Interview with Mary Martin

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

**Occupation:** Housekeeper, Johnson Hall, Virginia Tech

**Time and Place:** March 17\(^{th}\), 2010, Johnson Hall, Virginia Tech

**Interviewer:** Chelsea Locker, Junior Interdisciplinary Studies major from Manassas, Virginia; Caitlyn Sehl, Sophomore University Studies (English) major from Fredericksburg, Virginia

CS=Caitlyn Sehl
CL=Chelsea Locker
MM=Mary Martin

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

MM: Mary Martin, housekeeping, Johnson Hall for, uh, Residential and Dining Services at Virginia Tech.

CS: How long have you worked at your current job?

MM: I’m going into my 9\(^{th}\) year.

CS: Would you please tell me a little bit about your family background?

MM: I was born and raised in Beckley, West Virginia. My father was a coal miner, he died of black lung disease in 1998. My mother is still living in, living with my brother and his wife, in Beckley.

CS: And that’s also in West Virginia?

MM: In West Virginia. I had 7 brothers and 1 sister. Large family

CS: Yeah, my dad is from a big family as well, I have only brothers so I know what you mean. Lots of brothers. Would you describe in detail a typical day at your job?

MM: I arrive at Virginia Tech about 7 o’clock, at 7:30 I get my keys to my building. I go through the building and disinfect, take out trash, and stock up until about 9 o’clock at which time I sweep my halls and stairwells up till about 10 o’clock. After the 10 o’clock break I come back and typically on a normal day will disinfect all the toilets, urinals, pick up the showers, and sweep and mop each bathroom, disinfect each water fountain. I have a total of 6 bathrooms.

CS: Two on each floor.

MM: Right now it’s a little bit different because we’re very short handed at the present point.

CS: Because you talked about having to help out in Lee?
MM: Yes, sometimes we have to be pulled to other buildings. And that’s pretty much a normal day. On usually Tuesdays I will do the same early morning routine but I will come back later with my shower machine and scrub the showers and at which time I will take care of disinfecting and mopping the bathrooms on a regular basis until I get them all done. Sometimes they take a little bit longer than other times.

CS: But you have to disinfect the urinals even though it’s an all-females dorm?

MM: Yes

CS: Yeah

MM: Um, that’s not something I would typically do everyday but usually on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday I will go ahead and do that. Unless I see that they’ve been used. And sometimes that does happen.

CS: I’m not surprised.

MM: So um, you want to keep them as sanitary as possible, you know, just in case. You know, you don’t know what’s going on when you’re not here and you don’t want any kind of germs lingering around.

CL: Is it hard being pulled out of Johnson to go to a different place? Does it really affect your day?

MM: Yes it does because I try to time it to where I have just enough time to do everything that I need to do to keep Johnson up and to keep Johnson looking good. Um, I, I believe that everybody, every resident deserves to have a good clean environment because it’s your home, you know? It’s your home when you’re not at home. It’s your school home. So I feel like everybody deserves to have a clean place not only to live and utilize the facilities like the bathrooms, but the study lounges and kitchen and all that too.

CS: Which is why like when, ‘cause we got locked out of the kitchen because we were not using it properly.

MM: Right. And that was not my decision, that was the hallstaff decision but I do have to keep them informed and normally I wouldn’t even say anything, ‘cept that a couple times it’s just been totally trashed, you know that’s not good for everybody because it’s not even being used for what it’s designed to be there for, if you need to go in there and cook some cookies or brownies or whatever for your friends or your boyfriend or even family, then you do get to ‘cause someone else has been in there and kinda disrespected everybody.

CS: Right. Are the standards of your job difficult?

MM: Sometimes. We have to keep updated on all the new techniques, all the new diseases, and whatnot, that we need to keep you protected from, what such as swine flu, MERCA, normal flu, stomach flu that’s been going around, and I have to take that into consideration every day. And also we have to
be trained specifically in blood borne pathogens, and keeping you safe from anything in the environment that could hurt you.

CS: Are there seminars and stuff that you have to go to to take those classes?

MM: We go to uh, health and safety classes, and training classes in all the new products that we use and all the new equipment that we use on a regular basis. And that’s carefully guarded by, uh, the records that they keep here at Tech, and also OSHA keeps a close eye on everything that we do.

CL: When you go to those, do you have to go to those meetings on your own time?

MM: No, it’s during my uh, it’s something else I have to incorporate into my normal work day.

CS: So it takes out of the time that you would normally be spending...

MM: Right. And a lot of the times when there are big messes and stuff that may be left behind that can take away from the time that I have too. Which, and my number one priority has to be the restrooms and keeping things germ-free.

CS: Yeah. Do you consider yourself middle or working class? What do you consider the distinction between the two?

MM: Well, I have to tell you, we don’t actually make all that much money. The money we make is very minimal, a lot of us have to work second jobs in order to be able to make it on the salary that we have. Um, I myself I work as a lot attendant for basketball and football games, um, so I’d say really, we’re less than middle class...but I do feel like my job is important, somebody has to do it. And the benefits that we get, we get accumulated time off that we can use, we can schedule like time off to spend with our family for holidays or whatever. Most holidays during the school year we work but we have that accumulated time that we can use at a later date...which makes our job a little bit more beneficial in that way.

CS: If you were to turn back time would you still take this job?

MM: Yes.

CS: Do you enjoy it?

MM: Ninety percent of the time I do. Especially Johnson, I feel like Johnson is a good home environment, especially for girls who are starting out in their college life. It’s a good place to start, some of them, they fall so in love with Johnson Hall that they end up staying till they graduate. And I get attached, I don’t want to even let them go then. But you know, you get a few who like to uh, cause trouble.

CS: Yeah, they’re mostly on my side of the hall.

MM: It’s rare, especially in Johnson, but uh, I do love the environment, I feel like I was meant to be here because of the April 16th shootings. In fact as a lot of the parents picked up their children, their girls,
they hugged me because they said ‘my daughter says that if hadn’t been for you, hadn’t been for the
kind of parental person here that someone, you know, that they could just come in and hug, you know?
Because, everybody was just so upset, and you know, it was comforting that I was here, and was kind of
a steadying force, and I felt like that, in itself, just being able to be there for the girls...of course I was
upset too. I personally knew a few of the students that were killed. One I worked with on one of my
jobs, my lot attendant job with parking services. It was rough times. The Hokie Nation was great. It was
a terrible time but it brought a lot of people together, and it’s a day I’ll never forget.

CS: What is your highest level of education?

MM: 1971 graduate of Woodrow Wilson High School

CS: Were you able to go higher but chose not to?

MM: At the time my father was permanently disabled from the coal mines and I was working so I stayed
out to help my family, but back in those days a lot females didn’t go onto college. Your job was to get
married and have kids and raise them. And that’s pretty much what I did.

CS: Do you wish you were able to have gone higher?

MM: Sometimes. But not all the time. With all the new technology and everything today, I don’t think I
could keep up with everything you girls do.

CS: I don’t think we can keep up with everything we do. Do you think your life would have been much
different if you had gone to college?

MM: A lot of the reasons that I’m here today had to do with family and conflicts, um, you know I’m
divorced and uh, things like that. I think that I would probably be in this area, but I might possibly be in
a higher management position if I had gone onto college.

CS: Is the work you do, in your mind, worth the money you make?

MM: In my mind? I should be getting paid about double what I’m getting. But like I said the benefits
kind of balance that out a little bit more.

CS: What do you like best about your job?

MM: I like getting to know all the students, and there’s a lot of them, even after they graduate if they
come visit Tech they’ll come by and see me. It’s like one big family. I enjoy that.

CS: It does seem like Johnson’s set up to specifically make it like you’re one big family.

MM: And that includes other buildings that I’ve worked in also.

CL: Have you ever worked on Upper Quad?
MM: No. When I first started, I started in the President Quad, the first hall I took care of was Berringer hall, an all male facility. And those guys were pretty much the same. They at first gave me a hard time, and then pretty soon I was the dorm mom, you know? And you didn't want Mary to give you ‘the look’ because that was deadly (laughing). It was just like when your mom gives you that look-‘oh no don’t do that!’ You know, and they learned to respect me. They, um, after the initial shock of having a female taking care of their building, if they saw a sign out there in front of the bathroom that I was working on, they just turned on their heel and went to the next one. They never even had to ask. I love Berringer, I’m still attached to them.

CS: Where do you live? What costs are involved for you getting into work?

MM: Just the normal kind. I have a little Subaru that has to be all-wheel drive because I live down close to the river and it can get pretty treacherous in the winter. But um, just the normal car wear and tear and insurance and whatever and you know, payments for the car. I don’t live in an area that we could carpool because there’s nobody else in that area that works at Tech at this point. Some people live in areas where they can ride the van and do the carpool thing but I can’t do it.

CL: About how far away is it?

MM: It’s um, I think it’s like 15 minutes...if you’ve ever been to the river at McCoy, I’m out that way. It’s kind of secluded, but I like it that way. Especially when the weather’s pretty.

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

MM: At present I’m living alone so there’s not really a lot that my work interferes or anything with my family life, except that all my family lives in 3 or 4 different states and which if I take my scheduled times and I accumulate, I can take long weekend to go visit them. The only time it really ties me down as far as that concerned is, at Virginia Tech, family comes first, if there’s an emergency, you know I have the time that I can just take and go. Um, the only time that it interferes at all is when I have my ball games that I work, and normally if I have an emergency there, then they can get coverage for my lot. But a lot of times I’m spending the night on my lot, from 5 o’clock one evening till game time the next day to make sure the lot is clear for the ball games or contributor lots.

CS: If you could change one of the following things about your work, would it be the wages, the benefits, the schedule, the location, the availability of childcare, the availability of healthcare, the kinds of people you work with, or something else?

MM: Probably the wages.

CS: Is it just because you just...?

MM: Well right now, you see we, I probably shouldn’t discuss this but we haven’t even had a cost-of-living increase since 2007 due to this budget shortfall of the state, I’d say really, Tech has no control over that, also, with everything, that doesn’t keep the cost of living from going up, it doesn’t keep the power
companies from the rate increases and everything you pick up at the grocery store from costing more, so that really puts us all kind of in a pinch. So that’s the part I would change.

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

MM: That there’s more to it than what you see. It may look like it’s easy but it’s not. Um, that we’re basically there for the health and safety of all our residents and visitors and there should be more respect for what we do. We’re there to keep you safe. And you just don’t know what could hurt you that you can’t see.

CS: What advice would you give to someone who is considering your line of work?

MM: You’re too young to do what I do; you’ve got too many other opportunities out there for you. Like, at my age to start and try and do something else would be virtually impossible. For you, there’s just too much other things that you could do. So I wouldn’t advise it.

CS: What advice would you give a young person seeking a way to make a living?

MM: To first of all, go into something that you’re interested in, something that pleases you. If you’re an artistic person, go into the creative field. If you’re...don’t tie yourself down to doing something that you hate, um, if you go to classes and you just hate what you’re researching and what you’re studying, just look at different angles. Be happy in what you do.

CS: What do you like least about your job?

MM: Monday mornings.

CS: Is it just getting up and getting here?

MM: You never know what a Monday’s going to hold, especially after a football game weekend. Lot of times, you get a lot of extra work. That’s pretty much it.

CS: I guess we can just go to the last questions...where do you see yourself in 5-10 years?

MM: Hopefully retired.

CS: Any reason for retirement or just because...

MM: Just the age.

CS: Do you have anything else you would like to share?

MM: Not really.

CS: Do you have any other questions?

CL: Does Tech have a retirement plan?
MM: Yes.

CL: And what all does that entail?

MM: Well, after 5 years you have the, um, right now it’s kind of in question because of the budget, so what they do is set aside a certain amount each year for each employee that’s been here a certain amount of time. Some of the employees that have been here 30 or 40 years, they have a whole lot more. But they were on a different plan when they started. Um, up until about a year ago they had the Employee Match Plan but right now I think that’s on hold until they get the budget approved for this year.

CS: Alright I don’t think we have anymore questions, thank you so much.

MM: Alright.

CL: Yes, thank you so much.

MM: You’re welcome. I hope you get a good grade.