

Interview with Donald Walker

Hum 2504: Dr. Emily Satterwhite. Spring 2010

Occupation: Complex Director for Slusher Hall – Virginia Tech

Time and Place: March 16th, 2:15 at Slusher Wing

Interviewer: Bo Hart, junior, from South Carolina)

Bo Hart (BH)

Donald Walker (DW)

BH: Will you please state your name, your job title and the name of the organization you work for?

DW: My name is Donald Walker. I am a Complex Director, and I work for Residence Life at Virginia Tech.

BH: How long have you been a Complex Director here at Virginia Tech?

DW: Um, I am rounding out my second year as Complex Director, I started in July 2008, so this July will be my second year here at Virginia Tech.

BH: Would you tell me a bit about your family background? Did your parents work?

DW: Well both of parents do and have worked my whole life . Military family - didn't move around a lot, which is remarkable for a military family. People usually are like a military family? You must have move around a lot, but literally I've lived in two states my whole life - well three if I count grad school. I have lived in Maryland and Virginia my whole life. My mom was a jack of all trades – licensed cosmetologist the whole time growing up, also did childcare, and homemaker for a portion of us growing up. Because my parents had 4 kids, so it was important for someone being home during the day, and recently she is now in restate. She is fun. My dad was in the Navy as we were growing up. He was in the Navy for 20 years. He worked part time in the evenings at the Verizon Center in D.C. My parents live in Baltimore and both thought it was important for us to have a parent home as we grew up.

BH: Would you describe in detail a typical day at your job?

DW: Um, well, it is a hard question, because I would venture to say that there is not a typical day on the job for me. I typically come to my office in the morning and do those mundane tasks – administrative tasks of checking my emails, and other administrative stuff – which isn't my favorite. It really depends on the day. I oversee Slusher Tower and Slusher Wing, so we have 18

RA's that I must check in with, I have a Grad Student I oversee as well. The grad student actually oversees 10 of the RA's, but I argue that she probably works with all of the RA's, but directly with 10 of them. While I directly oversee eight of them. We have 12 RA's in the tower, and six in the Wing. I have one on one's with my staff ahhhh, I am the Co-Chair of the RA Selection Committee, where we meet from October to literally April to begin the selection of new RA's. Got to have an evaluation process, and put it together, so we can hire new people for the next year. So, mainly I am looking after the student experience and supervising my staff.

BH: How did you come to have this job?

DW: Haha, um, that's a good question – ummm I will try to get you the shortened version um, I think I have said that before ha. Undergrad as a electronic and film major, I thought I wanted to do something with that, but after a little while I decided I wanted to be an RA, which helped me refocus on what I really wanted to do. I have very very strong passion for people going to college, and access to those things, I think there is a common misconception that everyone can go to college, but I don't think that's necessarily true – I think that there are access issues and other things that prevent people from knowing about these opportunities. I became passionate about this in my undergrad education so I decided to go to grad school to get my degree in counseling and high ed, and with that I learned a lot about the college environment and I decided, you know, residence life was a pretty good way for me to go. Even though I very strongly believe that there are access issues, but I do believe the more important issues are looking at minority students that do make it to predominately white institutions, and sometimes there are downfalls and they struggle more as a student. I want to work on this, and that's why I'm passionate in what I am doing, and enjoy working in residence life.

BH: Speaking of this, what do you like best about your job?

DW: Um, if I had to say what I like the best about my job would be the student interaction. Everyday being able to interact with students and being able to have some type of impact on their whole college experience, is, um, probably the most beneficial piece of my job. I think often times people refer to professors or default to other resources on campus in order for them to be successful, but I think looking at the holistic experience, and not just offering some of those intangible educational pieces, but being able to help students learn how to navigate through those systems and understand why they are here at college and how much of an impact they can have on their lives and on lives of the students. That's probably the most enjoyable part of my college.

BH: Speaking of what you like the best, what do you like least about your job?

DW: Um, I think some of the mundane tasks. All the administrative things that I have to do. My personality is just not admin focus, so I can just get distracted by those things. I would rather not just sit at my desk and answer those questions, but hah but I mean it is part of what you got to do. Catching up on emails. Absolutely.

BH: Where do you live, and costs are involved in you to get to work?

DW: I live on campus actually, and the best part of my job, I guess, um, I wouldn't say it is the best benefit, because you take the good with the bad when you talk about benefits. I do live on campus, and part of my job is they provide a two bedroom apartment on campus for me, and I live there. The costs associated with coming to work is probably about zero, unless I include the cereal I eat, haha, when I walk out the door. I literally walk downstairs and down the hall and I'm at work. So. It is great until some days when you need to separate those things. It can be a challenge. It takes a little more time and attention to separate the work life balance. Draw a line in the sand.

BH: Could you please talk a little bit about how your work affects your family life?

DW: Sure, um, I think the thing for my, my family, they are about five hours away. It is not too bad of a drive, but um, but as much as I used to see them, I don't as much now, at least the face to face interaction. I do talk to them on the phone often. The older I get, the more important family life is for me. So uh the location probably affects it the most, but it is still the same relationship, but it can be a bit straining being four hours away, but it isn't too bad.

BH: I've realized the older I get, the closer I am to my family.

DW: Yea it is weird isn't it?

BH: It is crazy. Hard to believe this too.

DW: Hah I know.

BH: Alright, well. If you could change one thing about your job, what would it be?

DW: One thing I could change. Hm. I think I would change the focus of what res life is doing. Our department is in the process of making a lot of changes. Changes that I think are needed – it will take some time. I want it to become more student focused – student learning. I think often times we focus our attention on the students that get involved and want to be involved. I want to go after the students that are an average student and don't do much. I want to reach out to them and make them grow as an individual. This is an institution of higher learning, and I want to help make this possible for all students, not just the ones that are always involved. I think that's the one thing I would change.

BH: Have you ever thought about leaving your job? And if so, why?

DW: No, I have not thought about leaving my job actually.

BH: That's great – it makes you appreciate students, I guess.

DW: It does – it does. Absolutely correct.

BH: Um, if you could see yourself in 5-10 years, where do you think you'll be?

DW: Umm, I don't know, I guess it, I don't know haha to be honest. I see myself working and completely a Ph.D. within the next 10 years – hopefully – that's my goal. I want to continue working with student affairs, and working my way up – I hope. This is what I love, and am passionate about. I would hope my next step would be to be an assistant director of res life that is responsible for selection and / or training would excite me – the 5 year plan ha yea. I would want to be a vice president of student affairs one day – for sure.

BH: Would you want to be a President of a university one day?

DW: Haha, sure, yea, I would – who knows if I will, but yea.

BH: Ha alright. What challenges do you experience on a daily basis from your job?

DW: I think the biggest challenge is that it is never the same. Because I don't know what to expect. I mean I can forecast some things, and because of that I never have a set schedule. Nothing is the same thing over and over again. And that can be a challenge – because I am constantly having to think on my feet – and never a laid back situation. Must be prepared for anything really.

BH: With all of these challenges, financially – is everything okay?

DW: For me it is because I live by myself haha. I am single in Blacksburg, I live on campus. The money I make is enough for what I need. Yea. Some of my colleagues have small families – and I am sure it is a challenge for them, but I don't talk to them about their financial situations. Ha yeah.

BH: Here is a fun question: if you could name one crazy story about your job, what would it be?

DW: hah. Um, yeah. I am trying to think. I had one last week – um, for some odd reason for when students decide to use drugs in res halls, they don't think it smells, but it does. Especially when it is marijuana. Sometimes they don't think it through and when you smoke marijuana you can smoke it through dryer sheets – it still smells like weed. Ha, so I ran into an incident a few nights ago where I was walking around with an RA in the evening, and we had been smelling this for several weeks, and, uh, so we confronted the room – called the police like we were supposed to. Then the student denied through his teeth that nothing was happening. So of course we were like really? And the cops went in the student's room and found plenty of weed there. There was plenty in his room after they searched it. That was quite interesting actually.

BH: Never a dull moment on the job.

DW: Never ha. But it is good. A good learning decision for him, so he can make some more informed decisions for the future.

BH: Um, well, that's all the questions I have for you Donald, do you have anything else to share or questions for me?

DW: No, I mean, I think you get this, but I really do enjoy my job. I think it is a lot of fun. And I really enjoy the impact I am able to have on college students, because I do believe they can change the future, and a lot of it can be based on what this experience is for them.

BH: That's great – I appreciate you Donald for doing this for me, so what I'll do next is send you a transcript of what we just did, and I'll let you verify it and that it is correct, but I do appreciate you doing this.

DW: Ha sure. Well no problem ha.