

11-4-1998

## Interview with Libby Henderson

Libby Henderson

Jenny Owens

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### Recommended Citation

Henderson, Libby and Owens, Jenny, "Interview with Libby Henderson" (1998). *Interviews*. 27.  
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**Interview with Libby Henderson**  
**by Jenny Owens**  
**“Living Together” Transcript**  
**November 4, 1998**

J: What is your name, age, and how long have you lived here?

L: My name is Elizabeth Henderson. I am going to be 36 years old. I have lived here for 3 ½ months. I'm originally from the south side of Columbus, Ohio but I left when I was fifteen, finished my childhood out in Mississippi.

J: Will you tell me about your family and your marriage situation and children?

L: My family here?

J: Yes, your immediate family.

L: First of all, I come from a family of eight. There was five boys and three girls and I'm one of them and I only have one younger brother and one younger sister and everybody else is older. I married young. I quit highschool. I got a job and moved back to Ohio is what I did and that is where I met my first husband. We had 2 children who are now 17 and 14. We were together 6 years, we divorced. I met my second husband right here in Ohio and we lived in a little town called Appleton and he had 2 children and when we got married we had 2 more children and that was a girl and a boy that are 12 and 10 now and then me and him divorced after about 7 or 8 years of marriage and one of my highschool loves dropped into my life because he had just went through a divorce after being married for 10 years and him and I got together and we had little John who is going to be 4 this month and we have Lacy who is 16 months so I have six children altogether.

J: Will you tell me about your employment history and the experience of being unemployed and what are the barriers to being employed?

L: Well, when I was younger I started out working when I was like 15 and I used to work in the barns with horses and I learned early on about getting that paycheck, you know that was important. Well, then when I met Jimmy and Jimmy and I got married and had a couple of kids we had to make a choice on whether or not I was going to go back to work. And I did, I went to work at a plastic factory. I was, I worked myself half silly for those people, I worked my way into a position with them into quality control. I kept my job clearup and then they gave me maternity leave for Amber. I left and had Amber and then I went back to quality control at that same plastic factory in Memphis and then Jimmy and I moved back to Ohio and when I divorced Jimmy I decided to stay home with the kids for a while and then I met my second husband who was very against me working because of the kids so I stayed home. I babysat. I stayed home a lot. Sometimes we got in a bind and he would say “maybe you should get a job”. I'd get a job and it wouldn't last for two or three months and he'd want me home again. I got divorced from him and I started working two jobs so I could make it and I worked as a log slicer from 10:30 at night till 6:30 in the morning. I got off work from there, came home, with steel toed work boots and old blue jeans and a flannel on and took that stuff off, jumped in the shower, and put on high heels, hose and a dress, grabbed my kids got them ready for school, kissed the little ones goodbye, left the babysitter and was off to my day time job. I did that for about 4 months until I was down to about 98 pounds and the doctor told me I was killing myself. So then I moved home for a while to Mississippi with my parents. I was down there for about 6 months and I decided to come back to Ohio because the kids' dad being here and when I came back I got a good job, I

worked for Myers Loss Prevention. Long hours, sometimes not the type of schedule that a mother really wants but, you know, we adapted to it and got by with it and mostly I've tried to get babysitters that come into my home and I've been pretty lucky and fortunate with that up until I moved to Mt. Vernon this year because the roof got blown off our house and we ended up homeless and I had to call on the dads to say "hey, help me out with the kids until I get another place to live" and they did and I moved to Mt. Vernon because my ex-husband and I are going to do shared parenting which we're doing and it works out really well, so there is no child support or no arguments or anything like that. We have a better relationship because of it. It's easier on the kids to because they know now that if they got something come up and they don't want to go to dad's they know that he will say okay and if they don't want to mom's, i'm gonna say okay because I know that I can get them as much as I want. It's not like the court say "you get them every other weekend". We have a real easy schedule, like if he was to call me this evening and said "I need to, you know, can you take the kids" and we try to give each other 24 hours notice if we can't we're fine with it but if he called and said "can you take the kids" I would take them.

J: What do you see now as being the barriers to employment?

L: Barriers to me? Mostly what I ran into, my barriers seem to be, it used to be that I would get a job and the guys would quit paying child support, that doesn't seem to happen since its no longer an issue. The barriers that I have now is my transportation. I don't have the support system at home I think sometimes that I need because things start falling apart and the kids start failing in school and they blame me, "it's because you work, you know, and we can't do this, we can't do taht, you'r always tired or you know, or something to that affect" but my children ahve also learned there is a quality of life that they can have thats gonna be better if mom's out there working and they are at the ages now where they understand a little bit more so when they want that money to go skating then they kind of appreciate it when I do work.

J: Do you feel like it's also sometimes that if there is a job, maybe it's minimum wage and that's not going to cut it?

L: Right. I run into that a lot. I wouldn't refuse a minimum wage job depending on what type of work it was. Do tell people that if I would take a minimum wage job that I'm still looking because its not gonna cut it for me and my family. Another barrier I think a lot of single moms have is we get overwhelmed. You know, its like an overwhelming feeling. You start getting overwhelmed and its' like you try to keep your wheels turning and you can't and a lot of women they fall into depression and they find themselves not being the mom that they know that they can be and then that leads them to quit their jobs cause I've been there before where you know, if there was some typo, I don't know what to tell other mothers about the support system, because I find myself without one, so..

J: What would you say your economic history has been, even growing up, here, since you've had children?

L: We did fairly well growing up until my dad died of a kidney disease and my mom, that threw her into the workforce and she had to work nights, and we barely made it. I remember at a Christmas where the church ladies knitted us hats and my mom didn't have any money for us, and us older children we knew it but we had our little brother and sister so we were happy with whatever we got and we told my mom to just go buy for them and thats what we did. I remember the church delivering a turkey, you know I remember that kind of stuff, but my mom did give us a little bottle of perfume, me and my sister, she wrapped a five dollar bill around it, thats all she had, so I've told that story to my children because we've had our years where we didn't have

either, but as things went on, my mom remarried and things got better for us, you know when I was growing up it got better and then for me, I never struggled when I was younger and I think that was like when I started out being a mom and first married. Me and Jimmy never struggled, we seemed to have more tahn enough and I think that was in like the early 80s, around 84 or 85, we was doing really well and then jeff and I, we did struggle but I think its because we had all the children and since jeff and I's divorce I've always struggled, seems like i've always struggled one way or another and my two little one's dad, he had his own business, he made over \$197,000 his first year with it, but that ultimately, his own business threw him into being a workaholic and he wanted to live like closer to Columbus and be in Columbus and we argued about that and ultimately, him being, having more money and being in the postion that he was led us to a divorce, is what happened. You know, I don't know, I tell folks that, and I know that my life would have been eaiser had I stayed with john, but I wanted a dad for the kids, I wanted a husband at home, not someone that comes crawling home at 10 or 11 at night and can't even stay awake long enough to eat dinner because that was, you know, he never even made it to the ball games or nothing because he was too busy working.

J: Money is not everything.

L: Yea, and I'm not real material, some people are, I'm not. I think, I look at the little things. Like, I thank God everyday that I got six beautiful children, I thank God everyday that they're healthy and I don't stress over the little stuff anymore like I used to, I've learned that and I think that comes with age and experience because if you are a single mom and out there working and you come home everyday, we don't have no little good fairy that is going to clean up that mess, you know, and if you come home and you start stressing over that little mess, then thats, you know, you're going to start stressing over all the little stuff and that little stuff is not important. What's important is that you're making it and that you can keep your kids happy and that you can keep that love going.

J: How do you feel like you make end meet from day to day?

L: Ohhhh, I struggle, especially right now I struggle, I even have said "You know, I can't live on this, there's no way I can make it on this" I received a \$447 check last Saturday, and I have maybe \$14 in my checking after I paid the bills and went and did laundry and bought diapers and all the things we had to have here and you get to the point to where you're saying, you know, I catch myself telling the kids "don't waste toilet paper, now, mommy can't afford that and don't waste that toothpaste" and i'm behind them, where if i'm working, I don't worry quite too much about it, I still don't want em' wastin' nothing, but I don't start stressing over where it's going to come from cause you know you got that check thats gonna carry you through, where this way you just get one little lump sum and its gone, well, with me its gone by the time I pay rent and electric and a \$35 dollar phone bill wasn't much and my insurance, its gone.

J: Do you think being lower income, that you identify that as part of who you are. Maybe coming from an economic history where you have always struggled, that is just sort of part of you are, but maybe since you haven't always been that, do you see that, is there a difference now, do you recognize that?

L: I don't, personally, I don't see myself as being any different because I don't think I would be any different if I went out and won the lottery tomorrow, I might be a little bit more bubbly and happier or something, of course anybody would, and I would probably give it away, uh yeah, help the other people, but uh, I don't see myself any different but I do feel that other people view me as different if like, for instance, I just went and checked on getting a house because I really need a

washer and dryer and I want a house, I don't like living in this apartment and as soon as they found out where I lived, oh, you know that's, that started it right away.

J: What do you think is the community's view of maybe people, or women on public assistance, or is there a view, would you say that the community has stereotypes?

L: Yea, well, i've heard a lot of different sides of it as a matter of fact, well, between after my second divorce and I was on public assistance I worked with a lot of men when I went back to work and um, they had women that they had left or had kids with or divorced from and their women were on public assistance, they put em' down really terrible for it, and I was, i've heard that view, i've gotten uh, different views from different people, I know a lot of people think taht people that are on assistance are, uh, they don't want to work, they are lazy, you know they stereotype them in a lot of different ways,um, they're stupid, I mean i've heard so many different things and uh, i'd be the one to stand up and say, look, i'm on public assistance or i've been on public assistance and i'm not stupid and i'm not lazy, you know, it's something taht somewhere down through your life you may end up being there and no, I don't think anyone is there by choice, unless it's somebody who is there to use the system.

J: Do you feel like there are a lot of people there to use the system?

L: Yea, I think that there are, i've seen a lot of people use the system, you know, I seen a lady who was on it for over 11 years and she had bingo money, but was bumming from everybody else and gettin' her welfare check but she wasn't never applying to where it should have been applied, you know, but actually I think she lived better than we did, you know because of her bingo money, she was always winning, those type of people, you can tell if someone is using the system.

J: Do you think that women are seen more in that role of welfare recipients than men are?

L: Yes. I believe it is because when women get divorced or even if they have never been married, what ultimately happens is that they have children, they get left with the children and the men and don't live up to their end, and I know that first hand because it happened to me and uh, a woman can't go out and make the same wages that a man can and 9 times out of 10 that woman hasn't had the career because she's been busy having the kids and the man has always had the career so when the relationship ends, what happens is the men are still making that same amount of money, their life does not change, but the woman and the kids, they've lost that income and then he, most men turn their back on it, at least for a period of time, i've seen it a lot.

J: Do you think that happens in many of the cases, the majority of them - like maybe the reason don't jump back into supporting the family is because they have never been put in that position. When you were younger did you feel like when you got married for the first time, did you feel like you would work or were you sort of expected not to work?

L: No, actually I wanted to work, I enjoyed working, what I really wanted to do was go to college, but it never happened, but I did, I even worked at the same company my husband did for a while, I um, I always, I enjoyed working, you know, I wanted things in life, and I wanted to be able to give my kids things, so even back then I think it took two people to work.

J: What has it been like to try to get a job with children?

L: It's rough, it's um, hard because you have to keep, you have to struggle in your mind because as a mother you have that built in instinct where your kids have got to come first, well,when you go to apply for a job, mostly they want the job to come first, and a lot of times if you tell them you got children they are like "oh, are they in school," that's the first question they will ask you, are they in school, because if they are in school it's not like the kids are going to be a threat to

your job, I think they are more able to hire you that way, if you say no, i've got two little ones, they're like, well, what would happen if they got sick and you couldn't come to work, I mean they really put you on the spot. They will use your kids, it's almost like they take the kids and use them against you.

J: Is that legal?

L: It's not supposed to be legal, but there's nothing really that anybody can do about it because it does not fall under, if , you know, if a company, if you tried say anything and say, well, they discriminated against me, you'd have a hard time proving it because they would counter and say well we needed to know how dependaable this person could be. And a lot of times they won't come right out and tell you that's not why you didn't get the job, but you'll leave there knowing that's why you did not get the job.

J: Do you feel that in Knox County that there is a community of people of lower income, maybe a subgroup?

L: Yea, I think that there's a group, just right here where I live, there are a lot of, number one you have to have children when you move in here, it 's a requirement that you have to have children in order to be able to live here. Most of the people that live here are low income, these are low income apartments based on your income, um, they move in here, most of them are single mothers and almost all of them have anywhere from 2-4 kids, almost all of them.

J: Do you think a lot of them are on public assistance?

L: Yes, I know personally that there is quite a few that are on public assistance and some of them jumped off when they got to the point to where the state said, ok now you're at this phase and you have to go and work for us, a lot of them jumped off, you know, and some of them are trying to babysit, some of em' have found jobs, some of em' are, maybe they got a live in guy that their apartment manager don't know about, you know, I don't know how they are doing it.

J: Do you feel like you spend a lot of time or more time with those people?

L: Um, I kind of, well, because I know em' and I live here and i've gotten to know them, I think socially I probably do because those are the neighbors I see everyrday and I really don't go anywhere, so yeah, I would say yes.

J: Do you feel like employees or employers treat you any differently?

L: Yes I do, I had a lady tell me that I was pathetic, because she knew that I was on public assistance and that I was sent there to work and I didn't have the necessary skills for that type job, but I got sent there anyways and she tol me I was pathetic and I can take constructive criticism anytime anybody gives it to me, and I told her that I didn't think that pathetic was the right word and I just smiled at her, you know, I just blew it off, not gonna let people like that get the better of me because she don't know, you know she don't know, she's never been here, who knows her husband might get killed she might end up having to go to public assistance, she may not have all that income, you know that's the way I look at it , and I think that the people that judge everybody on public assistance are the ones that have never had to use it.

J: Do you feel like you ever try to hide your economic status from anyone?

L: Oh yeah, yeah I have, I met a wrongful death attorney uh, back in August, he lives in a nice neighborhood in apple valley and um, I met him through a friend of mine and I didn't want him to know where I live, and I didn't want him to feel kind of... because this guy's got a couple of corvetts in his driveway and he's got lots of money and applevalley just like a summer home for him, he's got another house, a couple of other houses, and he's put his kids through college, you know, he's got that upper standing and I didn't that, I felt like he probably wouldn't look my

direction if he knew I was low income, but then after I went out with him a couple of times, I found out that um, that just because he had all that money he wasn't anything like that, you know he accepted, yeah, I let him bring me home, you know, let him see where I live, but, yeah, that's something that I started out doing till I got to kind of know him cause I didn't want him to think - oh- because of my situation I didn't want him to you know think differently.

J: I've heard of some people not going to certain grocery stores if they are using food stamps, they won't go in Mt. Vernon, they will go to Newark or they will go somewhere further away.

L: Well, I was employed at Myers and I still got food stamps even though I was working, I got that supplement to go along with my paycheck and I went and used mine at the Myers store that I worked at because it was kind of like, they're going to wonder you know, here I am getting a paycheck from them, you know, my job wasn't um the bottom, my job was kind of like up there cause I was a loss prevention officer, but still I didn't make enough money with all the kids I had so they gave me a supplement, but I would not use that at the Myers store where worked. I was afraid of being embarrassed.

J: Did you run into a lot of people who used food stamps?

L: Yea, I've seen a lot.

J: Did you feel like they were ashamed to be using them?

L: No, you know today I go out and use them, but um, i'm not ashamed of it, but I have had people stand in line behind me while i'm trying to count em' out, you know they get impatient and some of them get down right nasty with you and you are treated inferior?

J: Have you had cashiers who treat you inferior?

L: Oh yeah, yeah, couple of different times I have, but there have been, for the most part, most of the cashiers are pretty nice because they probably have a lot of people who come through that line that use food stamps.

J: One person we talked to said that since Mt. Vernon is such a blue-collar hard working town that people on public assistance are looked down upon just because of that, they sort of feel like if they can work, and do you feel like you get that sort of air about the community?

L: Um, I know that most of the people in Mt. Vernon believe that way, I mean from just knowin' some of them and my ex and his wife being here in talking to them and I know that Mt. Vernon, a lot of the people, especially the people in their 30s they tend to be real materialistic, so therefore they want that \$400 truck sittin' in their driveway that they have to make payments on so they believe and I know that some of them spend more time working on Saturdays than they can spend at home with their kids, um, they complain to me about not being able to stay home with their kids, but I think that um, there are a lot of people in Mt. Vernon, like with Opportunity Knox that, you know there is a whole other side and they see it, so they know it and they are there to help people rise and overcome it and I think that they are doing a fantastic job, i've met more wonderful people in Mt. Vernon than i've met anywhere in my life. And I have been quite a few places and lived quite a few places, but, um, Mt. Vernon is the first community that i've ever come into where just can't believe all these wonderful people and they seem to all care and they are just more caring and wonderful than any place i've ever been. I lived in Johnstown and most of the people that, you know, were there in Johnstown most of em' you either fell in one category or the other, you was either a snob or you was a poor person and you hung out with the poor folks, there was no really, integration or whatever.

J: And you don't really feel that here, you don't feel that the community as a whole sort of snubs you?

L: No, I don't feel that at all, if anything, that I feel, I feel other people's support, you know, I've had people that I don't even know come up to me and say we've heard you're looking for a job and you can go here and there and they're out networking for me and I just met em', you know, I had one lady offer for me to have me come over and help her clean out her closet.

J: I guess I didn't expect it as much, and some of the things we've heard from other people are not as encouraging or as enthusiastic.

L: Right, and I think of uh, after I got her and started meeting people, I was thinking "wow, why couldn't I have found Mt. Vernon years ago when I was struggling over there in Lincoln county." Lincoln County never did anything for me, never.

J: Do you feel that Mt. Vernon v. Columbus, that is easier or harder to be low income in which one?

L: I think it would be easier to be low income in Columbus for the simple fact that there are so many low income people, but at the same time, I think that the reason why I find harder to stay low income in Mt. Vernon is because the people here make you not want to be, you know they give you, I mean its not in a bad way, it's more in a inspirational, we care about you, we're gonna help you. See, when I was in Lincoln county, nobody helped me with a resume, nobody helped me with job links, nobody talked about helping me with my car, Lincoln county didn't care, I mean they would right you a check, they'd do that and give you emergency assistance and help you with things like that, but I mean, nobody, I didn't feel that anybody in Lincoln county ever went out of their way to help me or help solve the problems that I had, where Knox was just, I was shocked, you know.

J: Do you feel like it's easier to blend in in Columbus more than you do here, because the community wouldn't probably take as much notice if you were in Columbus?

L: I think that's true, I think that if I was in Columbus I'd blend in easier just for the simple fact that you don't see too many people driving a car like mine in Mt. Vernon but in Columbus they're everywhere.

J: How do you feel like the job search classes help that? Do you think it was a good experience?

L: I think that they helped me a lot, I just wish that I would have went in there with half of what I know so I could have took more advantage of it, because I didn't really find out, you know, that my kids could be in daycare and I could take advantage of that until like the very last week of class, I didn't find out that they would actually help you, you know you could come in anytime with you're cover letter and stuff, part of the reason why I didn't find out though is because I missed a few days, you know, so I didn't get to take full advantage of it, but I'm glad I went and I had just done my GED in September and then started that class immediately on the first of October so I was on the right path anyways, but they kind of boost me up to where I really feel like I can't go out and do anything and if there's a job out there, I can get it. So, I really feel like it's been good.

J: Do you feel like being in an area like this v. Columbus that you are not just a number? That you have received maybe more attention and help than you would have if you were going through the public assistance program in Columbus?

L: Yea, I think so, cause I'm sure in Franklin county, it's probably overwhelming, and I'm sure that they probably don't have the staff to work one-on-one like you know, Opportunity Knox could here with the job search class and everything just because we has just the right number where they could, you know for time with each one of us.

J: That seems like the sort of image they try to present.



L: Yea, see I went through a job search class in Lincoln and they didn't do any of that. They just gave us a schedule and said this is what you're going to do, you go out and put applications in for 30 days and if you don't have a job in 30 days you go to work for us, there was no job search class, no daycare, they tell you that you get daycare but they wouldn't help channel you to it, they wouldn't tell you how to go about it.

J: Well, do you have any questions for me, or anything that I haven't hit on?

L: Um, not anything I can think of, I can tell you this- this one thing- when I was growing up, I remember most of our neighbors, um, we grew up in a neighborhood where it was a mixed neighborhood and most of the neighbors that I grew up with, they all worked, even when I was a kid, both parents usually worked, but you didn't see divorce and single families as much as you do today.

J: Do you think that most of the people that you see on public assistance or struggling are women with children?

L: Uh-huh, yea, I think a lot of it is because people just don't, they don't stay together anymore for what they should, I don't feel like you should marry someone unless you're committing to it and I don't think that people really enter into marriage anymore with the right way of thinking, I don't see too many people entering into marriage anymore, I mean I see people having children but not necessarily getting married.

J: Anything else that you want to add?

L: I think that what you guys are doing is great, and I hope it really works out.

J: I have one more question, do you see that there is much diversity in Knox County?

L: No, and I know that we just had a Mexican family just move in here and um, most of the neighbors here welcomed them and I seen that tonight, everyone was like "do you need me to move my car so you can get closer to your apartment"- you know I don't see that they are going to be discriminated against but that is something else that I see with low income people is that they don't tend to discriminate with others.

J: Another group, I think it was the Hispanic group, they were saying that they didn't feel like they had been discriminated against on the basis that they were Hispanic but they felt that they had been more discriminated against because of class level, that they were lower income.

L: Yea, I see that too, I can see that happening.

J: Yea, that is one of the reasons we are doing this project, because people don't know that there is an African - American community and how long they have been here.

L: Well, in Johnstown, you know, there were African -Americans that moved into Johnstown and they were in the same class with most of the people in Johnstown, they were up there with the snobs, but, um, I don't think they got treated any different, but I think if a poor family moved in there they would get treated different, because we seen them move in and leave, they never stayed and I think it was because they were low income that the upperclass picked on them and put them down, but they didn't do it with the upperclass.

