self-governing, and it is today self-governed. It’s just that it’s not on legal paper.

Gillcrist: Okay. So can you tell me a little bit more about your role in the process that your community is undertaking with self-governance?

Jeddore: I’d like to take a much greater role. I don’t have very much of a role – I’m just a teacher down at St. Anne’s School…

Gillcrist: Just a teacher…?! [Asked incredulously]

Jeddore: But I’ve tried endlessly to get on these committees, I really did. I’ve been very proactive in the fact that there was a memo Judy White sent to the band employees looking for a candidate to sit in absenteeism of a person who resigned. So of course I phoned right away and tried to get that, but she said, “No, you can’t sit on that because you’re a registered band member!” and I said, “I’m not a registered band member in respect to being Aboriginal from birth. It’s

* Interview conducted for the Aboriginal Community Development Centre at Mount Allison University, and transcribed in Sackville, New Brunswick.
just an acquired status.” “No,” she said, “you can’t sit on that!” So I was so disappointed with her, and I’ll never forgive her, because I really wanted to sit, and be a force in this. Because I’ll tell you something: it makes a difference if you’re here for twenty-five years, you walked in as a European person and lived here with them for twenty-five years. You see it at a very interesting angle, where they want to go, and where they’ve come from. Because these people are a very quiet people. They do not speak out. They have a lot of respect and kindness for each other, and they really don’t understand self-government and what it means because they were always to themselves: they lived off the land, and they fished and hunted for a living, they sent their children to a little community school, they were taught their own language, the Mi’kmaq language. So to look at it now and say, “Well gee. Self-government, what is it?” They don’t understand what self-government is, because they always governed themselves in their own eyes. They never see their dollars as having come from Ottawa or St. John’s. So I really would like to be part of that team. So if you’ve got any input now…! [Laughs] I mean they should have a C-32 member there. They really should. Because I really don’t look upon myself as a band member. But, if I wasn’t a band member, I might not be here next year. But, I’m telling you – they really should evaluate that. They should have a C-32 member available there. How did I become a part of the process? [Looking at the interview questions]

**Gillcrist:** I skipped the other ones because I figured you’ve always been a part from the answer you gave me. So I skipped the ones that don’t seem quite as important.

**Jeddore:** Oh good. [Bits of conversation]

**Gillcrist:** What have been your best experiences of the process of self-government?

**Jeddore:** Best experiences are… number one, they have their own traditional chief. With him comes so much. He brings to the table representation from the elders, from the youth, and the adult members of the community. He represents the social needs because he keeps in such contact with all of the infrastructure, all of these different departments. So he, I think, is going to be the guiding force. He’s going to be the head honcho. And the more respect his people give him, (which they will) and the more time he works on this project is going to be very, very, very successful. The other thing is last week I spent, just after returning from Japan, with severe jet lag, the Annual Assembly. The Annual Assembly is an amazing thing. This is my second Annual Assembly after living here for twenty-five years, because I’ve never felt I should be part of it. But other than that, it’s absolutely wonderful because if you went into St John’s and sat in the house there in the alcove above, you would sit there but you can’t participate, you can just listen, unless you want to get thrown out. But here it’s so different. They all sit in a circle and everybody has a say. The agenda’s given to you at least a week in advance so if you want to have input or you want any additions or
deletions made, you have the opportunity to do that. And then they sit in the circle, and everybody gets a turn to speak – be it a social issue, be it a financial issue, be it policing issue. Isn’t that amazing? So how many communities in this country can say that they’re on the wrong path? They’re definitely on the right path, they really, really are. So that’s some really positive things. And then of course the school, the education down there is in their own hands. They do their own curriculum, they design their own curriculum, and the curriculum goes. Their teachers now are almost 80% Mi’kmaq people from their own reserve, not from other reserves, but from their very own reserve. And they’re all graduates from universities throughout Canada. They have lawyers here, their own lawyers, born and bred from Conne River. They have nurses, they have nurse practitioners, they have accountants - they have everything. So all of these things are positive because the only way that self-government is going to work is if all of these people work together with a common goal: And that is to be able to self preserve what they have and draw on where they came from. So that’s how I see some of the positive things – I could go on for hours and hours.

Gillcrist: What have been some of the more challenging obstacles or barriers…

Jeddore: To self-government?

Gillcrist: Yeah, within your community…

Jeddore: Oh, language is the biggest barrier. Man, it’s going to be bad. It’s great to have a little choir that can sing Mi’kmaq and travel all across the country, but it’s no good if you can’t put a sentence together in public. Like even at meetings, the annual meetings, how many words of Mi’kmaq are spoken? None. That’s the truth you know. Go to the church services here, Catholic churches, (that’s the religion here), as well as native spirituality. But there’s no difference in walking in this church to walking into another church in the rest of Canada. Any type of ceremonies or Aboriginal gatherings you’ll have the drummers or the singers sing, and that’s it. And in order to have self-government, you see, one of the conditions is language. That is a precursor condition for self-government. If you don’t have a language, you don’t have a base. And I really, really, really impact Judy White or whoever’s in charge here to say “okay, it’s great to have these people: the chief is doing everything he can, but let’s put some onus on people in charge of the language.” Because sweetheart, it’s not working. I can see it, and people forty kilometres away can see it, people in St John’s will see it, and people in Ottawa will see it. Can they read and write in their own language? No. Can they converse in their own language? No. How many elders can do it? Probably one or two that are left. So I think that’s where your biggest challenge is, and it will be, unless you change the things that are happening now. The language was in the school now since 1987, and you still don’t see it outside the door. Even when you did French going to school, you took French trips in immersion and went on French exchanges… but here it’s nothing – it stays in the brick building, and that’s where it stays. And you can’t bring it home because the
parents don’t understand it. So how does that impact self-government? How can you say that you’re going to have successful negotiations for self-government when your language is so weak? But that’s my opinion. But I could stand to be corrected in many years to come.

**Gillcrist:** So what does self-government in Conne River mean to you? I guess as an expansion to your answer to the first question.

**Jeddore:** Self-government was always here, to me, it has been. But it’s a realization to the people of Conne River that they are distinct, they are a distinct people and they know that. Their needs are already addressed. You cannot go into another community and see what’s happening there as compared to what’s happening here and in means of positive progressive starts to social programs, health programs, education… it’s all here, it’s already done. There’s no unemployment. It’s an amazing community. Everything is already there. The people have the energy and the vision, so there’s not much work actually to be done as opposed, just the language issue itself. Self-government to me in Conne River…I can’t answer because to me it was always there and it always will be here. It depends who you’ve got in power. I don’t know what happens now when Chief Mi’sel Joe ever goes. That would be a fall - that would be just like the language to me. It really would topple. Because he’s got to have likeminded individuals behind him, and right now he doesn’t in my view. Because the only way for self-government to work… you’ve got to look at…the customs have to be there, traditions have to be there, the values have to be there, the needs have to be assessed. They’ve got to have something to look forward to – they’ve got to have vision. This Chief has all of that and he can communicate it to his people. But that’s very, very dangerous. If you have only one person, this is where it gets really, really bad, and really, really treacherous. So what he has to do, within his council, even just his council, if he can embark on his council to say, “okay, let’s do this this way to incorporate more of our customs, or more of our traditions”. If that does not happen, then self-government is not going happen.

**Gillcrist:** So how do you see self-government as impacting your children, or later you grandchildren, and your community. More so on a day-to-day basis?

**Jeddore:** How will it impact my children, and my children’s children? It will impact them greatly if it succeeds. Because the first thing they’ll learn they have to do is re-write all the history books and geography books saying there’s not just two distinct cultures in Canada, French and English, now there’s an Aboriginal culture there as well, but an Aboriginal government and an Aboriginal infrastructure. I think it would make them more independent and not as reliant, and it’ll make them harder worker because they have to make a go of it themselves - they have to balance everything in their lives and keep this community thriving based on how much they put in it – it’s all self-propelled. Whereas right now, if they failed, the federal government would probably bail them out – I’m presume that’s what you mean – but if self-government is to exist for our children, it would make
them stronger people, more respectful people. They would have more control over their land, they would be able to say, “okay, hunting is an Aboriginal right, but it’s also a responsibility”. They'll understand that then. Because if they go out and misuse the land, or misuse the water or any of the resources, they'll know that’s going to impact future. Whereas without self-government it’s like, oh well, the federal government will come along anyways and make some makeshift work projects or whatever. So I think that’s how it will impact them – it’ll make them second think everything they do in their daily lives, and it'll also give them a clearer platform for the future and how they see everything in the future. So they can see, if we do this here.....

So they can see, if we do this here, what’s going to happen twenty years down the road? Whereas now, they don’t have that power, because they know that someone else is thinking for them all the time. I don’t know if that answers your question.

**Gillcrist**: No, it does. Are you familiar with the exploratory process that your community is undertaking with self-governance?

**Jeddore**: No, all I know is that there were two town meetings where they signed documents. That’s all I know.

**Gillcrist**: Okay, I can give you an overview, or a little bit of one. Basically, we’ve just been going through all the documents at Mount A, and seeing all the correspondence your chief and INAC [Indian and Northern Affairs Canada] and the Department of Indian Affairs and just going through and documenting the whole entire process. And from the beginning to the hesitancy of the government to agree, all through the negotiations and things like that. And, we’re just wondering how you think the process has been handled by the community or how it was handled by the Federal and Provincial Government. I know that you mentioned the government earlier, but, if you’re not comfortable with answering that, that’s fine, we can move forward to the next one.

**Jeddore**: Well I think there should have been more heads up, like, once the chief, or whoever it was in charge of setting up the negotiations, the exploratory process, everyone in the community should have been kept on par about, what is this, why are we doing this. Probably that was done though, I don’t know.

**Gillcrist**: I’m not sure how it was...

**Jeddore**: Because if you don’t have everybody on the front page, right from the get-go, you’re not going to be, because as you expand, they’re going to be left further and further away. So, I think even in the school system... I know the grade twelves did this project on self-government which was great. And then I think they went through to junior high with it. I could be wrong.
Gillcrist: That’s what Mi’sel Joe mentioned.

Jeddore: Yeah, but I didn’t see anything filter out of that. I didn’t know anything about it until I went to the Grade twelve graduation. I said, “Oh, really, I didn’t know they were doing that.” So right away the staff was left untouched.

Gillcrist: So there’s got to be more awareness in the community?

Jeddore: Oh definitely, oh definitely. Workshops for the teachers, probably, or for the band staff as a whole. Saying where we’re to, where we’re going, and where we hope to be in twenty years time.

Gillcrist: What kind of advice can you offer to other First Nations communities that are looking at the same process that you’re going through?

Jeddore: How many, or which reserves in Canada have self-government, or are there any?

Gillcrist: No.

Jeddore: There’s none?

Gillcrist: To my knowledge there are none.

Jeddore: So this would be a landmark?

Gillcrist: This would be a landmark.

Jeddore: Now Labrador just acquired self-government, correct?

Gillcrist: I’m not positive.

Jeddore: I think so. The Inuit, I think they’ve got self-government, and probably Nunavut, I’m not really sure. See, if you don’t have the leadership, you have nothing. It’s just futile. You just need that great leadership and that passion to say, “okay, I know who I am…” because this is how he thinks. “I know who I am; I know where I came from. I don’t like what’s happening to me, so I’m going to try to…” There’s nothing in it for him, he’s doing it all for his people. So, if they don’t have a leader like that, then you can forget self-government; it’s not going to work. It’s not going to be idealistic for one or two band-members to say, “I think we’ll have self-government here, we’re sick of being handled the way the Provincial and Federal Government is handling us.” No, it’s not going to work. It has to be a vision and it has to have a starting point, and there has to be an ending point. So, if they don’t have that, I don’t think they’re going to be successful.
Gillcrist: Okay and you just answered my sub-questions. Moving right along… If the process were to begin again from the start, would you make any changes?

Jeddore: Yeah, I would educate the people on what self-government is, what’s entailed in it, why this persons in self-government, like, the role of this person as opposed to this person and what the community, or what we are expected to offer, because we definitely have to offer something. It’s great to have these steering committees and these sub-committees and all of this, but that’s no good if nothing is filtered down through. You know, the process is just not going to work. But that’s my opinion.

I would make that change for sure. I really would. And I really go back to the language thing again. From the start I would go to whoever’s in charge of the language and the education director and say, “okay, let’s see. Let’s see the change now. Let’s make this language more visible in the community. It would be the community channel, at homes, at meetings. It’s time for them to do that. It’s being treated too much like a subject, as opposed to a lifestyle. So that’s some changes that I would make.

Gillcrist: So we at Mount Allison in Sackville are documenting the process of your self-government project. I don’t know if you had a chance to look through the front page, but what we’re doing is we’re taking all of your documents that kind of go through the process, and we’re building an information repository, or a “gateway,” on the internet, so that people from your community, your teachers, your youth, your elders will be able to go and access that, as well as other First Nations communities - people who just have a broad interest in it, and we’re putting all those documents up, that document your process. And, so we’re wondering, who do you think will benefit from this kind of initiative?

Jeddore: If it’s part of… The only that people are going to benefit is if they have a need to go there, and access the information. If you don’t have a need, then there’s no way you’re going to be interested in accessing it. That’s going to be very, very difficult. In the school system it’s great, because you can go to whoever’s teaching Social Studies or whoever’s teaching History, and say, “Now, as part of your curriculum outlines, I want you to incorporate self-government – what’s the progress, where’s it to now, what stage are they at, where do you think they’re headed to, how could you help them? Go on their website and leave a message. Sign their guestbook.” Do something like, more hands-on. But with regards to the public at large, I really don’t, I can’t see… you know? That gateway, I really don’t know. I don’t know how to answer that.

Gillcrist: Okay. Is there anything that I’ve missed, anything of further importance that hasn’t been touched on yet?

Jeddore: How many different bodies will we see come through, now, if this process is…
**Gillcrist**: In terms of people coming from the community that I'm from?

**Jeddore**: Yeah, or anybody. So, would we see a lot of representatives from Indian and Northern Affairs?

**Gillcrist**: Not to my knowledge.

**Jeddore**: No? Okay.

**Gillcrist**: Ausra [Burns] would probably be a better person to give you some more background information where she is the director of the Aboriginal Community Development Centre at Mount Allison. I know that Ausra travels in and out of here as frequently as she can, and she’s in contact with Judy White all of the time, and she’s really taken a directive roll in this. Obviously, that’s why I’m here.

**Jeddore**: Good for you.

**Gillcrist**: So, I’m a bit of a representative from Mount A. But, in terms of sending people over to walk in and out all the time, I’m not sure how much of a common occurrence that is.

**Jeddore**: So, do they have a plan? Like, a yearly plan or a monthly plan?

**Gillcrist**: This project, the pilot, is supposed to be started at the end of October [2005]. So, this information is going to include a hundred documents. A hundred that we, in consultation with Judy, have come up with to be more important documents to put up on the web, for children, for the people of your community and for other First Nations who are interested in the process of self-governance. And that’s all going to be available on the internet. As it continues, it’s going to grow to expand to include more documents and more of the process. So, our interviews today are trying to get a more personal face on the whole process, because, I mean, you can read the documents until you’re blue in the face, but it’s talking to the people that really makes the difference.

**Jeddore**: Exactly. That’s the missing link, see. You got to get out there and chat. But then again, you got to get the people interested. That’s another challenge: how do you make them interested? It’s something that you don’t even understand. Like, if you go around and ask a lot of them today, “What’s self-government, what does that mean?” “Oh, that’s the new building went up underneath the craft store. I dunno, Judy White’s in charge of that.” You know? But, that’s scary.

**Gillcrist**: That’s where your awareness comes in, too.
**Jeddo re**: Yes. True. Yup, that’s true.

**Gillcrist**: Well, that does it for me. If there’s anything else, if you have any other questions…

**Jeddo re**: Can’t think of anything. Just want to be on the most committees. [laughter]

**Gillcrist**: Well, I don’t think there’s anything I can do about that.