

## **Interview with Heath Hyatt**

for HUM 2504: Introduction to American Studies, Dr. Emily Satterwhite, Fall 2011

Occupation: Patrol Officer, K-9 Unit, Christiansburg Police Department

Time and Place: November 9, 2011, 6:00 p.m.-6:30p.m., New River Valley Mall, Christiansburg Police Department, Christiansburg, Virginia

Interviewer: Lucas Eckert, Freshman Computer Science major from Great Falls, Virginia  
Brooke Shiflett, Freshman Chemistry major from Powhatan, Virginia

HH= Heath Hyatt

LE= Lucas Eckert

BS= Brooke Shiflett

LE: Okay, uh so we'll just start your name and if you don't mind, your age.

HH: Um...Heath Hyatt and I'm 38 years old.

LE: Alright, and could you please tell me your job title, the name of the organization you work for and how long you've been working there.

HH: My job, I'm just a patrol officer. I'm assigned to the K-9 Unit, I work for Christian--, the town of Christiansburg, Christiansburg Police Department and I've been with this agency for...a little over a year and a half.

LE: Alright, do you mind describing your family background, like where you grew up and what it was like.

HH: Um. I grew up in Giles county, which is, next county over from Montgomery. Uh.. spent most of my time in the woods: huntin' fishin'. Doin' the country boy stuff [laughs]... There was nothin' else to do there. Um, what else were you askin'?

LE: Oh um. Just like, what was it like?

HH: Um. I had a big family. I was... well my mom and dad divorced, so technically I had 5 brothers and sisters. I got two twin sisters who were my... biological sister, I have a step brother, step sister who I consider my brother, my sister. Um, we grew up in small town, everybody knows everybody, we fought, fussed, cussed, carried on just like every other family [laughs].

LE: What did your parents do for a living?

HH: Well my Dad's retired, he was a mechanic which was a millwright at Celanese which is the...the plant there in Giles county on 460. They make um... fiber for your blue jeans and cigarette filters. There a company from R J Reynolds, which is in North Carolina. My Mom... started out workin' at Car dealerships, as a secretary, doin' invoices and stuff like that. She ended up getting a job with uh Mark Hicks which is an attorney in Dublin. She worked there for...ten, twelve years and then she retired from the commissioner revenue in Giles County..uh...a year, about a year and a half ago. So that's, kinda her background.

LE: Alright, do you have a wife?

HH: Yes I do

LE: And uh, what, what does she do?

HH: Um, my wife is named Lindsey and I've got two children. I've got a son 12 years old for my first marriage and Maddie which is my two year old from my second marriage. My wife is a day treatment counselor at a school in Wythe County. She's got a degree in behavioral science; she's actually workin' on her Master's at Radford for school counseling.

LE: Alright

BS: Impressive

HH: Do it before you get married...I'm tellin you, Do it before you get married and have kids.

LE: Alright, um so let's get on to your job then. So how did you get it?

HH: Well, long story. I worked in machine shops, I worked uh, I worked at Long Airdox which is a, they rebuild mining equipment. Worked there for 5 years. They come in one day and say "hey, have your tool boxes out the door at 1:30." We come back from lunch and told us "hey you gotta hurry'n get outta here" so they shut the plant down, another company bought it. Picked up, y'know, different jobs here and there. I went to Celanese and went to work as a millwright for a construction company which was Monday, Monday construction. Monday had a weird way of workin' things, they would work you for one year and lay you off. They would lay you off for thirty days thatta way they did not have to pay your benefits. They would call you back after thirty days. Now it was good money. I mean, at the time, seventeen, eighteen dollars an hour was good money. We were workin' you know, six-tens, so it, the money was good, but they would lay you off and keep you out for thirty days thatta way they didn't have you pay your medical or your vacation, your holidays. So after the third time they laid me off I said "don't call me back." So I drew unemployment out, and hunted and fished [laughed]. Uh...I took a job at a m—at a garage [paused while radio chatter was heard] a garage in Narrows, Narrows Quick Lube. They did tires, breaks, oil changes and stuff like that. I can give you background [radio chatter heard in the background], my Grandfather owned a junkyard so my family is mechanically savvy, I'm not as good as my dad and my uncle but there, we've always been around that stuff. So I worked there, I enjoyed my job, the people I worked for were great. My brother-in-law says "Heath, as much as you like to hunt and fish, you need to be a police officer," and I'm like, "that doesn't make sense." It does make sense. You only work thirteen days a month. So I'm thinkin' "alright thirteen days a month, I got the other twenty seven to do what I want to or seventeen days and um. He, he stayed on me for almost a year so I started applying to police agencies, I applied to Tech, Radford University, Neri—Pearisburg. Ev—everybody said "we'd be glad to higher you if you were certified." Be glad to higher you if you were certified. I wasn't certified so I applied for the Police academy which was in New River, which is in Fair Lawn now. I applied, I applied for the Police academy, I got accepted, I went through the background, went through the physical and all that. I paid my way through the Police Academy, which is Pre-employment. Their success rate of hiring people out of the academy that didn't have jobs were really high. Um, half

way through my 22 weeks, I had an interview with several agencies, Wytheville Police Department interviewed us. They called us back the next day and said “we’ll offer you a job on you passing the academy.” So that was in October, December I passed the academy and graduated December 5<sup>th</sup>. Went to work for Wytheville Police Department.

LE: So, What’s the typical day of your job like?

HH: Typical?

LE: Or just...

HH: Nothing’s typical in police work, but it’s either slow as it can be or wide open. There’s not a happy medium. I mean you’re either running your butt off to calls and answering calls or it’s just, you know. Sunday mornings and Monday mornings are slow and Weekends are busy.

LE: Yea, I bet. So, how many hours do you actually work each week?

HH: Well, it fluctuates. My schedule is, I work two on, two off, two on, three off, so every other weekend I’m off Friday, Saturday, Sunday. So I may work Wednesday and Thursday, which is 24 hours and the next week, I’ll pick up and work 36 hours. So it doesn’t, it’s not a set forty. But you’ve got trainin’, I’m a K-9, I get called out, I have K-9 trainin’ that I do twice a month. You’ve got court. The Courts don’t really care if your off or not. So... I mean it fluctuates. I mean my typical schedule is either 24 or 36 hours and then...and then it goes from there.

LE: So like generally, do you, do you enjoy doing it?

HH: It’s the best job I’ve ever had

LE: Awesome, where else have you actually worked? – or uh, you worked for those machine shops as well but uhm. Is there any where like, you see yourself other than here right now?

HH: Teaching

LE: Teaching?

HH: Mhmm. That’s my goal. Is to get my, finish my Master’s and I would like to teach at a community college level. That’s what I would like to do.

BS: That’s awesome

LE: How come a community college as opposed to...?

HH: Well, there’s more for my field, and I’m police oriented. Most of your major colleges, Well Radford does Police Science or Criminal Justice but I can use my certificate...My police certificate, my certification, take eighteen credit hours which I’ll get my masters. But I can use eighteen hours and teach in a community college level. You know if you wanna go to y’alls

level, you're probably gonna have to have your PhD or doctorate and I can't afford it Heh Heh. I don't have the time for it. It's just way on my means.

LE: Alright, Um so you mentioned earlier you kinda work a lot with the Tech officers. Is it...do you think it's different being a police officer near a college campus as opposed to just like in a city somewhere else?

HH: Now, I think, I think their job duties are different than mine. I think their... I think they handle a different array of calls than we do. Um working near them, I mean we don't...we don't interact with the students a whole lot. I mean everybody says, you know "the students are back," but I mean traffic's heavy anyway. I, I don't know, you know there's not, you know we don't have any bars in town now. I mean we've got, you know Macado's and stuff but you know, they, Tech has that stuff all over there so we don't see, other than shopping, is the only time we see the, the student influx into town.

LE: So, uh what would you say is the hardest thing about the job?

HH: The hardest thing is...trying to please the public. You just, you can't do it. I mean we're not, we're not into making friends, you know most times we're dealin' with people, it's on the worst terms. And even though that, you know you're, you're nice and cordial with them, I mean, they've had a bad day, somethin's went wrong with them, they called you for a reason and you're there to resolve an issue and a lot of times they don't get the resolve that they should get or need and t- to me that's the, the hardest thing is...is being that customer service part of it. 'Cause we just, you can't make everybody happy.

LE: Has that ever uh, been a serious problem? Like made you think even maybe considering quitting or something like that? Or...

HH: Nah... they're not gonna run me out.

LE: Alright so, what about the job gets you through the whole forty hour- or not forty hours I guess but, just through the whole work week?

HH: Well I mean, you get those adrenaline dumps, I mean you get those high priority calls, and our job's not typical. Like, you know a nine to five, is what we call it, you know you come in nine, you're day's pretty much, you're doin' the same things, you know, throughout the day and it may, it may change from day to day, but when I come in, I mean I never know what my day holds. I may do, I may answer a few calls and deal with a few people and that may be it. I may be chasin' people down, I may be in a pursuit, I may have to fight pe-, I mean. My day is never the same and I don't have a s-. I've got stuff that I have to do, I have to go to court, I have to answer calls for service, but I can drive round and look at the trees. I mean, you know I can drive through the neighborhoods and look at the people's houses, you know I can take the...the back roads in town and just enjoy my day. I mean and that's what. I've worked factories, if I had to go back to a factory I would, I'd go sideways I think, I mean I couldn't do it.

LE: So-

BS: Okay, you said the days just are completely unpredictable, is there in specific that like, you can think of that just...stood out to you more than anything, like just something completely out of this world happened or it was just a ridiculous day?

HH: Yep, it was December 23<sup>rd</sup> 2009 at two thirty PM. I was settin' up for funeral traffic, I was workin' in Wytheville. Three guys working that day, I'm senior officer workin', Sergeant's not there, I'm in- I'm responsible for everybody. Get a call, we're settin' up a funeral so we're sat at the intersections throughout town to, to block for the funeral, we do escorts. Dispatch comes over the radio says "Shots fired inside the post office." Her voice...was screamin'...I mean it gets my blood goin' just now. I can't get my car in drive. I'm tryin' so hard to get my car in drive, I can't get it to go in drive. She comes back on the radio, says "Shots fired Shots fired." I'm two blocks away, I get on scene, my other two team mates were already there...uh...Brandon had the back, backside of the building covered, Lonnie was at the front side, I pull up beside Lonnie...Boom! Boom! Boom! Shots fired out the window at me. Lonnie was, was up, just enough up the road to...it couldn't hit him. I knew that the guy had a pistol, because one of the wist- witnesses called and said he had a, looked like a nine millimeter so from the distance I was at, I didn't feel like he could hit me and I was covered, I was behind my door of the car which is, it's not con-, it's not covered, it's concealment. I was hidin' my body. Um...anyway we get everybody out, get the streets blocked off...um...I'm a certified sniper, I get my rifle... as people were showing up, Myself and my partner, which was my sniper partner, Dave Wall, we go up to an adjacent building, take up stand, get eyes on the, the guy and pretty much from two o' clock till eleven o'clock at night we were in a hostage situation. That's probably my most...Everybody got out safe, he didn't kill nobody. He had four handguns on him, was mad at the government. Was headed to Roanoke and decided that Wytheville was just a nice place to stop. So he held them hostage. So yea that's a day that I can pretty much recall.

LE: Geez

BS: Ok, Wasn't expecting that one, that's for sure.

HH: [laughs]

LE: Oh wow, I'm not really sure where to go um...

HH: It turned out well. Made a few mistakes that day, um...I got on scene, 'course I had contact with Lonnie, Brandon who was my other partner was at the back of the building. I didn't make radio contact to make sure he hadn't entered the building 'cause we knew it was a hostage situation...um...that was a mistake I made. But, everybody lived, everybody didn't get hurt, So it was a good day, it was a good day.

BS: That's Merry Christmas right there.

HH: Mhmm

LE: Geez

BS: Wow

LE: What do you think is important for people to know about what you do?

HH: Cops aren't as bad as, I mean we're human too. There's not a cop out here that hasn't broken a law, that's the one thing that kinda gets me, I mean I can't go through my life, and I've sped, I've probably run a stop sign, I've probably run a red light. Ya know, there's not stuff that I don't do and most people we deal with are good, honest people. It's the 5% that are turds. I mean you deal with them day in and day out, it's the same people every other day, those are the people that we have to deal with. The people that get a ticket on the way to work, uh I mean we have a job to do, there's a reason that we're doing that, whether it's our bosses are telling us "hey we need to pick this up", or there's something going on, but cops are good people and one thing that really bothers me is that I'm willing to put my life in front of y'all, I mean that's something that I agreed to do when I took this job. Ya know, somebody is shooting with y'all in going to step in front it 'cause I got a vest on and I don't think that people take, I don't think they respect the law like the used to. I mean kids talk to us like we are awful, slobs, cuss us, I mean I'm talking teenage kids and if I woulda done that, I wouldn't have had to worry about the cop beatin' me, my dad woulda beat me down. But, it's just that, I think that's one thing that bothers me, is the disrespect that we see, I mean we're not there to disrespect, I mean I'm not gonna do it. I can't speak for everybody else, but I'm there to do my job, I'm there to try to satisfy whatever need you have and go on to my next call.

LE: Would there be any changes that could help anything like that?

HH: I mean honestly uh, our department is very community oriented. We do the citizens academy. We have a um, like the high school kids, they come in, they get through an academy. I have to say the chief here and the administration are very community oriented. Um, they get people involved and I think it's a good thing. I mean because when you ride in my car with me for twelve hours and you see what I go through and have to put up with sometimes, you're like, most people say I wouldn't have your job for nothing', that's the common response we get. So, no, I mean I think our agency is on the right track. I mean we, we're very community oriented. I don't think I could change anything to make it better.

LE: You said you wanted to teach, were your hopes and dreams similar to that as a kid?

HH: Oh lord... you know, it took me 'till I was 30 years old before I matured. I didn't know what I wanted to do. I really didn't, I mean I had no clue. I had no clue. So, I had no desire to get my degree until I saw the importance of it. And one thing that my degree has helped me at is, my English skills are awful, I am grammatically challenged haha so, it's helped me with my report writing. Um... I like to borrow. I'm going to teach for the attorney general in Roanoke. I'm a general instructor. I'm a regional gang director for our area, from Roanoke to Smith County and um they've asked me to fill in for a cancellation, so tomorrow I'm going to go speak in front of 150 people and I love that, I love it. I mean, I... that's something I like to do so.. and my dreams, I didn't have any, I didn't know what, I didn't have a clue., didn't have a clue. There was no expectations of me from my family other than don't get yourself killed and don't end up in jail haha.

LE: Now that you do have an idea, where would you see yourself in ten years?

HH: I do not want to be working swing shifts. I'm getting to the age where night shift kills me. It's a good shift, it's good work, I mean I would rather work night shift than daylight 'cause daylight you're doing a lot of gofer work. Uh, night shift, peoples hidin', they're doin' crimes, it's the... the works different. But in five years, ten years tops I do not want to be working night shift. Um, I don't know, I would like to be off the road and in plain clothes. Either a detective, I love drugs... not to take them, but I mean drugs are my thing. I mean I got a K-9. I would like to be in vice maybe, or on the task force. That's something that I'm striving for. Um, if not by then of course my 3 year plan is to have my masters, in the next 3 years, so if something doesn't change and I'm still on patrol, I will probably, I'll have enough time in that I can get out and maybe get a job teaching and still get my pension from here. Just depends on which way life goes.

LE: So earlier we mentioned the American Dream, so do you have any thoughts on it?

HH: To me the American dream would be, you know, if I was going to picture it and I guess you see it on TV, but would be someone coming over to this country or being here, ya know an entrepreneur type person that's open to business, a small mom and pops shop and ya know ended up rollin' it up into multi-million dollar company. I mean, that to me that would be the American Dream. I'm happy just livin' life. I don't really have a desire to do that haha. I mean, I just want to get, um, you ever watch the dog whisperer? Cesar Milan? He tells you "Live in the moment," that's my theory. I mean I.. I mean I could come in tomorrow and not go home. So ya know, I know this is part of my job and like I said I'd like to grow old so I can watch my kids grow up and have grandkids and I don't want to be in debt all my life, but if you own anything you're gonna be. I don't have a lot of high, high expectations. I want to retire, I want to have good health and I'd like, and my wife and I would like to do some, I mean we like to travel. I mean, we take some trips out west and ya know, we'd like to go overseas a time or two, ya know to Europe, Switzerland somewhere, so that's what I'd like to do when I retire, if not before.

BS: With the K-9 Unit, you say you work with a dog, is it a specific dog that you've worked with since it was a puppy? Or do you work with several dogs?

HH: You have several parts to your question. The dog that I have currently is Otis, which is a yellow lab. I was the first officer in Wytheville Police Department to ever get a K-9. I implemented the program. I done all of the grunt work. I set up presentation. I done statistics to show the need for it. They were nice enough to say "Sounds like if you can find one." My brother in law who was a cop, talked me into getting into this field, was a K-9 officer so we called a vender. We got him and he was right at 2 years old so he was a, they call it a green dog. He was not finished, but he had all the basics down. So, we put the finishing touches on him, certified him. Uh, I've had him since July of 2005, so he's been with me ever since. When I left Wytheville, they were kind enough to let me buy him, so I purchased him from Wytheville and brought him here. After I got off my probation, the chief was good enough to say "Hey, you have a \$5000 tool. We're crazy if we're not usin' it." So I got to bring him here. It's kinda funny that yes I, we have a training group. Tech's with us. Blacksburg's with us. Pilaski, Dublin umm.. Giles County, there's probably 15 or 20 of us and I'm just now going through the process of

getting my handlers certification so I can be a master trainer. So, that's something else if my other goals don't work out, I love dogs. I raise huntin' dogs. I've been around 'em for all my life, but I've had and raised dogs for the last 20 years and that got me my K-9. I mean 'cause I had the knowledge and the background. So, yeah I mean, we're around them all the time and I hope if I can get my master trainers license I can go around and certify all the other K-9s and there's not, there's not a master trainer from Roanoke to Bristol so I could cover this whole area.

BS: Have you ever had a unique case concerning a dog?

HH: I mean, ever case is individually unique. Um... I'll tell you this, you can't use cover scents, they don't work. You can pack your marijuana in coffee, you can put 'em in dryer sheets, you can put 'em in candy, the dog can scent discriminate. He don't care if it's on that stuff. I got um.. I can't talk about it but we got a pound and a half, two pounds of hydro last week, um, we've got another pound and a half, got twelve and a half pounds, um so we're busy down here.

BS: It's a common thing to use the dogs to find large amount?

HH: Well yes, and small amounts. Um, one thing people don't understand about the dog is, is the dog is a tool. He's not the answer. They have good days and bad days just like us. And ya know, one of the hardest things I have trouble explainin' to guys I work with is, ya know you sit up on a house and see someone go in a crack house and they're in there and out of there in two minutes, chances are they bought. I mean that's just typical behavior and they've taken this crack rock, they got a 20 rock, which is as big as the end of your fingernail and they've stuck it down their crack. They get in the car and they drive off. He stops the car and says, "Hey, can you come run your dog? They just bought dope." I go and I run the dog. The dog don't alert. They wanna know why. Well, the dogs nose had to be 16 – 18 inches from the source, so if you're sitting in the car, ya know it's not going to happen. And the amount of odor that comes off a crack rock is minute. So, they get discouraged because they know that he just bought dope, but your dog didn't hit the car. So you can't, ya know if they don't give you consent ya can't get in it. You either get consent or probable cause. So, that's the hardest things to overcome, but once you get like most of the guys I work with, they on my team, they understand and we've got some pretty decent pops. I mean, we um.. they trust my dog. They know that hey if you didn't hit, if I miss a joint or a crack rock, it's not the end of the world. If I'm missing a pound of weed, we got problems. Ya know what I'm sayin'? So, we don't want to let that stuff go, but if it does we'll get it next time. I mean, it's not uh uh, it's not a day ender.

BS: Do you have a final message for everyone?

HH: Yeah, I'll tell you Albert Einstein has got one of my favorite quotes. "What's the definition of insanity? Doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results." Sometimes you gotta change your ways to make things different. That's what I say haha. Einstien, oh yeah, I'm a big quote bug. I like to read quotes. I can't remember 'em all haha.