

Salvation Army Pathway of Hope Oral History Project

Interview with J October 25, 2019

Interviewer: Samantha Meyer

Narrator: J

Date: October 25, 2019

Location: Salvation Army, 724 Dale Ave SE, Roanoke, Virginia

Transcribed by: Liz Lee, Megan Reynolds

Duration: 40:42

Index:

0:00 = Introduction of interview

0:22 = Brief self-introduction by narration

0:55 = Growing up in Craig County (1980s-1990s)

1:56 = Experiences at college; developing interest in social work

3:42 = Moving to Roanoke three years ago

4:52 = Work at the Salvation Army

9:40 = Services that the Salvation Army offers

11:54 = Main goals of Pathway of Hope program

13:56 = Discussion of Pathway of Hope program; responsibilities, current numbers of the clients, changes, funding & budget

17:17 = Future of the program

20:14 = The narrator's motivation to work for the Salvation Army

22:52 = Support from public of Salvation Army

24:26 = Experiences working at the Salvation Army's Turning Point shelter

26:43 = Experiences with domestic violence; connection with clients on this issue

30:21 = Rewards of job

31:24 = Perspective on life; experience in first social work class

34:10 = Personal goals

36:43 = Personal goals for her daughters

37:56 = Advice for people interested in social work

39:55 = Closing remarks

00:00

SM: This is Samantha Meyer interviewing J for the Pathway of Hope Oral History Project. It's October 25, 2019 at 9 a.m. and we're in the conference room at the Salvation Army in Southeast Roanoke. Thank you so much for meeting with us today.

Could you start by telling us just a little bit about yourself?

00:25

J: I'm 36 years old. I'm a single mom of two teenage girls. I have been a single mom now for thirteen years, doing it by myself. I'm a college grad with a master's [degree] in social work. I've been kind of all over the field. That's about it, I guess.

00:55

SM: Where did you go to school?

00:56

J: In the sticks, is what you'd call it. Craig County.

01:02

SM: Is it here in Roanoke?

01:03

J: No. It's about 45 minutes away from here.

01:06

SM: Okay.

01:07

J: So, picture, you know, Franklin County. Kind of like that.

01:10

SM: Okay, so you are local to Virginia. What was going to school like? Did you always know that you wanted to do social work?

01:21

J: Going to school... when I went to a pretty much all-white school. So I was the only biracial kid there, which, pretty much, [I] was always referred to as like the black kid that never, actually

I guess, had a name. So it really sucked. I got bullied a lot. Hated it, wanted to get home-schooled. My mom wouldn't let me, so I just kind of became tough.

01:52

SM: And that was like elementary school, middle school, high school?

01:55

J: Yeah, they are all together.

01:56

SM: Okay, and then, so where did you get your degrees from?

02:00

J: I got my bachelor's... well, I first went to Virginia Western Community College for my Associate's [degree] and I went to Mary Baldwin [University] for my Bachelor's [degree], and Aurora University for my Master's [degree].

02:14

SM: So, when you went to college, did you know that you wanted to do social work? Or did you kinda go in not knowing what the heck you wanted to do?

02:23

J: Well, ever since I was a kid, originally, I had this dream I was gonna be a veterinarian, and that was what I was gonna do. And... I met my now ex-husband, in an early age so... my beginning years of college I kind of just failed out my first year for not going. And then [I] got kinda confused I guess what I wanted to do, and I worked for a couple of vet offices, and...thought I'd get my foot in the door and then tried to go to [Virginia] Tech to be a vet. And I had an allergic reaction to somebody's animal, and I realized, like, that probably was not gonna be the field that was gonna be the best suited for me. So, I kinda was like, "What am I gonna do?" So, I took general studies, and you know, with all the craziness that I guess was going on in my life at that point...someone said, "Did you ever consider doing counseling?" I was like, "No, why would I do that?" So, I was like, "Well, hum, you know, I do pretty good with talking with people." So took a few classes and I fell in love with psychology, and social work was a lot easier to go into than getting a degree in psychology to do practically the same thing.

03:42

SM: Okay, so how did you find yourself ending up in Roanoke?

03:46

J: In Roanoke, probably because in the little, small town which I grew up in, there are not any real employment opportunities. About the only thing that is over there, there is a grocery store, a Subway, and a Family Dollar are the two biggest like, named places that you would recognize. So those were not necessarily options that I wanted. And most people from over there travel either to Roanoke or Covington to work at the paper mill, that was also not an option. So came over here and started working and this is where I was coming to school, and I moved to Roanoke three years ago. After my dad passed away, there just wasn't anything really keeping me in Craig [County].

04:39

SM: Oh okay. What did you do, did you have a previous job here before you worked at the Salvation Army? Or have you been working here ever since you moved to Roanoke?

04:48

J: I've been working here the whole time I've been living in Roanoke.

04:52

SM: Oh okay. How did you find yourself at the Salvation Army?

04:58

J: I was doing my internship. I actually was working at the local detention center. And interning, doing part of my internship there. But couldn't do all of it, since I work there. So I was interning at our battered women shelter. And they liked me, so they offered me a job.

05:17

SM: Okay, what was that like working at the shelter?

05:24

J: I mean, this work, there's never a dull moment. I gotta say when you're in social work you see a little bit of everything. I tend to get drawn to where I have a passion about something or where I have previous experience personally. So, I picked ... there to do the internship and had a connection at the detention center. So I just felt like it was another learning experience on the way to kind of become a well-rounded social worker.

06:00

SM: So you would say that, that experience of the detention center definitely helped you with the things that you deal with here and the clients that you deal with here?

06:09

J: Not necessarily that one so much. But... all of it pieced together makes me well rounded, to pretty much deal with any type of clientele because I've worked with adult ex-felons in my previous history. I was an EMT [emergency medical technician] at one time, so, I mean, I've seen a little bit of everything. The detention center, it's just juvenile criminals...so I've seen it where it starts and where it ends. So that's why I feel like it makes me well rounded, because I've seen it from total different spectrums of it, so...

06:58

SM: So, what does a typical day look like here? Is there one? Is it something different every single day?

07:06

J: I'd say something different every single day. This is probably more chill out of anything I've ever done. I do usually stay pretty busy, because I never know like when someone's gonna come in and need something and, you know, like yesterday, I had all this stuff planned out I was gonna catch up on paperwork. It didn't happen, because little things happen. But... I'm not dealing with individuals in crisis so much here. They may have moments of crisis but this position is a way of preventing people from being in crisis. Whereas most of the other jobs I've had, you know, they are kind of draining. I mean, you have to be prepared for this type of work. You have to love what you do. Otherwise, you get burn out really quick.

08:04

SM: So, what are some of the challenges that you face working at the Salvation Army?

08:14

JM: Hm... I mean for most people... I like the fact that it's a religious organization. I'm a religious person. But it's not when it is like, I think people get a misconception. It's not like it's put on people. You know, if someone needs it, then we talk about it. But I like that we have a good support system and we are a team here. It's one of the first places I can say that I have worked where that actually is true because other places that the challenge has been 'it's every man for themselves' and people get thrown under the bus. The biggest challenge here is not taking your stuff home with you. That's pretty much anything in social work because it's frustrating and irritating and when you like can't figure out a way to fix a problem, and you see people suffering, and you know, you try and do everything in your power and you're met with obstacles from like other things, and you know, you have to maintain boundaries and not overstep. It's hard not to be like, "Oh, well if I was a millionaire, how could I just solve all of this and I would just feed everybody and house everybody," but you know, that's not realistic.

09:40

SM: I guess I should have asked this before, could you explain a little bit of like what the Salvation Army as a whole does, like what kind of services they offer, and how they help people?

09:53

J: So, well, here locally, ... we did have a homeless shelter for men but that's closed. Now we just have a DV—which is domestic violence, sexual violence, sex trafficking—shelter that is open to anyone that has experienced any of those. We have a new day center, which houses 18 to 24-year-old youth that have aged out of foster care. That, the foster care part, is not a stipulation to be able to go down there. During really hot weather and cold weather we have cooling and warming stations, so people can get in and out from the weather. We have the Pathway of Hope, which is a program to help stop intergenerational poverty. We have aftercare, which is case management for those that have completed programs to kind of make sure that they maintain and stay on the right track. We have pastoral care, which an officer or someone more connected with the church is there to support and talk to somebody if they need it, pray with them, and just give them a little extra support system if they don't really have one or if they're interested in learning more religiously. Then they have the church service stuff that they offer like for the youth, which is kind of like how Girl Scouts are, they can earn badges and stuff. They send kids to camp. I'm probably forgetting something... they have stuff for senior citizens...

11:54

SM: Could you, kind of, elaborate on the Pathway of Hope and what the main goals of that are? I know it's to target intergenerational poverty, but maybe talk about that a little bit more?

12:06

J: So, with Pathway of Hope, the biggest thing is to formulate a relationship and its... I know with my place the concept is to have a team and to work together to figure out what goals they want to work on. There are assessments that people do that help us figure out like where their level of hope is, are they ready to change, and willing to change their circumstances, and based on those assessments figure out if that is a good candidate for the program. Because, it's not just open to anybody. It is a process. Because if someone has no real hope of changing of circumstances, nor are they willing to put in the time and effort, obviously that's not an ideal candidate, but that's part of it. They assess their weaknesses and strengths to figure out how to build good action plans to accomplishing some of the goals. So, you know, we help them see, like, the bigger picture to try and set forth a no-fail hopefully direction into accomplishing their goals. And then any other little supports that they need, you know, to advocate for them because, you know, sometimes people don't understand how the system works. Sometimes people are met with discrimination; that's where I come in, you know, I go to court with people. The whole point is to give someone the life that they want to have, that they feel like is too far out of their own reach.

13:56

SM: Has it always been... how long has it been a thing at the Salvation Army? Has the Pathway of Hope always existed for a long time? Or is it like a newer program?

14:09

J: It's a newer program. I've been here for three years and it started here when I started.

14:15

SM: Okay. So you've been working with the Pathway of Hope since you've been here.

14:18

J: I have not since I started. So, I originally was at the shelter. There was another case manager for this, and they have since left. So I moved over into this position.

14:34

SM: Okay. So how—cause I know you said you go to court with people—what are some of the other responsibilities that you have within the Pathway of Hope program?

14:46

J: The thing is there really aren't any designated responsibilities. And just, I'm just like "Okay sure, you need me there, I'll be there." I do whatever needs to be done to make sure that the individuals that I work with feel like that they have a strong support system and I'm there through whatever they need me to be through. So, if somebody wants me to go to the doctor with them, I've done that before. You know, I've gone with a client to find out what the gender of their baby was gonna be. So, I mean, I really don't have a restriction on what I do it kind of depends upon the relationship with that client and what they need from me.

15:29

SM: How many clients are in the program here right now? Just a rough estimate...

15:36

J: Technically ten. It's like, I've just got on three more they aren't officially in it, so...

15:43

SM: Okay. What's something that you... Is there anything you would change about the way that the Pathway of Hope program operates, or do you think it's doing what it's supposed to be doing?

15:57

J: Well, we already just recently made some changes cause the program was gonna be, you had to either be working full time or part time and going to school. And I felt like that kind of shut out a lot of people that needed us and were probably willing to participate in the program. So now it's kind of been opened up a little more to people that, you know, may be on disability or if someone is actively wanting to change their situation and willing to put in the effort, then I'm willing to work with them.

16:33

SM: Okay, that's awesome. How do you guys, like, get your funding for the program? Is it nonprofit just by donations? Or is it there like a set budget?

16:50

J: So it's a little bit of everything. So, we have a donor that supports this program and... money that we get from... is it DHQ? I tend to get those mixed up...we get money from them. So, grants are another big thing.¹

17:17

SM: What's something that you want to see happen with the Pathway of Hope? Do you want to see it like expand and get a lot of people? Or do you think it's okay how it is right now?

17:35

J: I hadn't actually thought of that so... Hmm, I mean ultimately I think anybody wants to see their program grow... I think, and I don't know like if it would even be possible for Pathway of Hope because the title of it, should expand and not necessarily offer hope to just families. It would be nice to be able to see Pathway of Hope be able to work with anybody that wanted to change their circumstances ultimately because families aren't the only thing that are in poverty, but I mean it's an ideal place to start to see, like, if a program is gonna work and how many people are going to be invested in it, but it would be nice to see if it could grow in that direction to be able to help more people.

18:27

SM: What is something that people probably don't know about the program that you want them to know. Like, what, why is it important? I mean, you kind of have touched on that already but...

18:39

J: Um... One thing I feel like a lot of people had a misconception of is what Pathway of Hope was because my biggest thing was that I wanted to try and sell it on people, like myself, that you know, I had to kind of maneuver a system on my own the hard way and figure things out and

¹ DHQ may be a reference to the Salvation Army National Capital & Virginia Division's Divisional Headquarters.

didn't have a good support system when I necessarily needed help with things and was kind of combated with some discrimination and something like this could have been helpful, but I was also prideful and didn't really want to ask for help. So those types of people that are like "Alright, well I'm not as bad off as this person over here," and plus you don't want people to know what you're going through and struggling, because you want people to think that you have everything together and you don't want the outside world to know. So my biggest thing was trying to let people know that "Okay, this program just isn't for families necessarily in poverty," because people hear that word and it naturally seems negative and people are like "I'm not in poverty, though." But, if you're struggling and you're having a hard time, then, could you possibly be more open to a program that stated that it was for working families? So, try to emphasize that more so.

20:14

SM: Do you see yourself... what drives you to keep working here and working with the program and at the Salvation Army?

20:25

J: What drives me? Um...my biggest thing, I guess, is that knowing everything that I've been through, over the years, that I wanted to make sure that people could see me as a role model for the fact that you don't have to go through this alone, that you can overcome your circumstances, and reach your goals. Because a lot of people look at me, they don't know my past, they make assumptions. So, what drives me is, when I see people dealing with some of the same things that I have and we're able to build a connection, to be like, "I was once in your shoes but look at where I am now. You may have lost all hope, but I'm telling you that hope is possible and you can come up from what your current situation is." That's what drives me. And I think that certain people just naturally maybe have that in them. I think we're drawn to certain things based on our own personal experiences and because our personalities just fit with that type of work.

21:55

SM: So do you see yourself staying here for a long time or is there something else you want to move to and go off and do different things [*laughter*]?

22:08

J: So right now, the goal is to stay here for a while. I mean, before, you know, I did contemplate and think about going into other things because originally, when I decided to go into this field, I was really fascinated with criminal justice too, so that's how I got involved working with the ex-felons and the juveniles and you know, I was trying to double major and I thought, like, maybe I'll be a probation officer. And who knows what the future might hold, maybe one day I'll do that, but right now I'm pretty content where I'm at.

22:52

SM: If people want to get involved with Salvation Army, what are some of the options for them?

23:03

J: Like anybody? You mean, okay so volunteering...?

23:06

SM: Yeah, or donations or just if someone off the street is looking to help the Salvation Army and support what you guys are doing here, what are some of those options for them?

23:19

J: Well, we do have a volunteer coordinator, so anytime anybody wants to give back and do stuff, you know, they're looked at, what their skill sets are, and they connect them to where it's gonna best be fitted here. Like this time of year, bell ringing is a big thing. Donation-wise, people just send money and it specifically states that it comes to Roanoke or if they have a passion about a specific...what's the word I'm looking for... group that they want to work with. Some people, you know, they have a passion for domestic violence victims, so they specifically want money to go there. Some deal with youth so people specify in that manner. We have had people have special, and they donate proceeds to us. So, there are different ways.

24:26

SM: I'm going to back track a little bit. What did you do when you first started working at the Salvation Army? What were some of your responsibilities and your title, I guess?

24:39

J: So, I was a case manager at the Turning Point and pretty much it's the same concept as what I do here, except those clients are in crisis mode. So, it's like, alright what are the first few things that we have to get done, so that means dealing with the legal system a lot more than what I do now. It means getting protective orders, it means going to court numerous times, that's custody, that's, you know, it could be all sorts of different legal things depending upon what it is. So, you become close with the police department and judges. You know, you build these connections with them and then the rest of it is setting goals, trying to find housing, and jobs for people, whereas most of the clientele that I have now are usually already housed, already have a job, or they have some sort of an income because they are on disability or something. So, they're past the crisis mode, it's just the matter of making sure that the people I work with now maintain and don't become homeless versus these people [who] ran from a scary situation. They don't really trust anybody so trying to build that connection is a little bit harder because you're just kind of like everybody else that's ever said that they're going to help and it's like "are you just doing this 'cause it's your job, or do you actually care what happens to me?" type thing, and it's also frustrating sometimes, and scary, because when they go back you don't know, are you ever going

to see them again? And, you know, in those situations it's hard for your client to be like, "you don't understand what I'm going through!" But there again, I'm like, you can't always judge a book by its cover because you don't know how much I actually do know about what you're going through.

26:43

J: I was a victim of domestic violence, and I get not trusting and I get that people don't understand why people go back every time. And logically, now looking back, it's like, I don't really know what I was thinking, but I can see and it's like you do kind of want to be like, stop and think, because I know where the end is going to go. But, in those moments, like, I know what they're thinking. You think that you can change them, that you're going to make things better. People stay because of kids, that's the biggest reason. You know, I did. But then I tell them that story, and I tell them, like, I've seen the worst that could happen because I lost my mom to a domestic violence situation. My dad killed her and then committed suicide. So, I'm like, you may think that that cannot be you and it's not like I thought that was going to be my life story. I also swore that I wasn't ever going to be in one of those situations because of what happened to my mom. I thought I was smarter than that and was in better control, but sometimes you fall right into those same footsteps.

28:09

SM: So you definitely think that your story has helped you a lot, especially working in social work because you can build that connection with those clients and have you had instances where they really had a kind of moment of clarity and they were kind of like "wow, I see J and how much she has changed" and heard her story and that has really helped them?

28:34

J: Mm-hmm [yes]. 'Cause lot of people are like, well... and especially when I was over there more so, and I have one client now that I have seen her from when she was my client over there and then she transferred to Pathway of Hope. But I didn't see her for a little while and now I'm her case manager again. And we have a good rapport with one another, and her story is amazing. It's her own though, of course, so I won't get into that, but you know, someone looks at you and they think "this person has their life together, they're doing well, emotionally stable, there is no way that they could have *ever* [emphasized] been in my situation and understood. Because someone who looks like that could have never once been where I am." And it's not one of those, in this field, it's not about you, and I don't share my story unless I feel like it's necessary. I've had to a few times and then the next thing, you know, they're crying and apologizing to me, which I'm at a point in my life where I can tell that story and not get emotional. So, I think they're like "wow, okay, well then, you know, that does give me hope that if you're able to do it, then I can as long as I have a support system." So, I have seen plenty of people go on and do well and make

it on their own and become strong, independent women. And I've also seen people continue to stay in that same revolving cycle.

30:21

SM: I'm assuming that is really rewarding to see these clients go from such low points to high points. What does that feel like to see the transformation of some of these people?

30:36

J: I think that it makes this whole job worthwhile because those are the days that you live for and they make... well, they make me push harder and drive through because I realize that there are going to be the days that there're going to be clients that are lost. That there are clients that you're just not going to get through, and they are frustrating and it makes you question and wonder why are you even in this field doing the work that you do, and you're like "maybe this isn't right for me. Maybe I suck at this," and then you have that one come along that's like "my life changed because of you" and you're like "okay, this is why I do what I do."

31:24

SM: That's awesome. Do you ever find yourself, because you talked about how people judge you, they judge your book. Do you ever find yourself doing the same, vice versa, for some clients, they seem one way but turn out to be totally different?

31:39

J: [*pause*] I can't really think of any time that I have, I think, you know, I mean it's human nature to judge at times, but for whatever reason, I don't know, when I got into this field I never thought that I would be so open-minded to things. The first class that I ever took, the professor asked us, "in this field, what is the one group that you would ever refuse to work with?" And she asked the entire class that, and most everybody said pedophiles or sex offenders and that was one. And at my very first internship, that was, kind of like, what got put on me. I was dealing with people that committed murder, had sexual assault [charges] and different things, but it was one of those instead of going by what someone else told me about this person or reading their file, giving that individual the opportunity to tell their story to me so I could understand, and it helped me to just be open-minded and to not judge people. Because it's really easy to be on the outside, looking in, and make judgment on somebody if you don't understand their story.

33:12

SM: So, do you think that working here and working with so many different types of people has definitely helped you just in life, in general, and in the outside world, outside of work, just having different perspectives about people and about life?

33:27

J: I do. I think that being connected with working with different types of people, it helps you to be patient, to be more kind, to want to be more helpful and to realize that the world has already probably given up on a lot of those people and they know that. So, why not be the one person that maybe sheds some light and gives hope back to the individual. I'm a firm believer that everybody is capable of change, if given the right tools and resources.

34:10

SM: That's wonderful. We've been talking about a lot of the goals of the Salvation Army and the goals of the people who come here and what we want for them. But what is something, what are some of your personal goals, for your life, for your family, your career?

34:32

J: Okay so, well, the biggest one—I've kind of accomplished them at this point—my biggest one was that I was going to finish college because I really didn't feel like that was going to be a possibility. And I had so many people telling me that I wasn't going to do it, and I wasn't capable of doing it, and that I should just maybe settle, you know, with being a single parent and that maybe I wasn't college material, which just fueled me that much more to try and prove everyone wrong. The only person I had backing me, my dad was the one person that from the time I was small always told me I could do anything that I set my mind to. And he believed that I was capable of doing great things, believed in me when I didn't believe in myself. And after he passed, I was in the midst of my bachelor's [degree] and I pushed on through and got it, and decided that he really wanted me to do things. So, I was like, I'm going to take a break from college, and I when I went back I was like "I want my Master's." And I finished that in a year and I feel like that was, based on some of the stuff he instilled in me. I never thought that I would be a homeowner. So, that's another goal that I just accomplished this year. So, probably about the last one is a title promotion [*laughter*] so I'm working on that. So then, I think, I'll have to revisit the goals. Maybe I'll think about my retirement plan. So, I don't know.

36:43

SM: What are some of the goals for your daughters? Do you want to push them to go to school since that was something so important to you?

36:54

J: I do, and that I think that has also driven me, being a single-mom. I wanted to prove that you can be a strong, independent woman and that anything life throws at you, you are still capable of doing what it is your heart desires and that people are going to judge you and try to knock you down but you can still accomplish anything. I think that they have realized that, you know, it is okay to ask for help, but sometimes you have to take initiative and learn to do things for yourself and be driven and goal-oriented. Right now, they talk about going to college. The funny thing is,

my oldest says that she wants to be a vet so I'm like, "Hmm, I wonder if she's going to do that." And the other one says that she's going to do what I'm going to do. So, we'll see.

37:56

SM: That's great. Do you have any advice for people who maybe want to get involved with social work and that's something that they are interested in doing with their lives?

38:08

J: I would say the first thing to do is before you dive right in, because it's not for everybody. And I think for people who have naturally helping personalities, it's a good thing. Because I was once of those "I'm going to save the world and I want to help everybody," and you've got to first learn to one, have boundaries and realize that you can't help people who don't actually want to help themselves, and instead of trying to fix your friends and your family find a job because at least that will be more rewarding. So, volunteering at places to see if this is what you want to do because if it's not the right fit and you've already invested all that time and effort, and school, and then realizing that this job isn't for you because of how widespread and the trauma and all the stuff that you have to deal with. Figure out what your passion is and then figure out what resources are available in the community. And even if that first place I would say isn't necessarily where you feel like "this is where I belong," I would say don't give up because I jumped around to a few different places to be like "what do I like, what do I know I definitely don't want to do in this field?" And I think that way you can decide "I like this, I don't like this. I can tolerate these things." And then you'll know if this is a good fit for you.

39:55

SM: Thank you. That's all the questions that I have. If there's anything else that you want to touch on or something that we didn't get to that you think is important, feel free to share.

40:09

J: I don't know. I guess, did all of y'all [everyone in the group] kind of come up with the questions together?

40:15

SM: Yeah.

40:17

J: I can't think of anything.

40:19

SM: Okay. Well, thank you so much. This was such a great opportunity. I think that it's really going to help the narrative of the whole project, the fact that we got to talk to you and not just the

clients. I think it's going to make a really big difference and we were really grateful to be able to talk to you and this whole experience has been really great. So, thank you so much.

40:40

J: You're welcome.

40:41

SM: Thank you.

[END]