Interview with Margaret Breslau
For HUM2504: Introduction to American Studies, Prof. Emily Satterwhite, Spring 2010

Occupation: Local Shop owner (Home Body)
Time and Place: March 15, 2010: 5-6pm at Homebody on Main Street, Blacksburg, Virginia
Interviewers: Mia Perry (junior English major from Fairfax, Virginia), Jen Le (junior communications major from, and Jill Pedro (sophomore architecture major from Rhode Island)

MB = Margaret Breslau
MP = Mia Perry
JL = Jen Le
JP = Jill Pedro

MP: Okay, will you go ahead and please state your name and your job title and the name of the organization that you work for?

MB: Okay, my name is Margaret Breslau and I’m the owner of Home Body. And we’re at 119 North Main Street Suite 101 in Blacksburg.

MP: Alright, and how long have you worked here?

MB: I’m going into my eighth year of business.

MP: Alright. Okay and could you give me a little bit of like your family background growing up? For example did both of your parents work outside of the home and what were their occupations?..and that kind of thing.

MB: My...I was the first one born in this country. My parents are immigrants. My mother is Japanese. She came to this country in the fifties. And like a lot of um, new immigrants the work that she had to do, she usually worked two or three jobs. Anywhere from seamstress to factory worker to motel maid. That was...those were her first jobs. She didn’t speak English...very well.

MP: Oh, wow.

MB: My father pretty much the same story. And he’s from Hungary. Heh, so...

MP: Good.

MB: Eventually they worked themselves up and my mother, um.. she... teaches Japanese part-time right now even though she’s… 86-years-old.

MP: Oh wow.

[Laughter]

MP: Teaches English part-time…

MB: She teaches Japanese...
MP: Oh, heh sorry.

[Laughter]

MP: Good thing you corrected that... Japanese at 86. Okay, and um, how did you exactly come to be the owner of Home Body or the business profession?

MB: Mmmhm. Well... um, we moved to Blacksburg from Tel Aviv actually...

[Laughter]

MB: Which is kinda strange... but, um, my husband is involved in a lot of Middle East peace activism. And he’d been teaching in Tel Aviv. And he was at the rally when the prime minister was assassinated.

MP: Oh, gosh.

MB: So, we decided we had to leave Tel Aviv...

[Laughter]

MB: Because, it’s pretty... intense over there.

[Technology change]

MP: Re-going over, um, how you got into the business, starting from, moving from Tel Aviv.

MB: Okay, well, my husband was involved... still is involved in Middle East activism and was teaching in Tel Aviv. And he was at the rally when the prime minister was assassinated. So we decided it was time... to move. So we came to Blacksburg because a teaching position had opened up at Virginia Tech. And so that’s how we came to Blacksburg. I’ve never heard of Virginia Tech or Blacksburg. Or lived in the south, or lived in a town.

[Laughter]

MP: Oh no, that’s a big difference.

MB: So, that was a huge adjustment... for me. Um, but I decided that what the town needed and what I wanted to do was open a business. And the only kind of business I could really open was one that was ethical and fair trade and sweat shop free. And that’s what I did!

MP: Alright, I guess Jen do you want to do...

JL: Um, well can you describe your living conditions now? Like do you consider, um, yourself living comfortably?

MB: Well the interesting thing about living in Blacksburg, I’d always lived in cities before. And I’d always rented apartments. And Blacksburg is the first place... in my whole life, that I...we were able to buy a house. Um, the other thing about Blacksburg, in terms of quality of life...we really care about smart growth. I don’t know if you know about smart growth.
But that means you live and work, as close as possible so that you don’t have commutes and sprawl, you know and cars and stuff. Well I walk to work. It takes me 6 minutes.

JL: Oh wow!

MB: So it’s a real, uh, quality of life issue is quite high for us. And my husband just walks to Tech of course.

[Technology change]

MB: I mean I don’t mind answering the same question, I don’t remember what it was.

[Laughter]

JP: Like we were saying that, that we were looking at jobs in comparison to the American dream, do you have your own definition of what the American Dream is? Or what you think people think it is compared to what you think it is?

MB: Well, I think most people think of it as making a lot of money, and um, I don’t think of it as that. And I think that people also think of it as being your own boss. Um, I am my own boss so I guess that’s part of the standard definition, but to me um, the American Dream means that you work, and you get paid a decent wage, and you get treated fairly. And I think that if workers have those things that they’re going to enjoy their jobs a lot more, if they have a voice in the workplace. So it doesn’t matter to me if you’re a maid in a motel or you’re the CEO, but I think the main component of the American dream in terms of work is that you work in a way that you treat everyone with respect and dignity, and to me that’s the only part of the American Dream in terms of the workplace situation.

JP: With respect…

MB: Mmhmm and dignity.

MP: Pride in what people do…

MB: Mmhmm, treating people well, doesn’t matter if you’re the boss or the worker, I think people should be treated with respect and when workers are treated that way they do a good job.

JP: Do you think you’ve reached your dream?

MB: Well, a lot of what I do, because my store is a fair trade business, I buy products from people who um, unless, if they weren’t working in a fair trade production, they would be open for exploitation. Um, a lot of like things that come from India, or Bangladesh or wherever they’re coming from don’t get treated well at all, they’re exploited. As a matter of fact they don’t get paid, they don’t have benefits, they work under very harsh conditions. So, when I’m buying their, their products, their crafts, their fair trade, I know that I’m not just helping a worker I’m helping a community. So to me that does go hand in hand with what I consider the American Dream, that now its not just about me, that I’m happy that I have my own business that I’m the boss, it has to be about community. And that’s why I’m
involved with a lot of things in Blacksburg. To me that’s the American Dream. So, I try to do it.

[Laughter]

JP: That’s good.

MP: All right…. sorry just finding where we are.

MB: That’s okay.

MP: Ok, so can you kind of describe to us what your basic day is and what your responsibilities are?

MB: Well because um, I’m the boss I guess I get to decide!

[Laughter]

But, I work hard I think small business owners work really hard. I come in at ten, I leave around six but when it gets nicer, the weather’s better I usually stay till seven three days a week, Thursday, Friday, and Saturday. I work six days a week, um sometimes I work seven, and when I go home I also do a lot of things connected with my business. I do a lot of research on the issues that I care about, I try to keep up on issues that concern sweatshop free, you know issues or workers rights issues, so I do a lot of reading. Even when the store isn’t busy people always wonder, “What are you doing in there?” A lot of what I’m doing is reading and researching. And um I stay connected with the community, I am involved in the community so I do a lot of research that are of interest to Blacksburg and things that I wanna do to help the community and be involved. And I am the chair of a non-profit; The Coalition for Justice, so I do a lot of things connected with uh peace and social justice. My husband and I just gave a presentation last night as a matter of fact so we’re very busy people. So, we’re not like, I’m not like cha-ching cha-ching cha-ching!

[Laughter]

JP: Was the presentation at Tech?

MB: It was at the library.

JL: It is okay if I ask um, what your husband teaches?

MB: He’s in science and technology studies and he’s a sociologist. So that’s where he is, STS.

JP: So you keep it open an extra hour so that your customers can still come ‘cause you expect them to be outside more?

MP: Or more busy?

MB: Yeah when it’s warmer I stay open later, and then when its warmer I stay open on Sunday and my husband, bless him, he is my accountant so he also will work on Sunday so that I can have a day off. So strange thing about it, when that happens we actually never the day off together. We see each other at night though, we always have dinner.
MP: So pretty much if it's not Sunday, you like only get major holidays off?

MB: Yeah, mmhmm.

MP: Wow, workin' hard.

MB: Yeah, yeah.

JP: Is there anyone that you, like you get to choose your hours but you base them on business?

MB: Yeah I mean, it's not easy running a small business, and it's not easy in Blacksburg, and in an economy, you know we're in a downturn right now, you don't see a lot of independent businesses downtown, there's a reason. It's very hard to do it, it's very expensive the rent, and so you have to put in a lot of hours, because you never know when someone's gonna come in and want something and ya have to be open… but that's okay.

JL: Um, have you ever like learned any ethical lessons that affected your morals while working here at your store?

MB: Well, like I said, before I even opened the store I've always been interested in workers rights, um one of my first jobs, um, I worked at a bakery, um I was eighteen at the time and ya know how nuns can work in secular jobs, and their money goes back to the church? Nuns and priests and things they can work. Well the person who hired me was a nun, and the owner of the bakery was out of the country. And the owner came back from…Europe and he took one look at me behind the counter and he pointed at me and he said “You're fired, get your stuff and go.” And I had never been fired before and I had no idea what was happening but I had enough sense to know something wasn’t right, and I went to the legal, free legal clinic, and I said, “this guy just fired me an didn’t give me a reason” and I sued for discrimination and I won! So I took, it took almost a year and we settled out of court. So I learned a lot from that experience. Not just that experience but I also learned from my own parents’ experience and they had faced a lot of racism. They had faced a lot of you know terrible working conditions and um you learn a lot about work. How you should be treated, how you should expect to be treated, and how as a boss you should treat your workers. So way before, you know I opened a business I had learned those things from that experience.

JP: So was the bakery like a turning point-

MB: Well I learned a lot from that experience, I spent a lot of time you know with the lawyers and stuff and they kept saying “You could sue them for so much money!” and I said “I don’t wanna sue them for so much money!” It felt weird to me, so I said I just want to sue them for the time that I didn’t have a job, and I you know I mean I found another job eventually but I, I was out of a job for a while and I didn’t have any money! So I said I want that money back, cause I shoulda been workin’. So yeah, but it taught me a lot. I think things are starting to change but I think there's still a lot of racism in this country.

JP: Do you know a lot of the other local shop owners?
MB: Yeah, there’s uh, most of us, a lot of the independent, well not just the independent- most of em, are part of the downtown merchants of Blacksburg. I think they call it Blacksburg, Downtown Blacksburg Incorporated; they changed their name recently. But its, it’s a group so we work together like for festivals, or events, you know steppin out as a downtown merchant.

JP: Do you think they’re all as concerned with working conditions as you are? Like do you think you’ve influenced them, or they’ve influenced you?

MB: I, I don’t know, and I don’t wanna…[segment omitted for interviewee’s privacy] I know a lot of people who work downtown, I mean there are some great businesses that really do well for their employees but there are others that, they wanna exploit cheap student labor. So they don’t pay very well.

JP: Do you think that they’ve had experienced things like you have?

MB: I don’t know, I mean most of the small business owners that I’m close to are people who are aligned with pretty much the way I think you know? So I don’t really know other people’s experiences. But I’ve heard that Blacksburg is a hard town to work in if you’re a student. Because they don’t give you a lot of hours and they don’t pay you very well. But I could be wrong; do any of you work downtown?

MP: I used to work at Moe’s but I feel like that’s a chain, like corporation-

MB: That’s gonna be different.

MP: It’s definitely different, they think a certain way

[Technology transition]

MP: So, you were saying that this was your eighth year owning Homebody.

MB: Mhm

MP: So I guess that kind of covers that question.

MP: Well you’ve been talking about work, workers ethics and rights, and stuff like that is there anything else behind why you don’t sell things online? Does that go along with your ethics or…

MB: No, no to tell you the truth I, I used to sell things online. But it’s like you have to have two stores. You have to have all of your inventory for your online sales. And the store’s too small, so it’s just like I couldn’t keep up with it. Like it was too…not that it was like overwhelming or anything, but it was too hard to keep it up.

JP: It seems like it would take away from the essence of the store.

MB: Yeah, yeah so and I, you know, I like interaction with my customers. Once in a while. I used to like try to sell some vintage jewelry on ebay but it drove me crazy I couldn’t stand it. I hated it so much so I don’t do it anymore.
JL: Do you make some of your merchandise or do you order it all?

MB: I do make some things, but uh I make it when I feel like it and when I have time. I make deconstructive clothing. I make clothing out of t-shirts or sheets: all kinds of things. And then I make purses out of books. [Laughs and takes a purse out from behind the counter] I can show you I have one.

Interviewers: Aw. So cute.

MB: So like just stuff people would normally throw out but I haven’t been doing it because this winter I just like my mind went blank.

MP: So it’s basically if you feel like it…[fades out].

MB: Yep yeah.

JP: Would you say that you have other passions in life. Like, you seem very oriented around this but…

MB: Well I’m lucky in that my interests are a little bit part of my work and my personal life and they’re all together because um the kind of business I am it is a social justice business. I’m very interested in social justice, you know, like I said I’m the chair of a nonprofit and we focus on issues of peace. So I feel very grateful that I can combine those interests in my work and my personal life. My husband is also very involved so no conflict there. [laughs] It’s nice. Nice to be able to enjoy that aspect and to have it grow.

JP: It seems like that’s part of your dream where you can work towards a goal you really care about.

MB: Yeah, yep it’s good.

MP: Alright, well we looked on your website and there was a blurb about different newspaper that you’ve been in and one of the quotes that they listed you said “I knew I just couldn’t have things that were just from sweatshops and I thought how could that be, it’s actually really hard!” So you’re saying it’s hard on a small scale in this town but…

MB: It would be hard on any scale because out of the millions of things that are produced in this world. Millions of things. Things that are sweatshop free and free trade are less than fifty.

MP: Less than fifty percent.

MB: Less than fifty period

[Laughter]

MB: out of the millions of things that are produced. So it’s hard. It grows but then because of the economic situation where the producers can’t make it and they’ll drop off but then there’s always somebody adding. If you go to the fair trade federation website you’ll see a list of
fair trade producers but even though there are more than fifty there you’ll see a lot of them are coffee. So if you’re looking for something that isn’t coffee…. [fades out]

MB: People don’t want to you know…

[Inaudible]

MB: No it’s most companies, most people who want things produced, want to do it as cheaply as possible so they use labor that they can exploit and then they’ll make more money. That’s what it is. [shrugs] It’s not hard to have a fair trade production site, what’s hard is giving up that profit. That’s what’s hard

JP: It makes me feel lucky that this place is here.

MB: Haha yep, [to the customers:] if you want to see anything let know me know.

JL: Would you give any recommendations to someone who wants to start their own business? How to make the best of it?

MB: Well fortunately I think you can still do it these days and I think people actually prefer independent businesses you know rather than all this cookie cutter stuff and I’d say do your homework about your products where they’re coming from, who makes them, and educate yourself on the community get involved in your community. The more you know about your community the better your business will grow. And to be prepared to work hard, but you’ll like it so it’ll be ok.

[Laughter]

JP: Do you see yourself here in five to ten years or do you have other plans?

MB: Well, my other plans, because I think you should always grow. I don’t want to do this all the time. What I actually want to do is eventually become a whole-saler so that I’m working directly with the co operative and I’m thinking women’s co operative in Mexico we go to almost every year and buy their crafts. So if I was a whole-saler I would be buying and then selling that to different stores. Not just my own. So that’s what I want to do. So it’s not just me. It’s a lot of stores getting their stuff. Because then they can grow.

MP: Do you think that’s goes to be really hard to do?

MB: No, because you just have to do it.

[Laughter]

MB: You just have to try. Whether it works or not I don’t know. You just go for it.

MP: Well I guess our last thing is if you have anything that you want to share with the public.

MB: Well I just think the American dream hopefully is one that, you know, is not just about me and I and you know getting my thing. I hope that people, as they grow as people, if they enter the work world that they understand that they are also part of a community. Part of a world, you know. And if you factor that into your dream I think it’s a good thing.
[Laughter]

MB: Thank you.