Learning who I am: From sakaw to the tower (TRANSCRIPT)

I grew up not knowing where I really came from. What I did know is that we were somehow different from others. In fact, I was often embarrassed to have my friends over. After all, we lived in a house the size of a garage. We had an outhouse and a wood cook stove. The wood pile was our playground. Dad hunted and fished, so we had deer carcases hanging out in the shed. I played in the bush with my two brothers and I remember that we were often confused as to whether we should be the cowboys or the Indians. In fact, mixed messages were a big part of my early life. I knew that we were part native but at the same time, my parents told us to keep that secret to ourselves. Tell them you’re French, my mother would tell me, or better yet, tell them you’re 150% Canadian. I was confused. What was I to tell people and why did I have to hide my identity? In school, we learned about the voyageur and the Coureur de bois. They seemed to look like my family, but still I wasn’t sure. If we were part native, how come we didn’t live on a reserve? Why did dad look native, but mom really didn’t? Why did mom have an accent that almost sounded French. Why were we part of the Association for Non-status Indians? It was all a mystery for me. One thing I did know, I did not want to be ashamed of my native ancestry, I was proud to be native, part native, whatever I was. Later on in my life, after marriage, motherhood and a successful career in downtown Calgary I decided to go back to school. This was not an easy decision. I remember standing at the front door of Mount Royal College for a good 10 minutes in complete and utter turmoil. My stomach turned and anxiety prickled my skin. People stared at me as I stood there stuck between two worlds. I worried about my three kids who I had scattered throughout the city, I worried about where I was going to find money to get through my classes. I worried about how I would be able to handle this extra work. Mostly I worried about whether the little girl from the bush should try to attempt such a big move. Little did I know that I was about to take a journey to my true identity. My journey through university and now through graduate school has meant that I have started to hear some of the silenced voices of the Metis. Through books, other people and my own research I have not only learned a word I’d never heard before, Metis. But I also started to find out some very interesting facts about our people and my family. Things I can be very proud of. My dad’s family was part of the fur-trade, as early as 1640. Great, great grandfather, Pierre Poitras, sat on the Provisional Government with Louis Riel. My dad’s family had a ranching tradition and owned businesses in St. Paul des Metis. The women in our family were strong matriarchs, who were community leaders, healers and more. Moreover, I learned I could teach young Metis children that they could be proud of who they were. I started to find out more and more about my people, our history, our colonization, our present struggles, and most importantly I learned about me.