Building Bigger Bridges:
Untold stories of UMass frontline workers

UMass Amherst

Transforming Your World:
Introduction to Community Engagement

In partnership with UMass Labor/Management Workplace Education Program
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(SustComm/SPP 110)
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Introduction

The majority of students at the University of Massachusetts attend classes that start in September and end in May. Approximately 28,000 students shuffle from building to building at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst daily. Oftentimes those attending the university are blind to the amount of work that goes into the education that they receive. Before every class or lecture there is a street, a walkway, a doorway, and a hallway that is meticulously attended to by the frontline workers at UMass. The coveted “Number 1 Dining” title is a product of the staff behind the counters at each dining common on campus, and those behind the scenes preparing the food. Nevertheless, the impact of UMass frontline workers ripples throughout the fabric of the university and allows each student and teacher to fulfill their academic goals with minimum intervention.

Unfortunately, there is a stigma that surrounds frontline workers. Students, teachers, and other staff often view them with an implicit bias based on stereotypes. Most students aspire to leave this campus with a degree and a career, which doesn’t usually include being a custodial worker or a landscaper. Yet both students and frontline workers alike are driven by their dreams everyday. Every person at the university has goals, aspirations, and a unique past. Most importantly, these elements combine to create a unique individual with a unique story to tell.

Building Bigger Bridges: Untold stories of UMass frontline workers aspires to educate those at the University about the complexity, honesty, and importance of the stories behind frontline workers. It is through an unaltered exposure of these stories that individuals can come to an understanding of the critical role frontline workers play in the everyday operations of the University.

Dedicated to the individuals in this book. We appreciate and thank you for sharing your wonderful stories with us and letting us view the different lives of the frontline workers here at UMass, Amherst.

And a special thank you to Dr. Ellen Pader for helping us share these stories.
"I'M STILL NOT DONE."

Mail & Distribution Services

Kevin Billieux

UMASS AMHERST

A class project of Transforming Your World: Introduction to Community Engagement in partnership with the UMass Labor/Management Workplace Education Program. Fall 2018
**Little by Little**

*My grandparents immigrated from Europe during the early World War II period and settled in Massachusetts. My grandma was a school teacher in Northampton, my dad worked in local factories, and my mom stayed home.*

I grew up and went to school in Northampton, so going to school at UMass Amherst was close to home for me. I haven’t moved far. I remember when I was a freshman, I was terrified. Being in my thirties while I was in school made me a non-traditional college student. I had tried college once before, but had done very poorly, so it was just terrifying knowing that I was putting my whole life on hold, and taking out all these loans, so that I could get a degree. I graduated from college majoring in Astronomy, and minoring in education. I was desperate to get a job as soon as I graduated because I had over $60,000 in loans to pay back, so paying my bills was the most important thing to me when I graduated. I could’ve gotten a job using my degree right out of college, but it would be substitute teaching which is not consistent work. With the help of UMass and connections I made during my undergraduate years, I was able to find a job. I first got a job in one of the dining commons. Fortunately, I knew some people in the physical plant because I had worked there as a truck driver while I was a student here. I felt very lucky when they told me that several people in one of their departments were retiring. I had to get the appropriate licenses to get the job, but when I applied for it I was put on the list and got hired.

Working for distribution services consumes most of my day. During my eight-hour shifts, which start at eight in the morning, I deliver everything from large freight to small parcels to where they are needed around campus. Being a full-time worker I am here at UMass all year round. While the winters are cold and it is sometimes difficult to get up in the morning, UMass gives me great full-time benefits and friendships. I am definitely an active person and this job allows me to move around campus and see different things throughout my day. Many aspects of my job involve meeting and delivering equipment to people who are doing research projects on campus, and things like that. This leads to some very good conversations while I am at work. The job has taught me to be cautious and patient. I have learned patience by driving around campus in large vehicles. You just have to be cautious, know what you're doing, and think through your moves when working in a warehouse environment. The most important thing is getting home safely and everyone around you knows that. No one is fooling around because there is always a chance of getting hurt. I intend to use these lessons and skills that I have learned from this job in my future classroom when I become a teacher.

I have been at this job for two and a half years. Having completed my Bachelors degree in Astronomy, this job is a step to where I would like to end up. My main goal is to get my Masters degree and hopefully start teaching with a Massachusetts State license, or possibly
eventually get my doctorate to teach at the university level. Now I’m working on getting my Masters very slowly. I’m taking Education 497 at UMass right now. It is for teaching math grades four through twelve. It covers different strategies for teaching. If I had gone into substitute teaching I would not have the same benefits that I get here. Although I am given many opportunities here I wish I had finished my schooling twenty years ago instead of waiting. I’m still not done. How do you change something that has happened already? You can’t, it’s just second-guessing stuff that you can’t do anything about.

Aside from my job and classes, I also tutor kids anywhere between age eight and twelve years old, but mostly around ten years old like the 5th, 6th grade range, which was my concentration in the minor as well. I enjoy tutoring, as I’ve been working with this particular tutoring program for about six years now. I started when I was a student here. I like seeing my former students still in school and engaged in their learning, it is very rewarding. It gives me a sense of pride and accomplishment to see my former students actually go to college, showing how eager they have become. Instances such as these help to motivate me to stick with my education. I like being able to help these students achieve their own academic goals, and I cannot wait to be able to do that full time in my own classroom.

I enjoy what I do, mostly because of the activity and the freedom I have with my job. And definitely because of the people that I get to meet everyday. I’ve met some really cool people who are doing really cool projects around campus. I’m an Astronomy major, so I’m particularly interested in some of the projects that they’re doing. I’ve gotten to see them when I move equipment into their labs. I’ve stopped and talked to the researchers about what they’re doing. I think sometimes they’re a little bit surprised that the guy hauling the freight actually cares about what they’re doing and can have a conversation with them about it. I think it also kind of knits together the fact that we’re a community here at UMass. We are all interested in everybody’s well-being and interests. I’m many steps closer to getting a professional job related to my degree than I was when I first came back here. I am thankful for this opportunity and everything I have been able to learn and do at UMass.
Mara Martins

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Building Bigger Bridges
A Custodian Who Bridges the Gaps

Mara Martins has been a great member of the UMass Community; uplifting the spirits of students through her positive attitude and creating joy through her arts. She is a family woman who builds bridges in attempt to bring the people in her world together.

My name is Mara Martins. I work in the Goodell Building at UMass, Amherst. I came from Brazil with my family in 1980, so I’ve been here a while. My ex-husband was an ambassador so we used to travel all around the world. I came to Florida, from Florida we went to Switzerland, from Switzerland we went to Germany, from Germany we went to Italy, from Italy to Japan, and Japan to France! I got a lot of experience throughout the world because we kept moving from one place to another. The wives of the ambassadors didn’t work, but I was always looking for something new to do because I am so passionate about Fine Arts and Craft.

I’ve seen a lot of different people, different backgrounds, different countries and every story isn’t the same as the last, you know? I had a friend from Poland. Her family is from World War II so you see how many stories that she has, pictures from the Holocaust and all that. We learn from each other. Different cultures, different countries, different languages, that’s how we learn. Since I’ve experienced such a diverse group of cultures, and interacted with people from all over, I’m able to adapt to any place or situation. I adapt to what I have and what I’ve got so even if I don't like where I am, I will create or find something that I'm interested in.

Through my traveling and being all over the world, I’ve been able to discover and fall in love with art. Every place I went to, I was able to immerse myself in their cities, castles, museums, and all the other beautiful art I could find. I love to do all kinds of art. I like to draw, make jewelry, bath bombs, and most of all I love making soaps! Creating soaps is all types of art combined into one. I get to play with color, design, and even scents to make something original to me. It's not the regular soap that you see in the market! It's an art, it's like you're painting, you are creating something.

My favorite country I’ve been to is Switzerland. It does not have that kind of discrimination you see elsewhere, nothing like that. You’re free to do whatever you want to, as long as you keep your head about you. You can do anything you can imagine in Switzerland, but no one takes advantage of this by doing dumb things because they grew up in that way. Their economy is great, and the education is amazing as well. There’s great opportunity there. Now my home is where my kids are. One is in Florida, another in California and the third is here in Massachusetts. I’ve sent one through school, then the second, and now I’ve sent my youngest. I have a degree in Psychology from Brazil, and people ask why I don’t have a better education here. To be frank, my children are why. I need to get them through college first, that’s what’s most important. I couldn’t afford to send them and myself.
It has paid off though. I’m very proud of all of my children who have all seen great success. My daughter has become a school teacher, teaching kids from around the world. My oldest son lives in L.A. and works as a film editor, landing major jobs editing television shows on large networks and for Netflix! My youngest son is still in school with a full ride from Boston University, where he plans to become a surgeon.

My original motivation for working at UMass was to get my children through school, but it worked out that I didn’t even need it. I’ve stayed for the benefits, but all my children have gone to different schools with full scholarships! UMass only offered a leave on tuition, so it worked out for the best anyway. Now I do custodial work in Goodell, make my art, and do workshops for UMass. Every time UMass hosts a social art gathering or a workshop, I make sure to be there. Through art I am able to build bridges with workers, and building bridges is important for all of us. Whether you’re black, white, blue, it doesn’t matter. The more we can get to know each other, the more we can accept our differences. I have done martial arts and I am a black belt holder because my son wanted me to do this with him. I am very proud of myself and I want people to know that we are all more than you can see, and the only way I can show that is by getting out and interacting with them! I think I like who I am, I have no regrets. I did the college thing, I worked in a hospital, I was a children’s psychologist. I’ve lived a full life, I do not have any regrets.
"We Have to Enjoy Every Day"
- Sandy Connell

Celebrating Those Who Help Us on a Daily Basis

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“Be Good to The People”

Growing up in Hadley, Massachusetts, I never had much desire to move away from here. I love it here. My father was born here in the U.S. but when he was five years old he went back to Poland. My mother was from Akron, Ohio. My parents gave me land so I built a house. I lived right next door to my parents. I have two brothers, two older siblings that live here in Hadley, too. I have a son now, Tom. So, we just never went away. I went to school at Hopkins Academy, which is not too far from where I live today. While at Hopkins, what I really wanted to do was be a nurse. I was gonna go to be an LPN when I was graduating high school, but back then I would have had to work at the state hospital in Northampton and it was pretty rough at that time. Patients were beating up nurses, so my brothers didn’t want me to go. After high school, I attended hairdressing school and worked as a hairdresser for 15 years until I started my work as a maintainer at UMass in 1984. I worked in the Southwest dormitories until about a year ago, starting when I was in my late 30s. Every day is an experiment that’s for sure, but you know you get in a comfort zone and you stay in the comfort zone. That’s what happened with me. I got in my comfort zone and stayed there. When I left Southwest, the last day I was there, because I love the people, I bought coffee and donuts for everybody. Everyone was crying and I was crying too, cause I spent a lot of time there.

My first year here I worked in a dining hall, I loved it and everybody hated it when I left because, you know, I’m a hustler. It’s just too many hours there because you have to work every other weekend, and I have my son. When we got laid off in the summer, they had other jobs to give us. So I was working in the physical plant and it just so happened I knew a supervisor there, and he said, “Hey Sandy, why don’t you go and do maintenance all the time.” So that’s where I went! My job now is more money than the dining hall also, so that’s why I’m doing it. I didn’t ever want to be a supervisor, but when my head maintainer retired she said “Sandy, do it. They need people like you.” I said “If I do it, I’m going to do it how you do, and be good to the people.” I try to instill values in the people I work with in maintenance. We’re all humans, we’re not little kids. Treat people with respect, and that’s what I found. A maintainer I used to work with once said “I could put you in a room with 100 people and you’d come out knowing everyone’s names.” When they have problems I’m the go to person….I should have been a psychologist.

I think my pleasure is being with the students. I mean last year I had a bunch of great students living here. I’m Polish and do a lot of Polish cooking. Perogies, golonka, I make them and give them to people as gifts because a lot of people don’t know how to make them. One year when I was a maintainer, I really liked all the students on my floor, and I cooked barbeque and brought it to them. Through the years, I’ve had kids write to me. I even had a past student come to visit me. One time, there was a girl there and two guys had her, and I thought she was drunk.
Of course, that was my first opinion. I said, “What’s wrong guys? Is she drunk or what?” And they said, “No Sandra, we don’t know what’s wrong.” So I ran out there, and she was having a seizure, so I knew what to do because my son had seizures. So I laid her down and helped her until she came out of it. I waited until she was okay and told the others to get her to bed. She came and found me the next day and said thank you so much.

I haven’t called out sick in eight years. I have 520 hours, six weeks vacation time, but I usually don’t use it. You know, after the first guy I was with passed away, I didn’t take any time off for like eight years. I was at the cemetery every single day. I have gone on some vacations, but I have not been able to go for a while because I am a personal care assistant for my current boyfriend in Amherst. He was my boyfriend when I was 18 years old. We broke up, you know, it was one of those stupid breakups. And, I married on a rebound and he married on a rebound. He ran to Florida when I broke up with him. We saw each other through the years but we lost contact. He was in a motorcycle accident and I knew something happened to him. I got down on my knees and prayed, I said, “You have to save me. We have to be together someday.” He came out of his coma and his wife and two kids left him, took all his stuff, and wiped him right out. There’s brain damage but he’s fine. Slowly but surely his memory is getting a little bit better, he’s starting to remember things. He was my true love, and he needed help. So, I’m helping him.

I have a son who went to UMass. The school pays for the tuition of your children if you work here which is great. He was here when his father, my ex-husband passed. He still had two presentations to do the day after he found out about the death of his dad. And I said, “So what do you wanna do here? Do you wanna contact your professors?” He said, “No, mom, I wanna go through with my presentations.” He went through with his two presentations and ended up making the Dean's List. I mean to do that, that’s hard. He’s 40 now. He works at Big Y. He’s been there for 19 years. Just like me, cause when he was in school and had sick days, he only called out twice. We like sports; the two I love the most are football and baseball. I go to Red Sox games with my son because his friend gets a discount. He’ll cheer for anyone but the Yankees.

Years ago when I was growing up, families were really close. I mean you had the holidays and all your cousins and everybody got together. People don’t do that anymore. That’s sort of a lost thing. Kids don’t go out and play like they used to. When I was a kid, I lived right near a lake, and I used to be out there ice skating all the time. We would get home from school and we would be out there. You don’t see that anymore. It’s sad.

What do I feel most grateful for? I’m grateful for life, my family, my son, people I’ve met, yeah. Life it’s, it’s great. Every day I get to wake up, it’s a new adventure. I think it’s been in me but I got messed up so much in life from the people and going through what I went through, I’ve had a rough life, yeah. And I think it just made me a very strong person, it made me more caring for other people. Life’s short, and you don’t know what is gonna be handed to you. We have to enjoy every day.
"I’m looking for a more constant, never changing happy. And that, I won’t achieve easily, but I try to."
The Pursuit of Ultimate Happiness

Our story describes the life and culture of Pasang Norbu, a member of the University of Massachusetts, Amherst parking services staff. His story explains how the Tibetan culture has helped shaped his life, and the lessons he has learned through practicing Buddhism. He believes that these lessons can help everyone work towards happiness, and hopes to preserve Tibetan culture and values within his new community. Pasang Norbu was born and raised in India. Before moving, he earned his Ph.D. in Tibetan History at a university in India. In his spare time, Pasang enjoys spending time with his family and serving the community. He co-founded a Tibetan community here in Amherst, where work is done to preserve the culture for future generations. They held weekend classes, and the community has developed a Tibetan textbook based on the teaching styles of the United States.

Everybody has their own view on seeing. Everybody is running here and there searching for their happiness. Imagine if you win some lottery, you should be happy, right? But I would say that happiness is on a conventional level. I’m not looking for that kind of happy. I’m looking for a more constant, never changing happy. And that, I won’t achieve easily.

I came to the United States from India in 2005 because of my wife. She was here before we got married, so I left for her. We had our son in 2007, so I couldn’t stay back and find a job that I wanted. I had to take whatever I had in front of me, for our livelihood and to look after him. But it’s okay. And it’s okay because I have a target, something far in the future: ultimate bliss. That’s my goal. All the other things become worldly things, minor things; everything becomes easy going, you know? Because my target is more than just a worldly thing. I know I may not be able to achieve it in this life, or the next life, or the coming many lives, but there should be a time where I can achieve it.

Every morning I do certain things like recite mantras. They’re just like a few syllables. There is one specifically by the deity “Avalokiteshvara,” the deity of compassion. He is the manifestation of compassion. When I recite this deity’s mantra, “om mani padme hum,” I think about compassion within myself. So, when repeating it, I just focus and visualize, and that helps me. There’s a reason behind doing all this. It’s to develop and build up that compassion. I’m supposed to recite the mantras six times a day, three times in the day and three in the night. You do this so you are constantly not forgetting the practice. But I can’t do all six times. I try to do at least two, one in the morning and one at night. I’m not strictly following the practice, but I try to. It’s unfortunate that I can’t do it with my family. With the social structure we have here in the United States, everyone has to work. When my wife goes to work, I look after our son. And then when I go to work, she’s the one who’s looking after him. I try to teach my son the practice of Buddhism and how to speak Tibetan because there’s really no way to precisely understand Buddhism without knowing Tibetan. And there’s hardly Tibetan kids that can speak at the level I
can, so I am working to preserve Tibetan language and culture. It’s a very wise and deep culture. I think it has a lot of potential to serve the larger community across the world, especially in this age where it’s very stressful and a lot of looking down on others with differing views. And to preserve my culture, I have to start from myself.

You come across times when other people make you upset, or when you’re in a very stressful situation. People get happy so easily and they’re friends with everybody. But human beings are not perfect, we make mistakes. Something tiny happens, [snaps fingers], and they get upset and they don’t talk to each other. But you have to stay steady. That’s the main thing that I’m trying to do, control my emotions. For instance, the Dalai Lama never thinks about hating people; he never encourages violence. He’s a role model to me because of this. In Tibetan and Buddhist culture, we cannot harm anybody, not even an insect. So when everybody’s views differs with mine, I just think and look at a different angle and adjust myself. I’m not saying I never get upset. Everybody gets upset. But I learn and practice how to handle it. I am human. I make mistakes. I am covered with ignorance. But I have the potential to be Buddha; everybody does. Right now, I am not a Buddha because I am not enlightened. But there’s a time in the future when I, too, can become a Buddha and achieve that ultimate bliss.
From “Salad Wench” to a Woman in the Woods

My name is Leslie Benson. I work at the University of Massachusetts physical plant as a carpenter and sign shop letterer. I started off working in food services as the salad person. They referred to me as the “salad wench,” the boys did. I eventually realized that lettuce really wasn’t my calling. There were these apprenticeships they were offering to slotted groups, and being female put me in one of those slots because there were very few females at the physical plant or in any of the trades. So they gave me a apprenticeship book and it would say, “do stock room work,” so they would put me in the stockroom, “Do roofing work,” so I would work with the roofers. That is how I got in the sign and glazing job, which is cutting glass and fixing broken windows.

People say, “Well, you know it’s a targeted position and you got it only cause you’re a woman.” As I arrived, most people called me Bula or Betty or Wilma and I didn’t care so I didn’t stop people. I can act just like the fellas. The women can do anything the guys can do. Unfortunately, because of the contracting that’s going out here, there’s even less women, there’s less minorities. Most of my buildings, if I went in a door and it slammed really hard I’d look up at the closer, or if oil was leaking out of it, I would tell my supervisor, “such and such a door needs to have its door closer.” But if something was loose and I had my screwdriver, I fixed it, where contractors aren’t gonna do that.

This is the third state job I’ve held. I worked at a state hospital for the criminally insane. That was in Northampton, that hospital closed, which led me to Belchertown State School, which was a school, but mainly housed multiple disabled people. I liked that for a while, that was actually what my education was in, but I felt like I was just hurting people and unfortunately one of the clients became very aggressive and I actually got injured, so put me out of work for a little while and I said, “You know what, I better go back to school.” I started the apprenticeship program in 1999 which was four years of going to a trade school and getting 2,000 hours a year of practical. Once I graduated I became a full blown carpenter and then they added multiple trades a couple years down the line.

I do like my job here. It’s fun. Now I mainly deal with signage and labeling, putting Braille up, and replacing signs. If the department wants something, like their logo, they can send it to us if it has enough pixels, which a year ago I didn’t know what a pixel was. Now I do, but you know it has to have a jpeg and I want to sound like I know what I’m talking about. Photoshopping things, find out that really there is fake everything because I can put your head on somebody else’s body, and I’m getting good at it.

This is an exciting time here on campus, you know, we are allowed workplace education. But I am so old school that I definitely am going to have to get a couple more of those computer skills, just learning what the F keys do. You can now take classes on your computer. But, uh, this is--this is a good campus, um, I like the students. I prefer not to see you in your pajamas showing up to class, but you guys are entertaining. I like interacting with them. I mean, never would my...
hair have ever been green, but now it’s a normal thing. I don’t color my hair. However, I have been thinking of coloring it purple. I want to look like Veronica from Archie. Did you ever read Spiderman? Did you even read comic books as kids? We had Captain Kangaroo, and I was actually on The Bozo Show, twice. Bozo the Clown, you ever heard of him? Bright orange hair, blue outfit, no? I was Hooked on Phonics, where your phone will read you your books. I just don’t need instant gratification I guess. If you want to reach me you have to call my landline. And if I don’t recognize your number, I don’t answer the phone.

I live up in New Salem. I have a very large piece of property with fruit trees and bunnies. We do a lot of hunting. I grew up in the age where you learned to shoot guns and I’m good at it, and I eat what I kill, or almost everything. There’s a couple chipmunks that I am gunning for because they just ate all my birdfeeders. However, the bunnies on our property are not the rabbits that we want, so we mainly go up to Maine or Vermont to rabbit hunt snowshoe hare which are not little tiny cottontails. Farm living, it’s nice. I put on orange and sit in the woods in a chair that I have, a roof over with my little pavilion I built up on my property. I don’t have any kids. I only have dogs, birds, chickens, rabbits, and a moose that is one heck of a moose. I have a cockatiel that lived thirty-seven years. We only breed our beagles so that we get new dogs.

We met an eagle down on the Quabbin and now the eagle comes to our boat and she takes the fish right off the front of our boat and flies away. Now this eagle is like our pet. There’s a resource right there, you can rent a boat, go out on the Quabbin, fish, see wildlife. I go all the time, there’s a lot to do in this state. It’s just an amazing thing.
A STORY OF
Aaron Braithwaite
A class project of Transforming Your World:
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The Brooklyn Bridge to the Pioneer Valley

Growing up in Brooklyn? It was ok, it was alright living when I was living there as a kid, but as you know as I got older the teenage years got difficult, but I lived in Queens. If you know anything about Queens, it was kind of tough, but that’s where we grew up. I liked the Amherst area and I was just having kids myself. I used to come here on vacation with my mother. I lived in Brooklyn and Brooklyn back then in ’89 was pretty bad. So, I said to myself that I wouldn’t raise my kids in New York. I would raise them up here and I liked the valley.

My wife and I lived in the same building in New York City. She was the girl that used to bug me all the time and she caught me. I’ve been with her for possibly 32 years, 33 years. We’ve been together for a very long time. New York has changed so much over the years. It’s unrecognizable, now it’s, it’s different. I would’ve never left. I wish I also stuck it out, but at that time it was a drug era. And I was not going to have my kids growing up in that situation, so I moved here. In the last six years we’ve been working together, but before then we had a kid so one of us worked nights and one of us worked days. We switched over for a lot of years and we made it work.

My oldest daughter is 31. I have two other daughters that are 29 and 26. And I have a son that’s 15, but my daughters are all out on their own. They’re married now. They’re doing their own thing. I’m here worrying about my son, so you know prioritizing his education at high school. We enjoy playing basketball together, I’m teaching him the way of game. He’s learning a lot on his own as well, but as long as he focuses on school, I’m happy. I’m hoping he goes to UMass because it’s what he knows, so maybe he will come to UMass we’ll see. He loves the area, he likes going to the gym, he knows the college and he knows everybody around here. It would also be cheaper for me, but whatever he wants to do, as long as he goes to college; he doesn't really have much of a choice in that matter, he is going somewhere. Me and my wife travel a lot with him, he loves to go down to Baltimore and be with my friends. They have a son who plays the same things that he already knows. When he gets down there, he has someone to have a conversation with and be friends with.

I’ve worked at UMass for about thirty years now. I'm the Head Custodian in Bartlett and Goodell. I used to work in the dining commons many years ago. My wife worked at Hills, but it’s not even there anymore, she worked in there for ten years. It’s just a job. You know, it’s really just a job. It’s okay. You know. There’s nothing really to talk about the job. I don't really mess with students that much, that's not really part of my job. I try and stay away from you guys, you make me feel old (with a chuckle). I just go to work and I come back, and that’s pretty much it. As far as my job is concerned. I just try to keep work at work and home at home. However, there is a lot of opportunity once you get on campus. You know there are a lot of departments here at UMass. Depending on your ability and health, you can move around a lot. I try and tell
the young people in my community that you are not stuck in one place, you can move around and try and make some more money for your family. I try and explain it to them, but you know they think I’m old school, so I just leave them alone and have them try and figure it out on their own.

I just need my wife and kids. I love this town. We moved here, and we can't seem to leave this place. We moved to Northampton for like eight months, and my wife was like no, back to Amherst! Really, we would like to go back to New York, but we don't think about that now. But maybe in a couple of years when we will be retiring. Maybe in ten years I think we will probably end up back in New York, but as of right now we are just doing what we have to do right now. Get my son through high school and then college, then we can figure it out.

I just had a birthday the other day on Sunday. So, I just want to get to the next birthday.
Mitzi’s Balance

Mitzi Louis-Douglas has been part of the UMass community since 2013. After spending most of her life in the Bronx, Mitzi and her family enjoy a happy, relaxed lifestyle in Amherst.

“You know, money isn’t everything. If you’re not happy, who needs it?”

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Happiness Above All

I actually grew out of New York. It’s nothing like it used to be when I was a child. The struggle, you struggle everywhere. But it was harder there than it is here. You know, it’s just really hard to make it there.

Things change so much and I don’t like my home state. It’s a lot of crime, a lot of high rents. One morning, my daughter was on her way to school. She was surrounded by a group of guys and they wanted to steal her jacket because it was a Nine brand jacket. She was going to give it to them, but something in her mind told her otherwise. Being raised in New York, you are raised streetwise. So, instead of her giving up the jacket, what did she do? She backs up and acts like she has a gun. When she told me this story, I said “give them the coat. Your life is worth a whole lot more.” But now I realize why she did it. When it happened to my brother years ago in this same avenue, he froze to death coming back home, but my kid was not going to let it happen.

I knew New York wasn’t where I wanted to be. I thought, if we can just get out of New York and let my grandkids be raised in a better place where they don’t have to be watching their backs afraid all the time—then life will be better.

I think about my children a lot. My son. His girlfriend grew up here [Amherst] and then she moved to New York and they went to high school together and they got together and then he left home and they came here. He was telling me about working at UMass and I said: “Massachusetts sounds too good to be true, I can’t believe all this stuff.” So that’s when I started visiting. I couldn’t believe all of the benefits this area had. I couldn’t believe it, I couldn’t! My son told me, “If you get into UMass it’s steady work and you get your insurance and everything and you go from there!”

I knew I wasn’t gonna stay here and make half of what I was making [in New York] but that’s what I did. I started working in the DC for one semester. Every day I was putting in applications for all other positions. I put in applications and got another position for housing. I continued from housing to working in Southwest, and then I transferred here.

Now I’m a maintainer. I like the hours. I’m working from 5 a.m. to 1. Basically, I’m working on my own, which I’m good at. I work better by myself. So I like coming in here and there’s nobody here and I get my work done how I want to do it.

I could say a passion of mine is cleaning, too! So, that’s why this job fits me well, you know. To be honest I love the students here. I have never had a bad interaction with them. Everyone I have
talked to is respectful and I don't have any problems with them. The only issue here is with the male students who don't like to flush the urinal!

I do more than just my job, too. I like to watch all the ratchet shows, *Flavor of Love* and all that. All kinds of stuff though like the politics, sports channels and all that every day. My husband has me into politics heavily and with the current President we have now, I believe everyone should be into that heavily. I like to cook and clean, stay home with my husband and watch TV, and if I don’t have to watch my grandkids, I’m going straight to the gym. I love working out you know, I’m just into a lot of natural healing. However, out of all of this, I prefer to hang out with my kids and run around doing things for them.

There are many good things that come from working in Amherst but there are some things that are just so different from New York, such as the holidays. In New York, you get paid double time and they say that here, but it doesn't happen. You go in on a holiday for an eight-hour day then they pay you for another eight hours, but in New York you would get 24 hours for the holiday, then 16 for coming in, and there are just differences. You get paid for the day that for the holiday, plus a double time, which is 16 hours-worth coming in.

You know, it’s just really hard to make it in New York. The struggle, you struggle everywhere. But it was harder there than it is here. But you know, money isn’t everything. I’m happy doing what I’m doing. Money’s not worth a thing if you’re not happy with it. If you’re not happy, who needs it?
Thank You

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