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### Union: Interviews with Employees from the Holiday Inn of Liverpool, NY

Mary Gallagher

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**Kirk VanDenburg**  
*Assistant Chief Engineer*

I was born in Syracuse, at St. Joseph's Hospital, forty years ago. All of my family and friends are here, and I just stuck around because I found a nice job I was comfortable with, so no reason to move along.

I've been working at Holiday Inn about twenty years. Basically what's kept me here is it's a very interesting job. I haven't done assistant chief engineer the whole period; I started out as a houseman for housekeeping, actually. Then I went to maintenance after a couple years, and then I went back as assistant housekeeping manager, and then I went back to maintenance again as assistant chief. I worked front desk for four months, too. Working front desk's very easy, but you have to be people-oriented. You have to be quick.

Before Holiday Inn, I worked at mostly restaurants. I did my McDonalds stint for a while, and then I went to work at Ponderosa. Worked my way up through there, and worked at another little restaurant part-time when I first started at the hotel. I was going to school, also, at that time.

Actually, I felt stuck in the restaurant business. I worked at Ponderosa for a while doing busboy, dishwasher, line cook, waiter, I mean all the way up. The other one was McDonalds, and I worked at this other little restaurant. It was a little Italian restaurant, and I was a dishwasher there. But once you're classified in a certain little job thing, it's like no one else wants to hire you unless you have experience. So I saw a couple hotels and I decided maybe I'll go in and ask... I did not know anything about hotel work, who worked there, what did they do? I just came in, filled out an application down the street at

Quality Inn, and I came here also. I just put down any work, and I was hired in two days. They said, “Show up tomorrow.” Okay! That’s how I started. My first job was housekeeping houseman. What a houseman does for the housekeeping department is deliver the sheets to the housekeepers, the maids, take away the dirty stuff, and take care of the floors: vacuum, mop, the whole works.

While I was a houseman, they had just completed a renovation. I was with this other guy, Mike, who trained me how to be a houseman. Actually, we were more of project housemen than regular housemen. We still had to deliver stuff to the housekeepers once in a while, but usually me and Mike, we’d end up washing windows, moving rooms around, taking the furniture out of rooms, vacuuming... all kinds of weird little things which would give us a lot of freedom. One of our projects was to watch for broken things. Anything we saw broken we’d have to write it up for maintenance. I was gung ho on that, and I started writing up things that were obviously wrong. That’s how the process works: you have to write up a work order, and then the maintenance people will fix it. Right now, I can look around the room and see things wrong, you know, but unless it’s really serious I wouldn’t go fix it because there’s no work order on it.

So yeah, I gave the maintenance guys lots of work orders—they hated me, they wouldn’t let me in the elevator, they would close the elevator on me! But I got to know a couple of the guys and we got along. They had another renovation a couple years down the road and they needed help, so I started

helping them out. They liked how I worked, because I was fast, I was efficient, and I did things right, so they hired me in maintenance. I did that probably four or five years. It's hard to remember; it's just a blur now. I was stuck on nights and weekends for the longest time, and I always used to work with someone who would train me how to do things. I would just pick it up, because I knew things already. I knew how to do basic stuff and I just picked up everything else. I learned not to fear death, and just go ahead and play around with electricity and everything.

I'm working with high voltage, with these big huge boilers, five million BTUs. It's incredible—they look like train cars! You've just got to know what you're doing and you got to be aware. When you're in maintenance, you could hurt someone else if you don't repair something right. I mean, even the simplest things. One time, this girl got burned by her vacuum because one maintenance guy didn't hook up the wires correctly. You've just got to be really careful.

I really got a lot of experience when Steve was our chief engineer. Steve couldn't read or write. He called me "college boy" and he'd have me do all the paperwork, the purchase orders, the ordering, dealing with the time cards, going out and getting parts, doing the whole works... Getting parts was very fun. He'd just send me out on these trips in the van: "Don't come back 'til you get the right stuff!" Some days it's like I was traveling. It was like: "I can't believe I'm getting paid to run around picking up parts and everything." But I got bored with that, so when there was an opening for assistant

housekeeping manager, I said, “Yeah, you know, I want to go over there.” I did, I went over there and worked another five years as assistant housekeeper. That was a really tough job. The hours and the long, drawn-out walking were hard.

See, the housekeeping manager has to come in before all the other housekeepers come. I think the most I had was thirty-five employees under me. I was responsible for scheduling, getting their daily paperwork, and so I had to come in early in the morning so I could do all their paperwork first. Throughout the day, I had to make sure they had all their supplies, that they got all their projects done, that all their rooms were done by a certain time.

I’m married now, with just one child. A girl. She’s going to be three in February. It’s not bad now, but back when I was the assistant housekeeping manager it would’ve been hard to be a husband and father. No, I was single then. It’s not a married life. There’s a lot of people here at Holiday Inn that can’t make it with a family because it’s too many hours. It’s really tough, because in the hotel business you have to work weekends, you have to work holidays. It’s open 365 days a year. Someone’s going to have to work Christmas, New Year’s Eve night. When everyone normally goes out and parties, we’re working. There’s many New Years I’ve gone home after 12:00—“Happy New Year!”, you know?

I went back to maintenance as assistant chief engineer after doing my stint in housekeeping for so many years. It’s different from my old job in maintenance, especially because of pay. That’s one downfall with being

under a union—there's a certain pay scale you go by. It's not like you can pick and choose. Say, "Oh, you're a great worker! We're going to give you \$2.00 extra!" That was the shortfall for me, and I threatened to leave when I was in maintenance. They had to give me a title for me to come back to it, basically. The title makes you management and gets you more money, but you get out of the union. Sometimes I wish I was still in the union because of some of the benefits, like retirement, death benefits, stuff like that, but as a manager I have a pension plan also. You put money in and they put money in. You still get the same great health insurance that the employees do, you get the free meals, you get the free uniforms, all those little benefits, too.

Here at Holiday Inn was the first time I'd ever worked in a union, and there are a lot of benefits. Definitely. Say, this is an independent hotel, apart from Holiday Inn chain. It's not like working for a corporation like Lockheed Martin or General Electric, where you have a set person who does the hiring and firing, and where they give you your job review... like a once a month how-you're-doing. All the department heads, they hire and fire someone if it becomes necessary. They do have a small human resources department that does like the general training program that the Holiday Inn requests we use for employees. All the Holiday Inn 'how to do your job' films and stuff like that—the human resources does that. We do the individual training.

With a union, it definitely gives the regular employee who's making low wages the extra benefit. I've seen both sides: I was a union member and management. I really prefer that I do work with a union hotel, even if I'm not

a union member, just because of that reason. It's like having a negotiator at all times. As a manager, you realize that the employees have the union also, and that gives us security. With the union you can set up a meeting with our general manager, Mr. Gallagher, if you'd like, and there's set ways the union has for disciplining someone. There's a union contract that's between the company and the union itself, and inside the contract there's specific rules you have to follow. Employees know the rules, and we know the rules, so everyone is okay on that. Usually the first write up is a verbal or just written warning. There's usually three written warnings, then you're terminated. Or it depends on how serious it is, they might get suspended for a week, or two days—it depends really how serious it is, you know?

Any issues I've had have been handled very well. So Ann Marie, the union president, comes in and argues the point—we didn't do it right or they didn't do it right—for you, and then she would take it up to the next level if necessary. The next level, it's called... it's not a judge who oversees it, I can't think of the word... it's like if you got divorced, you'd have a mediator. Mediator, yeah, it's like an official—I guess through the court system or the Labor Board—that would mediate between parties.

The benefits of management for someone just starting out in the hotel business would be that you're gonna get your hours, and your pay will be the same from week to week to week. It goes by seniority when you're in the union. The people with higher seniority get the hours and the weekends off before someone lower, so if you just started you're going to be working



weekends, you're going to be working holidays, you might be working two days one week, five the next—it's not stable.

My typical workday is different now than it was just two years ago. Now, I work a regular 3:00 to 11:00 pm shift five days a week. I always used to tell people they stuck me on 3:00 to 11:00 because I was the only one knowledgeable to fix locks, computers, and televisions for the guests, which is very important between 3:00 to 11:00. People start checking in at 3:00, and that's when most of the rooms are occupied. That's when they want everything working and they want it done now, you know? It's not like you could wait and have the day person fix those things the next morning. There's only me on at nights. Basically, I just do all the standard things: check the pool, check the boiler room, do work orders that housekeeping has written up during the day, any guest calls...

People don't realize that maintenance workers have to know so many things. When I'm by myself working at night, I have to know everything; there's no one I can ask for help, you know, no one I can ask, "What do you think about this?" You've got to be very smart about things, you have to know what you're doing, and you've got to get the things done quick. You have to know a lot. It took me two years to get a good knowledge of how to repair things here, because there's so many. Hotels are different than working in an office building. We have two office buildings we take care of also, but it's completely different. You have the guests with the computers, televisions with movie cards, remotes, you've got electricity, plumbing, tub clogged,

locks broken... So you've got to know every single field of work. I mean, you have to know it all.

It took me years of work and years of being on hold to learn how to fix everything I have to fix. It's 'learn by doing.' During high school I had taken a BOCES course in electronics for two years, and then I'd gone to school for electrical/mechanical. I worked as a service mechanic for one semester during college, so that taught me a lot of things right there. That's where I grew the love of fixing things, basically. But now things don't get fixed, they get replaced. It's understandable: in the amount of time it takes to fix something you could have bought it and gone on to the next item.

You have to be a trainer when you're in my position, too. There's such a high turnover in hotel staff, especially at the front desk. A lot of times the front desk doesn't know simple questions; they have to get on the radio, "We don't have any clean rooms!" Sometimes I have to go up there and pull up the computer and say, "This is your listing, this is what you do. You unblock one person and put 'em over here. Get the person checked in, then you can rearrange the next person coming in to a different room." At the front desk, they might not know how to use the answering machine on the telephone, or the heating system in the room... There's actually a window in each room that opens, so you have to tell the front desk, "If the guest says they're hot, tell them to shut the unit off and open the window." There's all these little training things like that you have to constantly do.

In maintenance, you've just got to make sure everything's running smooth, basically. There's freedom: you're not stuck at the front desk, you get to go anywhere, everywhere... You get to see everything. I definitely like that kind of job where you're not sitting at a desk all day long. I like getting to move around and see what's going on.

I have a set time to do everything. I get rid of all of my little work, all the work orders done up in the morning, between 3:00 and 5:00. The housekeepers are cleaning the rooms in the morning, and if they find something broken they write it up on a work order. Maintenance will fix it before the next guest checks in if the process works right. Those things you want to get done during the day. Between 5 and 9 guests start coming in. After they're checked in, they enter their room, and if anything doesn't work—basically the telephone, television, computer, and air conditioning—you'll hear from them. The front desk will call me on my radio—we carry little walkie-talkie two-way radios around. As long as those things are working, then you won't hear from them. Say they let the guest in at 5:15, but he can't open the door. I usually get two to three of those at night. I also get three “can't connect to the internet” calls at least. Most of the time it's their settings on the computer; it's not our system. I have to go into their computer and fix it. I've learned a lot just from being on hold with the internet company: what to do, and how to do it. Once I get them online, they're happy. Then I just leave their room, do my daily walks, and make sure everything's running while I wait for the next call.

That's probably my favorite part of the job: taking care of guests. Regular people come in everyday. I'm glad to get their computer going so they can finish their project, I'm glad to fix their television so the kids can watch a movie and be happy... Pleasing people, I think, is the best reward of the job. I get a lot of people that think I'm doing an awesome job, then once in a while I get a person who's miserable, and there's nothing you can do. You just have to try to make the best out of the situation. Once a week, no matter what happens, there's going to be one person here who's gonna get screwed. No matter what happens... Their airlines were late getting here, the car broke down on the way, the first room they got has something wrong in it that's major—I usually move a guest if it's going to take more than twenty minutes. I move them to the next room, something else is wrong. I move them to the next one.... I tell the people, too: "I'm sorry, you must be the one! The bad mojo is on you!" I try to make light of it, but I want to be respectful; they're paying for a room, and they expect a certain service. You really have to get to know a person right off the bat. That's another thing about the hotel business—you learn to read people. I get to know your whole life that quick, because I have to. What mood you're in, are you happy, sad, miserable, are you going to complain after I leave?

I have a million stories about guests... We don't get a lot of long-term stays here. Most of the long-term people I've known were here because their company stuck them here for so many days. You get to know them. A lot of people ask you, you know, "Where's a good place to move?" or you're

walking by the hallway or in the lobby and you keep seeing someone and they always ask you, “How are you doing?” It’s always good to know someone that way. The other advantage we have is that we’re a convention center hotel. Conventions, they come and go, but usually they come more than once, so you get to know them. We used to have a big tattoo convention and I got to know them very well. They know you; they trust you. Another advantage of a hotel? If you really hate the people, they’re gonna be gone after a couple of days.

I’ve met some characters here. I’ll give you an example. One time I had the front desk call me up because there was a telephone not working in a room. Okay, I was way down on the seventh floor, so I took my time. I went to look for a good phone, a phone cord, everything I’d need because I didn’t want to walk back and forth—usually when you go to a room you want to have everything that could possibly be wrong in your hands so you can do it and get out. When I get to the room, the door’s open, and I see two guys standing over another guy who’s half on his bed, half off. His chest is all freshly scarred, and he says, “I’m having a heart attack!” I guess he just had triple bypass surgery. “I can’t use my phone, my phone’s not working! I want to call my wife!” The two guys are just standing there watching him!

So you never know what a call’s going to bring you. Sometimes people bring in like, oh, “Can you take apart my tape recorder? My battery isn’t working.” When you fix it, they’re appreciative. Some people will tip you actually. Yeah, as a maintenance guy you don’t get tips usually, but

sometimes they're very giving, you know, offering five dollars, ten dollars. You have to be careful of really big tips, though. It goes around the hotel quick if someone's tipping a lot, say twenty or forty dollars... There's something wrong here. Usually it's a guy who left his wife, and he's staying in the hotel and spending all their money. You feel real sad, and you don't want to turn away twenty dollars, but it's like, they're off they're rocker. When things like that happen, I always say leave it for the housekeeper in the morning. Other times, depending on what their mood is, it's like "Thank you very much, I appreciate it."

You do get a lot of crazy people here, too. Well, this one guy, he smoked outside and I'd give him a cigarette once in a while. I started talking with him. He told me, "Oh yeah, I'm here for a month, from down in North Carolina. I'm a mortician." I was surprised. "Wow, what are you doing up here?" I asked him. Then he told me this big story about how they have mortician companies and the guy went sick or something so they transferred him up here. Now he's stuck up here. He talked about snowplowing and all these stories. I guess he was bugging the front desk girls a lot, too. The front desk girls get a lot of guys bugging them, you know? So I guess the front desk manager had one of her friends run his name and she found out he actually lived in Liverpool. He made up this big huge story about being a mortician and actually he was living in the house of some girlfriend who he was getting a divorce from. He was living here in the meantime.

Working here has changed me. I definitely work with the public more than I did in the other jobs I've had. Even as a waiter, you take their order and go away. Now I might be in a room for twenty to thirty minutes with someone, fixing something, listening to their stories; you get to really know the guests more than in a lot of jobs. That's the way it is in most of the public service jobs, like at a gas station, you fill up your gas tank, you pay the gas attendant, and you're gone. Quick. Here, I'm with people more.

I never really thought about it before I started working this job! You know, even with doctors—you see them once a year and they're in the room for ten minutes. You get to know the nurse better. It's like a nursing thing, then; you get to know the patients better. You have to know how to deal with people, and you've got to treat them professional. You don't want them to get the wrong idea. I've had so many people say to me, "Come after work, we'll go party!" and things like that. I've had women try to take me out, I mean little things like that. You've got to keep it all separate. You get to know how to deal with people a lot more than normal in this job. If you ain't good with people, it doesn't matter who you're working for. You have to be very good with people and you have to make them go away better than they came. That's the hard point.

People'll take out their whole problems on you, but I'm very lucky because angry guests don't mess with me a lot. It's always the front desk people who get yelled at. "My sink has been clogged all day! I called this morning, blah blah blah....!" So the front desk girl radios me, "Come up to

the front desk right away! You've got to go up there right away! He's very upset—be careful!" I go up there, and they're normal as can be because I'm the repairman, I'm going to take care of their problem. I usually calm them down once I get there: "Ok, I'm going to take care of your problem!" I usually get it done quick, so they're happy. I'm the good guy—everyone else is the bad guy. It's definitely a benefit being a good guy.

That's why I like being an assistant, too. Like as assistant housekeeping manager, I went through I think four executive housekeepers—that's who's in charge of the whole department. The executive was kind of my boss, but more of a partner. That's how you have to work it because you have to count on each other. I've been trained by some excellent ones, and I've had real garbage, where I've had to go over their heads for certain things. Normally it worked out fine. Even with the bad ones, though, I always liked being an assistant, because the assistant basically ran the department while the executive got yelled at! They get fired—I learned that really quick when I went through so many... The bottom line is that it's their responsibility. As an assistant you have more freedom.

As I've learned in the hotel business, everything changes, but I'm not stressed at all anymore. I'm very calm, because I know everything. I don't care what happens here—I can handle it. We've had floods here, fires... We've had the whole works. There's nothing that surprises me anymore. I know I can handle it and the amount of time it's going to take to fix it.



**Linda Armstrong**

*Room Attendant*

I've been in Syracuse all my life. All my family's here. My three boys are fourteen, twelve, and ten. I'm the only woman in the house! So it's, "Mom, where's this? Mom, where's that?" I'm like, "Oh, my goodness!"

I met Ann Marie through cats! I lived over on Park Ave., and she was over there one day. I thought she was over there for the houses because the Five Sisters are there, these old Victorian houses that are being remodeled. I lived in the second one, the green one. When I first moved in over there I lived at 300, and then the bank took the house over. They told me I had to move, so I took the apartment next door and downstairs when it became available. I was like seven months pregnant when they told me I had to move, so I moved into the downstairs apartment because it was easy. I was there until July of 2006, and then I ended up getting my own house. I met Ann Marie through some strays. We were both taking care of the same stray cats.

It was Ann Marie who got me the job at the hotel. I've been working at the Holiday Inn since August of 2006. I started because my husband got laid off of his work. He stays home now and takes care of the kids. When he worked I did a little bit at the University Post Office. I only had I think an hour and a half a day there. Not much. He was a cook up over at Friend's Diner—it used to be up on James Street. His boss decided she was going to sell out. That Friday he went into work and they said, "Oh, it's your last day!" No notice, no nothing. I told him, "You know, I'll get a job. I'll get a full-time job. This way you can stay home with the kids and I'll go to work."

I was talking to Ann Marie, and I told her, “Well, Ann Marie, I need a job.” She says, “All right, let me call Tracey.” So she called me and she said, “Call the Holiday Inn and ask for Tracey, and go in and fill out an application. She should hire you.” So that’s how I ended up working at the Holiday Inn. I remember my first day. I went in for my interview and all that, and then she told me, “Come in tomorrow.” So I went in, and Theresa was the one that trained me. Yeah, not that she really wanted to. She doesn’t like to train the girls, but yeah, she trained me. At first I thought it was all right, and then as the day went on it started to get a little easier. Made a lot of beds that day. Yes, I did—a lot of beds. I time myself now; it takes me like maybe five minutes to make a bed.

In the beginning, me working and my husband staying home was all right, but now he’s bored. I says, “See, now you know how I felt when I was sitting home all day!” But yeah, he’s been out of work I think going on two years now.

The hotel work pays good—better if you want to put overtime in, you know, overtime really helps—so we don’t find it too hard to get by on one income. At least this way we’re not spending all that money on a babysitter every week. I’ve called people that wanted \$200-something a week to watch three kids! Oh my God, that’s like my whole paycheck! So yeah, my husband decided he was going to stay home and let me go to work, and that’s how it is today.

In the beginning, I worked a lot more. I was in the office buildings and they were short on housekeepers. Tracey used to ask me, “Well, do you want to work more? Do you want to come in and do offices?” I’m like, “Yeah, sure—no problem!” So I’d go in the morning and do rooms in the hotel and after that shift was over I’d start another shift and hop over to the offices. I mean, there was weeks I could only put like seventy-nine hours in. I just couldn’t get to that eighty-hour mark because I was so tired. It was days that she said, “Okay, you’ve got to work until 11:00 at night and then come in the morning at 9:00.”

When you’re working over in the office building you don’t have anybody actually supervising your work. Nobody checks it. When you go over there, you just clean offices, throw trash out, do dusting, vacuum, mop sweep... I enjoyed it. Some days were easier than others over there. What made it hard was I used to clean the daycare, too. Oh, God! Every floor in there had to be mopped. Just the diapers over there... Oh, they were bad. I think the daycare took me at least an hour to clean.

It was hard doing double shifts, but the paycheck was good. Tracey always said, “When it gets to be too much, let me know.” It never got to that point because I knew when I went home at 11:00 I was going to bed. I don’t do that anymore. I just work my forty hours now. But, if she ever offered it to me again, I think I would do it.

Before I got up at the hotel, I did the cleaning work for University Post Office, like I said. I worked as a book binder, too, but that was in my teen

years, way back, before I had kids. I used to work at McDonalds on Geddes Street... oh, I hated that job. It was a change coming to the hotel, though.

Back when I was doing the double shifts, those were the days I wasn't seeing the kids at all. They'd get up and go to school at 8:00, and they'd be in bed by 11:00. When I'm sleeping, they're off to school. The only time I'd see them is if they needed something; then they'd come up and wake me up.

It was hard not to see my family, it really was. But then they'd surprise me! My husband would bring them out and he'd bring me dinner with the kids... We used to like have a little picnic in the van. It was great!

Even if I'm working more, being up at the hotel is better work because you get to meet a lot of people. A lot of guests keep coming back, and you see them year after year. Or they come back once every five years. You really get to know your guests and stuff like that up there. I think in 2011 or 2012 we're supposed to get the fire people back, the fireman's group. Hopefully I'm still there, because they were really nice. They came as a big group for their convention. Oh, and then the people with the old cars—the kids love the old cars. That's mainly about all that I know so far. I've only been at the hotel a year and a half.

First thing I do when I start, I go in and I get my paper—that has all your rooms on it that you have to clean—and my keys from Tracey. Then I go upstairs. I've got my own section of the hotel to clean: everything's up on three, the beginning of three. It's nice, because you know what you've got to do on a daily basis. I just go in, strip the room down. I'll spray whatever

cleaner I need in the bathroom and let that soak. Get my linen, throw the bed together. I'll dust everything, I'll vacuum, and then take the towels and stuff. I'll check under the bed, dust everything down, make sure there's no fingerprints anywhere. I'll clean the bathroom all up, and then I'm out! That's about what we do in every room. It's supposed to take I think twenty-two minutes per room, but depending on how messy the room is it'll take you probably a little longer, or a little less. I've got that down pat now, I really do. It doesn't feel all that repetitive, but I do get tired of looking at the same rooms! I can't wait until they renovate! Yeah, they're supposed to start rebuilding our hotel. We're supposed to get all new furniture. Everything's supposed to match, and the carpet's gonna be all new. At least when everything's new, when you go in there it'll be a lot easier to clean it. That's going to be exciting.

Usually I clean fifteen rooms per day, but when we're busy it's seventeen rooms. If you clean fifteen rooms it's just your regular eight-hour pay. With seventeen rooms you get paid extra—I think four dollars and some change for each additional room.

In some other hotels you have to clean as many rooms as possible, like clean, clean, clean, but here you have an incentive. If you want to clean faster you can, but it's not like you're getting docked pay if you don't. That's because of the union. In an eight-hour period we have to give them fifteen rooms. If they give you seventeen and you can't clean them, as long as you still give them fifteen rooms you're good. Oh it's good, because there've

been days that I couldn't do it. Oh my God, there's been days... Like, when we get Am-Jam, the tattoo people. They have a convention at the hotel in January. The eighteenth they come in, just for the weekend, and they drink, and they give tattoos down in the convention center, and all that. Their rooms are usually trashed. They are a mess!

With conventions, I know what to expect in the rooms. The firefighter's convention—they're pretty clean, but soccer kids are messy like the tattoo convention. We just had those kids there, too, and wow! Yeah, I was like, "Oh my God, I'm not going to get these rooms done!" But then when I got up to five, I had nothing but airlines, so I was like, "Yep, I'm good, I can do this." Airlines are much cleaner. With those messy rooms, you'll be in a good mood before you start work and then you go up and see these rooms... You're like, "Oh my God, I don't want to be here today. I don't want to do this today."

Oh God, what day was that...? A Saturday, it just passed. I went in and I was good, and then once I got up to those rooms I was like, "Oh I hate this job! I do, I hate this job!" Then somebody from catering asked me, "Where's your Holiday Inn smile?" I says, "You know what, it was on this morning, but it's gone now. My body is so sore." I said, "I do not like this job." There's been days that I've wanted to quit that job so many times. Like the tattoo people—they come in, they make a mess, they move the furniture around in the rooms... I don't know, they just really party up there. You get

hit with these rooms and a lot of times they don't tip you. That's the worst part, when they don't tip you.

And there's days that you don't get your linen, so you've got to keep running up and down, carrying your own linen up. Double beds every day... I figured out how many beds I made in five days: 158 beds. You know, it's a lot on your back and shoulders. Getting down on your hands and knees and scrubbing the bathroom floor to make sure there's no hairs... It takes a lot out of you. I go home and I sit down and I don't want to get back up. The kids are like, "Mom, what's for supper?" No. You know what, I'm sitting here for a minute; my body's sore!

What can make the job even harder sometimes is your management. Last year, my old boss, Tracey, left the hotel and we had a new boss come in. This guy, he was horrible. I mean, from the get go he just didn't like certain people. When Tracey was there, I used to pull seventy-nine to eighty hours a week. I was working the night shift regularly because with my son's counseling I needed more money. My day shift changed to nights, from 3:00 to 11:00. So she said she needed somebody for the office building and stuck me over there, too. The minute this new manager came on he automatically said, "Oh, you're not doing the buildings right! We're getting a lot of complaints from the building people." I've never had a problem with the people in the building at all! He took me and he had me work one night from 7:00 to 3:00 in the morning. Then he told me, "Now you've got to be back



here from 8:00 to 4:00.” *The next day*. I said, “I can’t do that, that’s too much! I can’t do that!”

Anyway, that day I went home at 3:00 in the morning and the next day I ended up calling in because I had a migraine, I came down with bronchitis, and I had a double ear infection. He told me if I didn’t have a doctor’s note I was going to be fired. So I went to the doctor’s. I got a doctor’s note. I took it in to him and he said, “Okay, you’re back to work tomorrow, though.” I’m like, “What? Back to work tomorrow?” He said, “Yeah, I expect you here at 8:00 in the morning.” That morning, on my way into work, he called me and says, “Linda, are you on your way?” I said, “Yeah, I’m on my way. Don’t worry, I’ll be there; it’s not even 8:00 yet. I will be at work.” As the day went on he was checking my rooms and he kept telling me I wasn’t cleaning my rooms right! I was leaving hair all over in the bathrooms. I wasn’t changing my sheets. He wrote me up; I ended up getting suspended for three days!

I called Ann Marie and I told her about it. She says, ‘Okay, we’ll have a meeting with the general manager.’ The new guy had pictures, saying this stuff was wrong with my rooms, but those pictures could have been from anywhere in the hotel! He tried to have me fired, and I was like, “Oh God, I wish Tracey was back here!” At least Tracey was a little easier to deal with. I never had a problem with her. That guy—his name was Larry—he was just all over everybody. He was there about six months, and I was walking on eggshells every day I went in.

As time went on—I think it was like a month later—he wanted me to be a room inspector in the office buildings. For somebody that couldn't get her fifteen rooms clean enough, he wanted me to go in to the office and be a room inspector, because he says, "Oh yeah, Linda's rooms are the best now." Oh yeah. I kind of put that on the back burner; I didn't give him an answer right away, you know, because I didn't know what kind of game he was playing. I didn't want to lose my job. I'm glad I did that, because I'm still there and he's gone.

Ann Marie, she used to tell me, "Linda don't quit—he'll be gone before you know it! Don't quit." I held on. Everyday I went in there, I was called into the office. Everyday, it was something else. What am I supposed to do? So one day I went into his office and he said something to me. I asked him if we were done yet. He says, "Yeah, we we're done." Right after I left his office I went up to the general manager and he ended up calling Larry up. I lost that battle. It's like everyday something else. I didn't want to go to work! Now Tracey's back and it's much better here. She's nicer, too. She's pregnant, so I think that's why she's being better!

Really, I don't think people realize how hard it is to do what I do. Like, it took me probably about eight months to be able to clean a room as fast as I need to. The girls at the front desk, they'll call and say, "We need this room!" Well, if you'd have told me that this morning it would have been done! I've got to stop one room and get to the room that they need. I would

really like to see them clean a room for once! Once, just once! I don't think they could, I really don't.

Thank God I don't have to go home and make any beds there. My house is usually taken care of, usually cleaned. On my days off, though, I give my husband a break. I tell him, "Look, I'll do the housework," because I get bored of just sitting home. When I work, I'm always on the go from one room to the next. My day's pretty busy. I like my job. There's days I don't like it, but I like my job.

My favorite part is you get to know everybody there, You look forward to going in and seeing everybody, even though some of them are grouchy. It's the people that work there that keep me wanting to stay. Like on Saturday—that Saturday I just wanted to quit—I was so frustrated, but then Giovanna and one of the new housekeepers came up and helped me make the last four beds. We were waiting for them to put the beds in the rooms, because the beds were taken out for hospitality rooms. That's when the beds are taken out and they just set up tables in the rooms. It's harder because you have to wait, and I was like, "Oh man, I'm never gonna get done!" I asked Giovanna if she'd come up and help me on her break. She came up and helped and I was like, "Ah, yes!" It's nice having support.

You get girls that will help you, but then you get other girls that won't help you. I've learned it like this: help the ones that help you, don't help the ones that don't help. If they're behind, don't even worry about it. Just go help the ones that help you. Yeah, I've learned that a lot because they don't

care if you're behind, they honestly don't. When 4:00 comes, they're gone. Like the other day—I think it was Sunday—I got out of there at eleven after 4:00 because Theresa didn't have any sheets and she had all these beds to make. So I stayed and went up. I helped her until we were done. She appreciated it.

Stay-overs are the best. If we have a convention, I usually get seventeen, maybe eighteen rooms to do, but because they're all stay-overs, I don't have to really do much in their rooms. If they don't want their bed changed, they leave the little bed card on the bed, and it's one less thing I have to do. Sometimes you'll get them that come in and say, "Oh yeah, we just want towels. You don't have to clean our room today." That's big. I'm like, "Oh, thank you!" Conventions really don't make it too much harder. Well, not for us anyway. Maybe for PM lobby or something like that, but not for us. Actually, I'm happy when I have stay-overs! It's good.

I also like getting to talk to the guests. I don't always see them, but if guests are in their rooms and they want to stay in there while you're cleaning the room, you know, you can carry a conversation on with them. Sometimes you get the ones that say, "All right, we'll be out in like ten minutes and you can clean our room then." Pretty much, though, nobody's in their rooms, but you do get the ones that come back. I don't know, it's always good to talk to the guests.

I usually work 8:00 am to 4:00 pm, and then 9:00 am to 5:00 pm on Sunday, but I don't always know what days I'm going to work until Friday

afternoon. It does make it complicated with the family. Just recently my twelve-year old broke his braces, and I called the dentist this morning. They said, "Oh, we can get him in here on Monday morning." I'm like, "Okay, I'll have to call you back this afternoon after I get my schedule."

I'm number nine on the seniority list now. I remember when I was *way* down there, and I mean *way* down there. I mean, the girls above me get more seniority than I have, but if there's days that I need off I usually can get them off. Usually... Most of the time. It'll be nice having more seniority, because then I know what days I got off, what appointments I can set up on that day. That's nice.

My first year, I worked Christmas, I worked New Year's, I worked Thanksgiving. I was at the bottom of the list, a new worker, and they say the new ones have to work holidays. No one with seniority wants to. So I got to the point where I'd say, "Ok, if I've got to work it, I just might as well volunteer." That's what I did; I volunteered to work Christmas just this past year. Actually, they called and said they didn't need me, so I was so excited. I didn't tell the kids anything. We got up and... Well, they got up and they said, "Mom, you're late for work!" I said, "No I'm not. I've got the day off!" They were so happy!

Sure, it can be hard sometimes, but there's also good. I'm proud of the way I clean a room. I don't get any complaints from any guests, you know. I know I'm making the guests happy, and that's something to look forward to every day. I like being a room attendant, even though some days I hate it.

That's just... I don't know, I think everybody goes through it. I like that I'm not standing in one spot. I think I would get pretty bored standing in one spot all day. Somebody says, "Oh, we've got an opening doing dishes." I'm like, "No, that's okay, I'll stay in housekeeping!" I don't want to do dishes all day. That's probably the worst job you can have because you get all wet. Then, when it's cold outside and you go out on your break, you're all wet! No, I'd rather stay right where I'm at in housekeeping!

**Rod Geranis**

*P.M. Dining Room Server / Chief Union Steward /  
Contract Negotiating Committee Member*

It was thirty-one years in October I've been here at the Holiday Inn. That's a long time, but it's just that it's not a bad place to work. The money is good, and the people are nice. When I came here originally it was just sort of a hold over job 'til I found something else, but it just kind of over the years has developed and I've stayed here. Now I'm comfortable.

I'm from Binghamton originally. I came up here to go to Syracuse University, actually. I was a Pre-med major—a biology major, actually—but organic chemistry changed my mind. Just too much partying and stuff, I guess. So I'd gotten a part time job working up at Drumlins bussing tables, and then when I decided that school wasn't working out I just kind of ended up in the restaurant business, then eventually ended up here.

My family's all still around Binghamton, but I had a lot of friends here. My friends were mostly here, so that's one reason I stayed. Of course, they've mostly moved now, but... That's how I ended up here, anyway.

Like I said, Holiday Inn started out as a holdover job, just something while I looked for something better, you know? I'd quit the job I had taken as an employment counselor, which was horrible. It was for this private employment agency—I don't know if they really have them around much any more. When people came in, the woman who ran it would give you them to interview and you would try to set them up with jobs and things that matched. You would have to cold call all of these businesses and try and get them to give you a job listing. The pay was strictly commission-based; you would get a commission off of their salary for the first few months or something. It was



very hard. After the first two months I owed them money! I wasn't good at it.

I said, "I can't do this anymore! I've got to find something else where I can make some money!" I'd happened to see an ad in the paper for servers at the Sheraton, which is what this Holiday Inn was back then, so I came out and applied and they hired me. The rest is history!

One thing I like about serving is that it's never the same. You know, you meet different people every day, and different types of people. We have all different types of groups that come in through this hotel, like today we have the dairy princesses. Sometimes it's very stressful work, but it's not dull. It's not like sitting behind a desk and answering telephones or something. I've gotten to kind of enjoy it over the years. It's not the greatest job in the world, probably, but it's not dull.

Oh, God! The people I've met! Let me think... I have a few famous people. I waited on Bob Dylan years ago, that was like back in the '70s. It was all right, he was nothing special. Somebody was just in here that was playing at the Fair a couple of years ago, I wasn't here when they came in.... Oh, Charo, she was in here. I've waited on, I don't know, you name the type of people, and I've waited on them over the years. The good ones, the bad ones, the people who don't want to pay their check... I had one businessman one time, a well-dressed businessman, sit and have a nice dinner—I forgot what it was, steak or something—and he asked me where the restroom was. I

told him, “It’s right out in the lobby.” He got up and went out to the restroom and never came back!

It’s hard to single out the guests when I start thinking about them. I have a lot of people that come in once a year that I see, a lot of return people. I have one elderly woman—well she’s elderly now, she’s been coming here for twenty-something years. She lives in Michigan, and she has a summer home in Maine. Her son drives her to Maine every year and they always use this hotel as their stopover point. They always come in and see me and have dinner. When she comes back in the fall they do the same thing, so I see her twice a year. He comes to dinner looking like he just got off his yacht with his Bermuda shorts and his blue blazer with the emblem on it. They have all kinds of money, I think—I’m trying to get in the will, but I haven’t made it that far yet! No, no, they’re very nice people.

I have a lot of people like that actually. They come with different groups and things so I see them at least once a year. This weekend is the Psychic Fair. We have them yearly, and I’ve been waiting on the lady who runs it for years. She always insists that I’m here the two nights that they’re here. I have to wait until they finish the psychic show and they come in for dinner so I’m the one to wait on all of them. She’s been coming here for years, and she always leaves me a nice letter and a nice tip when they leave. There’s a lot of groups like that; I’ve gotten to know a lot of people that come in just once or twice a year. You get to form relationships with people. You wouldn’t think, being in a hotel, that you would have regular customers like

that, but you do. Makes the work a little more enjoyable when you see people like that that you know.

It's not all easy, though. To be a server, you have to be able to relate with people a little bit, you know? Your job is all about the people, and that can make things difficult, because it's unpredictable. You're always under pressure as a server. You're always under pressure to get the food out, to make sure the food looks good. A lot of times we work with a relatively small staff; there's really only two people who serve at night right now, and then if we need a third person we'll bring other people in. If all of a sudden you start getting busy and you don't have enough help... You never know what's going to happen in this place. The night you think it's going to be slow you could get a cancelled flight in here with seventy-five stressed passengers or something with food vouchers—that's happened before, you know? About a month ago we got about twenty minutes notice that National Grid was going to bring in forty rooms of crews that they were sending out to work on a storm that made power go out. They can eat whatever they want, anything but alcohol; National Grid covers it. They order shrimp cocktails and steaks and the whole nine yards, and it was just me and the guy that busses with me that night. Luckily he has been here for twenty-some years, too, so he knows what to do. Our manager was here, too, and the hostess. Within ten minutes the whole room just filled up with these guys and we had to try and get the orders and get the food in. The hotel had to call and try to get extra cooks in—we only had one cook on—so it was very stressful. These guys are all looking at

you like, “Where’s my food?” and people don’t always understand all the things that a server has to do. They think you just pick the food up and bring it out to them and that’s it, but you’ve got to get drinks for people, you’ve gotta get salads... We make our own salads, we do our own desserts, so that all takes time. And you’ve got a lot of stuff in the kitchen to do, and they don’t always see out there. It can be very stressful when it gets busy.

Working in a hotel is much different than working in a regular restaurant like Drumlins because the majority—well, maybe not the majority, but a lot—of the people you’re waiting on in a hotel don’t really want to even be there. They’re businessmen traveling, they’ve been out on the road all day, and they’d much rather be home. They’re here because they have to be, you know? Or you get people who’s flight have been cancelled at the airport and they come in and they’re all in a snit already. It’s not like in a restaurant where people want to be there and they’re having a good time. A lot of times, people don’t want to be here, and they’re in a miserable mood when they come in to start with, so you’ve got to learn to kind of deal with that as you go along. If you see somebody and they’ve been traveling all day in a snowstorm or something, or flying all day without eating, they can be pretty miserable when they come in. You have a lot more of that to deal with than you would in a regular restaurant. It’s hard—it’s hard sometimes. You just have to do the best you can to calm them down and make them feel welcome, and you have to kind of learn to feel people out. Some people like to talk, some people don’t

like to talk; you don't try to force a conversation with somebody who doesn't want to talk to you.

I've always worked as a server, but I'm also the Chief Union Steward here. Basically, if anybody has a problem, I have to keep track and make sure that the contract is being followed. If they're having a problem of some kind with their managers or their managers are having a problem of some kind with them, then I usually go speak to Mr. Gallagher, the General Manager, and see if we can get things worked out before it develops into something worse. Not always, but sometimes, we can do that. Other times we have to deal with a situation after it blows up. People come to me with any gripes they've got. A lot of times people come to me just with problems, too, their own problems. We have a lot of younger people that work in the hotel and I think a lot of them kind of look up to me like a father figure. I don't know why; I have a lot of that stuff to deal with, too.

Generally, the complaints are about scheduling: they're not getting scheduled right, somebody else has got more hours that shouldn't have them. Otherwise, they're being told they've got to do a certain job that they don't think they should have to do, or they think that the manager's harassing them because they are coming in a little late or something like that. Our workforce tends not to be knowledgeable about their rights as workers. Also, many are new to the workforce. A lot of them don't really have the tools to cope with the workforce that well, you know? You kind of have to coach them along sometimes. You know, tell them, "You can't do this, you can't come in

twenty minutes late.” Or, “You can’t not show up because your daughter’s sick and not call.” Things like that, you know? I have a lot of issues like that to deal with.

I came here back in 1976. I’d been here a couple of years, then they brought in a new dining room manager. There was another waitress and I who were the top two at that time—she was number one, I was number two. This new manager just came in and decided she was going to do what she wanted to do, and she was going to schedule us like she wanted us to be scheduled. It was like four-hour shifts rather than your full shift! So we started to fight back against her, and went to the union. I, at that point, wasn’t really involved in the union, and it turned into quite a mess, actually. We had an unfair labor charge against her and everything before it finally ended. That’s when I first started getting involved in the union and then, luckily, shortly after all this took place is when Mr. Gallagher came in as the General Manager. Luckily, he saw through her immediately and she only lasted like a month after he came in. That’s why we always got along fairly well, I think, because he got rid of her so fast.

So I had gotten kind of involved in the union at that point. Then—probably in the early 80s I guess it was—the Union Steward here became the president of the union, and so there was no union steward. I kind of assumed it—people just started coming to me, and then I officially became the Union Steward and I have been for probably twenty-three to twenty-four years now at least. When Ann Marie took over—early 90s maybe—she kind of drew me

in more and put me on the executive board. That's when I was elected her vice president. I just gradually got involved in the union more and more over the years, and right now I'm really the only one that is involved other than a few people in the banquet department. Most of the departments don't have anybody who really even wants to do it, you know? They don't want that responsibility. I don't get paid for doing this, you know; I get nothing out of it. It's just kinda like I do it because somebody has to do it. Somebody has to watch out for these people.

But it's hard. It's very hard to do, and I'm not here 24/7. If I know somebody's having a problem, I'll talk to them and try and see what the issue is and if there's some way it can be resolved. I'll just tell them, "You know you've got to try and do this..." or do that, or call in, or be here. I say, "If a manager asks you to do something, you've got to do it. You can't just refuse." A lot of people think that just 'cause they're a union member they can tell their boss, "No I don't have to do that." It doesn't work that way.

The union always tries to help them if we can. Like if they have a childcare problem, you know, try and set them up with something. Or if they have a transportation problem—a lot of our housekeeping people depend on buses to get here from the city, and it's not easy. Our General Manager had to intervene with the county legislature to keep the bus stop out here by the Hess station, because they were going to take the bus stop away and so many of our employees depend on the bus to get here. Mr. Gallagher intervened and actually talked to the legislator that represents this district. He got them to

keep the bus stop there so that our people would have it. We still have a lot of problems at night and on weekends because the bus service is not as steady then, it's more erratic, so a lot of times people have to wait two hours after their shift just to catch the bus downtown. Some of the housekeeping people have to be here at 7:00 or 8:00 in the morning. We have a kid in the dining room who lives in the city without transportation. There's days he's booked at 5:30 in the morning and he has trouble getting here. He has to get his mother up to drive him because there's no buses at that hour and that's the only way he can get here on time. It's a big issue, it's hard for them.

Every so often—every four or five years—I serve as a contract negotiating committee member for the union. Basically, when the contract comes to be renewed, the people on the committee try to get around to the various departments and get people to come out and tell us what they want in the new contract, you know, what their big issues are, find out what the feeling is around the hotel. Generally the issues are about money, of course, but we've worked hard on the insurance problem. You know, that's a big problem everywhere, health insurance, and we've been able to get a very good policy, very good prescription coverage. We pay nothing towards it—the employer takes care of the whole thing. It's very unusual anywhere these days, but especially in the hotel industry it's like unheard of. Anyway, we try to get as much feedback as we can from the workers, and then we go in with Ann Marie. She, of course, leads it, and we just give them our input as to what we'd like in the new contract. Of course, they give us *their* input of



what *they* want in the new contract, and we try and work out something in the middle.

Money is absolutely an issue in this business, though. There are some of us who are able to make enough to live—I'm not saying that everybody is destitute here. But, yeah, when you work in housekeeping or as a dishwasher or a cook—even the cooks here only make nine-something an hour—and you stand behind that line with the heat and the pressure and everything for eight hours straight some days... Some nights they don't even get a break! It's not easy work, it's very hard work, and it's hard to live on nine dollars an hour, especially if you have any type of family. I'm single so I don't have that problem, but it's very hard to live on eight or nine dollars an hour.

Being a server, I tend to depend more on tips than I do my hourly wage—that's just the way it is for that type of work. As long as the business stays good, we do alright. It's when business goes down... In fact, I'm kind of worried about this year with the economy and everything, because there are years when we've gone through recessions where business is way down. We're a convention center hotel, and that helps set us apart. We get a lot of business from conventions and meetings, and we see a lot of businessmen come through. That's what hurts when the economy slows down—you don't get the businessmen traveling as much. A lot of the groups cut back on their meetings and their dinners and things like that. It makes it slim pickings.

A union absolutely adds a lot of protection, and not just with money. That's first and foremost why I think that we need unions in this business.

There's a lot of hard work and a lot of dangerous work that people don't realize. In the dining room, we're always carrying heavy trays... You know, out here, sometimes we've got huge trays stacked up. Those trays are heavy, too! And we'll go out on the floor and there'll be water all over and everything, or we'll get out in the dining room on a busy night and there'll be no place to put the tray of dishes down because everything's filled up. It's very dangerous work sometimes and it's very hard on your body. It's the same with the cooks—there's a lot of safety issues back there with the cooks. The housekeepers, even—they have to be careful with cleaners, chemicals, that type of thing. We had an issue with one of the maids who was breaking out from one of the cleaners that they were having to use. They changed it to something else, as I recall. That was a few years ago.

The problem was mentioned and something needed to be done. We do have a safety committee here at the hotel, too, and they work on some of those issues, but if that doesn't get resolved then yeah, the union steps in. But there are a lot of safety issues in this business. A few years back we had a dog show here with some national dachshunds. The whole back area was filled with pens of dachshunds, the little hot dogs, you know? I'd always liked them up until then, but they were the most nasty, snappy little dogs, God! They had the whole parking lot, 'cause they all had campers with these little pens with these dogs in them. It was in the summer time, so you'd have to walk through them all to get up to the hotel and they would be like snarling and snapping at you and everything. Anyway, a few of the people that were staying in the

hotel kept them in their rooms. They were supposed to keep them in cages, but they didn't, and one of our maids got bitten very badly by one of the dogs when she went in to clean the room. That's the type of thing you have to deal with. Then at times in the past we've had girls, females, who do the room service. A lot of times they've had problems with men trying to lure them into the room, or answering the door with no clothes on or something. You have a lot of different issues you've got to deal with.

The way other places treat their workers, it's ridiculous. They take servers who they're paying—at that time they were paying like \$2.00 an hour—and they would want them to wash windows, or wash floors, and do dishes. To me, that was just unconscionable that you would ask somebody to do that kind of work for \$2.00 an hour. I mean, we're here to make tips, and we do work that relates to our making those tips and taking care of the customers, but I don't think we should be responsible for heavy washing and cleaning. In a lot of places you have to do that for your lousy hourly wage, and these places are getting away with it. When I worked up at Drumlins, there was a waitress who was just a sweetheart. She'd been there probably twelve to fifteen years when I started work there. They brought in this new General Manager, and he just gave her the boot! That's awful to treat people like that. She'd done nothing; they just decided they wanted to go with younger waitresses, so she was out the door. That's the kind of thing that I saw and it still goes on today in a lot of places. You go down here to this Colorado Steakhouse and look at the outfits that those girls have to wear.

They're in these cowboy boots and these tight tops, just hanging out all over the place and everything, and they have nothing they can say... It's not like someplace I could go get a job because all they want down there are young girls to wear these skimpy little outfits. I've talked to people that have worked down there. They treat them terrible.

When you're in a union, it's different. We have executive board meetings, and if there's a problem, we can get them addressed there. Anne Marie has a general meeting, too, but very few people go to it. Generally, if anyone has complaints and they don't get anywhere with me, they'll just call Ann Marie right at the office. They don't usually wait for the meetings. We aren't like some of the bigger unions like the auto workers or the steel workers. They have regular membership meetings where a lot of people attend, but our workforce just doesn't get involved like that. I think it has to do with some problems I talked about before—transportation problems, knowledge of the law and their rights... They just aren't used to being involved in anything like that. They like to have things taken care of, but they don't want to be involved in doing a lot of it. It's tough sometimes, it's frustrating sometimes.

If you really help somebody that you think really is worth the help, yeah it's worth it. A lot of times I get frustrated cause I have to go in there more or less like a defense attorney, you know? I have to come up with some wild, off-the-wall defense or find some technicality: "They didn't write him up enough times. You can't do this." Sometimes it works, and sometimes it

doesn't. But sometimes it's kind of frustrating when you know somebody did something and you have to sit there and try and defend it.

In my job, you have to know how to make an argument, and you have to be able to deal with Mr. Gallagher, who can be very tough. I don't know if you've met him or not, but he can be very intimidating. No first-name basis there! He's actually mellowed a lot over the years, but he can still be very intimidating when he gets somebody in that office. When he was in the army, he was an interrogator. He can just break people down like nothing! So over the years I've kind of learned how to deal with that. When I see him getting into his rhythm, where he's drilling them with questions, I'll just kind of interrupt and throw his rhythm off a little bit. That kind of slows him down a little.

It can be tough when you get an employee in there. I know one kid we had in there one time, he was like two or three hours late for work one morning. He didn't call or anything. I forget what his reason was... Maybe he had been out at his brother's apartment and his brother didn't have a phone? He said he didn't have any way to get to a phone, and Mr. Gallagher had him in there and he was just drilling him with questions. He's like, "Where's your brother's apartment?" So he tells Mr. Gallagher, and Mr. Gallagher says, "I know where that is! You could have gotten to a phone!" The next thing I knew the kid's like, "I'm sorry! I did it!" Da, da, da, he's completely confessing, and I'm sitting there thinking, "Wait a minute, I just made this whole argument for you and you're just blowing the whole thing up in the

air?” Generally, I can get Mr. Gallagher’s rhythm off a little bit when he starts that interrogation mode, but it’s very intimidating for the employees that aren’t used to being in there.

I don’t know how I got prepared for this role. It was hard. At first I was intimidated by it all, but over the years I’ve gotten more comfortable with it, more used to it. I don’t know that anything prepared me, other than the fact that I’d worked long enough in this business to see the abuses that go on and see how people get treated. Not here, necessarily, but in other places. I was a pretty staunch believer in the union when I came here—in fact, when I worked at Drumlins, we tried to get the union to come in up there and several people got fired over it, it was a pretty ugly scene up there—so I was quite happy to work in a hotel that was union.

**Luz N. Feliciano**

*Ware Washer*

I was born in Puerto Rico and came to Syracuse with my grandmother when I was five years old. This is where my uncles were, and that's where my grandmother came. I went back when I was sixteen, stayed down there for about two years then came back. I've got uncles and aunts and cousins there, but ever since my grandmother died, I don't really go down there as much. I just go visiting every once in a blue moon. We haven't had a blue moon yet. I got married here in Syracuse. I have seven children, but it's fine now, they moved out! All of them are still in this area. Now I've got grandkids to come over.

The good thing about being a grandmother is you can start kicking people out. But when they're living with you, there isn't very much you can do there, because even if you send them to their room they're still there. But the good thing about a grandmother? "Ok, it's time to go home." Just this Christmas all of them were together in the house. All grandkids, kids, and all. It felt kind of small. Yep, the house got kind of small this year. Not all, once in a blue moon we'll get all together, like, they take different turns. We invite 'em to dinner, but not all of them come. Just this Christmas was unusual because everybody showed up. We got one, she works at Chrysler, so come this time of the year (Christmas) she likes to go to Puerto Rico, Florida, any place that's warm, but this year her daughter got sick so she couldn't go nowhere. And the rest of them they didn't have nowheres to go either, so, we all got them. We had to get together sooner or later!



I've been working at the Holiday Inn for eighteen, nineteen years, maybe? Ever since my husband got hurt at his job. He was working at a foundry, and got hurt at work. At that particular time I was working in a cafeteria at school, but working in a cafeteria in school, there's not really much hours. There's not really much money either. I just worked lunch hours, about four hours at the most. So one time the Holiday Inn called my brother-in-law to come to work, but his wife said that she would pay him if he would stay home. I said okay, then you don't go to the interview, I go the interview. I came to the interview—and I stayed. She didn't want him to work so, hey, I need a job!

When I first started I was just doing dishes; cleaning the kitchen, doing dishes and things like that. But as years went by, you learn the trade, so you multi-task. Now I multi-task in the kitchen, between the cold side, making sandwiches, doing ware washing, doing the paperwork in the office. I multi-task.

Now I do more. Let me see, like today I did dishes, I cleaned a little, I picked on a dining room boy because he kept saying he was bored. I kept telling him little things he could do to stay busy, like say fill the salt & pepper shakers, combine the ketchup bottles so he won't have so many of them and things like that. Then every time he would go by me he would look at me and then when he goes, "I'm bored" after he left me, I'd say, "I heard that, what did you say?" And he'd say "Nothing!"

For my work I stay inside. Sometimes we don't even know it's raining, snowing outside... So somebody comes with snow or wet, we say "Oh, it's wet outside?" We've got no windows, so we don't know what's going on until it's time to leave, or somebody comes in. If people go outside, I've got the same rights. I don't smoke, but I can go outside, but what for? If the sun is shining outside, I think "What am I doing inside? I could be out here!" There's a lot of smokers, they go outside. When they come back it's: "Oh Luz, it's so beautiful outside, what am I doing here?" "Working!" So, no, I don't really go outside much.

With church I go different places, but there's nothing different, just the scenery. My family... I've got family all over. I keep hearing the same problems, so, might as well deal with one place than different places. It's like job hopping, that's all. Just looking for something you ain't gonna find, so, stay in one place and deal with it.

A lot of people, you know, they always say the grass is greener on the other side til they get there. A lot of people think it's easy, washing dishes, but once they start doing dishes they start finding out it's not as easy as they thought it was. When we're really busy they don't like it as much because, you know, we really got to get the plates clean, the dishes clean and all that. There are times that we're busy, but there are times that we can really breathe, but when things really start getting busy? Then they start breaking dishes. When we get busy, we have to work a little bit faster because we only got

about so many dishes and sometimes they've gotta come right back out so they can reuse them again.

It's an easy job once they get used to it, but they want to take shortcuts. Shortcuts in a bad way, not shortcuts in a good way. The way they do it, they empty the Queen Mary, the big cart with wheels where we put all the dishes, and then they put everything on the counter. And I say get it from the Queen Mary and instead of putting it in the counter you put it in the racks, then it will be a lot easier because then you don't have to come back. So like doing one job, two jobs, three jobs. You eliminate two if you put it in the rack and send 'em through. That's the way I do it, and they don't like it that way. If they do it the way that they do it, there's a person in the back of the machine doing nothing for all that time. The way I do it he stays just as busy as I am. That's the part they don't like.

You know, when new people start, they think they know it all. They really start to get under your skin. Well, not any more, after having so many people come in and leave, you get used to it. But at the beginning I really wasn't used to it. You know: they don't like the way you do this and instead of talking to you about it they go behind your back. But no, now I have learned to work with the new people. I tell them, "instead of complaining, talk to me about it, and we can deal with it. If you want to talk to Dave (Dave is my boss), you can go talk to Dave...but I'm still gonna hear about it. You can either deal with me now, or with me later, but we can still deal with it."

What can I say about them? My co-workers – they're co-workers! They all got their stories, they all got their sickness, and they all got their headaches. I've got certain dishwashers I like to work with because some of them like to walk around... Okay, when it's time to work, it's time to work. I don't mind them talking and things like that, but like I said if we're busy, we're busy. If we don't got nothing to do, I don't care what you do. I ain't going to be after you for nothing, but I do expect you to work when there is work. That's about it.

A bad dishwasher likes shortcuts. Lucy don't do this, because if it works, it works, and if it takes me from doing it twice, it's working. And if you work with Lucy, you do this – no shortcuts. Now if you want shortcuts, you want the night shift. They just like shortcuts, and then Lucy gets to hear it in the morning: "Lucy, the dishes are dirty! Lucy, the silverware is spotted!" Lucy this, Lucy that. I don't like doing it twice – I like to work once. If I do it the right way, I eliminate problems. Like shortcuts.

One time at a meeting, they said the coffee cups were all spotty and stained because they didn't turn them over. Like I said, shortcuts. When we got hard water, the coffee stain doesn't come off as easily from the cups. I usually bleach them, but the guys just turn them over and set them out. Shortcuts. But then the whole kitchen heard about it, about the coffee cups. I said "Uh uh, I didn't wash them. It wasn't my fault!"

I never say your job's gonna be easy, I haven't done your job. It's not really hard to be honest, it's just that some people don't like staying in one

place and they get bored, Maybe that's how come I multi-task. Working keeps me busy—money-wise, time-wise... Less time to waste, I would say. I could waste time if I want to, but I like to keep busy. I get bored, so I've gotta do something. Like today's been slow. So if I don't got dishes, I'll clean. If I have nothing to clean, I'll go help with the sandwiches. I keep myself busy, by keeping myself busy I stay out of trouble.

There was a time I wanted to quit, but they didn't let me. Well, like we say, in the kitchen we get to be like a family because we work together for so long. There was a time that I really wanted to quit, and I don't know, they started "why are you quitting" and all this, "just to change jobs, scenery, you know, benefits? It's not going to be easier on the other side, so why not just stay here?" It's true. We just worked out the problems and all that, we worked them out.

It's fun working here. Like I said, it's a family thing, especially in the kitchen. I can't talk about the front or back, I can talk about the kitchen. We're like family. We joke with each other, things like that. Like, you know, in every family we know who not to joke with, because in every family we've got those. They get mad at anything, so we know who to stay away from because they don't like jokes, who we can really put jokes on and all that. It's like a family! We're just careful with the new ones that come in. We really study them before we get jokes on them. But the ones that have been here longest, we know how far we can go with our jokes.

Juan was here when I first started. And Carl, the cook, he started after I did. Then there's dining room people, Mary Ann was here when I first started. Actually, if Juan sees me falling behind, he helps. If he's behind, I go help him, too. So, it's not like I push anything on him or he pushes anything on me. We help each other. So if he sees that I'm falling behind on dishes, he just goes right in and helps me. And if he's falling behind on the line I go help him.

I got more people to talk to here, not like in the cafeteria. There's not too many people there. You get bored in a job if you don't got a lot to talk to. See, I took secretarial work when I was in school, but come 2:00, I fell asleep. And that's not because you don't got nothing to do! Books after a while they get to you. Paperwork after a while gets to you, and you fall asleep. So, it's not for me. I like moving around, getting exercise. If I find something that I like I just stick with it. I don't like job hopping. Now if I get bored I would go find me something else. As I said the kitchen's been okay. It's just like a family.

There's a lot of people that don't like saying they're dishwashers, but I say, "Hey, I'm a dishwasher!" I earn my money cleanly, so it's "Hey, I'm a dishwasher!" wherever I go. Do your job well, that's all that matters. But there's a lot of people that say, "Don't say I'm a dishwasher." I say, "what do you want me to call you?" And then Juan would come in from the other side: "Tell them they're recording records!" He calls the big plates records, so tell

them they're recording records. Ok, you're recording records – what can I say, you're still a dishwasher!

And it's funny hearing the excuses we get to not come in. Once we got "I can't go to work because the Centro bus got a flat tire." That was the highlight of the day, because everybody knows that if Centro bus gets a flat tire, they can send another bus, you can continue. Then to top it off it wasn't too far from here; he could have walked the rest of the way. Then there was one "I can't go to work because my dog's having puppies." I said, "What you gonna do, coach it along?" And then, let me see, there was one "my dog was sick, I can't go in to work because my dog is sick." And I said, "What are you, the doctor today?" and things like that. We make jokes. They're excuses, but we make them as jokes. Then when he comes back, "There goes the doctor! How's the dog?" I mean, they've been talking about making a book, about excuses. The most popular excuses not to go to work, cause they have some good ones! Lately I haven't heard many, except for the dog. Those are the most recent ones.

In the time I've been here I think I've only called in twice. One time I started to work and my car left me on 81, so that was the only time I called in sick. And one time I was really sick. For some reason I walked into the walk-in cooler, and when I came out I came out with pneumonia! I went to the doctor the next day, he took me out for three whole days. He said "Where did you go?" and I said "I walked in the walk-in cooler!" He couldn't believe me, he thought I was sleeping in there. I said sometimes the kitchen gets too hot,

then when you walk into the walk-in cooler I think that's what did it. So he took me out of work for three days, but other than that, I don't like calling in sick. You can count on one hand in all the years I've been here how many times I've called in, really.

But other than that I would say, "Dave, I've got nothing to do, so tomorrow's a sick day." So he knows ahead of time he's gotta call somebody because Luzie's sick tomorrow. There's sometimes dishwashers asking for hours; he can't work cause because I've got seniority, so he hasn't worked all week. "Give him the hours, give him the hours." So if I tell Dave ahead of time he would tell the person to come in for Luzie, she's sick tomorrow. But other than that, I don't call in sick. And if Luzie's late...! One time I was late and they were almost ready to call my house. I was half an hour late, but see, I'm usually not late, so half an hour, that's a lot. Dining room was ready to call my house, they were looking. They didn't call me because the office was closed and they couldn't find my number, but they were ready.

This job is something to look forward to. It's something to do. Okay, like if I take vacation, the first two days in the whole week I'm busy, then I've got the rest and it's just "What am I gonna do tomorrow?" My husband said, "You can go to the mall..." I don't like going to the mall! I don't do movies, because my head aches. I do get migraines, when they turn off the lights. It's not like you can say, "I'll go visit Jessica tomorrow." I can't do that because she's working. Somebody's always working, or at school, or things like that.



So I'm always struggling for something to do... until I go back to work. This keeps me occupied and not pulling my hair.

**Maria Heinlein**

*Laundry Woman*

*Tom (Maria's fiancé): Maria's a wonderful cook and I appreciate it! She loves to cook. When she's home she sends me to work with meatball stew! It's amazing what she can cook, it really is. And she's taught other blind friends of hers to cook, too, and now they have the confidence to cook. She's awesome. She helps other people be independent and to grow.*

I'm forty-three years old, and I've been totally blind since I was sixteen years old. I started losing my eyesight at the age of thirteen from an ear infection that traveled into the area behind my eyes and the front of my brain, and it took a total of three years to go from perfect vision down to no vision. During the three years, I was hospitalized for a year and they thought that I was going to turn out a lot worse than I am. Obviously all I lost was my eyesight, which, you know, is a good thing in a way, because they thought it was going to affect my brain functioning and my body functions and stuff. So, I went blind at sixteen, and became a mom at nineteen. I went to college and raised two children.

If I didn't lose my eyesight, I would have been a nurse. I wanted to be a geriatric nurse. But they won't let me do that, obviously, because I'm blind, so I decided I would work in the medical field in a job that I could do. That's why I went to school to be a medical transcriptionist. I did medical transcription out of my home, ran my own business, because I didn't want my children to be latch-key kids. When the kids were old enough where I felt that I could go out of the home and work, that's when I decided to go into

customer service and work on switchboards and answer phones and use computers. I did that for a long time, but about two years ago I got laid off from the VA Hospital and I decided it would be so much fun to work in a hotel. I thought working at a hotel would be perfect for me because I'm a people person, so I went to school for hospitality and that definitely prepared me for this job at the Holiday Inn. I'm really grateful for the school; it's a special school in Buffalo that educates disabled people to work in the hospitality field. It's an excellent program.

I originally came here to work at the front desk. That was what I wanted to do, but it wasn't a perfect fit in terms of equipment and technology. There was another position available in the laundry room, and I thought that would be a nice change because, instead of sitting all day, I would be standing and being active. The thought of being more physical appealed to me, so I took the laundry room position.

If you think of things logically and if you're organized, whether you're sighted or blind it's going to make your day go better. Obviously having me in the laundry room has made the other workers have to be more conscious of the environment. They are more aware of leaving things on the floor, putting things where they belong. When I first got in there, of course, I had to learn where everything is. Everything has a specific place, and it took me about two weeks to get acclimated to the laundry room. We Braille-marked all the machinery so I could run the dryers and the washers, we put Braille marks on the front of the shelves so I could memorize what shelf held what size sheet...

Basically it's kind of like learning your way around your house; once you've learned the layout, it doesn't change, so you have it memorized. The only thing that changes is if somebody puts a cart in the way, or a bin, or something like that. Actually, you know, it really has been pretty easy learning my way around in the laundry room. I think the most difficult part was getting other people used to being around a blind person, because they had never been around a visually-impaired person. So kind of educating everyone was really the most difficult part.

It helps that I have a good sense of humor; I'm kind of a sarcastic person and I like to make jokes out of everything, so like when I first got there, my first day, my co-worker—she's like my best friend now—she kept asking my job coach questions instead of asking me. Finally my job coach said, "Why don't you ask her? Why are you talking to me?" And I'm like, "I *do* speak!" She felt like a fool, like, "Oh my God, why am I acting this way?" But it was funny, because she looks back at it now and she realizes how silly that was, but she didn't know and that's okay; people learn from experience. I guess the biggest issue is people thinking I can't do things without letting me try first. So I've been very assertive, "Don't say I can't do this unless I show that I can't do it. If I can't, well then okay, I'll admit defeat." I've learned to use the presser, I know how to fold everything, I can tell all the different sizes and everything, and I think at first they thought that I wasn't going to be able to do that, but I constantly prove to them that I can.

Like I had a job coach for about three days, just to help me label everything and to make sure that I knew my way around the room. I myself find having a job coach to be insulting. I want to prove to everybody that I can do it myself, but I guess they wanted to be sure that I knew my way around and that everything was labeled. I accepted one for three days—I compromised—but then I told her to hit the road!

I have a system for getting used to a place, which is why I don't need job coaches and stuff. When I walk in a door, I think of the right wall and the back wall, the left wall. I think of a room as a big square and then I just start walking around the perimeter and then I memorize what is on each wall. In the laundry room, there's stuff in the center area, too, but I figured if I learned what was around the walls first, I'd learn the layout of the room. If I step in the door I know exactly to the left is shelving, exactly to the right is a table and then the presser and then shelving... It doesn't change, it stays the same, but I had to memorize where everything was in terms of walking in the room and then picturing it in my mind. See, it helps that I could see at one time, because I can picture the room in my head. I think someone who couldn't see, it probably would have taken them longer—I'm pretty sure it would have. So I basically kept walking around the perimeter of the room and then when I got secure with that then I ventured to the center of the room. That's a real kind of cluttered and high-traffic area, so there's garbage cans, rags, and bags and boxes. Everything's in the center, so when I walk there I tend to walk slower than when I walk around the perimeter. I do bang into things—that's just part

of what's going to happen. I can hit my hip, my knees, I hit my nose on the shelves, but that's just part of life. That happens when I'm at home or at the store, or whatever; I'm just used to that. Lots of times people will be like, "Oh my God, Maria, there's a cart in front of you!" They just feel bad that I'm going to bang into it, and I'm like, well, that's okay: I'll hit it with my hand and that'll be fine. Basically, I can't memorize where carts are going to be because that changes everyday, but where the shelving is, where the tables are, where the machines are, that doesn't change.

The managers are also really willing to accommodate me. Because I'm disabled, I am secured in employment under the ADA Act. They have to make reasonable accommodations for me. They let me Braille-mark all the machines, put dots on things, they're willing to let teachers come in and assess situations to make sure they're safe for me. The elevators have Braille on them already so that didn't have to be done, but if I wanted to come in and label the vending machine or the soda machine with Braille, they would be completely open-minded to that. If I want to try something, my managers let me try it and let me show them that I can do it. I really appreciate that because I just don't want them saying, "Well no, Maria, you're blind. You can't do it." I want them to say, "Okay, well, show me how you're going to do it!" If I show them and I can't do it, well, then fine, I'm willing to admit I can't, but at least give me a chance to prove it! Just like cleaning the rooms—I know I can clean a room. Can I do fifteen a day? No, and that's what they need. So can I be a housemaid? No, it's not reasonable. That's not a

reasonable accommodation. Could I clean three to five? Maybe, but that's not what they expect from the housemaids. But can they reasonably expect me to fold as much as anyone else? Yes, and I should be expected to do that. They expect the same amount of work out of me as anyone else, and that's the way I like to be treated.

I know that the general manager has always had a concern with safety, and I always feel like people think that it's not safe for me to be in there by myself, but I always say I can't see you watching me, so if you ever want to just come and observe me and watch how careful I am, then you'll see. I'm not accident-prone; the whole time I've been here I have never tripped and fell. I have bumped my nose and my elbow, but not to the point where I've needed medical attention or anything. As far as job safety goes, other people here who are sighted have fallen, have banged themselves, have cut themselves... It has nothing to do with eyesight! I just wanted everybody to realize that the laundry's an active job. People are going to get bumped and scraped—maybe even slip and fall and trip! I just don't want them to think that because I'm blind that that means that I'm automatically a klutz, because I'm not. I'm very careful when I walk. I walk heel to toe, not toe to heel, because when you walk toe to heel that's when you trip on things. If you walk heel to toe, you don't trip on things. I'm just very careful when I walk. I know when there's a wet floor, because people will leave "wet floor" signs, and my cane will hit the sign. I don't always use my cane because I have the whole hotel memorized.



See, I could see when I was a kid. I've always been here in Syracuse, except when I went to school down in Albany and school down in Buffalo for a year. I grew up in Liverpool, right behind this hotel. We used to come to the hotel and run through the halls. That's what I did when I was ten, eleven, twelve years old. I've been thrown out of here as a kid! But the hotel hasn't changed since then; I know that the sixth floor is exactly the same as the first floor, so if I memorize one floor, I've memorized all the floors. It took me like two weeks to memorize the lobby. I'm not real secure with the convention area or the ballroom area, because I don't have to go in there. I haven't taken time to memorize that, but I can get through the kitchen, through the dining room, and out into the lobby, the whole basement, and I don't even really have to use my cane. I'd say probably 80% of the time I don't use my cane. I do the rest of the time because I know people leave things in the hallway—that's just because other people are working and doing their jobs. I know that others probably would appreciate me using my cane more for safety reasons, and I probably should, but I've just always used it only when it's totally necessary. Like I said, with the job safety issue, I just really want everybody to realize that just because you're blind doesn't automatically make you a klutz. If anything, it makes you ultra-aware of your environment. I'm not going to say I've never fallen down a flight of stairs—I have three times in my life—but other people have fallen down stairs, too. I've never had an accident here, and I think it's because I'm extra careful.

When I walk through the lobby to go to the elevator or come out of the elevator to walk through the lobby, I've tripped a few people... It's funny, it going to happen; you can't avoid it. I've met people out front when I was sitting and waiting for rides, talked to people. I talk to people on the elevators. One time I was walking, I had gotten lost and this nice gentleman helped me and we talked for a little while. We realized by the end of the conversation that he had met me when I was going to school down in Buffalo! He was like, "What a small world!" He had come to the graduation down in Buffalo, and he remembered me after talking to me. He was like, "Oh you have a uniform on! When I'd seen you, you had a beautiful dress on." Because I had a fine dress on for the ceremony. So I do get a little exposure to the guests. Like I said, it's always been positive, and I think when they realize, "Wow, a blind person works here," they think it's cool. I like that, I like them seeing that this hotel is open-minded, and an equal-opportunity employer. I think it's good for the hotel to have that image.

Like I said, I'm a people person. I've always been on phones, I worked for the cable company, I worked for hospitals. I, at one time, ran a fitting room at a store. I really have a lot of patience with people and I love the public. When I went to school for hospitality, I really wanted to be a front desk person. I was like, "Oh my God, that'd be so cool! I'd get to talk to people, and greet people, and help people!" By the time I got done with the course, though, I realized whether you're in the front of the house—that's what they call the front desk—or in the back of the house, every job in this

hotel is important. You realize, right from the girl at the front desk to the guy washing dishes in the kitchen, we're providing a service for the community of people who stay here, to make a lasting impression on them. Even though I may not be talking to the guests or greeting the guests or whatever, I know that if they have a good visit and they enjoyed their bed and shower and linens and everything, that was part of my input. You can't look at your job at a hotel in terms of "menial" or "high profile," because it's all important. It all makes the hotel what it is. At first, I thought, "Oh my God, I'm going from being a switchboard operator to folding laundry! How degrading!" But now I look at it like "Hey, my job's important too!" I make sure that everybody has clean linens, and sometimes when I'm sitting out front waiting for a ride, I get talking to a guest. I tell them I work in the laundry room, and they just think it's cool. I'll tell them, "Yeah, you know, I folded your sheets." And they'll be like, "Oh yeah, that was really nice," and everything. So I feel good about that, because their visit here was good, and it was all because I helped. That's how you have to look at it—everybody's job is important in a hotel.

The majority of my job is folding. Everyday we have to put together towel orders for each housemaid. Let's say there's ten housemaids on for one day, and each housemaid has seventeen rooms. Every housemaid we have to complete a towel order for, she gets twenty towels, twenty hand towels, seventeen bath mats, and twenty washcloths. We have to make sure that we have enough towels and washcloths and floor mats and hand towels washed, dried, and folded so that we can produce these towel orders for all of the

housemaids. Then, depending on what size rooms they have—you either have king size rooms or double rooms—we have to make sure that they have two sheets per bed, a fitted sheet per bed, and four pillowcases per bed. So we also have to make sure that we have enough sheets washed, dried, and folded, and ready for the housemaids to complete their rooms. There's a lot of folding involved. We have machine operators, people who are primarily responsible for the washers and the dryers. I can do it, and I like to do it, but I know they depend a lot on me for the folding. We have a presser in the room, and our dining room and our banquet facilities want all their tablecloths and napkins pressed so that they're wrinkle-free and presentable. We get big bins of dirty linens from our dining room and our banquet facility, they have to be washed and dried, and put through a presser, and then folded a specific way. That has to be done on a daily basis.

If they're all one color, like let's say what came down is all whites, I can do it. If it's all greens I can do it. When the dining room stuff comes down it's a whole mish-mosh of colors—we could have pink, yellow, blue, red, green, orange, whatever—we could have every color, so they would prefer that I didn't do that, because I can't separate the colors, which is fair. So I say okay, I'll just do all the whites, or all the greens, and that's fine. We have to make sure that all of the banquet linens are taken care of, we have to keep the washers running at all times, the dryers going at all times, and keep the shelves stocked. What happens is, I can be folding all day long, and the housemen—they're the deliverers, the guys who bring the linens to the

maids—could be all day long taking stuff off my folding table and delivering it. Well, if they're delivering it, the maids are getting their stuff, but nothing's being put on the shelves. Come the end of the day, you did a lot of work and did a lot of folding, but it looks like you did nothing, because nothing's on the shelf! So you have to try to make sure that not only are you folding enough to keep everyone supplied, but you're folding enough to keep the shelves stocked for the next day, so there is a lot of folding involved. I think they depend a lot on me for that.

It's funny, because when I wash my sheets at home, they just go in a big ball in the basket. I'm not folding sheets! Even my towels, I'll be like, "I don't want to fold towels!"

You can't be lazy in this job, that's for sure. If you think you're going to be in the laundry room and not do work, then you're just kidding yourself. It's a very physical job, and you have to make logical decisions. You have to assess your situation, like in the morning you have to realize what do we need to wash more of? What do we need to fold right away? What do these girls need for the day? What isn't on the shelf? You need to be neat; when we fold, everything has to be folded a certain way, and you have to be able to grab them off the shelves so they all have to be set on the shelves the same way. You've got to be able to tell the difference, obviously, between the different sizes and stuff. Do you have to be a rocket scientist? No, but you definitely can't be lazy. You have to be organized, and you have to be able to make logical decisions. I would say you have to have a good outlook. Like I

said, it's all in feeling like your job's important. It can be routine, and I'm not going to say you need a college degree to do it, but it is hard work.

Folding isn't easy on my body, either. I have carpal tunnel in both my wrists and my hands, but I've had this my whole life because my whole life I've used computers. Everything a blind person does you have to use your hands. So by the end of the day, after folding so much, my hands are numb, my thumbs are numb, my wrists are aching, my arms are burning, my feet hurt... But I feel like, "All right, I had a good workout!" It feels good at the end of the day, and you just go home, take a hot shower, take a couple of aspirin, and face the next day. My wrists would still be hurting even if I had a computer job because it's just the repetitiveness of using your hands all day long. Come the end of the day, my feet are sore, my shoulders are aching, but I feel like I worked hard today. It feels good. It can get boring, too, standing in one spot and folding, so we keep a radio on and we talk. People come in and out of the room, we try to make it full of levity, make jokes and pick on each other and stuff like that. I do a lot of thinking when I'm folding. I think about life, and my next day, and next year, what I'm going to do. It's a good time to think.

Actually, I had thought about moving to the front desk during the wintertime because we have a slow period. Room occupancy is down then, so we have a layoff where hours are cut; you may get no hours, you may get a couple hours, you never know. I had thought about maybe pushing the issue of working on the front desk during my slow period, but the front desk is not a

union job. I thought that would be a conflict of interest or something, so I just opted not to do it. I know I can do it, I really know I could, I could prove to them I could, but I'm satisfied with the laundry room.

This hotel, as far as I know, is the only one that has a union. I have never worked in a facility that had a union. My last job at the VA hospital paid twice as much as I get here, but I didn't have any benefits. In this place I may be not earning as much as I wanted to, but the medical benefit... I mean, you get Blue Cross/Blue Shield PPO—it's awesome medical insurance. You get dental insurance, you have the security of the union, I know they have retirement, there's just... the medical alone! And we don't pay a dime for our medical. When I hear about what other people have to pay for medical insurance, I'm just like, "Wow, this is awesome!" I guess the cut in pay versus the benefits I get, to me it's an even trade. Like I said, I may have earned more at my last job, but I didn't have the benefits that I have here. And I like having the security of the union, I had to get used to knowing how a union works and stuff, seniority and all that, but I think I've got a grasp on it now, and I think it's a good thing. I do think the union's a good thing.

That wintertime slump I talked about was hard financially, and I would say emotionally, because I really like to work. I was scared: how am I going to survive? But you get unemployment, and I guess you just have to plan for the wintertime. They also offer you a bonus in the month of November based on the hours that you had worked for the previous year, so I suppose you could take that bonus and sock it away and it can help you through the winter

months. Like most people, whenever you get extra money it's a windfall and you just blow it. I suppose I need to be a better planner, like next year I'm going to take my bonus and put it away, and use it try to cover the time when I'm out of work. It is difficult, you know, because unemployment pays pennies on the dollar, but it can be done. I guess you just have to tighten up your belt a little and be more responsible. I mean, emotionally I didn't like it, I didn't like being at home, and I'm so glad we're back full force now.

See, with my disability, some people might think I could live off a disability check and not work. Okay, I, on social security disability, make \$538 a month... *a month*. My rent is \$500, so could I live off of social security disability? Only if I worked my way into the system, had reduced rent, lived in a handicapped building, got on food stamps, had Medicaid, totally involved myself into the welfare system. I wouldn't feel good about myself doing that because I know there are people that can't work, and they need the services. But myself, I went to college, I raised children—my boys are twenty-two and twenty-three now and doing fine living on their own. I know that I can do things. I would hate myself if I was sitting all day doing nothing. I would be bored out of my mind. Could I survive on disability? I don't think so. I mean, if like I said, if that was my only alternative and if I worked myself into the welfare system, I could, but me as a person, no, I couldn't live on disability. I'm entitled to disability because of my disability, but I look at it this way—I pay taxes so I don't feel guilty about it, but I would never live off of disability. I choose to work, it's a way to socialize, it's a way



to feel good about yourself, it's a way to be active, and you know, you get benefits working. You get medical benefits and retirement benefits, and this hotel is awesome in terms of benefits. Do I think I have to work financially? Yes, I feel I have to, unless I'm willing to surrender to the welfare system, and I couldn't do that.

I started working at the hotel on April 25<sup>th</sup> of last year, so my anniversary's coming up! One year, I am very excited! Especially because at the employee party the other night, people were getting one-year pins. I can't wait for the next one when I get my pin!

You know, I thought that I would only stay about a year at first, but when I see there's people who've been here ten, twenty, thirty years... I mean, there's a reason they're still here; they love it. Down the road, maybe I'll try to work in other parts of the hotel, too. I think that I would appreciate doing more if they would let me help in other areas of the hotel. I'm thinking that maybe I could help in the dining room or something, but we'll see. We'd have to look at the positions, see how I would be able to do it. Either way, I think I'm going to stick with it as long as I can. Physically, there may come a time when my carpal tunnel needs to be attended to, but I know that it can be fixed and I would come back. I like this hotel and I love all the people who work here.

There's a lot of stuff that goes on between people in my department. I guess maybe it's the same way everywhere you work. I don't know because I've never worked in a hotel before, so I don't know if all hotels are like this,

but I noticed in our department and I think it's probably the same all over the hotel—there's a lot of gossiping, a lot of stories that go around about people. I've found the whole thing very interesting, you know? Everybody does it; nobody's exempt from it. It's funny, I've been the victim of a few stories going around the hotel. I guess if you're secure with yourself as an adult you don't really worry about what people say about you, but I think one of my concerns was, "Wow, you could say one thing in the laundry room and by the end of the week everyone in the building knows!" I've never experienced this before, but I've adjusted to that. You have to realize, okay, well, I'm not the only one that they talk about; they talk about everybody. I'm kind of a high profile person, so I guess that I would be a victim of gossip. I'm not completely innocent of not doing it myself, either; everybody gets into it once in a while, I guess. News definitely travels quickly through the hotel.

In our department, the housekeeping department, everybody complains, everybody bickers, everybody talks about each other, *but* they all care about each other, and you can tell. Everyone's close, we all know each other, we kinda all know what goes on in each other's lives, and I like that feeling. Everybody works together, you know? I really like everyone I work with. Everyone has unique personalities, and they're good people at heart. For me, working here is my social life. I think I'm more social than I used to be. I care about my coworkers. I like to do nice little things for them. What keeps me coming back is everyone is friendly and helpful and I'm really proud, like I said. When I told people I used to work with that I had started

this job, everybody acts like, “Oh, it’s beneath you.” I guess it’s a blue collar job, maybe they think it’s just grunge work or whatever. I guess I even thought that when I started out. Like I said, I’ve always had customer service positions where I had to be on a computer, I had to know different computer software. I type one hundred a words a minute, and I’ve had a lot of really difficult, technical jobs. Stepping back and working in a laundry room... In the beginning, I thought, “Oh geez, a monkey could do this!” But after doing it for a while, I realized no, that’s not true. I realized I was being a snob. What people don’t understand is that it is hard work, and it’s not an easy thing to do. It may be in a laundry room and maybe they think that’s demeaning, but I’d like to see them stand on their feet eight hours a day and fold hundreds of pounds of laundry and get it all done. Then tell me that working in the laundry room is a demeaning job! This is an important job. Look at the gas attendant who works at a gas station. People always think that’s a simpleton job, but you know, every job we do in our community helps people. It’s a service that you provide for people, so every job is important. I’m proud of this hotel and our reputation in the community. I’m glad that I’m part of it. When I’m at home, I think about coming in to work the next day. It’s not like I’m dreading it; I actually get my clothes ready and I’m like, “All right! I get to go to work tomorrow!” What keeps me coming back is my pride in working for Holiday Inn. I like my job; it’s made me appreciate working.

I can still remember my first day. I wanted to come in and I was just so gung ho! I was just going to show everybody that I could do it on the first

day! I was gonna do everything perfect and wow them, and my first ten minutes I folded everything wrong! I was embarrassed because I thought I was gonna do great, but I had to humble myself and have others show me what to do. It was a great first day, though. I was so happy because I was able to get a job in the field that I went to school for. All I kept thinking in my head was, "Oh, if they could see me now!" I was proud, and like I said, my co-workers are nice and they made me feel welcome. Nobody's ever made me feel like an outcast or like I didn't belong or like I'm the odd duck. That's important to me.

Like I was saying earlier, we get to really feel like a family here. One of my coworkers, Jim, is autistic, and he has some developmental issues. Jim and I are best of friends! He kind of attached himself to me early on in the game, and I realized that he needed a good friend, and someone to chum around with. Now he's one of my best friends. I go grocery shopping with him once a week because he's my eyes, and I'm his brain. People have a hard time dealing with his special needs sometimes, like when we go to a restaurant or other places he does odd things. I just explain to people, well, you've got to understand, that's Jim. But he will read the menu to me, and I help him make his decisions. He won the award at the employee party, he won the Constant Caring Employee of the Year, and I was so proud of him! He's such a good worker, and, like I said, Holiday Inn is willing to give disabled people a chance. You know, Jim's probably the best employee they have at the hotel. He's willing to do anything for anybody, and that's the way I want to be. I've

helped co-workers out with different things, personal issues, I get everybody a Valentine's Day card. The younger housemaids act like I'm their mom, and they come and talk to me when they need support. I make sure that I smile all the time and make everybody feel good about themselves and compliment people, because you know morale is important on the job. I guess you get back what you put out, and so I feel like if I'm nice to everybody and friendly that's the way they'll be toward me. I've really gotten close to the younger girls in housekeeping and kind of took them under my wing, and I'm good friends with Jim. As far as helping my coworkers out, I think that I've been really good for people in terms of support. I do what I can. Obviously I can't drive people around, so I do it my way.

Someone else who's really important to me at the hotel is Tom, my sweetie, my fiancé. When I told you my coworkers helped me a lot, taught me a lot, he was one of the people who worked with me and taught me how to do things. When I started, he trained me a lot on how to use the presser. We talk a lot on the job, and that's how we got to know each other. We talked while we were working, and realized that we liked each other a lot, so we started seeing each other outside of work. Naturally, there was a lot of gossip going on and stuff, but the general manager doesn't care as long as we keep it professional while we're at work. Tom works in the office buildings, and now he drives me back and forth to work. It's nice getting to see each other at work when we're here, and at company get-togethers, and holiday parties.

We've been together almost a year now. Actually, Tom just got his one-year pin at the employee party! I was jealous!

One of the things I like to do is decorate. I love to color-coordinate my house and decorate and things, but see you've got to remember that I could see at one time. It's funny, because so many colors have come out... You know, my Crayola box years ago is not the Crayola box nowadays. So many colors and variations have come out, and the world's different... I don't know what video games look like, or computers. I mean, I've seen a computer on *Star Trek* when I was a kid, but the whole world's different now. When I need things described, Tom tells me what things look like, or people help me out. Like when we watch a movie, Tom's my narrator. He tells me the visual stuff that is pertinent to the story.

At work, too... When things are hanging up in the break room, you know, I wouldn't know there is a notice hanging up, like sign up sheets and things like that. I lose out on things like that unless people are aware and tell me, "Hey Maria, there's a sign up sheet over here, do you want to know what it says?" So it's made my co-workers be more aware of the situation, which is a good thing because everybody should have disability awareness.

My hope for the future is that maybe they might bring in more blind people, you know, to fold laundry and to work here. Kind of like open the door to the situation. Because I know there are other blind people looking for work. I don't know if I want them cramping my space now, [laughs] but

down the road it would be nice to have other disabled people come in and work.

I really enjoy working here and I'm proud to work here. I feel that my job is important, and I really would like to be the best I can be for my managers and my coworkers and for myself. I would just like the world to know that the hospitality field is important and it's a rewarding job, and really makes me feel good at the end of the day.

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## Written Summary of Capstone Project

### WHAT

This project was undertaken through a new series of community-focused and research-intensive writing courses funded by the American Association of Colleges and Universities. For this project, myself and another Writing & Rhetoric major, Lucille Murphy, partnered with the Syracuse Workforce Development Council in order to interview ten workers at the Holiday Inn located in Liverpool, NY, the only union hotel in all of Syracuse. I interviewed five workers, as did Lucille, for a total of ten. It is thus important to note that the material gathered for this Capstone only represents half of the full project.

Our work was made possible by Anne Marie Taliercio, the president of the Unite-Here Local 150, a union which includes the Holiday Inn. Anne Marie introduced us to Mr. James Gallagher, the general manager of the Holiday Inn, and enabled us to get permission to interview the workers. Anne Marie and Mr. Gallagher also helped us decide on the workers to interview in order for us to get a wide range of stories. Lucille and I wanted to make sure that we had a variety of workers from different departments within the hotel so that our ten would be representative of the workers' experience. Together, Anne Marie, Mr. Gallagher, Lucille, and I identified seventeen workers who would be appropriate for the project. Anne Marie contacted the workers for us in order to establish a sense of trust and legitimacy. A few of these seventeen did not want to participate, and we could not get in contact with a

few of the others, leaving us with the ten we currently have. Our final group is comprised of two workers from the dining room, one from the kitchen, two from laundry, one engineer, two room attendants, one housekeeping houseman, and one banquet server. There are departments of the hotel that are not represented in this sample, but those jobs are not a part of the union and thus will not be represented by this project. The amount of time the workers have been at the Holiday Inn ranges from a little under a year to thirty-one years, with the average being around twenty-five years.

A project similar to this was attempted in the past with little to no success because the workers were reluctant to write. For that reason, we decided to conduct tape-recorded interviews in order to collect the stories of the hotel employees. Each worker participated in two to three rounds of interviews, each interview approximately an hour and a half in length. Each worker also heard his or her interview read aloud so as to have final say in whatever would be included in the final product. The worker could also use this opportunity to expand on something said before that he or she felt was not well-explained, or to remove sections that caused concern. Before the first round of interviews, Steve, Anne Marie, Lucille, and I worked together to generate a list of standard questions to ask (including, but not limited to: “What don’t people know or understand what you do?”. “Do you ever just want to quit? What keeps you coming back?” “Have the union benefits helped you and/or your family?”). We also determined that the interviews should focus on the community and cultural aspects of the hotel and the

hospitality industry, the physical strain and other hardships associated with hotel work, and the impact the union has on working at this hotel. Our interviews were thus structured around these questions and ideas. All interviews were conducted either at the Holiday Inn (in the hotel's interview room) or in the Unite-Here Local 150 offices.

Again, the ten hotel workers did not write anything. All of the material collected in this project was spoken in interviews. Each interview was transcribed and then edited for grammar, structure, relevancy, and organization. In order for the stories of the employees to be more readable and poignant, the transcriptions were reformatted into more cohesive narratives, as if the employees had actually written them. In order to ensure that the narratives still retain the intentions of the worker, editing has been done carefully and consciously so as to preserve as much of the workers' vernacular and emphasis as possible. In the case of my five interviews, this narrative format was the version of the interview that was read to the workers for final approval.

All of the research included in my works consulted helped me to understand and think about the process of interviewing and how best to represent another person's story. Many of the reference materials also helped me gain a better understanding of prominent issues of the working class and of the hotel industry, which prepared me to ask effective questions and prompt revealing dialogue.

As I mentioned earlier, the material I have submitted for my Capstone is not representative of the entirety of this project. In fact, it will continue even after this Capstone is submitted. The project, this time in its entirety, will be published as a book through a partnership between Syracuse University Press and New City Community Press. For this book, the interviews will be restructured once again. We plan to create “categories” or “chapters” of the book (such as “Family,” “Physical Toll,” “Friendships,” “Union Benefits,” etc) and pull out bits and pieces from the interviews to include in different sections. This, we hope, will increase the poignancy of what the workers have to say, and will create the illusion of a dialogue or conversation among many voices. Photographs were also taken of the hotel employees who participated in this project in order to further establish a sense of familiarity and community, create a sense of place for readers, and allow the visualization of some of what the workers discuss in their interviews. The photographs will be published in the book, but they are not included in this Capstone project.

## **WHY**

When I read about the Federation of Worker Writers and Community Publishers (or the Fed) in *The Republic of Letters*, I and other students in my civic writing class struggled to come up with a satisfying definition of literature. The Fed had its first meeting in 1976 in Hackney, England and it is what the name suggests: “a national organization for the promotion and

encouragement of working-class writing through writer's workshops and local publishing initiatives." In many cases, the writing endeavors of Federation members are focused within their individual communities; their work arises out of a collective history and experience. *The Republic of Letters* says that Federation members have a "local writing that does not seek to model itself on the prize-winning, official culture," yet their experiences within the working class world, of "being exploited" and of struggle, "produce a valid view of history" that is not always well-represented.

The Fed's relevancy is likely a large reason why their localized books have sold millions of copies. Still, because they do not write in a style consistent with that of the "prize-winning, official culture," the Fed has constantly struggled to gain respect for their craft, regardless of sales. *The Republic of Letters* explains, "literature has a privileged status among the arts in Britain. ... Yet it is an ancient cry of the artist how obtuse, how satisfied merely to preserve, how unwilling to support new creation, its guardians can be. The banker approach to culture doesn't encourage the granting of overdrafts to today's untried writers." For the Fed, 'literature' is a buzzword that closes gates, dries up their funding, allows the British Arts Council to snub their noises at their version of social action, and results in such esteem-killing summaries of their writing as "irrelevant." But what really separates an Aristotle from a Shakespeare, a Bronte from a Milton, a Frost from a Walker or a Grisham or a Fed writer?



One of the aims of the Fed and *The Republic of Letters* is “to ‘disestablish’ literature,” to make “writing a popular form of expression for all people rather than the preserve of a metropolitan or privileged elite.” That was the aim of this fellowship project, as well. As Antonio Gramsci writes in his *Prison Notebooks*:

All men are intellectuals, ... but not all men have in society the function of intellectuals. ... Although one can speak of intellectuals, one cannot speak of non-intellectuals because non-intellectuals do not exist. ... There is no human activity from which every form of intellectual participation can be excluded. ... Each man ... has a conscious line of moral conduct, and therefore contributes to sustain a conception of the world or to modify it, that is, to bring into being new modes of thought.

Indeed, Gramsci’s theories on intellectualism were important ones for this project. Although working class issues are not invisible, it seems less common to hear them from the members of the working class themselves. There are many scholars who speak *for* them, like Nickel and Dimed’s Barbara Ehrenreich, an academic who spent several months working blue collar jobs, but not exactly *with* them. While the employees’ vernacular interviews might not flow as easily off the tongue as the lyricism of Nabokov or Whitman, their narratives are important nonetheless. They may not be the typical academic, but they can provide a view of the world and how it works that many of us are not in a position to see. This is a view of the world that everyone needs to see, however, if we are to become truly engaged and civically involved in our communities. We must be able to listen to and understand the needs and interests of the people who make up those

communities, the needs of people like Kirk, Rod, Luz, Maria, and Linda. After all, as Gramsci says, “all men are intellectuals.” Everyone has the potential to affect the world around them, and it is important to understand the ways that these individuals affect and contribute to the world. Although none of the workers actually wrote anything themselves, this project was designed with the goal to provide these union hotel employees with the opportunity to tell their unique and interesting stories, to impart new knowledge and insight that cannot be gained through traditional academic means. In this respect, the project allows us to hear alternative voices, but also reminds us that these voices are saying something important, that they’re worthy of our attention and our study.

This project, in fact, has already had effects. After reading our interviews with his employees, Mr. Gallagher, the general manager, admitted to having learned things he did not know. He changed several of the policies within the hotel in response to the difficulties he saw his employees dealing with, and encouraged the managers to talk with their employees about concerns for the future of the Holiday Inn that he saw being raised (especially in regards to the DestiNY project). When the project is complete and published as a book, Ann Marie will be able to use it with other groups and industries that are thinking of unionizing. We hope that the book will be used by the Syracuse Workforce Development Center in their education classes, and that it might be available for guests to read when they stay at the Holiday Inn. *The Republic of Letters* asks, “What chance is there that you will find

anyone to whom you can show your work in the expectation that it will be read, understood, supported, answered, propagated and built into culture?"

The voices of these hotel workers will certainly continue to have reverberations in their work community and beyond.