



Interviewee: **Colette Garmer**

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Interviewers: **Athena Aardweg, Judy Barricella**

& Tony Buba

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Colette Garmer

Voices of our Region

Interviewer: ~~We have some questions that we always seem to ask, but they seem to come out as we talk about unrelated things...just informal discussion.~~

Colette: Okay.

Interviewer: ~~We'll start out with your name, where you live, where you grew up, a little bit about your family, that sort of thing.~~

~~Colette:~~ Hi, my name is Colette Garmer. I was born and raised in the Alle-Kiski Valley, mostly in Brackenridge, ~~and ironically kind of started in Brackenridge~~ and bought a house about three blocks from where I started, but in between I moved about nineteen times. ~~So I've been to all the different little communities and can appreciate our valley, and our Pittsburgh area.~~

Interviewer: ~~And your family?~~

~~Colette:~~ I'm an only child, and when I grew up, most of the people in my family thought that I was their only child, like my grandmother thought I was hers, my mom thought I was hers, my grandpa thought I was his, so I grew up with too many bosses. A lot of stress for a little girl.

Interviewer: ~~Are you married?~~

~~Colette:~~ I'm married. I've been married about thirteen years to a super guy named Jeffrey. I have a child and he has three children, and those are Mark, Lexis and Michael, or according to Grandma Cece, that would be Mikie Spikie, Markie-poo, and Lexi. ~~Wait, wait—her name is Lulubelle. That's it. Yeah. So they each have their own individual name.~~

Interviewer: ~~Did you say your grandson lives with you?~~

~~Colette:~~ Yeah, Markey Sparky is getting his ears fixed. He has a problem with hearing. They're working on that today. So I called before I came in today and left a message saying Grandma Cece loves her Markey Sparky, and give him a big hug, so I'm waiting to hear that he came out of surgery okay.

Interviewer: ~~How old is he?~~

~~Colette:~~ Five. He's going to be five on the 4th. Cutie pie.

Interviewer: ~~Is he at Children's Hospital?~~

Colette: He's at Forbes in Monroeville, because there's a specific doctor there. I can show you pictures. I wouldn't be a grandma without them, I guess, Huh?

(looking at pictures—oohs and aahs.)

That's the middle one, yep.

Interviewer: They're so happy. Look at that little girl!

Colette: Oh, my little Lulubelle. Her real name is Lexis, but she answers to Lulubelle or Lulu, or Stinkpot or whatever.

Interviewer: How old is she?

Colette: She just turned two. She was born on 4/5/6. And nobody realized it until we were at the hospital and somebody said, "Oh, good, her birthday's April 5th." And I sat there and started to run the numbers and went, "No, Her birthday's 4/5/6," and we thought that was kind of neat.

Interviewer: Tell us about your connection with Working Order.

Colette: Well, when I was sixteen I became quite ill. It was very apparent that I wasn't gonna be working like normal people, and I ended up with Crohn's disease. ~~Super super bad.~~ I've had sixteen operations and just horribly put back in where someone would be at that age.

And it really made me feel like I wasn't going to get anywhere and I was always going to be sitting around living on welfare or something like that, and that bothered me because I came from a family that did nothing but had their own businesses. ~~Where I lived—my mom and I lived with my Grandma and we lived above the storefronts. So to me it was normal to have a storefront underneath you. And my earliest memory is a bakery, where the local bakery would bring in whatever baked goods that they'd put in for the week and we would sell them to the neighborhood in Brackenridge. And when they closed the bakery, I... Well, I always got a ladylock every day, and when they closed the bakery I would still open up the thing the ladylocks were in and I would just inhale all these wonderful great smells, and then after awhile I'd just crawl into the case and just lay there and smell it for hours, and it's no wonder I grew up being heavy, and loving sweets because of my prior experience.~~

~~But then after I became sick, when I was sixteen, you know it made it so I had to take a GED and you know I wasn't graduating with my class. I wasn't doing anything the way the rest of the people did that I knew. ..and I also had problems with being able to just maintain status quo, like with the house and all that, so it just felt like I was a big burden. Everybody had to help. And once I had the operations that I had and they discovered that I had Chron's disease, I pretty much ended up being gutted inside, pretty bad. I used to tell people that you could look down my throat, yell down my throat and it would echo.~~

~~But, um, you know, I've had two colostomies, an ileostomy, a complete colectomy. I mean I've just been through the route with the surgeries. And it got to the point to where they would say, "Well, we've got to operate," and I'd be like "Okay," and I never even thought about it. I just went through with it, and I'd try to work all the time. I sat down one time, as an exercise in I guess futility, and I looked at everything I ever did, and I came up with close to 27 different jobs. And when I finally got to the point where I just couldn't stand it, cause I'd work on a job and I'd be healthy, healthy, healthy, and then I'd wear down, wear down, wear down and get put in the hospital. So I finally got to the point, I said to my husband, "I'm just going to apply," and ironically, when I started out, they had me on SSI, which isn't complete Social Security Disability, but then when I married my husband, they took it away from me. So then I did the 27 jobs and I said to him, "You know, I'm going to apply for Social Security." So I did this resume and gave them the resume, and in ten years' time, I had the 27 different jobs. I was approved in 53 days for Social Security, but somehow I started feeling like I felt back when I was 18 and 19, and a burden because I wasn't pulling my own weight.~~

So I ended up hooking up with some people from OVR, trying to get off Social Security, find something I could do, because I know I have a brilliant mind that can do something instead of sit around, and ~~I mean I still watch my soap operas, sit around and watch soaps and do nothing all day except get dinner ready. To me that wasn't the definition of life, for me. So I chose to try to find something that I could do. My husband's very handy with wires, since he works in the Electronics industry. So we started playing around with jewelry, and, uh, I put together kind of like a business plan, a half-hearted business plan, of having my own jewelry store, bead store, that sort of thing, and, uh, submitted it to the people at OVR. They hooked me up here with Working Order, so that I would have someone to sit down with me and be able to guide me the best that they could on getting my business plan together, and you know, doing it like a grownup, instead of just fumbling through something.~~ And that's how I met Ruby. Absolute, wonderful Ruby. And for the first time in my life I had the correct support behind me of someone saying, "You can do this. Wow, this is good stuff. Boy, you're really smart." And through my whole life I kept hearing, "You're too sick to do this, you're too sick to do this, and Ruby was the first person to say, "You can do this." ~~You know, even my husband was saying, "What are you doing? Just sit back and collect the money. Are you crazy?" And maybe I was,~~ but through my efforts we were awarded a grant from OVR for the startup capital needed to open up a store.

Now unfortunately, I didn't check with my foot when I started, and being on my foot for a very long time all day long, I came down with what was called Charcot's foot, pre-Charcot's foot, and where the ligaments in your foot get loose from diabetes and the bones shift and break. So about six or seven months after we opened, and we had one heck of a store when we opened, I broke a bone in my foot, and I had to wear a boot cast. And when I went to the doctor's and he was talking to me, he said, "You have to be off your foot immediately." ~~You know it's even iffy about, you know, using a walker, just going to the bathroom or something. And I said to him, "but this is November and Christmas is coming, you know, the Christmas season, retail and all that," and he said quite simply, "Do you want your foot or do you want your store? Because this is not~~

going to change if you keep doing what you're doing." And I was just going to the mall and I was due in surgery... (interrupted by telephone) He's still in surgery and he was supposed to start at 7:30, that's not good.

Look at the smile on that little girl's face. She loves her grandma, huh?

They were supposed to start at 7:30. Well, they could have started later, maybe.

Interviewer: Sometimes they don't start until nine, and they bring them out, so they put them in a hallway, and by the time they get them to sleep...okay, so he said, "Do you want your foot or do you want your store?"

Colette: Mm hmm....

And I just kind of sat down and I thought, you know, I just can't win. My ship came in, I'm at the airport, looking for my arrival of my success, or however to make myself feel good. Meanwhile I had this bead store. I had customers that loved it. I had regular clientele. I had an e-mail group that I would send announcements to, and people would show up after I sent announcements, saying "I wanna do this, or I wanna do that" after I put it out there to the universe, and it just made it very heartbreaking. And as I sat back and decided to figure out what to do...my girlfriend had a jewelry store in Gibsonia. Well then she said, "Why don't you put the bead store in the middle of the jewelry store so we'll combine it, and so we started packing everything up and actually went all the way over with the stuff and then her husband, who works on the road, came home and said, "You know, we can't do that, we can't do that...you know, insurances and all those other different things. So then I had to take it and bring it back, and by then everybody knew that the store was gone, and for Christmas we didn't do well at all. You know, I had my foot up for a while, and I just got to the point where I had to start selling things off. So it was very heartbreaking.

Interviewer: What year was this?

Colette: November, 2006. I bought my house and the same day when I was moving into my house was when the bone in my foot broke. And I had opened up in March of 2006. You know, we were booming, and gone, that quick.

So by Christmas, by the end of December, we had everything closed down. I still have stuff packed up, that I have to get rid of, some things here and there, and I started babysitting kids, for my son, while he went to work. So I did have some free time down, and I started getting that I just can't sit here and do this feeling. It wasn't the way I was raised, I was raised that you work.

I started trying look into what else I could do next. I used to work as an operator at J.C. Penney's Catalog Center. That was one of the first jobs that I had out of the twenty-seven.

Interviewer: Was that at the Waterworks?

Colette: Mm-hmm. Although they moved to Indianola, so I got back in there and I worked a couple of months there, and I got a call from Verizon to work as an operator in Verizon. That was just amazing. They were willing to pay me more money than I have every made. But I was supposed to work downtown, and after I got in there and started training, I found out that they were going to put me on at Robinson Town Center, which from Brackenridge to downtown in itself is a half hour on a good day, with traffic and Route 28. Then you start from downtown and take the Parkway West, which we all know is not good either. So now, with my vehicle getting 18 miles to the gallon, and back then it was \$2.89 a gallon... There was like, when you sat down and you figured it out, the tradeoff, in how much more money I would make, it wasn't worth it. So I told them I didn't feel it was feasible, so I resigned, and they said they would take me back if I wanted to come back, but it was just, uh...they're doing everything in Robinson Town Center. We own a house in Braekenridge, and we're not moving there 'cause of where my husband works, and I thought "Well, that was nice while it lasted" and it did give us a really excellent Christmas.

So that was this past fall and Christmas time; so I sat there and I thought, you know, I still want to do something, and my mother's financial advisor came in to see her and sat down at the table and my mom always has me there, and he has been telling me forever, "You know, you're really so good at this stuff. You really should do something, you're so good at it." And I got started thinking, maybe that's what I should try doing. So I went and got the book for the Life Insurance test, because that's where you start, I knew that there was a lady in Natrona Heights at Lisa Beattie's State Farm Insurance. I knew that there was a woman that had been let go there for messing with the money, that sort of thing. So I thought, "Well, she's got an open position - I'm going to call and see what's up with that, and when I spoke to Lisa she said, "You know, if you go get your life insurance license on your own, I'll know you're serious, and then you come in when you're done and we'll talk."

So I did just that, and I passed the test, called her up and said, "Hey, remember me? Well, I passed. When are we meeting?" So I went in, we met and she hired me right away and right now I'm studying for my Property and Casualty test, so that I can have all the licenses necessary. She's building her agency, so I'm getting paid hourly plus commission, so I'm always making some money. It's not all commission.

Interviewer: I have two questions. Just an aside about the bead store, did you ever consider using a scooter or something to stay off your feet?

Colette: That was not possible because of the set up of the store and if I needed to use the restroom. Otherwise I would have. There was just a lot of sadness with closing that, because even now I run into people on the street and they yell, "The bead lady," and they tell me how much they miss the store and they don't like driving down the closest one is in Lawrenceville close to downtown Pittsburgh.

Interviewer: Crystal Beaders?

Colette: Crystal bead Bazaar, yeah. Joanne runs it.

Interviewer: That's my cousin. Baricella....that's not her married name, but it's her store.

Colette: So there were people coming from Butler, Apollo, Kittanning, North that would then come to Natrona Heights, because instead of being a forty mile trip, it was only fifteen or twenty.

So I had a ton of people coming to me.

Interviewer: Is that a passing fancy, you think, the bead stuff?

Colette: There's ten good years left in it right now. There was a frenzy in it for the first few years, and I got into it during the frenzy period and it's leveling itself out right now, but our area still is not represented by anybody that has anything remotely close to what we were doing. If we opened back up, it would (snapping of fingers) just be like that. People would come back in a heartbeat.

Interviewer: So you made a reference to, are you also diabetic?

Colette: Yes.

Interviewer: Were you diabetic before you found out you had Chron's disease?

Colette: No, that came along about 7 or 8 years ago.

Interviewer: Okay. So not related to Chron's disease?

Colette: No.

Interviewer (to others in room): Do you all know what Chron's disease is?

Background Voices: No. I don't know too much.

Colette: It's an inflammatory bowel disease akin to a cancer, where it eats away at the lining of your intestines, and whenever I was operated on, they do intestinal work. They clamp one side, clamp the other; then they do the cutting and take the piece out, and mine came out like spaghetti. When they went to pull it out, it wasn't even a tube of an intestine. It just broke apart in their hand, so I was very, very ill with it. So I don't have a large intestine and I have half of my small intestine.

Background Voice 2: So can you eat?

Colette: Can I eat? (Laughter)

Background Voice 2: What I meant was can you eat regular things and it not affect you?

Colette: I have trouble eating things that are high residue, like salads. I'm in a catch 22. Everything I'm supposed to eat for diabetes causes me problems with Chron's. And now I just got out of the hospital last week because I have so many adhesions in my gut that where my intestines are passing through adhesions, things are getting blocked. And it's not because the intestines narrowed, which is typical for Chron's, is that it will get so narrow and they have to cut pieces out. Mine is going through properly, but when it hits adhesions, then the twists and the turns through the adhesions is causing pain. And they kind of like don't want to operate again because when they operate you get more adhesions, so unless I'm just incapable of any food going through, they're not going to open me up again.

So I have to, like, eat small amounts now each time I eat. So that I don't send a lot of stuff down, so I don't have to, you know, have pain.

Background Voice 2: So how do you get it? Is it hereditary?

Colette: Chron's disease?

Background Voice 2: Yeah.

Colette: It's hereditary. It's incurable. Sometimes it skips generations, which means somebody back in the 1700's or 1800's died very young, because once you get it you don't absorb well. You have horrible horrible pain. I would hate to see what they tried to do to fix this person at that time because you have diarrhea constantly. You don't hold food down. Food goes straight through you like a rocket, and it's not a pretty thing. It's very painful. It's very debilitating and sometimes if your feces doesn't get out fast enough it will create tunnels called fistulas, to get out even faster. And those don't have the benefit of having a rectum to hold it in, so if somebody back in the 1800's got a fistula, then they would smell all the time because it would just keep pouring out of them without any control. It's just, it's not pretty. I had a fistula and I had it operated on because in this day and age they can do things about that. So I'm so glad I wasn't born back then, because when I think I would have to go out in the middle of the woods and shoot myself in the head, because I would not want to deal with life, especially without toilet paper. (Laughter)

Background Voice 2: Can you do a test to determine or does it just environmentally elick on?

Colette: There's no answers to that right now. They're trying to figure it out. It's been narrowed down to the auto-immune section of your body. They're not sure what makes it start, what makes it stop. There's a lot of steroids that you can take to ease the inflammation. Right now, it took four years for them to find it in me in modern day medicine. Back in '77 or '78 when they found it. I remember being in the hospital and I was in for about two months, and every day the doctors would come in and they would all surround the bed just like they do on television. One would say this and one would say that, and I would just lay there and listen to what they were saying, and one day they walked in and said, "Lady we don't know what the hell's wrong with you."

And I thought, that's it, I'm gonna die young, cause this is just killing me, and I had weighed at that time 118 pounds. That's half of me, so I was basically a skeleton, and I do have a picture of me as a skeleton.

It was just a horrible time that I don't even like to think about. You know, it was bad. And then they ended up putting a scope down my throat, and then up my rectum and they could finally see it and that's how they knew for sure that it was Crohn's.

So I was diagnosed right before Christmas in '76.

Interviewer: That's tough.

Background Voice: Do you remember when we had the opening of Small Differences? Katie Rogal, she was like 10 or 11 then, she couldn't come because she had to go to the hospital for Crohn's.

Colette: Lot of flareups.

Background Voice 2: And the age? When does it usually start?

Colette: It can start at any time in your life, but normally when you get into your forties you kind of have less active problems. I think it's because your life has less stress at that stage. You know, when you're growing up and you're trying to do all the stressful things like work, and make payments on a house and that sort of thing. That you know, someone like me, it's a daily worry. Like "Am I going to be out of the hospital and can I do this?" And the people that have Crohn's, if they're the head of a household I don't see how they can do that. Now my husband has had the same job for 30 years, so he's the rock, and at this point in my life, we got married when I was 37, at this point in my life I don't have to worry about the roof over my head. So back then, when it was just my living off of \$302 a month and housing that was subsidized, it was like "How am I going to flip this around, keep my health going and get out of this situation and be able to do that. If it wasn't for my husband, I probably wouldn't be able to.

But we're talking about all this, I really need to get honest about something. I have three children. The older two children, when I was sixteen and I almost died, my cousin adopted them, so they're living with my cousin and I usually just say I have one child and

three grandchildren, but I actually have three children and seven grandchildren. I don't see the other ones cause they're with my cousin's family, but that was a result of the Crohn's and everything going on.

Interviewer: You had them very young?

Colette: Yeah, I had him when I was sixteen, seventeen.

Background Voice: Where do they live?

Colette: Up in Erie. My cousin will not share them now, so...

Interviewer: Really?

Colette: Yeah. It's not a nice situation. My cousin uses the fact that when I was young and in a lot of pain I had probably 14 or 15 different prescriptions, and a lot of stuff for pain and anxiety and that sort of thing to keep the levels down, so it was really easy for my cousin to paint me a drug addict, cause I had Librium and Percocet, and I would have to live on these things. I can take 150mgs of Demerol right here and sit and talk to you like I am right now, because my body was accustomed to high dosages. Now if I laid down on a bed I could probably take a nap on it, but if I'm sitting up I'm as lucid as ever. And even when I have operations, when they lift me off the table, it wakes me up. Most people are asleep for a long time. When they lift me and they put me on the table, I can look at the clock, and then I can tell how long I've been on the table, and then I let myself go back to sleep for awhile because in my mind I know what time it is.

I actually had a surgery where I was awake through it and they didn't know it. It was in New Ken. I had a double barrel colostomy done, and I didn't go under enough. I was numb for pain, but I could hear...KDKA was on in the background and it was kind of like an echoing, like (sings KDKA), and I kept lying there and thinking over here. There's someone sitting over here.... "Lift your finger, lift your finger, and I kept concentrating, but the drug that makes you go pfft, I couldn't do anything. It was 2 1/2 hours. Everything echoed. I could feel them leaning on me. I could feel them moving things around, it was like pushing something, but there wasn't pain involved, and this doctor botched this operation...I had to have it repaired two months later, but he kept yelling swear words and everything had like an echo of ten times on it, so I was listening to all these echoes and tools banging, and it just became very bad. You know, I was in a nightmare and I couldn't get out of it, so the next operation I had to have was the biggest one ever, and I was frightened. I thought, My God, how do I live through this? What if they don't put me under enough and I can't tell them, and the one I was going to have was six hours. I thought, I would lose my mind if I had to listen to that, so when I went into Presby they taught me hypnotherapy. They had a hypnotherapist work with me, so that I could make myself relax because they were afraid they were going to lose me if they put me on the table, if they did this operation and I was panicked.

~~So that worked out really well, but in those days, it was a successful day if I got off the couch and I could walk to the sink and wash up a few dishes. That was a successful day.~~

Interviewer: In terms of your health, when did things turn around for you? I know you said you just got out of the hospital again. But you gained weight and you're working?

Colette: Yes I am. I'm working for Lisa Beattie's State Farm Insurance Agency. I would have to say that about 10 years ago, things started getting really good. ~~You know, I had like my ovaries out, and that sort of thing, but that happens. But I haven't really had—oh wait, I did have two hernia operations in the 13 years we were married. I've got a third hernia that they don't want to operate on, but I guess it's a mental thing. I have these things go wrong with me.~~ I still have Crohn's. Now I have diabetes so bad that I have to use a pump. Uh, I don't want to be the person that's sick, so mentally I tell myself, "I'm just like you. You get up in the morning, you go to work. At the end of the day you're happy. It's just that I have to take into consideration certain things, in order to do what you do. So I think it's all a mental thing.

Background Voice 2: I don't know how you do it.

Colette: I do it because I want to

Background Voice 2: Especially when you were younger and I think of me at sixteen and those ages and I'm just in awe.

Colette: There's nothing to be in awe of. If anything, I'm a poster child for "Stay in School."

The reason that I got pregnant and got out of the house at a young age was because my mother was married to a terrible alcoholic, and there was abusive situations in the house, and I figured, "Well, the boy next door, who's my boyfriend is a friend. And if I got married to him and got out of the house, I could hang out with him and not have to deal with this. So it was like a grand master plan, and when I was 18 I divorced him just like I planned. Stupid! Stupid! Stupid!

But it got me out of the house. It also got me a lot of stress and also kicked up my Crohn's. ~~It also, you know, brought everything to a head way faster. You know, maybe I wouldn't have Crohn's if I hadn't put all this adult pressure on me. Maybe I would have done a lot more with my life, and done a lot more for people than having them have to do for me.~~

Life's kind of like a cookie jar. When I was younger I would take cookies out, because I had to be taken care of, but you also gotta put cookies back in or it becomes empty. And in my philosophy in life, yes, I've had all these things happen. That's my taking from the cookie jar, because I needed help. But also now, it's my time to put back in, because

that's what I need to be doing, because if people don't put back into the cookie jar, then everybody's a taking person, and there's not much left for the people that need.

~~And I felt that okay, yeah, I have this body that has let me down and I will pay it back later, cause when I die it burns, so I get to get the last laugh, because I'm going to have this thing incinerated to a pulp. But while I'm in it, it's going to do what I want, and I want to be a success. And that's just the way it is, so I've won writing contests, I've gone to writing seminars, I've written three manuscripts. I have one that I'm writing right now, which is about my life, and it's called Turning Right, cause when I used to live above the stores with my grandma, we'd come down the steps every day and when I went out to play I had to turn right. All the time, turn right. Never knew my Mom worked here. Never, until I was an adult, did I know that my mother worked right underneath, where I was at. That was one of her two jobs. So I chose to turn wrong and take the wrong path in life, to get pregnant when I was younger, to do the things that I shouldn't have been doing. But it took me until later in my life to turn right and do the right things and be a success. That's the story I'm working on right now.~~

Comment [k1]: Insert this into page 16 where she talks about her manuscript being what she is most proud.

Interviewer: Well, you know, you could have given up, but you didn't, so that's what makes you who you are.

Colette: I think so. If you give up you have to accept the fact that I can't do things. You have to either say I'm a failure or I can't do it, and you have to try to mix the two together, that you know that I can't go to college and I can't get a master's degree and I can't have doctorate after my name, so in a sense, you've failed at that part of life, when I always thought I would go to college. But when you've got the "I can't do it" it should mesh in here together so there's no guilt after the fact that the doctorate doesn't happen.

You know, I grew up Catholic, so there's an awful lot of guilt in the family, an awful lot of doctorates and masters, so to have all this success around me in my 23 cousins, it was a rough campaign.

And I was the only one that was sick. And I've also resided with myself that I know that I'm probably going to be the first one of us 23 to die. Because of everything that's wrong with me, I know that I'm probably going first.

Interviewer: You don't know that. We don't know those things.

Colette: Don't know it for sure, but it's going to happen to me more so than them because they're healthy.

Interviewer: Well, don't think about that.

Colette: The only thing that's good about being really sick like this is that I know that my end is probably going to be in a hospital bed, looking at a curtain around me, than being squashed by a truck, or you know, any of those terrible things. See, I'm a writer, I can

~~think of a hundred different ways for someone to kill me, so I don't read that kind of story because I don't need help figuring out how someone else can kill me.~~

~~And I just say, "This is not going to happen to me. I'm going to be sick and I'm going to die in a hospital bed, and that's my choice under drugs. That's what I'd rather do," so in a sense I guess my life's better that way. I have a better probability of slipping out on a cloud of drugs than being squashed by a truck.~~

Interviewer: Okay, okay, I choose that too! So what's been the hardest thing for you through all of this?

Colette: The hardest thing -- my two older kids. You know, cause I tried to reconnect with them. They got ahold of me and they weren't the people I thought they were. They were looking for money, not closure.

Interviewer: How old are they?

~~Thirty four and thirty two. Thirty-four is my oldest and he feels like if he had a relationship with me, he would be doing some sort of disservice of some sort to my cousin, like betraying her. I can understand that, that's a perfectly legitimate thing, and if he would see me he would speak to me, that would be okay.~~

~~My daughter is a drama queen, and I have caught her in a lot of lies. She has a very nice husband and she has three beautiful kids.~~

~~My son has a daughter, but my daughter has three beautiful kids and each one of her children is to a different father, and she actually had one to a black man and gave that one away because it was inconvenient, but in her eyes I should have been able to keep them.~~

Interviewer: You?

~~Colette: So it was ok for her to give away the half black child, cause it would be inconvenient for her oldest boy to have to explain why he had a biracial sibling, but it wasn't okay for me when I was told by a doctor, "Lady, if you ever want to get any semblance of health, you need to stop being mama altogether. You need to get rid of all of your children."~~

~~And I just looked at him and said, "I've only been a mother. That's all I know." And he said, "Well, at least get rid of two of them. You have to give them away or you're going to die. This is just going to be a two-month thing. In, out, in, out, in, out, and then you're dead."~~

~~So I kept the baby because the baby was to my second husband and the older two, since their father didn't care about them, and said to me, "Well, if I sign this paper does that mean that I still have to pay \$40 a month for child support?" And I said, "No, that goes~~

away,” and he said, “Where do I sign?”

~~So it was that kind of an atmosphere, it was like, ugh, so I put them with my cousin who is a teacher and her husband makes about 60K a year, so between the two of them they’re making a lot of money and they have vacations I could never even think. Like they were in Cape Canaveral to watch things shoot up. They were in the Grand Canyon. They have been everywhere and done everything. They have had private schools...so I did what was best for them.~~

Interviewer: How old were they when you...

Colette: Four and five.

Interviewer: So they remembered you?

Colette: Yeah, they were four and five and the baby was under a year when the other two went up there, and I guess they just resented the fact that I kept the baby.

Interviewer: Was your second husband with you?

Colette: No, he had beaten me up, kicked me in the gut and that caused the massive surgery that I needed, because I was now starting to hemorrhage. So I had to stay in the hospital to let the hemorrhage heal before they could even operate, so that’s how I got the hypnosis treatments.

Boy this turned into a really strange interview, didn’t it?

Interviewer: So then the baby...

Colette: Is 29. That’s the one that just called. That’s the father. Cause he just called to tell me that he’s still in surgery. And I guess he must need something else. So he’ll call me later, but um..

Interviewer: So this is your 3rd husband.

Colette: This is my 3rd husband and my last. I’m going to die a Garmer girl, I’m telling you.

Background Voice 2: So how long have you guys been married?

Colette: Thirteen years. Yeah, it’s been rocky because my son, God love him. He was married to somebody who, they weren’t good together, they were like oil and water and a lot of fighting, and now they’re okay. She’s with someone else, he’s alone now, but now they’re on speaking terms and they work things out well, but in between that, we had to put up with a lot of stuff.

Interviewer: So this is the son...

Colette: That I kept.

Interviewer: I thought it was the daughter that you kept.

Colette: Hm mm. The daughter's in Erie.

Interviewer: The son is the one that just called you.

Colette: The baby. Um, they weren't very good with their credit, so when my son and his ex-wife split up, she kept on doing things like "Come get these kids, I don't want them."

We lived in a small apartment and my son was staying with us, and it's like all of a sudden we're going to get three kids dumped on us? And the baby was only like six months old, five months old. I looked at my husband and I says, "These kids need some permanency. Let's buy a house. Then my son can stay there, we can move out. He can make the payments and the utilities. Well, that works well in theory, but I wouldn't recommend it to anybody, because when they don't pay the utilities and they get hurt and they're on Workmen's Comp, and there's not enough money, suddenly you're paying for two places. So at Christmas time I kind of went up and said, "You know what? You're out of here. I'm moving back in my house. He gave the kids back to the ex and he found an apartment and we moved back into our house and now everything's just wonderful. But, uh, it's been, to quote Jerry Garcia, a long strange trip. It has, and I guess it all just depends on what you create in your life. If you create chaos, you get it, and I created it with my grand master plan at the age of sixteen.

So my husband went to school, graduated from high school, went straight into tech school, went straight into the job that he's still in. So when he says something, I pay attention to him, because now we have like zero stress. I only owe a thousand dollars out. Nothing else is owed, you know. Everything else is paid off. This is good. This is a good thing. This feels really good, to not have to wake up and figure out "How do I get out of bed?"

So...

Background Voice 2: I'm ready! I just started paying it and I'm ready!

Colette: You probably have college loans.

Background Voice 2: Oh, yeah.....I have a nice amount.

So that failure, college stuff, goes away when I think of not having all those college loans. Now, I did go to college eventually. I went and I got an Associate's degree. That was fun. It wasn't at any Ivy League place. It was in a place called Kenlock College

because it was located in a section of New Ken called Kenlock, and you spelled the college with a K.

Background Voice: Was that the Penn State campus?

Colette: There is no campus, that was it. No, it's not Penn Ken. This was a private business school called New Kensington Commercial School. But you know what? It's still an Associate's degree. And it's still credits. And it still works for me. I have a degree. But I'm also now a licensed insurance agent, so that's, you know, that's a better paper to hang on a wall for me, cause it only cost me under \$300, and I don't have that failure thing in my head that I didn't go to college and amass all this debt.

Interviewer: So what are you most proud of, out of everything that you've been able to accomplish?

Colette: I'm most proud of... my manuscript, about all of this craziness, because I know it's going to sell. I know it is. I've had people read segments of it and they just "Oh my gosh! This is so good." And, you know, I did some writing training for awhile. I guess that would be my big regret, that I didn't have formal training with writing. You know, I mean, I was dumb enough, at a young enough age. My mother was a subservient person to a drunk. So when I had the boy next door, he said he looked at my Tenth Grade thing and it Honors English, Academic... the math that was a level higher, you know, he said, "What is wrong with you? If we're getting married that should be Basic English, Basic Math and it should be easy for you to go to school. You'd just get all A's. What are you doing to yourself? I let him change my selection, even though I was getting A's in English.

Interviewer: But you were only sixteen.

Colette: Yeah, and really nobody like watched over me. I don't think my mom knew when I got a report card. You know what I mean. Just being present in a household that...no one ever asked me what did I want to be when I grew up. No one ever had any talks with me about any of that. And I find that odd, now that I'm this age and I'm wondering, you know, what do you want to do when you grow up. I don't care if it's a fireman, you know, or...

Markie said, I said to him, "What do you want to do when you grow up?" He goes, "I want to be a black doctor."

(Laughter) I said, "Hey, if you want to be a black doctor? You do it, man." At least someone's talking to them about "What do you going to do when you grow up?" You know, "Where's your future headed?" So he's thinking doctor. He'll eventually figure out that the black part won't work, cause he is all white, on both sides. (Laughter) "I want to be a black doctor." And his eyes were big as quarters. He was grinning from ear to ear. "I want to be a black doctor." Whole room went down. Whole room went down. But anyhow, Michael wants to be a mechanic. He wants to fix cars. Being that he can't spell very well, I think he's headed in the right direction. His father couldn't

spell well, and he works in HVAC and sales, doing that sort of thing, but now his dad's doing very well. I think Michael's mostly like Matt.

Lexis? I don't know. I think she can just be a princess. That's all that matters. Grandma's baby girl.

Interviewer: So how often do you see them?

Colette: As much as I can.

Interviewer: They're with their mother?

Colette: Yeah, and she lives in the next town. Yeah. Like I would have had the two boys overnight for this morning while she took Mark to the hospital, but then she remembered that I had just got out of the hospital, so she found somebody else. She said she didn't want to inconvenience me. Which, that's come a whole heck of a way from "I don't want these kids, take them."

So things have healed in that area, thank God.

Interviewer: Do you have a book rep? Is your manuscript done?

Colette: No. It's under 100 pages right now. I'm now sure how long to make this, cause it is creative non-fiction. Although I can put that moniker in the front, the creative part, but none of it's untrue. You know, what I'm saying? I'll just people go, "Hmm? Wonder which parts are true and which parts aren't."

Background Voice: That's a big area right now—creative nonfiction. Pitt has a master's degree in that right now. My wife works there and tutors in that program. I actually went to listen to some of their readings.

Colette: I wish that I could do that.

Actually, I would love to be a full-time writer, and to that to be my job, and it would be so much easier than working. However, as we've discussed, it doesn't pay well.

Although I have had... My husband and I had a custody battle with his ex-wife and it did cost us \$44,000 and our house. But we did win. Small victory. But then I sat down and wrote about it and sent the manuscript out to True Story magazine and within three months, they bought it and it was a ten-page book thing in the center, you know, and I was published in Good Housekeeping Magazine, and something called Enable Pennsylvanians. I got published in that. I never saw a copy of it, but someone told me they put it in there.

Interviewer: And do you write under the name Colette Garmer?

Colette: Yes I do. But I did send a manuscript to a place called Bookends, out of New Jersey, and they're big-time agents, and when I did send it in, the lady said well since I had won a contest with Harlequin...

(Phone rings) "He's okay. Now I can relax."

What was I saying?

Interviewer: Harlequin

Colette: I had won a national contest. They chose five people, based on two sentences that you write, which would be like on the back of a book, a two-sentence blurb about your book. So I wrote these two sentences about this manuscript that I had finished and was trying to market around, and me and four other people won. And that was a national contest.

Anyhow, so then I took this book. After that you send it in to... one of the things was that a person would read your book, if you won the contest. So she read the book, loved the writing, but had already done something kinda like it, so didn't want it.

So then I sent it to this publisher, or agent and said that they had loved the book, so what can we do with it? She said, "Well, since that's a smaller genre and they wanted like 60,000 words, it's kind of hard to get that printed. You'd have to double it. Well, I didn't want to put the mental energy into doubling it, because I'm really not a romance reader. It's not what I like doing. I like doing the Erma Bombeck stuff. The, uh... I'm just reading it, Lake Wobegone..."

Garrison Keilor:

There we go. That's it. His kind of writing, that's my style. That's the kind of writing I do. So I had in the query letter I wrote to the agent I had told her I was working on this, and she wrote back and said, "I absolutely love your style. I want to see that when it's done."

Then I didn't finish it. That was 4 years ago. Isn't that stupid?

Interviewer: No, it's not stupid. I just think it's something you should get back to it.

Colette: I am. I am now.

Interviewer: And hope she's still alive.

Colette: She is, and she's sold hundreds of books since then. And I keep thinking it seems like I would set myself up for failure. I would get close to something and then fail.

Background Voice: Well, not failure. Afraid of success.

Colette: Afraid of success, that's it.

Background Voice: a lot of people end up working on things and don't finish because they know if they don't finish it won't be bad.

Colette: Okay, that makes sense. The thing is, I know it's a good book. I know it is. And now I sit down with the idea that even though it's stupid to do that, I tell myself, "Okay, this is my Stephen King thing." This is what I have to do that's the "Whoops, somebody found him." This is my "Whoops, somebody found me." So when I sit down now that I have that attitude running through my head, statistically I know it's way down there, but in order to sit down and get this into a format, in a manuscript and move forward. Cause I've already done three manuscripts; it's not like I can't do it. But I have to exorcise the demons. I have to talk about things.

Interviewer: You can do it.

Colette: I'm doing it. I decided to do it today, cause I normally never say anything about the other kids or any of that.

Interviewer: That was a good interview. Are there any more questions from you guys?

Background Voice: Any advice to anybody out there? Since you led such a full life, it might not be the life you originally thought it was gonna be, but it is a full life.

Interviewer: You're not done yet.

Colette: That's right. I'm only 50. 50 more to go.

Interviewer: I'm going to take your picture while you think about that. Would you give us permission?

Colette: Yeah. I guess I would have to say, it's probably best to go after your dreams and don't let anybody else burst your bubble. Don't let anybody else tell you you can't do something, because if I would have done that, I would still be living on \$300 a month in subsidized housing and have nothing to show for it.

Background Voice: That's where you said Working Order really helped?

Colette: Oh, if it wasn't for Working Order, I mean they gave me killer advice, and my business plan will stack up against somebody you would pay thousands to have one done. And Ruby was just, she was the gemstone in my life that created this, "I can do this now and I can do it right."