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Interview with Kim Staiger

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OG: This is Ondine Geary, and I'm interviewing Kim Staiger. We're at the Department of Human Services, Knox County. It is November 5. Tell us your age and how long you've been in Mt. Vernon.

KS: I'm 41. Been in Mt. Vernon most of my life.

OG: How long have you been at the Department of Human Services?

KS: Working for the DHS, I've just been here since September 3, but I've actually worked in this building since May 1.

OG: How would you describe your job here?

KS: My title is a case manager, so eventually I will be accessing clients. Right now, I'm in job development and job search, teaching people how to find jobs.

OG: What do you think is the purpose of the job search class?

KS: Bring needed interviewing techniques to light. Some of our clients have not been out in the community to be able to do that and learn. So much has changed and what expectations are by the employers and stuff, so we're here to teach them new techniques.

OG: How have things changed, expectations of employers?

KS: I feel they expect more out of you now a days, and as far as your skills, your attitude.

OG: What kind of skills?

KS: People skills, attendance skills, being able to adapt. We go by the 3A's, or actually the employers usually. It's adaptability, attendance, attitude. And that's mainly what they look at. So we also try to change attitudes about working and how it's better to work than be on welfare.

OG: What kind of attitudes do you think people come in here with?

KS: Some of them have bad attitudes because they're required to be there. Some of them feel that they don't need the experience or don't need the training. They know how to get a job....

OG: So you try to change it in what way?

KS: We show tapes and stuff and just try to explain to them that it's so much better working than not working. Also, your kids, most likely, if the parents won't work, they won't work. A lot of the people that we have are generational, which means generation after generation, after generation on welfare. We want to try to break that cycle also. The attitude is that a lot of them don't want to be there. They get into the class, first couple days and find out that Mark and I aren't there to force them to be there, we're there to help, and then I think that brings them in,

keeps them coming back.

OG: Why do you think the attitude exists that working is not as good as not working?

KS: Again, being generational. They're parents didn't work, they're grandparents didn't work. Some of them are afraid. We'll have women in there who've been divorced or left their husbands and never had the experience, and they're afraid to get off the welfare system and work on their own. They need that crutch.

OG: What do you think the feeling of the outside community is toward welfare recipients?

KS: I think there are stereotypes. And the clients themselves even stated that they feel there are stereotypes, that if they're at a grocery line or see food stamps, they'll get a different look. I think people who don't know are scared. Or they're not informed, you know, it scares them. Not knowing what to expect, and stereotypes.

OG: Can you think of any specific stereotypes?

KS: They're lazy, they're dirty, they don't want to work, they'll steal from you.

OG: Why do you think that exists?

KS: I wouldn't have the slightest idea. I don't know. Just people's attitudes. Well, I got an answer for you: not knowing is why. They don't know. People make judgements so quick, just from looks, the first impression. People miss out on a lot when they do that.

OG: DO you think that the recipients feel bad about themselves?

KS: I think they're more embarrassed.

OG: DO you think at any point they start to believe those stereotypes about themselves?

KS: Some, yes. They're self-esteem starts to get low because of these stereotypes, and because of the way people treat them. Another thing we try to do is build up they're self esteem and stuff. Some of them have not had the experience, so they feel low about themselves.

OG: In what way do you try to build up their self-esteem?

KS: Telling them they are worth something, bringing out their skills, even if it's just people skills, getting along with people. Sharing life experiences, letting them share their life experiences with us.

OG: Do you feel like the stereotypes for men and women differ at all from the outside community?

KS: I don't think so. And that's sad, because some of the women are here because of their husbands leaving them and they have no choice.

OG: DO you feel like the community offers support in any way?

KS: Yes, I do. The people that Mark and I work with, we've been going out into the community to employers and stuff and explaining to them what we're trying to do. So when they can, yes, they can. There are some, I've been out talking to some employers, small businesses, and they feel they would like to be able to help, but they feel they can't pay them enough to get off welfare because they're small Mom and Pop, but they would like to be able to help. They can't.

OG: Are you asking them to create new positions?

KS: No.

OG: It's just the existing positions don't pay enough?

KS: Exactly.

OG: What kind of wages are they talking about?

KS: Minimum. But I've had them make a statement say, "But I can't pay them enough to get off of welfare."

OG: Do you feel like that's a big barrier?

KS: I think it's an excuse. Personally. I mean, these people, they'll have they're medical card, they're not just dropped once they get a job. They have a medical card for a year, they have other benefits we still provide them to support them until they get back on their feet. But for some of the smaller companies, I feel that it's just an excuse.

OG: Why would they not want to hire?

KS: Stereotypes. It's a shame, they miss out on a lot of god people, stereotyping.

OG: DO you have any ideas about how to overcome--

KS: Mark and I are trying that, getting out in the community and talking about our people and how great they are.

OG: Just educating?

KS: Yes, exactly....

OG: Specifically, what would you like the community to hear about welfare recipients?

KS: That they could be at that position at any time in their life. And they're just like you and me. They just need a little help here and there.

OG: What do you think that welfare recipients feel about their own status?

KS: Some of them are frustrated. Some of them are embarrassed. Some of them are generational, it doesn't bother them. A few of them feel they deserve it and that the government should take care of them. For the most part, they are embarrassed. And lack skills, some of them lack skills, and that's why we try to build them up in there.

OG: Are the skills that they lack job search skills or are they limited education?

KS: Some of it's just getting up in the morning, knowing to get up in the morning and doing what you have to do to get to work. Some of them are, yes, educational skills to work skills that they lack, but it's not that they can't learn either. But some of them, I think, get comfortable where they're at, and it's a life. It's a way of life for them. They don't want to change, they're afraid of change. It's just getting them back into to getting them up every morning to go to work and getting in the habit.

OG: You mentioned that some of the people you work with are generational. Of them people you work with, how many would you guess are generational?

KS: I'd say like 25%.

OG: Do you think that recipients try to hide that they are on welfare?

KS: Some do and some don't. Some aren't afraid to say it. I've noticed people in check out lines and stuff that feel so embarrassed, you know, I feel bad for them.

OG: DO you think that they identify with one another outside of the job search class? Are they aware of one another? Do they go to one another for help?

KS: Well, the one's that are friends, yes. In our Job Search class, they form a bond there also, and I've seen friendships form there, but I wouldn't--no.
(About the bonds formed in Job Search class) I think that it helps them knowing that there are other people who are going through what they are going through.

OG: What ways do they support each other other than giving job leads?

KS: I just think it's moral support. I can think of one class we had where the one girl just needed support from another woman as far what she was going through and how to handle it and stuff. And they formed a bond there, they're still friends. It's just like, hey, someone else is in the same boat I'm in.

OG: What do you think brings people to turn to welfare in the first place ?

KS: Needing money.

OG: Are there specific events in their life?

KS: Some can, like women. If their husband leaves them and they've never worked in their life, have no skills, and Need help right then and there.

OG: DO you think it's difficult for most people to get off welfare?

KS: I think it can be, yes....

One thing I like about this new welfare reform, they know their limit. It's a one time thing. We have the Work Experience Program which also will give them skills to get out there and be prepared and be ready. I think that's a good thing we offer for them.

I think if you can work you should be out there working.

OG: Has your idea of welfare recipients or of the problems that people on welfare encounter has that changed any since you came to work here?

KS: Oh yeah, definitely. I was a stereotype person, I stereotyped. My brother was on welfare and so are all three of his kids. I knew my brother could work, and he was so talented, but didn't want to. But coming here and working with these people--some of them just have so many barriers, and it's amazing. And I think if I had had those, I would go nuts. I wouldn't be able to handle them. It's just amazing some of the barriers that they have to go through. And a lot of them aren't their fault.

OG: How do you think you can eliminate some of the barriers?

KS: Well, we try doing that. Some of them are hard, some of the barriers we can't. But we provide ways to get around them, all different things, all different agencies that we can go through to get over these barriers. So we network with different agencies in the community....

As far as the community, I would like them to give our people a chance.

OG: What do you think about the level of support that's available, income replacement and services?

KS: Their main thing is communication. As far as the services, they're all there. You hear about people getting sanctioned because they didn't do something or whatever, but the main thing is that they did not communicate. The services are there. Again, you need to know who to ask.

OG: Do you think that there are specific things lacking from the services provided?

KS: I wouldn't say lacking, I would say that the time constraints sometimes aren't conducive. It's the government, you've got a lot of red tape, a lot of paper work. An example, someone needed to get their car fixed to go back to work, well, they have to go through all this paper work

and they couldn't take this job because of it. I would like to just go over there and say, hey this person needs this right now, let's get this done so we can go back to work. Everything there's, but the government and the red tape and the paper work and stuff.

OG: What do you think should be the purpose of welfare?

KS: Welfare should just be a band-aid and not a substitute for your family. We should just be here in the need of emergency. Get the emergency taken care of and get them back to work. Get them off the system. It should be a quick fix thing and not years after years after years.

I would just like more community awareness and involvement. They bitch about the welfare, well, do something about it, help us out, give them a job, trust them, have faith in them, give them the experience, give them a chance. The main thing is community awareness. Mt. Vernon being a small town, stereotypes are, you know.