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### **Interview Log For First Hour's Material**

Last year, for my African American political science class, I visited Gemeinschaft Home in Harrisonburg, Virginia. The purpose of Gemeinschaft Home is to provide a “transitional therapeutic community program” for gentlemen just released from prison; basically it is a half way house between jail and the real world. During my tour last year I learned about the programs goals, rules, residents, and then contacted a lady who works there for my interview this semester. Originally, I set up an interview with a gentleman who I had come to know, but complications arose when he backed out of the interview. Natasha stepped in and organized for another resident, named Greyson, to help me with my project. Because Natasha had set up this interview, the power relationships shifted, and I wondered if I would be looked at differently. When I met with Greyson, he was very apprehensive to start talking with me at first, and as the interview progressed, he opened up more, shared more, and smiled more.

The interview was conducted in one of the neutral meeting rooms away from the residential section of the house, with each of us sitting on opposite sides of a small table. For the beginning of the interview, Greyson sat far back in his chair with his hands across his chest and away from the recorder. However, with more intimate questions and with my obvious non-accusatory motive, Greyson relaxed, spoke closer to the recorder and enjoyed recounting some of his favorite stories. A few topics I think might have pinched a few nerves were: family, talking negatively about Gemeinschaft Home, and his crime he originally committed. I opened up the interview with basic, easy-going questions, however when I asked about his family he pulled away from the conversation. He said that his mother and father were both deceased and

that he had brothers and sisters. He did not seem to want to go into any family dynamics, history, or problems even when probed. I had wanted to see if there was any other occurrences of jail in his family, but the bait was not taken. I moved on from the topic hoping that it would be brought up later, which it was not with the exception of lending money to a niece one time. The next problem area came about when I enquired about the crime he had been charged with. At the time he spoke so soft and quick that I did not catch what he had said, however I did not want to question further. I believe that my lack of questioning was because I was intimidated by him and his size, and maybe because it is socially unacceptable to speak of crimes? I am not sure exactly. My logic was that I would pick up on it in the transcription, however, that too failed! A large factor in my interview was lost because of this mistake, but at least I have learned from it. Lastly, Greyson had a hard time talking about anything negative going on in the program there at Gemeinschaft, largely in part because it seemed he had a loyalty to this place that had helped, clothed, fed, and housed him for the past six months. Also, he was to be released in a few days and probably was weary to say anything that might damage that.

For the most part, there were no silent moments or awkward silences, only because I came prepared with an abundance of questions. Yet, I did notice that unless I asked a question, he did not offer any stories or conversations. I think he predetermined in his head that the roles were interviewer and interviewee and that only myself was in charge of where the conversation was going. However, while doing the transcription, I found a remarkable occurrence in his speech patterns. Anytime I asked a multi-part question, Greyson would answer it, digress off topic for a while, and then summarize his response. He would close most of his answers with “basically...”, I found this very helpful to know when it was my turn to speak and to remember what topics we had just covered.

At the end of the interview a couple issues arose that I thought would be appropriate to log here: the issue of territory and rudeness, and guilt. One of the questions I asked this gentleman was in regards to my tour last year and I asked if he found it intrusive or rude when other people come to the facilities to look around or tour. He answered with the reply of “sometimes” and went off on a story about another James Madison student who completed some observational work there. He said the student did not follow standard necessities such as release forms, consent forms, sharing what information he took down, or asking permission of the grown men he was observing (he only received permission from the staff). Granted, I could see both sides of this dilemma: the student could not let them know they were being observed directly because it skews the results, and the gentlemen being watched were aware of it and wanted to know what the purpose was. As he told me this story, I felt the insider outsider relationship very strong at that moment. I felt as if I was an outsider who had come into this man’s home (regardless that it was a half-way home for criminals) and had asked him to bare all of his life on this subject and interrupted his day. Secondly, when the interview concluded, I knew this man was going to be released in a few days and I would never be seeing him again, and so I felt as if I had used him for my grade and that we would walk our separate ways. Greyson did not seem to really care about this project and that he was doing it primarily because I needed to have someone to interview, so in a sense it was not a fair deal and I felt guilty.

I learned a lot of valuable techniques and lessons from this first interview that I will carry on to my next. I will know to not be scared to ask the person to repeat an answer I missed, I will want to make sure the process is fair and even for all parties involved, and to make sure the person is comfortable and I provide a trustworthy atmosphere for this intimate time of sharing histories.