

Kim Rosenberg: OK, can you please state your name, your job title, and the name of the organization you work for?

Jennifer Pollard: Jennifer Pollard. I'm the Coordinator of Student Programs for the YMCA at Virginia Tech.

KR: OK. And where are you originally from and what did your parents do for a living?

JP: I grew up in Georgia and my father was in the restaurant business and then I moved to Virginia in high school.

KR: How was that working in the restaurant business? Did you do anything with that?

JP: In high school I did. He owned a couple of McDonald's restaurants so I was a McDonald's employee for a couple of years. It was OK. Not the path I wanted for my life.

KR: How long have you worked at your current job here?

JP: Two years. I started in January of 2007 so I guess a year and a half. Yeah. I went to school here at Virginia Tech and I was a volunteer here at the YMCA a long time ago very briefly and I didn't have any other employment with them until I got this job.

KR: What did you do before this job?

JP: Well, I was a sign-language interpreter in the public schools. I had just graduated with my master's degree in international health and development and so I had an interim job as a sign-language interpreter until I got my job here at the Y.

KR: If you weren't working here, where would you be working?

JP: Oh, working in the public health field would be another opportunity for me although it's difficult to find those kind of jobs around Blacksburg.

KR: Is this job a stepping stone for you? Do you want to go somewhere else and work or is this where you want to work?

JP: It's definitely a stepping stone for me. It's been a great experience. And I don't have any plans to leave anytime soon, but it's definitely not where I want to be in ten, fifteen years.

KR: What is a typical day like for you with this job?

JP: Well, there's two of us that work in the office, the director, Sandy Wirt, and myself and we share an office and then the students all day long so we have about thirty-five Virginia Tech students who are program leaders for fifteen of our community service

programs and they have to do one office hour a week and so we have a lot of students coming in and out of the office all day long constantly one after the other, you know, needing to talk to Sandy or I about their situations that are happening. So, like today, I think I got there at 9 o'clock and we've had students in their all day until you walked in the door and I've been trying to send one email and it hasn't happened. So, it's really chaotic and Sandy and I are OK with that because our main concern is our community and then I have to answer a lot of emails and make a lot of community connections and a lot of our programs obviously are community special events and community service programs and so we're always out trying to make connections. But it's very busy and it's very chaotic sometimes and you can barely catch your breath sometimes.

KR: What has been your best day of work so far?

JP: I don't know if I have a best day of work. I really am lucky because I do love my job and so I don't wake up in the morning dreading work everyday. I look forward to coming to work. It's always a good day, some obviously more chaotic and it's harder to focus on some days versus other days. Yeah, as far as a best day, I don't know. I get to work with amazing students everyday so I'm very fortunate. And yeah, I don't think I have a best day.

KR: What would you say about your worst day? Have you had one of those?

JP: Not really. Like I said, some days are more chaotic than others, so just the way I work I get, I don't know if stressed out is the right word, but you know I have a long list of things to do that I want to get taken care of and so it can be frustrating if my long list of things to do is still as long as it was when I started that morning eight hours earlier, but I know that productive things have happened with me and students and our relationships. Even if my emails don't get taken care of, I always have tomorrow so I haven't had a really, ever ... there's long days. We have a lot of special events that happen around campus. I have to work weekends sometimes, so it can get tiring, but I don't look back and say, "Oh that day, that was a really bad day." I don't really have those.

KR: Has there ever been a time when you were tempted to walk away from this job or when you seriously thought about moving on or when you want to move on?

JP: Nope.

KR: Do you have any idea when you want to move on from this job?

JP: Oh, I can see myself being here for another couple of years. After that, I just haven't taken time to look at what else might be available out there just because I'm happy where I am right now. So, I don't really have any specific date of when I plan to leave this job. Yeah, I can see myself here a few more years.

KR: What is your opinion of Tech students?

JP: That's a hard question because I was a Tech student and I don't know that I have a fair opinion of people that I don't work with just because I don't work with them so I don't know a kind of opinion. I think there's a lot of potential here on campus and students are able to release that in a lot of different ways and a lot of them happen to come through our office and I feel like we have the cream of the crop as far as students go that we get to work with and the students that are running our programs and volunteering with our programs. I think there's just a lot of high-achieving individuals here and they just choose to go to different programs and funnel through different events in order to publish their achievements.

KR: So does that give you a certain unique perspective from being a Tech student to coming back and working here?

JP: I look at my students and think, "Wow they've really got it together!" They do so much. When I was a Tech student, you know, I was involved in outdoor club and a couple different events here on campus but I spent a lot of time with my classwork and I was a good student but I certainly wasn't highly involved like the students that I work with so if anything, I look at myself as a slacker and think, "Gosh, I could have done so much more." I was here in 1991 was my first year here and I graduated in 95 so a lot of things have changed since then.

KR: So do you think the students that you work with are the general rule or the exception to the rule? Like, do you think most Tech students are apathetic or do you think they really want to help?

JP: I think the students that lend their selves to volunteer service are gonna be kind of the more cream of the crop than your typical student and studies have shown that people who volunteer often are the students who have high grades. So I feel that the students that we work with are representative of a certain part of the Virginia Tech population but I think there's a lot of Virginia Tech population who aren't as high-achieving as the students that I get to work with everyday. I also think that students are becoming more open to volunteer service. I've notice that with just this year and the number of applications we get from people interested in volunteering. I think the push on Virginia Tech campus to do so has kind of made younger students knowledgeable about the opportunities that are here so I think students are more involved than they have historically been.

KR: What is the retention rate like for volunteers? Do you see a lot of the same people from year to year?

JP: We do. Yeah, there's definitely, we don't have any studies on retention rate or anything like that. A lot of our really committed volunteers end up being program leaders for our programs, but we do have a lot of people who love tutoring and so they want to tutor every semester and they've been tutoring with us for their whole time here at Virginia Tech and then, you know, they graduate and we have other people who kind of come in and take those places. But I think the retention rate is pretty good. We have a really open office and we welcome any volunteers to come in at any point and talk to us

about whatever they want to and so I feel like the efforts that we make towards our volunteers help with the retention rate.

KR: Can you tell me a little bit about your life outside of your job? Are you able to live comfortably off of what you make?

JP: I would struggle living by myself comfortably because I'm only on a 9-month contract so I only get paid for 9 months of work versus twelve months of work because it's a non-profit organization, obviously the pay is going to be very different. We don't work for Virginia Tech. We work for the YMCA and so it's quite low. So to survive on my own I would definitely have to have a summer job and I don't know that I could work this job. Luckily, my boyfriend and I live together, so that definitely helps the situation.

KR: So, with your next job, wherever you go after this, is money a major concern?

JP: It probably will be. I think, any job that I'm going to get other than this position is going to be a year-round position which does not excite me. I really like having my summers off and my boyfriend and I love to travel, so it's definitely going to affect that and so that kind of is a big factor. It reminds me that this is a really good place to be, but I think later on I would want to have a job with a better salary and I could easily have that now but I choose to work nine months versus twelve months.

KR: You work a lot with the nearby communities. Do you encounter a lot of people who are struggling to make ends meet?

JP: Definitely. We have a lot of after-school programs that are in lower-income communities and I don't necessarily interact with and see, you know, see or hear of the kind of lifestyles that they have. We also do Project Home Repair where we go into lower-income individual's homes and do minor housing repairs and so that definitely, you know, offers a connection here to typically what it's like. The people in Blacksburg live a very different life than the people of the greater Montgomery County just because of the university connections and the educational status of people here in town, but you go out in the county and there's a lot of poverty that gets overlooked or it's not noticed because Blacksburg is cool and that's that. So, yeah a lot of our programs definitely put us out there and that's really one of the benefits of having so many students working for us because they are the ones that are actually out there working in these communities and seeing the poverty and seeing the educational struggles and so I think it's really eye-opening for the students.

KR: So what do you think about the standard of living in Montgomery County compared to other places you might have lived or visited?

JP: Well, depends on if you're talking Montgomery County or Blacksburg. Blacksburg is very high for reasons I mentioned earlier. There's a lot of single parents out there trying to raise kids and I've lived a lot of other places. I lived in New Orleans and I lived in Honolulu, Hawaii and Seattle, Washington and I've seen a lot of different economic, well

from different walks of life. I think that's what keeps drawing me back to Blacksburg, because I've left many times and I've come back many times is the fact that I really enjoy my standard of living I guess because I can walk anywhere I want to in town, I can bicycle pretty easily. Traffic's horrible, unfortunately. Everything I need is pretty much here. I don't do a lot of my shopping in Christiansburg. And so I'm very happy to just kind of be in this little town.

KR: So have you always lived in more rural or more country than city?

JP: No, like I said, I lived in New Orleans for two years and Honolulu for almost a year, a short period in Seattle, Washington, so I've been in some very big cities, which has been, you know, they've been really great experiences and I do like the rural aspect of Blacksburg and I really like there's a lot of hiking and backpacking activities to do around here. Yeah, that's what keeps me interested.

KR: What are your main goals in life?

JP: I enjoy serving, helping others. I think that is one of my key focuses and I've had very amazing experiences in my life and I've seen some really incredible things and really tragic things and traveled a lot and know that there's a lot of help and service to be done out there and so I think that's what my main goal in life is, to be able to offer help where needed and encourage others to offer help and get into service opportunities so they can see for themselves the rewards that it brings. I think that's my main goal in life. Traveling, I love traveling, I love introducing myself to new cultures and learning about other people and just you know living a very solid respectful life and hoping that other people see that and can learn for that or setting examples for other people.

KR: What are your main goals with this job?

JP: Well, I've become a much better manager. I feel like I manage fifteen different little businesses. And Sandy as well, she's the director so she has a lot more on her plate than I do, but I think my main goals were to be able to work with students and get them into the greater Montgomery County so they could see really what it is like living here and what the standards of living are for different people, but also just, like I said, me being a manager, learning more and more about that or more about programming or working with others, there's a lot of psychology. So I feel like I've had plenty of opportunity to grow and accomplish the goals that I had when I started this position and starting new events is always exciting, you know, making new connections in the community so that we can start a new, we're doing a bike rodeo for the first time next weekend and Sandy and I have both learned a lot from that whole process so we're fortunate that we can kind of create new programs and ideas and experiment, so it's really cool.

KR: So is there anything that you would like to change about this program that you haven't been able to yet?

JP: I think it functions very very well. There's a lot that goes into it. Like I said, it's fifteen different programs that Sandy and I manage, along with several special events, major special events that happen here on campus, like YToss and I think Sandy and I are really good at, very good at, working together, just being able to kind of roll with it and change things that need to be but keep it as is if things are going well and so I don't see any major thing. We'd certainly love a bigger office here in Squires because like I said, we have 35 volunteers and other people here on campus and new carpet would be exciting which I think we are getting eventually, but other than that, you know, of course I'd love for all of us to be paid a lot more than we are but that's the life of a non-profit employee, so I have to be OK with that.

KR: Do you feel like your position here, or the YMCA here, is really valued or do you think people undervalue it?

JP: I think the students value it. The students who work with us and the volunteers who work with us, I think historically maybe there were periods when it wasn't highly valued and I think the work that the YMCA does here – the YMCA's been here since 1873 – on campus & has been pretty involved in students' lives since then, but I think finally the greater Virginia Tech community is starting to see the things that we're doing on campus, especially with our YToss event so they're recognizing there's a lot of value. But the YMCA is so much more than our offices. We have the thrift store, we offer university classes, we have many special events, the craft fair, book fair, international programs, you know, there's a long list of things that the YMCA at Virginia Tech does and so they just don't put all the pieces together that we're all actually the same organization. We all work under the same person and I think people on campus and off campus are continually realizing, "Oh, wow, so you're the same people who have the thrift store and the open university?" Yeah, yeah, we're all the same, so it's interesting

KR: So if you could tell the students that aren't with the Y right now, what would it be?

JP: Go out and serve others and whether you do it at the YMCA at Virginia Tech or any other office here on campus, that's your choice. I just think service to others is an experience because I think it changes lives and it's definitely changed my life and if you can travel to another country and serve, that's even better. But there's plenty of people in our community, you know, right outside our backdoors, that need a hand and students here on campus have a lot going for them and I think they have an obligation to serve if they're able to.

KR: What is the thing that you want volunteers to come away with?

JP: Well, leadership skills. I think stepping into a volunteer position, putting yourself in a new environment like that where you're kind of in charge definitely educates you about your leadership skills and kind of points out what you need to work on and what you're really good at. I also think I want them to walk away just enjoying what they're doing. I don't want them to be involved in a program and feel obligated to do a program if they're not enjoying it. If you're going to volunteer, you should be getting a reward from that and

you certainly shouldn't be miserable with your volunteer service and so I tell people at the volunteer orientations that all of our volunteers have to go to and I tell them to shop around at our different programs and to find the one that fits them and the one that they can find meaning in.

KR: What about their views of the local communities? What do you want them to take from their experiences working with them?

JP: That we obviously, we're all very very similar people and a lot of it comes down to whether we have money or we don't have money and I think volunteers being able to walk away with the fact that there are similarities. You know, if you have a student who grew up in a middle to upper income family and they go out and do a Project Home Repair service in some trailer park knowing that, "Wow, there's people that live like this, right in my own community." I think that's a really important lesson and I think it's really important for people to see that, to be able to make a connection with that homeowner and be able to find a similarity or something that resonates within the volunteer. That's, just some sort of connection so they can walk away knowing that we have a lot in common. We have more in common in this world than we don't have in common and I think if our culture started focusing on that we would be a lot better off and so hopefully they'll wake up to that fact and then, you know, walk away and carry that on and, you know, be able to influence others.

KR: So what would you say are the most frustrating aspects of your job other than it being so busy?

JP: It's frustrating that so much of it is through email. I find that I spend most of my days doing email when it would be much more fun to actually be able to go to our after-school programs and go out and serve alongside the students, but Sandy and I don't really get that opportunity very often. I see those people who sit in front of a computer all day and now I look and think, "Oh I am one of those people!" and then I think, "Would it be faster if we just called each other? Should we keep doing this email stuff?" But a lot of our communication happens through email because we have over 2-300 volunteers who work with us each semester and so if you want to send messages to that many people, you have to do it through email and so it's how we run the office. So, it's necessary, but it's frustrating that I have to take my focus away from the students who are actually in the office communicating with me and turn around and sit there and type on the computer.

KR: What advice a young person seeking a way to make a living?

JP: To pick something that they love to do and for me, money has not been the main focus with me of what job I will choose, obviously. My first priority when finding a job is finding something that I will enjoy doing everyday and if I had to work a job that I dreaded, if I made \$100,000, it wouldn't matter. I couldn't accept that job because it's really important that my life is interesting and exciting to me and that I don't have this feeling of dread everyday in my life and so I think for students looking for a job, they should pick based on that and not on how much money they're going to make or what the

benefits are, even though those things are very important. I don't think in the end that's what's going to make someone truly fulfilled and truly happy.

KR: With the recent economic events, I know people sometimes don't have so much of a choice and they just kind of have to take whatever they can get. So what would you say to those people?

JP: I would say if they have to take what they can get, to continue searching for better opportunities. Obviously, they're going to learn something wherever they are, if they're open to that. And so, if they have to work a year at a job that is really not ideal, but it's the only thing they can find, then tell them to keep searching for new ideas and new jobs and new possibilities and you know, look outside of the area that you're in and be creative and open to other places and towns, cities. There's a lot of amazing things in this world and students have the option of traveling, especially while they're young, then that's a great way to start a life.

KR: Are you more of a saver or a spender?

JP: Saver. Definitely, I don't spend a lot of money. I've never really had a lot of money to spend so if I have to go below 100 or so, it doesn't happen very often.

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

JP: I don't know that it's so important that people know what I do. I think it's important for people to know what the YMCA at Virginia Tech does and the fact that we are one organization and we offer such a broad variety of programs and special events and I also think it's really important that people recognize what the volunteers do. I mean, I get paid for my work, but everybody I work with, or volunteer students, who put many many hours every week into our programs at the YMCA at Virginia Tech and so I think it's more important that people recognize what they do and understand what they do and I think that's probably the key thing.

KR: Do you have anything else that you would like to share, about your experiences, about Tech or the surrounding communities or just your life experiences?

JP: No, other than I really encourage people to volunteer at some point in their life and just see what it's all about. I mean there's so many ways to do it here in Blacksburg, especially after April 16 and the big push for volunteers in the community, there's no excuse for people not to, other than time commitment. Volunteer solutions is a great website to go to. YMCA Virginia Tech is a great website. I think it will really open people's eyes up to what's in their backyard and to what's inside themselves.

KR: What would you say your priorities are?

JP: In life?

KR: In life or right now.

JP: Well right now, I would say sending that email that's still sitting on my computer, that's one of them. Well I'll say right now, top five priorities. We run quite a few different after-school programs and they happen every week inside of the semester and so one of my priorities this week and certainly next week is to go out and visit those afterschool programs and just see what our program leaders have done and the connections that they've made with the kids. Another priority, we have the YMCA book fair this weekend and I'm actually going to volunteer for it so I'm kind of excited about that and we have a student/staff meeting tonight with our program leaders and you know, just being available for them this evening as we all gather together and talk about programs and about life and have lots of laughs together, you know, just being available for that. Yeah, I think that's about it for right now.

KR: What about in life?

JP: Well I guess that kind of goes along with the goals in life so I feel like that would kind of be redundant. I don't know that I have anything new to add. ... quite a few times traveling and working and that kind of stuff, so that's definitely a priority in my life to keep a connection with East Africa and either help with fundraising events for people there that I know that I know that are trying to start projects or going there and doing service or traveling or all of the above. Working in the public health sector would be really great.

KR: So you seem like you value experiences far more than money. Is money ever an issue in getting those experiences?

JP: Definitely. Like I said, I've traveled quite a bit, and when you travel to East Africa, once you get there it's pretty cheap but the plane flights are outrageously expensive and so I earned money so I could take a month-long trip to Tanzania for the first time. Two trips to Africa I've gotten to go for free because I've served as a leader or I've volunteered with a program that I was accepted to so I got to go for free. Yeah, money is always an issue with me, especially because I don't make a lot of money and I'm hoping to go to Africa this summer, so I have to think of ways, well how am I going to save that money? You know, what are my priorities going to be, as far as saving, because I'm saving for different things, so it's, yeah, always, always about where I look for opportunities. Take advantage of whatever comes up.