

Jennifer Maxwell - Interview conducted by Willard Watson and undergraduate students, Ethan Bowen and Madison Biddix, from Dr. Katherine Ledford's Appalachian Stories course. Interview was conducted in Mrs. Maxwell's office in East Hall at Appalachian State University.

Q1 – Who are you and when and where were you born?

My name is Jennifer Maxwell and I was born in Fayetteville, North Carolina, in January of 1976.

Q2 – What do your parents do for a living?

My dad was a lineman—an electrician—for many years, but by the time I came along, they were almost 40 when I was born, and so he had retired from that. My parents owned a florist while I was growing up.

Q3 – Did you contribute to family income or help your parents in their work in any way?

I helped at the florist some, you know, once I got into high school I helped some—I guess junior year in high school. I didn't necessarily contribute to income, but I just kind of helped out around when they needed things. My dad was always the person that did all the deliveries so I hung out with him and rode around doing deliveries.

Q4 – What do you do for a living?

I am the sustainability program specialist for the Office of Sustainability at Appalachian State. What that means, basically our office is an administrative office working with all departments and divisions on campus to institutionalize sustainability. Anywhere from working with

operational aspects to academic curriculum development. My specific role is to oversee different programs that we oversee through our office. Appalachian has a commitment to zero waste so I direct that effort. Most of our student outreach and engagement is under my purview as well as our food pantry, free store, and Green Office Certification programs so I kind of directly manage all of the different programs for the office.

Q5 – How long have you worked here?

I've been at Appalachian State for 11 years this month, actually. I predate the office of sustainability. I did my undergrad here (ASU) and came back to assume the role of resource conservation manager in 2006 in facilities and that was kind of more around waste reduction and recycling efforts. And when this office was developed, my role transitioned over to this office to come take on a more holistic role and holistic approach to campus sustainability.

Q6 – How did you decide on your career?

You know, it's interesting, my passion for specifically environmental sustainability came from just being a kid and really loving the outdoors and spending most of my time outdoors. I grew up on a farm so I just really connected with nature in that way. I had this interesting thing happen to me when I was 19. My brother was 18 when I was born so he moved away and lived up in Rhode Island. So when I was 19, I said "I'm gonna go" —I didn't really know him that well because he didn't really come home very often—I decided to get on a plane and go visit him

and so I went and spent a week with him. We went to some friends of his house and they had a cookout. We got there and they had this beautiful 10-acre organic farm and they had animals and they had built their own home—it was a passive solar home. It was just really an awesome experience for me just to hang out for the day on their farm. Everything that we ate came from their garden and I just really connected with that and got really interested in... “Oh I really want to live more sustainably and more self-sufficient”. That was what really drew me to that.

So I moved to Boone sort of on a whim in 1997. I was sitting with a neighbor in our apartment that we lived in and found out that there was this program—sustainable technology, specifically sustainable design was what I was really interested in. He was doing a project and building a model on the porch and I was like, “Wow, that’s really cool!” and he’s like “Yeah, there’s really cool classes.” So I looked into going back to school and went to Caldwell (Technical Community College) for a little while and then got into App, and got into the sustainable technology program.

Part of ending up where I am today is because I had a sustainable resource management class. My final project for the class was with two other students was to start composting operations here on campus. That project was one that needed to be done so I took it on. At the time, the recycling coordinator for Appalachian was Jim Rice. He was overseeing that composting. He became a mentor of mine. He kind of jokingly said, “Hey, when I retire you should come back to App and take my position.” I said “OK,” then it kinda happened and that’s how I ended up here today.

Q7 – Would you say your work has changed in any way since you've started?

For me personally, it has, just because I've kind of expanded what my responsibilities are with student outreach and engagement and the other programming from just specifically waste reduction and recycling to when I transitioned here, the university made a larger commitment. So it was really looking at more sustainable purchasing and then sort of morphing into the student responsibility and management of our students and other programs. I would also say that I've seen campus sustainability really change here at Appalachian. It's been going on for a long time but it's always been like grassroots efforts and in the last 10 years I've really seen a shift where it's much more supported by the administration. You still have a lot of the grassroots efforts, but a much more administrative support up top.

Q8 – Describe a typical work day.

It honestly varies every day, which is one of the things I love about it, because I'm doing different things every day. Typically, lots of meetings every day, a lot of my work is developing working relationships on campus. That's really the way that we are able to make change happen here and so I spend quite a bit of time in meetings. I sometimes spend time after hours here meeting with students. Students can meet easier in the evening than they can in a typical work day. My typical schedule is 8:30 (a.m.) to 5 (p.m.) but sometimes I'm here late at night meeting with students. I could be anywhere from out on the malls sorting trash and looking at what's in our waste stream, to tabling at an event, or sitting in a meeting thinking about what our contracts look like on campus—the typical work day really varies for me.

Q9 – What type of people do you work with?

I'd say specifically here in our office with our core team and our students that we work with, everyone's very kind and compassionate. I can certainly say that about just about everyone who's walked through this office—they're very easy to work with. Even at Appalachian in general, I think for the most part, inherently the culture here in Boone and around Appalachian specifically is very nurturing and family oriented and kind and companionate.

Q10 – What do you do during downtime at work or do you have downtime at work?

It is interesting being in sustainability because there's really no downtime at work and it's not something that you kind of turn off when you leave either. It's kinda one of those things that you're always working in some capacity, trying to create change—and behavior change. I try to get outside and take walks or if I have the opportunity, get out of the office, then I try to take up that opportunity to go outside for sure. There's really not too much downtime while we're here, it's a pretty busy, fast-paced place. We as an office—especially our core office staff—we try to do walking meetings and things like that too. There's not necessarily downtime but it does give us the chance just to get out of here and get outside.

Q11 – Does your occupation have any special sayings or expressions, and if they do, what are they?

“Sustainability is not a trend, it's a tradition.” What it is that Appalachian is trying to get at is that we've always been very sustainable and a lot of it comes from our location and our cultures. The mountain culture historically has always been resourceful and frugal and

neighborly. All of those things really relate to sustainability. Also, our geographical location has had to be very self-sufficient in the past. It's a little bit easier to get here now than it used to be.

I get the question a lot, "What does sustainability mean or what does it mean to you?" And it's really a hard one to answer so I've thought about it a bunch and finally came up with my own personal definition: It's when everyone and every things needs are met in a balanced way. That would be specifically what sustainability means to me. There's other kind of guiding commitments and stuff like that we use as part of sustainability here. One of the things that we've tried to do here is be very loose with the definition of it so that all people understand that sustainability relates to them. No matter where you are in your life, sustainability does relate to you. So we're pretty loose with the definition of it.

We have a strategic plan that sustainability is at its core. The title is "The Appalachian Experience". Basically, with that, it's just trying to make sure than when people come to Appalachian specifically as a student—or even as faculty and staff—that they leave here having a different experience. They have learned a little bit more about sense of place and sustainability and what that means.

Q12 – Are there any slang terms associated in your line of work?

Zero waste is a buzz word. It's really difficult for us to completely get to zero but it's really a concept and more of a systems way of thinking. It's much more about decisions that we make upstream... what we purchase as a university. If you were just comin' in you wouldn't really know, but I like to equate zero waste with reduce, reuse, recycle because basically, that's what

it is. Up front, you're looking at how do we reduce our purchasing. In our case at Appalachian, as a University, how do we try to purchase items that can be refurbished and re-used? Ultimately, making sure that we have systems in place for composting and recycling. That's basically what zero waste means. "Green" comes to mind. We have our Green Office Certification and really that's just a way for people to kinda connect. People really connect to the word green. They get it, it's like, "Oh, green means good for the earth or environmentally conscious." While we don't necessarily like it because it's over used in some ways, but at the same time people will connect to it. And so it is a way for them to get it like "oh green office, so we're gonna be a more sustainable office." And "Green Yosef," and "Sustain Appalachia," are some of our hashtags and ways to promote the office. So we've definitely gone with green, even though we were a little hesitant about it, just because people connect to it.

Q13 – What kind of special knowledge, skills, and abilities are needed?

Certainly knowledge of sustainability, whether it be sustainable resource management, sustainable development, or design. There's an overall knowledge and understanding of what that means—even the social justice aspect of sustainability and understanding that. More specifically, at least for me personally, has been the ability to develop working relationships is really important. So much of our work here is about that relationship development. Sometimes it takes a really long time to develop some of these relationships. If you can be really good at that, it's really super helpful. Good communication and facilitation skills are really important... leadership qualities... I've learned a lot about myself over the years about what type of leader I

am. I just think it's really important to be a good leader. Some of it is inherent, and some of it's learned over time and with different experiences. But those are some things I think would be most important.

Q14 – What are some things outsiders wouldn't expect about your work?

Well first of all, I always joke about my parents not really knowing what I do, like trying to define, and I mentioned earlier trying to define sustainability. But I think one of the things that people wouldn't realize is you can't really turn it on and off. If it's something that you're passionate about, then it's something that you kinda carry with you all the time. And so it's not like, "Oh I'm going to this job and when I leave it's all over until I come back at 8:30 (a.m.) the next day." The other thing is people may not realize how difficult it is because you're always pulling a giant boulder up hill. Our society has created this convenience-driven monster, and consumeristic monster. We're all about material things and all about consumption and all about convenience and single use items for example. You're trying to go against a pretty big machine when you're trying to change people's behavior. So I think people just don't realize how difficult that can be.

Q15 – Would you say that's the most difficult aspect of your job?

I would say behavior change is the most difficult aspect. One of the things we've been kicking around a lot here lately is the idea of social norms. If we could make it the social norm here at Appalachian that we try to reduce our consumption, that we try to look at clean energy and technology, and that we are leading by example as a university then it's a little bit easier

because it's like, "Oh, App State, tree huggers," I go back to that kind of as a joke but it we could kinda make it that social norm, it certainly will help with behavior change. We've got over 18,000 students here and that's *a lot* of behavior to change. And maybe 1,000 of them are really dedicated already, but there's a lot we have to be creative about the way we change behavior.

Another difficult aspect for me is historically, as I was younger in this field, I was feeling like a failure because I had not changed everyone in the room's behavior. There's 20 people in the room and only one person changes. I've really learned over time that every little change makes a difference and really to be able to sit with and be thankful for changing one person's mind because then that person goes out and changes other people's minds, and other people's minds, and then you have this ripple effect.

Q16 – What is or was the most satisfying aspect or time you've had at your job?

The connections that I've made specifically with students. I really love the opportunity to kind of oversee that outreach and engagement. Because I've just really come to know a lot of students through the work here in the office and I just love that kind of human connection and knowing that I've made a difference. Because I have had so many students come back and say, "Hey will you be a reference?" or "Write a reference letter for me?" or drop off a gift like, "Oh, I got into grad school because of your help!" It is really rewarding to have made those kind of connections with students.

I've had the opportunity in the last two years to develop an eco-reps program. Our eco-reps are student representatives in the residence halls. Along with that program development, we were able to develop a sustainability leadership and engagement course for those students and so that's been a really rewarding thing for me to be able to help develop that course and actually teach it and kind of learn for myself that I actually really love teaching and I never thought that I necessarily would. It happened really organically for me, too. I was really nervous about it going in and I realized, wow, this is awesome. It's really cool to be able to have those connections with students and then also just the opportunity to teach and kind of share my passion with others.

Q17 – What advice would you give someone going into this line of work?

I would say be patient, you know, and to go into it knowing that it's very difficult but also that you are doing something that is really making a difference. Your work is very valuable. I've been in this sort of recycling/sustainability-education field for 16 years. It requires a lot of patience. But also remind yourself all the time that what you're doing is very meaningful work. Especially working in a state college and university setting, we have this strong sense of urgency here in our office but things do not happen very fast. Nothing happens as fast as you would like. So if you're specifically going into that area of work then be prepared to have lots of patience because it does take a while to create change.

Q18 – Is there a memorable moment for you from work?

One of my most memorable moments is finding my passion for teaching just because I went into it really nervous. I had to write the syllabus and create syllabus and the course and also you know, roll in the first day to teach. And I co-taught the course. So just to give a little bit of background, I had been over time working on my masters here in the Higher Education Community College and Leadership program. It took me five years to do it but that was the last thing I did, was create and teach the course as part of credit to finish up and I graduated in May and that was pretty memorable for me because I really didn't realize that about myself that I was pretty good at it and that I really loved it.

Q19 – Is there anything that we missed or that you would like to add?

I will just say that I, like a lot of people, moved to Boone, came to school, my husband and I left for four years and lived in Chapel Hill a couple years and then Saxapahaw, NC a couple years. I am one of the many "Boonerangs," people who leave and come back. There definitely is this sort of sense of place and this town and this community are really sacred to me and to a lot of people. I'm very blessed to be able to be here and have had to opportunity to come back. It's not easy. It can be very difficult to find work here post-college. It is a really special place and I am very thankful to be able to be here, be able to create by career here, and raise my children and family here. We are lucky, those of us that get to stick around here.