

AMERICA WORKS PODCAST

OCCUPATIONAL FOLKLIFE PROJECT, AMERICAN FOLKLIFE CENTER

EPISODE 4: JOYCE VEGAR, Home Healthcare Worker. Coos County, Oregon.

Announcer: From the Library of Congress, in Washington, DC.

Theme Music: "Pay Day" played on guitar by Mississippi John Hurt.

Nancy Groce: Welcome to "America Works," excerpts from interviews with contemporary workers throughout the United States collected by the Library's American Folklife Center as part of its Occupational Folklife Project.

This America Works podcast features Joyce Vegar, a dedicated home health care worker from Coos County, Oregon. She was interviewed by fieldworkers Nathan Moore and Donald Stacy as part of "Taking Care," a Library-sponsored oral history project that documented the Occupational Culture of Home Health Care Workers throughout Oregon.

"Taking Care" was organized by Professor Bob Bussel from the University of Oregon. He and his colleagues worked closely with the Service Employees International Union, Local 503, to record 35 interviews with home health care workers--an occupation that had not been previously represented in the AFC archive.

INTERVIEW

Joyce Vegar: I live in Lakeside, Oregon, and I've been a homecare worker, this May, will be 13 years.

Nathan Moore: So, what kind of clients have you worked with or currently work with?

Joyce Vegar: I have worked with a broad spectrum. I've done everything from hospice—I currently have my first client with Parkinson's; I've had several clients with diabetes; with Alzheimer's or dementia.

I've never worked at a center, it's all one-on-one. I've lived-in and I've been hourly.

Nathan Moore: Do you think that there's special skills that it takes to do this kind of work?

Joyce Vegar: I think anybody could do it, maybe, but not everybody could do it well. If you can do what I do and remain totally disconnected and uninvolved with the person you're doing it with, in my opinion, you should not be doing it.

One of my private-pay client, right now, she has some dementia and everything, but she has this really big purse. It's one of those ones that's kind of open and it has several eyelets on it, and purple in it. And she's like, "I really wish I could find something that would close this." And I'm like, "I think shoelaces would work." And she's like, "Oh, OK, OK. And on my day off, I happened to be in Dollar Tree and happened to see purple shoe laces in Dollar Tree. I grabbed them and took them to her the next time I went to work. And she's like, "Oh, these are perfect!"

It's what you do. You don't necessarily have to be bosom-buddies with them, but you have to care for them. It's a prerequisite; you have to care.

You have to have the mind-set where you're willing to roll up your sleeves and get dirty. I have changed adult diapers. That is not something that everybody wants to do. Did I enjoy doing it? Not necessarily. But it had to be done and I did it.

It is stressful, especially since there has been two separate occasion where I lived-in where the person who was supposed to relieve me did not. And when I say did not relieve me, I don't mean was an hour late. I mean, she didn't show up, and so I ended up working 13 straight days, and without relief.

I've gotten yelled at and stuff. When you have Alzheimer's or dementia you lose some of those filters. Things that you and I might think, but would never say...

Nathan Moore: So when you're just interacting with clients on a daily basis, what sort of stuff to you talk about with clients?

Theme Music: "Pay Day" played on guitar by Mississippi John Hurt. Any and everything. You know, like you talk to a friend. You talk about any and everything. I like being around different people. And there are times when you go in on your day-off because there's nobody else to go in on your day-off.

Nathan Moore: Do you think there are any moments in your career that would define to somebody what it means to be a care-giver?

Theme Music: "Pay Day" played on guitar by Mississippi John Hurt. The lady that I lived-in in Lakeside—one of the first days I was working with her, I happened to see her back. And the skin right above her tailbone was a little red. And I knew what that meant: that meant because she sat in her recliner in a certain angle all the time, she was starting to develop a pressure sore. And so, because I only lived about a mile away, I would set my alarm for 2:00 in the morning; I would get up, get dressed; go over to her house; help her up to the bathroom, get her a drink of water, let her dog out and then let her dog back in. And then you help her back to bed with the pillow under a different hip. And we were able to keep the pressure sore from becoming a pressure sore. And I did that every night for about 4 months.

Nathan Moore: Do you get together with other caregivers?

Joyce Vegar: Yeah. There aren't other people at our worksite. When where at our worksite, we're there all by ourselves. And it's really nice to get together with other people – be able just to talk about your day or to talk about things that have happened.

I had one client that, she had dementia; she was no longer taking baths or showers, but she'd sit on the side of her bed and we'd give her a little sponge bath. And all of sudden, she decided she didn't want to do that anymore. And I'm like, "Ah, what do I do? Because she has to be clean. And one of my fellow caregivers said, "Tell her it's a beauty treatment." If we told her it was a beauty treatment, she would let us do whatever we needed to do. And I don't know if I would have thought of that on my own.

And one of the things about homecare workers is because the people we take care of come in all colors, shapes, and sizes, by the very nature of what we do, we are one of the most diverse work populations you will ever find.

Nathan Moore: How do you think the community at large, or in Coos Bay sees your work. Are they aware of your work or what you guys are doing?

Joyce Vegar: Some of them are aware a little bit, some of them are not. It's like, "Oh, you're a babysitter for adults?" No I'm not! I am a professional. I am a home care worker.

It's one of the things that people are going to have to start getting better about. Curry County is about one-third 65 and older. Coos County, where I live, is about—I believe it was between a quarter and a fifth 65 and older.

So that means that there are an awful lot of people that are either going need help or need it presently. And they are part of our community. It's part of the covenant we make with workers in America. If you work hard, and you participate all your life, at the end of your life you're going to get to retire and have a little Social Security—you're going to have a little respect; and we're going to take care of you a little bit. If we don't do that, we're letting down what we said we'd do as a country.

Nathan Moore: What makes care giving different from the other jobs you've had?

Joyce Vegar: I've had the privilege to be the person sitting beside someone who passes away twice now. One lady, I had been with her for 20 months, I believe, when she passed away. She got to pass away in her bed, with me, her dog, and her cat in the room with her--[choke up] – Sorry! – and that was exactly the way she would have wanted to go.

I make a difference.

Theme Music: "Pay Day" played on guitar by Mississippi John Hurt.

Nancy Groce: You've been listening to home health care worker Joy Vegar from Lakeside, Oregon. She was interviewed for the Library of Congress's Occupational Folklife Project by fieldworkers Nathan Moore and Donald Stacey.

To see the complete video interview with Joy, as well as interviews with other home health workers documented as part of the Archie Green Fellowship project "Taking Care," please visit us online at www.loc.gov/folklife.

On behalf of the American Folklife Center, this is folklorist Nancy Groce. Thank you for listening to America Works.

Announcer: This has been a presentation of the Library of Congress. Visit us at loc.gov.