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Interview with Melissa Pankuch

Melissa Pankuch

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OG: This is Ondine Geary and Jenny Owens. We're interviewing Melissa Pankuch at the Department of Human Services, 117 East High Street on the third floor, Mt. Vernon. It's October 27, 1998. Just to begin with, if you'd just tell us your age and a little bit about your family history, how long you've been in Mt. Vernon....

MP: I'm 25. I've been in Mt. Vernon since '81. Before that, I lived in Cleveland. I actually gone back to Cleveland for a year, 'bout a year and a half ago now. Came back to Mt. Vernon because it's a small town. Got a daughter. Feel safer with her being here instead of the city.

OG: And I guess if you'd talk a little about what we were just talking about your daughter and your family situation.

MP: Yeah, it's just me and my daughter. Two weeks before my fifteenth birthday, I was raped. Got pregnant with my daughter. She is wonderful. I am very thankful that I have her. I was married for a little while. Found out that my husband liked men, and he disappeared. So right now, I'm struggling to get a divorce. And I guess that's about the situation I am in now. I've been with my boyfriend now for three years. He and I were actually first loves in high school, and we got back together about three years ago now, and still going strong. Still have a great relationship. We've had one fight in the last three years. We have a great relationship.

OG: How old were you when you got married?

MP: When I got married I was 18. The reason I'd gotten married was I came from a very abusive family life. My father was very abusive. He works for the government. He thinks he's all powerful, has a real ego problem and took it out on us kids, and basically, I got married to get out of that situation. I don't think I ever was really in love with my husband. I mean, I loved him as a person, but I don't think I was ever actually in love with him. It was an escape for me.

OG: Up, growing up, your father worked for the government?

MP: He just...well, he started working for the government back in '81. Before that, he couldn't hold a job. He refused to work. My mother supported us waitressing. She made really good money doing it, and she supported us because my father refused to work so that left us at home with my father all day long.

OG: So what was your economic situation like growing up?

MP: Growing up I'd say we were probably lower middle class. Made the best of what we had. Spent a lot of time with my great grandmother and great grand father and my aunt lived with them. I spent a lot of time with them. They were like my immediate family. Every vacation I had, every spare time I had, I was there. And they spoiled me. So , I did get that. But my family life in general was lower middle class. We did struggle until Dad got this job with the government and decided he liked it and decided to stay with it. But we did struggle a lot. We bounced around, we moved around a lot. We moved around in Cleveland at least three or four times. Then we moved to Medina. We moved there twice. Then we came to Mt. Vernon, and

we started out in the country and ended up in the city. But then, life kinda stabilized. Things started going good. Dad was still an ass, but we were doing alright. I found other ways to deal with things. I played softball a lot, was very active. Didn't really have any really close friends because I didn't really trust anybody because of the situation I was coming from. But I did have a lot of people that I did hang around with because I've always been an outgoing person. Anytime I left the house I left the abusiveness behind me and found ways to deal with life in general. Growing up and the older I got, becoming a teenager, I had actually just stopped, you know, spending as less time at home as I possibly could. When I was 16, I moved in with my grandfather to get away from my parents, but then he passed away after a year. So, had to go back to mom and dad.

OG: When you were bouncing back and forth and having economic struggles, did your mother mostly take responsibility for that?

MP: Yeah, my mom supported us, through and through. My mom was our main financial means. She gave us what we had. And even though I have sour feelings for her, I think that that was a noble thing, that she took the weight, especially in the '70s, I mean. You know, it was the '60s and the 70's the times that the women were just getting started, just saying "Hey, we have rights too." And my mom supported all of us. And there was 4 of us at the time. And then my brother came along, and then there was 5 of us. And by the time my sister, my youngest sister, came along, Dad was already working for the government and he'd stopped being as abusive. He wasn't as bad, but he still lashed out at me. I was his favorite. I was his favorite. Only because I always was there to protect my mom, to protect my brother. Now he's not really...when my brother was little, I... 'cause he never really, uh,....he was pretty abusive towards me and my sister, but my sister was his favorite so it wasn't ever really that bad. I watched my mom have 6 miscarriages because of him. And I had started, anytime he started in on my mom, I had gone to aggravate him enough to divert his attention from mom to me. And when my brother was young, I started doing the same thing because, I would watch my dad beat on him, I'd watch him throw him across the room. So I would do everything I could to divert his attention from my brother to me. By the time my sister was born 6 years later he was still abusive but, I don't know, I guess having that 4th child, I don't know, it did something to him, because he's not as bad now. He does go on his rampages every once in a while, but it's nothing serious anymore. I mean, it used to be a daily thing; now it's once every 6 months. And it's still bad, it's still...nobody should have to go through that. But, it's quite an improvement.

OG: So you found support or an outlet through sports and things?

MP: Yeah, Up, well, softball was really the only sport that I ever participated in because I really enjoyed it. Other than that, I did a lot of walking. I walked around town. I found ways to, you know, use my time. I would go to a friends house, do whatever, and just hang out. And do the best I could to get away. I mean, I would come home at the last possible minute that I could.

OG: Do you know where your mom found support?

MP: I don't think my mom ever did find support. My mom is, and I blame my dad for it, my

mom has become a pathological liar. She's really hard to get along with. Very difficult, very, very difficult. And my older sister has a decent relationship with both my mom and my dad. I mean, my dad goes down there. They spend a lot of time with each other. I have cut myself off from them because of the way that they still treat me. They still, you know, they had no idea until I was 22 that I was raped. They just thought that I was out, you know, screwing around. And uh I finally told them when I was 22, but I still hear about it. I still hear about how I was a teenager, I had a kid. They spent over ten thousand dollars getting this kid back for me. And they don't let go of the past. They don't let go of the past. And I was a pretty rambunctious teenager. I was wild. And I'm not afraid to say it. Pray to God my daughter doesn't end up that way. But I didn't ever go to the point where, I knew right from wrong. I didn't go past that point. I never did. I knew a lot of people that did.

OG: It cost ten thousand dollars to get your daughter back. Where did that come from? Do you know?

MP: Well, by that time, my dad was working for the government and he started off, and this is back in '81, making something like 30, 33 thousand dollars a year. And since then, he's boasted up. I mean, he works for the DCSC. But he actually works in the analogistics department. He had actually written the front end defense system for Desert Storm. And that was something that I was proud of my dad, but that's the only thing.

OG: How do you think that job changed his perception of himself?

MP: Up , for a long time, it didn't. Like I said, up until my sister was born, Up I think he...I'm not sure what opened his eyes to make him realize how wrong he is. But he is still an alcoholic. I mean, he used to be into drugs and alcohol. He has since quit the drugs but he's still an alcoholic. Any it's pretty severe. Anytime my daughter goes out there, if my father comes and picks her up and I can smell alcohol, I mean as soon as that door opens its like, it's like being at a bar. I'm like, "No dad. Sorry. She's not leaving with you. She will not leave with you. If you guys want her to stay, mom is to come get her. She's not leaving with you." And we've had a lot of bouts because of that. And now, I'm slowly cutting my daughter's ties off with them. Because they're bad for us. They are bad for us. They tell her I'm a bad mother. And I had to go through 2 years of hell with her. I mean, she was to the point where she thought that I was--and my mom and dad had fed her that I was such a bad mother that everything we did we fought about. Everything. She would not listen to me. Anytime I punished her, she would call my mom and dad, ya know. And then she has friends who's parents are with the police department, and I sent her to her room one night, screaming at the top of her lungs. I went in, smacked her on the butt. She threatened to go to her friend and tell her friend's father that I was being abusive. For smacking her on the butt one time. So--and I told her, you know, I told her. I was like, Fine. By that point, I was so frustrated. I did not know how to fix this. I did not know what to do. So, we went through counseling for a little while, well she went through counseling for a little while. But a lot of it was my boyfriend. He would talk to her and explain to her. I mean it's because of him that I have the self esteem that I have. It's because of him that I'm the way I am. I mean, when we were teenagers and we went together, he pulled me out of a shell that was really thick. And when we broke up, I had had that going, I was still out of my shell, still feeling good

about myself. And then I got married, and ended up weighing over 200 pounds. By the time our marriage was over, I weighed over 200 pounds. My boyfriend, who was just loving and caring and so open, he helped me lose over 70 pounds. He helped my daughter learn, you know, "That's your mother. You respect her. You don't listen to your grandparents. That is the only person that's always going to be there for you. And, he then built my self-esteem back up. I mean, because it was pretty low. I mean, when you gain all that weight, and your not use to it, because all through high school, I weighed between 120-130 pounds. And then , even after I had my daughter, I was still at 140. And to go up that much, it's just like.... So, it's been a struggle, but it's been worth it. And I've had him to count on and be my support, and he has been. So, we've cut ties off from my parents.

OG: Did you have to miss school at all when you were pregnant?

MP: No, because nobody knew I was pregnant. I was only pregnant like the last few months of school because she was born July 1. And, I was actually playing softball--still. I was still playing softball. I was still doing everything I had normally done. Nobody had any idea until I went into labor. And then I told my mom.

OG: Nobody meaning--

MP: Nobody, at all. Nobody at all. It was just me that knew. I never would tell anybody. And then my water broke, and I told my mom the exact words out of my mouth were, "Mom, I can't stop peeing." And her mouth dropped. "Oh my God, you're in labor." And took me right to the hospital. And I had Ashley five hours later. And my poor mom. You know, she was in shock the whole time. I mean, honest to God, she was in shock the entire time. I mean, 'cause no body knew. I didn't want anybody to know. And I didn't even realize it until after the second month.

OG: How'd you hide it?

MP: I didn't gain very much weight. I wore big clothes. Mom just thought that I was just putting on weight 'cause I was eating. I wasn't as active as I had been, you know, but I was still playing softball. And that, you know, that's pretty much, mom didn't think anything was wrong with me. You know. I'm playing softball. And I'd actually carried her air conditioner down 2 flights of steps that summer. And it just, you know, it never crossed her mind. Never crossed anybody's mind that I could possibly be pregnant. And I didn't, I didn't gain very much weight. I have a large chest anyway, so I've always worn big baggy clothes. And...

OG: Did you then go back to school in September as well?

MP: Yep. I went back to school. I did my sophomore year, and then by my junior year, I had my daughter back. I had gone to school maybe a week. Told my mom that I wanted to quit, get my GED and start working. So, that's what I did. I quit. The next day I was out, talking to the lady who was teaching the GED class. I asked if I could skip the classes because I thought I could pass the test, and I did. I scored really high on it, 'cause I was always really smart. I always knew what was going on. I just had classes that bored me. So, I goofed off a lot in class. And I

got that, and I started working.

OG: Why did you decide to drop out?

MP: Because I wanted to work and be with my daughter a little bit more. I wanted to be the one to take her out to the store and buy her clothes. I wanted to be the one to take her out and buy her toys. You know, I wanted to be that person. And while I was in school, mom and dad didn't make me work. I did work at McDonald's for about 8 months because I wanted to, but that was while I didn't have my daughter. That was while we were fighting to get her back. So I worked at McDonald's to kinda kill my time, and then after we got her back I decided that I wanted to go back to work, I wanted to be the one to support this kid.

OG: Why was it important to you to be the one to support her?

MP: Because I was her only parent. Because I felt like I was really let down by my parents when I was a kid and I didn't want to do that to Ashley. And that's kinda the position I'm in now. That's why I have been hammering so hard to get another job. I mean, I am doing everything I can possibly do to get a job. Because I hate it. It stinks. She didn't get to join band this year because I didn't have the money for it. I've got her--she's going to be starting basketball. I'm going to be able to pay for, and that kinda relieves me some because she was really disappointed about band. She's been wanting to play in band for the last couple of years. And, I'm hoping next year will be okay, if she starts band, and you know, she gets involved with that, then I'd feel a lot better. And with Christmas coming up, I'm really stressing, really stressing, stressing really hard. That's is another reason why its so important for me to get a job now so that I can--because I've fallen behind in my bills. I mean, I get disconnection notices every month. Every month. And I'm struggling. My boyfriend's doing all he can to help me out, but, he'd tell you that I'm stubborn because I don't want his--I don't want him to help. I want to be the sole one to be there for my daughter. And it's really stressful. I've actually gone back to the psychiatrist to deal with it, to deal with all my problems. And it's helping. You know, I've been through this a couple times already. When I was 16, I tried to commit suicide 'cause at that time there was no hope of me getting my daughter back. I felt like I was never going to get her back. And everything in my life had just fallen apart. So I tried committing suicide. I made it through. I was really lucky to make it through because my heart stopped five times. And they put me--they wanted to put me in the psychiatric unit at OSU, but I refused to go there because there were some real psychos up there. So I was like--and you know, I was a teenager, and I was like, "Mom, you have to find me somewhere else." So she found this place in Mansfield. Where I was at, it's called The Tomorrow Center, but I think it's like a subdivision of Richland Hospital or something like that. So I spent a month there. I was in there for a month. We had family therapy, and my father, the only reason I was there for a month was because of my father. Because the first family therapy we had, I was in there for 2 days, the first family therapy we had, my father told the therapist he wished I would have died because it would have been cheaper to bury me. While I was sitting right there. And that's what kept me in for a month. It was like--I punched a nurse because I didn't want to sit in therapy anymore. So I took off, I was going back to my room. This nurse tried to stop me and I punched him. Right square in the face. I was, just leave me alone. Went to my room. Stayed there for a couple of hours and cooled down. Started going to therapy again. But I refused to go to therapy with my father. We had some sever issues. So the psychiatrist

deal was nothing new for me. But, it is a good way--I know a lot of people this you gotta be a freak to go to a psychiatrist, you gotta be a flake--it is becoming more and more common, but it's a great way to relieve stress. It really is. I only go in for half an hour. I have a half an hour session. I cry the entire half hour. I go in. As soon as that door's closed, the tears just start flowing. For a half hour. I dry 'em up and I leave. And I go once every 2 weeks, and it's what I need. That's what I need. And it's not that Mike can't help me, but Mike doesn't understand. He doesn't understand what's going on with me. Whereas, they do. That's what they went to school for. And it really is, it's a big release. And even my psychologist says that. After I get a job, I'll be alright. My mental state will be fine. Because this is what it's all come down to. Is the job. And I had to leave my last job because, well one, lack of transportation because my car had broke down, and two, I had had--Up--I have a lot of problems in my female area, in my uterus. And I had actually had fluid in my fallopian tube. And it was something that was really severe. I would go through really severe pains. I mean, it was killing me. And, went to the doctor and they decided to take it out. Then they found traces of endometriosis. So they made a couple more cuts and got all that out, burned it all out. And I was off work for about a week went back in with my doctor's excuse, gave it to my boss who was a female, and uh, it said that I was to be put on light duty, no pulling pushing, lifting, anything like that. She disregarded it. I was back out doing the same thing, and I towed cars. I mean, I was working for a car rental agency. So I towed cars, and it's a lot of physical work. And I got an infection, had to go back to the doctor. Doctor writes me another note, "You have to keep her on light duty." I was on antibiotics 'cause this thing was just terrible. I was in a lot of pain again. And, so she refused to do it. I made it about a month. Couldn't handle the pain. Couldn't deal with it, and I just left. I couldn't take it anymore. I just left. So--and that was really the wrong thing to do. I was in the mind frame, well, you know, I can pick up a job anywhere. You know, it's not going to be that hard for me to get back on the ball. And it was. Well, first I had to get my car fixed. And I found out about this PRC [Prevention, Retention and Contingency] or whatever it is, and the towed my car in, fixed it, and now my clutch in going out. So they're going to fix it again for me, which is really great because I was going to take this and trade it in on another used car after I got my income tax. But now, I'm just going to keep this one until it dies because there's absolutely no reason. It's a little Ford Escort '88. It's a piece of shit, but it drives. It's not in real bad shape. It's not like it looks like it's going to fall apart. It's decent, so--which is a good thing because I fully intend by the time Mike and I are 30 years old that we will be buying a house. So, this is a good way to set aside money, because actually, if you're not making, I think it's like \$28,000 a year, you get a huge tax cut because I have a daughter, if you have kids. And I get like \$2,500.00 back each year because I have a child, so that's gonna be a big thing to put aside for us, and not touch.

OG: Is the therapy a huge cost?

MP: Right now, it's not because I have a medical card. The state's actually paying for it. I have had--because when I worked at Colorado Prime, I was working from 8:30 in the morning until 9:30 at night, and I had a couple hours off during the afternoon, but I was working in Columbus, so I couldn't come back. And it was a lot of strain on me and my daughter. We had a lot of problems. That was along the time period that, you know, my mom and dad were drilling it into her head that I was a horrible mother. And during this couple of hours that I was off, I had gone-

-and it does get costly. It does get very costly. Even if you have insurance. So, it's something that I can revert back to anytime I'm under a lot of stress. I do, I go back. Because if I hold my stress in, I go into a severe depression. And I'm really quiet. I don't talk to anybody. I'm really really quiet. Won't even make eye contact with people because I don't want to end up talking to them, so it's, I've learned that it's best for me to do it because that way I get it released and I can go back to my normal life.

OG: We were kind of touching on this, and I wanted to go back to it a little bit, Up, your experience after school in jobs and what that's been like for you.

MP: Every job I've had has--you know, I've made it a good job. Like I said, I worked at McDonald's, and I had a great time there. It was a great place to get away from my family. I worked with a great crew. You know, I had--it was cool, I liked it. And then when I went back to work, I went to work up at Ame's, at the department store. I've always been in customer service because of my attitude. Up, went up to Ame's, was there for about a year. Then my husband and I got married. He decided he didn't want me working, and I stayed home for a while. Then I got antsy and took a part time evening job up at Kroger's. Moved my way up until, well, circumstances happened and I ended up leaving there because of my husband. From that point, I didn't work until I got the job at Colorado Prime.

OG: How long was that?

MP: Probably a year and a half.

OG: And how long were you at home before you got the part time job at Kroger?

MP: Probably about a year. Then I picked up this job at Colorado Prime and started out as a telemarketer, was only a telemarketer for 3 months and they put me in the manager training which was a 3 month long process. And to be honest, I was a horrible telemarketer. Horrible. Because when somebody tells me no, I'm like, "Ok, thanks for taking your time out." And I was, I was terrible, but I was great with other people and I got everybody motivated and put everybody in a good mood. And once I started, when I became a manager, and I started bringing in decent money, I put--everyday, I'd take a five dollar bill and they'd have to get so many appointments. If they got 3 appointments, then I'd give that telemarketer the \$5---[end of side one of tape] Who ever had the most appointments that had actually sat, I would take out to lunch, anywhere they wanted to go. Fudruckers was the place everybody seemed to want to go. But I did take people out to the Olive Garden and places like that around Columbus. I told them, you know, you got a \$15 limit. Wherever you want to go, you have a \$15 limit. That's it. So, and that helped a lot. And I worked there until about a year and a half ago, maybe two years ago. And my boyfriend had lost his job. They'd closed the plant down that he was working at. We'd only working two minutes apart. I mean, we were right there next to each other. And he stayed while I worked evenings. He'd go watch a movie or go to the bar, do whatever. And, uh, so we drove to work together, we drove home together. Then his plant closed down. He got a great opportunity up in Cleveland. He had a great opportunity. So we went there. We were there for about a year. I got a secretarial position for a managed care organization. I was there for a while,

had a big beef with the vice-president's assistant and as soon as the vice-president went on vacation, she threw all this shit on me that I had no clue how to do. And when I didn't get it down, she was riding me and I tried telling her, I have no idea what's going on here. And so we ended up having a big beef and she fired me. Then I couldn't get anything quick enough because of the fact that, I mean, I was working downtown, and I wouldn't taken anything downtown because I was riding the bus because it's cheaper. So I was willing to take the bus downtown, but I didn't 'cause it only took a half hour, but I didn't want to get to where I had to go--I lived on the east side of Cleveland. I didn't want to have to go clear to the west side. And uh I couldn't find anything around, and our bills started piling up. And he did all he could, I mean, he started working major overtime hours, he was working like second and half of a third shift to try and pull us out of it. But our rent was really high, and utilities up there are just incredible. And we fell behind. He was going to try and get the money from his aunt because he's got an inheritance heat his aunt has, but I'd told him that I'd really rather come back to Mt. Vernon. Because I would feel more comfortable with my daughter out playing in Mt. Vernon. Because when we lived there, she'd go out and play, and I'd make her check in like every fifteen minutes. Whereas in Mt. Vernon, she can go out and play for a couple of hours before she checks in. And I'm comfortable with that, but it's--I wanted to come back to a small town. I felt better here. Not that--you know, if I didn't have her, I'd want to live in a city. I'd rather live in a city. But with a kid, I'd rather be right here.

OG: When you would hit the slumps economically, is there a difference in how it works here in Mt. Vernon in a small town versus...

MP: Yeh, it does. It really does. Honestly, I think it's worse.

OG: Here?

MP: Yeh, because of the fact that this is a small town, and because of the fact that with an outgoing personality you meet so many people. And you talk to so many people, and then if you get stuck in a position like *this*. I swear, I go out of town to buy my groceries. I refuse to do it here in Mt. Vernon. It's really tough. I hate telling my daughter, you know, we don't have the money. I only get \$296.00 a month, and that, all of that goes to my bills, all of it. I don't have a penny left after that. My boyfriend gives me money for gas and anything else that we might need. And it sucks. I hate it.

JO: Do you feel like you're treated differently by the community?

MP: Oh yeah, I think that when I first --this is only going to be my second month. November will be my second month, but I know that, Up-- I lie about it. When people see me that I'm not working, and that they have an automatic downfall, and I lie about it. I tell them that my boyfriend supports me and my daughter because I don't want to create that image of me and my daughter, because that will stick with her in Mt. Vernon.

JO: So you definitely feel there's an image?

MP: Oh yeah.

OG: What do you feel like that image is?

MP: That people around here, really-- I mean, this is a hard working community. I mean, it's a blue collar town. Everybody struggles, everybody makes ends meet. You know, they all do what they can. And there are people who don't have any worries. But, and I think that when they see somebody on public assistance, it's like, "Well, they're worthless. We're out busting our ass and they're not doing anything." And to me, I just want to say, "Hey, if you only knew what the hell is going on, you would not judge people." And I understand that a lot of people that do come through this program are really welfare addicts is what I call them. And I understand that because I see that in the community, I mean, I know. I know from working at places like Kroger and McDonald's, well I worked at Taco Bell too and Ames. I can see that. And there are people that are dependent on that and will do that and just stay on and they're happy with it. I can't conceive that. I can't conceive how you're happy about it because I'm doing everything I can to get off of it. I mean, like I did last night, I went home and for 2 and a half hours I called every-- I started with A's in the yellow pages and I called every company. And I got to the D's and my neck was sore, my ears were burning, and I was like, "This is enough, I just gotta quit doing this." And I did get some good leads, unfortunately none for me. But, I thought I'd bring them in for the class. Maybe somebody else, like, you know I gave one to one of the girls for Kim Rose's for legal secretary, and I hope she gets the job. I was a little bummed that I couldn't find anything for me, but then I get the phone call yesterday for this management position, and it's boosted me quite a bit. I mean, I feel great right now. And like I asked Mark, I want the warm up interview tomorrow. I want someone to interview me tomorrow. And I want it to be a tough one. Because I want to go in and be prepared and make sure that I sell myself to his woman because I have to get this job. I mean, since I left Colorado Prime, all I wanted to do is be a branch manager of a company, and to be able to set my own hours, to be able to get the pay, and you know, kinda lighten up a little on my stress problem. And so I want to make sure that I am ready for anything that might come at me Thursday, so that's why I asked.

OG: When you mentioned that you've seen the welfare addicts, what do you mean?

MP: Well, I guess I can say that mainly it was in Kroger's that I noticed it, Up, because of the food stamp deal. You can tell when people that are really grungy and don't care about themselves. I mean they don't take their personal hygiene to heart. To me, those are welfare addicts. They're getting food stamps, they're getting a check every month, they're getting a lot of the things like the utilities. Like I'm going out November 1 to see if they'll pay my-- it's a program called HEAT to see if they'll pay my gas bill because I just don't have the money to pay it this month. I'm not going to because in order to keep my telephone from being turned off, I have to send them \$100.00. And my electric bill's \$80.00. Otherwise it's getting cut. And of course I have cable I should probably cut but I'm thinking that I only have to deal with it for a couple of months and then I'll be back working and I won't have to worry about it. So I haven't cut that bill. And I probably should, but it's me being selfish for me and my daughter. It's the one-- you know, I mean cable is--it's kind of an enjoyment. There's so much stuff on, I mean, we watch Discovery channel a lot, we watch A&E a lot. And, it's, we do take our time out, we do go roller blading. I finally bought myself a pair of roller blades like a year ago. My

daughter's like an expert. I can not, I mean, I'm still horrible. I wear all the gear, except that helmet. But I wear the elbow pads, the wrist pads, the knee pads, I wear it all because I get out there and I am just a klutz. I have not yet figured out how the hell to do this. But it's because I've only done it-- I've had the roller blades for a year now and I've probably only been out 6 times because I get so frustrated, so any other time I take her out, I take our dog. And I just walk him. We'll either go to the gap trail or we'll go to Memorial Park and she skates now on the skate park and I take him up on the dike and we walk. He runs around, and we do that for a couple of hours and then, it's just--because of the fact that she is getting a little over weight, a lot of it I think was the TV. She had gone through a period while I was working at Colorado Prime where it's all she did, she watched TV. My mom and dad weren't real into making her exercise or get out and do things or anything like that. They were pretty "well whatever you want to do." So she watched a lot of TV. Now she goes out, she gets home from school, does her homework, she goes out and plays until 7:30, she comes in and she watches *The New Adam's Family* until 8 o'clock. She goes out and plays for another hour because she's allowed to stay up until 9:30. She goes out and plays for another hour, comes back in, gets ready for bed, and goes to bed. And, it's, to me, it's a blessing because I'm hoping it'll help with her weight and bring it down because she is overweight and it scares me.

OG: How do you think this has affected her?

MP: Honestly, she has been really, really understanding. She has understood the situation. I've talked to her about it-- I mean, when this first happened, I had to let her know. You know. When we go out to the store, I can't buy-- you go to the toy section, you ain't getting anything anymore, you know. And she's been really, really understanding. She collects pennies. She gets pennies from everybody and she's always offering me, "Mom, we can roll up all my pennies and take them in, cash them in." I'm like, "No," you know, "save your money. That is your money. I do not want it." "But mommy--" and I'm like, "No, that's yours. Keep it." But she is very understanding. She has understood the whole situation. Up, she sees that it stresses me out. She tries to do the best she can to help me unwind. She'll do little things--she'll keep her room clean which is a great thing, she'll do dishes, she loves to help me cook. She loves to help me cook. We have a really good relationship. Very close, and I feel like this is something I can talk to her about because she is understanding the situation. She doesn't mind the free lunch at school. But she's only in 5th grade. So I think that kids that age don't really understand, you know, why somebody might-- they might, I don't know--why someone's getting a free lunch. But I'm not sure, you know, they may. They might go home and ask their parents, and their parents tell them. But she doesn't have a problem with it. She is accepting that. And she hasn't told me of any problems that she's having at school with it. And, you know, like I said, I'm hoping that I get this job and I can stop.

OG: Are there specific incidences where you've been treated differently?

MP: No, because like I said I lie about it.

OG: So you don't feel like anybody knows?

MP: Yeh.

JO: How do you view the community? I mean, being maybe of less economic means?

MP: Like I said, I lie about that. I think this community is kind of snobbish. I mean, I like it. It is a nice little town. Not all the people are snobbish, but it is, it is a small town. Whoever's got money, their kids participate in sports, their kids, you know, their kids are the first ones to go. Like my boyfriend, he was an awesome baseball player. He was probably the best baseball player Mt. Vernon ever had, and he got benched because this kid that sucked, his parents had money. And he got benched, and it frustrated him through middle school and high school because his family was a-- his dad was a truck driver, made good money, but they had a huge family. I mean, he's got 3 brothers and 3 sisters. And he's the youngest. So, there's 7 kids. And his one brother died 5 years ago. His one brother--it was a freak accident here in Mt. Vernon at UPI. Chained snapped and something fell down from the ceiling, crushed him. So, he lost his brother like 5 years ago, lost his dad maybe 7 years ago. And his family struggled, but his family was a very loving family. I mean, they're not open about it, like they never tell each other they love each other. Never. That never comes out of their mouths. But they're very supportive, and they help each other out when they need help.

OG: I was curious also about how you make ends meet when all these bills are piling up, and--

MP: Umm, I do the best I can. I have called each of my utilities, except my cable bill because you know this is something they don't care about. They find out, they're going to cut me. So, I've called each one of my utility companies and I've explained to them, you know, "I've recently lost my job due to a health problem. I had to go to the state. I only get \$296.00 a month, and, you know, I'm trying. I'm the best I can." Because I'd actually stopped working at the end of August. I went through September with no income at all. That's where all my bills piled up, was September. And then I can only pay so much this month; got disconnection notices from everybody. I've called all my utility companies, explained to them, and they've been very lenient, I guess, about it. I've made as least payments as I can, which in all actuality isn't that low. But, you know, it's the only thing I can do. And, it is stressful. It's very stressful. I get frustrated all the time, all the time.

OG: Their, Up, willingness to help you out somewhat, would the same thing happen in Cincinnati, do you think? In a big city, would they--

MP: It could. I think it all depends on the situation that you're stuck in and who you actually talk to at these utility companies because I know even when I was working, when I had the surgery, I only had one paycheck, and it was only like \$100.00 because I only worked like one day, two days maybe at the most. So, in August, all my bills were piling up, and in September, I had no income, and in August, I'd talked to--because, see, I had my surgery at the end of July. And all my bills started piling up. I called the utility companies to let them know, and they didn't care. In August. I was still working; they didn't care what was going on. And then I called back, you know, like the end of last month and then this month, and I get somebody different and they're really open about it. And they're like, you know, "OK, I'll make a note here, and this is what you have to pay." So, I think it depends. It depends on the circumstances that you're in, and it

depends on who you talk to.

OG: This is really different, but I was wondering if you feel any community or connection with other people in the class or other people you know who might be in the same--

MP: You know, I do because when I had found out that I had to do this, I kept an open mind about it. And I honest to god thought I was going to come in with a bunch of welfare addicts, you know. I thought that I would be the one that was going to-- I mean, I don't want to say that I'm any better than anybody, but I-- the experience that I've had, I thought I was going to come into this class didn't no body have their GED. And that's the wrong way to perceive, but that comes from living in the community. That comes from living in this community.

OG: And maybe other stereotypes?

MP: Yeh, and I've learned since I've been in this class. A lot of people are doing it because they are in the same position I am in. Something has happened in their life where they've lost everything, and I think that most of the people in that class are very skilled. I would hire everybody except Henry.

OG: How do you feel like your own perceptions of welfare addicts have changed, or have they changed?

MP: I would have to say somewhat because of the stricter laws on it. The whole welfare reform. You know, I would have to say a lot of people probably have gotten off their ass and have gotten jobs, even some at minimum wage, you know, just taking it. And I think once somebody gets that feeling of freedom, of being able to--because you have to report everything to this place. Nothing is a secret. Nothing is--you can't keep anything to yourself, you know. It can't happen. You have to let them know everything. And I think that once people get out and start working, I think that they find that freedom, and they feel good about it. And I think maybe that's probably the biggest benefit of the whole reform deal--is letting people know, "Hey, you have it in you. And this is the way that you can live." But then again, there are those people who just don't give a shit, who just don't want to do it. You know, they'll do what they tell 'em to do, and that's it. That's all they'll do. Just as long as they keep getting their benefits.

OG: So how do you feel like the system can make you feel about yourself?

MP: The system, honest to god, is a very, very, very, gives you negative esteem. I think that it pulls you down, except this class. I love this class. I think this is probably one of the best things that I've ever seen. I mean, even for somebody that's not on welfare, this is an excellent class to go through. I mean, you learn so much, and it's great. I think that, you know, and we all have a good time. Nobody, except Henry, is really sour about this. First day, everybody came in and we were all open, we were all talking, and I think this is a great thing. I think this program is good.

OG: Do you think you'll keep any of these relationships?

MP: I'm hoping. There's a couple people in here that I really enjoy talking to and I enjoy

associating with. Umm, a lot of my problem is getting past-- I'm still at that point where I don't like to make friends. I don't want anybody really close to me, except, you know, Mike has broken that wall. And I have allowed him in, and honestly, it's a frightening thing because I'm always afraid that we're going to end and I'm never going to see him again, and I'm going to be right back down on the ground where I was. But, I don't know, I felt that way for a long time, but now, it's like, you know, the guy's put on like 30 pounds since we've been together and he's perfectly content with me. He's perfectly content with me. He always tells me there's nobody else he'd rather be with. And the only reason I say that about his weight is because that is something with men. Once they're content in their relationship, they do put on a lot of weight. And I cook a lot. I love to cook and I love to bake. And to him, my cookies are the best cookies he's ever eaten. And I have to make cookies, I swear to god, twice a week. I have to make 2 batches of cookies. I will take this container of cookies like this over to him and come over the next day and they're either all gone or there's only a little bit of them left. And he's like that all the time. And I cook for him, I cook dinner for him and-- he doesn't live with me right now because of the situation that I'm in because it would affect the benefits, it would affect everything. Because I have METRO. They pay my entire rent, and I got the benefits that I got here that aren't that great but I do have them, and if he moved in, it would take them away. So, I have, you know, he comes over, and I have dinner with him. I make dinner with him or I go over to his mom's. Because he's staying with his mom until we-- because I told him, I was like, "There is no reason for you not to stay at your mother's house. You know, you're going to be saving money that way, and you know, we'll be able to get another place. I mean, I'm looking into moving out. Somewhere I can have my dog. And that's--then we'll get back to our normal life."

OG: How old is he?

MP: He just turned 26. Yeh, we're both the same age.

JO: It seems like since being in the class, there will be a lot of jobs and a lot of people have their own idea of what sort of job they want, but it seems like, do you think like, Up, Mark talks a lot about a lot jobs that there are out there, but do you think a lot of people don't take jobs because that it is only minimum wage and that's such a barrier?

MP: Yeh, I can honestly say that I did that. I was offered a job at Staples. It was only \$5.50 an hour. I have not made less than \$7 in the past 3 years. And every job I've had except my secretarial job, I've had the opportunity to make bonus money and I've done that so that my income has always been right around where I want it to be. I think that people do do that. Mark says, you know, you find a job; use it as your stepping stone. And I'm just about at that point. If I don't get this job, if I don't get this management position, I'll go take a job at McDonald's or somewhere like that just until I can get going. Or like BlueBa, they have a part time opening. I might just take that so it gives me time to look for a job, too. But that, a lot of people--see, that's where I think that I'm different from a lot of people, and I think that I've gotten this through talking to some people. A lot of people aren't willing to do that. A lot of people think that they shouldn't work somewhere unless it's where they want to work. It's the job they want to do. I think because of the fact that a lot of people get unhappy in positions that they're in. They don't

make the best of it because it's not what they want to be doing, whereas I, I take every job and I make it work. I make it like the best job I've ever had. You know, and I don't allow myself to get negative because I have a daughter to take care of and I do the best I can.

JO: Do you think that by being on public assistance now, and sort knowing the stereotype of the community that that has sort of shaped your identity in anyway, or for other people also?

MP: I think that if I allowed people to know, I think that it would definitely--you know, I would definitely have a different outlook, or people would definitely look at me different.

JO: By having that label placed on you, you really think that it would shape who--

MP: Yeh, yeh. I mean, even--see my friends are Mike's friends, and Mike's friends are his best buddies. I mean, they are all just as close as could be. And, that, I even lie to them. No body knows. I mean, my mom knows and my family knows and then of course Mike knows. It's like, he used to go grocery shopping with me all the time. I enjoy it because he's a great shopper. I won't even ask him to go now. I won't even ask him. I don't even want my daughter to go with me. Because it's humiliating. A very, very tough thing to deal with.

OG: What do you feel when you're buying the groceries with the food stamps?

MP: I'm OK until I get to the register and then it's just like-- you know, I can honest to god I can feel my face get hot and flushed because I'm so frustrated about it. And I don't like doing it. And you know I just want to get it done and over with. And I found that I get real shaky. At that moment, my self esteem drops. But as soon as I get out of the store and I load the groceries in the car, I start building myself back up. But my self esteem drops like that--and it's just for those brief moments.

OG: Do you feel any difference in treatment from the cashier?

MP: Umm, well, like I said, I go out of town. I actually go to Newark, and they have a lot more people. And I've never sensed any disregard from them, just like when I worked at Kroger's, I never really treated anybody any different.

JO: Has there ever been a time when you went to a grocery store here in Mt. Vernon--

MP: No. No. I won't do it. Because I know too many people around here. I won't do it.

OG: Do you feel like your self esteem changed a lot when you decided to take public assistance?

MP: It did until I started going to see the psychiatrist again. And I was allowing myself to feel pity for myself. I was allowing that to happen, where as I shouldn't have been. And that was like the first thing I told him. I told him, I was like, you know, "I feel sorry for myself, and it's my own damn problem. It's my fault that I'm doing this."

OG: What do you mean?

MP: I can keep my self esteem where it is, and I can feel up and bubbly by knowing that if I get down in the dumps, it's not only going to affect me, but it's going to affect my daughter, it's going to affect my job hunt, it's going to affect every aspect of my life. And I can't allow that to happen. I can't. Because there's no way. I never want to feel like I felt when I lived with my parents. Never. It's a horrible feeling and I never want it again. So, I did for a few days. And then as soon as I got in to see the psychiatrist and I told him, you know, "This is my own fault. I really need to release this stress. I really need to deal with this." And that's the way that I do deal with it, you know. I don't cry in front of my daughter. I'll wait 2 weeks. I'll hold back my tears two weeks. For that entire half hour, tears just flow. I talk to him, and tears just flow. He's got the Kleenex box ready for me. And it's such a relief because it's what I need. It's what keeps me going.