

A LOGO AND A SMILE: THE FAST FOOD CULTURE

Andrea Banse

Writer's comment: “Write about what you know” I’ve always been told. And what do we know better than our place of employment, a culture we may exist in and adapt to for thirty or forty hours a week? The details may be surprising, the implications disgusting, but the stories are true and worth telling. Unfortunately, this article comes across as very negative and pessimistic even though much of my experience in fast food was rewarding. Needless to say, my eating out habits have changed dramatically since viewing the scene from behind the counter.

I have long shied away from journalism and its curt, concise ways. The switch from my usual creative writing to journalistic writing has therefore been a tough one for me. “A Logo and a Smile” was the first article I ever actually enjoyed writing and I need to thank Jayne Walker for encouraging the incorporation of my more descriptive style into this piece.

— *Andrea Banse*

Instructor's comment: When Andrea Banse told my English 104C (Journalism) class that she wanted to write humorous pieces, I winced. Nothing is more difficult for novice writers. But Andrea has the magic touch. In this first-person report, her scathing wit is grounded in a multitude of well-observed details so powerful that they seem to speak for themselves. On their next visits to a fast-food court, readers may wish they could forget some of them.

— *Jane L. Walker, English Department*

WORK IS A CULTURE. Don't let anyone try to tell you it isn't. When you take a job, you accept a ready-made family with its very own quirks, customs and skeletons in the back room. The fast food business has a culture that rivals that of any cutthroat corporation or gossipy office. Rumors reach the outside world, but can seldom be confirmed. The spit in the hamburger, a stray pubic hair in the burrito. Unconfirmed rumors...

For two years, thirty hours each week, the most important items in my wardrobe were a baseball cap with a logo on it and a smile. The customers were always right (until they turned their backs) and a quality product brought immeasurable joy to my face. Some said I had a job. And yet, I knew it was much more than that. Behind the windexed sneeze guard and bright yellow linoleum counters, another dimension lay hidden - thrived.

As a junior in high school I set out to look for a part time job. My first interview took place in the food court of a mall five minutes from my house. I came a little too well dressed, a little too eager and much too naive. My enthusiasm somehow sparkled off the dingy plastic table top in the bustling mall and the manager that sat across from me fed off my innocence.

"Okay Andrea," he folded his hands across the worn paper which held the long ago memorized interview questions, "let's talk about why you want to work here." The next thirty minutes were filled with my polished answers to what I would later learn were considered "Mike's bullshit questions."

As we sat there Mike would occasionally turn his head to check up on his color coded employees as they stood at attention behind the counter. It was a rainbow hierarchy. Mike wore a purple shirt, symbolizing the royalty of management. The assistant managers wore blue and the rest were relegated to wearing a red that faded after the second washing. All wore hats that matched and cold plastic name tags stamped with bold black letters advertising our names.

"Well, it looks good Andrea. I'll let you know in a few days after I have completed the rest of my interviews." Mike and I stood up from the table and a janitor who had been buzzing around the food court looking busy quickly stepped around us and made a beeline for the employee exit. The mall was closing in ten minutes. I nervously shook the extended hand and walked to the down escalator.

I expected to have to wait awhile to hear back from Mike, but he called the next day. Apparently his "other interviews" hadn't been as promising as he thought they would be. He actually hadn't interviewed anyone else, he just didn't want to sound desperate. I was hired over the phone and told to report the following Saturday, which would be tomorrow.

I walked up to the counter the next morning like any common customer might and was greeted halfheartedly by a short stocky girl with short stocky pink hair that spiked out from under her hat and clashed badly with her faded red shirt. She pointed a stubby finger with black nail polish at an inconspicuous door on the other end of the food court next to the Chinese place. There stood Mike, smiling and waving.

When I reached the employee entrance and entered the labyrinth of concrete walled, floored and ceilinged hallways I recognized my rite of passage as an employee. Mike led me past a maze of back doors reading "Pizza Kitchen - Employees Only," "Beijing Express - Employees Only," and countless others until we reached door 203. He sucked in a full breath of air heavy with grease and unlocked the back door.

My first glances at the back room met my expectations only because I wasn't looking hard enough. The metal sink piled high with plastic tubs, two walk-in freezers (I would later experience harrowing adventures locked inside both because of faulty locking mechanisms), the shelves packed tight with condiments, napkins and boxes of potato chips. It all seemed in order.

Mandy, the girl with the black fingernails was to help train me. She gave me my first tour of the

behind the counter scene and introduced me to the wonderful world of customer service. When my first customer walked up, I was nervous yet confident. Unfortunately, I was also slow on the register and the customer, a regular who probably could have done my job better than I at that point, was quick to snap a rude comment and snap up her change.

“Bitch,” Mandy muttered. The great and sophisticated art of relieving “customer tension” under one’s breath thus revealed to me, my glowing smile faded. I was like a kid ripped away from her favorite toy, which in this case could have been labeled “faith in the inherent good of the individual - both customer and employee.”

It only took about a week for me to meet the rest of the crew and learn the ropes. As we came to know and accept each other’s existence, all pretenses were stripped away and the true colors of our culture began to shine through. We were the underdogs. The unappreciated. The underpaid. And damn it, we weren’t about to let the injustice go unnoticed. Working in fast food is being a part of a guerrilla army. Our revenge may never have been noticed by those unlucky enough to receive it, but we soared on the consolation it brought us.

On a slow weekday evening I walked into the back room to toss a dirty tub into an even dirtier sink filled with stagnant water that might have contained soap bubbles about a week before. Wayne, code name “Nee” (every good army has its code names) stood stooped over the sink, up to his elbows in a three gallon tub filled with mayonnaise and some frozen fake stuff we liked to call chicken salad.

“Waynee, the human blender” I teased him as dirty water splashed from my miscalculated tub toss into the mixture. “Oooo, might want to move that away from the sink...” Nee’s 6 foot 2 inch 234 pound frame stayed contorted as his bare arms churned the mixture. He had a wicked smile on his face that night and I reminded myself not to eat the chicken salad until I made the next batch myself.

Now, Wayne was a quiet guy, a Junior College dropout who had frequented more metal concerts in his life than family dinners, but I didn’t believe he had it in him to do what he did that night to the poor unsuspecting chicken salad. After that batch had been consumed the next day by customers, he told me his dirty little secret - “While I was mixing the chicken salad, my band aid fell off.”

As it happens, Wayne had only noticed the missing band aid after he felt the stinging in the finger he had sliced while maneuvering the lettuce chopper earlier. Well, at least he was good enough to fish through the tub until he found the band aid. What about the blood?! What about, God, I don’t know, health hazards maybe?! “Ach, a little extra protein won’t hurt anyone.” The grin spread up to his nose ring and he turned to greet a customer. “How are you today, sir? What can I get for you?” How about a little extra “protein” with that, I thought as I pulled on gloves and turned on the smile. “Can I help whoever’s next...?”

True, we were like a dysfunctional family, but we were in this thing together and I felt trapped by a sense of loyalty. I could only restore my faith in humanity by acting. When Mandy, who we also called Sleepy because of her propensity to come to work stoned (or “high on life” as she preferred), found it necessary to chew off a hangnail and throw it into a bubbling marinara sauce, I found it hard to turn away. Every instinct called for me to stop this insanity. When she wasn’t looking I’d throw out the contaminated food. I was like a vigilante, desperate to avert the bitterness that flowed from behind the counter.

But then, I wasn’t an angel. I, too, grew to tolerate the frequent visits of our cockroach friends. The same cockroaches we would name and draw pictures of on the white board in back. Once, as I rang a customer up, I watched horrified as little Freddie crawled on the underside of the counter, inches away from the customer’s plate of food. The plastic smile never wavered. I sent the customer away in a flurry of napkins and paper cups and quickly removed Freddie from the counter. (At least we didn’t have the rats the Armenian food place was rumored to harbor.)

Even the brother and sister twin co-workers, Andi (“Dee”) and Eric (Tweedle “Dum”) had their

secrets. Cute and blonde, cheerleader and jock, university bound high school seniors, this dynamic duo found it much simpler to satisfy their need for fast food evil by shortchanging the customers and pocketing the money, or using it to “buy” frozen yogurt across the hallway. Of course that was only if Sarah, our “you hook us up, we’ll hook you up” accomplice, wasn’t working.

Whether taco twirlers, hot dog dunkers or sticky bun bakers, each and every worker in the food court recognized the unspoken link between us. We were unionized in spirit and all banded together in opposition against the other mall workers; those who rode up the escalator flaunting their “mall discounts” and the fact that they worked on the first floor, away from the rising grease and rat’s nests.

We hated them. The worst had to be the big time department store perfume counter girls. We rarely acknowledged their requests and violated the “under the breath” rule when it came to ridiculing their inch thick eyeliner. It was too much - this vicious cycle. Rude customers had irritated these fellow mall workers who in turn abused us - we then pissed them off and they returned to work and upset future customers who, come lunchtime, would storm upstairs to get a drink and yell at us. No love I tell ya, no love.

Despite this apparent evil streak, the allegiance we felt to our fellow coworkers-workers within the store grew strong. During the holidays, when customers were at their worst and employees on their shortest, if not merry, fuse, our loyalty was fierce.

Once, when I had been yelled at for 5 straight minutes by a grandmother who had confused her inability to find the right Power Ranger toy with my service abilities, my co-worker, Michelle, usually preoccupied with her need to smoke before her jitters caused her to drop everything she held, jumped in. Not only did she tell Granny where to go, she told her how to get there, how long it would take and what the weather would be like when she got there. Needless to say, we lost the sale and I worried for a week that the old woman would die of shock. But somehow, “Squeegee” (Michelle) had recovered a shred of the dignity she had lost that busy shopping season.

Of course, the fast food culture is not entirely a negative thing. After almost a year, I traded in my red (then nearly orange) collared shirt for a shiny blue one. A new dawn had risen as a wave of old employees left for more promising venues. Nee disappeared to England where he was rumored to have a family. Dee and Dum separated to pursue their educational goals. Sleepy was fired after missing work one too many times. And Squeegee, alas, had to quit work when she became pregnant, though she never quit smoking.

When it came time to hire new staff, I worked with Mike to avoid the many problems I had witnessed in the past. It was a new family, but it was not a new culture and the war continued to rage while I was there and long after I moved on to better things.

It’s been awhile since I smelled the grease, smiled the plastic smile and bonded with my rebel comrades. As the reality of the onion chopping, the floor mopping and the “hi, how can I help ya’s” fades, other memories emerge.

On weekends I would rise early and open the store. Before my co-workers arrived and while the gated faces of the other shops remained sleeping, I would look out at the quiet food court and imagine how the day would go. There was an occasional Folger’s moment when I brewed that first batch of coffee - the only time it would be fresh the entire day - and greeted the sparrow family that had mistakenly flown into the mall and nested in the skylight rafters. (In a few months they would be found dead in the air conditioning vents).

I could never correctly predict the course of my workday. As the morning “mall walkers” tromped around the upper level and the first few customers showed up just a little too early, I might think it would be another rough day.

Because the mall was just off a major Los Angeles freeway, we were visited by many “transients.”

My personal favorite, Jonas. If he slipped past the “rent-a-cop” mall security guards, he would always make sure to come tell me personally that the world (here he always had to pause to suck in the escaped alcohol vapor) would end soon. “This very night mah-bee.” If Mike wasn’t around I’d slip Jonas a little something over the counter. Maybe a leftover from my “free lunch.” He wouldn’t even mind if Freddie had crawled on it earlier.

Another frequent visitor was Cheri. She was privileged enough to belong to a local mental health care home that took its residents on weekly “field trips” to the mall. Cheri always ordered the same thing, asked the same questions, left the same straw wrapper on the counter. I never minded. She was 16 and moderately mentally retarded.

One day she unexpectedly came back up to the counter. I was working alone and rather busy. A huge jar of mustard had toppled on the back room floor, the sink had flooded again, the corroded pipes were letting in the cockroach family from next door, the dishes... “Excuse me.”

I looked up and waited for Cheri to ask for another napkin. I was already prepared and had one in my hand. Instead, she cocked her head, and, almost embarrassed, confessed “Something made me come back up and tell you. I think you need to know God loves you, and you can’t do it all on your own. But it’ll all be okay. Um, okay? Okay, bye.” She shuffled off and I stared dumbfounded. Maybe I had been wrong. Maybe it would turn out to be a good day after all.