



Behind the Scenes in Yukon Mining

Mayo, 5th of October 2015
5:30 pm Curling Lounge

Work, camp & family life in Yukon mining today

Stories collected 2014/15
Full text of the presentation with pictures

by Gerti Saxinger and Susa Gartler

Gerti Saxinger/Susa Gartler, University of Vienna/Austria
“LACE-Labour Mobility and Community Participation in the Extractive Industries”
is a joint project with the Yukon College, Lakehead University, University of Vienna,
the SSHRC research program ReSDA: Resources and Sustainable Development in the
Arctic and the Yukon Government (Department for Economic Development)

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BEHIND THE SCENES IN YUKON MINING

Rotational shift work, camp and family life

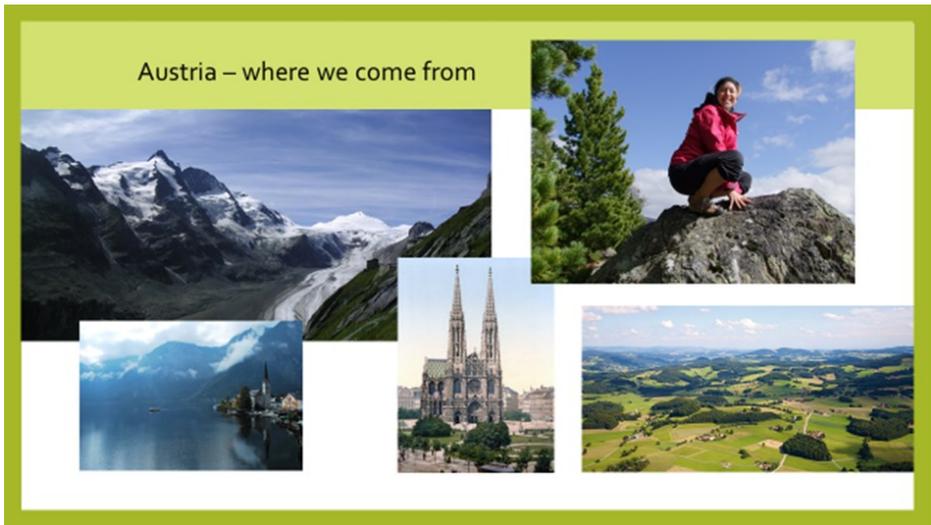
Presentation of Project LACE

“Labour Mobility and Community Participation in the Extractive Industries”
Yukon

Mayo, 5th of October 2015, Community Hall

By Gerti Saxinger

So wonderful to have so many people here tonight at the curling lounge in Mayo! Some of you know me and my work that brought me here last year. Some of you do not. Therefore a few words about me and my Ph.D student Susa(nna) Gartler who some of you also know.



We are both based in Austria, at the University of Vienna. Susa and I are both anthropologists. You can see Susa here in the picture besides some impressions of our home country, Austria, in Europe.

We came to Mayo last year with a project idea and a suggestion to the **Na-Cho Nyäk Dun First Nation (NND)** and the village of Mayo about doing a 3-year study on mining in the Mayo region. The project is called **LACE Labour Mobility and Community Participation in the Yukon**. It covers the Yukon Territory as a whole, but Mayo will be a prime focus to help us understand the communities that have been involved in mining for many decades. We want to focus on two things in particular:

1. Work in the mining sector and how this goes hand in hand with living off the land
2. The relationship between the community and the mining companies when it comes to local hiring and job opportunities as well as to economic development

Since this spring we've been working with Liz Blair as a community researcher. At this point I would like to thank her for setting up so many contacts etc. I'm looking forward to spending some more good times with her! Before starting with the stories I would like to give you an impression about the kind of research we are doing and what the project in your community, where so many have already actively taken part, is all about.

LACE - Labour Mobility and Community Participation in the Extractive Industry - Yukon

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Our project is funded by the **Yukon Government/Department for Economic Development and the Canadian Social Science Fund**, called **SSHRC**. The activity that we conduct in the community of Mayo is being done in close collaboration with the **Na-Cho Nyäk Dun First Nation**. A big thank you to the council members and Chief Simon Mervin as well as to Joella Hogan, Eileen Peter and Norma Germaine from the **Cultural Heritage Department** for the kind welcome! Susa and I would like to thank also the **Village Council of Mayo** (with Mayor Scott Bolton) for their kind support (like making this evening happen today and a lot of other help). Thank you Margrit Wozniak and Barb Barchen!



Canadian – Austrian Project

**LACE –
Labour Mobility and Community Participation
in the Extractive Industry - Yukon**

Canadian program: ReSDA – Resources and Sustainable Development in the Arctic

- Na-Cho Nyäk Dun (Mayo), Village of Mayo
- Yukon College
- Lakehead University/Thunderbay Ontario
- University of Vienna/ Austria

Our project is part of a large Canadian research initiative called **Resources and Sustainable Development in the Canadian North (ReSDA)**. Our partners are the **Yukon College**, **Lakehead University** in Ontario and my home university: the **University of Vienna** in Austria/Europe.

Susa and I truly hope that the results we deliver and the stories of local people we collect can be of value to the community, to the people who are engaged in mining and those who are interested in it in the future.

We would like to contribute to the knowledge of the younger generation and share the experience of your “elder” miners. Young people are the future of any community. In a mining region like the Yukon Territory they think about mining: what does it mean to their land, the wealth of their traditional territory, to ecological changes and what does mining mean for their future in terms of making a living. I hope that we can serve these needs with our work.

In a few minutes, I would like to tell you some stories. Susa and I interviewed people from various professions like – just to name a few – miners, equipment operators, geologists, administration and service staff from mines like Victoria Gold Corp., Alexco Corp., Minto/Capstone Corp. and Wolverine/YukonZinc. Many of them also shared stories about other mines and camp situations they had experienced over their long careers. The many sites, projects and camps all over Canada are of a great variety in size and also in services and convenience – jobs differ in payment, type, safety and the like. I also visited the camps at the Victoria Gold Corp. site and the Wolverine mine. Therefore, I got a fair idea of what people generally talk about.

Background of the research team

A bit of my background: I’ve been studying fly-in/fly-out shift work and the camp and family life of mobile miners for 8 years. I started my investigations into this area by looking at the Russian/Siberian Oil and Gas sector and I travelled to the Arctic sites there. I spent time amongst the shift workers on commuter trains in Russia, travelling 25 thousand km in total over the years. So I had quite a lot of time to learn about their way of life in mining and the oil and gas industry. I was in camps – average ones, excellent ones with fancy services and also in those with very poor conditions.

A few years ago, I went to Alberta’s Ft. McMurray to study the boom and bust cycles and the life of workers and city people in the Oil Sands. Two times I travelled to Australia, where fly-in/fly-out is a big thing since

most of their mines are located in the outback, whereas the people tend to live on the coast. I visited many abandoned mining towns too. Towns where only the ruins of houses, parts of the mill or of the smelter and the cemetery are left. I could see how villages and whole towns can vanish when a mining boom is over and people get scattered all over the place and communities simply stop being a home for people that had lived together for many years and generations.

I got interested in the mining sector in Canada's north due to the fact that the current Canadian and Yukon Governments promote mining in the north as a tool for improving well-being among northerners. But my question was: Can an industry that is so dependent on outside factors, like metal prices on the world market, really be a stable and long term (sustainable) basis for economic and social development?

Fly-in/Fly out or Drive-in/Drive out shift work also in Russia, Australia and elsewhere



Aims of LACE

The purpose our work in the Yukon Territory is to produce a so called **Mobility Companion Guide**, a website with stories and recommendations from elder and experienced miners to younger ones and newcomers. Hopefully it can be produced as booklet too. Sharing experience is important in order to know in advance what challenges and benefits jobs in the mining sector might have. Many of you know that mining towns like Elsa and Faro are no longer built. Increasingly, nowadays, FIFO and rotational shift work with workers from all over, who are then housed in camps, is becoming the norm. So, workers have to adapt to this lifestyle of being away from home and their friends and families for several weeks. They also must adapt to the special atmosphere and their workmates in the camps, they have to get used to having only a small space there on their own and to being, in many cases, confined to the camp site.

Mobility Companion Guide – experienced teach the newcomers



These are some of the stories and topics that concern people. I summed up quotations and I will not give names. We agreed with our interview partners that their stories, very personal stories as well, will remain confidential.

Opinions about mining

Okay, so, what do people in the Yukon and especially around Mayo think about mining? Well, a common reaction is *“if it is done in the right way, we are not against it”*. But what is the right way? *“We want jobs. Not only those jobs with having a shovel in the hand or only jobs as cleaners or helpers; we want our people to get trained and educated and we want for them to be able to get jobs at every level.”*

Someone else said *“it is of utmost importance that we keep the environment intact and that we do not open up all the territory for mining. It must be carefully thought through. We are people who also live off the land and we need a good environment, healthy animals. Moose should not be chased far away by noises and all the mining infrastructure.”* An important idea came from a young woman: *“We want our people to still be able to mine in hundred years too. We should not open up all the territory, especially not the Peel Watershed for quick money for a few companies. We think over generations, our culture thinks long-term and not short-term.”*



Elders on mining

Remembering History



On the request of NND Susa also interviewed some elders about their opinions on mining this year. Typically their concerns were about job opportunities for the younger generation, communication between the companies and the local government, the environment in general as well as respect for activities such as hunting and picking berries.

What was also interesting for us, but I'm sure all of you know about, is that a lot of the elders' first memories are of the steamboat coming in many decades ago. The apples and oranges thrown down from the ship and the children playing on bags of ore that filled the streets. This confirms that mining has a very long and important history for people in this region.

Along with the mining came not only jobs and money but a lot of other things like foreign miners or foreign foods but also alcohol. So the people and elders in this community are very aware of the diverse effects mining

had. One of the elders says “companies should tell people about their projects, what kind of workers they are going to need. So people can get training. And they should be respectful of our traditions like how to deal with animals.” An important quote is also “Mining is not sustainable but we have to make the best of it. We should not make the same mistakes again and let them pollute the environment like they did in the past. The traces of it can be seen all over the Yukon.”

Community relations with the mining sector

Communities near mining sites usually have a so called impact benefit agreement (IBA) or a comprehensive cooperation and benefit agreement (CBA). Apart from many other topics, the active hiring of the local workforce is also negotiated. These agreements are often a few years old already and sometimes new decision makers in the community want to renegotiate the contracts with the industry. This seems to be important, because things change over time. The plans of the industry, the needs of a community, and many other things can change during the course of a project’s life. But this is another story. We would like to look a bit more at this relationship in the course of our research in 2016.



When it comes to jobs, I experienced that companies, not only those related to Mayo but in other communities in the Yukon as well, are ready and willing to actively hire locally and to provide stipends and other means for training people. However, for both sides it is not always easy to meet these ideal goals.

Finding jobs and becoming a mobile worker

Finding a job, be it as miner, as helper, millwright, welder, carpenter, cook, first aid officer, office worker, cleaner, truck driver, heavy vehicle operator or one of the many other professions is not always easy. One participant says *“I heard about mining through word-of-mouth. A friend recommend-*



ed me; that’s how I came to submit my résumé. For the company it is important to know a bit of your background. If you are a friend of a good worker, they listen to the recommendation. Sure, in a boom period they take people of any kind, but usually they look carefully.” Another says *“training and qualification is needed and it makes you proud and self-confident when you’ve completed the training and you get a good and well paid job.”* *“They want people who stay and who also show up for the next shift. And if you do that you can have a stable job and good income.”*

We asked *“Did you know about the different lifestyle that occurs in the mining sector?”* *“Well, I didn’t have the slightest idea, but I tried it. It was a very unusual environment in the camp, on the remote site and being locked up for a couple of weeks. [...] I recommend to anyone interested in that to ask, ask, ask, talk, talk, talk with other people who are into that! Make up your mind beforehand and get*



as much information as possible. People are very willing to tell you all about the changes that will happen in your life with these kinds of jobs”.

So it seems to be very important to make this decision with your family, with your wife or your husband if you are in a relationship. It is

necessary that she or he supports you. Because many of the burdens of daily life will be on her or his shoulders and you cannot take part in all the decision making that those back home are faced with. It is like being a single mother or father for a few weeks. One wife said as a recommendation to all husbands and fathers out there: *“Be aware that your wife will be doing her job just well. Just trust the folks at home while you are on site”.*

And a worker put it in quite a similar way: *“While you are on site, just concentrate on your job, do not worry about things at home or mess things up over the phone. Just trust and you will be fine. Anything else drives you crazy and then you cannot do this job for a long time and that would mean losing a lot of money.”* For individuals and families with friends who have been doing this job for a while it is easier to decide whether to take



up a job with rotational shift work or not. They have some sort of a role model and can see very well the benefits but also the challenges. They can also see how to cope with challenges coming along the way. A young worker observed that “it is easier if you don’t even



know too much about what is going on at home, like the party on Saturday, because then you don’t think about it and you don’t get jealous that you can’t be there.” A mother said something similar: “You have to be prepared to miss birthdays and ball games and important events.”

Variety of professions in the mining sector



Job flexibility

But what if a bust comes to town? Like now in the Yukon and other places in Canada, when job opportunities in the mines are unpredictable? A driller said to me: *“Mining people are very handy folks, they are good and hard workers and can quickly take up other skills. Try not to rely on one trade only. Be ready to go into other sectors. Do some additional training, use and discover your talents! Whether it’s in carpentry, working as an electrician or even as a helper in these and similar fields. Then you can fill the gaps when mining goes down.”* Therefore, a key to a long-term career – as was suggested by our interview partners – is to be flexible in the job market, although the next job might not be as well paid as mining.

Another strategy to get through bust times is to be ready to migrate for a certain period of time elsewhere or to fly-in and out to mines in other provinces. This means however, spending even longer periods of time away from your community and your family, and longer and more tiring commutes. However, you can keep up your income at a certain level and pay the bills. In the end, one miner said, *“it does not matter so much if you go on a plane to a remote Yukon site or a remote site in BC or Alberta.”*

An interesting phenomenon I saw here in the Yukon, although it is probably not so special for you folks here, is that people are confident that after a bust the boom will come back and that a boom does not last forever.

When a bust comes and how to deal with money

How to be prepared for a bust, besides being flexible in your profession and being prepared to travel elsewhere?

It is about money. A diamond driller said to me *“Think ahead, keep in mind you can lose the job as fast as you got it. Therefore, blowing all your money on booze and drugs is not a good idea. Sure, in the beginning you are not used to suddenly getting such a huge pile of cash. Sure, you go out, you party and enjoy your life. This is good. Do that! Enjoy your money, but think ahead. You will need the money to cover your expenses and mortgages also in those months when you*

have no job. In the beginning I invited my friends and the whole bar for drinks. But I soon stopped doing that.” A young woman in the service crew told me she puts a certain amount of money regularly into a separate bank account that she does not touch. Another guy told me he wants to get married soon and doesn’t want to stay in the small house he currently has. He wants to save up money to start a life with a young family in a bigger house and he needs money for that. The diamond driller added “I know quite a few guys who turn fifty and have spent all their money that they earned with hard work and in the end they have nothing. But now they cannot go back to do this hard work. Their body is sore, one had an accident etc. It is easy to do the job when you are younger, when you get older, you’re done. You cannot predict the impact of underground work on your health: some cope better, some get chronically sick. You want to live a good life when you get old and so you’ve got to think ahead when you are young.”



Some of our interview partners also raised the issue of drugs: *“Where the money is, there are also drugs. Regardless how remote the places are.”* Especially younger people who are not used to a big lump of money may fall into this trap of not being able to show up for the next shift or not passing the *“piss test”*. When they are fired they potentially sit on their debts. Psychological problems may result that in turn can impact on family life and private relations and overall wellbeing.

In this context we asked people what they spend their money on. A common answer was: on the house, on the mortgage.

“The standard of living gets higher” one says, *“you get more toys, a larger house, and another, bigger truck, you travel, holidays abroad, because you have time on your off-shift, and so on. It is hard to afford and keep up this lifestyle when you are without a job and that happens from time to time.”*

Something really interesting we found was special about the first nation workers. It became clear that living off the land, going hunting and fishing requires quite a lot money. One says *“Even in the days when we used to go by dog-sled it was expensive. Well, today you need fuel, a truck, a boat, a skidoo, a four wheeler”*. And all of you in this room know better than I do how much that costs.

Mobile jobs and living off the land



Susa and I are interested in first nation people and how wage work in the mines and living off the land and following the old traditions go hand in hand. It turned out that rotational shift work does not necessarily compromise traditional activities on the land.

On the contrary, as one guy put it – besides being able to afford it - he said: *“I have two weeks off and therefore plenty of time to be in the fishing camp or to be several days out in the cabin to hunt moose or to be on the trap-line. I can also take my children with me which is really important. I couldn’t do that when I had a normal nine-to-five job”*. By the way, taking kids out on the land was mentioned very frequently by the interview partners from NND and other First Nations. It is clearly important for the folks here to pass on knowledge about the land, about hunting techniques and about sharing etc.

Therefore, First Nation interview partners pretty much supported the idea that working in the mines does not necessarily contradict a traditional lifestyle. People reported and also company representatives pointed out that taking holidays for the hunting season is supported by the company as long as it is announced early enough so they can plan ahead.

Simply not showing up for your shift without giving any notice is not only unacceptable for the company but also for your co-workers who have to step in and must extend their shift.



Thinking about environmental impact



Another question is: What do native mine workers think about the environmental impact? As workers and beneficiaries from mining income they are also part of that impact on the environment. One woman described it like that: *“Sometimes I feel like*

we’re squeezing out the land. When we follow the veins it is like a body, and we’re sucking the blood out of the veins. The resources do not come back, they are not renewable. On the other hand, if we do not do it, someone else does the job and then we are left without any benefit; this is even worse”. Apparently this is a trade-off. As mentioned in the beginning, people are concerned that mining today is done in an environmentally safe way. Not like back in the day. One person said: *“You still can see everywhere the trash that people left out on the land, the abandoned work sites, there is still trash visible from decades ago. Today we must do it differently”*. While many NND interview partners strongly criticized the developments around the Peel Watershed, other NND people are of the opinion, that *“we have and must have the right to mine on our land and to get our share. It is our land and we should be able to decide whether to use it.*



Also the minerals belong to our land as we understand it. Therefore, I am pro mining". Apparently the subsurface resources are also an integral part of the land and not only the environment that is above the ground. We witnessed a very spiritual, careful and responsible relationship with the land, to nature. This shows a strong stewardship of the land and a great awareness about mining and its impacts. Therefore, it is so necessary and so important that First Nations in the Yukon have their land titles and their own governments. I know of many places in the world where indigenous people don't have a say and have no land rights and even no voice in decision making. Therefore, I think you can be very proud of yourselves and those who fought for land and self-government.



Women in mining

I promised in the invitation to talk about FIFO families and life in camps: Let me start with the perspective of women. Estimates say that around 10% of employees in this sector are female. These numbers do of course vary from company to company. It's well known that women are involved in jobs like cleaning, cooking, first aid and administration. However, in our research we also came across numerous female geologists, camp managers, women working in laboratories and as core samplers etc.

In Wolverine I met a female welder and in other places up here I met women working as truck drivers and heavy vehicle operators. In Australia I met a female underground bus driver. In Russia it has been a rule since Soviet times that many women do 'men's' jobs and work as engineers. Now: How to survive and feel comfortable in a masculine and male dominated environment? This is the number one question. The underground bus driver said, that today women are well respected as drivers and machine operators. They apparently drive with more care and so the companies have lower costs for repairs.



Actually all the women I talked to said that being a woman in a male peer group is not a big deal. They are treated respectfully and sexual harassment is really the exception. Well, this also depends on the size of the camp and the atmosphere among the inhabitants. However, all of them and also the camp managers and company representatives clearly stated that if a case of harassment would occur the perpetrator would be fired immediately. This fact is important to know as a woman. It is important for every female to know that you are protected by your supervisor and by the company. You have the power. You can speak out.

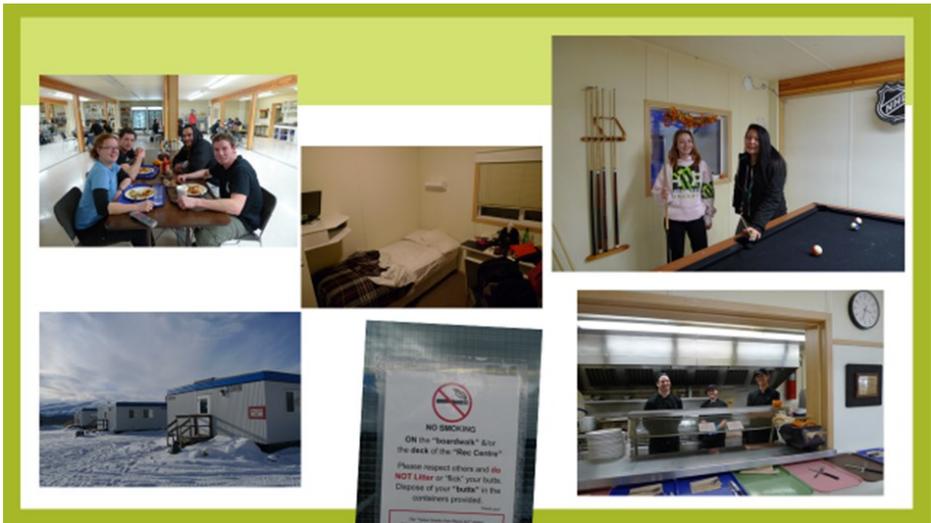
No doubt, troubles may occur and often unpleasant situations are not upfront harassment. Often discrimination is more subtle. What if you are not sure how to take certain behaviour? There is a fine line. How to deal with this? A female interview partner puts it like this: *“Be upfront. Talk to the guy who is behaving in a weird way. Often there are only a few weird guys who do not know how to behave. The others will support you. Just be upfront to stop it. Do not hesitate, do not be ashamed. Nobody has the right to put you in an unpleasant situation.”* Another woman who has been doing this job for quite a long time said that it certainly is a bonus if you behave a bit boyishly. *“Talk back, don’t be shy. [...] Do not take looks and men-talk seriously. Do not let it get to you. Just ignore most of the talk you hear and which you do not want to hear.”*

It is a masculine and often sexist environment. Therefore, one woman says: *“Do not dress up too sexy. Do not give them a reason to stare at you.”* It is a tricky situation. On the one hand you should be yourself and on the other hand you have to adapt to a certain extent to the male environment. They are simply the majority. However, this is no reason at all to accept unpleasant situations: Defend yourself, talk to your colleagues and seek the help of your boss; he or she is obliged to help.

The special situation of living in camps

In the camp you have a very special situation in general, since people are confined to a small space and you cannot usually leave the camp whenever you want. Certainly not at night and not without previous notice. All because of security reasons. It might be because of bears or of simply getting lost in the “bush” (this is important for those coming from towns down south and have no idea of the bush). Furthermore, you live in small rooms. You share the bathroom and you only have little privacy in your own room.

There is a combination of two – at first glance contradictory – practices needed. First, you do quite well if you appreciate your alone time. As far as we understood, most workers have so many social interactions during the day that they do not necessarily need more people in their time off shift. One put it this way: *“You are lucky if you know how to deal and be with yourself. You will spend a lot of time alone since you want to get rid of the close crowd around you and you need your rest.”* You need your privacy for reading, working-out, skyping and chatting with your loved ones or just playing on your computer or watching TV in peace.



Second, the other component which is of equal importance: Engage with the buddies in the camp. Share fun stories, share stories of the shift that upset and annoyed you. Another interview partner put it like this: *“We are a family, at least your peer group, we stick together, we support each other. We respect each other and we are close. Nevertheless, as in every family you want your own time and space and sometimes you want to be left alone”*.

I have seen a lot of people who did cope very well with camp life over the last few years. Some did not. However, those who adapted to camp life were people who were pretty serious about their life and work. You have a lot of time to think. One woman said: *“When I started this work, I really started to think about my life, I started to learn a lot about myself. This helped me to grow.”* I personally find this very touching. It means for me that the majority of these folks are very well aware of what they do, and of what they have to give up. Especially the older ones.

Families and relationships

Many talk about mine-workers in a derogatory way, especially in the oil sands. Many think their marriages are messed up, that it's all about gambling and prostitutes. That's just not the case and a very simplified way to see this particular world. I did a survey in Russia and I compared this to some statistics from Alberta. The divorce rates are similar to the Canadian or Russian average. Hard to believe, many would say. But it's a fact. When it comes to divorce, a lot of other factors come into play: Drugs, alcohol and domestic violence etc.

Sure, many mess up their job and their life, but what about the ones that don't? *“Just trust”*, as many of the guys say. *“it is a big problem that we are all so jealous. This hurts and does no good if you are in this kind of relationship.”* So many of the people we talked to said that it is important to be strong and self-confident, not to mess up your life because of thoughts you have in your mind.

It is hard for the kids too. Therefore, it is really important to stay in regular contact with your partner and your kids. Say that you love them! The majority of workers told us, that you have enough time to even be a better parent while you are off shift. You can do cool stuff with the kids and they will always remember.



You get two weeks off in a block and you can just take care of your kids. Take them out for fun stuff! This is an opportunity you would not have with a nine to five job.

No doubt, this mobile way of life is hard on individuals and families; on spouses and kids. It is hard emotional work and work on the own personality in order to be able to make the best of this situation. However, it is a process of learning – together with your family members and colleagues who know best how you feel.

Conclusion

In the end, as Susa and I were shown by our interview partners, it is very much a question of personality, it comes down to who likes this way of life and who doesn't. Therefore, the government can hardly expect that mineral resource development can really change



the north and make it a better place in general. There are so many other components that must be tackled and problems which need to be solved.

Furthermore, as we can all see today, mining is a good, a very good source of income when it is there, but when it is not around like now, people have to make ends meet in other ways and be very flexible.

You can make good money when the boom is there, and I think, as was told in our research to us, get ready during bust times for the next boom. Do not miss out vocational training, even when there's nothing on the horizon today. Tomorrow, a new opportunity may arise. Always be yourself, think ahead carefully if you want to go into this sector.

I am very grateful that Susa and I could enjoy long stays in this region. I would like to thank all the people of Mayo for their kindness and openness and the stories they shared and hopefully will share in the next year.

These are some of the many stories we collected and many more are to come. We would like to go on collecting more of history with Elders and especially a lot more about the future ideas of young people.

Mussi Cho! Thank you!



I hope you all enjoyed the Austrian goulash and dumplings Buffy and I prepared for you. Thank you Buffy for all your help. Goulash turned into Moolash (local moose meat) J.