

Interview with Francine Helms

for HUM 2504: Introduction to American Studies, Prof. Emily Satterwhite, Fall 2010

Occupation: 1st Grade Teacher, Gilbert Linkous Elementary

Time and Place: October 7, 2010, 7:45-8:17 am, GLE, Blacksburg, Virginia

Interviewers: Maddie Nye, sophomore Human Development major from Stuarts Draft, Virginia.
Kyla Little, junior Interdisciplinary Studies major from Dayton, Virginia

Maddie Nye: Will you please tell me your name and, if you don't mind, your age?

Francine Helms: My name is Francine Helms and I am 56 years old

Maddie: Um, will you please tell me your job title, and the name of the organization you work for, and how long you've been working here?

Francine: I am a classroom teacher for first grade. I work for Montgomery County Schools I have been a teacher for 20 years, I have worked in Montgomery County for 15 of those years.

Maddie: How long have you been at – have you been at Gilbert Linkous for 15 years?

Francine: No I have been at Gilbert Linkous for 8.

Maddie: Will you please – Um, Tell me about your job. How did you come to have this job? What's a typical day at your job like? How many hours? How long have you worked? So what's it like to be an elementary school teacher?

Francine: First of all I love my job, so I really enjoy teaching and being a teacher and I really like the lower primary grades. I have taught kindergarten for a number of years and then I have taught first grade for a number of years. A typical day you arrive in the 7:45 range. Here students come in at 8:30 and are immediately busy. My job continues until- contract hours are 3:45, but we're usually here between usually 4- yesterday I left at a quarter to 6. It's typical day depending on meetings and if you have parent conferences that sort of thing.

Maddie: Do all the students come around 8:30 or is there an option to come earlier?

Francine: There are, we have a before school program that students can arrive as early as 7 am and that is open till 6 pm for parents.

Maddie: Okay. Um, can you please tell me what was it like getting a Bachelor of Arts in Education at Virginia Tech?

Francine: Um, keep in mind that I went to school in the 70's. I chose Virginia Tech because of their year-long student teaching program and I am an only child. So I had a choice between Radford or Virginia Tech. And I primarily chose Tech because of that even though I knew Radford had been a state teachers school for a long time. Um,

Campus was smaller but I thought that the education and the courses I was receiving were adequate at the time. Um, I don't advise students to now to go to Virginia Tech for education. I think that well, they have actually done away with it.

Maddie: How big was the education program during your time? Was it a large class or was it kind of smaller?

Francine: Um, When we student taught within that particular group, because they had modules all over the state at that time and there were 8 of us in the Roanoke city model and there were some of us in Northern Virginia. It's hard for me to say but there were probably 50 students who were doing student teaching at the time we did it that year of '75-'76.

Maddie: Okay, what made you decide to stay around here after you graduated?

Francine: Actually once I married we moved around the United States because my husband was an Army Officer we came back to the area in 1994 because both of our families live here and we felt like we needed to come back and help with them and especially older parents and grandparents.

Maddie: Would you please tell me more about your family like where you grew up, what your husband does now, what are your kids doing?

Francine: Both of us grew up in Christiansburg, and as I said I am an only child. My parents were both factory workers in the town of Christiansburg-Blacksburg area. I was the only person in my family or the first person to go to college so that was sort of a big push, um there was never a time when my parents said 'oh I don't think we can afford college'... you will go to college it was very important for me to do that. Um, my husband is currently the acting Town Manager for Christiansburg. Our children-Linda is the older child and lives in Germany, she is married to a soldier and the younger daughter, Mary, with her husband and new grandchild (smiles) live in Zimbabwe they are Missionaries.

Maddie: So you mentioned that, um, it was a big push for you to go to college as being an only child um, would you say that you view college as a job and you go strictly and your pay is your grade or would you say that it is more about the learning and the environment and what you get out of College?

Francine: Well definitely I saw it as a job opportunity but you do learn a lot from college. And the older I got the more I would place emphasis on building relationships while you are in college because that networking can really benefit you later in life. Um, and I did graduate work in 2004 and those relationships *especially* make a big difference. Um, you learn more from your colleagues sometimes more than you do from your books.

Maddie: Do you--working here at Gilbert Linkous do you learn a lot from them and do you take a lot and share a lot with the other teachers? Is it community based or is it just you work with your grade level?

Francine: No, we have to communicate and really work together in particular because of the Standards of Learning. We have to know and work with our kindergarten teachers so that we know where they're coming from. Especially the Standards of Learning K-2 they are cumulative for the third grade test. So we um, we spend a lot of time collaborating.

Maddie: Do you have any side jobs or other form of income other than teaching?

Francine: (Laughs) No I don't. Um, I don't need to do that, I just. I have hobbies of course but no extra income.

Maddie: You don't really have time to have an extra job.

Francine: Although there are teachers that do. Like, my teammate next door has an extra job on the weekends.

Maddie: You said that your husband was in the Army, so did you move around a lot and if so did you teach when you moved or were you not there long enough? How did the Army affect your teaching?

Francine: We did move around a lot we were generally in an area three years and we would move. One thing I chose to stay home with my daughters while they were younger. But also um also you will find with a teaching profession, a lot of times, that you will have to work your way into a position and by the time you do that then you are moving on. Um, what I liked about that army was that it um gave me the opportunity to look and learn from many teachers across the country, how they do things differently. Um, it also gives you an openness to change. Um, we don't have to do things the same way as every year and um I can appreciate that cause I say different things in different places.

Kyla Little: Um how do you think your traveling and seeing things in different countries and um just the different nationalities all together, how do you think that has changed your outlook on teaching?

Francine: Well what I see is that teaching is often viewed in America, I think because we have free education so to speak, students take that for granted, they expect the education to almost be handed to them. Where in, say for example in Zimbabwe where my daughter is, parents pay for their education regardless of how poor they are and it's more about relationships and making sure you have a job. I don't see that work ethic so much in some of the students. I think we have come through a generation where I don't see that.

Maddie: Do your first grade kids, do they seem to be inspired to learn or do you feel like you are pulling teeth some days?

Francine: Um some days definitely, I think we're in that situation. Um many parents do put an emphasis on that teaching aspect. However um a lot of them just send their kids

to school and sometimes they are not willing to follow through at home or they don't have time to follow through at home. So, um, we do what we can here.

Kyla: Do think that um, the children's enthusiasm fades as they get older and progress to higher grades.

Francine: Um yes, to an extent I think here especially here we see a lot of pressure on students to do well on the SOL. Our school is noted for high scores in Montgomery County. So my children even hear me say we talk about 'this is an important thing you have to learn this in first grade in order to move on to second grade'. And I'll remind them that there is this big test in third grade that they have to know certain things. So the pressure is sort of there.

Maddie: Do the kids feel the pressure? Do they recognize that this is something very important, for their SOL, or do they just kind of look at it as the unknown big test that they take in third grade?

Francine: Well they do a lot of preparation and I don't think that the primaries see that pressure. But definitely third, fourth now has an SOL, fifth know that that testing is coming and they know that they are review and know that they need to do a good job at taking it seriously. When they do test here our younger students know that they have to be very quiet in the mornings because the test are given via computer. So the older students are down in our hallway in the computer lab, 'remember everyone has to be quiet,' that sort of thing.

Kyla: Whenever I was in school, you know, up until probably maybe even high school we didn't take the SOLs on the computer have you seen – do you think that the technology difference there changes the pressure or anything like that or do you think, how has technology in general affected you?

Francine: Technology has really made my life um more interesting I like the use of the Smart Board, the things we can find on the internet to use in our lessons. Some students may have tested better on paper and pencil instead of on the computer and yet this is the computer generation (smiles) they have grown up with the technology so to them it would probably be almost strange to sit at a desk and fill in little bubbles that sort of thing. Um, they are used to just clicking on the computer. But truly technology has made a big difference in the way you teach and you have to stay current with the things that are going on. Montgomery County is very good at offering classes for us or pointing out that different colleges are offering courses where we can get our recertification points.

Kyla: I think that is a good thing cause in my high school we weren't technology based at all and when moving on to college where everything is on the computer it was like a whole new world to me and I was so lost I didn't know what I was doing.

Maddie: Yeah it's definitely something that is a positive thing but it can also be kind of negative at the same time.

Francine: Well you can imagine the nightmare if you walk in ready to take the SOL and the computers are down um technology is um we have people on site ready for that it happens.

Maddie: What advice would you give to somebody who is considering your line of work?

Francine: Be serious, be ready to persevere. Um, get in the classroom as soon as possible. It's very sad to have a student teacher or an intern who comes in as a junior or something thinking that this is what they want to do with the rest of their life and realizing it's not. Um teaching is a tough job these days doesn't pay very well, you don't go into it for the money for sure. So um really get that experience especially that classroom experience. I would like for my interns, or student teachers, to see the beginning of school and the end of school I just feel like that whole year is if you are only here for a semester you don't always see everything.

Maddie: Because Tech does not have an education program per se and Radford does have a direct five-year can you see a difference in your interns coming from Virginia Tech who doesn't have an educational program and Radford who does have an education program?

Francine: Um I hate to say this but yes I do. Um, I really think that the Radford college interns are better prepared. I think that the courses they are taking do make a difference um I know you are in Human Development and those aspects are very good but it just seems like our Radford interns have more of the knowledge about, let's say, the subjects and SOLs that sort of thing.

Maddie: Do they respect the need for knowing a little bit of everything and then testing or do is it just, they know the subject?

Francine: I think one of the things Radford does is stay in the real cutting edge of especially reading the changes that have come about in reading the research that is done these days we are seeing a lot of research based evidence. You know we are looking for that. When someone comes in and says that 'well I have this idea', is it research based? How much experience have you had with this particular um, program or system. Especially reading has come a long ways I just received my masters in reading in 2007. It's changed a lot we don't use just the basal series anymore. And I see the Radford students that are on top of that. Where my Virginia Tech interns, may have heard about the program but don't have experience with the program.

Maddie: Is reading a big focus here at Gilbert Linkous?

Francine: I don't feel like I've done my job if my children aren't solid readers when they walk out my first-grade door. Because even math, there are word problems that you have to read. So it's our job to teach them reading if they don't already read when they come to first grade. Many of our students do. They are reading on a 3rd or 4th grade level in first grade.

Maddie: Do you think that's one of the reasons, why uh the school gets high SOL scores is because of the main focus on the reading and the program?

Francine: It's one of the things but a lot of it is just the fact that I think our students understand that this is serious business and it's going to make a difference in their lives further down the road.

Maddie: What personality traits do you think are required in being a teacher and standing in front of the classroom and grasping the kids?

Francine: Well you do have to be comfortable in standing in front of a classroom of students but really perseverance. Patience especially with first grade because you have all kinds of things going on. Um, and being willing to just be open to these new ideas that are presented. You can't do the same thing every year. I have a sibling this year from a child last year and, you know, I don't want the parent to go and see the same packet that I did last year. There will be some things but definitely try to change up. Look for new ideas. That's where the internet comes in too because there's always new things.

Maddie: What opportunities does a child get while they're here. Do you have activities during the day when they go to a music classroom or an art classroom or do they have a physical exercise classroom? What's a normal day like for a kid here?

Francine: Um, they do have those, we call them specialties. PE is twice a week, music twice a week. They have an art class 50 minutes – one time per week. Which I'm very thankful for because I'm not very artistic. And our art teacher does a fabulous job. They have guidance and library time. So those times offer teachers planning times but they also give the children a chance to be with somebody, like our music teacher is an accomplished musician so she obviously knows more about music than I do and it makes a big difference in their lives. They also have extracurricular activities after school. We have a chess club, there's a Chinese class, 4-H meets here. Different opportunities like that. There is even um, we call them Linkous Ladies and Linkous Lads and those students are selected who may need a boost of self-esteem, this sort of thing and those sororities and fraternities come in and work with them. Um, I don't know if they come in like twice a month – something like that – where they plan different activities.

Kyla: How much of your, um, spare time do you spend planning your classroom activities and what you're gonna do the next day?

Francine: Do you mean during the day?

Kyla: Just any time – how do you have time to plan it?

Francine: Well we are given a minimum of 30 minutes of planning per day and many days it will be an entire hour. But I spend a lot of my time – I'd say generally 10 extra hours a week out of school doing preparations. So it takes a lot and again, a teacher or a

person considering teaching needs to know it's not going to be an 8:30 to 3:40 time frame. If a teacher can do that, then they are especially gifted.

Maddie: Do you find yourself having to pay out of pocket for things you want in the classroom or is there a system here at the school that you can sign up and someone will go and get it for you? How do you –

Francine: We are given a small budget for items but teachers do an out of pocket. I tend to be one of those if I want it right now I will go get it out of pocket. Um, our principal is very generous. She will try to get things but sometimes it may take – by the time you do paperwork and things, I'm not as patient (smiles). And there are just some things like the pictures behind me I paid for the photo processing because I give those pictures to the parents. So that's really not something I expect my principal to pay for.

Maddie: What is one of the most memorable experiences you've had teaching or working with kids?

Francine: (Pauses to think) Hmm...Well I had a student in Hawaii that was a special needs child and I worried about how I was going to work with him but it turned out that I learned a lot more from him than he learned from me in some ways because he taught me about looking at the diversity and just what his special needs were but he could still work with the children in the classroom. And his mother was very good to help but she was also learning how to cope with his disability. So it was sort of like a whole learning year together.

Maddie: How have you seen the administration improve and grow and do you learn a lot and work with them?

Francine: Mhmm. Mrs. Kahler has been here um, 7 years now. When she first came in it was her first experience of being principal. She had been an assistant principal. I really feel like over the years we've just learned from each other. She had, again, new ideas because she had been a first grade teacher prior to being a principal. Um, but you're not just a principal of first grade you're a principal of the whole school. So one of the things I like about her is that she is willing to look at cutting edge things – the Smart Boards – she made it possible for every teacher in this building to have one and that took a lot of thinking about 'how can I provide funds for that' um you know, 'how can we go with those' because she wants her teachers to have the best that they can, the opportunities. And she is just always just really encouraging us to look into courses and she's always there when we need her. If you have a student that is not having a good day – or maybe a student that is having a *great* day, you can send them up and she will give them that pat on the back and, just, she's very good with the children.

Kyla: Can you tell us more about the Smart Boards? I'm not sure what all they can do and how they're useful.

Francine: Well anything you can put on the computer screen it can be projected onto the Smart Board. We used to use – and I still have in my room – over head projectors, but now the Smart Board has sort of taken that. You don't have to run off a transparency.

So, if I want to show a DVD, a movie of some sort, or I can download from one of our favorite sites is United Streaming, to show how a plant grows or something a 3-5 minutes little film, I'd download it to the computer and it simply projects on the Smart Board. Other things is there are lessons and the kids can actually go up and write on the Smart Board. They can pull things into boxes using their finger. So, there's a handwriting activity so some of our children practice if they need that wide swing or something to practice handwriting there. It's amazing.

Kyla: So you've seen many positive changes from technology.

Francine: Oh yes.

Maddie: Do you feel the amount you're paid compensates for the work you put in here?

Francine: I don't work for that. But, if you're in teaching for money, you're not in the right profession. My husband just often laughs and says it's more like a hobby (everyone laughs). Virginia is low on the teaching scale for salaries, we're always wanting more.

Maddie: You do it for, because you love it.

Francine: I do.

Maddie: Um, where do you see yourself in 5-10 years?

Francine: I actually see myself retired. Because I'm getting to, close to 60 and we talked about if we are financially able we would like to retire. Hopefully then travel and visit our grandchildren. Just do fun things that we don't always get to do because we are tied to the summer vacation.

Maddie: Do you see yourself moving or do you see yourself staying around the area?

Francine: As long as our family, particularly parents, are still living, I would say we'd stay in this area. We love this area with the change of seasons, the mountains.

Kyla: How do you usually spend your summer break?

Francine: There are times when I'll go to school during the summer. It depends on courses that are offered. Many years Montgomery County will offer free classes that we can get recertification for so I'll jump at the chance to do some of those. But then we, obviously this summer I went to Zimbabwe to see the birth of my grandchild. We like to camp, garden, we grow a vegetable garden during the summer and then put up those crops.

Kyla: So you love having that free time?

Francine: I do like that free time. Although, I would not be opposed to year-round schooling and having like 6 weeks on, 3 weeks off if that could work for families. When

we lived in Denver there was a year-round system, but it wasn't coordinated well and they actually went back to the traditional, with the summers off.

Maddie: In our class we've been talking a lot about the American dream, and with your husband being the Army, do you think there is an American dream? Is it more overseas or do you think there is one in America?

Francine: I think there is one in America and when you go overseas you find out that people there truly believe that if they came to America their lives would be better. If people here were more willing to embrace the work ethic I think they would see that American dream realized. It's getting harder and harder to realize it because I think people are just not willing to put forth the effort.

Maddie: Not put--They're not willing to put for the effort to achieve and to work hard to get their quote, unquote American dream?

Francine: I think so, I think that people, more students are coming to school expecting to be handed the education. Not really work toward that, and then I also see the work force, many people will refuse to take a position because they feel like they could get a better position. Instead of starting at the bottom and working up as I feel people of my generation more likely did.

Maddie: Do you feel like we've missed anything? Do you want to touch on anything more?

Francine: Just the advice of if you're going to be a teacher, really think seriously about it and be ready to work hard. I truly think it should be a 5 year program if you come out with a Masters. Think about 'could I pursue other opportunities' or atleast courses to stay current.

Maddie: And stay on top of the changing...

Francine:...Yeah because teaching is changing and I feel you need to stay up. Otherwise, you're not doing your students justice.

Maddie: It's a constant learning and growing field.

Kyla: Okay, well thank you very much for having us and taking your time with us.