

Nérée on how his aunt “opened the door to the hospital” for him

I'll just back-track a bit to explain why I got involved in the kind-of anti-psychiatry movement. When I was a child welfare worker in Northern New Brunswick, I had a telephone call from my cousin who said that his mother, my aunt, was in hospital-- psychiatric hospital. And it was quite a surprise and a shock for me and I knew she wasn't crazy, I knew that after 18 children and a difficult husband and living in poor areas and stuff like that, and working 16 hours a day and taking care of 8 teenagers at home and a husband who was difficult--I mean you're an expert. Anyways, she was admitted and so she opened the door of the hospital for me, she also opened the door of what's going on in a world that I didn't have a clue, except a prejudice that I had about mental health and professionals and psychiatric institutions, I didn't have a clue what was going on there. So I arrived in a ward where there was 40 women, almost literally jumping on me because they wouldn't see any males and they had no visitors, basically. And I said to my mind; "My god, they're all crazy," and I was scared, but my aunt was okay. I knew I could talk to her, but the others--but gradually, as the days went by, and weeks, I realized they were not as crazy as I thought, and they had a story, and their story was terrible, it was incredible. And I first I said, "Can't be that she has this story and be here." Then I would compare with my aunt and her I knew it was true. So anyways, long story. So that was Campbellton and the history of ma Tante Gemma. So that was the first introduction, and then I was figured by all that [sic], and now I'm leaving Campbellton, have my job in Moncton, and then a professor tells me, says, "If you want to stay at the university, you've got to do your PhD," because--that's late '70s. He said, "If you want to establish yourself do it well." I was 35 years old and I had vowed to my life that I would never go back to school, after I had finished my masters. And there I was, applying for a PhD program in Nice, in France, in sociology. So that was a relatively big step, because a young family, we have to leave our work, we have to leave our house behind, we have to leave practically everything, but a few suitcases and move to France. And the director I had there had both of these interests in Acadian culture--he had written a book, he was a French sociologist, but had written a book about the Acadians, and about sociology-mental health. So, when you combine all this as my director, it gives me a little bit of a nice leadership about. So, that's how it evolved into, putting into questions, some of what I had observed from my aunt in the hospital, okay, like who gets admitted, and why, and when, and under what condition, and how come it is that we have non voluntary admissions. I mean, there's nowhere in the world, except psychiatry and jails, where you're not voluntary. But it's a treatment and it's not voluntary, how can you put these two words, these two concepts together? It doesn't work well. And then when you mix with that Acadian population and you see, well, my god, over centuries how the Acadian population had been treated. Deported by the Anglophones and had to come back to Acadia through the back door and they had to leave everything behind because they were faithful to their faith and language and were then dominated by the English government, who was adamant that we should be Protestants, and by the way Anglophones, but Protestant was the big thing. And we refused that, the clergy for us refused that, so we were all deported. So, then we're coming back and how can we find some identity in New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, wherever it

is that we re-establish. So, you put all these things together, and it's quite a mix of different variables that are complex. Each of them is complex. But when you put them all together, it's quite complex. So that's how it evolved in my PhD program and my PhD reading books about Foucault. For example, history of psychiatry, history of mental health, history of prison, history of all this and finding out how over four or five hundred years we have, as a western culture, if we can call it culture, have evolved to become controlling of people with deviant behaviour of some kind. And eventually I published my thesis, and in English it was, "The Politics of Madness."