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Jenny Owens
Interview with Mark McClintok
Mount Vernon Department of Human Services
November 3, 1998

J: Where are you originally from, how long have you lived in Mt. Vernon and how long have you worked at the Dept. Of Human Services here?

M: I've been at the Opportunity Knox program for about 6 months now, I've lived in Mt. Vernon for about 4 months and I'm originally from Wooster, Ohio and I've worked in the field of job placement for over 10 years. Mostly in Franklin County and more recently in Mt. Vernon.

J: What is your impression of how extensive poverty is in Knox County?

M: I think you get a pretty diverse picture of poverty in Knox County, it's not a urban type of poverty, but the different levels I've worked with folks basically living out of their cars to other people that were basically were just, just needed help with bills and things like that, so its fairly diverse I would say.

J: How would you say a female welfare recipient views herself:

M: It's really hard to answer that question in a short period of time, but some of the perceptions I would at least throw out would be I think in some cases the recipient may have felt very dependent on a relationship that may be ending or may have been terminated and now has filled that gap with the Dept. Of Human Services and a dependency there without really looking at all the potential they have or the transferable skills they have or how to market those skills. I think probably a majority of the women that I work with have just not looked at their own pattern or process of career development, maybe as much as the males have.

J: Do you think that women face more barriers in the community or how do you feel about whether or not the community has stereotypes about women or welfare recipients in general?

M: I think the community does have stereotypes about welfare recipients, and women welfare recipients, and I think that women do face a lot of barriers some of them are just because of their own thinking about the process, I think inroads are being made, I think there is more communication and more information going on and there is more community resources that are slowly being tapped, but we are nowhere close to fulfilling our potential. The best example I can give is that I know that a majority of this community still feels that the Opportunity Knox program is exclusively for welfare recipients and they feel that our welfare recipients are mostly unmarried women which is not true. Opportunity Knox is a program that any resident of Knox County can be involved in and I haven't done a breakdown of, recently of our services by gender, but I can safely say that there aren't a dominating number of women that are served by our system more than any other particular group.

J: How do you see women making ends meet from day to day, versus men?

M: I think that there are services here at Knox County that can help them if they are the custodial parent, I think there are also community resources such as Interchurch, I think they should be plugged because I think they do a wonderful job, I think there are women that also are able to, because of their situation, generate under the table money such as doing private housekeeping and things like that, I think that there are also situations where a live-in companions take place just to help the family keep going financially sometimes women are faced with many choices, none of them particularly desirable and it's pretty difficult. I do feel that some of the community resources that we have our being used more and more, I see progress in that area such

as the Freedom Center, such as support groups, such as New Directions, I think women are a little bit more free, feel more free to come out of their shells and open up about their situation and not just keep it to themselves, finding that there are other women that are in a similar situation, sometimes in class I think it helps the bond, it helps the networking, they really feed off other success.

J: Do you think that more so than men, do you think women are more willing to open up?

M: I do, there just seems to be, maybe its because there are other women in the class that they feel comfortable with, but they somehow vocalize some of their concerns out in the open, publicly, maybe more than men who keep things silently or either give me information privately or informally that they don't want stated in class.

J: What is your image of a welfare recipient, what brings them here and what keeps them here?

M: My image of a welfare recipient, um, would be somebody that is just run into some financial difficulties in supporting the family and they've come here because they're not on track with their career plan or generating enough money to keep the family in tact, I think most of the people that are here would be tremendously aided if they had financial stability, a regular paycheck, it would reduce stress, they would be able to provide for their families a little bit better, so I think that reason that people are here is because they haven't probably devised a plan for taking care of their families, it may be due to a desintegrating relationship or a relationship that's ended, some of the women that come were not expected to be the breadwinners, were not put in that situation and now all of a sudden are so they need us and part of your question was what keeps them here, well, I'd probably give pretty the same answer for the males to. I think what would keep them on the system is just the pressure, the fear of rejection, the anxiety, the fear of making a change, the loss of self-esteem thinking they cannot market themselves, there is no job for them, no one will hire them, they have no real options, they've faced so much rejection that they need to be regenerated.

J: We asked Melissa this question about whether or not you sort of see people who have taken their role of a welfare recipient and have come to identify themselves as that?

M: I won't say it doesn't a lot, I do think it happens some, it's the thinking, and that is one thing I try to address, I try to create a positive atmosphere in which people will come in here and open up a little bit, but I do try to mess with thinking, I do try to challenge their thinking which may include their perceptions of themselves and how they fit into the world of work, so, I do feel that some of the recipients are like that.

J: How do you feel about people who cycle back onto welfare once they get a job?

M: How do I feel about people, (laughing)... There's, um, that happens and we're starting to address that more and more to, that it's not just a job that you're looking for but a good job and the financial stability and let's talk about some of the reasons this job didn't work and things like that and I'm trying to take off pressure on them from getting a job forcing them into a job during class because of pressure, peer or otherwise, and so they will look at the things carefully that they need to consider before they get into employment. Um, a job for two weeks before it blows up really doesn't, it may generate a paycheck, but you take two steps backwards in the loss of self-esteem, because, well there's just another that blew up on me, I can't do that, so, we're trying to talk things through to them, it has been a problem, it will continue to be a problem, but we will continue to address it.

J: Do you feel like there is much of a community or a community at all that exists among poorer people, that they sort of support each other or considers themselves a sub-group of the

community?

M: I really do, it's interesting but I know that in most of the classes i've found out that many of the people know each other even were related to each other, or I was the one in the class that was the least knowledgeable about who everyone was and everything like that, so I think there is kind of a quiet bond, maybe, I don't mean a bond in which they have meetings or go over to each other's houses, but a general knowledge about people and their situations and the problems that they are facing and that bond is probably further developed in class because the personal stories come out a little bit, so people can relate and identify with the situation, so I think there is kind of a really subtle, or really quiet bond almost a sub-community of the poor that exists.

J: Do you think that the community at large gives them much support or that they would just rather not deal with them, just sort of look at them negatively and that they are lazy and that they don't have jobs and they're not really worth their time?

M: Probably more of the latter that you have mentioned. There are certainly groups and individuals and employers that are not like that, but I think that as a general rule, when I mark the program I try to disassociate the program with terms like welfare and public assistance because i've run into some stereotyping there and I have encouraged the people that when they go out and apply for jobs their welfare status or their status with this program should not become an issue. So, I think there is some general stereotyping, feeling that people in this day and age, no one should be on public assistance, there's jobs for everyone, look at the paper, there's two pages everyday just here in Mt. Vernon, everyone should have a job this kind of thing, I think there is some feeling like that, that generally can be changed when people realize that all of us aren't too far from that set of circumstances and it could be anyone of us walking in those shoes and sometimes employers and people in the community just have a generally great experience with one of our folks and that helps overcome the attitude to but I believe it is a slow process and I will, I do feel that it will take a number of years for people to realize that Opportunity Knox is about jobs and growth and economic opportunity for everyone.

J: What do you think it might take for the community to realize that and offer that support?

M: More people going through our program, subtly or loudly and more success within the community, um, it's gonna take a number of years, i'd like for people to, when they see me, just think of Opportunity Knox and think of people that may have potential and skills that they could use and I'd like for people when they go out in the community to associate themselves with the phrase Opportunity Knox and immediately leave the community will know, here's a good person, here is a good person with skills, here is a good person that is taking a job search class refining their job search class techniques. I just think more of what we're doing, we're marketing the program a little bit better, we're putting ads in the newspaper and trying to draw people in, we've developed the community resource room where it's used everyday morning and afternoon to some extent, and as we make everybody that uses the facilities kind of a satisfied customer they will go out in the community and talk and eventually slowly we'll change the image.

J: Do you think that people sort of try to hide their identity, try to hide what's going on here, that they are on public assistance?

M: I think they did at first, when people came in here I think they identified themselves on public assistance and I think they felt everybody else did, so i've tried to convince them now that that is not the way I market the program, that is not how they should market the program, I tell them I don't know whether they are on public assistance, whether they have been ordered in here as part of child support enforcement or whether they are a curious job seeker or underemployed, it

doesn't matter to me and the more I hound on that, I think that they will be, they will feel more comfortable in associating with the name Opportunity Knox, again, it's going to take a while to change that image, but we've started the process. I know I always show a film called "Why work" and I know depending on the classes that some classes have really taken, some individuals have really taken an offense to that which to me shows more and more they don't associate with being labeled or stereotyped on public assistance, if it reaches the point where I show that film and every class and every person is outraged, in a way, I may be achieving a goal that I have been working at.

J: Do you think that they try to hide it in the community, from other community members?

M: Yes, I do, I think that people are embarrassed about going over asking for bread and things like that, I've heard comments like that. I feel that when you go in and use food stamps that people feel that they are being judged and somebody's looking over their shoulder, rolling their eyes, or little body language, nuances that don't make you feel very comfortable and so I do feel that they would tend to hide that.

J: How do you feel employers tend to act towards welfare recipients:

M: Again diverse, we have some employers, let me answer this very candidly, some employers do not realize that we're working with probably, mostly public assistance folks because of the way i've marketed it and they are thrilled and delighted and totally pleased with our folks, I brought an employer in here who did some mock interviewing and she went out of her absolutely raving about our people and employed 2 or 3 or 4 of them, we were very happy about that. Other employers are, know exactly all the ends and outs and are supportive, they feel there's some value there, they're really committed to the program for the right reason and they can handle the truth. There are other employers that their not probably going to touch us or deal with our kind of people and so on, not that they make public issues about that, but there are subtle ways that you can deal with an organization like ours, no return phone calls, no communication, no applicants ever being taken seriously, I think you get the gamet, and we don't have to have every employer here in Mt. Vernon, I think if we get a good portion of them,they'll see that, employers will see you can't exclude any group, that is not the way to build a team and that's not the way to build an excellent organization, so some organizations are just slower to respond to good hiring practices than others.

J: Do you think it's pretty even across the board or do you think you sort of get more snubbed more often than not?

M: I think we probably get, I won't say more snubbed, but we probably get more lack of enthusiasm because they haven't had a success story yet, we haven't broken through, when we're able to break through there will be a large number of the employers here in Mt. Vernon that will, I think, have a different tune.

J: What do you think you're relationship, or the administration's relationship with the recipients is, how do you think that works?

M. I think generally, do I use the term administrations, I think a lot of recipients come here thinking that this is like the IRS, words like sanction and all of this and I have to be here and all this, they come in with kind of a negative outlook and I don't believe that that is their attitude toward me, I've tried to take steps to create a very consumer friendly approach with them because I just don't think I get anywhere with them unless they see me as a positive force, I think if they see me, me, since i'm working with them daily, as a positive force I have the opportunity to convince them of something, now if they lump me with every problem they've ever had with

human services that would be a problem, now we do try to dispell some of those negative myths, we bring in a representative of children's services, we bring in a representative of child enforcement, you might raise your eyebrows a little bit and think why would you bring in those controversial people that may have had already negative experiences with them, I try to bring them in to put a human face on it, to show them that they have limitations and to answer individual questions and I think when they can see the organization cannot always serve their needs well, but we can provide good customer service, I really think that is all they want.

J: I was wondering, in general, what you felt were the feelings the welfare recipient got from the welfare system, you know, if they are made to feel really negative?

M: I think because some of our folks have had negative experiences with social service agencies, or maybe in particular with the department of human services that we're easily labelled we're easily blackballed and they may come in with a negative attitude simply because they have to be here to comply with public assistance, there are requirements, or child enforcements, so they are coming in with that attitude, so it takes us a while maybe to turn it around, and I hope to turn it around not only toward me personally and the jobs but by bringing in the other organizations maybe they can see that well, gee, the child enforcement services isn't so bad, they're just doing their job, or I asked them this question and they got back to me, and blah, blah, blah- so, it's again an image changing process, because you are dealing with kids and people's personal lives and little things, I know that some of my co-workers have been out in the community and sometimes they are asked things that are work related in the grocery store "gee, why were my benefits lowered this month" and things like that they can't answer but they still have to provide the person with the dignity with some sort of response, you know, "can you give me a call on Monday" that kind of thing so its, just, I guess because we are dealing with money and people's lives and kids that there is so much potential for people to be, those are pretty sensitive topics.

J: The last question I will ask you is, I was wondering, do you think being a poor person in Mt. Vernon, Knox County, is a lot harder, a lot easier or sort of the same as maybe being in the same position in Columbus?

M: Well, that is interesting that you would ask me that because I've spent 12 years there working with a lot of folks, if I were going to opt to be a poor person in Franklin county or Knox county I would pick Knox county because I do think that you're not quite lost in the numbers, I do think that there are maybe not as community resources but I think the ones that are here are trying to maybe give a little bit more individual service, this is a small town and you know accountability is a two way process, when I go out to the grocery store or a restaurant or the gas station or whatever, I don't want people upset with me because of the way I've treated them, I want to have that long term relationship and I feel in Franklin County, oh there are just so many people that are numbers that are lost, you see them and they're gone, you never see them again, there is no follow up, there has almost been no way for you to express human concern on a long term basis, I see our folks now, our graduates, that's the word I use, I see them all the time and I want to see them and it's positive, they'll come up, shake your hand, make a snide remark or something, or say they're sneaking out early or something, and that's good and if somebody comes back that has a problem, their job blows up, I've told them, I'm the first or second you should call, let me know, this is an ongoing thing so I'd rather be poor here in Knox county.

J: In terms of the community's response, being able to blend in and that sort of thing, do you think it is harder in Knox county?

M: Yes, that is part of it too, as they say everybody knows each other and you don't get away

with too much here in Knox County that either a neighbor or friend or a relative or a co-worker or somebody isn't going to find out about so that is a double edge sword because people find out about it but I think that because they may know you a little bit more and you have a relationship I think that you get better service from the organizations if, I can't be a bureaucrat here in Knox County, I could have been a bureaucrat in Franklin County, I could've treated people in a certain manner knowing that i'm not going to see them again, they're lost, they're gone. In Knox county I treat people in a poor manner and I may be walking across the street to my car and they may be waiting with a comment for me, so I think the smallness, you're right the smallness actually helps you get better service, less room to fall in the cracks, i'd rather send my school to a little smaller school than a larger one for that same reason.

J: Do you have anything to ask me or anything you feel I haven't touched on?

M: The only last thing I would say that this is my absolute dream job. I could not design it any better, I don't think everybody in the state knows it yet, we're always trying to find ways to make it better...The people in Mt. Vernon are just great, i'm just honored to have the opportunity to work with them.

End tape