VERBATIM

## John Amagoalik

My name is John Amagoalik, I was born in Northern Quebec. My family was relocated to Resolute back in the 1950s. And I lived up there, grew up there for nineteen years. I now live in Ottawa… in Iqaluit. And I spend some time living in Ottawa as well. I'm now working with the Qikiqtani Inuit Association as a negotiator and a policy advisor. I've been here for almost forty years now.

### *Question 1: What do you remember about the relocation?*

Well I do remember when we were still living around Inukjuak. I remember when I was about four years old that I started remembering things and I do remember the RCMP visiting our small camp when I was about five years old. And I do remember the relocation itself, I was almost six then.

Well they came to our camp, I remember that and they had some very intense conversations with my parents and I could understand that they were talking about being relocated to some other place, so I could understand the subject that was being discussed and I could understand that the RCMP were very determined to carry this project out and that my parents had a lot of reservations and they didn't want to take part at all when they first responded to the RCMP request. And I remember the RCPM went away, I don't know for how long but they came back and made the same request. They did that two or three times and I could sense that they were not willing to take no for an answer. And I remember my father finally agreed to the project under certain conditions.

My father insisted that they would be allowed to return if they didn't like this new place and that the whole group would not be separated, that they would stay together.

### *Question 2: Did they keep their promises?*

Well, I remember the trip, I don't remember every details of it, but I do remember it was a very long trip, through Hudson's Bay, up the West coast of Hudson's bay and then coming across East to Baffin Island and going up on the East side of Baffin Island and arriving in places like Iqaluit and Pond Inlet. And I remember very vividly about being transferred to another ship at Pond Inlet, to an icebreaker and getting on that ship and then being told that our group was being divided into two groups. At that point everybody panicked sort of, because they had been told that they would not be separated. Now they were and there was a lot of confusions in the group as to what we were going to do. So they finally decided who was going where, among the group… among the families. And they decided who was going to go with whom. And I remember the situation was very sad, because all the women started to cry…

So I remember that's probably the most painful of the trip was the separation and so that happened and one group was dropped off on Ellesmere Island and our group went on to Cornwallis and I remember landing on a very barren beach.

### *Question 3: How did you manage to survive in these conditions?*

It was very difficult to say the least. We had been told by the RCMP that there was plenty of game in the area and that we would be able to catch different species of animals for our food, but when we arrived there we discovered that there weren't too many species of animal. It was mostly walrus, seals and polar bears and we were used to a much different diet. Of course we were used to large animals, but we depended very heavily on fish, game birds and caribou and that was just not available. At the time all we could find was some starving muskox who couldn't even move. So it was devastating to find out we had been told a pack of lies about this place. There was no vegetation; there was just gravel all over the place. And it was very very cold, compare to Northern Quebec. So it was very difficult the first couple of years, before we started discovering different species of animals, where they could be found. And it became a little easier after the first couple of years, but the first two years were very very difficult because we couldn't find the kinds of animals that we were used to and we ran into the dark season when it was total darkness for three months. And so the first two years were very hard.

Our first reaction, especially my parents, their reaction was, we have been lied to, this is terrible place, we want to go back home. You know they made that very clear the first winter. After we had survived that first winter they went to the RCPM and said "we don't like this place, we want to go home". And it was then that the RCMP told us that we were pretty much stuck here, that we had no choice.

### *Question 4: How long did you remain stuck in Resolute Bay?*

Well, some of us were stuck there for twenty years and some managed to move back to Inukjuak when they were able to get enough… to put together enough money for transportation but about half the population are still there because they were born there and they don't have any other home.

After all these years up in Resolute, some of the older people wanted to go back and they did, most of them, but the younger people ended up staying up there, so we have a second event of separation.

***Question 5: How was it growing up in Resolute?***

My childhood in Resolute? Well, as I said, the first two years were very hard; I was very concerned especially with my mother because she was very lonely and depressed. But being a child I guess I was able to adjust myself to the situation and try to make the best of it. And after the first two years it was all not that bad you know growing up as kids, we did have good times especially in the spring, when the animals came back and we could hunt on the ice and go on trips of discovery and that sort of things.

And of course we had friends, who had arrived from Pond Inlet and we became very familiar with them, so it was not all bad, there was some good times as well. And then a little later, probably around the sixties, alcohol got introduced to our small community and our parents and adults got involved in drinking and that’s when life in Resolute really started going downhill.

Our people were not used to alcohol, it was not part of their culture, it was just dropped on their lap and they started drinking, they didn’t know how to handle alcohol properly and many many of them began drinking too hard and getting violent. So we had a hard time when alcohol was really flowing in the community.

When I was I think 20 or 21, you know I just got tired of life in Resolute because of all the drunkenness, the violence and the abuse that was going on in the community and I just didn’t want to be a part of it anymore. So I had a trail bike and I sold it and I got enough money for a plane ticket and I jumped on a plane and came to Iqaluit, which was Frobisher Bay at the time. And I didn’t know very many people, I had no place to go, I had no job prospects, I just arrived and a local family took me in and I began to be able to live in this community and to find a job and make friends. And then I managed to persuade the government to send me to a flying school in southern Ontario and I spent about a year and a half down there getting a private license and but I grew up too late living in Iqaluit and I wouldn’t want to live anywhere else right now.

***Question 6: How did you become a leader?***

I guess it was from experience, having gone through these difficulties, living in the High Arctic and trying to survive. I guess in a way it helped me, made me stronger, be more determined. Growing up, going to school, I went to residential school in Churchill, even in our school days we could see that the lives of our people was not acceptable. Our domination by the government, by another race, which was actively trying to kill our culture and language. Even as teenagers we could see that this was wrong and had to be changed, and my generation started thinking and talking about trying to change the circumstances of our people and that’s where it came from.

***Question 7: What does it take to become a leader?***

In order to be a political leader, you must have a drive, you must have what they call “fire in the belly” and I think I had that you know. I was always able to provide leadership even when I was a young boy and a teenager among my peers. So they always looked up to me as someone who could take leadership so you have to have some inborn talent to be able to do this.

***Question 8: What would you like to say to the younger generation?***

The first thing they should do is to understand their history. They do learn a bit about the very early history back in the nineteen hundreds when government first started arriving in our homeland so they know a little bit about that they learn a little bit about that in school. About Christopher Columbus and Martin Frobisher and all these so-called discoverers, but I think our children don’t know our recent history. They don’t understand what happened in the forties, the fifties and the sixties so they need to learn that. And I think that if they learn that they will begin to understand the situation they are in now. You know colonialism has had a big effect on the lives of our people. It’s very difficult to make people understand who have never been colonized what damage and pain colonialism inflicts on people. So they have to understand the effects of all the changes that have gone in our homeland and to understand our recent history so that they can understand where they are now in terms of early history, recent history and to decide what they want to do. We want them to retain their language; we want them to retain their culture and to improve the economic status of our people.

There’s been references to a lost generation, so I think we have lost a generation of people who could not fit in the old way of life and could not fit in the modern world and we have this generation which is half way period, position. They did not get enough education in the old ways and the news way so they basically ended up with nothing. And so I think this is the lost generation that people speak about so we have to get it out of that hole somehow.

Over that last few years, the government of Canada has apologized for residential schools, they have apologized to our relocation, so that helps, but also it brings back memories and pain. So these apologies have helped us in some ways, but the average Canadian still probably doesn’t understand the kind of situation we are in, in Nunavut. We are still in third world conditions, things that they take for granted is just not here and the cost of living is really sucking the life out of our small communities and that we don’t have basic infrastructure that southern Canadians take for granted. So our ambition right now is to catch up with the rest of Canadians and to enjoy the same benefits that Canadians have as a result of their citizenship. And I think it is also important for southern Canadians to understand that Inuit are determined Canadians and that we want to make a contribution to this country.

***Question 9: What do you think southern Canadians can do in order to help?***

I think the first thing they need to do is listen, because we have been trying to tell them things for so long and it seems to take generations to finally start to understand those messages. We have been telling Canadians that the housing shortage in Nunavut has been around since the nineteen fifties and sixties that shortage started as soon as the Government built the first house. So we have been telling them for 30, 40, 45 years that a housing shortage is a crisis! But they don’t seem to hear it!

And also with suicide… Suicides started in the sixties. After returning from Churchill I started hearing that fellow students that I knew in Churchill had committed suicide so I started hearing that around 1966, 1967. It was also at that time that my young cousin was a suicide casualty around 1968. And it’s been getting worse and worse and worse right from that time and we’ve been trying to tell Canadians that our young people are dying but again they don’t seem to hear. And it’s about time that they started listening to what we’re saying.