
IMPLEMENTING DELGAMUUK'W

Biography of Gene Joseph
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In this session one of the things that I'd really like to bring to people's attention is the issue of storage, storage of your valuable oral and historical linguistic/legal materials that you have in your offices. I'm quite aware that all of you are very under-funded, are very crowded, and just do not have the facilities that archival institutions, museum institutions may have and would recommend strongly that you do have to save this information. But even though you do have all of this lack of financial monies to provide for this great storage and everything that you need for your information, you should be very aware of what can happen to that information. I know that most of them are probably in your band office, your treaty office, in a trailer, or something like that.

As you know I worked for the Gitksan-Wet'suwet'en for quite a number of years as their librarian for the Delgamuuk'w case. After the second level of court that we went through, a lot of our information went back to Hazelton. In the process the Gitksan and Wet'suwet'en groups broke away from one another. The Wet'suwet'en set up their own offices in Morristown. The Gitksan continued to have their resource library in Hazelton. Then about two to three years ago, there was an arsonist in Morristown and the building that housed the band office and the treaty office burned completely to the ground. That meant that the Wet'suwet'en lost pretty well all of their information that they had been collecting over the years, and that included a lot of the oral history tapes that contained valuable information that could not be found elsewhere, information from chiefs and Elders who had passed away. All of this had been transcribed and put onto computer and all of that, so it was accessible on computer. The only problem is, in spite of my warnings to them to please have a copy or microfilm it or do something so that we have a set off-site -- I got them to do a duplicate copy of the oral history tapes -- but the only problem is that they kept those two sets together on the shelves or in the file cabinets because we just didn't have another building that we thought was secure enough to hold this information, as well. So we lost all of that. And every time I think of it, I just get heartbroken. My sister phoned me first thing in the morning, around seven o'clock in the morning, to say that around six in the morning a fire had been sighted at the band office in Morristown. All morning we were waiting and waiting to see what happened. It went right to the ground. At first people said, "well, we have fireproof cabinets and we also had a fireproof safe for one of the sets of the tapes," which sounds good. The only thing is when you have fireproof cabinets and fireproof safes, you have to make it a firm position that someone is going check every night to make sure that safe is closed and locked. Unfortunately, that night before the fire the person responsible had forgotten to close the safe, close the fireproof cabinets and so those were all lost in spite of having that type of equipment available. So what I would like you to go home with is, with the really important issue that information that you have in your collections is just too valuable for you to be sidestepping the issue of securing it for the future. I think nowadays... and in the past what we could have done, and what I had requested the Wet'suwet'en as well as the Gitksan to do, was to start microfilming everything or copying it all on microfiche. And there was always the problem with funds, "oh, we got this problem, we have this problem with funds, we have that problem with funds." And we never got to it.

Nowadays you can buy computer scanners that will scan at a fairly low price. You can buy a CD-ROM, readable/writeable CD towers at fairly reasonable prices. You could scan your information and save it on CD-ROM -- and you know the CD-ROMs take a very small little space, so it's fairly easy for you to go and place it off-site. Like one of the things that I recommended, okay, if you don't have another building that's half-decently secure, then why don't you rent a safety deposit box at the local bank? You know, you can fit CDs into that, you can fit in microfiche, microfilm and, if you're really stuck, you could also put a copy of your oral history tapes.

For a while we weren't too sure about how useable computer-copied information was, you know, if we went to court. Would the courts accept the copy that we have on the CD-ROM, or whatever? But just last fall Parliament had introduced Bill C-54, and part of that bill -- which hasn't gone yet, I think, to second or third reading, but I think it probably will in this Parliament -- is that electronic material will be and can be used in evidence in courts. So if you watched out for that final reading of Bill C-54, or even before that, get a copy and start studying it to see how it may affect your material and how it could potentially affect your evidence in courts of law.

What I learned in library school and in my courses in archives and what I studied about museums is that to protect our information we want to have this wonderful controlled environment, and that means that the temperature in the building is very securely controlled, that you have a water system for the fires in your buildings, and such like that. You might even have a gas-type of system that will put out any potential fires, to do all kinds of work to secure it from bugs and fleas and all of these things. And it would be a wonderful day when we could see that happening, but I don't really see it happening to darn soon. So at the very, very least get back home and very seriously consider how you can copy and put a second copy off in a safe storage location just in case you do have a fire, just in case you do have a flood. Because you can't revive those old Elders who have given us those stories. They are gone to the next world. We can't access them that easily now. So save what you've got and do your best to protect it. That doesn't mean you've all got to rush home and save it for yourselves. I mean, you are saving it for the community. You're looking to do something worthwhile with it.

So even though I said we had these fireproof file cabinets and everything went up, the problem was that it wasn't closed. So you still can go out and buy some fireproof cabinets that I think would do a fairly decent job in maybe saving some of the paper material. You could also buy what they call "transformers," a small type of safe that will, in case of a fire, save electronic media like your CDs and such. They're fairly expensive, they are very heavy, you have to take into consideration things like what your building can carry. At one point we had put our fireproof file cabinets on the second floor -- and these cabinets can weigh anywhere from 700 pounds to 1,100 pounds, so when you get a bank of them of five or six you can think of all that weight up on the second floor above you. And then you start to see the cracks in the walls. Unfortunately I have seen that happen too. You have to take that into consideration. So you may be in isolated areas and you may be in a very poorly financed environment, but there's still something you can do about it, there's something you can do about securing your information. That is basically one of the most important things I thought I could bring to you today.

The other thing that I am interested in is privacy, privacy of the information that you may hold. I recall in Delgamuuk'w -- and many other First Nations collections that I have worked with over the years -- that it contained at times fairly personal information about the people in your community. What I am aware of is that a good many of our First Nations do not have any kind of policies in place regarding records management or archiving their information. And if you had policies like that, then you would have policies in place as to privacy and who has access to information. So it isn't up to just a clerk, or whoever, who may be filing the information. You actually have it written down so that everybody in the community would understand why you can't access this or that and why you shouldn't access this or that and why you can access other information. Because, myself, I would not want anybody in my community or elsewhere to be able to access my personal information about say, my medical records, my income, anything like that, you know. It's quite common for the non-Indian institutions to already have their policies in place. The government has their policies in place, and you are aware of it because you have worked with the band offices and such. But not with self-government. It's more and more important that First Nations develop their own policies to control their information because we are gathering more and more of our own information, not only for treaties, but we also have our educational records, our medical records, as we take over more our health; we have our social assistance records, you know, all of that. And it should be controlled by policies, very firm policies, that would be put in place by your councillor or the band council or chiefs, whoever is in authority.

In the court case what we found with privacy was that we were always under the gun, always under-funded, and we found that the federal and provincial governments did not have any problems with bringing personal records of people into court. We were totally shocked about things like that because we as individuals thought that this was private and personal and, you know, you don't just let it go out for no good reasons that we could see. But even though that happened, I've found that because of that we are gathering information from the federal and provincial government that was pretty well personal to people in our community. Therefore, I had to scramble and start putting into place some policies on restricting access to certain types of information and certain records and, primarily, just certain record units. It wasn't very easy at times because you have, say, you have oral history tapes that have been transcribed -- and I have gone through a lot of transcripts of oral history. What I have found, and you may have found as well, is that our Elders and the people who are talking are talking as though we were in conversation with an individual. You know, when you're speaking to one individual and you are feeling as though you have a personal conversation going then you are likely to say things that you may not wish to have broadcast over the entire community. You might also say things that are potentially libelous or slanderous to other people in the community. Some things may certainly be incorrect or whatever, and so even your oral history tapes, your transcripts, parts of it you may have to do something about restricting access to it because you don't really want that type of information to be just broadcast all over the community.

What I have found in that area was that a lot my oral history tapes were transcribed, and so I was able to require that if you are going to access certain portions of it or whatever, that you'd require a password. That restricted just anybody accessing it. If they had the right to access then, okay, then I would give them a password to access.

The other thing that I found about privacy -- and you may all be aware that Gitksan-Wet'suwet'en have our clans and then our house groups -- and then the house groups and the individual chiefs own the right to certain songs, certain history, whatever. It could be an ownership by the clan in general, or it could be a ownership by the house, or it could be ownership by an individual chief. So there is different levels of ownership, which is totally different from the level of ownership of information that you would find in the non-Indian world. For example, what the government of Canada and British Columbia and all of that, information is seen potentially as being owned by all of the citizens of Canada, theoretically they say -- I wouldn't go so far to say they follow it but, theoretically, that is the idea they follow. But with First Nations it would be different. Our idea of ownership of certain songs, regalia, history can be a three or four level type of thing, and that has to be taken into consideration when you start developing policies for access. So, for example, with the Gitksan-Wet'suwet'en during the court case, when I knew that certain histories, information was only owned by a house, then I would restrict access only to those house members, and sometimes that information was restricted only to that chief of that house. Sometimes if the chiefs came to me and said, "we want the wing chiefs as well to have access," okay, then we spread the access to them. But it was fairly complicated at times because with the hereditary system people were always dying, and so there was new people who were coming into the name and therefore the ownership and such, and so it was always changing. So it wasn't something that could just firmly be put in place and that's it. You always have to be ready to change as the people in the system, people in the chieftainships changed.

Now for policies it's fairly easy, I think, to start looking at policies by looking at the non-Indian institutions. The archives policies of, say, the local municipality, the provincial government and look at their records management policies and look at their archival policies, access policies -- even the government of Canada. You can find a lot of this information on the Web, or you can just go to, say, U.B.C. [University of British Columbia] library or wherever and get copies from these different groups. Now we always like to say, "okay, no, no, no, First Nations it would be quite different policies because we're different." Yes, we're different just as I said about the levels of access that may be required in a First Nations collection of records, or whatever. But when it comes down to it what we are trying to control, it is something relatively new to us; that is paper, that is recorded-type of information. These non-Indian institutions have a hell of a long history about developing these types of institutions, so I don't think I should just turn my back and say, "well, they're non-Indian and we don't want to have any kind of policies that are just like theirs." Well, I think that's cutting off our nose despite our face. You should go and take a look at those policies of other institutions and start adapting them to your own community. That's basically about all I needed to cover. Thank you.