

“What Y’all See is What Y’all Get”

One night at work when she was particularly frazzled over the condition of her bras and underwear I told her about my assignment, she laughed. When I told her how Justin and I argued over who would get to interview her she laughed again and said, “No you didn’t, no you didn’t.” Then when I asked her if I could interview her and she realized I was serious she asked, “why me?” She gave me a number of reasons to ask someone else like, “I’m not nobody special” and “I don’t know how much help I’ll be.”

A week later when I came to interview her during her lunch break at Wal-Mart she still didn’t really believe I was serious. Her first question was, “Is it cause its black history month?” I just laughed and said no it’s because you’re a woman with a lot of insight to give. I told her the questions weren’t hard and the answer doesn’t matter, even still she looked skeptical and we headed to the break room.

I’d like you to meet Melissa S. Webb, 52 years old, born and raised in Radford, Virginia. Currently she works at the fitting room in the apparel department at Wal-Mart. As a fellow employee I can say the store would be lost without her beautiful smile and spirit. She never meets a stranger and can make anyone feel an inexplicable wave of comfort when in her company. Customers and employees alike notice her and are drawn to her, she exudes trust and love for everyone, and everyone is her sister or brother.

As she sat down with her dinner, I began my interview with asking her about her childhood rules and responsibilities. She is the youngest out of a family of five with three sisters and one brother. She said her mother’s number one rule was to always act like a lady. One of her chores as a little girl was carrying coal to heat their home. She also told me that their home had no bathroom and they had a “Johnny house.” Her mother worked

as a maid and housekeeper then later worked for Radford University as a maid. Her father worked at Lynchburg Foundry for about 30 years. She also added that her father was once interviewed by a Radford University student. I noticed her relax a little more at this point and I could see her swell with pride.

One reason I chose Melissa is because she is black. I really wanted to learn more about the struggles she faced not only as a woman but as a black woman. She said that racism was not very common throughout her life but she did remember something happening to her father at work. His lower body was crushed between some machinery by a fellow worker who held a grudge towards him. Melissa said that her family did not have any animosity against the man but they felt hurt that someone could do such a thing. During this I could see the pain that her father felt come across her face but I could also see where the strength of her spirit came from.

As a little girl Melissa went to Belview elementary which was an all black elementary school at this time. Integration began when she began high school at Auburn High. She said she never experienced any racial problems when schools were integrated. That she was very accepted and very well liked. This answer did not come as a surprise because in the year that I have known this woman I have always known her to be friendly and true to people. She isn't putting on a show when she is friendly, she is genuine. She went on to tell me that she was frequently chosen to sing solos for school programs and functions.

I went on to ask about her various jobs throughout her life. She worked for Mackie Company, Tastee Freeze, Hills dept. store, AT&T, Heritage Hall nursing home, and Wal-Mart. At Mackie she filled vending machines, changed coffee filters and made

coffee, at Tastee Freeze she was a cook and has been answering phones and doing customer service work at all of her other past jobs. She said she only had to deal with a racial issue in the workplace at her first job..."The woman I worked for was jealous cause everyone liked me and everyone liked to talk to me, and she did not like me for whatever reason." She said though, that the jobs she had were often seen as demeaning for black people but she was proud to have a job. She said working was very rewarding for her and she was proud to have the opportunity to be chosen for these jobs. Melissa also said she was thankful that she did not face the challenges of her parents. She told me the story of her grandfather Jake Stuart. "He was very intelligent and very bright; he started out working in the Canteen of the Lynchburg Foundry but ended up being the first black man to be an officer of the credit union. Unfortunately in the times he was living in he was murdered. His body was found near the railroad tracks and no one did anything. The law didn't want to get involved, and everyone just kinda let it go." This was the only time in my 2 hours with her that I could see a profound sadness lurk across her face. It struck me deeply as well, although I can't say I am surprised considering the politics of the time he would have been living.

Melissa married later in life and had one son. When I asked her about his rules and chores and things like that she said "he didn't have to do any work, he never had to carry coal or use a Johnny house." He was expected to behave, make his bed, and help sweep. Every Sunday Melissa her son and her husband went to church together and with beaming pride she told me he is going into the ministry now.

My next topic was the Civil Rights movement and the Women's Rights movement, she told me she wouldn't have much to offer for these, she really

underestimates herself sometimes...She said that the civil rights movement was a rough time for her and all blacks. She said she felt like she had to be on her P's and Q's. She did have the opportunity to march in downtown Radford and she said that was one of her proudest memories because they were marching in unity and in peace. She was also able to attend NACP conventions in Virginia Beach, VA because her father was president of the NACP.

She was not as involved in the Women's Rights movement but as I asked her these questions she sighed and I could tell she wished she could have been more active during that time. She said she believes in equal rights for everyone not just blacks or women but for everyone. She also said she is thankful to have more rights, choices and opportunities for her life and for her brothers and sisters. She got fired up here! She was just a sweeping and went on to say, "...if we wanna be a doctor we can, if we wanna run for city office we can, if we wanna run for the government we can!"

When I asked her if she thinks younger generations take older generations' work and struggles for granted she said no, no, we can't afford to take things for granted. She went on to say "we (as blacks) have come a long way but we ain't outta the woods yet." She did however say that she believes some do take their opportunities for granted but she believes it's because of how they are brought up, that they don't have people who really care about them to steer them in the right direction. She said that's what I do, "I try to steer them, do what I can to be a blessing to all my brothers and sisters, don't matter who you are cause God made us all and everything he made is good! Make sure you put that in there." She went on to say that everyone knows she doesn't play games, that she is real. She says "I don't have time for games; I got time to be real. So everyone knows

they can trust me and they can bring any problem to me and I'll pray for them." She told me about a man who also works at Wal-Mart who has been having some struggles and he wanted to speak to her alone about them. She said, "I bet people wonder why people always wanna talk to me, they wonder "What's so special bout Melissa?" I ain't nobody special I'm just me and people are drawn to me...what y'all see is what y'all get...I just know how to appreciate who they are and help them, it's not hard when you're raised that way."

With my questions about aging she gave many wonderful examples about how aging adults are treated in the workforce. She said that many get passed over or kicked to the curb. One of her nieces has worked for 12-13 years and now her job is being phased out and she doesn't know what to do. Melissa's advice here: "It behooves us to not get wrapped up in a job but (here she pointed above and even with a broom in hand her serene face looked angelic) get wrapped up in the One who provided in the first place and will continue to provide. She conceded that men and women do get treated differently when they are aging in the workforce. Men tend to last longer while women are encouraged to quit their jobs. Another example from her is her sister, she is 66 years old and she is getting pushed out of her job of 30 years as an administrator of the Veterans Hospital. They keep trying to get her to step down before she can retire and receive all of her benefits.

When I asked her about her own job and what made her feel fulfillment she said the people. This woman works for the people, she works for being a friend and making people feel important and that someone truly cares about them. With her family she treasures being in church together and is thankful for having those days to share with her

family and just be there for each other. Outside of work and her family life she enjoys visiting hospitals, jails, nursing homes and ministering to people in need.

She said she is most thankful for her husband because he is very supportive and understanding. "I have the best husband he has always been very supportive. When I was dating him my mother was very sick and we were gonna get married. I knew he was gonna ask me and it was gonna be awful to say no, cause my momma was sick and I couldn't leave her and I woulda had to move to Pearisburg. Well we talked and he let me stay with my momma and later he even stayed with us. He was very caring for my mother, he always took us both out, he loved us both really, and when my momma died he cried harder than anyone there because he truly loved my momma, yes he did. And I am so thankful to have him in my life. You don't see too many men that give you the whole tax refund check to care for your momma with, most men worship money, not him. He would buy me jewelry and I would lose them. Most men would get angry cause you lost it not him, I'd say honey I lost my diamonds, he'd say its ok Melissa. He always loved what's important. I could tell that they have an amazing relationship because even talking to me she began to get teary-eyed just talking about the wonderful man that "God put before her." I don't know how, but I always feel so refreshed and so peaceful when I am talking to Melissa, I feel free.

My last question was what advice she would like to give the young people of my generation. She said, "remember as long as you can keep God, he gonna bless you, I know that for a fact, I know that for a fact. Stay in school, get all the education you can and be call you can be with the Lord on your side. She also said to take Matthew 6:33 and

apply it to all that you do, “But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.”

“My father always used to sing this song, “If I can help somebody as I travel along, if I can heal somebody just with a word or song, if I can show somebody that he’s traveling wrong, then my living shall not be in vain.” And I believe it, that’s how I live, if I can help somebody then my life will not be in vain.”

In the year that I have known Melissa I can say that surely her life has not been in vain. She is a pillar of strength, kindness and love. She is the real thing, she has seen the best and the worst that this world has to offer throughout her life and it is a true tragedy that there aren’t more Melissa Webb’s in this world. She thinks that she’s “nobody special” but the funny thing is that everyone else knows she is special. I hope that I will be able to spread her values and insight on life with this paper, I only wish there was a way to include her infectious smile and joyous laughter. To anyone reading this, if you ever find yourself struggling with life and you have no one to turn to, head to the fitting room at Radford Wal-Mart. The only thing truly worth paying for in that store won’t cost you a dime, the genuine love, compassion, and prayers of a wonderful woman named Melissa Webb.