The Accidental College Student

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Phyliss Dubinsky Shey
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Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to the best college roommate and friend anyone could hope for, Gail Spalding. Gail befriended a depressed and lonely girl who was floundering amid family drama and academic ambivalence and taught her how to study, manage her time, and most importantly, think critically. Gail was also really good at playing pool, swaggering into honky-tonks and biker bars, and dancing in gay bars. She was a good influence on me because she taught me how to approach and accept other people for who they are. I still miss her even though she has been gone more than twenty years. I think of her on her birthday, July 11, each year.

My children have been supportive of me on my educational journey from the very beginning of this endeavor to earn my Bachelor's and then my Master's degree. We began this long journey together when Lauren was a freshman and Ben was in high school. I dedicate this thesis to them. They know how much I love them.

I also wish to dedicate this thesis to the other women in my life, both past and present. My grandmothers Selma and Rose, may their memories be a blessing. Both provided that most needed ingredient in any young person's life, unconditional love. My aunts Adele and Charlotte, may their memories also be a blessing, were both supportive of my second career in college. I wish they were still here to share this with me. My aunts Shirley and Elaine have been cheering me on for years. I'm so glad they are a part of my life. To my girlfriends, Mimi, Michelle, Cindy, and Kathy, thanks for understanding many, many "I can't" excuses over the years.

My father, Sid, has come a long way since I was in high school and he didn't think it was necessary for a girl to earn a degree. Since beginning the Master's program, without fail, each phone conversation begins with a question about classes or writing. He is so proud of me, and I am so proud of him. I dedicate this thesis to you and to Ann.

And finally, I dedicate this thesis to my mother, Janice. I am truly blessed to have such a strong role model as my mother. Mom never kow-towed to societal norms when I was growing up if she believed they were wrong. She fought long and hard to ensure my sister and I received the kind of education she felt we deserved. I am so grateful that she is here with me.

Acknowledgements

This thesis would not be complete without the encouragement and guidance of three professors, Allison Anders, Bob Kronick, Barb Thayer-Bacon, and one graduate teaching assistant, Katharine Sprecher.

I can remember my first class with Dr. Barb, Contemporary Philosophy of Education. I was so lost, and Dr. Barb patiently drew out my inner philosopher until I was able to critique articles and write a cohesive response. Many courses later, I look back and realize how far I have come in my critical thinking about education in our schools. Thank you, Dr. Barb.

I've known Bob for years outside academia. It was a real pleasure to experience one of his classes early in my graduate school career. I was thinking of exploring the high school to college experience for a paper and he responded with, "Sounds like a dissertation topic to me." I about fell on the floor! At that beginning stage of my education, I wasn't seeing any light at the end of the tunnel and Bob helped me to do that. Thank you, Bob, for all of your encouragement.

Katharine's class on Teachers, Schools, and Society in the summer of 2009 was the genesis of my thesis; the beginning of my thinking about Odessa's schooling. And this was when I really began to critique the state of education in the United States. Thank you, Katharine, for being a wonderful teacher.

Allison has been cheering me on and guiding me for so long I'm sure she thinks this is the never-ending thesis. Thank you for being my teacher and my friend.

Abstract

This narrative study began as a retrospective of an in-depth interview study with a young woman who navigated the move from a large, suburban school system in the mid-Atlantic region before the fifth grade to a small, isolated rural school in Southern Appalachia in the 1990s. She graduated from the only high school serving the county in which she lived. Over the course of two formal interviews, hundreds of informal conversations for more than ten years, and particularly through writing this analysis (Goodall, 2000), I realized that even though there were vast differences between our ages, cultural backgrounds, and current lives, we walked in tandem through similar experiences along the convoluted path to college; even if at different times and locations. The purpose of this thesis is to represent both my production of her story and mine in order to share the experiences of two female first-generation non-traditional college students (page 71).

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Chapter 1
Introduction: Odessa, Big Southern, and Me

Odessa and Me

I first met Odessa[1] when she was nearly twenty years old upon the occasion of her coming to work in the same office building where I worked as an administrator for a large research university located in a mid-size city in the southern United States, "Big Southern". Odessa interviewed for a position in a different department than mine. The two departments often collaborated on projects and programs, so it was not unusual for staff from one department to participate in position interviews for the other. I can still picture Odessa at her job interview. I learned she was nineteen-years-old and had moved to the "big city" from a smaller community where she had been working for a couple of years after graduation from high school. She had a friend who worked at Big Southern who encouraged her to apply for a job but not for college. During the interview when asked, Odessa indicated she had no interest in going to college. I saw her purse her lips as a look of panic came into her eyes. Her brow furrowed as she emphatically shook her head and said something to the effect of "no way." I was instantly intrigued. I felt as if she was frightened of going to college which I thought was odd. During the interview Odessa told the group that she hated high school. She said that if she were ever to go to college, it would be to get a degree in art because she liked to draw. Her interview was in December. By the following summer, some of her colleagues in the building, including me, convinced her to take English Composition in summer – "just try it," we urged. She

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[1] All proper nouns and the participant's name are pseudonyms. I will discuss Odessa's choice of her pseudonym at length in another section.

had absolutely no knowledge of how to get admitted or enrolled in college. Two of us helped her with the admission process and soon we had Odessa enrolled in her first course. I had recently experienced the college admissions process with my daughter. I remembered the feeling of pride and accomplishment and felt similarly about Odessa's admission.

Both of Our Stories: Working and Studying at Big Southern

Big Southern is a large research institution with a predominantly white faculty and student body located in a small city in southern Appalachia. The largest groups of minority employees are in the clerical and service maintenance categories. While there is diversity gender-wise, the faculty remains less than seven percent Black; less than thirteen percent minority (Big Southern University Institutional Research, 2012).

To work here is like being in a bubble. Outside of the campus, we are surrounded by predominantly Christian conservative culture so common in the southern United States. Many of the university clerical employees I connect with are from the area and fit with the predominant Christian conservative culture. There is more diversity of background and culture among the administrators and faculty with whom I work. I am always navigating decisions on how to communicate with the two different groups; what is acceptable and what is not.

Big Southern is currently on a quest to become one of the top 25 colleges and has been undergoing a major cultural shift because of this. When I began here, the students, particularly undergraduates, were the afterthought. Policies were designed for the

convenience of faculty and staff or the institution. In recent years many academic policies have become much more focused on student learning and how best to maximize retention and persistence to graduation. The entire student information system has been undergoing a transformation in order to accomplish such things as easing bottleneck courses, degree plans, etc. Students are better able to navigate registration to ensure they get the classes they need when they need them in order to graduate on time. Systemically, this is fantastic and a good sign for progress forward in our quest to help our students. However, there remains the layer of culture, “we’ve always done it this way”, in some of our key administrative areas and among some of the staff.

Most of the faculty I know are my own professors, a very progressive group, or those who teach our first-year experience courses, and from the general Muro City community. My undergraduate courses taken here at Big Southern were mostly in the social sciences and humanities. My experience taking classes in the social sciences and then in graduate school have been different than what Odessa experienced. Most of my classes are based on collaborative learning, group discussion and group projects. I worked mainly with other students in my classes. Odessa’s major was more based on individual work. Odessa likes to work on her own independently at any rate. Each of our work styles turned out to be suitable for our educational pursuits.

Big Southern and Me:

Work Life at a Large Institution

When I began working at Big Southern more than ten years ago, I was coming back to work full-time after several years of part-time work. My oldest child was in high school and a friend suggested I work at Big Southern to take advantage of the tuition discount plan for children of employees. In addition, Big Southern as a university in the state system, offered excellent health benefits and retirement plans. I had no intention of taking advantage of free tuition for myself at the time. My then-husband was in a period of health decline, and I was more concerned with the benefits and full-time work.

My early career at Big Southern was as the assistant to the director of one of the academic advising offices. I worked with student scholarships, degree auditing, and students who needed help from the director for academic issues. After several years I took a position in another unit that allowed me to work with all undergraduate students. My current job at the Academic Support Center (ASC) affords me the ability to meet with students in academic distress, those who were on probation or who were dismissed. When I meet in person with students I want to hear their stories. Our unit has conducted surveys of students who break their housing contract between fall and spring semester. The seemingly obvious pattern is poor academics, but digging deeper and analyzing the student comments, one realizes that poor academics is often the result of other factors.

So, How Did I Get Here as a Researcher?

While I was in college in the 1970s, I worked at a car rental agency. After some time working there, I was offered a full-time management training position. I took it and quit school. To me college was about getting a degree to get a better job and earn more money. I chose the job and money over finishing my degree. At the time I never intended to go back to school, especially once I met and married my husband.

Soon after I began working at Big Southern University, I realized I should complete my bachelor's degree since the tuition was free. I knew that with my husband's failing health I would need to be the major breadwinner and the degree would help me with more earning power. I began working at Big Southern in July and began the admissions process in late August. I submitted transcripts from previous institutions, applied, and met with an advisor to figure out the quickest path to graduation. I was a criminology major before I quit school; Big Southern didn't offer that major at the time, but sociology fit the bill. I needed approximately 30 credits to complete the degree. I started the spring semester after I was hired. I was extremely nervous since it had been more than 25 years since I had been in a college classroom. I began with an upper level German Jewish history course. I knew enough to meet with my professor early in the semester to explain my circumstances. He was very kind and allowed me to submit many written drafts of my written work. After that first semester I typically took two courses per semester as well as two over each summer.

I was able to avoid a math course during my second college career but did have to complete natural science. I opted for geology because I could take both classes over the

summer. I took these two courses together with two other women who worked at Big Southern so that we could help each other and study together. We all made A's in both, but it was an intense summer! I loved geology so much that I had a brief period when I considered switching to a science major. I was almost a senior and would have had to go back to introductory science and math courses before I could get into major courses. Reverie was over in five minutes and I was back to sociology! I adored school this time around. I was learning so much from so many people, including my classmates. I was 30 years older than them but worked right alongside them in group study sessions and group presentations.

I took two and a half years to complete my bachelor's degree taking two classes part-time in fall and spring and one or two each summer. Odessa was working on her degree at the same time; she was taking three classes each semester plus one or two in summer. I was much further ahead as I transferred in many credits from my previous institutions.

While I was working on my bachelor's degree my marriage ended. It was very difficult to manage everything entailed in a divorce, moving, and getting my son admitted to college while working full time and taking classes. However, I eventually graduated with honors. My family was very proud of me, especially my children.

One or two semesters after I graduated I realized I missed school. I was a little envious of Odessa as she was still pursuing her degree and I was finished. I decided to apply for graduate school and began researching potential programs. Upon admission, I entered the Library Science program at Big Southern. I soon realized that I was not at all interested in the number system on book spines. Since my work at Big Southern was

mostly with students in need of academic assistance, I thought I should pursue something in education, and so I did. I found my niche in the Studies of Culture program in the College of Education at Big Southern. Odessa earned her bachelor's degree that spring and I was right behind her due to earn my master's degree the following fall.

Thesis Road Map

According to the Oxford English Dictionary online (2012), some of the definitions of accidental are 1) Present but not essential. 2) Not essential to the existence of a thing; not necessarily present, incidental, secondary, subsidiary. 3) That may occur from time to time as a result of chance; characterized by or relating to chance circumstances or to a chance occasion; occasional.

There were unplanned, unexpected, and fortuitous circumstances that allowed both Odessa and me to earn our degrees. Odessa had not planned on college and I had not planned on finishing my bachelor's degree, much less go on to earn my master's. For many non-traditional students like us, the path to college can be full of obstacles and impediments. Non-traditional students are defined as those who do not enter college immediately after high school graduation.

In chapter two I discuss the reasons I selected narrative inquiry to understand our experiences and the barriers to a college education (page 71) and the method I used. I also discuss visual ethnography. In chapter three I introduce Odessa's story and her family background. I also introduce Odessa's move from Big Atlantic City to Kyleton. Odessa's narrative and my analysis of her schooling and life in Kyleton are also included

in chapter three. Finally, I offer partial closure to Odessa's story. In chapter four I tell my story, family background, and produce my experiences in school. Chapter four continues with my college years, marriage and family, and partial closure to my story. Chapter five offers my reflections on our two stories, the differences and the similarities, family expectations, money and access, demographics, and geography.

Chapter 2
Method

Narrative Inquiry

In my work at Big Southern, I often see data presented in an effort to understand retention and persistence to graduation issues. The data is always quantitative. We know the numbers of college students at this university who do not succeed. We know who they are by race and gender and by place (rural vs. urban), as well as a number of other demographic and academic factors. But we don't know the students' stories. We don't know why they succeed or don't succeed **from their point of view**.

I think we need to go back much earlier than college, even further back than high school to begin to unravel the tangled threads of what barriers some children face in order to shed light on possible retention solutions. The variables are so many and so tightly bound to each other that I don't feel it is feasible or desirable to separate them.

I have selected to use narrative inquiry for this thesis because I am committed to understanding the many threads and layers of meaning in Odessa's story. Narrative inquiry allows researchers to look at people as embodiments of lived stories (Clandinin, 2000). Since I have known Odessa for many years and was interested in a rich understanding of her journey in education, I knew thematic analysis would require fragmenting not only the chronology of lived experiences but also the context of moments and experiences themselves.

Coffey and Atkinson (1996) consider narratives as formal structures with identifiable properties that function in particular ways. Narrative analysis can focus on social action.

One approach in narrative analysis is to explain the effect of the story, or tale, or narrative through chronicling our experiences and lives. Social actors organize their lives and experiences through stories and in doing so make sense of them. According to Coffey and Atkinson, recognition that social actors organize their biographies narratively provides a potentially rich source of data in research. The narratives of everyday life are used to construct and to share cultural values, meanings, and personal experiences. They can express and enact the social conditions of power and influence in everyday life. Analyzing oral performances, for example in an interview, requires consideration of the structure of the performance event, the interview, and how the situational factors feed into it. This includes the performer and the audience. “Thinking about stories in our data can enable us to think creatively about the sorts of data we collect and how we interpret them.” (1996, p. 55). I believe deeper understanding of Odessa’s experiences can best be derived from immersion in her story, and most importantly, using her words to tell her story. I believe there is great truth in the old adage, “don’t judge a person until you’ve walked a mile in their boots.”

While a large portion of my data is from interviews with Odessa, much of the context of my understanding is gleaned from casual everyday conversations we’ve shared over the years of our acquaintance. In the following section I will share the process of research. Formal interview tapes consisted of two hour-long interviews, one taped at Big Southern and one taped while we spent the day together driving to Ridge County, where Odessa moved to, and exploring the area. In our first interview it took some time for Odessa to become comfortable with the office setting; to move from direct answers to my

questions to storytelling. Later, during our daylong trip together, I noticed she was much more relaxed. Possibly this change was because I used less direct questioning and conducted myself more conversationally. Following the interviews, I transcribed our conversations verbatim and then member checked them (Glesne, 2011). Odessa has reviewed all of what I have written for accuracy. Any statements I made about Odessa and her life that were in error have been changed for accuracy. My IRB is Appendix A. All data has been kept in a locked cabinet and on password protected files and will be destroyed at the project's completion. Additionally, after the first interview and before we took our trip together I used my field notes from when I took my own trip to Kyleton. It was very important to me to see the "lay of the land" for myself without Odessa. I am a visual learner; I needed to see the town and surrounding area for myself. As it turns out, I also needed the guided tour with Odessa because I did not see the school buildings Odessa had described when I went on my solo trip.

In this thesis, I attempt to represent Odessa's narrative of her point of view on her experiences of schooling as well as my own, with reference to my daughter's educational experience as she is close to Odessa's age, and over the years I found myself often thinking of both.

According to Chase (2005), narrative allows for the possibility for self and reality construction within the narrator's world. Chase also positions the researcher as a narrator as well, allowing for researcher interpretations and the making of meaning from the self as researcher. As narrators, researchers develop meaning from, and some sense of order in, the material they study; they develop their own voice as they construct others' voices

and realities; they narrate “results” in ways that are both enabled and constrained by the social resources and circumstances embedded in their disciplines, cultures, and historical moments. As such, where salient and appropriate I intertwine the threads and layers of my experiences as I interpret and represent Odessa.

Data Sources and Analysis

My data sources are the transcribed interviews mentioned above, my field notes and comments, and analytical memos (Glesne, 2011). Field notes are the ongoing daily notes full of the details and moments of lives in the field that help tell the story. Analytical memos consist of anything the researcher writes in relationship to the research other than transcriptions or field notes. Both are indispensable tools in qualitative work. I used archival material from the Ridge County local library and Odessa’s high school yearbook. I also used photos both Odessa and I took of various spots in Ridge County. Other visual sources are screen shots from Google ™ maps, and photographs of our respective schools. These sources are used for triangulation, which is according to Glesne one way of contributing to the trustworthiness of the data.

As Coffey and Atkinson (1996) observed, “there are no formulae or recipes for the ‘best’ way to analyze the stories we elicit and collect. I used in vivo coding which refers to codes that derive from the terms and the language used by social actors in the field, or in the course of interviews. I used in vivo coding to code Odessa’s language and experience. As I mentioned earlier, I transcribed my interviews with Odessa. However, to make the move from in vivo coding to narrative analysis meant, for me at least, listening

to the tapes over and over again. Odessa's accent, her inflection and tone, her emphasis on certain words were all critical to my attempt to understand and interpret depth of meaning. Since I've known her for so long, I always hear her voice when I read her words.

As I listened over and over to Odessa's tapes I realized our stories had many similarities. We were both first-generation female students. Even though we come from different backgrounds, we both had some similar experiences. As I listened and began writing, I kept returning to my formal and informal conversations with Odessa recursively. I certainly found myself circling during the writing and revision phases, which Goodall (2000) argued is part of theorizing and analyzing the data.

As a large portion of my data consists of both formal (taped) and informal (recalled/field notes) conversations with Odessa, I found myself returning to her language in in vivo codes and thinking about my own life story. I began to compare Odessa's stories to my own. I found the differences and similarities of our respective journeys to college are what intrigued me the most. When I began the process, I thought our lives were very different because of our different ages, family backgrounds, location of our schools, etc. I have since come to the conclusion that while this is partially true, when it comes to being first-generation female college students, our approaches to entering college were very similar. As I documented the narrative arc of her story chronologically I recognized we both ended up in college in an accidental fashion without plan. Thus my analysis will wind its way through the threads of each of our experiences.

To ensure my data meets standards of quality and rigor I used several strategies. To test for credibility I used member checking and triangulation (Glesne, 2011). Since my representation is my interpretation of my Odessa's experiences, I asked her to read it and make comments. As noted earlier, Odessa has reviewed my entire first draft. I have corrected any errors she noted. I triangulated by using archived materials from the local historical society, the high school Odessa attended, and back issues of the local newspaper to put her experiences in context with what was happening in the wider community at the time.

Visual Ethnography

According to Schwartz (1989), using pictures in social research requires a theory of how pictures get used by both picture makers and viewers. Typical perspectives include approaching photographs as art and/or as a record of a scene or subject. Either approach conceptualizes photographic meaning as being contained within the image itself. Schwartz noted that these perspectives fail to consider the role of the spectator in the process of constructing photographic meaning. According to Schwartz, meaning is actively constructed, not passively received and is a dynamic interaction between the photographer, the spectator, and the image. Prior to this thesis I had never used my own photographic work in any research project. I had used other's photos on occasion, but not my own. While taking the photos in and around Kyleton I was absorbed in the action of the moment as I always am while taking any photograph. Not until I was coding did I look again at the photos, and then again as I was writing. As Schwartz indicates, being

the spectator of the scene and subsequently viewing the photographs allowed for me to recall and articulate my thoughts and emotions while I was taking the photos.

Pink (2001) wrote that an awareness of the theoretical underpinnings of visual research methods is crucial for understanding how those images and the processes through which they are created are used to produce ethnographic knowledge. Pink broke from the "how-to" by emphasizing the individualistic nature of ethnography work. Pink noted that the methods should serve the aims of the research, rather than the other way around. Pink applied this notion of developing theories on how to do fieldwork in the field to visual images and technologies. She considered the relationship between scientific-realist (the record) and what she called reflexive approaches to the visual in ethnography. As I go through the process of narrative analysis, I understand that I am interpreting Odessa's experiences. As the researcher my perspective affects the representation of the work. On first blush, it seems that inserting a photograph is simply adding a picture to the narrative. Simply choosing which photos to include or exclude is a decision I as the researcher make. The reader does not see all of the photos I have taken, just as the reader doesn't read every word I transcribed. I choose which stories to tell and show.

In this thesis I deem myself the photographer and one of the spectators, along with anyone who reads this thesis. My forté is not in the spatial realm. I am terrible at gauging distances, room dimensions and the like. I also do not think of myself as a good photographer. I do not analyze perspective and placement as I'm taking a photograph. I'm more focused on the story I'm trying to capture for myself. I usually think of

photographs as a memory prompt for me to be able to recall what I was thinking and feeling at the moment I was taking the photograph. I have also never taken photographs with the intent to distribute them for others to make meaning of them. I didn't even think of this as I was taking photos in Kyleton. My photography tends to be the typical vacation and happy people shots most of us amateurs take. As I took my first pictures in Kyleton during my solo trip there, I thought about how different Kyleton was from Mid-Atlantic, the state where I grew up and where Odessa is originally from. During that trip I took photos of the beautiful scenery as I approached Kyleton. I took photos of some businesses on the main road and of the high school. It wasn't until Odessa and my trip to Kyleton together that I learned the high school photos I took were of the new high school, the one that opened after Odessa graduated. The photos from my first trip did not move me emotionally. I think of them as typical memory prompts. I have never before taken photographs of a place that has made me move from thinking to feeling, feeling through the gut. It wasn't until I was taking my last photographs during our trip together of the elementary school Odessa attended in Kyleton and the school that was similar to hers that I had this experience. The bleakness, the oppressiveness, the meanness of these schools hit me in the gut like I was punched. Later as I wrote about Odessa, particularly her experiences in Kyleton schools, I often went back to the photos both of us took on our trips to Kyleton. Then I reread what I wrote and realized that no amount of words could adequately describe my gut reaction of serene natural beauty in the area against utter astonishment at the deplorable conditions at Odessa's schools. I leave it to the reader to make whatever meaning s/he chooses from the photographs of Kyleton schools.

Promises to Odessa

Odessa agreed to be the participant for this study with the stipulation that I would not try to contact any former or current school teachers or administrators in Ridge County, even for general information. Odessa was very uncomfortable when I told her I was going to Kyleton by myself. I promised that I would not talk to anyone from Kyleton, even people not associated with the school system. I also agreed not to contact any members of her family.

Chapter 3
Odessa's story

Introducing Odessa

As I was continuing with my course work for my master's degree, I began to think about Odessa. I called her and asked her how she had been doing. We met for lunch on campus a few times. It turns out that Odessa continued with her courses after that first summer, although she was no longer interested in an Art degree. After our first formal interview we began to have lunch together more often as our relationship deepened to one of work friends.

Odessa is a white woman in her mid to late 20s. Over the course of over ten years, I was able to get to know her and see her intelligence in action on many occasions. She worked at a full-time job as a fellow staff member at Big Southern in the Division of Academic Affairs, a part-time job in a local mall, and was enrolled in six hours of course-work each semester until she graduated this spring from Big Southern, magna cum laude. Two years after beginning work at Big Southern, at the age of 22, she researched on her own and purchased her first home. Odessa shared: "I would describe myself as very independent. I also care about helping people, animals and the environment. I also enjoy learning new things, I have a healthy curiosity and I am organized."

When I asked her to be the participant for my thesis because of my interest in her educational narrative (Noblit, 1999), she wanted details. Odessa began studying how to write a thesis. She scoured Big Southern's library and provided me with one interesting find. She checked out the only thesis she could find written by someone from her county,

written in the mid-1970s. When I asked her to choose a pseudonym she researched names based upon her interest in plant life and school. Some options were Ortensia (the garden lover), Xylia (wood dweller), and Xylona (from the forest). Among the contenders was Odessa, which means a long journey, and we selected it because by this time she had been working on her undergraduate degree for almost eight years.

For all of Odessa's intelligence and curiosity, over the years I've also heard numerous stories of her life in high school, and have noticed some differences I took for granted in my own education. For instance, in one conversation we had she could not locate Europe on a world map, and did not know that it was a continent. When we talked about it she indicated that she did not study much geography in high school. Odessa was not certain if big wall maps were available in her schools. If there were maps, she doesn't remember any.

Odessa's Family Background

Most of Odessa's father's family lived near her in Big Atlantic City in Mid-Atlantic State. From our many conversations, I had the feeling that Odessa enjoyed her family, especially her paternal grandmother and great-grandmother. Odessa always smiled when she related stories about her paternal grandmother and great-grandmother. When Odessa was in second grade her father died unexpectedly. Odessa didn't talk much about her father and I do not know the details of his death. All I know is that she was in second grade and her younger brother was pre-school age when her father died. I remember one conversation when she told me that her mother became depressed after her husband's

death. Odessa's younger brother was probably about three or four years old at the time. I tried to imagine what it would have been like to experience the same situation and failed. During the same conversation Odessa talked about her maternal grandmother and how she had met and married a man from Ridge County in Mid-Appalachia State, where we both live now and where Big Southern is located. She explained how her maternal grandmother convinced her mother to pack up and take Odessa and her brother to Ridge County three years later. Odessa said that they would visit Ridge County during the summers after her second, third, and fourth grades. She loved roaming the woods and fields in the countryside surrounding her maternal grandmother's home. Odessa always said the nature is the best part of Ridge County, and I suppose her love of plant life began there. Eventually, Odessa's maternal grandmother's persuasion prevailed and Odessa's family moved to Ridge County just prior to the beginning of fifth grade.

Introducing Kyleton: Isolation at the Top of the Ridge

This section is based on field notes between interviews one and two. I took my first trip to Ridge County and Kyleton by myself one foggy Saturday morning. Ridge County is sixty miles from my house and it takes approximately one and a half hours to reach Kyleton, the County Seat. The ride was beautiful on an early fall morning. Fog clung close to the ground for most of the early part of the ride before clearing. However, once I began the climb up the ridge, it came back. The drive is easy for the first two thirds, divided roads most of the way with a few minor detours. As I took a left turn at a gas station onto the road that turns into Ridge County Highway 22, the adventurous part of

the journey began. Ridge County Highway 22 is a steep, curvy, narrow road that heads toward Kyleton. There are two main county roads that cross Ridge County generally north/south (route 22) and east/west. Three other county roads cut across corners of the county. After a sharp turn on route 22, Kyleton appeared out of nowhere. The first thing I noticed was the Hardee's on the right near what turned out to be one of two traffic lights in town. There was a Rite Aid on the other side of the road. Other businesses and offices I noticed were a feed store, furniture store, two real estate offices, and some county offices, including the county library. I soon passed the health center and various doctor's offices near the health center and was out of the center of town. I pulled into the parking lot of the high school and looked around. There was a group of farmers with their tractors parked in the back lot, apparently preparing for some show. As it was Saturday, the school was not open. I drove a few miles further up the road and turned around to come home.



Figure 1: On the way to Kyleton view from Route 22 (2011)



Figure 2: Tractors & farmers in high school parking lot (2010)

Ridge County is not only rural; it is extremely isolated due to the rugged nature of the surrounding geography. The county is so isolated that currently there are only three state roads dissecting the entire county. Demographic data (U. S. Census, 2010) on the county shows the total population to be less than 7,000, with just over 1,300 residing in the county seat where the schools are located for the county. The per capita income annual income is less than $20,000, the lowest in the state. Educational attainment for people in Odessa's age range shows only 7.3% attain a bachelor's degree, far below the state average of 22.4%. Even more telling, only 61.8% have a high school diploma or equivalent or better; lowest in the state. Over 50% of the county residents are on food stamps, the highest in the state. As of June 2011 the unemployment rate in the county was 14.9%. The county school system consists of one early childhood center, one elementary, and one combined middle and high school. The closest larger town is approximately 35 miles away (about an hour's drive due to the geography) and has a population of

approximately 4,400. This town is located in the next county that has a total population of greater than 50,000.

According to Odessa, “After high school, there is not much to look forward to in the area.” The nearest area of plentiful manufacturing jobs has been reduced just like many other parts of the U.S. This town is Mortontown and is about an hour’s drive from Kyleton. The nearest community college is located there. The nearest technology center school is further away and takes over an hour and a half to reach by car. There is also a public university in the next county, and again is over an hour away.

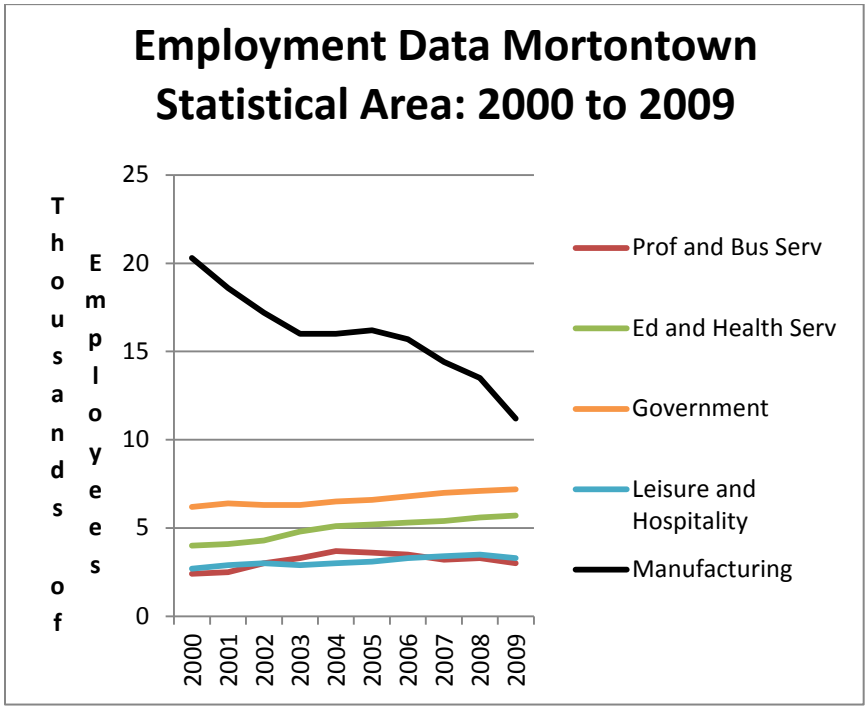


Figure 3: Employment Data Mortontown - nearest large town to Kyleton where many residents worked in manufacturing. (Center for Business and Economic Research, 2007)

Ridge County was first formed out of two neighboring counties in 1844. From a history written in 1886 (Goodspeed), “Ridge County lies immediately east of Clay County, and is bounded on the north by Big South State. Cloutch River traverses the county from northeast to southwest, and Powing River crosses the northeastern corner of the county. The surface is very rough and mountainous, but some excellent land is found along the streams. The valleys, however, are generally narrow. The extent of its mineral resources is not well known, but both coal and iron exist in considerable quantities.”

A Move from Big Atlantic to Kyleton

“I Felt a Little Cheated”

When I first interviewed Odessa it was for a paper I wrote for my Teachers, Schools, and Society course. The assignment was to interview someone about their school experiences. What follows is Odessa’s story of her school experiences, in the order of how our interview flowed. It is chronological beginning with elementary school in Kyleton with a few remembrances from her Big Atlantic City school. After elementary school, Odessa spoke more about high school. She told me she remembered more about high school than elementary school. Odessa’s school system had two schools; elementary – grades K-8 and high school - grades 9-12.

Odessa recalled her trouble understanding what her new teacher was saying when she first moved to Kyleton in elementary school. She couldn’t understand his regional accent. Speaking of spelling she said,

> I could not know what he was saying. I could know the entire list of 30 words, but still not get it. I typically did not do much studying in spelling because I was good at

> it. I did study more and looked at the lists, but I could not tell what he was saying. It was horrible.

This was a fascinating revelation to me, as I had not considered regional accents as potentially problematic. Soon after Odessa moved to Kyleton she realized she was in trouble in school. Her old methods of study would not work in this new environment. Previously, Odessa simply had to memorize her spelling words and she would be fine. More of the same would not help if she couldn't understand what the teacher was saying as he read them aloud for the spelling test. Unfortunately, I don't think there was any adult who could see her struggling to offer assistance.

I knew Odessa was from Mid-Atlantic State. She was born in and spent her early years in a city fairly close to where I grew up. I wanted to know how she ended up in Kyleton. So, I asked her where in Big Atlantic City she lived and went to school. Odessa didn't remember too much about her first year in school, but told me what she could remember, "Parkridge, Townson area." I asked if she was in the city or county schools. She did not know since she moved just before fifth grade. Odessa told me, "It was a public school, but I don't think it was a city school." As it turns out, Odessa attended Villa Cresta from grades K-1 and then moved to Pleasant Plains from grades 2-4 before moving to Kyleton where she completed school. Both Villa Cresta and Pleasant Plains are in Big Atlantic City School System. Currently, Big Atlantic City is the 26th largest school system and has more than 103,000 students while Ridge County has two schools with enrollment of a little more than 1,000 students. I asked Odessa about her schoolmates in Big Atlantic City. "We had White students, Black students, Asian students. Those are the only ones I really remember seeing at the time that I was aware of." There is not much

racial diversity in Ridge County today. The county is overwhelmingly white, greater than 97% (U.S. Census, 2011). The percentage has not changed much from the last census taken in 2000.



Figure 4: Google Earth image of Big Atlantic City. (2012) Retrieved from http://maps.google.com



Figure 5: Google Earth image of Kyleton in Ridge County. (2012) Retrieved from http://maps.google.com



Figure 6: Photo of Pleasant Plains Elementary School. (2012) Retrieved from ww.pleasantplainsschool.com

I thought if Odessa remembered the diversity of children in her Big Atlantic City schools, it probably meant she also remembered the lack of diversity once she arrived in Kyleton. I asked what it was like going from Big Atlantic City to Kyleton. Odessa looked down at the table and then back up into my face.

> It was terrible. I did not like it because schools – I used to love going to school in Big Atlantic City. When I moved to Kyleton I hated school. Dreaded it worse than anything. I started counting down the days before summer when I would go back to Mid-Atlantic State for the summer. The differences, there were many. First of all the schools in Big Atlantic City were very clean, very organized. When we left a classroom to move to another classroom the students were more in control. We had to walk in a single file line with a line on the tiles in the hallways. That's how strict they were. We weren't supposed to make a sound going through the hallways. Class change in Kyleton – the bell would ring and all the students would jump up and be noisy and crowd the doorway at once. The school was very dirty compared to Big Atlantic City.

I chuckled when she mentioned control and cleanliness as the things she liked about her old school. Odessa has always been very neat and organized. More than that though, I know she learns best (we've been to many training sessions together) when material is presented slowly and methodically. She gets distracted with too much noise around her. It seems to me that she has always been like this. I know she was diagnosed with Attention Deficit Disorder and takes medication for it. I can't imagine how shocking and disturbing the chaos and dirtiness of her new school would be to Odessa. I continued by asking about the teachers and how they differed between Big Atlantic City and Kyleton. This was when Odessa related her story about her difficulties with spelling.

> Okay, because I moved from up north to somewhere down south the accents were very different. I was making A's in spelling in Mid-Atlantic State and I loved it. I loved it because I was naturally good at it. When I moved to Kyleton I was making F's in spelling. And it was because I could not understand what they were saying.

> Because you know they have to say the words out loud for you to know what to write down to spell. So I was suffering terribly in that area. I did talk with the teacher. I was very upset about my grades. He tried to do better, but there was only so much… He had never been anywhere outside Kyleton, he could only do so much to change his accent.

I think it is interesting that as a young child in the fifth grade, Odessa took the initiative to talk to her teacher and not for example, her mom. I agree with Odessa that there wasn't much the teacher could do about his accent, but couldn't he have provided a list of words to Odessa? Or written them on the board for all the students? Surely there was a compromise that could have been arranged other than to shrug his shoulders as if to say, "Oh well, she'll do poorly." At least when she memorized the words she could discern possibilities of the word spoken from the list given as a study guide. I was very dismayed to hear his apparently nonchalant attitude come through Odessa's telling of the story. This was happening to Odessa in elementary school. This type of experience could only set the stage for Odessa's expectations of her abilities in high school.

We moved on to high school and talked about Odessa's experiences then. Odessa told me,

> Oh well, there it seemed like there were very few teachers who were interested in teaching, or were even qualified to teach. There were very few who I felt like did a good job, did the best they could with what they had to work with. Students were not used to being made to work. The teachers would just let us do whatever we wanted to in class; talk, cheat, you know whatever. I had one teacher in particular, he would come to class late. Only be there for the last 10 minutes of class every day. This was Algebra. So I didn't do well in that class, it was hard on all of us. There were kids in the class who were really smart, and they were making 20's out of 100 on their tests too. Because he was never there. The ten minutes he would show up, his face was blood-red. The other kids said he was an alcoholic.

I remember thinking about whether the principal knew the teacher was not in class except for the last few minutes. Why did Odessa and her fellow students accept an absentee teacher? Was this absenteeism such a common occurrence that Odessa's classmates were blasé? At this early stage of our interview I was angry; very angry at the lack of control and adult supervision for Odessa and her classmates. I was also very saddened and wondered if any adult surrounding any of these children knew what was happening. I asked if she or the others tried to learn on their own. She responded,

> Yeah. Then, when we moved to the next year. Oh, oh, not to mention, so at the end of the year, we all have basically decided we were not going to pass. There was no way. I made 20's in all my tests, but I made a B on my report card at the end of the class.

As I sat there with my mouth gaping wide, I asked Odessa how she felt. She paused and frowned before she responded with,

> I'm not sure. I was all ready to accept the fact that I was not going to go on to Algebra II. So, I wasn't very happy about that because it was not really under my control why I couldn't pass it. So then when I saw the B as an eighth grader I thought this was great. Now I won't have to repeat the class. Because I didn't really like the class and didn't want to re-take it with him. But at the same time I thought I don't know how this is okay, and didn't want to really say anything. Other people in the class passed too, nobody had to re-take it.

I know the feeling of not wanting to be the person who rocks the boat. We all feel that way sometimes. Here Odessa was in the eighth grade and clearly knew she was being cheated out of learning Algebra. At that age, it must have been very difficult to feel so alone with this knowledge. Odessa was most likely not the only student who felt this way, but without a catalyst or adult role model, like another teacher, to make them realize they could change things, no one acted or said anything.

I asked if everyone passed the class. Odessa responded,

> Yes. I got a B, better than a C. I felt a little cheated. But then I also cheated by letting it go by that way and not saying anything. It became a problem for us when we moved into Algebra II. Tried to make us learn from the material. So a year had passed by in between. So when we got into Algebra II with the new teacher starts jumping right in. He doesn't understand and asks us about it. We're explaining well this is what happened. Our teacher didn't teach it. He didn't come in and then would come in at the end write something on the board and not answer any questions. We all got passing grades but didn't pass any tests. We complained and talked to the next teacher but we didn't say anything to anybody higher up. So if he didn't say anything then nothing happened. So I'm pretty sure that the 2nd Algebra teacher I would think he would have mentioned it, but there were very few, only him and one other teacher in high school that I can tell you cared and tried to teach us and we didn't have to complain about.

Clearly, Odessa was not alone among her classmates. They knew they were cheated out of learning Algebra I. So, they turned to the new Algebra teacher to complain about their previous teacher and apparently he didn't (or maybe couldn't) do anything. At this point in our interview I regretted my promise not to attempt to contact anyone in Kyleton; especially anyone in the school system. I wondered what the teachers thought; they had to know as the school was small. I remembered when I first moved to this region. My children began school here in a more rural school system in a nearby county. Everyone knew everyone; there was no escaping the "we know your people" fact of life. There is also the degree of relationships to consider. I remember thinking everyone was related to everyone else in our smallish town. There is no anonymity in small communities and perhaps the new Algebra teacher felt he couldn't complain. After a pause Odessa continued,

> At the time I hated school, because those were the classes we were being pushed in and weren't used to doing anything. Those were the classes where cheating was not going to be allowed or accepted. Our Spanish teacher also taught drama and art. She

> attempted to teach us. We were all excited to learn something new - a foreign language. It turns out she didn't know Spanish. The first couple of days she tried. She used to get to school later and we were used to the first couple of minutes not being taught. As time wore on, she would sit at the front and not teach us at all. We sat and talked the whole class time.

I wonder how those in charge decided the drama and art teacher would be the one to teach Spanish. Did they draw straws or toss a coin to decide? I'm not a teacher. I imagine there are some subjects that an experienced teacher could take on and be able to teach out of a book. However, I really can't imagine someone who does not know a foreign language being capable of teaching it to others. I have experienced being told "this is your new responsibility" in my job – I've had to take training in order to learn a new skill and then be able to pass it on to others. I've been allowed the time to learn the new skill myself so that I can then pass it along. The drama/art teacher apparently did not have that luxury, rather she had to immediately begin teaching Spanish. I was wondering what it was like to be that teacher, the one who tried and gave up. How disheartening. Odessa was on quite a roll talking about her teachers in high school.

> Chemistry was another teacher nobody liked because she taught. I was actually catching on, so that made me like it more because I was good at it. She actually taught. [Odessa was an exception here when no one else liked the teacher]. We had to have our homework due. The same thing we dealt with in Spanish which was having it like a study hall or socializing time. So they can say they offered art and drama but technically did not because we didn't actually get to do anything. Drama was her area. She loved drama. She tried more in that class than any other but we never did much in there either. Towards the end she had some big play we were supposed to be putting on, but we never rehearsed. She had a lot of people who never showed up.
>
> After going through the actual graduation I remember thinking to myself, this is great that I actually graduated but I don't feel like I should have actually graduated because I wasn't taught anything. I felt pretty gypped. I did learn a lot of stuff there [voc school] English and general things up front. That's pretty much where I learned everything. The only thing I think that carried through [prep for college] would be

> the same teacher from Spanish 2 who wanted us to learn and give us a refresher. She also taught English. She offered an extra class – AP credit. It was brand new when our class got to her year. That was the first year she was able to do that. I did not take that because that was when I found out from my guidance counselor that I wasn't college material and it cost extra money [fees for taking the AP exam] and was extra work so I didn't take it. There was a college path and technical path. I took the college path because I thought it would be good in case I changed my mind. I chose it early, early on before I had all these bad experiences there.

Thank goodness Odessa selected the college path early in her high school career. And apparently there were some teachers who tried to teach their students even though the circumstances were not in their favor. Odessa floored me with her comment about the guidance counselor telling her she wasn't college material. She was so nonchalant as she said it. I don't think Odessa even realized how casually she talked about something that could be so devastating/influential/powerful. It wasn't until after I finished transcription that *I* even realized what was said. I showed this part of the interview to Odessa then (before I began to write the thesis she later reviewed) so she could read what she had said. She shook her head and told me, "Looking back on it now it makes me angry to realize what I missed."

Continuing the interview, I asked if any of her classmates were interested in going to college.

> Not many. Because we didn't feel like we had gotten the education necessary to go to college. Well, there were some students, not me. They were talking about going here and I'm going to do this when I get out of here. These were the students who were smarter, who I felt like were smarter. They made good grades. They would study. Some of the students were planning on going to college and were okay with that. Me, and some of the other students got to the point where we knew the education we were getting, how were we supposed to go to college? Somewhere along the line I heard terms like remedial courses. People who didn't meet the expectations would have to take remedial courses for a year or two before they could take the college-level courses. Well a lot of us were ready to be out of school and we wanted it to be over.

> We didn't like school, we didn't do anything but socialize basically. We'd sit and talk with each other in our classes and that's it. We didn't think it [college] was an option unless we took a ton of remedial courses, and not be sure how we'd do after that. I did talk to my high school guidance counselor about college as it got closer to the time to leave high school and she basically told me that I wasn't college material, so that kind of made in my head made me feel like that means it probably wouldn't work out and not being able to learn. It confirmed my thoughts already about not being able to succeed in college. So I didn't plan on going.

Here Odessa spoke as if she wasn't smart enough to go to college. This is the message she received from her guidance counselor and from knowing some teachers had not taught her and her classmates what they needed to know. To me it seemed as if Odessa felt she was being punished for her alleged lack of ability by being sent to Kyleton schools and she didn't deserve to go to college. This really gave me pause because I began to remember being told as a child that I was ugly. In my case, it was my mother utilizing an old Jewish superstition; by calling me ugly, she was fooling the evil eye. Unfortunately, it took me many years to get over that because we weren't in the Shtetl in Russia, we were in a suburban neighborhood in Big Atlantic. How was I to know the deeper meaning? The messages Odessa received about her capabilities were non-existent from her family about going to college and decidedly negative from school authorities. It isn't surprising that Odessa did not realize how smart she really was.

We returned to talk about high school. Odessa told me about books and one of her other teachers.

> We had textbooks, the problem was we never used them. Our Spanish II teacher – she was the only one who seemed to say anything to people. She would give us updates, 'I've been trying to get new textbooks next year…' She was able to get our responses to give a proposal to the principal to get it [extra funding for AP exam fees, that ultimately was not funded] approved. If you wanted to pay for AP [Advanced

> Placement courses], there were students who would not have been able to pay. Money was definitely an issue if I wanted to take AP.

While it does not cost anything to take Advanced Placement courses, the exams have a fee associated with them. Odessa was referring to this fee. I suppose no one explained the fee waiver available for qualified students.

I asked Odessa about extra-curricular activities at high school.

> We only had basketball for a sport. We didn't get to be involved very much. Home games during school hours we were allowed to go watch. Kind of forced to actually – it will be at this time and the teachers would take us to the gym. People guarding the doors to make sure that we were only going to the bathroom if we left the gym. People were forced to go. We did have things like pep rallies and stuff like that, but I don't remember if we did that often. In the early years of high school every now and then, I'm trying to remember field trips, can't really remember any in particular in high school. They were mainly in elementary school. End of sophomore year we found out that our superintendent had been caught stealing money from the schools somehow. So we had to pay the consequences for that happening. They took away a lot of our extra-curricular activities. Things we would do to make money for prom – bake sales – they took all of that away. Basketball games – we couldn't do any more of those. Field trips I was looking forward to were cut.

After this interview, I looked online for news of the theft. I found an article about the Ridge County school superintendent who had been charged with four counts of stealing money from the school system along with his wife who was the technology coordinator. I was unable to find out whether either was convicted. (NewsBank, 1997). Here was another moment when I was floored. The students were punished for the loss of the money by having their extra-curricular activities taken away. Even the money that the students had raised through bake sales was taken from them. Where were the parents of the students? Did no one stand up for the students?

Odessa talked about technology in her classrooms in high school. I asked her if they had any computers in school.

> Only in the library. She was the only one who got some computers in her classroom – I don't think they were new actually. I don't remember doing anything on them though except games in homeroom. Now there were computers in keyboarding class that I had. And we only did our keyboarding work in there, but I don't remember using them for any classes. They were the old-timey kind with floppy disks, not even the A disks.

Odessa and I decided to take a road trip together after our first formal interview and I took my own trip to Kyleton, too. We had to wait some time before we could take time off on the same day, but we managed one day the following spring. We wanted to go on a weekday so we could be there when everything was open. Odessa does not enjoy talking about Kyleton the same way she does about her family and she was very nervous about taking me there. She specifically told me not to talk to anyone from her school and I respected her wishes.

We shared all sorts of things as we drove together, nothing in particular related to Kyleton. We mainly talked about Odessa's life after school let out and on the weekends. She told me how the kids would drive to Mortontown, about 20 miles from Kyleton, and hang out.

> Yes, I didn't really hang out there before moving there. Just the mall, and it's not a big mall. It's small and the movie theatre [is too]. In Kyleton, there is just the block. We'd hang out and drive around and pull up and talk to each other in our cars. Besides riding around, we'd get a car full of people and go riding out around the mountains. Well I wasn't old enough to have my own place when I lived there [Kyleton]. Nobody wanted to hang out in their parents' house. I don't know, maybe some did, but we'd say we're "going to town" – that's what we'd say.

Odessa's description of "hanging out" reminded me a lot of my high school years. I laughed when she talked about it and told her so. I, too, drove around with my friends. We drove around our suburban town, down into the city, and out in the country. We drove around a lot. Our hangout was the McDonalds across the street from my high school. There was a parking garage behind it and we would park up on the second level and hang out. The difference here was that we would go to each other's house also. I do recall one or two friends who avoided visitors at home; there was always someone's house to go to if we wanted to be out of the cars.

I reminded Odessa that she had once told me that she didn't like to admit that she lived in Kyleton.

> Yeah, there is nothing that I'm proud of saying about that place. The only thing if I were to search for something, I'd say the plants and the environment. Even though they're really bad about littering and don't do anything to clean up. If there were some people who took care of it there would be a really nice place to visit. When people go across the mountain, they just throw stuff out of the car. The plant life, the forest, the trees, I love that. The people there, I'm not proud of what they do – the people who do drugs and even those that don't. There are other things that are bad about them that I don't agree with. It's a small town and they want to know everything you do and they make stuff up about people because they have so much time on their hands.

It did not surprise me that Odessa chose to talk about the plant life in and around Kyleton. When she first entered college, she wanted to be an Art major and mostly drew from nature. Eventually she settled on a major in landscape design. Odessa always had books about trees and plants nearby her work space.

In a previous casual conversation, Odessa spoke about the people in Kyleton and how many seemed to be on disability or dealt drugs. Here there is the "perfect storm" brewing;

fewer and fewer manufacturing jobs available, the continuation of education designed to meet the needs of people who go to work in factories; and few other opportunities for work in Kyleton. It is no wonder that with a dearth of opportunities for gainful employment, many people turn to other means, e.g. “disability”, to make their living or illegal drug dealing and or growing illegal substances.

Kyleton is located in the part of Mid-Appalachia State under the jurisdiction of a special unit created by the U.S. Office of National Drug Control Policy in 1998. The special unit is comprised of sixty-five counties located in Mid-Appalachia State and surrounding states; twenty-nine within Mid-Appalachia State. The area consists of predominately rural and rugged terrain with soil, temperature, and other climate conditions ideally suited for marijuana production. Demographic conditions of this area including relatively high unemployment and low median family income, create an environment where illegal activities and corruption can flourish. According to eradication statistics, marijuana is the number one cash crop in the three states that comprise this area (Mid-Appalachia State Bureau of Investigations, 2012). A quick online search of “social security disability and the name of Ridge County” shows fourteen attorneys who serve this county of approximately 7,000 people (Findlaw.com, 2012). Using 2011 population statistics from the U.S. Census, there were 4,123 adults between the ages of 18 and 65 living in Kyleton in 2011 (United States Census, 2012). That works out to one attorney/law firm for each 295 adults in the county who handles Social Security disability cases. Using the same findlaw.com website, a search of attorneys for this city nets

nineteen firms, one per nearly 15,000 adult residents in Muro City, where we both now live and where Big Southern University is located.

I told Odessa that I'd noticed how private she is. She rarely talked about her family or her life in Kyleton.

> I probably got that from being there because everybody talks. Even if you don't say anything, they make stuff up about you – one little piece of information can really get blown up into stuff that's not true. That affects your life in high school – guys and girl stuff – even afterwards. People get married and divorced there a lot because of people talking.

I asked if people could get a reputation in high school that would "stick" forever.

> Yes, that can happen, but they just continue to make more stuff up. It is not just a high school thing like everywhere else where you grow up and get mature. It just continues there. After high school usually it stops, but there it keeps going. People don't grow up there – they just stay immature.

I believe Odessa is embarrassed to have people know she lived in Kyleton and went to school there. From the way she spoke, it seems she does not think very highly of the people in the area. I cannot compare my experiences to hers in this area. I have never been ashamed of the people I grew up around. I had no comparison to make between two very distinctively different locations. When people ask Odessa where she is from, she usually says Big Atlantic City. She stops there and does not go into any details about her move.



Figure 7: County offices, Main Street, Kyleton (2011)



Figure 8: Side view of the farm and home supply store, Main Street, Kyleton (2011)

As we drove, I realized once again that once we left the state roads, the ride was very hilly. Not that I'm an expert, but it didn't look like good farmland. I asked about where people worked. Odessa said,

> Factory jobs used to be a big thing because you used to have to take a test to get the job. I'm not sure how hard they were because I never took one. But there's not a lot in town to do for a job. You don't ever see like job openings in a paper or anything. They have the 'Kyleton Shopper' but I gave up on that after seeing it. News gets around, people have scanners. They're like telephones almost. That's how they keep up with what's going on. They learn the code and all this stuff like when I'm on the scanner I don't know what they're talking about. Even my mom got one. She didn't really want to move here and it took a lot of convincing [from Odessa's maternal

> grandmother] to get her to do it. We tried to get her to move back quite a bit, but she stayed.

At this time, my recorder stopped. I was driving so was unable to write down what she said verbatim. Later that night I wrote notes on this portion of the interview. I wrote that Odessa elaborated on the Kyleton Shopper as a local weekly newspaper. She told me most of the advertisements were for handyman and babysitter needs. Very few ads were for actual jobs. Driving down the main street in 2011, I could only see a handful of businesses. Most of the jobs to be found were in Mortontown, about 20 miles away and almost an hour driving distance.

We had finally reached Kyleton and Odessa reminded me, "People don't go to Kyleton unless they mean to." My batteries in my recorder were in need of changing, so we went to the Rite Aid across the street. I wanted a tour of town and Odessa wanted to show me where she lived. I also wanted to see the Ridge County Library.

When we were planning our day trip to Kyleton, Odessa was positive there was no library there because she had never been there. I thought I remembered seeing the library during my solo trip to Kyleton and sure enough, I found it by searching online. She looked shocked and quite upset once I told her the library had been in existence since well before her time in Kyleton. The library was located less than ½ mile from her high school. I actually had to show her the library website before she believed me. Odessa was not pleased to find out that none of her school teachers had ever suggested the children go to the library. Odessa told me on many prior occasions that she was a "nerd" because she used to love to read the dictionary and she loved books. I was fairly certain her reaction

to the news there was a library in Kyleton meant she had missed out on many years of enjoyable reading. When I asked, Odessa confirmed my suspicion. “Man, I wish I had known that there was a library so close.” We found the small public library; I noticed it had a large fiction section. Interestingly, there wasn’t much of a children’s area. The reference section consisted of several shelves filled with auto manuals, genealogy, local history, and *World Books*. There were two or three notebooks with copies of newspaper articles having to do with the local area – all from either our newspaper in Muro City or the one from the other closest large city.



Figure 9: Library in Kyleton; newspaper article in notebook (2010)

From the library we went to Odessa's high school. This was not the high school I had seen on my solo trip. That one, a new middle/high school, opened about a year after Odessa graduated. Odessa's high school building now houses some county offices and some community organization offices. A large part of the building is unused. We were able to go inside and make our way down one or two hallways. It looked like the typical white high school built in the late 1950s or early 1960s with a gym, lunchroom, classrooms, etc. The really interesting thing about the location is that directly across the parking lot is the back of the county jail. I was trying to imagine what it would have been like to stand at the front steps of the school and look across to see the razor wire fence and jail inmates in the yard. It was definitely strange to me to see a jail so close to the school. As we were leaving, I noticed a used syringe in the parking lot. We stood there for a minute, both staring at it, and Odessa told me that there was "One boy I used to know is now living across the street." She meant he was in jail.



Figure 10: Odessa's high school in Kyleton. The entrance to Odessa's high school seemed dark and eerie to me. Odessa told me, "it was always like this when I was in school" (2010)



Figure 11: Odessa's high school in Kyleton. (2010)



Figure 12: View of Ridge County Jail across parking lot from Odessa's high school (2010)



Figure 13: Syringe found in parking lot of what used to be Odessa's high school (2010)

From her old high school, Odessa took me up the ridge to where her grandparents and mother now live. Their home is located on a curve of the road that winds its way up the ridge. The family has several acres with a couple of homes for Odessa's grandparents and mother and another for an uncle. From the vantage point of Odessa's grandparents' front porch, one can look down over the town and see across to the next ridge. It is a spectacular view from there. As we were headed back down into town, I could see the

elementary school. I hadn't seen it on my solo trip. It looked too new to have been Odessa's. She snorted, "My brother was so lucky. I would have these ratty old schools and as soon as I left, they would build a nice new one for him." Yes, here was this lovely, modern up-to-date elementary school with a nice playground area. Across the street was Odessa's elementary school. I was stunned. It looked more like a prison for children than an elementary school. And I was looking at the "good" side in the front. I read the news, I've read books about poor schools, and I've seen some of the older school buildings no longer in use in the area. Nothing prepared me for what I saw in front of me. Odessa could see my reaction. I blurted out my question, "Is this where you went to school?" Odessa told me that the first day of school, she came home crying believing she was being punished. "I had to have done something truly awful to have deserved this. I thought I was going to school in the dungeon." All I could wonder was how hard a time Odessa's mother must have been going through to not notice the difference between this school and Pleasant Plains School Odessa attended in Big Atlantic City.

We drove up and parked. The doors were locked, and the windows were covered in filth – but we did manage to see a little. Her classroom was one of two in the basement. It appears as if they are being used for storage now. The rooms were jammed with desks and other items.



Figure 14: The new elementary school in Kyleton (2011). This school opened after Odessa completed elementary school.



Figure 15: Odessa's elementary school, the upper level from the front, what I term the "good side." (2011)



Figure 16: Odessa's classroom is on bottom level which she thought was the dungeon. (2011)

Odessa and I headed out to drive around to see where she used to live. She and her mother and brother lived in a rental house before they purchased a house during her school years. Odessa took me to the house her family bought, a cute house situated on a large piece of property. Odessa told me the house looks very much the same now as it did when her family lived there. The house has three bedrooms and two baths and looks to be approximately 1500 square feet. There is a nice porch, although I didn't take a photo of that side of the house. From the porch one looks out onto a wooded copse. Beyond the trees lie more open fields. Odessa doesn't know the size of the property, but I guess it to be about an acre. There are other houses nearby, but most of the lots seem to be half acre to acre, so there is a nice sense of privacy, but not isolation. Most of the houses are situated like Odessa's; deeper lots rather than wide ones, so that one's neighbors are within sight.



Figure 17: House Odessa's family purchased. (2011)



Figure 18: Beautiful park-like area next to Odessa's house. (2011)

Odessa told me, "One time I walked to the store without Mom's permission to buy candy for myself." We measured and it was about a mile to the store. It seemed so far away, yet when I was the same age I was riding my bike a similar distance to the pharmacy. The house was near a stand of trees and a really pretty park-like area. I could easily see where Odessa got her love of the outdoors and plant life. It was truly beautiful there. As we rode along, we talked about her friends in Kyleton. One friend was a girl whose family did not have indoor plumbing.

> This girl's family all lived in one room in their house. It confused me because she had at least two or three brothers and sisters, I can't remember exactly, and her parents and her grandmother all living in this one little house. And no bathroom!

Like me, Odessa was born and spent her early years in a suburban neighborhood. I'm certain she had no prior experience of living without indoor plumbing. I was busy calculating in my head when this must have been taking place. I figured Odessa was in seventh or eighth grade when she moved near this girl's home and first encountered the living conditions, in the mid-1990s.

The Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) is a regional economic development agency that represents a partnership of federal, state, and local government. Established by an act of Congress in 1965, ARC is composed of the governors of the 13 Appalachian states and a federal co-chair, who is appointed by the president (Appalachian Regional Commission, 2012). Ridge County is one of the counties encompassed by the ARC. Our town, Muro City, is also located in the area encompassed by the ARC, classified as urban. According to the report by the ARC to President Kennedy (Appalachian Regional Commission, 1964), "Appalachia is a region apart." There are factors unique to the region. For instance, the report notes that rural does not mean "a checkerboard of rich farms", but rather "dense narrow ribbons of bleak habitation that wind along the valley roads and up the tributary hollows." The report further notes the deficits in education in the region. At that time, 32% of Appalachians over age 25 completed high school as opposed to 42% high school completion rate over the entire United States. Appalachia also suffered a shortage of college graduates.

As I write this, I think that this report would be very close to the case today, nearly 50 years later. It would take another thesis to delve deeply into the Appalachian region in all of its unique qualities and problems. I grew up near another part of Appalachia and spent time during some summers at summer camps located in the region. Certainly the summer camp experience was one of privilege up against poverty in the region. I remember going back to one of these camps with girlfriends when we were in high school. We drove ourselves on several visits. I clearly remember what the media frames as poverty as we approached the nearest town to the camp. The tiny trailers right up against the road with rusted cars in the yard and clothes hanging from clotheslines. Such a child of privilege, I couldn't imagine how anyone would "want to live that way." Even while attending the camp when I was younger, I remember the "townies" vs. "campers"; feeling it was us against them when we would go into the town for excursions. I remember the kids of the town staring at us and feeling uncomfortable because the stare did not feel at all friendly. I didn't understand it then, but later realized how it might feel to be the kid from town who could not afford a candy bar watching us as we indiscriminately threw money around to purchase candy and treats.

The 2006-2010 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates shows that 5.1% of households in Ridge County lack complete plumbing facilities. The same data set shows that almost 36% of households use methods other than electricity or utility provided gas for home heating (bottled/tank gas, fuel oil, kerosene, wood, coal) (United States Census, 2012). The U.S. Census does not truly capture what the ARC report termed "deficits in living standards." The report goes into detail about the condition of housing in

Appalachia and notes that over 26% of the homes needed major repairs and 7.5% were considered in dilapidated condition, as compared with the national averages of 18.1% and 4.7% respectively. These data are combined for all thirteen states located in Appalachia. When measuring rural areas, the situation is more aggravated. The report notes nearly 25% of homes had basic deficiencies and nearly 10% were considered dilapidated. An update to the report prepared in 1964 was prepared for the ARC (Appalachian Regional Commission, 1996). This report repeated the statistical analysis underlying the earlier report and asks if the findings are still valid. "The traditional characterization of Appalachia is incorrect. Conditions have improved greatly and the region is catching up to the rest of the nation." This may well have been true as of the report publication date, but according to the ARC datasets (Appalachian Regional Commission, 2012), Kyleton appears on the list of distressed counties at each benchmark year, 1960, 1970, 1980, 1990, 2000, and is also on the 2013 list of distressed counties. Kyleton has appeared on the list for each year it has been compiled. The ARC commissioned another report in 2009 to assess potential new indicators for distress in the region (Appalachian Regional Commission, 2009). According to the report,

> Based on our evaluation (through statistical analysis) of the 40 potential candidate indicator variables, the following five were determined to be most viable for incorporating into a distress index:
> - The employment/population ratio;
> - Poverty rate;
> - Per-capita market income;
> - Percent of the adult population (25 + years old) with at least one-year of college education, and/or percent with at least a four-year college degree; and,
> - Ten-year percent change in population.

Regardless of changes in the definition of distressed county, Ridge County has remained on the list. The report summarizes,

> Remarkably, our analysis reveals a strong and immutable association between poverty and people being in the workforce. In other words, employment remains one of the most powerful tools available to move people out of poverty, but in turn, employment depends on levels of education.

What do these reports mean to me when thinking about Kyleton and Ridge County? They confirm what I have been thinking about during this entire process. Ridge County, and subsequently Kyleton are isolated. Even though there are larger communities in the counties surrounding Kyleton, the roads are narrow and climb up and down the ridges. It takes about an hour to drive to the nearest small city under optimal road conditions. There is a dearth of good work to be found in and around Kyleton, especially for people without a college degree. The nearest community college is about an hour's drive in Mortontown and there is a state university in the same nearby small city mentioned above. Neither is easily reached from Kyleton. As I have mentioned earlier, the manufacturing jobs have nearly disappeared. One needs a working car to get to work or school, and one needs the means to afford a working vehicle. One also needs support from school officials, not to mention family and friends to be the most successful in college. As mentioned in my method section, I was unable to talk to anyone from the school system in Kyleton. I do not know if there were programs in place to attract teachers to teach in Ridge County when Odessa was in school. We briefly discussed who the teachers were and where they came from. Odessa did not know the answer, nor would she have known anything about

teacher pay in Ridge County. I'll discuss family support in much greater detail later in my conclusion.

We headed out of town on the side opposite of the one we entered. Here were the local medical offices, small hospital, and new middle/high school I had seen on my solo visit. We retraced the route Odessa and her friends would take as they "cruised" during high school to Mortontown. When I was growing up Suburban County was not as rural as Ridge County, but we did have plenty of undeveloped areas and back roads to cruise. This area of Ridge County reminded me a somewhat of the rural area near my home town back in my day.

While Odessa and I were driving around and talking about cruising, I reminisced about the last time I was in my home town, which was about six months after my first trip to Kyleton. When I was in high school, we used to cruise out in the "boondocks" for a change of pace. We went to a speedway to watch the races, to parties, to football games against the schools located in the area, to bars that had looser definitions of the drinking age. This area was rural, full of small family farms interspersed with the beginnings of suburban sprawl. It took about 40 minutes to drive to this rural area near my home. After the "end of civilization" as we used to call it, there was a stretch of a good 25 miles of two lane road before getting to the smaller community. As it turns out, the outlying rural area is on the way to my hometown from where I live now. What used to be one housing development after another is interspersed with strip malls, and the road is four lanes now with limited access. I saw busses, parking lots for commuters, and heard talk of bringing

the commuter rail to the area; clearly this area is a bedroom community now. Kyleton, on the other hand, has not changed much since Odessa lived there in the early 1990s.

We were several miles outside of Kyleton and about to turn around to head back. We were very close to the state line. And then we came to a dilapidated building. Next to it was a house with a school bus parked next to it. We could see part of the area outside the building was fenced in and there was a basketball hoop. I asked Odessa what was here. It turns out we were in front of another elementary school that was closed at the same time as hers when the new elementary school was built. The children in this area are now bussed to the new school. We had to stop and look. We couldn't get in the front, but we could see inside and Odessa told me it looked very similar to her old elementary school. So we went around back and walked right in the back door which was slightly ajar. We walked down the main hallway and into some of the classrooms. There was also a lunchroom/gym. The wing to the office was blocked. This building was closed about 15-20 years ago and nothing was disturbed even though the door was open. We were parked out front for at least 30 minutes and nobody questioned or stopped to see what was happening even though we heard the occasional car go by. Words cannot describe adequately how awful this place felt; so oppressive. Piles of books and papers were everywhere. It looked as if the school closed and no one bothered to move anything or clean anything.

We spent quite a bit of time in the school. Odessa kept saying that this school reminded her of her school in Kyleton. The building had two wings. One was for the office and led to the combination cafeteria/gym. The other wing was for the classrooms

(Figure 21). Even though there was no electricity in this school, Odessa remembered her school hallway looked very similar; dark and “creepy.”



Figure 19: Other elementary school closed near the time Odessa’s school was closed – front view. (2011)



Figure 20: Basketball hoops next to school. (2011)



Figure 21: Classroom wing hallway. (2011)



Figure 22: Inside one of the classrooms where all the books were dumped. (2011)

Partial Closure to Odessa's Story

I find it appalling and fascinating that even as a student in the eighth grade, Odessa understood that she was being cheated (even if she enjoyed not having to do any work to pass a class.) Odessa's words stood out to me when she spoke of cheating and being cheated, "Yes. I got a B, better than a C. I felt a little cheated. But then I also cheated by letting it go by that way and not saying anything." She repeats this theme when she later spoke of graduation, "After going through the actual graduation I remember thinking to myself, this is great that I actually graduated but I don't feel like I should have actually graduated because I wasn't taught anything. I felt pretty gypped."

I was wondering about the purpose of a so-called education for the students in Kyleton. I cannot speak to what school administrators and teachers in Kyleton would say as I promised Odessa I would not attempt to contact anyone from the schools. I also promised not to talk to Odessa's family, so I do not have their perspective either.

However, from seeing the schools Odessa attended, reading about theft of money for technology by county school administrators, and hearing Odessa's stories, I can only conclude that what passed (still passes?) for an education in Kyleton is merely a casual affair to pass the time.

Spring (2008) posits that "the current (in 2008) public interest in education is to help U.S. businesses compete in the global economy." He defines the public interest as "jobs and national dominance in the global economy." What I found particularly interesting was his distinction between private and public educational goals. Parents' goals for their children's education may or may not coincide with the public (as determined by elected representatives in local, state, and federal governments) goals. The public educational goals have changed over time in the United States. Spring divides his discussion into political goals, social goals, and economic goals of schooling. Listed below are some of the educational goals for United States schooling according to Spring,

> 1820s – 1840s – Teaching common moral and political values, equality of opportunity.
> 1880s – 1920s – Americanization of immigrants, training labor force for industrialization, reforming urban areas, anticommunism and radicalism.
> 1920s – 1940s – Control youth problem and keep youth off the labor market.
> 1950s – 1980s – Racial and cultural harmony, War on Poverty, educating more scientists and engineers, equality of educational opportunity.
> 1980s – 2003 – Preparation for a global economy, control of learning through testing.

I was in school in the 1950s – 1980s time period. Desegregation in my school system happened when I was in elementary school. I remember the race riots on the television, but they had very little impact on my daily life. My school district experienced a relatively mild desegregation transition. Odessa's schooling occurred in the 1980s – 2003

period Spring writes about. Odessa and I did not talk about testing, so I cannot say anything about her experience. However, as a parent of a daughter who is only two months younger than Odessa, I remember thinking that there was more and more emphasis placed on "teaching to the test" during her school years. I know I felt there was much more focus on control of the students and less freedom than what I experienced.

I trusted that my child's teachers were attending school each day and actually teaching her something and that she was learning. I assumed that my daughter's teachers were proficiently trained in their subject matter. At the same time that my daughter was attending high school here in Muro City, Odessa was in school **two counties away in the same state** receiving a markedly different education. My daughter was encouraged to go to college by her guidance counselor even though she earned only average grades. There was an assumption that any bright student could/should attempt college. Odessa was actively discouraged from trying. Odessa was specifically told she wasn't college material, and since going to college was rare for students from her area, she told me she didn't try. There was no discussion of financial aid opportunities.

Somewhere along the way Odessa went from being an enthusiastic and bright learner to one who was bored and not at all confident about her ability to succeed. She is very bright and has earned her degree. She maintained a grade point average in excess of 3.50 while working full-time as well as holding another part-time job. Yet, when I met her nearly ten years ago she was convinced that she could not become a college student. If she had not taken a job on campus and had colleagues who beleaguered her until she enrolled in English 101, I don't know if she ever would have considered herself "smart

enough." Peppered throughout our first interview she used this type of terminology. She was not one of the smart ones. Other students were smarter than she was. And then she would qualify those statements with "at least I thought so." Where did she get the impression that she wasn't smart enough? Did it begin with her rocky transition from Big Atlantic City to Kyleton schools? Did she become disengaged because she could not understand her teachers' accent? Perhaps by the time she became used to the accent the disengagement continued because school seems to have been a place to socialize and learning was not taken seriously. Odessa knew she was not really *earning* good grades, they were merely doled out to her. Did Odessa think she didn't deserve to go to college because her good grades were largely unearned?

In conversation after our first interview, Odessa told me that she did not want to attend her 10th high school reunion. She had no desire to see her classmates because she has moved so far past them. She believes that only one or two others made it to college. Her mother and grandparents still live in Kyleton, so I know that she goes back there once or twice a year to visit. She tells me that nothing much has changed.

Odessa's story doesn't end here of course. Odessa's plans after graduation include eventually having her own landscaping business. Odessa has moved out of state to a new place and has begun working for a large landscaping firm. In typical Odessa fashion, she lined up the landscaping job before she graduated so that she could immediately move after commencement. I have no doubt that whatever Odessa sets her mind to, she will succeed due to her determination, perseverance and intelligence.

Chapter 4
My Story

Introduction: Who am I and Where do I Come From?

Most of the time I feel like an outsider. I self-identify as Jewish. My roots in the United States are only two generations deep. All four of my grandparents came here as immigrants, two escaping Pogroms in Russia. All of my life I have heard stories of how difficult it was to "become an American." Both of my grandmothers lived to be over 100, so when I say all of my life – I mean well into my late 30s.

At times my identity as Jewish has been buffeted about this way and that. My father's parents were Orthodox and he was raised as one. My mother's parents were non-religious. In fact, my mother's father was a labor organizer in Chicago and Baltimore in the garment industry. My parent's religious "compromise" was to join a Conservative congregation. I attended Sunday school and Hebrew school but did not have a Bat Mitzvah and ceased to attend in the seventh grade. I would say that we paid lip service to the religion. I suppose this is one of the ways I am suspicious of organized religion. The Jewish denominations are no different than the various Christian denominations. Some may be more strident in their insistence that theirs is the "only" path to God, but they all purport to be more "correct" than the next. I subscribe to the belief that for anyone who believes in the idea of God, there are many paths to God and what is right for one person may not be for the next.

My family was definitely culturally Jewish, though. I grew up in a predominantly Jewish neighborhood. The last time I visited the area, I drove through our old neighborhood with my sister and we counted the houses in the development and then

counted those that belonged to Gentile families when we were growing up. When we were growing up, among 38 homes, three were owned by Gentiles. Most of my early childhood friends were Jewish, as were most of my parents' friends. We always celebrated Jewish holidays with the appropriate meals whether we observed them ritually or not. Schools were always closed during Jewish holidays due to the large number of Jewish families in the area.

My mother modeled for us how to be good people. Mom was always ready to stand up for her beliefs and never backed away from positive relationships with a variety of people. She was (and still is) outspoken about her views. Dad's influence was a little more subtle. He was always on his soapbox regarding systems (school, the government/politics, the military, the Synagogue, etc.) and less focused on individuals.

I married a Jewish man. Naïve as I was, I didn't understand that just because we were both Jewish, it did not follow that we would have the same outlook on life. As a matter of fact, I distinctly remember thinking at the time that it would be so much "easier" to marry someone who was Jewish because we would understand each other in ways that might not be possible otherwise. While that is partially true, I was imposing a totality of life outlook on only a Jewish one. We had very different social, financial, and political views and different understandings of what child rearing should look like.

For a course I took on philosophy of education, I wrote a response to a report by Luise McCarty (1993). I wrote my personal reflections on culture. I re-engage McCarty's work here as I think it provides a frame for me to discuss the intersections of my identity and the idea of culture. McCarty's thought provoking essay on multiculturalism

illustrates the difficulties of defining what we mean by culture. Her rejection of the notions of culture as a picture, as information, and as a unitary notion is clearly delineated. Since culture is not disposable according to McCarty, a picture or other finite representation will not suffice. McCarty rejects 1) the notion of culture as gaining information, too still a disposable, and 2) the assimilation of difference in culture to difference in spatial or geographical region. I understand her concerns and like her idea of culture as a path, and the notion of culture as home/house (culture as place).

> We might imagine cultures as collections of pathways running this way and that, with variable distances — or, sometimes, with no distances — in between. As I move along one path, other paths and sets of paths draw closer. Others diverge. I can move toward rapprochement with another culture, another path, without leaving the confines of my own. Think of paths in the woods: they intersect. They may seem to go on forever; often I cannot see their ends. (1993, 59)

The first time I read McCarty's piece, I wrote in the margins: "space", "geography not needed anymore", "don't fence me in", and "culture to be defined without contrast to other cultures." I feel that thinking of culture as "collections of pathways" reduces the possibility of incorporating an element of time. McCarty rejects the notion of culture in pictorial terms because pictures are disposable and culture is not. I think culture can be disposable. Are there any Mayans or Aztecs or Hittites or Huns left? Is there anything left of these cultures? These cultures are gone. Another way of thinking of cultures as disposable is to think of people who voluntarily reject their own culture. Every culture has a "dropout" contingent. Then there are peoples whose culture is stolen from them: African slaves, the Marranos, the Cherokee Nation.

Who defines one's culture? Who decides to which culture one belongs? These are questions I have pondered over the years, especially as they relate to being a second generation American Jewish woman. I have many cultural memberships – baby boomer, adult student, divorcee, mother, etc. but I will only concentrate on representing my sense of feeling like an outsider, which means in Muro City those pieces of my identity that are Jewish.

I define myself as a second generation American Jewish woman. A Jewish culture has been in existence for so long that it has morphed from a clan, to a kingdom, to a nation, to a religion, to a lifestyle, and sometimes back and forth and in-between. Even while on the inside (of Judaism), I feel like an outsider. About the only real concrete way I feel truly a "member of the tribe" is my love for questioning everything and my argumentative nature; and the food.

I've lived in the Muro City area for more than twenty years, many of them spent on the west side of town in an upper-middle-class neighborhood. Since moving to another side of town, I've learned about my neighbors. I've learned much about the way my neighbors conduct their lives. They live much more like collective societies than my former neighbors on the west side. There is a lot more interest in each other and real assistance. It not only takes a village to raise children, it takes a village to share the burdens and small joys of daily existence. I've been so changed and humbled that I have come to really value the past few years residentially as a learning experience.

My Family Background

A while ago, I was having a conversation with my father. He asked about my thesis and I began to describe to him that I was writing about the barriers to a college education through the educational journey of someone I know. He told me about his experience; one that I thought I knew. I was mostly wrong. I thought that since Dad served in WWII, he went through college on the GI Bill (Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944). What I did not know was that he *finished* his degree on the GI Bill. His college career began when he was in elementary school. My grandmother, born in 1892 or 1893 in a Russian shtetl, and who emigrated to the U.S. as a young girl, wanted my father to go to college. She began a savings account for him when he was young. She had managed to save over one hundred dollars. When Dad was in junior high school he got a job at a local store. He earned three dollars a week. One went to my grandmother to help with household expenses, another he kept for spending money (including trolley fare and lunches), and the other dollar went to the college fund. By the time he graduated high school, they had saved enough money for him to attend his first year of college and pay for his books and room and board. He worked for another year and a half to earn his second year's tuition. After his sophomore year of school, he served in the Army. After the war, thanks to the GI Bill, he was able to return to school to finish his Engineering degree and graduated in 1950. There was a delay because he had a difficult time getting readmitted because of admission quotas in place on Jewish students.

I have tried to imagine the determination it must have taken for my grandmother to make the sacrifices necessary in order to send her son to college. What I try to imagine is how she even came to know about college and the opportunities it could afford someone.

My paternal grandmother was orphaned in her teens by the flu epidemic of 1914. She was sent to live with distant relatives and was married two years later to a widower with a ten-year old son. I never knew my grandfather; he died before my parents met. He was a grocer. I don't know whether he aspired to have a college-educated son. My uncle, Dad's step-brother, never went to college and neither did my aunt, Dad's younger sister. I suspect that if my grandfather desired a college degree for one son, he would for the other as well. I believe my grandmother was the driving force behind the desire for an education for *her* son.

My mother is the youngest of four sisters. I knew that none of them had a college education. Recently, I found out that my mother was offered a college scholarship upon graduation from high school. She told me that her parents could not afford room and board and books, so she declined the offer and went to work instead. Her next oldest sister told me that my grandmother asked her if she wanted to go to college when she graduated. She is one year older than Mom. She laughed when she told me that the offer came a little late since she had taken no college-prep courses. It is not altogether surprising that my mother and at least one sister had the potential to go to college, but my grandparents did not know how to navigate admission or preparing for college. What did surprise me is that they even considered it at all.

I contrast my grandmother's determination to send her son to college versus Odessa's experience. Odessa's guidance counselor told her "You're not college material." Her family was silent. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2001), young people whose parents did not attend college are less likely to plan to attend college and actually enroll in college. The low percentage of adults holding college degrees means that Appalachian youth are exposed to fewer role models with postsecondary education and have diminished access to information and fewer supports for postsecondary educational opportunities, which can potentially result in low confidence in their academic abilities. It seems to me that Odessa did not have the necessary support from family during high school to help her navigate a path to college.

Introducing The Wonder Bread Years: Growing up in Suburban County

I grew up in a white middle-class neighborhood in Suburban County, Mid-Atlantic State. Mine was a privileged existence, although I didn't know it as a child. I am the eldest of two girls. My sister is two and a half years younger than me. Our parents bought our house when I was less than a year old and we lived there until the summer between junior high and high school. Woodbrier is a neighborhood of 38 single-family split-level homes on three streets, each with three to four bedrooms, living and dining rooms and a large "rec room" on the lower level. Woodbrier was a new development, and all but one of the families that purchased the homes remained in the neighborhood while we were growing up. My birth year was the surge year in the baby boomer generation. There were more children born in my same year than any other. Only one of our streets was a through

road and not heavily traveled. No one had a fenced yard and all of the neighborhood dogs roamed free. Napoleon, the standard size poodle who lived with one of my friends, guarded the intersection of two of the streets – the main road (our street) and one of the other two in the neighborhood. He used to sleep in the middle of the intersection during the day. The only time I remember him moving voluntarily was when the school bus was headed his way. All of the other drivers lived in the neighborhood and knew he would be there, so they drove around him.

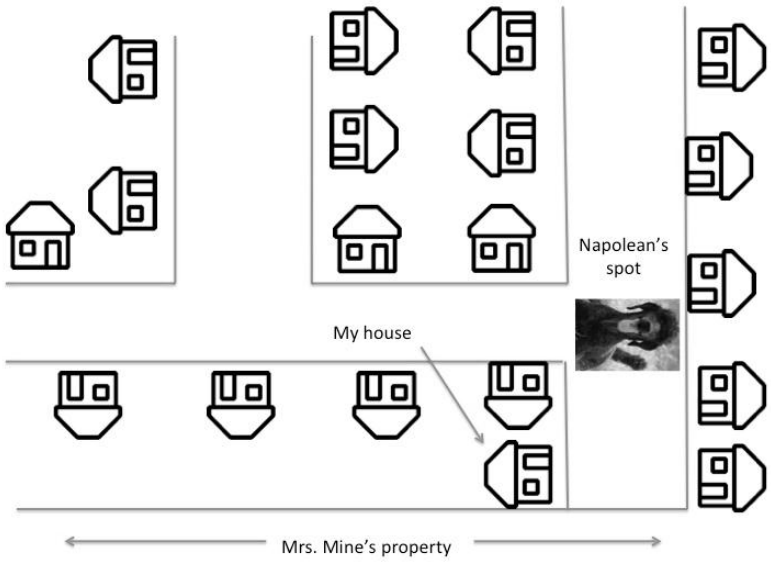


Figure 23: Woodbrier neighborhood (rendering by Shey 2012). This rendering only shows my immediate neighbors on the three streets where I spent most of my time. The neighborhood is much larger with several more interconnecting streets.

Our house was at the dead-end of the main road. The side yard of our house bordered Mrs. Mine's property. Mrs. Mine was a wealthy woman whose estate bordered the back yards of an entire street. Her estate was wooded at the edges and she had an agreement with the neighborhood children; we never disturbed her except on Halloween and she would be extremely generous with her candy and cash for our collection efforts for Trick-

or-Treat for UNICEF. When Mrs. Mine died and left her estate to a nature conservancy, nothing much changed for us except for Halloween. We had a neighborhood pool within walking or biking distance and everyone belonged to it. Also, within biking distance was "The Lake", what we called the local pharmacy and lunch counter. The store was owned by the pharmacist and all area children were allowed to hang out and read comic books to their heart's delight. Mr. Padgett knew all of us children and could keep track of which family we belonged to. We didn't need money; our families all had accounts with Mr. Padgett and he would follow our mother's instructions on how much candy to allow. One time in the late 1980's my husband and children and I were in the area. I took them to see my old house. My daughter had a cough. We went into Padgett's Pharmacy to purchase some cough syrup for her. Mr. Padgett's son actually recognized my face and asked if I wanted to charge it to my mother.

I graduated from an excellent public high school in Suburban County, Mid-Atlantic State. I went to school at Twin Cities High School with the children of diplomats and senators. My experience was one of plentiful school supplies, the newest textbooks, an experienced and stable teaching staff, a fully stocked library, and plenty of enrichment class opportunities such as French from 7th grade on, art classes, music classes, etc. Since we lived so close to Washington, D.C. our out-of-school field trips were to places like the Capitol to visit with our elected officials, Daughters of the American Revolution Constitution Hall to hear concerts, and to the Smithsonian Institution. During the spring break of 9th grade, I went to France with virtually everyone in my French class.



Figure 24: Photo of Twin City High School - main building (2012). Retrieved from http://twincityhs.com

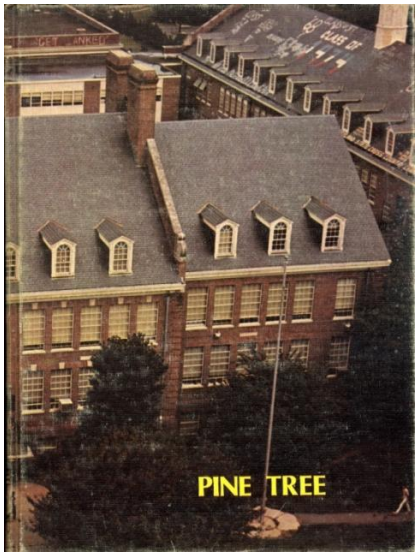


Figure 25: Photo of Twin City High School - multiple buildings around quad. (2012). Retrieved from http://twincityhs.com

The High School and College Years

Growing up as a girl in the 1960s and 1970s, it was not expected or assumed that I would go to college, but it was not discouraged either. I think my father was ambivalent about me going to college. He certainly saw value in higher education, but mainly for higher earning potential. Remember, he had an Engineering degree. My parents hoped I would meet a nice young man who would support me. A college degree for its own sake

was not something my father saw as useful. My mother disagreed. I think she was sorry she never followed through on her chance. When they would argue, my father's weapon of choice was to tell her, "What do you know? You never went to college." He was arguing with someone who ran a successful business. I do know that she was much more upset with me than he was when I quit school in the middle of my junior year.

I remember going to college fairs during high school. There were admissions counselors from many colleges who helped everyone apply. We had guidance counselors at school who wrote recommendation letters and helped with the application process. Mom encouraged me to further my education after high school as she saw value in it. Dad was more inclined to think that it wasn't necessary for girls to earn a degree. He has since changed his views, but at the time, his opinion wasn't outside the norm. Dad had earned an engineering degree, and my mother owned her own business. After Mom's experience with the Suburban County school system, both of my parents had the ability to navigate the college decision process, application process, and finally matriculation process. Because of where we lived, what we considered "local" colleges were internationally known universities. Many of my peers went to these universities, eventually including me.

My parents began to have trouble in their marriage when I was in high school. Because of Dad's indifference about college for me, and Mom's attention concentrated on the marriage, even though I took the SAT test and scored well enough to get into many universities, no one actually encouraged me to apply to college, so I didn't. Consequently, upon graduation I went to work for Mom at her travel agency. Travel was

not deregulated at that time. I took a travel agent course and finished top of my class. After about two months working full-time, I decided I wanted to attend college after all. All it took was a registration form and a check and I was enrolled part-time for fall at Continental University taking Introduction to Psychology and Introduction to Sociology. I was hooked. College classes were so much better than high school. I applied to Mid-Atlantic State University as a transfer student and began the following spring semester. I had the full college experience of living in a residence hall on campus. I think one of the reasons I wanted to go so desperately was because my parents' marriage was definitely crumbling and I needed out. I would take the bus to downtown on Friday's after classes and hitch a ride home with a family friend and neighbor. I was home for the weekend, but spent most of my time out with my friends or working on Saturday. On Monday, Dad would drive me back to campus on his way to Big Atlantic City and his office.

As my parents' marriage continued to fail, I became more depressed and isolated on campus and my academic performance reflected that. I drove to Sunshine State for spring break with another girl on my floor. She was transferring to Bay University, a small private school with a fantastic Oceanography department. We visited the school so that she could tie up some loose ends. I waited in the hallway outside of the admissions office. A woman came up to me and asked me my name. I was shocked! My name? I was used to being called by my Social Security Number; not my name. We talked for at least twenty minutes. By the end of our conversation I knew I had to leave Mid-Atlantic State University and transfer to Bay University. It would put more distance between my family

and me and give me an opportunity to attend a college that was only slightly larger than my high school. I was looking for a fresh start.

I flourished at Bay University for a time. It was located just outside downtown, but still in an urban area. The main administrative and classroom building was a converted hotel built during the heyday of Sunshine State's railroad boom at the end of the 19th century. Dorms were converted apartment buildings. I soon met my roommate and best friend, Gail. Gail was from First Southern State; the state immediately south of Mid-Atlantic State and north of Mid-Appalachia State. We remained friends until her untimely death during the first Gulf war.

Bay University as I remember it was very small. There were approximately 2,000 undergraduates when I attended. It was almost like being back in high school. Administrators knew students by name, and professors were more accessible to me. When Gail and I moved from the dorm, we actually rented from my Economics professor. Knowing his students personally, he knew what was happening with all of our lives and offered his rental house to us. He told us that he normally did not rent to students, but since he knew me, he was willing to rent to us.



Figure 26: Photo of Bay University. (2012). Retrieved from http://bayuniversity.edu

Studying with Gail certainly helped my grade point average. She was dedicated to her schoolwork and really taught me how to study. Unfortunately for me, my depression over my parents' situation did not bode well for my ability to concentrate. As time went on, I became less interested in school and more interested in my "career" working for a rental car company. I quit school in my junior year and moved to the south part of Sunshine State to take a management position at the rental car company I was working for. This was a management opportunity that I did not want to pass up. I met my future husband soon afterwards.

Taking a Break from College

South Sunshine State was where I met and married my husband and where we started our family. This area was a large, metropolitan area that included almost continuous cities along a highway. I continued to work full-time after I had my children and never considered going back to school to finish my degree during that time period. I lived in the south of Sunshine State until we moved for a job opportunity for my husband. After a two-year stint in another large metropolitan area, we moved to Mayola near Big Southern University in Mid-Appalachia State.

Once we moved to Mayola, I was able to work part-time and spend more time being a wife and mother. I was the typical suburban wife and mother. I worked on and off through the years. I raised two children. We bought homes in the "good" school district. Our children had gym lessons and played baseball and were in orchestra at school. I never questioned their opportunities, just like I had never questioned mine growing up.

Just as our parents worked hard to provide a nice life for us, my husband and I did the same for our children.

Going Back to School

Once I began to work at Big Southern I realized that I should take full advantage of the free tuition for myself and attempt to finish my bachelor's degree. As I said earlier, my focus was still on earning potential, not on learning.

I graduated in December 2005, thirty years after my high school graduation. At Big Southern I had been working in one of the academic advising units until I took a position working in the Academic Excellence Center. One of Big Southern's Chancellors created the Center and I was the first person hired by the director. We opened in the fall of 2005. The core mission of the AEC is one of helping students achieve academic success through the various programs and individual assistance and referrals. Due to changes at the state system-level of the university, Big Southern hired a new Provost and with him came the focus on student retention and persistence to graduation. The AEC had grown with the addition of an associate director and assistant director and we were an integral part of the group studying the barriers to success at Big Southern.

Becoming a Graduate Student

After my first two or three courses, I realized that going to college was not what I previously thought it was. It wasn't about picking a school, applying and entering, taking classes, earning a degree. College was about learning how to think critically and learning

how to ask for help and respond to outreach efforts. Successful students weren't the ones who were smarter in book learning; they were the ones who realized how to seek out opportunities and ask for help.

I was now thinking of my work as a career rather than a job. With encouragement from my colleagues, I looked at graduate programs offered. I missed being in class. Early on I signed up for Cultural Counseling during a summer term. I chose to write my final paper comparing four high schools in our county. Two were known as the best high schools in the county. The other two were known for other things. I had recently moved from the "good school zone" side of town to a neighborhood served by one of the other two schools. Up until then, I had never given any thought to the differences between schools in the same school system. I had always assumed that there would be much more similarities than differences. I was educated that summer. That experience along with my daily professional experiences looking at the data on college student retention changed the way I saw K-12 education and access to higher education. My eyes were beginning to open. Since this was a summer class, I did not have the ability to interview anyone, so I chose to compare the four schools by looking at their websites, comparing AP course offerings, and what college information was provided to the students (including how large the counseling staff was at each school). I also looked at property values and public library access for each of the schools. I looked at state census data on income and population demographics for each of the schools. And finally, I looked at the state report cards on dropouts, graduation rates, and amount spent per pupil, etc. It was certainly eye-opening. For instance, I learned there is a disparity in the number of offerings of AP

(advanced placement) courses in the schools. Two schools offered a wide variety of AP courses, almost twice as many as the other two schools. The technical-track courses offered at the two schools with more AP courses were geared to careers in fields that pay higher. I saw offerings for Information Technology and health-tech fields. At the other two schools, the classes offered were for the beauty, food industries and the trades, typically low-paying jobs.

Partial Closure of My Story

No one's story ends including mine. As I finish my thesis and ponder my future, I realize how much I have grown and changed since coming back to school. When I first began, my intent was to finish my bachelor's degree to get a better job. As I've continued with graduate school, my focus has been more on how to be an advocate for those who don't have easy access to college or find themselves flailing in college. I've turned the corner from job to career, whether it remains in higher education or not.

I was so surprised to find out how similar Odessa and I are considering our backgrounds and age difference. In the next chapter I will reflect on those similarities and differences and the barriers to a college education.

Chapter 5
Reflections: Who Do I See in the Mirror?

When I began this project, I imagined that I would be interviewing someone whose life and school experiences would be very different from my own. I discovered that while on the surface this is true, Odessa and I share some deep similarities as "outsiders". In this chapter I represent these similarities and differences and the barriers to a college education. The sections below were developed from coding Odessa's transcripts, my field notes and reading my analytic memos and personal narrative for patterns across both stories and outliers (Coffey, 1996).

One might assume fewer students means greater attention to those students, but that is not how Odessa represented her school experiences. Odessa talked a lot about her teachers and what stood out to me was her disappointment in finding that her Kyleton schools did not have teachers who were subject matter experts. For example, she shared "Our Spanish teacher also taught drama and art. She attempted to teach us. We were all excited to learn something new - a foreign language. It turns out she didn't know Spanish." Odessa also had the math teacher who often did not show up for class. As I reflected on my own schooling, I can remember certain teachers, but usually I remember them for the incredible positive influence each one had on me. Mrs. Hanrahan was my sixth grade teacher; she taught us how to do a research paper using materials from the reference section in the library. She wanted us to be prepared for Junior High School. I had wonderful French teachers from seventh through tenth grades and was reading *The Little Prince* in French by my third year. Each of my math teachers specialized in

geometry or algebra, and I had different teachers for biology and chemistry. I do not know what the ratio of students to teachers in Odessa's schools were. I know in mine it seemed to be about 25 students per class (as I counted heads in our class photos). More importantly, I know that in my classes, the teacher would never have let us spend the entire class period socializing.

Differences: Odessa vs. Me

Educational Differences

Odessa attended three elementary schools, two in the suburbs of Big Atlantic City and finally one in Kyleton. I attended the same elementary school throughout my childhood. Odessa graduated from Kyleton High School, a school with less than 200 students and one that served her entire county. I graduated from a high school with over 400 senior classmates. My high school was one of ten that served the county at that time. Students who graduate from Kyleton rarely go to college. Odessa's recollection is of only one or two students who were interested in college and had plans to attend. Big Southern University is the state flagship university. According to Big Southern's online fact book (2012), only a handful of students have entered Big Southern as freshmen from Kyleton in the past few years. My high school had several guidance counselors whose main function was to talk to students about college. I remember college fairs with representatives from various schools at tables set up around the gym.

Educational Enrichment

Had Odessa stayed in Big Atlantic City schools she would have been exposed to a variety of enrichment experiences. She would have had field trips to museums, concert halls, and likely to Washington, D.C. as it was so close. Big Atlantic City schools had band, choir, AP courses, art classes, and many sports to be played. Odessa does not recall many of these opportunities being available to her in Kyleton. I began French class in the seventh grade and continued through eleventh grade. I was able to go to France on a student tour during the spring of my ninth grade.

Odessa did not know there was a local library near her in Kyleton. She never had a library card then. My mother took me to the library when I was a toddler for story-time. I got my first library card when I was in first or second grade.

Family Differences

Odessa's father died when she was young. She was raised in a single-parent household. From my conversations with Odessa it seems to me that her maternal grandmother exerted a lot of influence on Odessa's mother, at least enough to convince her to move to Kyleton and to stay there even though Odessa and her brother wanted to return to Big Atlantic City.

My parents are both still living; they did not divorce until I was married. The evidence of my mother's ferocity in trying to obtain the proper education for my sister who had learning disabilities leads me to believe that my mother would never have agreed to move somewhere without checking out schools first. There was a time when I

was young when my parents actually debated moving to Big Atlantic City as my father's office was there. Mom determined that our county school system was superior to Big Atlantic City and refused to move. Dad continued to commute instead.

Generational Differences and College Aspiration Differences

Odessa is a first-generation college student. Odessa is the first member of her immediate family to attend college. There are many definitions of first-generation used in academia, one being

> First-time student (undergraduate) A student who has no prior postsecondary experience (except as noted below) attending any institution for the first time at the undergraduate level. This includes students enrolled in academic or occupational programs. It also includes students enrolled in the fall term who attended college for the first time in the prior summer term, and students who entered with advanced standing (college credits earned before graduation from high school) (National Center for Education Statistics, 2012).

Odessa fits the definition. I am not the first member of my immediate family to attend college as my father earned his bachelor's in engineering, but I am the first female member of my family to do so.

Terenzini et al (1996) discuss one aspect of first-generation students' precollege planning and expectations. First-generation students might be at a disadvantage with respect to their lack of basic knowledge of college and family support among other factors. Odessa told me on numerous occasions that her mother questioned her need to study and attend classes instead of taking annual leave time to visit her family in Kyleton. Odessa did not have family support while she was in high school to apply to college, nor did she have the support while she was in college. While my father was less enthusiastic

about my attending college than he could have been, he had the background and knowledge to talk about it. I did take a college visit while in eleventh grade to see his alma mater. Dad and I went alone and stayed with the widow of one of his professors. It was amazing; I was feted and had an individual interview with the Dean. I think if Dad hadn't been so ambivalent about it, I would have easily been influenced to attend college directly after high school. My family was very supportive once I matriculated. Recently, my mother has been kicking me out of my own home so that I would go to the office to finish my thesis.

Place Differences

While in Big Atlantic City, Odessa attended two elementary schools because of at least one move. This was followed by the big move to Kyleton. I know she lived in at least two houses while there. I was raised in a two-parent home. My parents bought our house when I was a baby and it was the only home I knew until I was in junior high school. Even after we moved, I was able to attend the same high school as the one I would have attended had we not moved.

After her move to Kyleton, Odessa played by herself in the fields and woods on her grandparent's property. It was a hike to the nearest neighbor. When Odessa showed me her house I could see how far it was to the neighbors. This was the house the family rented after first living with Odessa's grandparents and before buying their final home in Kyleton. It was probably about a quarter of a mile to the nearest house where the girl lived without inside plumbing. Since Odessa's schools were the only ones serving the

county, most of her friends did not live within walking distance. I, on the other hand, grew up with seven girlfriends in the same neighborhood who were either my age or one year older. It wasn't until Junior High School that I had friends who lived out of my neighborhood. Even then, I could simply ride the bus home to a friend's house after school and my mother would pick me up. The Junior High School was only about three or four miles from our neighborhood.

Cultural Differences

Even though Odessa was not born in Kyleton, she was influenced by the culture of the people in the area. According to Sizemore (2008), "Appalachian-Americans are not generally discussed in multicultural textbooks or thought of as a distinct cultural group, yet they exhibit major cultural differences when compared to the common social construct of 'white America'." (Ali & Saudners, 2006) write,

> This sense of independence may serve as an important asset for Appalachian students who are planning to attend college. However, self-reliance to an extreme, along with cultural isolation, may serve to negatively affect the willingness of Appalachian students to seek help for their career-related concerns from teachers or counselors. Because of the strong sense of kinship, these students may also choose to rely solely on family members for assistance in career planning. This may be challenging for students who wish to attend college but whose parents and family members are unfamiliar with navigating institutions of higher education.

Odessa makes her own car and house repairs. If something breaks, she researches how to fix it and then does it herself. In a casual conversation I once asked her why she thought she was this way. She told me that growing up in Kyleton, most people had no one to rely on except themselves or their own family. It was so isolated, that it was difficult to get repairs made easily. Almost everyone in our building relied on her to fix

things if we couldn't find the maintenance staff. Sometimes it was simply faster to ask Odessa than to wait for the maintenance department to send someone. I remember Odessa struggling with her college academic advisor. In her college the advising was rendered by faculty. He didn't know all of the academic policies. Odessa refused to seek help from other faculty or administrators; she preferred to print pages from the catalog and teach her advisor.

Socio-Economic Status

I was raised just like all of my Jewish friends, as a Jewish American Princess. My mother used to joke that for an electrical engineer, my father was woefully inept at changing light bulbs. I grew up understanding that the best tool to have around the house was a checkbook. We hired someone to clean our house and mow our yard. Shopping was abundant – anything my family needed or wanted was available locally. I still operate this way, when something needs to be done around the house – I hire someone to do it.

Odessa grew up in a less affluent manner than I did, but her family was not poor. She had clothes to wear and plenty of food to eat. Her family owned their own home. When she was a teenager, she had money to put gas in the car and do all the things her other friends were doing.

What stands out to me the most about our differences regarding socio-economic status is that it is less about money but rather our different attitudes towards doing things for ourselves versus paying others to do them. Because Odessa spent years in the isolated

area of Kyleton, she did not have access to the vast shopping choices I did, nor were there large choices in home or auto repair companies available. Odessa learned to fix things herself.

One of the biggest lessons I learned when I became suddenly poor upon my divorce was the enormous amount of time it takes to figure out how to fix things as opposed to writing a check. When I didn't have money to spend, I had to do without, learn how to fix things myself, or barter. It also takes an enormous amount of time and effort to get the best deals on purchases, cut coupons, etc. All of this effort takes time away from the freedom to think. I found myself spending time on "survival" rather than on assessing and processing the news of the day or theorizing about educational opportunities for me and my children. I finally came to the realization that I had to consider my time spent thinking as an investment in my future. I had the opportunity to come to this realization because I had grown up with plenty and could see the effects of lack of time on me and my children. I don't think I would have come to the same conclusions if I had always been busy surviving – I would have been too busy getting by.

Similarities: Odessa and Me

Outsiders

Odessa and I are both outsiders. Odessa has told me on many occasions she doesn't like to admit she is from Kyleton or went to school there. She didn't want me to meet her grandmother and grandfather. She did allow me to meet her mother, although not in her

home. In an educational setting, the only setting I really know Odessa, she offers very little of herself. She is very private about her background. She adapts to fit in.

Over the years, I have watched Odessa become slightly more involved with her classmates in study groups, but she tended to be what I call a loner-learner. She mostly studied by herself at night. Her do-it-yourself mindset flowed through to her school work. I, on the other hand, studied with my roommate Gail when we were at Bay University, and then worked with various study partners or study groups when I was earning my undergraduate degree at Big Southern University. When I had questions, I went straight to my professors. For the first two or three courses, I made a point of contacting my professors to tell them a little about myself and that I was a re-entry student. I would submit early drafts of papers to get feedback. Odessa never did anything like this. She would avoid interfacing with her professors, especially in the beginning. Every semester I would see Odessa planning her next set of courses, carefully following her catalog. She used to tell me her advisor was not much help; I really think she just didn't realize that she did such a good job herself, she didn't need his help.

The entire time Odessa was earning her bachelor's degree she held a full-time position at Big Southern and usually a part-time job in retail as well. I rarely heard her talk about her classmates, her talk was more about the project she was working on, or something she had learned in a book she read as a companion to class materials. When she did speak of her classmates, she would note how most of them went from high school directly to college and did not work like she did. When Odessa began college, she was barely twenty years old, so she did not look much different from other college students,

except that she wore office clothes to classes. I remember her commenting early on in her academic career how different the other students were because they did not work like she did and she felt so much more mature.

I am an outsider, too. I often find myself in direct opposition to how I'm supposed to behave in my office culture. I should wear different (better?) clothes; I should wear more makeup; I should wear my hair differently. I should keep my mouth shut and only speak when spoken to, especially in meetings. I find myself adapting to fit in with the office culture by not being true to myself. As a Jewish woman, I grew up with a dry, wry witty set of relatives. My sense of humor does not fit well, or so I've been told.

Big Southern is a public institution, yet still has lighted Christmas trees atop buildings from November to December. Each year I complain, and get nowhere. Last year I was told the power used to keep the trees lit was minimal, so I should not worry about the cost; my complaint on separation of church and state was ignored. I enjoy the festivities of the holiday season, and love to hear the music and cheeriness when shopping. I feel very differently when it is so prevalent on my campus in an official way. It makes me feel like an outsider because of my Jewish identity and because I do not have the insider power at Big Southern to be heard.

Plans After High School

Neither of us was very enthusiastic about going to college while we were in high school. We both hated school, although we both had plans. Odessa was in a hurry to leave Kyleton and she did so. The day after graduation she moved to Mortontown and

moved in with a friend so she could begin work. My mother owned a travel agency and immediately after graduation I took a travel training course so that I could work for her as an agent.

First-Generation and Part-Time College Students

I mentioned earlier that Odessa was a first-generation female college student in classic meaning of the term. I was a first-generation female college student and also the first in my generation of family to earn a graduate degree. We both also fit the mold of non-traditional college students. Odessa entered college when she was twenty, almost three years after she graduated high school. I am an adult learner; I earned my bachelor's degree thirty years after high school graduation. Both Odessa and I worked full-time while earning our degrees. In fact, both of us had second, part-time jobs while in school. We both had to maintain energy and enthusiasm during many years of our education. I can attest to the dedication and single-mindedness that it takes to embark on an often lonely adventure such as this.

Determination and Persistence

Odessa's barriers to graduation were in place while she was growing up and in high school. Lack of family and school guidance counselor support for college education and having few friends who expected to go to college were some. Odessa also experienced teachers and school administrators who actively dissuaded her from college with negative messaging. Odessa has told me on several occasions she wasn't "smart enough" for

college. Odessa thought her first two semesters in college were flukes as she made good grades. It took her awhile to overcome her assumption that the negative messaging was correct, that she wasn't qualified.

As a child, one of the messages I received from my father (not to mention society in general) was that girls don't need to be educated. While I was married I was actively discouraged from going to school and the attempt was made by my then-husband to make me feel guilty for wanting to pursue my degree at the supposed expense of my family. Fortunately, I was able to overcome that particular barrier and my children have always been supportive. I reflect on our interview and can relate to Odessa's frown as she related her stories of high school and not "being smart."

The barriers both of us faced were those of physical and psychological barriers. But here's the thing – all of them were barriers to be overcome (but aren't always for everyone).

Concluding Thoughts on Access and Retention

Access: Can You Go to College if You Can't Get to College?

The literature on college aspirations tends to focus on social capital theory, that relationships give individuals access to important resources that influence their behavior (Kao, 2004). Potential college students need information about how to navigate the process from someone, whether it is parents or school officials. What if the school you attend doesn't have any teachers or guidance counselors who talk about college? Or worse, tell you that you aren't "college material"? What if your parents do not talk to you about going to college? What if most of your friends have no college aspirations? If

students don't have these relationships to fall back on, how do they gain access to college? Odessa and her classmates all believed they would have to take remedial classes before they could take college credit classes. When Odessa was in school in Kyleton, she experienced a math teacher who did not appear in class until the last few minutes, gave quizzes and tests that all of his students failed, and then subsequently passed all of the students. Odessa also experienced a Spanish teacher who did not know any Spanish.

In my case, my parents were ambivalent about college, but I knew many, many friends who applied and went to college directly after high school. We heard from recruiters all the time. Even if I didn't have the full-on family support, I certainly heard about college from a number of sources while I was in high school.

Big Southern does not hold college fairs in Ridge County. When Odessa was in high school Big Southern participated in my daughter's high school college fairs for the last time, I know they were not holding fairs at the smaller high schools. Big Southern makes very little attempt to attract students from the smaller counties in the state. Most of the focus is on the larger metropolitan area schools. Only a handful of students from Ridge County have matriculated to Big Southern in the past several years. In Odessa's case, the only way she ended up going to college was by coming to work at Big Southern and making those connections and establishing relationships with her colleagues who encouraged her to get her degree.

The time to talk about going to college should not be while the student is in high school. I believe the time to talk about it is during grade school. The expectation, the foundation, should begin much, much earlier than high school. I believe the state of Mid-

Appalachia should provide resources to the parents of students in elementary and middle school, especially in those areas of the state not served by large metropolitan school districts. Parents of potential first-generation college students can be taught how to talk about going to college. I participated in a program created by our Mayor several years as a mentor to several area high school students. The program was a combination mentorship/scholarship to help local high school students go to college. The program was designed to provide the mentorship needed to assist the students and parents navigate the daunting application process such as the FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid), college application, immunization records, etc. The program has been expanded state-wide and while I believe the intentions are wonderful, I feel the program could expand into the earlier grades to provide parents with more useful information at an earlier point in time.

College Retention and College Completion

The data I see presented on retention at Big Southern is parsed by gender, ethnicity, grade point average, number of hours attempted, and by parents level of education. Most of our students are in-state and we do not look at in-state versus out-of-state residency. Even within our state, we do not look at school district or region of the state or rural versus urban or suburban school system.

The literature on retention focuses on high-impact practices (Brownell, 2010). Big Southern uses all five practices listed in this publication: first-year seminars, learning communities, service learning, undergraduate research, capstone courses and projects. In

my work at Big Southern, I have been intimately involved with the first-year seminars, one of which has been a program running since the late 1990s. All of these practices make their impact on retention, but most do so for traditional college freshmen. Big Southern places most of its focus on traditional college students. There used to be a department for adult students, which was disbanded during our last fiscal crisis.

In our quest to become a top 25 research institution, Big Southern officials talk about "each student counts." Our graduation rate is improving and so is our retention rate. We need to pay attention to all of our students, not just those that fit into these neat columns of data. In order to really reach the top, we need to pay attention to individual student stories.

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All photographs from road trips taken by Odessa and Phyliss

Appendix

THE UNIVERSITY of TENNESSEE KNOXVILLE

Institutional Review Board
Office of Research
1534 White Avenue
Knoxville, TN 37996-1529
Phone: 865.974.3466
865.974.7400

October 13, 2009

IRB#: 8029 B

TITLE: The Accidental College Student

Shey, Phyllis
Educational Psychology & Counseling
1817 Melrose Avenue, Room 203
Campus - 3551

Anders, Allison
Educational Psychology & Counseling
418 Claxton Education Building
Campus - 3400

Your project listed above has been reviewed and granted IRB approval under expedited review.

This approval is for a period ending one year from the date of this letter. Please make timely submission of renewal or prompt notification of project termination (see item #3 below).

Responsibilities of the investigator during the conduct of this project include the following:

1. To obtain prior approval from the Committee before instituting any changes in the project.
2. If signed consent forms are being obtained from subjects, they must be stored for at least three years following completion of the project
3. To submit a Form D to report changes in the project or to report termination at 12-month or less intervals.

The Committee wishes you every success in your research endeavor. This office will send you a renewal notice (Form R) on the anniversary of your approval date.

Sincerely,

Brenda Lawson

Brenda Lawson
Compliances

Enclosure

INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT
The Accidental College Student (thesis)

INTRODUCTION

You are invited to participate in **a series of interviews which is for the purpose of providing data for my thesis.**

The immediate purpose of the project is to complete an assignment for the above mentioned course. This project may also be included in my dissertation at a future date.

INFORMATION ABOUT PARTICIPANTS' INVOLVEMENT IN THE STUDY

You and I will engage in a several (anticipated three) one-on-one interviews. Each interview will be digitally audio-recorded. Each interview will not last more than sixty minutes unless we both agree to continue.

I will transcribe the audio recordings. These transcriptions will then become my data sources. I will then use the data to form the basis of my written report. I will give you copies of the digital interview recordings. I will password protect all files related to the project (digital voice files, transcripts, paper). All files will be kept on my home computer and no one else will have access to them. After the project is completed, I will keep the files for possible use in an eventual thesis and/or dissertation. After those potential uses, all files related to the project will be destroyed (except the written narrative). The final paper (written narrative) will use pseudonyms. My advisor for the project does not know who you are.

RISKS

There is little physical risk to you. I will make every effort to be sensitive to you and treat you with respect. I plan to offer you the opportunity to read the report prior to submission. As the report will be my interpretation of the meaning that you makes from your own lived experiences, there is the possibility that we will disagree about those meanings. In that case, I may include both sides (and identify them as such), but will not necessarily change my interpretation.

Your identity will be protected and no one but you and I will know who you are. Pseudonyms will be used in the report. The raw data in both digital and written form will be protected and destroyed once the project is completed (or upon completion of thesis and/or dissertation).


_____ Participant's initials (place on the bottom front page of two-sided consent forms)

BENEFITS
There is no real anticipated benefit to you other than the opportunity to have your voice heard.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Information in the study records will be kept confidential. Data will be stored securely and will be made available only to persons conducting the study unless participants specifically give permission in writing to do otherwise. No reference will be made in oral or written reports which could link participants to the study.

CONTACT INFORMATION

If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, (or you experience adverse effects as a result of participating in this study,) you may contact the researcher, Phyliss Shey, at 1817 Melrose Ave, and 974-4880. If you have questions about your rights as a participant, contact the Office of Research Compliance Officer at (865) 974-3466.

PARTICIPATION

Your participation in this study is voluntary; you may decline to participate without penalty. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw from the study at anytime without penalty and without loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you withdraw from the study before data collection is completed your data will be returned to you or destroyed.

CONSENT

I have read the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study.

Participant's signature [redacted] Date 10/27/09

Investigator's signature _____ Date 10/27/09

Vita

Phyliss Dubinsky Shey was born in Washington, D.C. and raised in the Maryland suburbs of our nation's capital. She graduated *magna cum laude* from The University of Tennessee in 2005 with her Bachelor of Arts in Sociology and a minor in Religious Studies. She has worked at the university for over ten years in the division of Academic Affairs. Her work has mainly focused in the areas of first-year studies and student success. She plans to continue her career in education.

Phyliss strives to be the person who stands up for others. She pursues justice in an ongoing effort to create equality of thought and action for all people.