

Interview with Buffi Vestal
Payroll Coordinator for Wake Forest University
By: Allie Bodemann

AB: Would you mind just telling me a little about what you have to do here at Wake Forest so I can understand your job description?

BV: I work in payroll. I actually do more of the accounting piece of payroll. I do W2s and account recons...I've done all the payrolls. I'm the team leader. We have a bi-weekly payroll that's done twice a month, and we have a monthly payroll that is for faculty and staff. We have a student payroll and then we also have a grad student payroll. We also process the payrolls for Reynolda House. Those are in with the others, but we do have to do their tax returns...all those items. We do all kinds of things.

AB: So it's a pretty big job description?

BV: Yeah, and we kind of...well, one thing about the job is [that] we are all cross-trained.

AB: Okay.

BV: So it's kind of like we are all responsible for everything. There are certain things we do, but we just have to make sure everything gets done.

AB: Okay, that's kind of cool. So next: tell me a little about your background. Where did you grow up?

BV: I'm from Yadkin County. I live in East Bend. I have two children. I have a seven year old daughter and a three year old son. I've been married for twelve years. I went to school at UNCG and graduated with a degree in accounting.

AB: Tell me a little about your family growing up. What kind of work did your parents do? What kind of work have your siblings gotten into and where are they now... if you have any siblings?

BV: Well, actually, my parents both work in construction. They--my mom and step dad--both work. Well, she just goes with him...she doesn't do a whole lot. (laughs). I don't really have any siblings; I have some half brothers and sisters but mainly it's just me.

AB: Did your parents go to college? What was their highest level of education?

BV: High school.

AB: So you have kind of improved on them in that sense?

BV: Well actually, out of all my cousins, I was the first to go to college. There are lots of them [in college] now. I actually have one that's a doctor; he's younger than me. But I was actually the first one to go to college and complete college.

AB: What did you want to do when you were younger?

BV: I wanted to be a school teacher, but in high school I decided I wanted to go into accounting. I had a teacher in high school--I really liked the teacher--and that got me interested in accounting. I've always liked math so I decided to do that instead of teaching.

AB: Well, you already kind of answered this next question a little bit, but what got you interested in the occupation you are in now? I know you said you had a school teacher you really liked...

BV: Well I had never done (before I came here) payroll. It is like accounting, but it's a little different. I actually had asked another lady who worked here about a job--I was coaching cheerleading at the time. I said, "If any of your parents know of any places that have job openings, please let me know." She said, "Can you do payroll?" I said, "I don't know...probably." So they gave me the chance and now I've been here ten years, so it's really worked out and I love what I do. I love the people I work with and it's really nice.

AB: What do you see as being really important to making a university like Wake Forest run? And do you think about that a lot while you're doing your work here? I know you're working over here off campus so does that change what you think?

BV: Well, I think it's great to have the good employees. I know we try in our office to make sure that if we can help somebody, then we help them. We don't try to just send them to somebody else. We get all kinds of calls and things, but if we can figure out what they need we help them. And I think that's key to making a university run: having those types of people. Another thing is cross-training. If the people within the departments are cross-trained it makes things run so much more smoothly. We deal with a lot of departments and when you call and can't get a hold of somebody to help because they are on vacation or whatever--that makes it hard on the university. So I think it's great that we're cross-trained, and I tell that to everybody: be cross-trained in your department.

We have some people who have talked to interns and we told them that's the most important thing you need to ask them [the interns] when they come in for an interview...are they cross-trained? I think it's great when we have functions to get out and meet people. Just like this, meeting students. I think this is great for the university, so both sides can meet each other: the students, the faculty, the staff.

Everybody knows one another, instead of us all being separate. I think that's important for our university as well.

AB: Yes, it seems like an important part about making Wake Forest work. [It's] the willingness of people to help regardless of whether it's their assigned job or not they are still willing to help.

BV: [It's nice] just having events where you can mingle with the other people and get to know them, because a lot of people have no clue who is on the other side of campus, especially in certain jobs. We have more of that here where we can get to meet our people so we don't feel like we are just talking to a person on the phone; we know who they are.

AB: What are your favorite things about your job?

BV: I like a lot about my job. People think we're crazy. (laughs) They think we're crazy because we look at our job as a puzzle and we love to be able to [solve it]. If something is missing, we find it. For example, we looked for four cents one day, out of millions. So people think we're crazy but, I mean, we found it. We like that about our job...it's like a puzzle we can put together. It's nice to come in and know exactly who you are talking to. I also like that our job is very demanding...it's very deadline oriented. Payrolls are not able to be done late, and I like that about our job.

AB: So you really enjoy the challenge of your work.

BV: Yes.

AB: What type of advice do you have for people who would like to go into your line of work?

BV: Well, like I said, cross-training is probably the biggest [skill]. Make sure you have somebody that can help you in a crunch time so that it's not all on one person. I think another thing is that people really need to remember to make sure they are willing to listen and learn. You may have a way to do it later that is better, but it's important to listen and really learn everything you can from the people who have been doing it a while before you try to start changing things. I think that's a big thing in this line of work because it's so deadline oriented--you don't have a whole lot of time if you're new at it to research the work. Usually it's [as if we say], "Okay its due now, what are we going to do?" So I think that would be a big plus for someone going into this work.

AB: What do you think you will be doing (or where do you see yourself) ten to fifteen years down the line?

BV: Well, I hope to stay here at Wake. I really enjoy working here, but maybe I could do more with my accounting, because in the last year I did do more [than] just the

processing and payrolls. Within the last year they moved me into the lead and then I do the account recons and the accounting piece of payroll...making sure things get to the right places. I do all the history screens. Any time something is charged wrong I do the redistributions to put them back, with the help of other people too. But I have to make sure those things get done. Maybe [I'll be using] even using more of my accounting later, doing more things that involve my accounting...more than just payroll.

AB: I know you mentioned you had two children. What would you say are your hopes for your children? Not necessarily occupationally, but also as far as education goes.

BV: I hope they go to college, and get a degree in whatever they want to do. My three year old wants to do all types of things. (laughs) I don't think you could go to college for most of them. (laughs) I would hope that they go, and even maybe go further than me. I have my Bachelor's degree but maybe they could go for their Master's degree.

AB: Do you have any special hobbies or interests--things that you do outside of work?

BV: Well, I actually coach a middle school cheerleading squad during football season. My daughter is the mascot, so I get to be the coach. I'm a member of the firefighter auxiliary in our area. My husband is a firefighter. He is a professional firefighter in High Point and a volunteer firefighter in Fall Creek, which is where we live. I'm the president of the auxiliary there. I'm part of the recreation counsel at the elementary school, which is for the sports. Pretty much whatever activities my kids want to do are my hobbies.

AB: Well that's understandable. My last question for you: what do you think about the idea of the "American Dream"? How do you see it in the present day or have you seen it change from when you grew up to now what the "American Dream" is?

BV: I mean, I think it's probably changed because a lot of people still have the dream but they are just making it day to day. They are not able to pursue those dreams, they financially can't do it. I've not actually attempted to get my Master's degree, but people who maybe wanted to do that may not be [and are instead focusing on] something that they can do now. For one, they may need to start working earlier and can't go to college. I think that's a big thing--the financial world.

AB: Does the term "American Dream" have any special meaning to you?

BV: Not that I can think of right now.