

Victoria Potter interview – *Interview conducted by undergraduate students, Ryan Munker and Serena Her, from Dr. Katherine Ledford’s Appalachian Stories course. Interview took place in Victoria’s office in the Green House in Downtown Boone.*

Q1 – Who are you, When and where were you born?

I am Victoria Potter, and I was born here in Boone in 1993.

Q2 – What did your parents do for a living? Did you contribute to the family income or help parents in their work in any way?

My Dad has always been in management. He is the Watauga County sanitation director and then my mom is a manager of a cafeteria at an elementary school. So no I did not have to help.

(Laughs)

Q3 – What do you do for a living?

Right now, I work two jobs. I am a sales associate at Mast General Store in Downtown Boone, and I am the executive director of High Country Local First (referred to as Local First throughout).

Q4 – How long have to worked there?

I have worked at Mast for over six years, and I have been with Local First for a little over two years.

Q5 – How did you decide on your career?

Well, Mast, I just always loved the store and it is a great job. Working through college, they were good to work with my schedule. And then Local First, I majored in communications and public relations minored in non-profit management, so it's a perfect fit and I actually interned with them my senior year at Appstate, and then was hired.

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

Well at Mast, it just seems like we are not just retail, we are a tourist destination. It's all about the experience so we just have to, maintain that good quality customer service and give them what they want. They expect to be greeted because it's an old timey store that's just the way it is, and you know, it hasn't changed too much, we've always been about those values.

Then Local First is really kind of the same, we are just trying to expand our membership and get our non-profit known more in the community.

Q7 – Describe a typical work day

At Mast, I work in the Candy Barrel with all the toys and t-shirts and candy, and on a typical day you're gonna fill tons of candy, especially after busy weekends, or on a busy holiday, and fold t-shirts and fill those, fill toys and just, you know, customer experience make sure everyone is finding what they need, helping everyone out, a lot of register stuff, I am usually on there at least three or four hours out of my eight hour shift especially on busy days.

Then at Local First, I'm in my office and I do *everything* right now because I'm the only person that works here. But mostly database management, membership renewals, a lot of social media, newsletters, community outreach, stuff like that.

Q8 – Can you describe what Local First does?

High Country Local First is a non-profit here in Boone. We help support local farms and businesses through promotion, education, marketing, networking. So we do events like the street festival called the Boone Block Party, where we have local vendors come out, live music, local breweries, and we've done that twice now.

We're based off of memberships, so we are kind of like a hyperlocal chamber of commerce really. We include farms too, so that's cool, and non-profit organizations. So there's different levels of membership one can join at, you just have to be local independently owned, no chains. We publish a printed directory twice a year that lists all of our members and different stuff that is going on. And then we have an online directory and we do marketing through our social media pages for all of our members.

Q9 – What type of people do you work with?

At Local First I work with me, myself, and I unless I have an intern from ASU, and they're always really helpful. I have one right now that's doing most of our social media and our e-newsletters.

At Mast there's all kinds of people, and I've seen a ton of people throughout my six years working there. I've made a lot of lifetime friends there. Most people at Mast are outgoing, just happy, and we like to have fun. That's the good thing about Mast, they believe in having fun and sharing it. There's locals and students that I work with at Mast, older folks and younger folks, so it's just a really good mixture.

Q10 – When do you work?

I work at Mast on Mondays and Wednesdays 8:30 (a.m.) to 5 (p.m.) and I work at Local First Tuesdays, Thursdays, Fridays, usually morning to evening like 9 (a.m.) to 5 (p.m.), but it's flexible when I have different meetings and stuff I can move it around.

Q11 – What do you do with downtime at work?

At Mast, there's always the saying from when I started, "if you have time to lean you got time to clean." There's always something to do, straightening, rearranging, organizing the merchandise, or just talking to customers, making sure they're finding what they need.

At Local First there's not too much downtime either since I am the only one and have limited time in the office. But if there is, I'm out in the community delivering our printed directories or reaching out to potential business members.

Q12 – Does your occupation have any special sayings or expressions? What are they? How did they come about?

Yeah so at Mast their slogan is “Have fun and share it” I think that’s just really great and that really is what Mast is all about. You know, we can enjoy the day and bring customers into our conversations. We don’t have to just stand there, and you know, not say anything to any of our coworkers all day. We can be playing with the brand new toy we got and lead into a conversation where the customer is like, “oh yeah I should buy that.” So “have fun and share it” is awesome.

Q13 – What special knowledge, skills, and abilities are needed? What techniques and methods?

At Mast, you definitely learn your product knowledge, it takes a while to learn all the different things, we have a ton of different candies, and toys, and t-shirts. Once you’ve been there a while you get the hang of it, but you do need to know how to connect with the public and know how to show them guest services and respect even when they’re not respectful, which happens. You just need to be able to keep a smile on your face even when you can’t move because it’s so crowded – and just do your best. Here at Local first it’s also about the public too, you just have to be able to reach out and talk to people and get to know them and make the relationships and connections so we can all work together as a whole, for the community.

Q14 – What are things about your work outsiders would not expect?

Mast is really awesome to their employees. There's so many benefits of working there – that's why I'm still there! I never wanna leave, honestly they are just so good to us with their promotions and things for employees only. They treat us really well and if we do well, we get bonuses and things like that. So I guess some people don't realize how good it is, and we are an employee owned company so you have your employee stock after you've been there for so long, so that's really great too. It is harder than it looks though, people will be like, "Oh it's so easy," but on Saturdays, when you literally can't move, and you're carrying a case of drinks and customers just look at you and don't move, it's a lil' tough, but it's worth it to work for a good company like that.

Q15 – What were originally the most difficult aspects of your job?

I guess at Mast it was you can't really be claustrophobic; like I've said it just gets really crazy in there. And that's the thing that people are used to. When it's slow like yesterday, there was like no one in the store pretty much, and some of our customers that come in daily to get popcorn were like, "where is everyone at? This is weird, it needs to be crowded!" People get used to it. So that's probably one of the hardest things, not being able to move where you need to go. I guess dealing with the public is a hard thing to do sometimes especially when people aren't happy with the service they are given or with the product, if they bring it back, stuff like that. So learning your way around different people and how to react to the different things that come each day.

Q16 – What is the most satisfying?

At Mast, just being a part of that family that we all are, we've never met some of the people that work in the Asheville store, or anywhere, but we're all just part of that whole Mast Store family and we could just get together and talk for hours, I'm sure, about everything. They bring us all together through different big events throughout the year, like our anniversaries. When I had been there for five years, people all got together for like 5, 10, 15 (year anniversaries) so you get to meet all the people. And it's just satisfying knowing that you work for people that care about you and people that started out where you were too and worked their way up.

And then at Local First it's just really satisfying seeing your local economy prosper and seeing local businesses grow and learn and continue to thrive in our community because of maybe a little thing that you did. And I love seeing the whole community come together for the big block party, it's just really awesome.

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

At Mast, get used to people, and you know take it to heart, "to have fun and share it," because if you don't have fun you'll just get really down, and you're like, "I'm doing the same thing every day," but you have to bring the customer in, bring your coworkers in, and just work together. We're doing Christmas decorating tonight and that's always really fun and just brings a little Christmas spirit into the whole store and we all get really excited about the season.

For Local First I would say just continue to grow this organization so that more folks can work here and have more opportunities and more businesses can get the educational help they need through our programs.

Q18 – Describe a memorable moment.

At Mast, it would be when President Obama came to our store in 2011. It was insane, and we'd heard rumors all day he was coming, and we were like, "No way!" and then he just walked in, and they just shut down the whole store from the inside so people got to stay in the store which was really cool. All the security people came in and checked everyone out, and then he came in and bought like \$150 worth of candy or something. So it was really crazy, just to see that and be a part of that history in the making right there. At Local First, it would probably be the first Boone Block Party we had in September 2016, when everything was done, everything was going really well, all the setup and stress was over and I could just sit back and see the big event come to life and see everyone having a ton of fun and supporting local.

Q19 – Is there anything else you would like to share?

I'm just a local Wataguan, it's pretty cool getting to work in the community in two different jobs but still they are kinda the same because Mast is a local business and they're actually a member of Local First so it's pretty cool I get to be on both sides.