

Interview with Linda Thomas

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

Occupation: Housekeeper

Time & Place: November 8, 2011, 8a.m.-9a.m., Prof. Satterwhite's house, Blacksburg, VA

Interviewer: Brett Ruby, and Cait Whitlow, junior Communication major

BR: Brett Ruby

CW: Cait Whitlow

LT: Linda Thomas

BR: We'll start with some basic questions. Will you please tell me your name, and if you don't mind, your age.

LT: My age, huh? Okay. Linda Thomas, and I'm 70. That was painful.

CW: Will you please tell me your job title, the name of the organization you work for, and how long you've been working.

LT: I do house-cleaning, and I'm self-employed, and I've done it about 26 years.

BR: If you could describe your background; where you grew up and what it was like?

LT: My early years till I was about nine, I lived in Charleston, South Carolina. Then I grew up on the last village on Long Island. It was like 500 people. And um, you know what else do you need? I did go to nursing school, you know for a while, but just family problems I had. And took classes at university for a while, and then just family problems; I had to discontinue.

BR: What did you parents do for a living when you grew up?

LT: My mother didn't work, she had four children. And my father was [pause] my step-father was a marine distributor for the east coast.

CW: Do you have a spouse and if so, what do they do for a living?

LT: I've been divorced for about 19 years.

BR: Then you said you have children, and you said one was a chiropractor?

LT: One is a chiropractor, and then my daughter is a loan-broker. She is self-employed.

BR: Okay. If you don't mind could you tell me a little bit about your job? Like, how did you first come to have this job?

LT: Um, I had two friends. One wanted someone to clean their house, and one did house-cleaning. So I called her to get her a job. And I didn't work at all when I raised my children. I chose not to. And she said, oh I just happened to mention to her I might take on a couple houses, I'm thinking about it. She said do you want to clean my house, and I said alright fine I'll do it. I'm just one that I really enjoy cleaning my own home, so I don't mind doing it, you know?

CW: What's the typical day at your job like?

LT: Just general cleaning. I do 8 hours a day.

BR: How many hours a week would you say you end up working after everything?

LT: I work 40.

BR: Forty. And how long have you worked in the Blacksburg area specifically in this industry?

LT: For 26 years.

BR: Twenty-six years, alright. Have you held any other jobs previously?

LT: Yes. I worked in my early years. I worked for the telephone company as a long-distance operator. Then for about 4 ½ to 5 years I worked for a bank on Miami Beach.

CW: How has your job affected your family life, or vice versa?

LT: It doesn't affect it at all.

BR: At all?

LT: It's helped my children, you know—educating them and everything.

BR: Oh, definitely. How is a way since you've started out finding your clientele changed since you first started out? You said how you originally got into the business and how you found clients, but how after that did you find clients, and how do you do them now?

LT: Alright, I would run an ad in the *Current* when I first started out. Now, I never run an ad; it's always by you know, referrals. And I always have a waiting list.

BR: Oh, it's a waiting list?

LT: Yes.

BR: How long is your waiting list usually?

LT: I have four on it right now.

BR: Four on it right now, wow. Awesome. What clients do you decide to work for? Is there a specific type of client you typically seek out?

LT: Yes. I actually prefer professors. I think they're the best to work for. And [pause] some elderly can be very difficult. That's about it.

BR: What is it about the professors that you think it makes them the best to work for?

LT: I think they're just great people. I think they're terrific.

BR: So, how much interaction do you usually have with the people that you're working for?

LT: Some of them I actually become good friends with, really good friends.

BR: Oh, that's awesome. So it's not just usually just you working at the house? Usually you have a lot of interaction with the people there?

LT: Yeah.

CW: How has working within a college town and with college faculty either positively or negatively affected your view of the university?

LT: It's a great view, because that's why I do prefer the professors. I just think they are the nicest people, and the greatest people to work for.

BR: Did you previously have any affiliation with the university before you ended up in this area?

LT: No.

BR: How did you come to end up in this area actually?

LT: You couldn't afford to live on the end of Long Island anymore [laughs]. That's why yeah, you had to move.

BR: So how did you hear about Blacksburg?

LT: We had searched out for quite a few years and I would write to the Chamber of Commerce. Actually when I looked on the map this Christiansburg area was the only place I never requested any material from. I didn't want to live this far over. Then we came through this area just looking at it, and I really loved Christiansburg. It's the one place I didn't seek out to live.

BR: So you never looked at it before and all just kind of fell in to it?

LT: Yep.

CW: So do you only work for people in Blacksburg, or do you work for people in Radford, too?

LT: No, I don't do Radford at all. I have, let's see, three families in Christiansburg.

BR: Is that the farthest out that you go usually?

LT: I only do Christiansburg and Blacksburg.

BR: Let's see here. What would you say is your favorite part of your job, or what do you find most rewarding from it?

LT: [Pause] Do you want me to be really honest?

BR: Yes, we'd love for you to be honest.

CW: Yes, please!

LT: [Laughs] my paycheck.

BR: That definitely makes sense.

LT: It's true.

BR: On the opposite side of that, what is something that you enjoy least about your job?

LT: There isn't anything that I would say I enjoy least about it. It's something, like I said, I never mind cleaning my own house. I'm one of these clean-bugs and I love to do my own house, because I get it perfect. So it's something that I don't mind doing, so it's all about the same, just a variety of things you do. So I don't dislike doing anything.

BR: So there is no one particular task that bothers you?

LT: No, no.

CW: How do you decide the cost for a client for a job?

LT: Generally what I know is being charged in the area, but I've usually charged less than what most people charge.

CW: Do you differ on the price on house size?

LT: No, I do 4 hours. That doesn't mean if you have a huge house I'm not going to be able to cover it. Some homes you can only do one floor in 4 hours, there so massive. So I'll do 4 hours.

BR: So is it always 4 hours and then the next week 4 hours again? Or how many times a week would you say?

LT: Most people are every other week. I have some people that are weekly jobs for four hours. I have ones that have large homes. One week I work every—I'll do 4 hours, and then the next week I'm there all day long in a home.

BR: So the 4 hour time limit is just for a usual job, if there is a bigger one you'll stay there longer and do it?

LT: I won't stay longer than 4, but they will take another spot for 4 hours. Like one person has all day. Every other week she has 8 hours, because she has a 3-floor house.

BR: Do you like being able to switch up every four hours, or would you people to keep getting the same slots so you can do one house and get it all done with?

LT: I'm not sure what you mean.

BR: Do you enjoy having like only a 4 hour time set out so you kind of switch tasks, like go from different houses?

LT: Yes, because it gets too monotonous being in the same house for 4 hours, you know? You like the change.

BR: So would you say the 8 hour day is your worst one, roughest one?

LT: Yes.

BR: I can understand that. What is one thing that you think is important for people to understand about your job?

LT: That I'm honest. They can trust me. They all know I won't steal from them, and that's the biggest thing because I've heard problems. And being dependable because I'm always there. I've never in 26 years ever cancelled out when I'm not sick. You know, there are days when you don't feel like going to work, but I've never done that. They need it done and I'm always there for them.

CW: Have you ever ran in to any complications with accusations or anything like that?

LT: I've had a few problems with a few people and I have discontinued them.

BR: Does that kind of help with the whole building relationships with you clients like you said, how you become good friends with some of them?

LT: Yes.

CW: Does the amount you're paid compensate for the work you put in?

LT: I think it does.

BR: You said you liked your job, but if you could change one thing about it be it wages, benefits, schedule, the way you're treated by your clients, what would you change?

LT: I don't think I'd change anything.

BR: Wouldn't change anything; so would you say you're treated pretty well by your clients then?

LT: Oh yes, wonderful.

CW: I'm sure you've seen some interesting things working in other houses, do you have any stories that are either funny or upsetting that you'd like to share?

LT: Oh dear. Y'all caught me off-guard. No, not in general. We just have amusing times sometimes laughing about family things or talking about our children, you know?

CW: Do they ever stay in the house while you're working?

LT: Sometimes they are, but they'll usually be in their office or their in and out running errands, because the few people I have are retired.

BR: Is most of your client based professors or is mostly split kind-of half and half, like retired and professors?

LT: Mostly professors. I have few lawyers and a few retired people.

BR: You said the elderly ones are the hardest to work for?

LT: Yes.

BR: Why is that?

LT: One wanted to set her air conditioner at 82 degrees [laughs]. You know things like that. So I had to discontinue that one.

BR: So it's kind of like harsh working conditions?

LT: They're harder to deal with.

CW: What was the worse house you ever had to clean like?

LT: Oh dear, I don't even like to say it. One that was like I could have spent 4 hours just in the bedroom and the bathroom. And I discontinued that one. It explains to you that I won't take those kind of houses.

BR: Was it just like in disarray, like stuff everywhere?

LT: Very bad, really bad.

BR: Do you think people sometimes try to take advantage of you like that, like leaving stuff out for you to clean that really isn't your job?

LT: No. No, they don't take advantage of me. No.

BR: Is there like a set list of stuff when you go to a house that you say this is the stuff that I'm willing to clean and do? Is it like a contract that is set out, or is it kind of more discussion based?

LT: No. I've had some homes that have small children and I will have to do more picking up, or picking up in the bedroom with teenagers. I expect it with that type of children, and it doesn't bother me.

BR: What is the stuff that when you go to a job that you usually do? I know we went over this before, but is it more picking up stuff, or more regular cleaning like dusting?

LT: Cleaning, more cleaning.

CW: What was a moment that made you proud, or that you felt a lot of satisfaction for?

LT: [Pauses] I think the one that I worked for—I don't even like to say 'I did this'—but working for a professor that was killed last year in the glider accident. Do you recall? Mier Schneller, he was the most wonderful person I've ever known. They had visitors in their home 3 nights a week, and I just gave her the time. I would go over every night for a couple hours and I wouldn't charge her for it. I would just clean the house, you know get things organized for the next group of people. That was probably the most rewarding thing to me. It isn't what I did for them, but it [pauses].

BR: I'm sure they appreciated that. Is that a relationship you built up to? One of the one's you said where you were closer to the family?

LT: I'm close with that family, but I have one other one in Christiansburg that I am the closest to.

BR: How long have you worked for that family? Is it more based on how long you've worked for them or the type of people they are?

LT: Just the type of certain people you just get closer to, you know? Cause one family in Christiansburg just about 6 weeks ago my grandson is in college. He has a difficult time paying for his books and all, he is on part scholarship. And she just gave me a 100 dollars to give him to buy his English book. You see?

CW: Did you know them before you started working, like cleaning their house?

LT: No, but I've worked for her for about 25-26 years.

BR: So you got pretty close to them in that amount of time?

LT: Oh yeah.

BR: How many clients are you that close with? I'm sure there are different levels.

LT: Probably three-quarters of them, but a few of them I'm pretty close to.

BR: That's awesome that you can be that close to people in your job and have interactions that are actually really worthwhile. Is that something in your job that you really enjoy, that makes it like a lot easier to do?

LT: Yeah.

BR: You said everyone has those days they don't want to go to work. Does that help you?

LT: Yeah, some of those people that I enjoy. Cause you know it's like the Kenzie's that donated the 100 dollars for my grandson. You know, we just do things for each other. Twice I recovered her dining room chairs for her and haven't charged her anything, I just do it for her you know?

CW: What were your hopes and dreams when you were younger?

LT: To be a nurse.

BR: Did you say you went to nursing school?

LT: I went to Brooklyn Hospital in New York, and I took classes at Long Island University.

BR: How did you like New York compared to here?

LT: Well, I went to school in the city, but I lived 110 miles from New York. The village I grew up in was only 500 people. It was the last town on Long Island.

BR: So do you think that kind-of small town, like everyone knows everyone?

LT: Yes.

CW: How did you end up going from South Carolina to New York?

LT: My mother remarried.

CW: Do you still see yourself cleaning houses in the next 5 years, or do you plan to retire?

LT: Two more years. I think two more years—as soon as my son's on his feet with his business.

BR: Where'd you say you were going to move down to?

LT: To Raleigh.

BR: We've been talking a lot in class about the 'American Dream,' what does it mean to you?

LT: [Pauses] not to get rich. I think you know for a family to be able to make a good living, and it is a shame that women have to work that much with children. Being able to educate your children and you know, live comfortably. To be able to save for retirement and it's very difficult today you know for younger people.

CW: Do you feel like women should be in the house or should be working?

LT: I'm sort of from the old school and I think being a mother and raising your children, I think that's the greatest thing a woman can do. That's my view of it. I prefer a woman to stay at home, but she still needs that education. You know so she would always have something to fall back on to. You know especially if there's a divorce.

BR: Yeah, that's a big thing we've been talking about in our class lately—is what people see different roles as. Would you say with education that a woman should stay with her kids at home and then go back to work after the kids are in school?

LT: You know even if she could work part time because if she's educated and she stays out of that work-force she is not going to be that employable. You know with being out for 10-14 years, while you children still need you at home. I know professionals do work full-time with children because I've seen

both sides I prefer staying home, even if it's part-time. You know where she can still have that work experience so she will be employable on a full time basis after her children are grown.

BR: Do you think that the people you've seen that have a full-time job, that hinders their family relationship or hinders their kids in anyway?

LT: They seem to manage it well. Maybe it's my age, but I don't think I could do it as well as they do.

CW: Do you work for any families that the mom does stay at home and she just doesn't prefer to clean?

LT: No, most of them actually work.

BR: Are most of the families you work for usually a husband and wife, or is it usually more single families?

LT: No, I just have married families.

BR: Have you ever worked for just a single, one-person family, or like a mom and a kid?

LT: I've had you know as far as single, just a professor that wasn't married. I work for him. I have one retired professor that I also do, you know that lives alone.

BR: Are those jobs a little bit easier with just like one person?

LT: It's about the same.

CW: Is there anything that you think we might have missed asking?

LT: No I don't think so. I think it's pretty complete. I think the questions you've asked are very good.