

AMERICA WORKS PODCAST

OCCUPATIONAL FOLKLIFE PROJECT, AMERICAN FOLKLIFE CENTER

SEASON 03: EPISODE 5: Kira Fobbs, Elementary School Teacher. Madison, Wisconsin.

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

THEME MUSIC: “Pay Day” played on guitar by Mississippi John Hurt.

NANCY GROCE (HOST): Welcome to *America Works*, interviews with contemporary workers throughout the United States collected by the Library’s American Folklife Center as part of its Occupational Folklife Project.

This is AFC staff folklorist Nancy Groce, and this *America Works* podcast features excerpts from a longer interview with elementary school teacher Kira Fobbs, who has devoted her life to teaching 3rd and 4th graders and Special Ed students in the schools of Madison, Wisconsin. An innovative and dedicated teacher, she was interviewed by Mark Wagler as part of an Archie Green Fellowship from the American Folklife Center to document “Teaching in Wisconsin Classrooms.” Ms. Fobbs’ is proud of her own personal heritage, which includes African American, Swedish and German-Jewish ancestors, and she speaks poignantly about how her heritage has helped shape her career as a teacher.

INTERVIEW

Mark Wagler: What motivated you, inspired you to become a teacher?

Kira Fobbs: Wow. That is a really good question. Well, I spent most of my college career studying to be a lawyer. And I actually got to law school, got to that point and realized that my goal in life was to help change the world, essentially.

My mom always accused me of wanting to be Martin Luther King. And I guess in some sense I did. I wanted to bring about justice and eradicate racism and sexism and homophobia. But when I got to the law school phase, I recognized that that lawyers don’t have a lot of impetus in that area.

And so I figured if I really wanted to have that kind of effect that I would have to become a teacher, because the teachers are the ones that actually assimilate our citizens into our culture. If I wanted to change what our culture was, I have to change the kids. And so that’s how I ended up being a teacher.

My typical day starts at 5:00 in the morning when I get up. I teach at an early start school, so we're required to be in the building by 7:30. And since I live across town from where I teach, I have to get up quite early to make sure I get there on time, especially during wonderful Wisconsin winters. And our day – we go through to--we get out at 2:32, so we're officially in school from 7:45 to 2:32.

And then, I'm also the coordinator of the math program for the academic afterschool program, so then after my students leave, I am getting set up for our ACE program: setting out activities for approximately 60 kids after school. And that usually takes me to about 4:30, 4:45. And at that point, I'm planning to go home, after having done—after making sure that whatever it is I have planned for the next day I have ready. As I learned from my her cooperating teacher, Andre Davis, you don't leave until you are ready for the next day, and you always have a Plan B, C, and D. So, that's a typical day.

My class is primarily African-American. I have 3 Hispanic students – I have 18 students total-- 3 Hispanic students; 2, no, 3 Caucasian students, and the rest are African-American. So I spend a great deal of time trying to find out what is really motivating for them; what is going to engage them. And then I try to craft something what is going to be engaging for them, based on those needs. It's very, very student centered. Very "responsive"—that's the new term used in teaching. So its very student centered.

I think it's really, really important that you know what's going in in your kids' lives. I go to basketball games, I go to football games, I go to volleyball games, I go to soccer games. I shop in the stores in the neighborhood. I walk the neighborhood regularly. We have-- If I have any problems with students, I will walk them home after school because I want the parents to know that I'm involved in their life and I'm willing to go the extra mile to make sure that they're on the right track.

Mark Wagler: What about outside of school? Family? Close friends who are not teachers?

Kira Fobbs: I don't have any. I have no close friends that are not teachers.

Mark Wagler: So your discourse is always about teaching?

Kira Fobbs: With the exception of my spouse, everybody that I care about is a teacher. Even her mother—my mother is a retired teacher; although she's not very retired. She's still teaching GED classes and she's still substitute teaching, so at the age of 70 she's still going.

I think that good teaching is student-centered. If I walk into my classroom and I see my students engaging in a collaborative discussion about something that they're very interested in, I believe that that's good teaching.

I think that lot of people— a lot of older people--have this vision of school as being this very quiet, orderly place, and my experience of good teaching is its loud. Its chattery, its active, its kinetic. And when you walk into a room and you see kids doing that, and they are engaged in

whatever it is that they're doing, that's good teaching, because that is what their life is going to be like most of their life. The most productive careers, the most productive forms of employment are kinetic, they're not static or stationary; they're not quiet.

And I really have, very frequently, wished that those people that people that are making the standards, and those people who are making the tests, and those people who are making the textbooks would sit in a classroom and try to be a teacher for a little while, because it is one of the toughest jobs there is.

Don't go into it for the money! And I say this to all of my student teachers, my practica students. Teaching, as I said, is a lifestyle, it's a calling. Like being called to religious service. You have to feel it in your heart, you have to be dedicated to it otherwise it will kill you because it is an extremely stressful job.

There are lots of things that help me survive, but the greatest thing is that when I was in 4th grade—3rd and 4th grade—I would go out to recess and then I would hide under my coat under the stairs outside at recess, because I was bullied and beaten up on a very regular basis because I was half Black and half White.

In 1965, that was not heard of. And I couldn't talk to anybody but my parents about it. And what keeps me going in education is that that never happens to any child ever again. And that's really my mission in life. What keeps me going in teaching is a mission that says, "I am going to change this." I will work every day, sun up to sun down until I put my head on that pillow at night, to change that. So that no child ever has to feel that pain ever again. That's what really keeps me going.

END OF INTERVIEW

THEME MUSIC: "Pay Day" played on guitar by Mississippi John Hurt.

NANCY GROCE (HOST): You've been listening to Madison, Wisconsin teacher Kira Fobbs, who was interviewed for *America Works* by Mark Wagler, a member of a team of folklorists interviewing classroom teachers throughout Wisconsin as part of the American Folklife Center's Occupational Folklife Project.

To hear the complete interview with Ms. Fobbs as well as in-depth interviews with other classroom teachers, please visit: www.loc.gov/folklife or just search online for the Occupational Folklife Project. This is AFC folklorist Nancy Groce. On behalf of the American Folklife Center, thank you for listening to *America Works*.

ANNOUNCER: This has been a presentation of the Library of Congress. Visit us at LOC.gov