

Interview with Martha Lucas

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

Occupation: Housekeeper, Main Campbell Hall, Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, VA

Time and Place: March 22, 2010, 3p.m.-3:42p.m., Main Campbell Hall, Blacksburg, VA

Interviewer: Elizabeth (Betsy) Brucker, Sophomore International Studies Major – Valencia, PA

BB – Betsy Brucker

ML – Martha Lucas

DVD Part 1:

BB: Ok. Just to start off, would you please state your name, your job title, and the name of the organization that you work for.

ML: My name is Martha Lucas. I work in housekeeping, and I work for student programs.

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

ML: Going on four years.

BB: Could you tell me a little bit about your family background – what your parents did, where you lived growing up, that kind of thing?

ML: Well, there's not much to tell. My dad passed away when I was twelve years old. My mom was in nursing. That's about it. Back in the old days, the wife stayed home most of the time, but my mom worked.

BB: Were you an only child, or did you have siblings?

ML: I am one of three, I've got one sister and one brother.

BB: Do you think... Your mom was a nurse... Did you live around this area?

ML: I live in Giles County.

BB: Ok, and have you lived there your whole life?

ML: Yes. I was born on the mountain that I live on.

BB: That's really cool. Well, would you describe in detail, a typical day on the job here?

ML: Ok, after I get here, or...when I get up?

BB: Starting when you get up would be great.

ML: Ok, I get up at 5 am every morning Monday through Friday and I have to be here by 7:30.

We usually arrive here about fifteen after seven. We have to check in with our supervisor before we start our day. Mine is for the area where I work. There's nine of us that work there. After we check in with her, if she's got something special for us to do, then we do that first. Right now, the first thing I do is go up to East Campbell and do fourth floor. And after I do fourth floor and am finished, I come back here and start my building. We start with our entrances and after that, I go to clean the stairs. And then yeah, we do first floor first – everything on the first floor. And after that we go on up to second, do it. Bathrooms, studies, halls. Then third. Typical day.

BB: And you work at Main Campbell every day?

ML: Yep, yes.

BB: And have you been working at Main Campbell since you started working at Tech, or...?

ML: I trained in Main Egg [Main Eggleston], but I worked here for a couple months two days a week, because the guy that was housekeeper before me, he was going to retire, so he was doing three days a week, and I was doing two days a week here. And after he retired, then I did all week.

BB: So, how long did you say you have been working here again?

ML: Going on four years.

BB: Going on four years, and what did you do before coming to work here?

ML: I was a nurse.

BB: What made you switch to here?

ML: The reason I switched is, my husband got liver cancer and I took a leave of absence to be with him, take care of him, so he could stay home instead of in a nursing home or in a hospital. And I believe that in taking care of him and watching him, all the pain and things that he went through, I didn't want to go back to nursing. I didn't want to see anybody else hurt like him.

BB: So, was that your first job, or did you have another job before then.

ML: I worked in a convenience store for about four years. It was family owned.

BB: Ok, and how old were you when you worked at the convenience store?

ML: Probably in my early twenties.

BB: So, coming back to the job here at Main Campbell. Do you find your job here to be enjoyable for the most part, or is it more of a strain.

ML: I love it. I think this is just what I needed when I came here. I love talking to the students. And um, laughing with them of course. I feel that it's a privilege to have such good students like we have in Main Campbell.

BB: So, do you think the students in this building are different from students in other buildings? How would you compare your experiences to other people working in this kind of job?

ML: I think this building is, to me, uh, the students are all, they're friendly. They're all good kids, you know? And I think they do different, differently, than other kids, because they are. They'll take time to talk to you. Speak to you, you know? And they do special things for me too. I mean, it makes my day, if I just see one of them smile, it makes my day.

BB: What are some the struggles you find with your job here?

ML: I actually haven't found any struggles. I mean, each day differs, but I haven't really run into any, anything that I could say is very hard to do, or a struggle.

BB: What are some, you were going into your interactions with students, but what are some other benefits of your job here?

ML: Well, this building itself is, it's very, the kids help keep it up. It's not very hard to clean. It's, they pick up after themselves. Um, and of course the benefits are that it's an Honors building. And I just think there's no other building, no other dorm like Main Campbell. I mean, for a lot of people that work in housekeeping, most of them are just here for the paycheck, and of course that helps, but I'm not here just for a paycheck. I'm here because I love the students. And I just, and it could have a lot to do with the fact that I have two teenage grandchildren that I talk to a lot. And I think it helps a lot, knowing what they're into, and so it's just, I just love it here.

BB: So, what, we pretty much covered this, but would you like to talk about your favorite part of the job, or rewards?

ML: My favorite part of the job is just coming in, in the morning, and having students pass me in the halls, or whatever I'm doing, and just say, "hello, Martha, how are you?" Or, I get ready to go home, "bye Martha, have a good evening." And the special things they do, like make me birthday cards or Christmas cards, and I cherish them. I think that to me, the benefit to me is just, you know, the kids doing things like that for me. And to think that I'm someone special to them.

BB: So how do interact with your, we talked about the students, but with your fellow, you said there's nine of you that work in this area, how do you interact with them?

ML: I get along well with them. I mean, we aren't all put together until summertime. And, I myself could get along with anyone, you know? But sometimes, there's tension, because in summertime you get really hot and aggravated and things don't go right, but I don't have any problems with my coworkers. I mean, we're not like, they're not like, my best friends, I mean, but I like all of them, but um, I don't dislike them. We just don't talk to each other about personal things, it's mostly just the job. But we all have different lives, different backgrounds. I mean, some of them are real young, they're just starting out working, and some of us are older, and we don't have a lot in common.

BB: Would you, do you like it like that? Do you like interacting just based on the job? Or would you prefer that it was a more friendly environment where people talked about things?

ML: No, I think I like it more like, more for them being my coworkers, instead of my best friends, because that way, if an issue does come up, you know, you deal with it. And, some of them get into arguments and stuff, and I just go about my way, I don't. There's work to be done, and there's not time to stop and, you know, worry about one person not doing this, and one person's not doing that. Just try to get the job done.

BB: Do you find it, do you have enough time during the day to get everything done that you need to get done, or is it kind of like a scramble at the end of the day?

ML: Some days it's a scramble, like Mondays and Tuesdays. We try to get everything major caught up, and that way you can work on other things that needs to be done. You know, like on Mondays, our bathrooms come first, and trash has to be taken out first. Other days, we don't do it that way. But we try to get everything done so by Wednesday, we can do the showers and have time for everything.

BB: So, we talked about your coworkers, how about your supervisor? You said you had to check in with them in the morning, and check out when you leave. How do you interact with your supervisor?

ML: I have one supervisor, one that's here in the building. She's a very nice person. She's a good supervisor. I don't have any issues with her.

BB: And do you just have to do the one check in at the beginning of the day, or do you have to report to her? What is your professional relationship?

ML: Actually, we check in, in the morning and we check out in the evening, unless an issue comes up. Like, I ran into something that I don't know what to do with, or I don't know how to do it, or something that she has to see before, then I'll see her during the day. But, or, if she has something in another building that needs to be done, she'll come and get me. And, that's about it, I get along with her pretty well. She's a very good supervisor.

BB: Going back to aside from the job, you said you live in Giles County. How do you get back and forth from work? And what costs are associated with that?

ML: Actually, if I drive every day myself, it was costing me like \$200 a month for gas. It's about 35-40 miles. At first I thought it was a long drive, but after I got used to it, it's not that bad. But now, I have a coworker, that we take turns driving, and it's a lot better that way.

BB: Is that what most people do?

ML: Most people do. Some of them prefer to drive alone, but a lot of them can't afford to drive alone. Like the coworker I work with, she has a big house payment, and it's a big help for her, to have the car, just to take turns driving with me, because that way it doesn't put her in line.

BB: And, carpooling, is it easy then to get to work every day? Do you have problems, like with the snow, did you have problems getting to work this past winter.

ML: Well, yes. Sometimes we couldn't get here. It was just too much snow, and I live on a mountain, so. But, actually, we didn't miss that many days. I don't think. It may have been a couple of days.

BB: Back to the job here. What are your working conditions like? Do you feel safe and taken care of here? Do you have any safety concerns ever.

ML: I don't have any safety concerns. I feel that we're well taken care of. I think that we have, like the passports and stuff for the doors, I feel like we're safe in the buildings. Because, you know, I myself would never let anyone in the building that I didn't know, and I know that the students here wouldn't. Safety has never been an issue for me, and I was here when, on April 16th, and, of course, you know, I was scared. I was scared for the students, I wasn't actually what you would call scared for myself. There has been some changes since then, and I think they were good changes. And I feel safe here. I've never been, I've never felt, that my life was in danger, ever.

BB: With the job itself, I know that you work with chemicals and things like that. Do you think that you have safety protection in that regard? Has there ever been a problem with that healthwise that you're concerned about?

ML: No, because we have our own procedures that we go through. That we know how if we have a spill, or anything like that. We're prepared, we have the spill kit. Of course, I already had my training in nursing. We've done a lot of that, and everything is disinfected every day. So, we have a lot, we do a lot of things to help protect the kids from getting sick or catching anything. Course, the flu and things, you can't really stop them from catching. I caught it myself. We do use, I mean, gloves, we use gloves for everything. I go through probably, maybe 25/30 pair gloves a day, because when I touch anything to clean it, I change gloves. And everything is disinfected every day. And if there is a blood spill, we're prepared for that. We have some things in our spill kit. We have the bio bags and things to clean it with, so we have just about anything. And we take training just like, every year. Every year, we take the same training, you know. In safety precautions, fire extinguishers, ladders. We have to take those in order, if we didn't take those, we wouldn't be able to work here. We're trained in a lot of things.

BB: And is that standard training for the job? Or is it training that Virginia Tech has decided is important?

ML: I think that Virginia Tech decided what training we need for the job. So, I think that they're the ones, because any time we need to have training, we have to sign a paper saying that, when we go in, that we're there. And if we're not there, we have to go back. They go back on your papers and check if you've had that training. If you haven't had that training, you have to go back and take it. I mean, it's a, you have to do training, or you don't work here.

BB: So, quick question. Do you think that something, I've noticed, I know you said that the housekeeper here before you was a male, but I've noticed that most of the housekeepers tend

to be women in my experience. So, do you think your gender affects your career here, or is that a false assumption on my part?

ML: I don't think it does. I think that, we have had, we do have, a lot of male housekeepers. We had one here, but I don't think he liked the idea with coworking with eight women. I don't think it had anything to do with gender, or, or, I think he just felt, maybe he didn't have a lot of things to talk about with us. But, Virginia Tech does have lots of male housekeepers who work with male housekeepers. But, we're just not, I guess a lot just don't apply, or maybe a lot just don't get interviewed in our area. But we have had them. I think though that the male housekeeper that was here before me was here for, like, six years. So, we do have them.

DVD Part 2:

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

ML: Important for people to know. Well, what I do here, I do for the students. Because, I think that Virginia Tech has a very good reputation to keep, and I think that the housekeepers that keep the dorms in very sterile and very clean condition is important. It's important to the students, and it's important to anyone else that visits the building. And uh, I just think that what, I do what I do for Virginia Tech. And, that mostly, my concern is for the students.

BB: Ok, where do you see yourself in five years? Ten years? How much longer do you see yourself working here?

ML: Actually, I can retire in two more years, but I don't see me doing that. I'm not a person that can sit home all the time, and I'm not a person that can sit still, so. I see me, if my health holds out, still being here in five to ten years.

BB: How long do most people end up working in this position?

ML: I am not, uh. A lot of them stay a long time. The lady that we had at East Campbell, she is, I'm not sure that, she can retire. She's been out for almost six months now, I think that definitely she is going to retire, she's 62. But, I know some that's working here that's in their seventies. As long as their health holds out, they can still do the work.

BB: Do most people stick with the job because they are like you, they want to be working here to interact with students, or is it a financial reason for people?

ML: I think a lot of them, it's financial. With their benefits that Tech offer. Like their insurance, it's really cheap here. And it's good insurance. And they give them life insurance. A lot of them have to have that. A lot come and go. We have some that come in, and they don't last.

Some of them don't last a week when they see all they have to do. But actually, after you get used to it, it's not that bad. A lot of them have never worked this kind of work, and they just don't like it.

BB: You were mentioning some of the benefits of working here, that Virginia Tech offers. What are some of the things you receive, and how does that impact your job?

ML: Ok, number one for me is the insurance, because it, they take it out of our check. I think mine runs about \$42 a month. And of course the life insurance helps. Comp days, I'm going to have to mention that, so they won't never take them away from us ever. If we work a holiday, we'll get two days pay for that day, and we'll get two days pay for that day. Whenever we need a day, or if we're not needed here for some reason, we have to let our supervisor know 24 hours in advance if we want to take one, use one of those days. If they build up, if you don't get sick and let them build up, you have a lot of days, if you have to use them, they're there. But for me, it's just being able to take a day off every once in awhile. And maybe just to rest, or for me, it's to go to North Carolina to visit my grandchildren.

BB: So, you said you have two teenage grandsons. And just one son?

ML: I have one son.

BB: Any daughters?

ML: Nuh uh.

BB: But one son.

ML: One son. He's an engineer at North American Trucks. I have my oldest grandson goes to NC State. He's been in college for six years. He wants to be a referee. And well, he's already a referee, but he wants to get to the ACC referee, that's his goal. And, the younger one is a basketball player. He started playing for the varsity team in North Carolina in ninth grade. And, right now, he just won four awards. He won All-District and three, number one in the tournament, and there was two more, I think honorable mention. So at being sixteen years old, and being that good, if he doesn't get hurt, I think he's going a long way. Because he's six foot five and wears a fourteen and a half shoe. He's a basketball player.

BB: Seems like it.

ML: And the other one, he loved basketball, he didn't go on with it because, he was just five foot eight. He said he'd rather referee. But the only downside is that he can't referee the games his brother plays in. They're the love of my life. My son and my two grandsons.

BB: Going back...

ML: And the students at Main Campbell. I can't forget them, can I?

BB: So you were talking about insurance and your comp days. Is there any other benefits you'd like to talk about?

ML: We get sick days. We get 64 hours. If I don't have it backwards, we have 32 hours personal, we get 16 hours community service, and holiday, of course holiday pay. We have, we've got access to comp time. A lot of the housekeepers, me too, including me, we love the comp time, because there's not many places that are going to give you a day off with pay. So, and I'm going to have to mention, how many students do we have in this building right now?

BB: Umm, I think there's between 100 and 125, there's 93/94 on the first two floors, and then there's more on the third...

ML: I think at one time it was 131, but I'm going to have to mention that I know everyone by their first name. It took me awhile, but when freshmen come in, course I already know the other ones. When the freshmen come in, I make it my goal to learn their names and things about them. Get to know them.

BB: So you know all the international students, grad students, and all of them?

ML: *nods*

BB: Is it different interacting with them than the community members? Because I know a lot of them, well, there's international students, then there's grad students, and there's non-traditional students. Is it different interacting with them?

ML: Well, it's, actually, it's not really different, but a lot of them up there don't have time. They're studying all the time. Some of them, I don't see maybe once to twice a week because they study hard. And some of them I do see every day. But, and first and second floor of course are my favorites because they're here longer and the third floor, most of them are just here one semester and then they're gone. About the time I get to know them, they're gone. And, I do have a tendency to shed a tear when one leaves, because I get to know them well.

And it well, even when they graduate, I've had them for awhile, and then they graduate. I'm ready to tear up, but it's hard to see them leave.

BB: Have you stayed in contact with any students that have graduated or left?

ML: Actually, a few of them have emailed me. One from Africa, he emailed and said he was doing well, and he's going to school up there now. And, another one from Finland emailed me and said he was doing fine. So, some of them do write to me. Yeah, it's nice when they do. But, to me, Main Campbell is family, and I just consider them my family.

BB: I think that's all the questions I have, but is there anything else that you'd like to share with me about the job, about life, or anything?

ML: Uh, just the fact that I just, I thought that when I first came here, 'Martha, can you do this?' And, then after awhile, I thought, you know, I'm really doing a lot better in my life right now. That I've got all these young people around me, and they're so full of life. Here I was debating about going back into nursing, which I know there's a lot more money in nursing, but to me, being here with the students and them being so full of life, and most of them so happy, that I guess it rubs off on me, and it makes my life. It makes my day to come in, and one of them will come up to me and say, "Oh, you know that test I had to take yesterday? I got an 'A' on it." And, I'll say, "Oh my gosh, congratulations, I'm so happy for you." And that comes from my heart. I am happy for them.

BB: I remember meeting you on my first day. I remember, you came, and you gave my parents a tour of the building. That was my first impression of you, and it's been a lasting impression.

ML: And I try, when they first move in, I do try to meet the parents when they come in. I make a point of introducing myself. Some of them are really concerned about leaving their babies here for the first time. A lot of the time, this is the first time these students have been away from home, and the parents are really concerned about leaving them, and I can understand that. And uh, I do try to make a point of meeting the parents. And telling them that they're going to be fine here. This is Tech, they're going to be fine. But, this is my family. This is my home. My home away from home.

BB: Do you ever regret your decision to leave nursing and come here? Have you ever been burdened...

ML: It's never crossed my mind to go back, because this job makes me happy.

BB: Has it ever been a financial struggle though, because you switched jobs, or have you been able to...?

ML: Not for me, because I've been able to. I have my own home and everything, so it's not really a struggle for me.

BB: Do you think you have an advantage over some people then because you're here because it's what you want to do as opposed...?

ML: I think I do, because I'm here because I want to be here, not because I have to be here. And I think that makes a lot of difference, even in your working environment. If you see someone come in the morning, and they're all down. 'Oh, this is another day.' I just smile and go on, because to me, it's not just another day, because I want to be here. And, yes, a lot of them do struggle financially, because a lot of them have to pay rent. And, they're not married, or they have been married and divorced. And a lot of bills to pay. And the pay's not that great here, but for me, the benefits outweigh the pay. But, you know, for a lot of them, it is just a job.

BB: Ok, is there anything else you wanted to share?

ML: Just that I love everyone in the building, they're my...well, I, I have a tendency around my grandchildren to say, 'Oh, that's one of my kids.' And the older one will say, MawMaw, those are not your kids, we're your grandkids. And I'll say, 'I didn't mean it that way, you know, you're my grandson, but they're still my kids. I consider the students my family. I see them every day, five times a week. And, I enjoy seeing them.' So, I'm not going to say, I'm going to work to see students that are there. I say, I'm going to work to see my kids today. And I don't consider myself special. I know a lot of the students do. I don't consider myself special, I'm just me. And this is the way I want to be. I don't want to work somewhere that I'm not happy. I mean, I want to work where that, I can talk to people. I can share in their, when they achieve something, I can share in it. And they, you know, most of them do share it with me, when they get a good grade, or they get engaged, or they get an internship, anything, you know. I'm happy for them. Very happy. And I want to always be there to be happy.

BB: Well, I think that's about all I have. Thank you so much for taking the time to do this.

ML: I'd do anything for you all, just ask.