

Interview with David Abraham

For HUM 2504: Introduction to American Studies, Prof. Emily Satterwhite

Occupation: Hokie Spokes Owner

Time and Place: November 4th 2011 Hokie Spokes

Interviewers: Paul Lascko and Nicholas Piccollelli

DA = David Abraham

PL = Paul Lascko

NP = Nicholas Piccollelli

PL: So, will you please tell me your name and if you don't mind your age.

DA: I don't mind, Dave Abraham and I'm 58.

PL: Um, ok and job title and organization that you work for.

DA: Well I'm the owner of this business which is New Wheel and Hokie Spokes.

PL: Ok...um describe your family background, well how long have you been working at Hokie Spokes.

DA: {Holds his finger to wait while a customer comes into shop} I've had the bike shop since 1980.

PL: ok.

DA: Speaks with a customer off camera.

PL: Describe your family background, where you grew up umm... if you're from the area what was Blacksburg like back in the day or what.

DA: Ok uh just a minute.. speaks with customer. Ok family background.

PL: Yea, family background

DA: Grew up in Christiansburg

PL: K and um

DA: Normal Heterosexual parents.

PL: Right, what did your parents do for a living.

DA: My father uh had a small business like me. He's a better business man than me I believe.

And uh my mother uh was a schoolteacher and a guidance counselor.

PL: ok, did you work for your dad at all growing up.

DA: Just, not a whole lot just a little bit. I did do something in the print such something called collating. Which is uh one of the most boring things you can imagine. Like you would take not necessarily this kind of book, but you would put all the pages in a book.

PL: And then uh, do you think that that had an effect on you wanting to become an entrepreneur and open your own shop er?

DA: Uh yea I think that it runs in the family a little bit.

PL: Really?

DA: Yea, I mean sort a sort of stubborn and independent like my father.

PL: Absolutely, have you ever have you been a cyclist your whole life or er have you always had a passion for it?

DA: I kind of got into that when... bout probably the age of the average college student. About when I was 21.

PL: When did it, when did it I mean obviously it's a college campus but when did you have the idea for Hokie Spokes.

DA: Right around then.

PL: Right around then.

DA: Well not so much Hokie Spokes but I went to Radford University, I'm one of the first men to ever go to Radford and um see we still have a bike shop in Radford. And we started with the bike shop in Radford. I started at Radford.

PL: Your partner is still over there?

DA: Yea, for what that's worth it's a very, it's a tough environment for a bike shop.

PL: Really, um what would you say is the hardest part about running a bike shop in a college town?

DA: Well I think in general this business is challenging because um basically uh the profit margins are very tight.

PL: Do you have trouble uh stocking types of bikes that college kids might like or have you found kind of a few niche brands that have been popular.

DA: Well the thing about bicycles is that in general uh their very similar from brand to brand I don't think we have problems per say. I think that many more bikes are sold on the internet and various ways. And um their sold at places um mass market like target and Walmart. So it's so competitive that its very challenging.

PL: Do you think that theirs more any like advantages that Hokie Spokes has over a place like East Coasters that you've finally come up with over the years.

DA: Well East Coasters has the advantage that they were in this town before Hokie Spokes and also they were uh better capitalized. Which that means of course that they they uh put more money into it in the beginning but uh ya know their uh have a whole different philosophy than we do.

PL: Um this day to day what would you say your average day at Hokie Spokes is like? What time do you come in uh.

DA: I work six days a week and um certain days of the week im doing uh athletic activities which uh basically uh uh I get in closer to lunch time but the most days I'm here at ten or twelve and I work till six or seven or eight.

PL: Oh jeeze and how many employees do you have here.

DA: Um part time probably about a half dozen.

PL: Uh... Lets see and how many hours, you say you're here eight hours a day. I'm sorry uh so you're here about 50 hours a week 60 maybe.

DA: Well id have to do the math {takes out pad and pen to figure out how many hours he works} uh ok you wanna do the math so Monday say 10:30 till see it varies because with back to school .

PL: right

DA: Ok in general probably eight hours Monday, Tuesday uh more like 9 hours, Wednesday prob seven hours, Thursday 9 hours, Friday uh seven hours, Saturday probably 9 hours. So probably 1,2,3 27 and 14 and 8, that's probably and I work at home as well online just for fun.

That's probably about fifty hours a week.

PL: What would you say is probably the toughest part of those hours just that aspect of your job.

DA: Well people often say to me, uh whats your name again?

PL: Paul

DA: They say don't work too hard, I say I don't work hard I work long.

PL: Right.

DA: Ok so none of its really tough if you kind of like what you're doin.

PL: Big time commitment?

DA: Uh certain... yea more than most businesses where you can punch out and go home. You know since you're the owner it's not so easy to walk away.

PL: And what would you say... would you say that you enjoy that freedom? Is that probably the best part of your job? Or what would you say the best part of your job is?

DA: Uh, I like uh helping people to be healthy and uh I am sort of a missionary for cycling. So I believe in bikes so its somewhat easy for me to uh to sell um.

PL: And I think you and I had talked, you do bike to work? Um with physical activity bike to work.

DA: No {laughs} couple times, I've done it about five times this year. Maybe if I'm lucky once every month or two.

PL: Let's see what other good questions do we have here. Um... So have you since Radford have you worked anywhere else or was this kind of your first venture.

DA: This is the first time ive had my own business yea.

PL: Have you had one {laughs} what would you say is the worst job you have ever had?

DA: I did work in a bike shop once and lived in the bike shop. And this was a bike shop that was going out of business. And um the guy that had it was a mail man and he just had it, thought he was a business man so he thought he threw money around. But it immediately kind of tanked, and um he cheated me he didn't pay me what he was supposed to pay me. So it was pretty grim there.

PL: Do you think that affected how you run your business?

DA: To some degree, yea.

PL: Definitely keep that in mind.

DA: Might have learned some good things and some bad things from him.

PL: What would you say um, so if you weren't doing this job what do you think you would be doing.

DA: Uh that's a very good question, I'd tell you what I'd like to do but I'm not sure if I could make a living doing it. Is I'd like to uh it's more of a hobby for me but which is bird photography.

PL: What kind of camera do you have?

DA: I have one my dad gave me which is a Canon with a pretty nice lens.

PL: Um could you see yourself uh doing this for the rest of your time or employment, or is this gonna be.

DA: Well uh, its likely that ill keep doing it for a while.

PL: Would you say that this is your dream job? Or maybe professional bird photographer?

DA: Um yea, I'd rather be a bird photographer but on the other hand um you know its questionable whether I can make a living doing that.

NP: Right. Where's the best place in Blacksburg or Christiansburg to photograph birds.

DA: The place that I often go to with my father is, he's much more into it than I am because he has more time, is the um its in Radford um below the damn near the New River. You can get pictures of ducks and herrings and stuff like that.

NP: Have you ever been to the uh, Claytor Lake.

DA: Yes.

NP: Um, we used to row there for the Crew Team. I dunno if you've ever, everybody always ran into us with their boats and stuff

DA: I havnt been there in uh too much. Wildlife Photography but he does {his father}

PL: How much start up capital do you think you dropped into this business over the years?

DA: I know how much and it wasn't very much. It was a little over \$4,000.

PL: Ok and uh, I mean obviously the biggest cost is, is it staffing or paying your staff or stocking bikes.

DA: Payroll is a major expense, the biggest expense is the uh the lease payment the rent.

PL: Has that had anything to do, is that kind of why the business has moved around a couple times or?

DA: Yup landlords are very tough in Blacksburg.

PL: Interesting, and are you in a position right now that you like or?

DA: This spot, it's good for walk by traffic. It uh, it's a little smaller than I would have preferred.

PL: You said you lived in Radford, so what do you think your costs are getting to work every day.

DA: Uh its 14 miles so just on a off the cuff thing, which would be uh 50 cents a mile that's 14 dollars not counting things like your time.

PL: Right, uh could you please talk about how your work has affected your family life? Or maybe your social life?

DA: Um well im very fortunate to have a relationship with a woman who is very patient with me, in terms of bringing in my fair share of the money. She has a good job and she has a large share of the work around the house as well as bringing in the majority of the money so. So I'm really blessed in that regard. To be able to do something that I like to do and yet put putter around at it but she uh you know its uh, she's not the sort that actually complains out loud. It would be nice to uh make more money at this.

PL: D you think that the the financial stress out shadows the enjoyment that you get from it.

DA: Well it sort of situation that um you told me you rowed, rowed on the lake well im on the boat and were movin somewhere or the other and I can't get out. I mean it's not so easy to uh change course in mid stream. To continue a screwed up uh kind of convoluted metaphor.

PL: That makes sense. Uh so obviously your major clientele are Virginia Tech students how would you say that Tech has affected your business?

DA: Uh well, it's a lot of fun helping Hokies. I like everything right down to the uh, the motto of the school is pretty neat.

PL: So

DA: Because if im gonna be successful in retail I feel like serving people is very important.

PL: Um Would you say that ah, So um the next question here is uh do you have a love or hate relationship with uh Virginia Tech. So obviously a love relationship I would assume.

DA: Well no, there are issues with Tech. I think the bureaucracy um is tone deaf sometimes. There is a lot of bureaucracy.

PL. You and I had talked about uh, you had gotten couple of tickets for unloading your uh stock right here.

DA: Yea, yea I got one ticket. That's the town of Blacksburg though.

PL: Well yea that was kind of my second question though, um have you had any more issues with that any interesting stories about those guys.

DA: Nope.

PL: Are there any historical events or movements that have impacted your work or your life in general, uh how have they impacted you um maybe the shootings at Virginia Tech, um it says Vietnam War, Civil Rights Movements, September 11th anything like that? It sounds a little off topic but has anything, anything you got we'd love to hear.

DA: Well obviously with the uh April shootings, one of the people shot was a client of mine. So yea that was as close as it came to impacting me; but um I think it was emotionally traumatic for everyone that has uh a little bit of uh compassion and humanity about them. You know it, there was a time when you know are sales were off because of it. Which you know, so what. Which of course even things such as bad weather can impact sales. You know when Tech closes down for a month in the winter time, for Christmas break its challenging from financial standpoint because we still have our monthly expenses like rent and lights and phone bill. And you know we're not doin as much business.

PL: Um, how does your business change during the summer? Do you cut back on staffing or er? Maybe cut back your hours?

DA: Summer for us is, the best time for us is back to school. Uh summer is ok, it's really the winter that we should be cutting back. And um, I was very fortunate this year once school started that we had people, temporary people who stepped in. And it really got me through it. I have to do something real quick {steps out of frame to do something in the shop} Ok im good.

PL: Ok, if you could change anything about your day to day work what would it be? Maybe the type of clientele that come in here, like I mean do uh kind of like uh window shoppers annoy you? Or

DA: Oh uh, well this is just a crazy thing but one of the things that actually impacts us in a crazy way is uh people, we probably get on average one or two requests daily for us to hang up uh posters. And uh you know ive been takin the posters and politely telling people well we'll do it as soon as we can. And they seem to take that and leave their poster and go away. And uh ya know it's sort of rude but on the other hand our work I feel is more important than hanging up a poster.

PL: I mean you're not an advertising company.

DA: No we, they don't pay rent here so; but uh.

PL: You could charge um.

DA: But we, your question was whats the worst thing.

PL: Yea, I mean what would you change if...

DA: It would be nice to have a bigger facility here.

PL: Ok.

DA: But that's like {laughs} we can't make the, we can't expand the walls.

PL: Um, what was the craziest thing that has ever happened to you while you were here?

DA: At work?

PL: Yup.

DA: {pauses to think} Uh... it's always fun meeting different people with different attitudes and beliefs. I've helped a woman fix her wheelchair, which she could keep on going. Um but then I've had landlords from hell, one that threatened to sue me if I cuz I told him I was tired of him harassing me and that I was gonna beat him up. So I'm not a real violent type of person, so this was like the landlord from hell. Um so it's uh a really dull moment.

PL: Did any lawsuit ever come out of that?

DA: Yes, they sued me for damage to their building and they lost pretty badly but they get some money that I don't feel that they earned but its water under the damn. These are slumlords which anybody at Tech is probably familiar with.

PL: So would you say that's a pretty big problem in Blacksburg?

DA: Slumlords?

PL: Yea.

DA: My impression is that it is because you know, this is just anecdotal but um some kid rents an apartment. And uh theres a mark on the wall and he doesn't write it down or he doesn't know to annotate it or she and then at the end of the term the landlord charges him for that mark and probably charged ten previous people for the same mark. And mark is a good description because that's, I feel like a lot of landlords prey on the Tech students. Because a lot of Tech students will just get mom and dad to pay for it. Um and won't stand up to a landlord.

PL: Would you say that uh, affected the way that you conduct business here. Has it preoccupied you ever?

DA: There's certain landlords that I would be reluctant to rent from again. Or you know so.

PL: This says, have you ever experienced discrimination in the work place. Would you call that discrimination or?

DA: Mmm well, not really I mean the guy did have sort of uh, I'm Jewish, and he once called me an old world Jew. I think that the guy's just a pain in the ass. And is nasty to everyone I don't think that it's the fact that I'm Jewish that he treated me any worse or better than anyone else.

PL: Um, would you say that you were motivated by money like monetarily when you started this business.

DA: I will say, I was very naïve and I thought that uh I would start a bike shop and work hard a couple months and money would really in. And really, I really have never run it really well as a business and it's really to my own detriment. I should really do more with the books. I should do more planning. And yet my skills are more in the way of fixing the bikes, so I tend to uh neglect some of the more important and managerial functions or entrepreneurial functions to the detriment of the business.

PL: Uh

DA: So I kind of at a certain level part of me likes being on the edge. Part of me likes the adrenaline rush of running into a bill you have forgotten about.

PL: Cool there is nothing wrong with that.

NP: I know you sell quite a few bikes but do you also rent bikes as well, um what do you think makes the most money on a day to day basis?

DA: I think that's an excellent question, because there is nothing that is more profitable in the bike shop then renting the bikes. And we use the rental as a sales tool because in this regard we're quite different than most other bike shops. Most other bike shops have a certain group of bikes that are rented, and we will rent any bike in here. And one of the things that we do, I feel like its important dealing with people to try to help them overcome their fear of buying the wrong thing. So, because we allow rental payments to be credited towards purchase a person can rent a red bike one week and a green bike the next week. And whatever money that they pay us accrues and deducts from if and when they buy a bike. Um so you know it's a policy that is fairly unique and that works for us.

NP: Was that something that you just thought of or was it a suggestion from?

DA: I, I figured it out after a while yea. Just looking at things, how I would like to be treated if I were a customer.

NP: Do you thing that has contributed to your business' reputation and why you're so popular on campus.

DA: I dunno, I hope we're popular on campus. {pointing to the window} We were fortunate enough to win the CT {Collegiate Times} "Best Bike Shop" last year. And maybe we will win it again this year. I don't know but um, I think that it's a good policy but the flipside of the policy. Where it's not so good, is sometimes the new bikes look a little used. And this might deter some

people from uh from going ahead to buy a bike. If they found some sort of a they have a feeling that the bike might be a little muddy or scratched or what have you.

NP: Like, what's you most popular seller in the shop? Mountain bikes, road bikes, cross or anything like that?

DA: The bikes that have the most demand {bites his lip to think} um are actually road bikes. Um it's a funny, I'm gonna answer you totally off the wall kind of thing. Basically, um uh if you wanna look into, it's a site it's called Blue Ocean Marketing and Blue Ocean Strategy. You're not business majors right, this isn't.

NP: No

PL: I am.

DA: Well this Blue Ocean thing basically says that whatever business you're in you may not be in that business, that there's this whole untapped field you don't know about and uh so. So the first example is in this book uh Cirque du Soleil. And Cirque du Soleil they looked at circuses and they didn't want to have elephants. Ok, and they decided instead of being in the circus business and charging \$12 or \$15 dollars for a ticket and having three rings. They were gonna have, compete with the prices of Broadway shows. And have trapeze and just have human beings in the circus, so they kind of defined their own category. And they have been very successful. And I think one of things that we're really doing here is not so much selling bikes per say but providing transportation. And I think it's a subtle but important difference. And I think that one thing that I have seen lately is that there's this huge demand for bicycles in Blacksburg that would be between 100 and 200; and unfortunately the whole structure of the business is such that new bikes are made in Asia and but their imported by wholesalers. It's sort of uh, bikes just aren't sold to us at a price that we can sell them to are intended clientele for a 100 or 200. So we do sort of try to counter that with uh, with used bikes. But there's a whole can of worms, and there's a lot of ways to uh to uh screw up.

NP: Do you think because Blacksburg, is such a pretty small compact town and parking around here is pretty bad, do you think that might contribute to um your business and um college students trying to buy bikes instead of driving their cars all over the place.

DA: Well I think that bikes are a great way to get around town, with exception the cold wet weather. Uh which of course the cyclist has many, headwinds you know. He or she, its dangerous to some degree. I don't think the town in particular supports like it could with bike lanes. I think that bikes get ripped off fairly easily. I don't think that, and don't think that this is just true of Blacksburg but in general Police departments aren't as diligent about trying to recover stolen bikes as they might be. Um so, but I think actually Virginia Tech being a spread out campus, like we it's a lot easier in general to sell a bike to a Tech student than a Radford students. Because the Radford student campus, you know people have enough time in between classes to walk to their classes. Where is at Tech they might need a bike. So I think it's actually in that regard there is good demand.

PL: What personality traits do you think that you have or would need to be successful owning a bike shop.

DA: Um, I think that's a fairly broad question. I think um, I think to be your own boss in whatever you do, you have to be a little quirky, sometimes a person doesn't a person who's their own boss doesn't play well with others. And like end up saying well this guy worked you know sayin that like this guy here was a jerk. And I can do better than these people. And uh so {answers phone}.

PL: So if you had kids and they were like Dad I wanna open up a bike shop. What would you say to them?

DA: Run

PL: Run?

DA: Well I think you know I'm happy with this, I'm happy with myself uh you know. But uh but it's not an easy gig. Ok and you know probably if most things were easy, what I like say if it were easy people would already be doing it. Everybody would be doing it, so {pauses to think} um it's definitely; I think any body's work is gonna be love hate. There's gonna be things they like and things they don't like. And uh {pauses to think} the economy's tight right now, uh this business is mature and as I say I think the business model in many ways is broken. So uh, it's very challenging. Yea it's what I know how to do and it's what I've been doing, and so um I don't see. I mean events will, this winter shall be interesting. And it should be very challenging, financially but um. So if you interview me again in the spring um my answers would be uh, maybe more insightful. {laughs}

PL: Uh, let's see here. What gives you the greatest satisfaction from your work?

DA: Uh, you know I like to ride bicycles. And I, I it's just getting people involved with that. Helping them to be healthy and fit.

PL: Um

NP: What um plans do you have for the future, as far as maybe to expand or improve your business as a whole? Or do you think that it might be at a good place where it is?

DA: One thing that we, I plan to work on almost immediately is uh to have uh a better website. Our Website is static, it was written a while ago. We don't have its dated, there's a student who's willing to help me and uh probably this afternoon I'm gonna make a phone call. And try to grease that a little bit, to get that going a little better. I think if we had a shopping cart on the internet that we could make, that would be an alternative revenue force that would help us. But uh and, we this premises right here needs a ton of cleaning so. We're still kind of behind from when school started so, and there's really no excuse for that anymore because we're not so busy that we can't clean up right now.

PL: Um, you know in class we're talkin about the American Dream, and uh would you say that what you're doing kind of defines the American Dream.

DA: Well I'm not an immigrant and um I uh, in terms of the history of me. In this business, at one point starting I thought that selling was something negative you did to someone rather than for them. And uh, I had to learn to be a salesperson and uh you know that was. You know, it wasn't a linear straight line, thing that I succeeded. I, in a way I was fortunate to start in Radford where mistakes that I made were on a smaller scale. But I think many of the things that I did wrong then, I still do wrong. Uh so, you know but then again I say to some people is part of being smart is knowing what your dumb at. But its uh, the American Dream uh; I think we live in uh overall the greatest country in the world but on the other hand uh you know I think are country has uh uh many issues and problems. I like to joke that we have the best government that money can buy. Uh I think that the pressures on small businesses right now are uh extreme. And I don't think that things are gonna get much better, and uh our foreseeable future. So uh, if I had some uh some sugar daddy come in and want uh to buy the place. Uh I would quit, if the money was right.

PL: Uh.

DA: I don't see that happening, because you see this business is easy to get into. You don't have to buy somebody out, you can just start another one.

PL: Right, um so um maybe so you think that maybe you have made kind of a brand in the area?

DA: Well you can make, maybe you can be a better judge of that than I. We try to brand, we uh but marketing this. You sort of have to do gorilla marketing; I have this little hobby of collecting school jerseys'. And I think that adds color to the store, and I like to do that so. So I want people to say "oh yea that's the place with all the college jerseys' on the wall." Um but uh you know I think one of the better things that I did do was just thinkin up the name Hokie Spokes. I think it's a really good name.

PL: For sure, um so I've asked you a ton of questions. And got a ton of good answers. Do you think I missed anything? Anything else I should put in there.

DA: Um, well I think one thing; if I've learned anything in 30 years of doing this. It's not important just to work hard but to work smart. And uh like I said before, I'm not sure if I still work smart; because I tend to do the hands on stuff. If I were really smart, I would have someone else do and I would do more thinking. But um, so uh and ya know I had a client recently say that I was a little bit ADHD. You know I tend to do two or three things at the same time, which uh probably is not. Makes me less effective than I might otherwise be. Uh but uh yea, you know its its I think in general with bikes; Um you know, what we're really sellin as well as transportation. Is uh you know we're sellin the sport as well as the fun of it. And that um , ya know it's important that we try to keep things light and fun for people. Uh so, the question was do we have a good brain. Was that?

PL: Well, it's not just that anything I missed. Uh that's all I was asking. But uh

DA: Oh anything you missed and the American dream in general?

PL: Uh yea the, just the fact that you're an entrepreneur and kind of in that you didn't go out and take a job. You just kind of made your own way and. And you've supported yourself for this long.

DA: Yea but unfortunately, it's been more of a hobby than a job.

PL: Ok, um would you say that's unfortunate though?

DA: Yea because, I should make more. It should be more profitable than it is. And any normal person would have quit by now.

PL: Really?

DA: Yea, for the level of business that it is.

PL: So you think that you may be compensated for all time you put in.

DA: Well uh so compensations is not just about money it's also about knowing you've helped someone. Knowing that you've done a good job, and uh you know in that sense its very rewarding. But financially it hasn't been.

PL: ok I think we're good Dave.