Before starting this interview project, I would have considered myself a monthly customer at Margaret Breslau’s local sweatshop-free business on Main Street. I first went to Homebody when I was visiting Virginia Tech the summer before I decided to come to this school. I was so intrigued by all of the recycled products and bought a bag made of magazines and a headband. At this time I knew there was a good cause behind a shop such as this one, but I had no real understanding of what it was. Once I came to school in Blacksburg, I continued to shop at Homebody for presents, and whenever I needed to go to Main Street for something else. I started to read all of the tags on the quirky products and become more appreciative of their creation, but I never made any other efforts to learn about the business. Margaret always greeted me with a familiar smile and I witnessed her sincere interaction with other customers. The entire essence of the store brought me happiness.

This project was the perfect opportunity to learn more about this mysterious essence. Surprisingly, I found myself wanting to know more about Margaret and her personal life than the business. I think this came from reading the narratives from Gig. I feel that understanding Margaret as a person will give me better insight into her passion: workers’ rights. I sympathize, sometimes to tears, when I hear or read about people who are left with no choice but to physically and mentally suffer in order to earn money in order to survive. Unfortunately, I have never made an effort beyond a donation. After learning about Margaret’s own past and the suffering and prejudice that she and her family had to go through, I have come to truly admire her as a woman and respect her as a business person. Thinking about business and the economy and all of the lies and manipulation involves makes me disgusted. I find myself wanting to learn more about this popular culture though, in order to change it or avoid it in my life. After
interviewing Margaret and talking to her personally about the research she does as part of her
business, I think that she lives by this as well. By researching fair trade production I hope to
gain new morals to apply to whatever my future careers might be.

The information that idealizes fair trade and the information that recognizes its limits is
limited. The variation of imbalances between these two opposites defines the difference in
information. It seems in order to have a fair trade business a balance has to be found. The
idealization of its existence is real in the eyes of those who have morals that truly support the
individuals who hand make products and the honesty behind the trade. It goes beyond ethics and
what seems like the most humane organization and to the heart for people like Margaret.
Unfortunately, while these efforts are made with good intention, their benefits are questionable.

Coffee and other products produced on small farms in undeveloped countries labeled as
fair trade address the bigger issues that limit fair trade. The real success of this market comes
from larger corporations taking the control out of the producer’s hands to make them a profit.
The ideal seems even more impossible when the fact that even the smallest fair trade
organizations that stay true to the ethics behind their production are controlled by the most
privileged of the third world regions is addressed. This just brings coffee back into the capitalist
cycle where the people making the products will have to harsher conditions and less pay in order
to get any pay at all. In this economy this cycle is a whirl wind and seems inevitable. While,
small businesses buying creative products from artisans seems to neglect the globalization while
concentrating more on the aesthetics and culture of the trade, they should still be praised for not
giving up and making an effort every day of their lives.

As unrealistic as it may seem, I think the only real promotion of fair trade and the
decrease in mass production will come from the power of the people. Margaret said that people
actually prefer products from local businesses; it’s just hard to choose them when Wal-Mart will give it to you for half as much. Of course, this leads to further discussion on wages. It will take the people who are stable financial to promote fair trade and share their beliefs. Greed is inevitable in this society on this day, but it will only remain inevitable if we succumb to it. Sacrifice is necessary. Sacrifice is what Margaret is doing by living the way she does.

I do regret not knowing much about fair trade production before conducting this interview. I think the overall topics discussed in the interview could have been predicted, and it would have been more interesting if we knew more specific questions to ask her about. I think a second interview with follow up questions would be beneficial for anyone because even though Margaret seemed very comfortable sharing her thoughts, being recorded and trying to follow a predetermined path created a pressure that disrupted a potential flow.

In the end, my definition of the American Dream cannot be simplified to working, getting paid, and being treated fairly as Margaret said. However, especially after having a better understanding of why she chooses to live the way she does, I can simplify it to what she doesn’t actually say which is to live for what you believe in and even if you have to work under certain conditions, don’t forget these beliefs and take risks to live them.