

Terry Harmon– *Interview conducted by undergraduate students, Wyatt Payne and Tara Speelman, from Dr. Katherine Ledford’s Appalachian Stories course. Interview was conducted in Terry’s office at the Samaritan’s Purse headquarters in Boone, NC.*

Q1 – Who are you and when were you born?

I am Terry Harmon and I was born in 1965 in Boone and I have lived here all my life, and my family has been here since about the 1790s.

Q2 – What did your parents do for a living?

My Father taught at Watauga High School, well he actually started out at Blowing Rock, because of the time he started teaching we still had, I think, eight high schools throughout the county. So, he started teaching at Blowing Rock High School and then they consolidated the year I was born, in 1965, and so from that point until he retired 1991, he taught business at Watauga High, accounting, business law, business math and my Mother she’s had different jobs. She used to work at the soil and conservation office for the county, but then, probably about 1978, she started working at Watauga High School and she was a secretary in the Guidance Office until she retired.

Q2 Cont. – Did you contribute to the family income or help parents in their work in any way?

I did not. My first job was not until I graduated from high school, and I worked at the ASU bowling alley which no longer exists. So, I did that for two summers, but no I never had to

contribute to the family income. Yeah, my Mom and Dad provided all that.

Q3 – What do you do for a living now?

I work in the projects department at Samaritan's Purse, and specifically I manage a unit called the Field Support Unit. When we hire international employees my unit helps support those staff with their travel and their orientation and preparing them for their service abroad. Then just supporting them in any way that we can while they are serving.

Q4 – How long have you worked here?

In about two weeks it will be 21 years, and before that I worked at Appalachian, I worked at ASU for nine years in the registrar's office after I graduated with my bachelor's degree.

Q5 – Can you tell us how you started at this career?

So, I was at ASU for nine years and then there was a part of me that had always wanted to teach. So, I thought well, I'll go back and get my teaching certificate specifically in history, and so the ladies in the College of Education at that time they said, "Well if you'll take your course work on a graduate level you can also earn your master's at the same time. So, I said okay well I'll just get my master's in middle grades education. So, then the last thing with that was to do student teaching. So, I did my student teaching at Mabel Elementary and then decided after that I didn't want to teach. But it wasn't because I had a bad student teaching experience. I mean, I love the kids and it was a good experience but I, as a Christian, I just felt like the lord was leading me to work somehow in ministry and I didn't know what that would look like and

then I thought, “Well, Samaritan’s Purse is in my own backyard so that would be a good place to start.”

So, just backing up a bit, after I graduated from college with my undergrad degree, before I started working in the Registrar’s Office, I worked at the Sheraton Hotel at the front desk - that’s now the big girl’s dorm beside a BB&T. So, I worked there for maybe about six or eight months. At that time a lot of these facilities on campus here were not here, so there weren’t a lot of meeting places, so Franklin Graham would bring guests into the Sheraton, because that was the nicest hotel in town and they had a lot of conference rooms. He had written a biography of Bob Pierce who was the founder of Samaritan’s Purse and who had previously founded World Vision. And, he left a copy, or somebody left a copy at the front desk. When I had to work the night shift and it wasn’t very busy I would sit and read that book, and it would talk about the ministry of Samaritan’s Purse, and I used to think, “Well, gosh wouldn’t that be interesting work to do.” But that was 10 years before I ever started working here.

So, after that I worked at the university, then went to graduate school, and then when I thought, “What would ministry look like?” I also thought back to that book I’d read a decade earlier, and I also went to church with a lady who worked here, so she served as a reference for me and there was an opening in World Medical Mission, which is our medical arm. And so, I interviewed and got the job. I finished my student teaching on a Friday and started at Samaritan’s Purse on Monday. So, it was just seamless with the timing, you know. So, the first two years I worked in World Medical Mission and that was as a logistics coordinator helping physicians plan their short-term mission trips, and then I moved into the project’s department after that, and that’s where I have been since.

Q6 – How would you say the work has changed since you started?

Well, when I started here there were about a 150 employees just in Boone, and now we have between 500 and 600. So, it's grown quite a bit in the last 20 years and one thing, one way that I would say we've changed is, in the earlier days, because there were fewer of us, you got to wear a lot of different hats and serve in a lot of different functions and now that we're this many years down the road I feel like the jobs are more specialized and not necessarily siloed, because we all work together, but I feel like people have very specific job descriptions and that require specific training and education. So, there's not a lot of flow back and forth between roles. You're pretty much designated to your one role.

Q7 – Could you describe a typical work day?

It's kind of like typical office hours Monday through Friday, we actually work 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. We get half an hour for lunch so we leave at 4:30 p.m. instead of 5 p.m. One unique thing about Samaritan's Purse is that the first thirty minutes of each day the entire staff gathers in this building for a devotional time. So we usually have a speaker and then sometimes we will see a film about something that the ministry is doing, something that the broadcast department has put together. Sometimes we have special speakers and special music, then we have a time of prayer for the ministry and for the staff around the world. We usually are at our desks by 8:30 a.m. ready to go.

Typically, my job, my activities are kind of driven by whatever the requests from the field might be, so if we have an employee overseas that has a specific question or a need your inbox can look different each day. There are some things that are pretty standard, for example,

every month of the year we have a new employee orientation and that includes new international employees. That is something that I am always in the midst of or finishing up, or preparing for next month's orientation. We are very driven too by what disasters happen in the world. For example, right now in our department we've got three responses going. One for the Caribbean, one for Vietnam, and one for Myanmar and Bangladesh - which is a refugee crisis situation. Sometimes my team is pulled in to help support those responses and if those are ongoing then you could work some extra-long hours and weekends, just because it's driven by current events.

Q8 – What type of people do you work with?

We are all kind of the same in a way, we do have some diversity here, it's kind of amazed me over time. Watauga County isn't a very racially diverse county anyway, I think the university brings in some diversity but even here at Samaritan's Purse I think speaking in racial terms, we are all just kinda white people. It is interesting because we have some international employees, for example one of the guys who works with me in my department he was one of the former, Lost Boys of Sudan, and has a really amazing story because he's been a refugee for a quarter of a century in different places, didn't know how to read and write until the age of 14 and now he's graduated from Harvard, so it's just an incredible story. We have those rare examples and we do have those international folks working here. One of the hindrances even though we are an international ministry, sometimes it's hard to attract people to Boone, because Boone is a small town and maybe doesn't have some of the amenities or things that a larger city would.

Genealogy is my hobby, so when I first started working here I did a Samaritan's Purse family tree and there were about 60 of us out of the 150 who were related in some way either by blood or marriage. I would say that percentage has gone way down now since we have 500 or 600 folks. Used to, the work population here was mostly drawn from locals and now we do have quite a few that have come from other places. So we're diverse in that sense but the other common denominator is that we are all believers, we are all Christians and that's part of the application process when we come here. I think our faith above all is what unites us.

Q8 Cont. 10:04 – What kind of people do you work with in terms of their employment, like what kind other areas of the business, maybe in government or locally?

I don't really have any interactions, so to speak, with really that many people off campus. Most of it's internal, but of course we have lots of different departments. The two major ones are Operation Christmas Child, which I think most people know about that's probably the most advertised portion of Samaritan's Purse and lots of communities and churches. Now in their situation they would have a lot of interaction with communities and local business and schools and those types of things. And then projects, the way I describe it, and that's not to diminish Operation Christmas Child, but I say, "Okay, Operation Christmas Child does the shoeboxes and then everything else that Samaritan's Purse does around the world is the projects department which is the department I am in. (Laughs) That doesn't mean we're any more important or less important, or, you know, in terms of busyness, you know, we've all got lots to do. Specifically, my team, we interact usually a lot with Human Resources, because they are hiring the people that we are then responsible for. And within human resources they have a team called Member

Care which are pastors and chaplains that are specifically given the responsibility to make sure that staff are spiritually healthy in the field, so we interact a lot with them. Then we have regional directors and regional managers and country Directors. So, the RD's and RM's in our department, they're assigned certain regions of the world and they are responsible for the programing in those regions, and then each of those regions have different field offices. So, for example in Asia, we have field offices in the Philippines, Myanmar, Cambodia, Vietnam, other places, and then each of those places has a country director. So, my team has also interacting with the Country Directors and it's all related to the needs and care of our international field staff. And then just within the ministry we interact with lots of the support departments like finance, travel, and the mailroom.

Q9 – When do you work in terms of time, day, or do you work night at all, weekends, weekdays?

Normally it's just Monday through Friday; just normal business hours. But as I was mentioning earlier if there's some particular disaster response where it's kind of like all-hands-on-deck, then we might have to work extra hours either here in the office or sometimes from home. I was recently helping support the Caribbean response, and I was on that team for about a month and we worked every weekend, and a lot of times I was working from home in the evenings sending reports out.

Q10 – What do you do with your down time at work? If you have any.

Oh, do I have any down time at work? I mean occasionally we have lulls. We used to have those more often, but I think that as we've grown those are fewer and far between. But, I mean there are times that you might have one portion of the office that's really busy with a response or a certain project and maybe things on your side are a little calmer. Usually use that time just to catch up to, you know, sometimes there are things that you want to devote your attention to or you think, "Well, if I ever have the time I'll work on this or try to improve this process." But because you're so busy you just kinda back burner those and don't get to them for a while. So when you do find that you have some down time, that's a good time to redirect your attention to those things that you normally wouldn't have had the time to work on. Other than that, you know, sometimes just asking other people, if you can help with something they're doing, just to lend an extra set of hands.

Q11 – Does your occupation have any special sayings or expressions?

One thing that's kind of a famous line in the projects department is "The quality of our work is the platform of your witness." So, we're a Christian ministry and a humanitarian relief. We have a mission statement that talks about how we're trying to meet people's physical needs as well as their spiritual needs and it goes along with scripture saying if you know somebody's cold or hungry and if you don't give them those things that meet their physical needs but you tell them to go away and be blessed, how are they going to be blessed if they are cold and they are hungry? So just from a Christian point-of-view and wanting to share our Christian witness, how can you come into the people group to share what you believe spiritually if you aren't going to care for them physically. So our Vice President came up with that saying, he's one of our VPs,

but he is the VP of the section that I work in. But he's saying if we do excellent work, if we do our work to the best of our ability and it quality work then that's actually what gives you an audience to share what you believe. And then we have lots of different acronyms:

OCC – Operation Christmas Child

WMM – World Medical Mission

OHOP – Operation Heal Our Patriots

CHP – Children's Heart Project

So we've got all kinds of those little usages. That's one thing for a new employee coming into Samaritan's purse as part of their orientation is just learning what all those little acronyms mean.

Q12 – What special knowledge, skills, and abilities are needed for your job?

Well a monkey could do my job and a monkey does. No, it's kind of funny that you ask that because now-a-days I'm not even sure I could be hired here because in those earlier days, like I said they weren't so specialized and so I could come in with a degree, my undergraduate was political science and then my master's was middle grades education. Neither of one that I'm technically using other than I do some teaching during orientation and I think that from some of my studies at ASU even just basic classes on geography help me in what I do today. For my particular job I wouldn't say its highly specialized and needs a lot of technical skill, but then you see jobs advertised here that you didn't used to in the past like, monitoring and evaluation officer, or a program development officer, or some of the positions in IT or in security. Those require a kind of specialized training; I couldn't tell you exactly what that training is.

Q13 – What are things about your work outsiders would not expect?

That's been kind of an interesting thing too, the luncheon I was attending before this was for a guy who has been here for 20 years and he is also a Watauga native, and I was talking to him the other day about "Do you ever feel like you have a foot in two worlds?" Because, coming from Boone, you know I'm really just a small town Boone boy who never really traveled much, ever, even when I was a kid we didn't really go on family vacations, and I lived in Vilas which is west of Boone so even going to Boone was a big deal for me. We thought Boone was a big treat. I had never flown until I was in my late 20s, I never saw the ocean until I was about 14 or 16 years old so in some ways I felt like I lived sort of a sheltered life. I didn't know I was sheltered at the time, but in retrospect you think, "Gosh, yeah I didn't have a lot of opportunities." So you still got your one foot in that part of the world and all my extended family is here and friends from years back and I go to a small church, who even though they are involved somewhat in missions, I wouldn't say they have a complete global world view. So then to come here and work in an international ministry, and over the past 20 years I have travelled to maybe around 60 different countries, and so to have that kind of exposure and to have the other side of your life where it's hard for them to grasp a more global picture, you feel sort of split sometimes. It's not like really divided affections.

Well, I think sometimes they wouldn't have expected that I would travel so much. Or, you know, even looking back before I started working at Samaritan's Purse, even though it was here, you know, it's been here since 1980, and I would have been 15 at that time. But I still probably only knew about Operation Christmas Child, because that is what was advertised out in the community. And I knew that they did other things, but I didn't realize the scope of it and I

think that's one thing that if you've never visited the campus or taken a tour you might be surprised at all the different realms that we're operating in and not just internationally but domestically and whether that's, you know, some people might know of Children's Heart Project now, but they might not know that we also do cataract surgeries and cleft lip and palate repairs. I think a lot of people maybe don't know the extent of what we do with Operation Heal Our Patriots, in terms of, you know, former military and helping them to restore their marriages and things like that. So, I just think it's probably wider scope than people from the outside would realize.

Q14 – What were, originally, the most difficult aspects of your job?

This is kind of a funny one, but the first time I was ever asked to go to Charlotte airport to pick somebody up that about blew my mind, cause I'd never been to Charlotte. And I wouldn't say I was backward, but I just again was sheltered, so that just actually panicked me to have to think that I was going to have to drive to Charlotte and go pick somebody up at the airport. So, yeah, even something as simple as that was hard starting out. Nowadays I don't even think anything about that. But also, I like to be the person who plans and has time in advance to think through things and things here happen so quickly and on the spur of a moment and especially when you're talking about world disasters. I mean who knows when the next one's going to be. Something could happen this afternoon that none of us have anticipated, but then within, you know, 24-hours' time you need to have a team and supplies on the ground. So, I think just that urgency and the fast turnaround that's involved that was sort of a hurdle for me.

Q15 – What is the most satisfying aspect of your job?

The real Christian thing would be to say, seeing people come to The Lord, which you know really is a great thing from my perspective. But you know, a lot of times you don't see that from this side, you know that the ministry is occurring on the field but when you are sitting in a cubicle in Boone, you feel somewhat removed from that. You hear the numbers and you hear the results and the impact that the ministry is making and your proud to be a part of that, but like I said, it's a bit removed from your everyday circumstances so maybe you don't feel that as acutely as you would if you were overseas. I think for me, it's meeting the people that come through orientation each month and a lot of those are not just Americans or Canadians but you could have people from any number of countries coming to Boone. So it's really like this cross cultural experience and just getting to have sessions with them and share meals with them, and learn more about them. I would say that a lot of my closest friendships have been born out of working here, so that's been a blessing to me, and just to think about how many people I know around the world that I would consider friends.

Q16 – What advice would you give to someone beginning this line of work?

One would be referring back to the flexibility, I don't think you can be a real rigid person and work in this environment because it is fast paced and you have to be willing to be stretched. I'd say that's the main thing.

Q17 – Could you describe a memorable moment from work?

A memorable moment? Well, I think, you know, looking back over the last 20 to 21 years, one of my most memorable assignments was earlier this year, probably January or February. I went to Iraq and worked at our emergency field hospital near Mosul and so, this was during the time that the National Forces were trying to drive ISIS out of Mosul. And I had never worked in a medical setting. I mean the closest I'd come would be visiting somebody in the hospital or being a patient, (laughs) you know for surgery, but never in a foreign country and never in a war situation. And so, just being at the hospital at the time that the war wounded are being brought in. I remember one-day in particular we had patients; there was a car bombing. There was a, suicide bomber at a café and then there was also a car bomber. And so, they brought patients from both of those there. And, you know, there was even a little girl whose legs had been blown off. And so, you know, just seeing that was very impactful.

It, it was strange, because I never felt in danger. There were times that we had alarms and sometimes there were drones that would fly over, and they didn't know whether they were hostile or, you know, drones. So, they would sound the alarm and we would go to the bunkers and you know, sometimes even laying at bed at night you would hear gunfire and we were in a walled compound behind blast walls. And so, I never felt afraid and I think part of that was just a faith that, you know, I felt like the lord had called us to serve there and along with that came the faith that if he called you to be here than he'll also be your protector. And so, I had assurance in that, but still I would say that's one of the highlights of serving with Samaritan's Purse. There's just nothing like that experience.