

Narrative: Linda Thomas, House Cleaner, Self-Employed

Blacksburg, Virginia

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My name is Linda Thomas, and I'm 70 years old. That was painful to say. I do house-cleaning, and I'm self-employed, and I've done it about 26 years. My early years, till I was about nine, I lived in Charleston, South Carolina. Then, when my mother remarried, we moved and I grew up on the last village on Long Island. It was like 500 people. When I was growing up I wanted to be a nurse. I did go to nursing school at Brooklyn Hospital in New York, you know for a while, but just family problems I had. And took classes at Long Island University for a while, and then just family problems; I had to discontinue. My mother didn't work, she had four children. And my father was [*pause*], my step-father was a marine distributor for the east coast. I've been divorced for about 19 years. My job doesn't affect my family at all. It's helped my children, you know—educating them and everything. I have two children, my son is a chiropractor, and then my daughter is a loan-broker. She is self-employed.

My family and I moved, because you couldn't afford to live on the end of Long Island anymore [*laughs*]. That's why, yeah, you had to move. We had searched out for quite a few years and I would write to the Chamber of Commerce. Actually when I looked on the map this Christiansburg area was the only place I never requested any material from. I didn't want to live this far over. Then we came through this area just looking at it, and I really loved Christiansburg.

I got into housecleaning because I had two friends. One wanted someone to clean their house, and one did house-cleaning. I didn't work at all when I raised my children. I chose not to. So I called her to get her a job and she said, oh, I just happened to mention to her I might take on a couple houses, and she said do you want to clean my house? And I said alright, fine, I'll do it. I'm just one that I really enjoy cleaning my own home, so I don't mind doing it, you know?

I just do general cleaning. I do 8 hours a day and I work 40 a week. I've been doing it for 26 years. I've held other jobs besides this. I worked in my early years. I worked for the telephone company as a long-distance operator, then for about 4 ½ to 5 years I worked for a bank on Miami Beach. To get houses I would run an ad in the *Current* [section of the *Roanoke Times*] when I first started out. Now, I never run an ad; it's always by, you know, referrals. And I always have a waiting list; I have four on it right now. I prefer working for professors. I think they're the best to work for, they're just great people [*pause*]. Some elderly can be very difficult. One wanted to set

her air conditioner at 82 degrees [*laughs*]. You know, things like that. So I had to discontinue that one. They're harder to deal with. I work for mostly professors. I have a few lawyers and a few retired people. Right now I work for mostly married families. I've had, you know as far as single, just a professor that wasn't married. I work for him. I have one retired professor that I also do, you know, that lives alone. I've also had some homes that have small children and I will have to do more picking up, or picking up in the bedroom with teenagers. I expect it with that type of children, and it doesn't bother me. The work's about the same.

Some of the people I work for I actually become good friends with, really good friends. We just have amusing times sometimes laughing about family things or talking about our children, you know? I have one family in Christiansburg, the Kenzies, that I am the closest to. Just the type of certain people you just get closer to, you know? About 6 weeks ago she just gave me 100 dollars to give my grandson, who is on part scholarship in college and has a difficult time paying for his books and all, to buy his English book. But I've worked for her for about 25-26 years. You know, we just do things for each other. Twice I re-covered her dining room chairs for her and haven't charged her anything, I just do it for her, you know?

I think my most rewarding experience working has been [*pause*], I think the one that I worked for—I don't even like to say I did this—but working for a professor that was killed last year in the glider accident. Do you recall? Mier Schneller, he was the most wonderful person I've ever known. They had visitors in their home 3 nights a week, and I just gave her the time. I would go over every night for a couple hours and I wouldn't charge her for it. I would just clean the house, you know, get things organized for the next group of people. That was probably the most rewarding thing to me. It isn't what I did for them, but it [*pauses*], I'm close with that family.

It's important for people to understand that I'm honest. They can trust me. The people I work for all know I won't steal from them, and that's the biggest thing because I've heard problems. I've had a few problems with a few people and I have discontinued them. My clients also know I'm dependable, because I'm always there. I've never in 26 years ever cancelled out when I'm not sick. You know, there are days when you don't feel like going to work, but I've never done that. They need it done and I'm always there for them.

The American Dream to me means [*pause*] not to get rich. I think, you know, for a family to be able to make a good living—and it is a shame that women have to work that much with children. Being able to educate your children and you know, live comfortably. To be able to save for retirement, and it's very difficult today, you know for younger people. I'm sort of from the old school, and I think being a mother and raising your children, I think that's the greatest thing a woman can do. That's my view of it. I prefer a woman to stay at home, but she still needs that education, you know, so she would always have something to fall back on to. You know, especially if there's a divorce. You know, even if she could work part-time where she can still have that work experience so she will be employable on a full-time basis after her children are grown. Because even if she's educated, if she stays out of that work-force 10-14 years while her children still need her at home, she is not going to be that employable. I know professionals who do work full-time with children and they seem to manage it well. Maybe it's my age, but I don't think I could do it as well as they do. But because I've seen both sides I prefer staying home, even if it's part-time.

To read the complete conversation, please see the transcript.