

A JOURNEY THAT'S BEEN MORE THAN WORTH IT:  
MARIE CHRISTINE ROBIDOUX, CLS, LLM, Calgary

*By Katherine Gordon  
—January 2011*

Marie Robidoux is not only a Canada Lands Surveyor; she is also a Past President of the Association of Canada Lands Surveyors and a member of the Canadian Board of Examiners for Professional Surveyors. After more than a decade working as a land surveyor in the public sector in Alberta and the Northwest Territories, she is now the Aboriginal Relations Coordinator at Osum Oil Sands Corp. in Calgary.

These are impressive achievements for someone who spoke no English when she first arrived in Edmonton in 1983. The former Quebecer laughs now at the recollection, even though that was a challenging time: “I knew I had to learn fast, so I took work in the hospitality industry so I would be forced to speak English and become fluent as quickly as possible.” It was a shrewd strategy, consistent with Robidoux’s straightforward approach to her career from the get-go: deciding what she wanted to do, then simply going ahead and doing it.

Robidoux initially studied law at Université Laval in Quebec, but after several years in practice decided a career in a law firm wasn’t for her. A change of scene was also in order. Edmonton sounded good, so Robidoux promptly packed her bags, caught a train west, and plunged into her self-directed English language immersion program.

Once her English fluency was well in hand, Robidoux turned her mind to an alternative profession. “I researched the options, and the possibility of surveying came up,” says Robidoux. She had always greatly enjoyed the outdoors and physical activity—playing hockey at national level in her younger days, among numerous other sports—and

the prospects of a career spent in Canada's wild and rural backcountry appealed. "Then my mother told me my grandfather had been a surveyor, which I had not known before," says Robidoux. "That sealed it—I felt like it was meant to be."

The shift from law to surveying wasn't as great as it might seem, says Robidoux. "Many surveyors go on to become lawyers," she says. "I just reversed the usual trend!" All the same, it wasn't easy as it sounds: "I had never done any mathematics, and certainly never had to study it in English. That was challenging—after the first week I really wondered if I could do this. But I persevered. I didn't give up."

From 1987 to 1994, while she pursued her studies, Robidoux worked as a survey technologist and officer in Edmonton, first for the government of Alberta and then for Natural Resources Canada. After obtaining her CLS commission in 1993, she moved to Yellowknife as a program manager for NRC. It was her introduction to the world of First Nations rights with respect to lands and resources, and corresponding government obligations to First Nations. "I was the lead for the Nunavut and Northwest Territories land claims surveys," says Robidoux. "Consultation with First Nations was a very large part of the work."

The job was a natural fit for Robidoux, whose family had boarded First Nations teenagers from northern Quebec who had to come south to complete high school. "I learned a great deal from them about their lives and how difficult things were for First Nations communities," says Robidoux. "I remember as a teenager myself feeling so shocked, and thinking to myself, some day I am going to do something to help. So here I was doing exactly that, and I really liked it."

Robidoux has remained in the same line of work ever since, moving into private practice in 2000 and focussing her efforts on First Nations projects and legal surveys in Canada's remote northern communities. It continues to be very rewarding work, not least of which is helping her non-First Nations clients and colleagues understand the challenges that First Nations face, and inspiring them to actively support aboriginal people in their aspirations to improve their lives: "You see people putting their prejudices aside, and First Nations working so hard to get ahead and make progress, and it really makes it all worthwhile."

Her chosen surveying career has also been an opportunity for both adventure and outright fun. "Working in the north, it's just adventure after adventure! Some of them scary, most of them fun." The first time she was dropped off by helicopter by herself in a remote arctic location, she didn't know enough yet about polar bears to be frightened. "I do now!" she laughs. "But at the time, I simply had this sense of wonder at what an incredible landscape it was and how perhaps no-one else had been here in hundreds of years, or maybe even ever. It was a very powerful feeling."

Robidoux has also found time along the way to support the advancement of professional women through networking, among other things. "My mother was a good role model—she always worked, so I thought that was just normal for women. I guess in one sense I have been a bit of a trailblazer for women," adds Robidoux. "I was playing hockey at a national level before there were official championships, and when I started law school, there were only a handful of women in the class. There were even fewer in survey school! So it has always been important to me to do what I can to make it a little bit easier for those coming along behind me."

Robidoux continues to be physically active, enjoying golf and running these days rather than hockey (although she plans to indulge in the occasional round of road hockey with her grandsons). Although her position as Aboriginal Relations Coordinator at Osum Oil Sands Corp. doesn't involve physical surveying, her technical expertise still comes into play as she deals with legal issues relating to land, boundaries and traditional territories. She is also editing a textbook on Canadian survey law on her downtime (in 2002 she obtained a Master of Laws specializing in information technology) and simply enjoying what each new day brings.

“I think when I started this career what surprised me the most was the sheer adventure of it,” observes Robidoux. “From day to day you might be out in prairie farmland, or in the bush, or in the High Arctic. I love that. I still look forward to that sense of adventure, every day.”