

Salem State University
The Graduate School
Department of English

From Inexperienced to Passion-Driven: Navigating The Working World

A Thesis in English

by

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1

When I went job hunting at the ripe old age of fifteen, I did not expect to have the most glamorous job. But the matter of fact is, I didn't want to work at all. I don't think anyone does. I heard retail was a job straight from hell, babysitting meant I was supposed to be good with kids (which I wasn't), and the thought of scooping ice cream made my arm want to fall off. My interest career-wise hadn't been figured out yet, and my introverted personality caused me to recoil in panic at the thought of going in for an interview and *gasp*, having to talk to someone. I was content living in my own little shell, until I realized that my twenty dollar allowance that I got every two weeks wasn't doing me any favors, and that I'd have step outside of my comfort zone and go looking for someone to give me money. As a sophomore in high school, I needed to start saving for important things; like a new laptop for school and for a new car when I could eventually get my license. Which at that point, wasn't too far away.

Turns out I didn't have to look far, because my sister Olivia had gotten a job before I even started looking for one. I always admired her ability to do things on her own. It was at a retirement community that we will call Bayview. Although we were born minutes apart, she seemed to do everything first before I could even get a chance. I don't think it's a coincidence that she learned to tie her shoes first, put her hair in a ponytail first, get a boyfriend first, and of course, get a job first. But with my shy personality and lack of willingness to submit any job application, she was my ticket into employment. She could tell me all about the hiring process and what the working life was like before I tried it out for myself. She is kind of my trial run for everything in life. Sure, I might be a little dependent, but she's the outgoing one, not me. She

even got me the job that I currently have as a receptionist since she had worked there first. One perk of being a triplet is and having 2 siblings the same age is that we go through everything together at the same time, so I always have someone at my side.

One afternoon in the summer of 2014 before I started working, I was sprawled out of my couch while watching tv, digging into a pint of Ben and Jerry's ice cream. My mom and Olivia had been carrying bags of Market Basket groceries into the kitchen from the car. They were chatting about some sort of interview, and I started listening when they began talking about a work schedule.

"Honey when you go in for your first day, that's when you can give them a list of the days you want to work after school," my mom said. "Don't worry about it until then because they still said you need to come in for an orientation."

I got up and kneeled on the couch, turning around to face them. "What are you talking about?"

"I got a job," Liv said.

"What?" I asked. At this point, the idea of me or my siblings having a job was still foreign to me.

Liv shrugged, "Yeah, Mom and I were going to talk to you and Gil about it. They hire a ton of students and we can work after school. It seems pretty chill."

"Where is it?"

"Literally down the street right next to the Walmart. Some sort of retirement community."

"There's a retirement community next to Walmart?"

“Apparently. I didn’t even notice it there either. Some people from school work also there. It’s called Bayview.”

“What are you supposed to do there?”

“Well, I applied for waitressing in one of their restaurants.”

My mom chimed in. “Yeah, we wanted to know if you or your brother want to apply. Your sister already went in for an interview so we can also get you guys in quickly if you want to start soon.”

My head was spinning. I don’t handle adding new activities into my daily routine. Leaving my comfort zone was something I didn’t have experience in at the time.

“It’s so funny, the woman that interviewed Olivia was someone in my class that I went to high school with,” she continued. “She said since you’re my kids, she would hire you guys in a heartbeat! She is one of the general managers for their restaurants. I didn’t even know she worked there!”

“Mom, I’m still trying to get over the fact that there is a whole retirement community next to Walmart that I have never even noticed before,” I laughed and looked at Olivia. “Wait, you went in with her for the interview?”

My mom sat down at the kitchen table and started sorting through our mail she retrieved from the mailbox. “Yeah, she was nervous so Maureen said I could sit with her. Do you want me to talk to her about you?”

I looked at my sister. “So did they say what exactly you have to do and stuff?”

She wandered around the kitchen, opening cabinets in search of a snack. “You just wait on tables and serve them food.”

“Wait...really? Like an actual waitress?”

“Duh, what else do you think a waitress is?”

“No, no, I know...But I don't know if I wanna do it. I'm scared lol.”

“Bro, why are you scared? I literally just had my interview it was fine.”

“I hate talking to people.”

“Shut up, you're fine.”

“No 'cause I'm gonna have to interview like you did and I'm not good at waiting tables.”

“How do you know you're not good, you've never even done it.”

“I don't have to do it to know that I'm terrible.”

“Dude, it's old people you're serving. Get over it. Don't be nervous and worry before you've even done it.”

“Okay, I'll look into it and let mom know.”

“Hurry up and just do it so we can work together. You're not gonna work without me.”

“I stuck my tongue out at her. How do you know?”

She smirked. “Because you need me.”

“Shut up.”

And that is how I found myself standing in front of the entrance to Bayview about a month and a half later, ready for my first day on the job. I know that getting a job meant that I had to talk to people, but this was my nightmare. I already was super shy in school with kids that have been in my classes since the first grade, so I had no confidence that this job would be any different. Communication was not my strong suit, and not only do I need to have people skills,

but I also was handed the most horrendous uniform in existence. I received an entire checklist of things I needed just for that: black dress pants, black non slip shoes, bow tie or regular tie, and a belt. On the first day we also got an apron, name badge, and a clipboard for taking orders. The shirt was a scratchy dark green long sleeve collared dress shirt. Everything about it screamed uncomfortable. Before I started, I thought the uniform would be something like a normal chain restaurant, where you could just wear some jeans and a t-shirt with the restaurant's name on it and call it a day. I was so wrong.

It also took me a while to get to my first day because after I talked to my sister, I didn't apply for weeks. I self-sabotaged, constantly thinking of all the ways I could mess this job up or make a fool out of myself. However, after a month of no cash flow and watching my sister get her first paychecks, I knew that I had to take the jump and apply myself.

2

Long story short, I ended up working there for six years. As I am writing this, I am about to graduate from college with my master's degree, and it is crazy to think about how it had been my first and only job since sophomore year. I moved onto my receptionist job full time and left Bayview about 8 months ago now, but working there was a huge part of my daily life for some important and formative years. I had never thought in a million years that I would spend such a long time in that job, but it proved to be the most interesting, funny, exhausting and sometimes depressing place I have ever worked (even though I don't have much experience anywhere else). All I can say is that I have gained valuable skills, learned life lessons, and I am the person I am today because of that place. Not a lot of people would take waitressing for the elderly as seriously, but I genuinely believe that working there helped me grow and improve as a person. Looking on it now, I was lucky to work in such a supportive and flexible environment. I am currently searching for a job that will do the same for me all over again.

At the time, I had never stepped inside any kind of retirement community or nursing home, and no one told me that this was like the Disney World of nursing homes. Seriously, the place was huge. I was so relieved to be working in the first building to the right on campus, because it seemed like a maze as soon as you entered through the gate. I definitely would have gotten lost if I had to go anywhere else. There were multiple small roads that split off and led to different buildings, with each building connected to one another with a hallway/bridge structure. The landscaping was immaculate and each building had a small pond with a beautiful water fountain in the middle of it. Past the parking lots were small gardens that I now know were for

the residents who had passions for gardening and there were trails where they could walk their pets. It was like its own little world for the elderly.

Also, I was not too familiar in conversing with the elderly. Three of my grandparents passed before I was born or when I was very little, and I only had one surviving grandparent, with whom I barely spoke. The oldest family member that I was closest to was my sixty-five-year-old first cousin, who graciously babysat my siblings and I from elementary school, practically until we got our driver's licenses. Even then, she was like a second mom to me. I don't know how she ever put up with the little triplet hellraisers that are me, my brother, and my sister. But that's a different story. Anyway, back to my culture shock.

My heart never beat so fast than on my first day of work. The feeling felt eerily similar to the first day of school, or when I would have to give an oral presentation, or when I would unfortunately get called on in class. The social anxiety was high, and so was my awkwardness and lack of social skills. The first thing I noticed was that I had never seen so many old people in my whole life. I knew I was stepping into a nursing home, but I was not prepared for how many people I was going to see. At first, they all looked the same to me. They were everywhere, usually accompanied with their walkers and scooters, and it took me a really long time to recognize names and faces. Funnily enough, I learned over time that there were so many cliques and friend circles just like in high school. Eventually, I began to figure out who belongs with who, which groups played cards, which groups participated in their community theatre, which groups went power walking together, which groups bet each other on mahjong, and which groups spent all their time in the arts and crafts room. The list could go on and on.

And this place wasn't like a small nursing home. When I say Bayview was big, I mean it was like a small town, and they had everything that they needed. I honestly had no idea what I was walking into. I'm pretty sure it took me a whole year to learn how to walk from one building to the other indoors. All of the buildings had indoor bridges to get from one place to the other. They seriously thought of everything. There were five different main buildings, each one connected to another, reminding me of a hamster maze.

Don't even get me started on the hallways. All of them looked the exact same, except they were slightly different colors depending on which building you happened to find yourself in. Rows and rows of apartment doors everywhere, the only unique things being the decorations residents got to put on their doors and shelves. I can't even count how many times I ended up lost. The place has three restaurants, two hair salons, two convenience stores, a café, a full sized CVS, a fully functioning doctor's office, an indoor swimming pool, a gym, a library, a dentist office, and their own tv studio and television program (I've been featured on it twice). For someone that was hired to work in one of the restaurants, I found myself in the different buildings quite a lot.

What I learned on my first day was that it is okay to make mistakes. This was a good teaching moment because I was sure that I was going to make a lot of them. Putting in orders, pouring water, servings drinks and food, I knew something was bound to go wrong at some point. And this restaurant wasn't a simple establishment. They wanted the residents to have a dining experience that mimicked regular restaurants outside of Bayview, so they ordered from a three-course menu, could get a drink from our bar, meet up with friends and family to eat, and usually would have to wait at least 20 minutes for a table after five o'clock. I always thought it was crazy how the residents had to wait to eat dinner in their own home, but we always filled up

quickly without fail. I quickly learned that the end of the month was also the worst. Residents received a monthly meal plan with meal swipes when they moved in, allowing one meal per day for the month. If they didn't use them on some days, they wanted to use them later on. The meals didn't roll over to the next month, so if you didn't use them, you lost them. Family and friends were also allowed to use those extras as long as they were with a resident. This made the end of the month the busiest and most hectic time for us. Between our dinner business hours of four to seven o'clock, we usually served an average of four hundred people (both residents and family), almost double the amount we have on the first day of the month.

3

On the way to my very first day, I remember how I spent the entire car ride hyperventilating while my mom offered some words of encouragement. But due to my excessive nervousness, those words went in one ear and out the other. We had gone shopping two weeks prior for my uniform. The collar of my button up dark green dress shirt felt too tight on my neck, and it was the first time in my life that I was wearing a bow tie. I had on a clunky pair of black non-slip shoes, and a pair of black dress pants that were way too long on me. She pulled up to the front of the building and put the car in park. My heartbeat was getting faster and my stomach felt like it was in knots.

“Mom, I’m gonna throw up.”

“You’re going to be fine.” She finished putting her shoulder length blond hair into a ponytail and gave me a squeeze on the shoulder. “Who knows, you might have fun.”

“Do I have to go in? Olivia’s not even working tonight.”

“Yes, you do hun, your training is today.”

“Where do I even go? Who am I supposed to talk too?” I whined.

“You just go up the stairs and ask someone. They will tell you,” my mom encouraged.

“Now hurry up, you don’t want to be late on your first day.”

I groaned and stepped out of the car, shutting the door behind me. My mom rolled down the car window and pulled out her phone. The flash of her camera went off.

“Mom, you have your flash on and would you stop taking pictures of me?”

“Sorry honey, I want to capture this moment!”

I didn't know what was worse, the horrible pictures my mom was taking, or the fact that I had to go inside by myself. After some internal debate on whether it was too late to turn back around, I headed into the building, half-wishing that I wasn't fifteen and old enough for a job. I found the place easily enough and noticed two other kids my age who were also there for training. As all three of us sat on our phones in silence, our two trainers came out to introduce themselves, Rebecca and Joe. I learned that they had each been there for four years and that they were both in college. The first thing we did was take a tour of the restaurant and they showed us where everything is that we would need during our shifts.

I developed an irrational fear of the walk-in freezer for the first 2 months I was there. It did not have a handle on the inside and I thought I would get locked in if the door closed behind me. Any time I had to go in there I made sure the trip took less than five seconds. I didn't have to go in there much, so I didn't realize that the door pushed outward when you were on the inside. If I wasn't able to grab everything I wanted in those 5 seconds, I would leave and then return to the freezer to get what I missed.

Once we saw and then probably forgot where everything was, Rebecca and Joe showed us how to pour water for the residents using water pitchers. The most important thing was to grab the water glass off the table and turn away from the table when pouring the water, or else you would probably spill some on the residents. It was impossible to pour water and not have a few drops or ice cubes spill. To emphasize that spilling water wasn't a big deal, Joe filled a pitcher up, and then proceeded to dump the whole thing onto the carpeted floor. I appreciated him for trying to lessen our fears of making mistakes.

Trips, accidents, and spills are nothing new in this job and basically any server job that exists. I have never really considered myself to be a clumsy person, and breaking things in my household growing up was terrifying. I remember a few instances where I would hear the seemingly endless yelling from my parents about something my siblings or I broke. Since there were three of us running around with high energy, there were many occasions where we did the exact opposite of what our parents told us. My brother and I had been tossing a foam football around the living room when we were seven years old. My mom told us to stop because we were going to break something if we continued. If we wanted to keep playing, we could go do it outside. Right after she scolded us, my brother defiantly threw the ball back to me but missed. It went soaring towards some shelves hanging up next to the tv and shattered a glass picture frame that held my parents wedding photo. The shattered glass also scraped part of the picture and ruined it. It was ironic that as soon as she told us that, we broke something. An important something. Of course she yelled at us and told us to go to our rooms, but I'll never forget the fear of breaking something, especially something that was so meaningful to her.

So I was pretty flustered when I broke something at work for the first time, and of course it was on my first training day. A part of our training was learning how to use both small and big trays, and to practice carrying dishware on them. Small trays were used to hold a smaller number of dishes, and usually to bring drinks to residents. Big trays were large and oval shaped, and were put on top of a folding stand so that you could put more dirty dishes on them and clear tables easier. For anyone who has never served, the small ones would be carried atop the palm of your hand, like a waiter that you've seen in a restaurant or movie. Once the big trays had a lot of

dishes on them, you would have to bend down, slide your arm under the tray, and prop the weight onto your shoulder to carry it into the kitchen.

I bet you can tell which one I was most afraid of. I had (and still have) no upper body strength. The idea of piling a bunch of dishes on a tray and carrying it on my shoulder made me rethink every choice I made that led me to being there in that moment. Looking back on it now, I can't believe how scared and nervous I was. Joe put one water glass on the big tray and told me to lift it, and I could feel my palms sweaty and the adrenaline pumping. It's moments like those that make me want to go back in time and tell myself that it will be okay, considering how when I left, I could pile four tables worth of dirty dishes on a single tray and easily carry it into the kitchen.

Initially, the balance is the hardest part to grasp, and it does take some practice to get used to it. I carried the water glasses then quickly moved on to carrying heavy plates and bowls to see how it would go. During training, the weight caught me off guard at first and I leaned to the right. Two glasses rolled off and fell after I had taken a few steps. One broke but the other miraculously didn't. I waited for any angry or disappointed responses, but that didn't happen. My new coworker Joe then rushed over to grab the tray and stop me from dropping the rest. He said that it was totally fine, that people drop things all the time, and that we could give it another try. This made me feel so relieved and less afraid of dropping things or making mistakes. And I ended up dropping many things over the years. Obviously, I wasn't intentionally breaking things, but it did happen more often than I would have liked.

My first traumatizing screw up was on my first brunch shift on January 1st, 2016. I remember the date because we only serve brunches on holidays, and New Year's day was my first one. I had been working there for seven months already, and I felt pretty confident waiting

tables and was now fully comfortable in this environment. I had just received a table of six ladies, and asked them what they wanted to drink before they went up to the buffet. By the time I got their drinks (two apple juices, two Bloody Marys, an orange juice, and one mix of cranberry and orange juice), they had returned to the table with their meals. I had all six drinks on a small tray, I was much better at balancing (but I guess not as much as I thought), and walked over to the table. When I reached over to place an apple juice in front of one lady, the glass filled with cranberry and orange juice tipped forward and spilled all over the back of the lady sitting directly in front of me. I was horrified. The entire contents of the glass completely drenched her from her neck all the way down her back. And this woman was so tiny and frail. She didn't have a good range of motion and heavily relied on her walker. That just made me feel worse. I have dropped and spilled things since I started, but it was the first and only time I had ever spilled something on a resident. No one wants to go to a restaurant and accidentally get an entire drink poured down their back. She couldn't reach where I had spilled the drink, so I ended up having to grab towels and try and clean it up as best as I could, which meant shoving towels under her shirt and bra strap. She also kept saying how cold she was after. I have never felt more guilty in my life and it still haunts me to this day.

Another fun time was also during a brunch, on Christmas Day 2017. I was starting to think that I had bad luck with brunches. My assigned job was to be a busser that day, so I was tasked with clearing dirty dishes off of tables, so other parties could sit once others had left. I was carrying a particularly heavy tray of dishes, attempting to make my way to the kitchen doors and to the dishwasher. The way the restaurant and kitchen was set up is that there were two sets of swinging doors, one on the left side and one on the right, both leading into the kitchen from the dining area. The left set of doors lead immediately to our dessert and dishwashing stations,

and the right set of doors lead to the freezer and the two management offices. But whichever door you picked; you were met with the open floor plan of our kitchen.

While carrying my heavy tray, I was trying to go in the left doors which was the shortest path to the dishwasher, but it was momentarily blocked by residents who were walking around because of the buffet. I decided that it would just be easier to go in through the right set of doors and just cross through the kitchen to the dishwasher. Big mistake. With the tray on my shoulder, I lifted my foot to kick the door open (like all of wait staff usually do), but unfortunately, someone had left a very large box of unused Christmas decorations on the other side of the door that I couldn't see. The door proceeded to bounce back, hit me in the face, causing me to drop the largely packed tray of dirty dishes onto the floor. Nothing survived the fall. The whole restaurant went quiet when they heard everything shatter. I had never been more embarrassed in that moment. Cleaning it up only made it worse because with each sweep of the broom, there was a loud sound of glass pieces scraping against one other. It only prolonged my suffering. These are exactly the kind of things that I was afraid of when starting this job, and even though they were embarrassing at the time, I look back on those moments and realize that it's okay to make mistakes.

4

Since I had been in this job for so long, I have seen a lot of kids come and go. Some new hires stay on for a long time like me, but they are typically only a few. The majority who get hired come and go in the span of a year or less. After a few years, I began training new kids and I was surprised by the lack of work ethic in them and the amount of laziness there was in the place. I was raised by parents who have incredible work ethic and have always worked round the clock, almost never taking any sick days. My work ethic definitely came from them. I steadily picked up hours even during the school year. Monday through Friday, my routine would be school until 2pm, then working from 3:30-8:30pm, then homework until I fell asleep. Depending on whether I got the last table or not, I would be able to get out earlier which meant more time for homework. But it was important to me that I support myself and earn my own money. The rule was if I wanted something, I had to pay for it with my own money, and mostly everything I have; clothes, shoes, phone, technology, and more, I have paid for myself. Over the last 6 years, I have bought two Apple MacBook computers for school (one in high school and one in college). If it wasn't for my hard work, I wouldn't have gotten either of them because they are really expensive. When you buy something, you worked hard for, it feels good.

Anyway, some of the kids I have seen come through this place, don't even try to give it a shot, are lazy, and will try anything to get out of working. My favorite memory of someone trying to avoid serving was a few years ago when one of my coworkers Ally, didn't want to get a new table when we were near closing time. We were always open until 7, but if you got a table in your section last minute, it meant that you would probably be staying later than everyone else.

Ally and her friend were known for not caring about the job and messing around almost all of the time. I didn't like that kind of behavior because the restaurant was a part of the community, which was the residents' homes. I sound like a goody two-shoes when I say that because everyone has moments when they don't like their jobs. But if they don't do their work, then it just gets put on me to eventually do it. And if they give poor service, the residents aren't being treated the way they should.

Even though we aren't nurses or health aides who work directly in the apartments, it is important to be respectful. Besides those essential workers, we might sometimes be the only other faces that the resident may see that day. Some live by themselves and some don't even get visitors, but the dining room is the one place where they get to socialize. That is why I cared so much about bringing my best self to the workplace. I wanted to brighten the day for some residents and make meaningful connections since a lot of them didn't leave the community or socialize much. Since we were hired, we were taught that we needed to be responsible and helpful to the residents because we were technically in their home.

But Ally didn't want her table, so she did what any person might try and do when they want to get out of something; pretend to be sick. In one of our beverage stations, while her friend recorded on her cell phone, she grabbed a bread roll, some milk, salt, and juice, and put it all into her mouth. After a few chews, she spit it up into the trash can, pretending to throw up. She then walked over to our managers office. She was holding her stomach and leaning over while her friend showed them the video. She got sent home, smiling to us on her way out. It showed that they didn't care about their coworkers having to do extra work that they didn't ask for. I'm not trying to sound stuck up or like a know-it-all. I am just amazed at what these kids do to not work, since I work hard for what I have and never missed a day unless it was an emergency.

While some kids created schemes to go home, some kids also had a hard time adjusting to the work environment and didn't stay long. The shortest time I've ever seen someone work in our restaurant was just forty-five minutes. We had just gotten a new batch of kids hired, and my friend Serena was excited to start training some of them since it was her first time being able to do it. When you train someone during your shift, they stick by you the whole time and you teach them how to wait tables, essentially like having a shift buddy. It was this new girl's first day, and she looked a little overwhelmed, nothing unusual. But her and Serena got their first table, and she asked the new girl if she could pour water in the residents' glasses for them. The girl said okay, and timidly walked over and introduced herself. She poured the water while Serena took their beverage order. Serena thought it was going well, but the new girl walked away while she was making the drinks for table. When she finished, she couldn't find the girl anywhere. She asked us if we had seen her new trainee anywhere, and none of us knew where she had gone. Turns out she returned her apron and clipboard, and just walked out. Didn't say anything, only walked out and after completing the forty-five minutes she was employed.

Strangely, hiding behind or in fridges had also been an occurring activity in our restaurant. In one of our beverage stations, there is a six foot tall silver industrial fridge, which a gap between it and the wall enough to fit a teenager in between. When you hide in the gap, whoever comes in the beverage station doesn't know you're there and can't see you. One at a time, kids would hide in there and use their phones when they had some downtime so that the managers wouldn't see them. It was the next best place to hide other than the bathroom. We

weren't supposed to be on our phones during the shift, so kids would take turns standing in there so they could scroll on their phones without worrying about who would walk in and see them.

Another crowd favorite for a while was using that hiding space as a hidden vaping spot. At the time I never vaped and never understood the hype around the seemingly pointless activity. It's just a flavorful way of destroying my lungs, but let's not let my bias get in the way. Vaping was a popular trend within the staff for a while, and I saw so many kids get sent home because of it. My friend at the time was hiding in the fridge spot and took a hit of the vape, not knowing that my manager had walked into the beverage station at the exact moment she stepped out into the open, the smoke still sitting in her mouth. They made eye contact as the smoke poured from her mouth and nose, and she realized her fatal mistake. She was immediately sent home, because the managers reminded us every day that summer that the entire campus was a smoke free zone.

But hey, at least she wasn't fired. The one thing I learned is that it is really hard to get fired from there unless you try to physically hurt or lay a hand on someone (There were a few of those). There was the occasional firing of employees who failed to show up to multiple shifts, but I had seen others do worse and experience no repercussions. One example is about the boyfriend of my now ex-best friend. We didn't get along and he was always irritating me. He smoked weed all the time, but seemed to get upset whenever his girlfriend (my friend) would do it. I guess he thought it was fine for him to show up to work high, but if my friend did, they would get in a huge fight (double standards am I right?). But one day, their little argument about smoking ended a little differently. He walked into the beverage station and punched two holes in the wall. That's right. Punched two holes in the wall at his place of employment. Word traveled fast throughout the rest of the shift, and everyone spent their downtime going over to the beverage station to see the damage. Since multiple kids witnessed him do it, we all knew it was

him. Eventually, the managers saw the holes, and it led to an awkward group conversation after shift as to why we should not be causing property damage. I still can't believe that had to be said because it seems pretty self-explanatory. Figuring out who did it was easy enough for them because all of us knew who had done it and all it took was for one student to say something. They called him into the office at the end of shift and I thought he was going to be in serious trouble. But (like many other times when people broke the rules), nothing happened after that. Nothing. Not even a write-up not even a disciplinary action. I won't lie that I was disappointed in nothing happening because he was a pain in my ass. But I wasn't surprised.

And since ninety-nine percent of the waitstaff in our restaurant were teenagers; dating, relationships, and drama were nothing new in this environment. Since I am older now and graduating college, I am not involved in that stuff anymore. But when I was that age, I was involuntarily pulled into a lot of things that I wish I could've stayed out of. I saw a lot of broken friendships, new friendships, relationship drama, and have been on the receiving end of nasty text messages from girls (it's always the girls). But for some reason, a good amount of my issues turned out to involve guys. I actually met my first and current boyfriend of five years in 2016 when he came in for his first day of training at Bayview. We were best friends for a summer and started dating eight months after he had been working there. Before this job, I had never talked to boys and didn't have many guys friends. But then I started dating my boyfriend, and I became friends with a few other guys as well. During my time working there, two of my male friends confessed to me that they liked me and had feelings for me. The problem, was that they were completely aware of my relationship status and personally knew my boyfriend. I still don't know why people decide to go after people who are in relationships, as if their goal is to break them

apart. But I've only had one happy relationship that I am still in, so maybe I will never understand.

But after that, I had become one of those people involved in friend group drama because both of those guys had been some of my best friends. Once they said to me how they felt, it made things awkward because I was obviously not willing to sacrifice what I had with my boyfriend. One of them became so persistent that it was just better to cut all contact, which can be hard when you have to work together. I had also told my boyfriend when things like this happen, because I want him to know everything going on in my life. So the final decision was to stop being friends with them because they couldn't respect my relationship. My boyfriend came first and still does, and doing that was the best decision for our relationship even though I hate destroying friendships.

One of the most important lessons I learned is that it is sometimes necessary to remove people from your life who do not have your best interest at heart and who go behind your back to other people. Besides those other guys, I also lost a few friends along the way during these years. But it happens. Going from high school to college is an important time in our lives where we grow, change, and recognize who our true friends are and who aren't. For someone who doesn't stand up for themselves that much and can let things slide too often, this was a hard pill to swallow. But as crazy as the staff was (and occasionally some of the residents), I have met some of the greatest people and created amazing memories at this place. Even though I had lost some friends, I have also gained long-lasting friendships with my coworkers and residents.

5

This job also provided great opportunities for the staff. We got bonuses, staff appreciation days, and most importantly, a college scholarship. Every year, the residents raised money to go towards a staff appreciation fund and a scholarship fund for all the students who work in the restaurants (since the majority of staff in the restaurants are in high school and college). The staff appreciation fund is what we received as a yearly bonus, and the scholarship fund was given to high school seniors every year. The generosity and the amount of scholarship money has increased every year since I've been there. The year that I left, the graduating students received twelve thousand dollars towards their tuition. It isn't given in one whole amount, it is divided up by each semester, and a portion of the check is sent to the school of the student's choice. I received the scholarship when I graduated high school in 2017, and it helped me immensely. I commute to Salem State, so college isn't as expensive as other schools or staying in the dorms. Getting the "college experience" can be the main priority for a lot of students, but I don't know why anyone would stay at a dorm in a college that is less than forty-five minutes from their house. I had a coworker that was a year younger than me. She lived 20 minutes from Salem State, but still chose to stay in a dorm, which was double what I was paying for semester. It seemed like a waste of money to me, but I was also the only person paying for my higher education. My parents weren't helping me pay for college. If students have the means to be supported through college by someone else, they should be able to have the experience and school that they want. Anyway, the scholarship allowed me to cover a good part of my loans

each semester. Both funds showed the immense generosity of the residents and how invested they were in the future of the students and their success.

Over the last couple of years, I have felt the love and generosity of the residents and have developed many friendships with them. It all started when I got hired after my sister, and then my brother got hired right after me. Apparently, it is unusual to be triplets and working in the same restaurant. The residents got a kick out of it and we were all over the community news, television program, and adored by them. Almost every single resident I went up to would say, “You’re one of the triplets, aren’t you?” When I tell you I heard that question for four years straight, I mean it. It was funny that we were well known in other buildings too, since we spent our time only in one building. That showed how many residents watched the community program. But it happened to be a great conversation starter. When talking to a resident I didn’t know so well, the triplet thing would eventually come up, and that brought a bunch of other questions along:

“Do you three look alike?”

“Do you have any other siblings or is it just you three?”

“What is it like growing up with three at the same time?”

“Who gets along better with one another?”

“Who was born first?”

Honestly, I loved how it worked as an ice breaker, and I enjoyed talking about the close relationship that I have with my sister and brother. As the years went on, the questions slowly stopped, but it was great to see how much of a positive impact the three of us had on Bayview. I miss the days when all of us worked together and had fun doing it. About 6 months before I left for good, I was asked the triplet question and it made me feel as if I was a newbie server again.

But I was a little sad because my sister had left the job and my brother transferred over to a different department so he was rarely seen. However, residents would still ask about them and I would try to provide the best updates about them as I could.

When word spread about us working together, we were printed in a small Boston globe article. I didn't even expect any sort of press about it. Someone came in to take a photograph of us, and we were asked a few questions about how we were enjoying our time together at Bayview. We were asked to do an interview for the retirement community's tv program, and went to the studio one day to film it. We got our own little microphones and everything was set up like a real tv studio which was really cool. Thankfully, it was all prerecorded and not live. For some reason, I feel more pressure knowing that something is broadcasting live. We sat on a couch together and answered questions about growing up together, working together, what our plans were for the future.

The studio was right next to our restaurant, but that was the first time I had ever gone inside. Past the computer room was a small room set up like a talk show. I had never done any type of interview or appearance on camera like that before, so I was nervous. I kept thinking about all the people that were going to see it.

A tall, broad man walked over to me and my brother and sister.

He shook our hands, "Hello there. My name is Rodney Jones. I am a fellow resident here at Bayview. I am going to be doing your interviews today."

There were a few other employees, making sure that the cameras were working, and one person walked up to the three of us, attaching microphone to our shirts. At that moment, I found myself wondering how I was talked into doing this interview. Even though my brother and sister were by my side, I was freaking out on the inside. We sat down on the orange couch together

across from Rodney, who was sitting in a separate chair. Another employee holding the camera steady signaled that it was time for us to start talking. Rodney asked a series of questions about our time growing up together and what it was like to work with your triplet siblings.

“How did you three all end up here working together at the same time?”

Olivia answered, “I was introduced to this job from a friend who used to work here. Once I applied and was hired, my two siblings also joined since my mom was pushing for all of us to get a job. We want to be able to save up for important things like cars and college.”

“It’s great that you have a mindset to work for the things you want in the future,” Rodney replied. Do you three have an idea of what you want to do for a career or where you want to go to school?”

I cleared my throat. “My sister and I were looking into Salem State University because it is close by and they have a good Education and English programs for us. I was leaning towards it because I want to still be able to work full time while I am in school.”

My brother chimed in. “I’m going to apply to Fitchburg State University. They have a really awesome criminal justice program. I want to be a cop, and there are one of a few schools that offer a 4+1 program that offers all police training in the fifth year. In that combined program I will be able to get both my Bachelor’s and Master’s in criminal justice.”

“Wow, it seems like you have that all figured out. That’s wonderful. Have you enjoyed working here together?”

“It’s always great to have people you know by your side,” I said. “At first, I was really nervous to start working here because I never had a job before. But the two of them gave me the confidence to start because I knew we would be able to work together and help each other. That’s the best part about being a triplet. There is always another person who is going through

the same things at the same time as you. We always had the first day of school together, doctors and dentist appointments together, school events together, you name it. To me, we are each other's support system."

"That is nice that you guys share such a strong bond. Thank you for coming in today, we really appreciate you taking the time to sit down with us for Bayview television."

Our interview is what made us popular with the residents around the entire campus, so when I would visit other buildings, I would also hear the question pop up sometimes. It also wasn't the last time the three of us would do an interview together. Approximately two years after the three of us started, we graduated high school and received the scholarships. The tv studio asked us to come in for another interview to talk about our official college plans that didn't end up straying from our original interview. We talked about how much the scholarship fund was helping us for school, so that the residents knew how much of an impact they made for all the graduating students. Our interview was also a sort of "thank you" for the generosity of the donations they provided.

All I can say is that this place definitely helped with my public speaking and social anxiety. It broke me out of my shell and gave me lasting friendships and memories. In order to get something I needed or if I needed help, I had to ask someone, which was my least favorite thing to do. But I also learned how critical teamwork was. All of the staff had an integral role of keeping the place running smoothly. I had a lot of people that I depended on when running the front desk. When people didn't show up, we were put to the test because we had to pitch in a lot more to get things done. There were nights that we struggled more than others because there

were so few of us. There is a lot of moving parts when running a restaurant so communication was one of the most important elements.

Since I began hostessing (sitting tables, checking wait times, making sure the front desk runs smoothly, and more) it involved a lot more communication and multitasking which had definitely improved my social skills. I had to talk to the servers and see how they were doing and if they were overwhelmed or not. I had to make sure that they are ready for another table, and to communicate to the bussers about which tables I needed cleaned at a certain time. I also wrote down the tables for each server, when the people sat and how many people were at the table, as well as check people in and put them on a wait if all my servers are busy. Before the pandemic, I had thirty to forty minute wait times that usually lasted more than half the night because we were the busiest restaurant on campus. This job made me more outgoing than I had ever been before. I went from never saying a word in class at school to going to work and talking with everyone there. Without this job, I wouldn't have met a ton of people (some good and some bad).

6

When working in an environment with a ton of other high school students, there is usually one big thing on everyone's minds. College. I started working when I was a sophomore in high school, but I made many friends at work who were graduating, applying for scholarships, thinking about financial aid, and deciding on which school to go to. One junior year started, all anyone could think about was where they wanted to go for school and how to apply for college scholarships. This gave me an early glimpse into preparing for what college looked like, and watching my friends go through it mentally prepared me for the dreadful day of finishing high school.

I say "dreadful" because part of me dreaded the thought of graduation day and having to move onto a new chapter in my life. As exciting it may be, I have always been resistant to change. Having a shy personality and being an introvert can hinder me from new challenges and experiences because I become anxious and nervous. Those emotions outweigh the excitement of starting something new. I specifically remember being almost reluctant to even go to my high school graduation because the thought of walking across the stage in front of so many people made me nauseous. I didn't like any sort of attention on me, so I felt like I psyched myself out when it came to things like that. Trying new things is always beneficial in the long run, but I don't enjoy the feelings of anxiety before.

But at that age, I had absolutely no inclination on what I wanted to do career-wise, which also meant I had no idea what school I was going to end up applying too. I am not the best decision-maker, and this choice is one of the biggest ones you can make. Since I wasn't sure about what I wanted to do, I didn't know what made each college so special, or why people had only one dream school. To me, all colleges served the same purpose of providing a higher

education. Even though I was so young, I sometimes felt alone in my struggles of being undecided because both my brother and sister had always known what they wanted to do. As a triplet, we went through all the stages of childhood together, but this time it was different. We had plenty of time until we had to start applying for schools, but being the only sibling that was unsure made me feel like I was behind. Looking back, I realize that it is completely normal to be unsure of what you want to major in or have a career in, especially since you are still able to get into college and start off as undecided if you haven't chosen a major. But 15 year old me panicked at the thought of not having it figured out.

Once junior year rolled around, we all started to turn our focus to potential colleges, meetings with guidance counselors became more frequent, and we were given info on scholarships. We were told that the time between junior and senior year would fly by, and soon enough, college application deadlines would be right around the corner, and they were right. Soon enough the decision that I thought was years away, was now right in front of me. Students were handing thick folders with every kind of scholarship imaginable, and we were told to apply to as many as we were qualified for. As the application deadlines moved closer, I knew that I wanted to go somewhere close by so I could save money and still have a similar routine as I had in high school.

There are a million reasons why students might choose the college they enroll in. Some students want to move as far away as possible so that they can live in a dorm and get the "college experience." That freedom away from home can be a big deciding factor. Other teens may decide to choose a commuter school. It also depends on what school can cater to each student specific needs and what programs are the best for their degree. For me, choosing a school went pretty smoothly since I had already decided my factors of wanting to live at home and work full time. I

just needed a school that was nearby and wasn't too expensive since I would be paying for school on my own. Salem State University was only 15 to 20 minutes away from my house and was pretty affordable with financial aid. With my 3.6 GPA, I researched the school and knew that I would definitely be accepted. I applied on Halloween of that year since applications any time before November were free, and I stopped my search for a school.

Danvers High school had one school day that was reserved for senior students to tour a college campus of their choosing before they had to apply. The faculty provided a list of colleges like North Shore Community College, Salem State University, Endicott College, and UMass Amherst that they would transport us to in the morning. My sister and I signed up for the Salem State tour with a few of our friends. Since we had shown more interest in Salem State and sent our application in, we chose that one for our tour. That morning we arrived at the school, Dunkin' Donut's iced coffees in hand, excited to skip class and go see a college campus. We piled on a bus with 20 of our peers and took the short ride to Salem State. Some of our unluckier peers went on the long bus ride to UMass Amherst. We later found out that the trip they had involved someone throwing up and another kid peeing in a water bottle during the trek and then spilling it everywhere by accident.

The last time I had regularly been on a school bus was in elementary school. So when I got on the bus with my friends, we immediately ran to the very back and snagged the last two rows of seats. When we were younger, the best place to sit on the bus was always in the very back. If the bus hit a pothole or went over a bump, you would feel it the most in the back, and we

would jump out of our seats a tiny bit and pretend we were on a rollercoaster. I sat down next to my sister and touched the rough and cracked leather of my seat. In that moment it reminded me of our bus rides together when we were little. And now in the blink of an eye we were able to graduate high school and pursue our individual dreams.

We arrived at the central campus and some Salem State students arrived to give us a tour. I was immediately content with what I saw because everything was close together and I was trying to avoid a very large school and campus (the Starbucks on central campus was also a plus). Going from building to building, I envisioned myself going to school there, sitting in classrooms, studying in the library, and hanging out with friends in the commons of the North Campus. Seeing the campus for myself and walking amongst other college students made me more comfortable with idea of a new school and chapter. This is when my sister and I both decided that we would be attending Salem State together. Touring the campus and knowing that my sister would be going there with me, made me feel genuinely excited to start something new. I can't imagine not having a sibling to do things like this with. If I was an only child, I feel like I would have been stuck in my shy shell forever. Some people go away to college specifically on their own to find some freedom, but I wanted nothing more than for my sister to go with me and to still have my family close by.

A couple of months before I sent in my college application, I decided on what my major was going to be. Since I was very little, I have loved to read and always had a book in my hands. Unlike my brother and sister, I liked summer reading for school, I was always keeping track of

the books I read and how many, and I enjoyed the books assigned in English classes. The assigned reading helped me expand my horizons past my typical young adult fiction and fantasy reads. I even discovered a love for reading historical fiction that I wouldn't have known about if it weren't for reading books like "The Things They Carried" or "The Tattooist of Auschwitz." Over time, one of my favorite class became English and I thrived with essay based assignments rather than quizzes and tests. Junior year, I thought that I would be going into college undecided, but then I realized that my passion for reading also turned into an enjoyment for writing. I felt like an English major would be a perfect fit for me, and I haven't looked back.

My all-time favorite class that surpassed all the other ones I had taken was Independent Reading. You could sign up for it as an elective, and you had to read a total of five books during the semester. The best part was that what you read was completely up to you. For each book, you needed to submit a series of worksheets about your analysis on it. The analysis would consist of any important quotes, aha moments, questions, or interpretations you had about the book. It was like a dream come true for bookworms like me. There were no lectures, only silent reading. The course was made for you to work at your own pace, and you met with the teacher if you wanted to discuss your progress. For your grade, all that mattered was participation and the completed worksheets that you submitted for the final. So basically, all you had to do was show up to class and read. I loved this class so much I took it three times. For this class, you were allowed to take it as a college-prep course which is normal level, or you could choose to take it as an honors level course. The only difference is that for the honors level, you have to read ten books a semester instead of five. Both times I had the course, I was in the honors level because I felt that I could keep up with that much reading. It became difficult to juggle sometimes with the course load of my other classes, but my love for reading outweighed the negatives.

One day during my junior year, I had walked into school before the morning bell, heading straight for the library where I usually spent my time before being summoned to first period. I was holding four novels under my arm, reading to return them and eagerly browse the shelves for my next reads. Usually, we weren't able to check out so many books at a time, but I read them quickly and always brought the books back in good condition. The library had an amazing section of young adult fiction that I would get lost in every morning.

That library holds a special place in my heart because I was consistently introduced to a bunch of different authors and series. I would pick up a book that looked interesting to me, and then I would end up spending the whole month reading all of that author's books. But there was one recommendation that I still remember today. In freshman year, I had one of the best English teachers I have ever had. We'll call him Mr. P. There wasn't anything special about the class, he just made it fun to come to. He was always humorous and making jokes, and used his whiteboard in the back of the class for students to write inspirational quotes on every day. Whatever problem you had, school related or non-school related, he let you sit in his room after school and relax.

I had stayed after school one day with my brother so he could talk to the teacher about a homework assignment. We were in the same class. My brother then went to write a quote on the board, and Mr. P and I started talking about books, since I was holding a new stack of them.

"That's a whole lotta books you got there," he said.

I replied, "Yeah, I can never decide with which one I am going to start first."

"I share the same struggle. What's your favorite genre?"

"Young adult fiction is my go-to."

"Do you like thriller or mystery books?"

"Like true crime books?"

“Kind of. There’s this author Tana French who write fiction, but with detectives and murders. More psychological stuff. Her book ‘In the Woods’ is about a pair of detectives on a murder squad in Ireland. Good stuff.”

“That actually sounds really good. Do they have it in the library?”

“Oh yeah, they have a bunch of her books in there.”

“Hmm, I wonder why I hadn’t noticed them yet.”

“Me too,” he looked at my books. “It seems like you are gonna read all the fiction books in the whole library before you graduate.”

I smiled, “That’s the plan.”

“Well read it and let me know what you think,” Mr. P said. My brother walked over to us, proud that he had written a Michael Scott quote from The Office on the board. “You’re gonna be impressed.

And I definitely was impressed. I read ‘In the Woods’ and it is still one of my favorite books today. As soon as I could get a hand on another one of her books to read, I was excited. Turns out, that it was the first book of a series about that murder squad. I consider her to be one of my favorite authors, and even now, as a super senior obtaining my masters degree, I am still buying her books. I ran an errand to Target, doing my usual routine of stopping by the book section even though I have too many books on my shelf that I have not yet read. A book caught my eye, and I realized that Tana French has put out another book, one that I hadn’t read. I immediately scooped it up, and it made me think of my freshman year in high school and how Mr. P gave me one of the best book recommendations that I have ever had.

But back to my story. I walked into the library, exchanging out my books for four new ones. The first one I put on the checkout counter was “Paper Towns” by John Green (I was in a John Green phase after his popularity from “The Fault in Our Stars”). I had some downtime before first period so I decided to start that one. But it was so good, that I couldn’t put it down, and kept reading in most of my classes that day, only stopping when I needed to go to my next class or to briefly pay attention to the teachers. Next thing I knew, I had the entire novel finished in last period, with 30 minutes left of the school day. Once the bell rang, I headed back to the library to return the book so I wouldn’t have to bring it home with the other books I had. The same librarian who checked my book out that morning helped me, and she was so surprised to see that I had finished it already. I have always read really fast and had a passion for books, so it was nothing new to me.

Nothing felt natural to me except for reading and writing, so that is how I ultimately decided to become an English major. I wasn’t the best at creative writing, but I felt like I had more talent in academic and nonfiction writing, which is why I took the professional writing track for my English major. But reading is a passion of mine that will always stick with me and helped me find my way through college.

At the retirement community, all of the residents had a campus fund that they donated to every year for college scholarships for the student employees. Every year, student workers that were going into college were eligible for the scholarship if they completed 1,000 hours of work before they went off to school. The flexibility of work scheduling and the environment of working with other kids my age is what originally caught my eye about the job, and then learning about the scholarship opportunity was the icing on the cake. It showed how much that the company and its residents cared about the students who were working in their dining rooms. It was their way of showing us that they were grateful for the work we were doing.

Each year, all of the graduating seniors that were working in the dining team on campus would be given matching t-shirts to wear for a few months to celebrate being a scholar. The residents loved seeing all of the students who were going into college. They enjoyed talking to each student about what school they were going to, what their major was going to be, and what they wanted to do.

I loved seeing how it brightened the resident's day and how proud they were to be donating to such an important fund. Every dining room on the campus displayed a large poster of the current amount of money that was being raised. On the edges of the posters were the student photos of the kids who worked in that specific dining room, along with what college they were attending, and what their goals were for the future. Education was such an important aspect to the residents and the company. The retirement community prided itself on providing flexible part-time jobs to young students and the scholarship to help them in college. Since almost all of the dining waitstaff were high school students, the environment was always energetic, bustling,

and fun. The residents love coming to lunch and dinner to socialize with both their neighbors and the kids.

When my senior year came around, I had been working in this community for approximately three years. All of the other senior students and I received our matching blue scholar t-shirts and our faces were now up on the poster that tracked the donations. Every night that I served, each table of residents would ask where I was going to school and what I wanted to do. Their interest was wholesome. It would sometimes sparked interesting conversation because they would often know someone who was in the career field related to what you were doing, or might have had experience in it themselves. I once had an enlightening conversation with a resident who had worked as an editor for the New York Times. He talked about how he would be assigned the most interesting news articles to edit, but he mostly veered off topic to talk about his lovely wife whom he came to dinner with every night. He reminded me of how experienced this generation was and how we can learn so much from them

Waitressing for them allowed me to get to know them on a personal level and discover that each resident had their own multitude of knowledge and experience.

Since the residents were so generous in their donations, the campus put together a scholarship ceremony each year where the students could go and accept the scholarship with the residents in the audience. They could personally go and see the students that they were helping financially with school. At the time, my brother, my sister, and I were working there at the same time and received the scholarship together. Already excited about us getting the scholarship,

residents were even more enthused to see triplet siblings getting the scholarship together. We were always congratulated on all of us going to college at the same time (with a few honorable mentions to our parents who supported all three of us). People always bless my mom and dad and ask how they raised the three of us to be successful and goal-oriented students, but to be honest, I have no idea either. I appreciate all that they had done for us to make us the best versions of ourselves that we can be. That night, each student was allowed to bring their parents to ceremony as well, and there was a cocktail hour beforehand where the residents, students, and parents could meet.

As soon as my family walked into the reception room, we saw a lot of familiar faces that we serve and my siblings and I introduced our parents to a lot of the residents. I could see the excitement on their faces and they were so happy to meet them, which warmed my heart. This was just a job to some kids, but to me, I made some deep connections with the residents and knew them on a personal level. I knew the names of hundreds of residents and had a close connection to dozens.

Two ladies, Roberta and Margie, were people I had seen almost every single day I worked there. Their group of six ladies sat together every single night and were some of the funniest ladies I talked to. As soon as they walked into the dining room, we always joked around with one another and they made serving an absolute breeze. When I wasn't busy, we would talk about things like school, family, and they would talk about their past, their families, or what activities they participated in on campus. Whenever I talked about my family, they would always say things like, "God bless your parents, they raised wonderful children, please tell them we say hello," etc. Leading up to the scholarship ceremony they would talk about how excited they were to see all the kids who were graduating and how fun it would be to meet the parents and

socialize. I introduced them to my parents and they were so ecstatic and funny. The two of them gave hugs to my mom and dad and gushed over the three of us. I could tell that this was a really proud moment for my parents because you always want to hear good things about your children and want them to be successful.

After the reception, everyone filed into the chapel where the ceremony was being held. The students sat in chairs in front of the pews to the left, while speeches were held. A few managers from the dining team said a few words about their students, and some residents came up to front to talk about the scholarship program. A well-known and generous resident named Richard spoke last. He had the largest donation that year in the scholarship fund and explained why this was so important to him. His wife Alice had passed that year in 2017 before they had put in their donation. Before she was retired, she was a teacher, and was very passionate about her career. She dedicated her time to educating and shaping young minds, and education was something that was really important to her.

He donated a large amount that year in her memory and said that he was proud of us for continuing our education. His speech left a few of us in tears (including my mom), and it showed how much we mean to the residents. It reminded me of how rewarding it is to come to a job where you can make so many connections and relationships with people. Sometimes, our faces would be the only ones that some residents would see that whole day. Working with that specific age group meant that a little more care and compassion was needed, but it was also given back.

The scholarship that year was \$8,000 per student, and has only continued to grow each year. Last year in 2021, it went up to \$11,000 per student. The total was split evenly between the number of semesters being completed, and the retirement community would send a portion of the money to the student's school each semester. Those of us who received the scholarship in the

past and were still attending school, received a small increase in the amount of money each year that the scholarship fund increased. Even though I commuted to a less expensive school, that scholarship fund made the college experience even easier. I only needed a small amount of loans on top of the scholarship and am now about to receive my second degree with a manageable amount of student debt. I am proud of the path that I chose because it fit my needs and Salem State University is an amazing school.

8

When working in an environment with the elderly, it is important to remember that every resident has decades of life experience, and probably has interesting memories to share with you. Some had been born in the Great Depression, others vividly remember what it was like to live their adolescence in the 1940s and 1950s. The world they grew up in was completely different than our own today. The residents enjoyed hearing about the student workers and what was going on in their lives, but I also found that talking to the residents about their own lives was just as enjoyable.

Growing up, I didn't have any grandparent figures in my life. My father's parents had passed away when he was a kid so I never knew them, and my grandfather on my mom's side passed away when I was six years old so I only have vague memories. I also wasn't close with my grandmother (my mom's mother). Watching all of my friends spend time with their grandparents and have close relationships with them sometimes made me jealous when I was younger. It's no fault of my parents, but I often wished that I had grandparents who would've attended my school events, taught me how to cook or bake, read stories to, or spent the holidays with.

But even though I didn't have anyone in my family who held the grandparent title, my first cousin was the closest I could get to that. Although we were cousins, she is now 70 years old. We have quite the age difference, but our bond became strong when my mom asked her to babysit me, my brother, and my sister when we were in the second grade. My parents both worked full time and needed someone to pick us up and watch us after school, as well as watch us during the summer.

My first memory of her was at my grandfather's funeral. I was standing along the wall with my siblings at the funeral home. We watched as family friends passed by, offering their condolences to my mom and her six other siblings. At the time, we didn't really have a strong concept of death and funerals, but we knew to be quiet and behave. I stared down at my black shoes with velcro straps and admired my white socks that had intricate lace around the top of them. It was better than looking at the coffin. The funeral was the first one I had ever been to, and I could feel the quiet and still atmosphere of the room. The air was filled with sadness, and I remember my chest feeling heavy. My mom squeezed my hand.

"Honey, go grab your brother and sister. There's someone I'd like you to meet."

Olivia and Gil at some point had wandered to some chairs during the service and were sitting next to one another, gently swinging their legs back and forth since their feet couldn't touch the floor. Olivia was wearing a short sleeve velvet dress with the same socks and shoes that I had been wearing. I wondered if the clothes were as uncomfortable for her as they were for me. My brother Gil had on a black kid's suit with a navy blue tie that was just a little too long for him.

"Mom wants us," I said as I tugged on my brother's sleeve. I led them over to her and noticed she was standing next to an older woman with a cane. She was a few inches shorter than my 5'7" mom, and she had light blonde hair that stopped just above her ears.

"This is Sandy. She is your cousin and she will be watching you guys from now on while your dad and I are working."

I looked up at her. "Do you have to work too?" I asked.

She chuckled. "I don't work anymore because of my age, but now that I have you three to look after, I bet I'll be busy." Her and my mom laughed. "Gosh I haven't seen them since they were babies, they grow fast."

My mom sighed, "Don't you know it. Soon enough they will be going off to college and I'll be wondering where the time went." She glanced over to the coffin. "I just wished my father would've been here for it."

Next thing I knew, Sandy had become a stable adult figure in our lives. She picked us up every day from school, helped us do our homework, made us dinner if my parents were running late, and had fun days planned for us whenever school ended early or there was a day off. At the time, our favorite place to eat was McDonalds because they had the kiddie meals that came with a toy. Every other Friday, Sandy took us to McDonalds, our faces pressed against the plastic container that had all of the newest toys as she waited in line to get us our food. She would carry the tray of food over to our designated booth, a large round one in the corner of the restaurant. We would tear into our meals eagerly, hoping to get the toy we wanted. Some visits ended in happiness, others in disappointment if we didn't get the one, we wanted, or had gotten the same toy twice in a row. We still loved it anyway because of the excitement and anticipation of opening them.

She helped keep us on track without schoolwork as the years went on, especially in the summer. Every year in middle school, we were assigned summer reading and needed to read a few books and complete an assignment for each one. Since I am an avid reader, I had no

grievances towards summer reading, but my brother and sister definitely did. They did their homework when they had too, but they would often procrastinate, and that habit was ten times worse during the summer. It was harder to concentrate when the sun was out and we had a perfect above-ground pool in the backyard. But summer reading meant a trip to the library which was one of my favorite things to do.

We used to go to the Peabody Institute Library in Danvers, Massachusetts. A 10 minute bike ride (or 3 minute car ride) from my house, the library sat next to a small pond, with a gazebo overlooking it. The gazebo was used by the town for events, high school prom pictures, or to feed the ducks. Its surroundings were perfect during a summer day for relaxing outside with a book. Since I wasn't yet old enough to have a job and earn money, I relied on my library membership to get as many books as I could. I loved browsing the shelves and making mental notes of what I wanted to get next time (apparently trying to check out 10 books at a time is frowned upon). Every summer, the library had a table up front on the first floor dedicated to summer reading books. The books were separated by which grade you were in so that it was easy to see your options that you could choose from. I was always eager and knew what books I was interested in ahead of time. However, Olivia and Gil didn't plan ahead and usually wandered around the tables, looking for any book to catch their attention, which didn't happen too often.

Neither of them enjoyed reading, and were slower readers because of it. This made it a lot harder for them. I could breeze through books, but I realized that it wasn't so easy for others who couldn't do the same. So in order to get them motivated, we all sat down in our living room together as a group and read. Sandy even brought a few of her own books to enjoy. Up until we finished all of our summer reading assignments, we helped each other along the way. For me, working alongside others, (even silently) helps motivate me to get my work done.

My favorite places nowadays to do homework are Panera and Starbucks. The public atmosphere somehow keeps me focused. Working from home is almost impossible for me because I can often get distracted by my TV or my bed. Having a different environment makes me feel concentrated because I can't just go lay on my couch. But just like when I used to sit with my siblings and complete the homework together, I work better when I am around other people. I prefer to sit down and work on homework with my sister, but if she isn't available, public places are the next best thing. I overthink and get writer's block when I am alone because I put too much pressure on myself.

Summers were still really fun with Sandy, even if we didn't like that she made us do our homework. Most days we would stay at home by the pool, visit parks, or go shopping. But one day every summer, she would take us to Canobie Lake Park. We looked forward to that day the most out of the entire summer (and the whole year, besides our birthday). We marked the date that she chose on our kitchen calendar every year with a red circle. It was her special tradition with the three of us. We would get up early in the morning and pack our miniature backpacks with a water bottle and snacks, and she would take us to bagel world for breakfast. Then we would set off to Salem, New Hampshire, so we could enjoy some rides, amusement park food, and carnival games.

For years, I would go on almost every single ride at Canobie, except for their rollercoaster Untamed. The completely vertical ascent would be enough to make anyone's stomach turn just from looking at it, and the complete loops around the track was icing on the

cake that convinced me that I would never go on it. Until the summer of 2013, when I had just turned 14. Olivia had shown me up last year by being the first one to conquer the coaster.

Her long brown ponytail was almost undone with pieces frantically waving around her face as she stepped off the rollercoaster. She had a large grin on her red face.

“That...was...AWESOME,” she yelled as she made her way back over to us. “You guys have to go on it. I’ll even go again with one of you.”

Gil replied, “Do you see that line for it? No way. We already waited almost an hour just for you to go on.”

I nudged him in the ribs. “What he’s trying to say is that he is too chicken to go on it.”

“Shut up! No I’m not!” He protested. “I don’t see you running to get in line.”

I looked up at the rollercoaster and felt my stomach turn into knots. “Ummm....”

“That’s what I thought.”

“Whatever.”

Olivia chimed in. “Are you guys going on it or not?”

“No,” we both said in unison.

“Then I dare both of you to go on it next year.”

So there lies the reason as to why I was standing in front of the massive coaster, with my heart racing and my hands sweating. This ride was the monster of all rides, bigger and scarier than the Turkish Twist or the Yankee Cannonball. The line wrapped around multiple barriers, so the wait had been approximately 45 minutes. This just antagonized me more. I inched closer and closer to the front of the line, and had more time to think about the ride. What if my seatbelt isn’t all the way fastened? What if the coaster stops when we are upside down in a loop? What if it breaks and we fly off the track? All of these things were a little far fetched, but I’ve always been

able to focus on the worst case scenario. Olivia gripped my hand as we got to the front of the line. The next car started to pull up, eager for its next passengers.

“You, ok?”

“Yeah,” I replied. I tried to swallow but my throat was suddenly too dry.

“Can’t turn back now,” she joked.

But I was already saying the same thing in my mind.

We settled into our seats on the coaster and we were in the front row. I didn’t know if that was a good thing or bad thing. The employees checked our seatbelts, and we waited for the coaster to start. I was so nervous that I didn’t feel like I was in my own body. As the coaster started its ascent, we headed toward the top completely horizontal, and all I could see was the sky and clouds. That brief moment of stillness before the coaster barrels down was the most terrifying moment of my life. We move, and the wind immediately whips against my face and I could barely keep my eyes open. I tried to yell but nothing came out so I held on for dear life. Another minute later and it was over. Olivia and I stumbled off the coaster and made our way to the photo counter. The photo displayed showed Olivia sticking her tongue out at the camera while I clutched the handles and had my eyes squeezed shut. There was a look of pain across my face.

“Dude, I told you to smile for the camera.”

“Bro, I couldn't even keep my eyes open!”

The relief I felt was stepping off the coaster washed over me, and I realized how intense the rush of adrenaline was. Other rides were fine, but they still didn’t compare to Untamed. I was already thinking about next year and how I beat my fear of rollercoasters.

“Well at least you survived. Next year we are going to the next level.”

“But Untamed is the biggest ride here,” I said.

“Duh! I know! We are going six flags next year!”

Sandy became someone that I spent almost (if not more) time with than my own parents. Because of the age difference, people mistook her for our grandmother instead of our cousin, and instead of correcting others, she embraced it. She watched us grow into young adults. Her babysitting career eventually just turned into “hanging out” with us with the older we got. Once we had gotten our driver’s licenses, she didn’t need to drive us anywhere anymore, (we still let her drive us around when she wanted to). We were old enough to take care of ourselves, but we loved having her around anyway.

I can’t remember the last time that she had spent watching us because it happened gradually. Over time, we started seeing her less and less, but we made sure to keep meeting up, especially in the summertime. One sweltering day in summer after my junior year, we had met up with Sandy and were eating lunch at the local Outback Steakhouse.

“I don’t know what I would have done without you guys,” she said. She pushed her food around on her plate with a fork. “Now that I don’t see you guys as much, I’m not as busy as I used to be.” Since we had known her, she has lived in a condo in a couple of towns over by herself. Her three kids are grown and have their own families, and she became a divorcee decades ago.

“Well I can promise you that we will always be a handful, and we are just one phone call away whenever you need us,” I reassured.

“Yeah Sandy,” Gil chimed in. “I’m always gonna need someone to help me shop for clothes. You’re the best at picking out my color combos,” he joked.

I noticed her eyes began to tear up a little. She chuckled softly. “Yeah, you’re right.”

“You’ve been there for us as long as we can remember,” I said. “And now it’s our turn to be there for you.”

9

Working at this retirement community has provided me with amazing friendships, relationships, and opportunities. I have always been shy and still have a more reserved and introverted personality, but I made connections (some positive, some negative) with a lot of people that I wouldn't have had the opportunity to meet without this job. Job experience always helps people make connections, but this specific environment allowed me to connect with a lot of people my age, and others across all different departments. Throughout the last six years, a lot of these friendships have come and gone, but I still have the memories to look back on. I always made it a priority to get along with the people I worked with because our staff relied on being a team to get the work done. It was easier and more fun to work together than by yourself.

However, one lesson that I have learned is to never personally recommend people you know for the same job as you. I have many examples as to why this is a bad idea. When you recommend someone, you are vouching for them, and their actions reflect back on you. If they do not follow through with their responsibilities, stop showing up, and have bad behavior, then you look bad for recommending them in the first place.

At the beginning of my junior year, I had sat down at a lunch table after 4th period, where my friends Angela and James were sitting.

“Hey, what's up?” I asked.

Angela had her laptop set up next to her and was quickly shoving half of a ham and cheese sandwich in her mouth. “Nothing much,” she said mid-chew. “James and I are looking for jobs. We are trying to save up and get our own cars.”

“Yeah, my car keeps breaking down every other week. I need something new,” James said. He was right. If he kept driving his 1999 gold Toyota Camry, I was afraid it might implode on him someday.

“I’m not sure if you want to work in a retirement community,” I said. “But the hours are flexible and you can create your own schedule. It’s super convenient for students and they also have a scholarship program.”

“What do you have to do,” Angela inquired.

“You just take tables and serve them their food. It’s fast-paced but pretty easy. I’ve been there for about six months now.”

James took a break from peeking at Angela’s computer. “That’s not bad.”

“Angela, let me see your laptop.” She handed it to me, and I pulled up the company website. “If you guys are serious about it, just apply here at the bottom of the page and I will let my managers know about it. If I don’t tell them, then we might not end up working together.”

“What do you mean?” They both said.

“Well there are like four different restaurants on their campus, so if they don’t know I am recommending you, they won’t know to put you guys in the same one as me.”

“Tell them as soon as you can!” Angela exclaimed. “I don’t want to work in another restaurant with a bunch of randos. James and I want to work with you!”

“Relax Ang, it’s no big deal. I’ll just tell them when I go in tomorrow.”

“Good.”

When I went into work the next day, I made sure to tell my manager Tyler that my two friends were applying. We desperately needed staff, and I didn't want the other restaurants to steal them. When the dining team recruits new employees, they divide the applicants up randomly between the restaurants depending on who needs staff the most or where they can fit in the best. The restaurant I ended up in was called the Oxford Lounge, and it was (and currently is) the most popular and busiest restaurant on the campus. I didn't choose it, but it was where my sister was hired first (I will get into detail later about that). If you were hired with no connections, you didn't get to choose which one you worked in.

So a few short weeks later, Angela and James were hired. At first it was a good thing, but then it quickly looked bad on my part. We needed employees who were going to stay for at least more than six months, and we weren't having any luck with some of the new hires coming through. I thought the scholarship program would entice them to stay for a longer period of time. They started to get a hang of the duties and how serving worked. Angela struggled a little bit more just because she was kind of clumsy. She was sometimes accident prone, and this type of restaurant environment was filled with all kinds of possible scenarios, for slips, trips, falls, and accidents.

She had broken more things than I'd ever seen anyone break (besides me). Every day it was something; a cup, a plate, dropping food onto the floor, spilling drinks, tripping inside the beverage stations, etc. I admired her ability to push through it and still have a smile on her face. She had the sweetest personality and enjoyed the job for a while, but when her clumsiness didn't subside, she grew tired of making mistakes. One day in the middle of a dinner shift, she leaned against the wall next to me, a small tray dangling from her left hand.

“I don’t know if I can keep doing this,” she sighed, wiping her forehead with the back of her other hand. “I can’t seem to go one shift without dropping something or losing my balance.”

“Ang, it’s okay. Everyone messes up.”

“Yeah, but I do it all the time. I think I need some desk job that requires me to sit and have minimal movement. At this rate, I’m going to accidentally knock over a resident or something,” she joked.

“Don’t beat yourself up,” I encouraged. “I think you’re doing great.” Considering our other employees, I was just glad she hadn’t been doing things like vaping, not showing up, and refusing to do tasks, like some of the other kids have been doing.

She looked down at her feet. “Mmm. Thanks.”

Not even a full month after I had gotten her the job, she quit. And little did I know that just a few days later, James would be out the door too. He didn’t have any particular reason for quitting besides the fact that he didn’t really like it. But he also didn’t like any other jobs either. For the rest of high school, he didn’t have a job and had the luxury of his parents being able to pay his car payment, car insurance, and phone bill.

I felt guilty for vouching and recommending two employees just for them to leave in less than a month. At least Angela had given them her two weeks notice. James didn’t even give them anything. He was there one moment and gone the next. If you recommend someone, the last thing you want them to do is quit without even giving them a notice. It makes you look bad because you had thought that they would be a great asset to the work environment. But all it does is show that you have bad judgement. It is just easier to not invite your friends and just leave the situation alone.

Olivia had learned about the retirement community through a friend of hers who was a senior at our high school. They were in the marching band together and spent a lot of time hanging out with their mutual friends. Senior prom was approaching in a few months, and he had yet to find a date. Their relationship was completely platonic, and he asked Olivia to be his date to the prom.

As a sophomore, she was excited to attend a senior prom, especially since a lot of her chorus, theater, and band friends were seniors. Olivia and I were looking forward to her dress shopping, hair appointments, and nail appointments. Once the prom day had arrived, we dropped her off at his house and spent some time taking pictures of the two of them before they headed off to Boston. Her dress was stunning. It was a sleeveless floor length black gown. Although the front was plainer, the dress was backless with beaded crystals. The crystals lined the neck of the dress, coming together into one strand at the back of her neck that draped beautifully down her back. It was old-school and timeless, and both classy and elegant.

Her dress was probably the best part of her night. The next day at school she shared details of the event with me, and how she became disappointed with her date.

“Sof, it was so weird. As soon as we got to the event hall, Rich literally left me alone the whole night. I don’t even know why he asked me to come with him. I still had fun because Shannon and Ashley were there, so I danced with them the whole time. But I could barely find him anywhere. When I did see him, I asked if he wanted to take funny pictures in the photo booth or dance with the girls, but he completely brushed me off and walked away! But like, you don’t leave your friend hanging like that, especially since I don’t know that many people in the senior class.”

“Hmm I wonder why he was being like that.”

“I have no clue, but I was telling Ashley about how he was pissing me off and I guess he saw my texts to her and now won’t even talk to me.”

“That’s honestly stupid, he’s the one that was being an ass,” I said.

“Whatever, I don’t have time for that immature bullshit. If he decides that he wants to get over his issues, then he can come talk to me.”

However, Rich had a flair for the dramatic and ended their friendship for unknown reasons. He blocked her on social media, talked about her behind her back to some of their friends, and distanced himself from her in afterschool activities. But in the time right before prom, Rich had gotten Olivia a job at the retirement community, where he had already been working at the Oxford Lounge restaurant. She got recruited there and they worked together briefly. After prom, she heard that he had quit and he didn’t go back to the restaurant. Olivia still speculates that it had something to do with her, but I’m not so sure. But since she started there, I started a month later in the same exact place, and that’s how I randomly ended up in the Oxford Lounge Restaurant.

Transferring restaurants was rare, but not unheard of. It usually didn’t happen because most kids either already knew, or bonded with their coworkers. If you worked in one restaurant, it was unlikely that you ever went to the others or even saw kids from the other ones. It was like each restaurant had their own little bubble. Some of the students had friends in other dining rooms, but never got to see them at work because of this separation. That is why it was so

important to personally recommend and recruit people you know, or else they would get snagged by another restaurant in the application process. Which is what accidentally happened to my best friend Shayna.

A year and a half after I had gotten hired, she wanted to work with me. Who doesn't want to work with their best friend? So I took a chance again and recommended her through my management team. We waited for her application to be approved. Once it had gone through, she began the process of orientation, where they gave you a binder with your restaurant information and gave you a tour of the campus. She called me as I was driving to work to tell me about it.

"Hey what restaurant did you say we were working in?" Shayna questioned.

"I work in the Oxford Lounge. Did you see Tyler there? He's my manager, he said he was gonna be running some of the orientations."

"Yeah, I saw him, but I don't think I'm in your restaurant. They said that I'm working in some place called Evergreen Cafe."

"What?"

"I said Evergreen Café."

"Yeah, I heard you, It has to be a mistake though. I specifically told them that I know you," I said.

"And you're sure that they listen to that?"

"Yeah, they always have."

"Well shit buddy," she quipped. "I got the wrong one."

"Dude, I'll talk to my managers and figure it out. I'm on my way now actually."

"Good lol, I don't want to work with a bunch of weirdos."

When I talked to my managers, they said she would have to start in the other building and get transferred to our building afterwards. But since it was up to Human Resources and the managers of the other restaurant, it took about 2 months to actually get her to come work with me, which I felt bad about. I promised her we would be able to work together, but she got put into a different building and didn't know any of her coworkers when she started. She felt a little alienated since most of the kids over there were already friends before the job or had been working with one another for a while. But once she had transferred, we were ecstatic to work together.

Until our friendship began to unravel.

People always talk about how great it is to work with your friends and how fun it is, but no one wants to talk about what happens after you aren't friends. And this friendship is the first of many friendships that I will lose in the coming years of me working there.

The friendship didn't end because of the job itself; it was worse.

Shayna was not always the nicest person, but I failed to see how toxic our friendship actually was. I gave her the benefit of the doubt because she wasn't awful to me, and it can be hard to let go of someone that you talk to every single day. I had other friends, but she was by far the closest, and we drove together to and from school every day since she lived two streets away from my house. We liked the same music, watched the same shows, and agreed about almost everything. But our relationship began to thin when she did not get along with my sister.

I have always believed that family comes above everything else, including friendships. It is extremely hard for me to bond with someone when they don't get along with my family. But girls can be complicated. They can often be nice face-to-face, and then hostile behind closed doors. Looking back, my one regret is that I should have ended the friendship sooner. I had many

reasons to, but wasn't the type of person to confront people or shut them out of my life. One of my personality traits is people pleasing and I hate myself for it. I am always advocating for people to be nice to each other and have always extended my friendship to others, which is why it was so hard for me to let go. I want everyone to be happy, but this was my first major realization of how that isn't always the case.

For a while, Olivia and Shayna had been cordial with one another. They shared some extracurricular activities, and the three of us would sometimes hang out. We would do homework together occasionally, go shopping, etc. They weren't super close, but from what I could see, they didn't mind each other's company.

But one night, Olivia came from Acapella practice, and you could tell she was in a bad mood. Her forehead crinkled and her mouth turned downward. Without saying a word, she threw her black North Face backpack onto the couch and walked into the kitchen to hang up her coat.

I wandered into the kitchen, an empty bowl of potato chips in my hand. "Sup."

"Hey," she muttered under her breath, her back turned to me.

"Are you good?"

"Fine."

"You don't seem fine."

"It's fucking Shayna. I'm literally gonna kick her ass."

"What happened?"

"We were at practice and Mr. Jacobs gave us all a 15 minute break so I went to grab a snack and headed to the bathroom before I went back into the classroom."

"Okay."

“And when I went to wash my hands, Shayna came in and she was being a bitch as usual. She was talking some shit, so I told her that she can’t fucking sing, and she literally slapped me in the fucking face.”

I almost dropped the bowl. “Are you serious?”

“Yeah dude, I swear to God it took every ounce of my strength not to knock that skinny bitch to the floor.”

“Shit.”

“Yeah.”

We stood in silence for a moment. I was shocked that it even happened, and wasn’t sure of what to say next.

“Have you told Mom?”

“Nah I just got home.”

“You should tell her.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know, maybe she’ll be able to call the school or something. She shouldn’t be able to just hit you and have nothing happen.”

“I guess…”

“Liv, I’m so glad you didn’t punch her lights out even though I know how badly you wanted to.

“I know.”

“I can’t fucking believe she did that.”

“Yeah.”

Once my mom found out what had happened, she was furious. The next morning, she was already going into the principal's office with Olivia to report what had happened. The school looked into it, but Shayna completely denied that she had hit her. Since there was no one else in the bathroom, it became a "he said-she said" situation and they couldn't prove that either person was telling the truth (even though we asked them if they really thought Olivia had made something like this up). There was no reason for her to lie about something like that, but the school decided to let it go.

And this is where the friendship should've ended. But it didn't. I wish I could explain why I decided to still be friends with someone like that, but I can't. When I look back on those days, I want to shake myself and say, "What the hell are you doing?" But it's a part of growing up. We make mistakes that we wish we could have prevented. A couple of months went by after that incident and things returned to normal little by little. She wasn't allowed of my house anymore, but we still talked at school and slowly returned to spending time together outside of school. And to my surprise, Olivia let the whole thing go and actually started talking to Shayna again too.

Later on in our senior year, the three of us were still working at Bayview. But two months before graduation, Olivia and Shayna's acapella group had a competition in Tennessee that they got to fly to. The rest of my family drove down to support them. We stayed in the same hotel and everything. The two girls were roommates together for the trip, which turned into a disaster because of Shayna. Long story short, she said things to my sister that should never be

said to anybody and she threatened physical harm. It was the last straw for me. Olivia would come down to our hotel room at night when the rest of her peers went to bed because she couldn't stay in that room anymore.

At the end of the week, we returned to Massachusetts and went back to school that Monday. Because of how she treated my sister, I completely cut off all contact and never talked to her again. Ever. Work made it a little more challenging because I had to put all feelings aside and get the job done while at work, but other than that, I refused to talk to someone who hurt my family. The feelings were complicated. I was happy to let go of such a negative person that I held so much anger for, but it was also hard losing what you thought was a best friend. I talked to her all day every day, so I missed that stable friendship. Only the friendship though. Not her.

11

One word that I can describe about working in the retirement community is turnover. During the six years I was there, I was always training new employees or introducing myself to a new manager. Being thrown into an environment where you are constantly showing other people the ropes or communicating with a new supervisor forced me to climb outside of my comfort zone.

I have always had a shy personality that shines when I am in situations where I do not know anyone. One prime example is school. Every semester, whether online or in-person, I join a new group of people for a class and immediately get nervous. Public speaking is not my strong suit, so even raising my hand to answer a question or offer an opinion is really hard for me. Every time I had to give a presentation or get called on in class my heartbeat instantly started getting a lot faster and I felt like my body was on fire. And even though I have grown over the years, I don't think I will completely get over my fear of public speaking or new social situations. I am a naturally quiet person with a matching personality, so I tend to just sit back and listen to what other people have to say.

But in a busy workplace, there isn't time to sit back and blend into the background. Due to constant turnover, me and a few other people were the most experienced servers that our restaurant had. This meant we had to train all of the newbies, but also had other jobs like bartending, hostessing, and the occasional shift in a different dining location or department. Communicating and multitasking were the main two requirements of the job. I was never one to voice if something was incorrect and tended to let things slide, but I learned quickly that I needed to speak up for myself if I needed anything or if tasks need to be done. Being a server is a job that's all about timing and customer satisfaction.

Serving could get exhausting, but for the better part of four years there, I was a hostess almost every night. I would be the first face the residents saw coming into the restaurant, I controlled all of the seating, and managed the flow of residents coming in. At first that sounds easy, but there is actually a lot of variables that go into it. I did all of my work on a single piece of paper at the front desk that was our floor plan. For us, the floor plan was our holy grail for the night, it had everyone's names on it and what their job was for the night. Our managers decided who had each of the jobs. Every shift before we opened, all of the kids would wait eagerly for the floor plan to see what they would be doing for the night. We obviously needed servers, but we also had jobs dedicated to seating customers, bussing tables, food running, dessert station, bartender, and the occasion food expo or dishwasher.

Waiting on tables was the main job, but the kids would complain if they had a section of tables that were larger, had the same section of tables a few nights in a row, if someone else had a better job than them, and so on. There was a least one person every night who was disappointed in the job they got. Our managers tried to switch it up every night, but we also needed to assign people based on their strengths in order to ensure that the restaurant would flow smoothly. We trained everyone in all the positions, but over time we noticed that some kids thrived better in certain jobs so there would be times were someone was stuck in the same job for a little while.

For example, there was a friend group of four boys who all got hired together and went through the training process. I had been there for approximately four years when they were new. For weeks, a few of my coworkers and I showed them how to wait on tables and communicate with residents, but they didn't pick up on it as easily. They often forgot parts of orders, were a little clumsy with bringing drinks over, and didn't have the best communication. As someone

who went through the same thing when I started, I could relate to their quiet demeanor when serving the residents.

But one night, my manager and I decided to see if they would be better off working in the kitchen area, running the food to the tables instead of waiting on customers. And on the nights that they worked together, we put them all on food running. When putting friends together for certain jobs, there is always that worry that they will goof off and get distracted by one another. However, we discovered that they had a good work ethic together and were more confident as a team. They were more comfortable around the younger (and mostly male) kitchen staff instead of the residents, and they were efficient with making sure all of the tables got the food that they needed. From that point on, they were in the kitchen every single shift that they worked, and the restaurant became a more enjoyable place for them instead of a place they dreaded going into. They didn't do as well individually, but found their strengths when working together in a group.

Once the floor plan was released, everyone would get ready for their role, and I took my station at the front desk, waiting for our normal flood of residents to come pouring in. All of our tables were numbered, and we had certain residents who would show up early before our 4pm start time so that they could grab their specific table that they wanted. One of the tables was Donald and Charlie, two best friends who sat together every single night. Don was tall with glasses, always in a new plaid shirt and tan khakis. Charlie was the opposite; he was just over 5'1" and always wore a suit and tie. He loved getting dressed up to go to dinner even though he lived two hallways down. Donald took a more relaxed approach with his appearance, but the one thing the two of them had in common was punctuality. They always showed up at the same time, and requested table number nine, a four-top that resided in the back left corner of the restaurant by the window. They were almost always the first people to sit down every night.

By the time I started hostessing, it became an unspoken rule that table number nine was reserved for them at the beginning of the night. Sometimes their friend Joan would come and sit with them, but most nights she cooked food in her own apartment. Don and Charlie wouldn't even have to ask to be seated, I would usually give them a wave and they would walk up to desk, grab two menus, and head on their way. I loved their routine; they already knew mostly what they wanted (unless something on the specials menu caught their eye) and they were easy to serve and polite.

Don loved photography and helped the staff in other departments by taking photos for community newsletters and sales events. He always brought his camera to dinner and his favorite night was Halloween. Every year, the staff would dress up in costume and all the residents loved it. They would try and guess what/who we were, and sometimes students would even dress up as their favorite resident, which always got a good laugh out of everyone. One of my coworkers even dressed up as one of my managers for Halloween and they coordinated matching outfits. Halloween was always a fun night for us because it meant we didn't have to wear our daily attire of long sleeve button up shirts, dress pants, and bowties. Don would take pictures of our costumes for the employee costume contest, and would also get the photos developed so we could have a copy of our own pictures. He loved having a hobby that helped out the communications staff and spend joy around the campus.

There were a few more groups of residents who had their designated tables just like Don and Charlie, but we also had a popular counter-top area for residents to sit if they came alone. There were eight seats side-by-side at the counter, facing our kitchen area through a glass window. Some residents enjoyed sitting there because it was a different from the tables, and they could watch the chefs prepare the appetizers in front of them. A lot of single residents were

regulars at the counter top and seated themselves there nightly. It was a self-seating area, so whenever there was a seat open, they could just walk up and take it. We had one server dedicated to just serving that counter area since the seating and number of people was at a different pace than the rest of the dining room.

For our dining area, we offered closed seating and open seating for residents to choose from. If a couple or a group of three came in and requested “closed-seating,” this meant that I couldn’t sit anyone with them and had to close off their table to any other pairs or singles that were coming in. A good number of couples would request that, but a significant portion of all the resident were okay with the open seating, which meant that an pairs or singles who needed somebody to eat with would be sat at any tables that had the room. This worked out well for us so we could consolidate seating and have more tables available, but that also gave residents the chance to get to know each other. We had a large population of residents who lived by themselves, so dinnertime could sometimes be the only time that those people could socialize and make new friends by sitting down with them. I was nice to see how welcoming residents could be towards those who had no one to sit with.

Serving here was also the first time I had encountered the deaf. Older people can often be hard of hearing as they age, but we had a few residents who had been deaf their whole lives. One of them was a lovely married couple, Bill and Marie. When they moved in, I didn’t realize they were deaf at first. They came in for dinner their first week on campus and I tried talking to them, but quickly realized once they started using sign language. I don’t know ASL, so I used hand gestures to show them to their table, and their servers each night would write down what they wanted to say and show it to the couple so they could order what they wanted. I had been their server multiple times after that and made sure that they were getting everything they needed and

made sure I communicated everything clearly. Over time, they developed a routine at the restaurant, and became one of the groups of people that showed up right before opening every evening. Soon enough, they discovered that they liked sitting at table 43, a small 2 seater booth against the left wall, and that became their go-to spot.

It was my first experience as a teenager serving someone with a disability, and I realized how different their world is from mine. Not everyone knows sign language, so they had to communicate by gestures, pointing, or writing down what they wanted to say. Although there were a few extra steps involved when serving them, I always loved having their table because they were really sweet. Every night, Marie would write a little note on a napkin to their server they had that night, which would often include some hearts and a thank you.

But once our clock at the front desk hit 4:00, the residents swarmed to the desk and our regulars grabbed their menus and settled into their usual places, with everyone else quickly getting in line. We had twelve sections of tables, with four or five tables in each section. This meant we had twelve servers on the floor. However, they could only take one table at a time, so if I filled up twelve tables as soon as we opened, I needed to go on a wait for people to be seated. On good nights, I could go almost the whole night without needing to put anyone on a waitlist and the seating of guests flowed really smoothly. But since we were the busiest restaurant on campus (and endured a whole year of another restaurant on campus being closed due to renovations), most nights we were on a wait, sometimes reaching to wait times of almost an hour if we were really slammed.

With the dining program on campus, residents signed up for a meal plan when they moved in. They could sign up for 20 meals or 30 meals a month. Most of them chose the 30 meal plan which meant that they got one meal a day from the restaurants. If they ran out of meals for the month, they could still purchase meals of food items by charging it to their residential bill. Almost every single resident chose to use their daily meal on dinnertime, so when they came in, we would use one meal from their plan. To do this, each resident had their own unique 6 digit number that we would punch into our computer systems to charge them. Their meals that they don't use expired at the end of each month, but they could bring family in to use the extra meals.

Almost everyone waited until the very end of the month to use them, so the last week of every single month was our busiest time. We served double the customers since almost all the residents were also bringing in family to eat with them. The phenomenon was always talked about throughout the dining team, and all us dreaded that time of the month. Many times I would come in for my shift, totally forgetting about what date it was and not realizing until we got really busy.

The very last day of each month was always the worst. There was lot of customers coming in, but the worst was charging the customers from their meal plans. If a resident was charged incorrectly just once throughout the whole month, it affected their last day of using their meals. Behind the scenes, if students were lazy and wrote down a resident's number wrong or forgot it, they would charge somebody else or leave the check open. It was hard to keep track of what all the servers were charging on a daily basis and if there were multiple transactions on a resident's number on the same night, it often wasn't caught until the end of the month when they were told that they ran out of meals.

Most of the time, residents kept track of their meals and would still come in after they ran out and charged it to their bill, but it was also common for a resident to come in and find out that their meal plan was messed up which is unfair to them since they are paying for these plans. I tried to stay on top of it as much as I could, but the rest of the issues were handed to the dining office team because they were the ones who could look at records and refund residents for the errors that were caused. Since the employee turnover was high in the workplace, there were always new servers who accidentally charged people incorrectly when they were waiting tables on their own. But this always sparked issues at the end of the month because when a resident is told they are out of meals, the server would then have to get the manager to look up records of when their meal plan was used and sort out the problem with resident before they can leave the restaurant. This would sometimes slow down the timing of when tables would get up, which made our waitlist longer since people weren't leaving.

As I seated customers throughout the night, I recorded everything on the floor plan. Every time a table sat down, I wrote which table was seated, the time, and the amount of people at the table next to each server's name. It helped me keep track of when a server got a new table and if they were ready for a new one. It involved a lot of multitasking because I needed to pay attention to which tables were filled, empty, or being cleaned for its next use, while also paying attention to how busy the servers were and if they were ready to take a new table. I was also doing this while keeping track of the waitlist. For the waitlist, I would write every new party down and hand them a buzzer, then record what time I gave them a buzzer and when they eventually got seated.

I was overwhelmed sometimes, but I loved the busy fast-paced environment. I performed my best when I was so busy that I was unable to think about anything else besides the task at

hand. When I was in a work state of mind, the three hours that we were open would fly by and I could slow down for the latter part of the night. After everyone was seated and all of the data from hosting was collected and given to the managers, I then had to wait for all of servers to be done with their tables, sections, and clean up jobs. It was my responsibility to check all of the work that they did was completed before they left, so I couldn't leave until everyone left, which usually lasted for another hour and a half once we were closed. As soon as closing time at seven o'clock rolled around, the last of the tables were seated and I went around the restaurant and collected a list of all the tables that did not receive their entrees yet so the kitchen could see exactly how many orders still needed to come through before they could stop cooking for the rest of the night. Once all the tables on that list can through with their orders, they could clean up the kitchen. We called that list "The Count." Every night leading up to closing time, the chefs eagerly waited for the "The Count" because that meant we were done seating tables for the night.

Once I delivered the list to the kitchen, I had a lot of downtime until everyone was finished, so I would vacuum the floors, clean up any extra objects like glasses or water pitchers that were left around the dining room and talk to my coworkers. If I didn't have any friends at work that night, the waiting period got really boring. But at the time, my managers were nice enough to let me sit in our private dining room area in a small room connected to our restaurant and do my homework if it was empty. The room was tiny, with just one large rectangular table, enough to seat 16 people. It was often empty unless a resident reserved it for dinner for a group of friends or family. So I often showed up to work with my backpack and laptop and was able to get a few hours of homework done when I worked the lunch and dinner shifts.

The work was very fast-paced, and I discovered while working there that I thrive in that sort of environment. I went from working somewhere that was bustling and busy, to a spa that

focuses on relaxation and quiet. Sometimes I find myself missing the days where I could talk to everyone and rush around waiting tables.

12

As someone who has always been a people pleaser, I am always focused on what other people think of me and try my best to be friendly to those I meet. I never like to say no when people ask for help, and I consider myself to be a hard worker and team player. Although the retirement community was my only job for a long time, I had no shortage of managers and superiors that I could report to. I noted earlier that at any time, each restaurant needed three managers, but there also seemed to be a lot of turnover in that department since I had 11 different managers within 5 years. There is always change that comes with new management, but I managed to handle it smoothly and develop a rapport with my managers. Having strong communication with superiors helps ensure smooth service and a positive work environment.

“Treat others the way that you want to be treated,” my mother always used to say to me.

I grew up thinking that if you were kind to others, they had no reason to treat you in a negative way.

That was until my most recent manager before I quit came along. Her name was Rachel.

I worked with her for almost two years, which probably the worst two years of my time working there. Having a bad relationship with any coworker, whether they were fellow servers or superiors, just made things awkward and lessened my desire to come in for work. It used to be a place I loved showing up to, until Rachel decided to test my patience time and time again.

I have no problem with a little tough love, especially since some of our waitstaff needed a little more prodding and direction when it came to getting things done right. Some didn't care or put as much effort in as others, and Rachel let them know the expectations that she had for them and us.

But after a few weeks, I knew that we were in for a challenging time. I noticed right away that the way she approached situations and talked to the staff (including me) was pretty much unacceptable. Managing others in an encouraging way while also being stern is possible, but I don't think she was aware of how to do it. I would describe her behavior as belittling and rude. I had managers who could sometimes be tough but you could tell that they had good intentions behind their words and just wanted the kids to be respectful and succeed.

I had been working with my friend Stephanie one day during a lunch shift. She was standing at the front desk, taking lunch orders over the phone and getting things ready for the dinner shift. A resident had called and specifically asked for Rachel and asked if Stephanie could write down a message for her to call them back. She wrote the message and phone number down on a sticky note and waited for a good time to give it Rachel. Once a little time had passed, she had seen that Rachel had a free moment and walked over to her to give her the note.

“Hey Rachel, I have a resident calling for you about their meal plan. They had a question about their balance,” Stephanie said, holding the note out for her.

Apparently, she was in one of her moods that day, because she took the note from Stephanie, crumpled it up, and threw it onto the floor between them.

“Yeah, I already know,” she said, voice filled with attitude. She looked down at the crumpled note and pointed at it. “Pick it up.” Before Steph could say anything, she walked away.

My friend told me what had happened, and how she felt belittled when Rachel told her to pick up the note that she had deliberately thrown onto the floor. She was caught off guard by Rachel's reaction because she had done nothing that would've rendered a bad attitude. But that was the problem with Rachel. When you came into work, you never knew if she was going to be nice to you, or really mean to you.

My boyfriend had been working there as waitstaff too. Another night, he had the responsibility of sweeping the beverage stations and under the counters at the end of the night. Every server had their own cleaning duty at the end and once they finished, they needed to check out with the manager on duty. He had just finished sweeping and called Rachel over to check it so we could leave. I had even checked it before she came over to make sure it looked good. She came over to us and scanned the station. There was an empty sugar packet that we had missed on the floor in the corner. Once she noticed it, she took the dustpan of the stuff he had swept up, and poured it all back onto the floor, making sure to spread it around.

She said, "Not good enough. Do it again."

And we had no choice but to do it all over again.

It was no secret that she made many employees cry and was even known to be incredibly rude when speaking to other kitchen staff and even her fellow managers. I am convinced that one of my managers left solely because of her. Over time, I even contemplated putting in my own two weeks notice because I couldn't stand her attitude and it didn't seem like she was going anywhere.

But around six months before I left the place for good, I was scheduled for a double and had been getting ready for work that morning. My shift began at 11:15am and I was about to head out the door when my landline rang. I answered the call because it was my bank calling to tell me that there was fraud on my account and someone had taken \$800 out of my account. I was on the phone with them trying to sort out the situation and trying to get my money returned to me. I couldn't leave my house because I was on my landline phone, but the call didn't take very long. I live a short two minutes away from the community, so the phone call only made me four or five minutes late for my shift. Usually if we are running late, we have to call the

restaurant and let them know, but I couldn't remember the number and figured it wouldn't be a big deal because it was only four minutes and the majority of those minutes was me trying to park the car and walk into the building. I rushed in and went to go punch in at the time clock, when I was confronted by Rachel. Apparently, I was the first one there for shift which meant that if I was a couple minutes late, everyone else was definitely tardy. I think that sent her over the edge.

“Sofia, why are you late?” she said angrily, arms crossed over her chest.

I was about to blurt out the whole situation with my bank and the phone call but only got two words in before she stopped me.

“You've been here for how many years now? I would assume that you know how to pick up the phone and call us, which is what you should've done in the first place. I don't know why you all think that it's funny to waste my time because you are first one here and late, which means everyone else is to. You guys think this is a joke but I expect better from you. Clearly you don't have respect for my time...”

I stare at her wide-eyed, completely caught off guard by the angry speech. “But....I...”

She continued, “I don't need to hear why you were late because I don't care. Next time you are late, I will write you up.” Right after that, she turned around and went back into the kitchen.

I stood there speechless. It was the final straw for me. Time and time again, she had flown off the handle for small things like this and had spoken to me in that way when I didn't deserve it. Yeah, everyone makes mistakes and I am not perfect, but my attendance record was perfect and I cared about the job and worked hard. What was the point of working hard and trying to help when all you did was get belittled and shut down? Unfortunately, I don't cry so

much when I am sad, I cry when I am really angry or frustrated. And I was really angry. So I went to the bathroom, and cried (I know I'm such a wimp). But again with the people pleaser personality; I try to help people as much as I can, I care about what they think, and I don't like confrontation. I knew that myself and my coworkers didn't deserve the way she talked to us. (Multiple claims were made by fellow employees to Human Resources, but no action was taken). We all came into work every day dreading to see her. Most of us tried to avoid working days that she was there, which was very difficult to do since she was there most days. If we knew she had the day off, we all wanted to pick up shifts and come in because it was way less stressful without her.

I continued to work the rest of the lunch shift and tried not to let her words and attitude affect me, but it still put me in a bad mood. After a year and a half enduring her behavior, I couldn't take it anymore. Myself and all my coworkers were tired of her disrespectful demeanor. On my break, I was sitting at a table in the empty restaurant. Rachel was on the opposite side of the dining room, and called over to me with a question.

“Sofia, did you print the lunch reports?”

“Yep,” I called over. I stood up to throw away my trash and to start getting ready for the dinner shift. We needed trays, cups, and other supplies, so I headed to the kitchen, passing Rachel on my way there. She stopped me.

“Do you have a problem with me?” she asked.

“No why?” I said. There goes my non-confrontational personality again. I wasn't giving her any attitude; I was just less talkative with her that day because of what she said. When I am mad at someone, you can tell because I become quieter around them.

“Clearly you have a problem with me, so if you have something to say then say it.”

Another common example of something she could have said in a nicer way.

I could feel my heartbeat racing in my chest. I couldn't hold back what I wanted to say any longer.

“You are the most disrespectful person I have ever met. Honestly, I don't care that you are my manager right now, because you don't even know how to talk with human decency.”

She didn't even seem phased by what I said. “The only one who is being disrespectful right now is you by saying that to me.”

“Don't even bring your position into this right now,” I said, hoping my voice didn't waver. “I have never had an issue with a manager before, and I have tried for a long time to let the things you say slide, but all of the kids in this restaurant can agree that you are degrading, and unnecessarily rude. You need to rethink the way you speak to people. Why do you feel like it's okay to tear us down all the time?”

I expected her to get furious and lash out. But instead, she sternly said, “I'm rude? I'm just doing my job. You need to think about how you're talking to a manager.” Ending the conversation, she turned around and went into her office. I thought she was going to write me up for my outburst, but that never happened.

Rachel wasn't the exact reason as to why I quit. When I had left, I just felt like it was the right time to move onto new things and experiences. But not seeing her ever again was a pretty big plus.

13

Out of all the residents, I do have a favorite. I talk to many of them who are sweet but there is one lady that I now consider to be family. Her name is Dolly. She is spunkiest, most fashionable, funny, and sweet 85-year-old woman I have ever met. . I can't even believe there was a time where I worked in the community and she didn't live there yet. I feel like she's been here for almost all of my life when she has only been in it for a few years. At first, I thought it was be a normal friendship between staff and residents like I have with a lot of them.

But after a few weeks of talking, Dolly became like a grandmother to me and she made me feel so loved. The first conversation I had with her was when I was waiting on her table for the first time. She regularly sat with her husband and another couple, Judy and George. Judy is also a sweetheart and her husband George suffered from dementia but was always smiling and happy to see us. The first thing she said to me was "Oh, Sofia I love your name it is such a beautiful name." She then proceeded to tell me how much she liked my blue nails (I get them done every two weeks) and she also showed me hers because getting manicures is one of her favorite things.

We hit it off instantly and since I was working full time a couple years ago, we talked almost every single day. My sister and I would vent our frustrations to her, tell her the gossip going around at the time, and tell her about anything new in our lives. She always looked forward to talking to us and we soon exchanged phone numbers so we could keep in touch. My sister and I took her out to dinner, and she invited my parents to eat with her and Bernie in the restaurant a few times. Even if I leave this job, Dolly will be a part of my life and it is so incredible that I have been able to create such a special bond with her. You never know where a path can take you in life, and in this case, this job had given me a lot that I am thankful for.

Don't get me wrong, there are a lot of bad days that come with the good, but that can also represent a lot of different places., What matters is that you look at the glass half-full and recognize the things you have learned from your experiences. There are some days where I lay in bed unable to sleep because of my legs and feet aching from a tough day, but there are also some days where I have great interactions with my coworkers and residents that improve my whole mood. I know that I can truly pick this place as the reason for my personal growth. It pushed me to have a solid work ethic and to make sure that the residents are enjoying a comfortable atmosphere in their own home. Working in a retirement community is not for everyone and may not seem like it could be a life-changing experience, but working with a ton of people can create a lot of great experiences and change a person's mindset.

Although I had fairly strong relationships with many of the residents, there were the two that held a special place in my heart. Dolly and her husband Bernie moved in to the community after I had been working there for approximately three years. My sister had gotten to know them first since she was serving tables most of the time, and she properly introduced me one night, almost a month after they had moved in. I had learned their names, but since I was so busy at the hostess stand, I hadn't had a substantial conversation with them yet.

The end of the dinner service was wrapping up, and Olivia briefly stopped by the hostess stand, balancing a small tray of assorted drinks in her hand.

"Hey," she said.

"What's up," I replied, eyes glued to the end of night reports I was trying to put together.

“When you are done putting the count in, come say hi to one of my tables. They are new and I told them that we were sisters.”

“Okay, what table?”

“Table 47, by the window. I’m gonna be over there once I drop my drinks off.”

“Sure thing.”

She wanders away, and I begin to get the count together, walking through the tables, clipboard in hand. Most of the tables are still full with residents chatting away, the atmosphere still buzzing. I take note of which tables are still waiting for their entrees, and I pass it on to the chefs, so they know how much longer until they can close up for the night.

I scoot past tables and get a little caught up with other residents who are waving their walker valet tickets in their hand. Since there isn’t enough room in the dining room for everyone to keep their walkers and wheelchair next to the tables, we have a ticket system where the residents receive a number that matches their item, and we put them in a separate area. This way, no one trips over anything and it clears the area for the servers to walk freely. If they want to go to the restroom or head home, they just hold up their ticket and we will come over with their walkers. I walked down the hall and retrieved three of them, almost stumbling when trying to maneuver them to their owners.

Without any other requests from residents or fellow servers, I made my way over to the back of the restaurant, and I could see Olivia kneeling down next to a table, waving me over. She was talking to two residents, that I could only assume were Dolly and Bernie. Dolly was petite, with light blonde hair styled in a shoulder length bob. She was wearing jeans and a hot pink sweater, with sparkly pink Coach shoes that matched. Her husband was tall, with round glasses and a contagious smile. Olivia was in between them with her phone in hand, showing them some

kind of comedic video online. All of them were laughing, and looked up at me when I came over.

“Hey guys,” Olivia said, nudging Dolly’s shoulder. “This is my sister Sofie.”

“Oh my God!” Dolly exclaimed, grabbing my wrist. “Finally, I get to meet the other one!”

“Hi,” I said sheepishly. Even though I am seen as outgoing at work, my shyness still peeks through here and there.

“You guys are absolutely adorable,” she gushed. “Aren’t they Bernie?”

Bernie laughed. “Yes, they are hon.” He stuck out his hand. “It’s nice to meet you.”

“Same to you,” I replied.

He finished up the rest of his ice cream, and stood up. “Well, I’m going to head upstairs for the night if you don’t mind.”

“Alright Bern,” Dolly said. “I’ll catch up with you later.”

I came to learn that this is their normal routine, they walk down and eat together, and later on, Bernie goes home to watch sports games and relax, while Dolly socializes. I like how they are able to spend time together but also do things that they enjoy on their own. After we said by to Bernie, I noticed that Olivia and Dolly were deep in conversation about shopping.

Dolly sighed as Olivia was scrolling on a shopping website on her phone. “I can never find good bras nowadays, everything is uncomfortable.”

“Girl, I feel you,” Live replied.

“Not to mention, sizes are always different. I don’t even know what size I would be at any of these stores.”

“Check some of your bras when you get home and we can see if we can find you some good ones online tomorrow.”

“Okay honey, sounds like a plan.”

The two of them talked like they had known each other forever, sharing all kind of stories and talking about anything, including bra shopping. Dolly’s personality was easygoing and welcoming, and soon I was talking to her and Bernie every single shift I worked. My sister and I hung out around their table towards the end of our shifts (don’t worry, we still got our jobs done). I learned more about them and my sister and I would gossip to them about everything going on in our lives. They were great company and were often entertained by the stories we would tell them. Whenever, we were going through something like a breakup or friendship problems, Dolly would ask us about it and check in with how we were doing. We developed a special bond, closer than I had ever been with any of the residents.

My sister and I learned from Dolly and Bernie that love can happen at any age. At first, we thought that they had been together for many years like a lot of the couples in the community. But one dinner shift when we were talking, Dolly was telling us how they met.

“We met through mutual friends, and at first I wanted nothing to do with him,” she joked. “I was like, ‘I’m too old for this.’ I had already been married twice before.”

“Wait what?” I asked.

“Woah, woah, woah, slow down” Liv said at the same time.

“Hold on were you guys when you met?” I said, fascinated.

“Yeah, we need a little context,” Liv chimed in.

Dolly laughed. “Yeah, Bern and I met in our sixties, and got married when I was seventy and he was seventy-two. We’ve been married for 12 years now.”

We said “Awww,” at the same time.

“That’s so cute! I had no idea.”

“I definitely wasn’t looking for anything at that age, but Bern stole my heart,” she gushed. “He was very persistent and kept asking me out on dates. He’s such a goofball, and he makes me laugh all the time, and his humor convinced me to go out with him. I’ve been with him ever since.”

“I love that,” Liv said.

“You girls should come up to our apartment one night and I’ll show you our wedding album,” Dolly offered. “It was beautifully made, and I never get to show it to anyone anymore.”

We nodded. “Sounds like a plan.”

Unlike with other residents, my family became well known to Dolly and Bernie. Dolly would always say sweet things like, “I need to meet your parents who raised these wonderful kids!” She loved my sister and I, and eagerly wanted to meet our brother and parents. Residents were welcome to bring guests, and they didn’t have much family in the area, so they invited my family to dinner with them. Olivia and I couldn’t join because we were employees in the restaurant, but we were working the night when my parents and brother met them over dinner. I was waiting on tables that night so I was their server.

There was an immediate connection and they got along really well. My parents talked about everything from what they do for work, where they grew up, and of course, their kids. Dolly and Bernie shared stories of what they did before retiring and how they met. It was cool to see how these two residents went from being strangers moving in, to being as close as family. We celebrated birthdays, sent Christmas cards, and regularly stopped by to visit at their

apartment when we weren't working. I would tell Dolly about everything in my life; complain about school, how things were going with work, talk about my boyfriend, anything I wanted to talk about. She was funny but honest, and gave great advice. She always knew the right thing to say and was always on my side if I was upset about something. I gravitated towards her because of her upbeat personality and humor. Being in her early eighties didn't stop her. She was always high energy and busy; running errands for her and Bernie, walking her dog, and socializing with her friends. You would have never guessed that she was that age.

My sister and I loved everything about her and still do. In the last two years, we have both left our jobs at the retirement community, but still try to keep in touch with Dolly. The pandemic especially made it harder for us to visit her and Bernie. Our restaurants were closed down for a while in the beginning of covid, and we talked to them through facetime mostly. Even when we reopened, there was a lot of protocols and precautions, in order to decrease any potential covid exposures, so our communications with them diminished a little more. My sister had left in September of 2020, and I eventually left last year in July. Not being at the retirement community plus the pandemic made getting in touch a lot harder. But then Olivia and I had gotten devastating news. Bernie had passed away.

He had been having health issues in the last few years due to being on dialysis and having diabetes. Towards the end of my career there, Bernie had gone from being an independent resident, to needing home health aides and a wheelchair. Most of the time, it didn't stop him from being his humorous self, and he would always continue to make jokes and light up the room. But over time, we noticed how he went to bed earlier and earlier, and slowly became quieter and quieter.

When working in a retirement community, it is almost certain that the death of a resident will affect you. When you work with them for so long, it is part of the job. But that doesn't make it any easier. I worked 30-40 hours a week on average for six years, and knew almost all the names and faces of the residents who in my building. No one talks about how sad it is when they pass away. Bernie's death was the one out of two that hit me the hardest, but I was still in shock whenever new obituaries came out and I recognized them.

After I had been there for a year and a half, I came home one night and sat down at the kitchen table. In every building at the community, they had a bulletin board near the main lobby, that was regularly updated with memoriam posters of those who had passed, and when their services would be. It was obviously intended for the residents, but all of the employees in the restaurant would pass it on their way out, and we often recognized and knew the people on the board. A resident that I served on a regular basis was on the board that night, and it got me in a funk thinking about how many residents have passed that I have known.

I sighed.

My mom was on her laptop at the kitchen table and looked up. "What's wrong?"

"My job is sad," I said.

"What happened?"

"Nothing, I just get sad when I hear about a resident from our building that has passed away. I serve them all the time, and it's just tough when you get to know them."

"That's exactly why I quit nursing."

I hadn't known this before. She has told a few stories of being in nursing school when she was younger, and I remembered that she had been a nurse in retirement homes instead of hospitals. But as long as I could remember, she was a property manager for apartment

communities, and I am not sure why I didn't put more thought into her career change that happened before I was born. There is a reason for everything after all.

"Because people die?" I asked.

"Kind of. It's the relationships and bonds that you form with people before they do." My mom sighed. "I cared too much about the elders that I was helping, and every time a patient died, I lost a little more of my passion. I kept losing it until I couldn't handle the sadness anymore. I thought I was built for the profession, until I started to see patients that I considered to be good friends and people pass away."

"I didn't know that was the actual reason."

My mom reached across the table and placed her hand over mine. "Working in any type of elderly community is hard, especially when you become close with them. I knew firsthand what it was like, and even though you are not a nurse, the sadness is still the same because you became close to them in a different way. But you, your brother, and your sister are so caring that they are lucky to have you. All you can do is show up to work ready to help them in any way you can."

That was the first time I had actually processed how sad it was to see so many familiar faces become memories instead. But news of Bernie hit me and my sister the hardest. I had great relationships with other residents, but Dolly and her husband will always be our family. Olivia and I left gift baskets and cards at Dolly's apartment door after we had heard the news, but she didn't answer any of our calls or contact us for a while. Which was totally understandable given the circumstances. We just wanted our gifts for her to show that we were thinking of her and that we would give her as much time as she needed. But Covid-19 was another thing that made everything even worse. Bernie's services were small and intimate for their family, so my sister

and I couldn't attend. We wholeheartedly respected the family's wishes, but the absence of Dolly and the inability to attend any services made us feel empty. We just had to let them recover from a distance.

As someone in their adolescence, I had sometimes wondered what residents thought about death and what it was like to live in a community like this. I also wondered why there were older people who jumped at the chance to move in, while other people preferred to retire and still live in their own home, other than financial reasons. A place like this community was better than a retirement home for a plethora of reasons. The staff here guides all their residents through independent or assisted living, and they had almost everything in one place. If residents didn't want to leave, they didn't have to. Those who still had their cars could pay for parking, while half of the residents didn't even have cars or drove anymore. But living in a place like that with hundreds of people your own age, had its pros and cons.

Socialization was a huge pro for the residents, especially for those who had little family or were moving in on their own. We had a large number of residents who lived in their apartments alone, so living here was a great way for them to meet new people at dinner, clubs, and "neighborhoods." In each of the four buildings on campus, there were four wings of apartments, separated by long hallways. We called each wing a "neighborhood," and it served as a way to help staff and residents know the locations of all the apartments. But the fact of the matter is, when working with or living in a community of elderly, death is probably something that has crossed our minds more often than other people. I have seen larger friend groups of residents, that slowly dwindle down to two or three people. I have seen husbands and wives come in one day with their spouse, and my heart breaks for them. Death is something that is inevitable and part of life, and is prevalent in this type of society.

The year before I left, I waiting out the rest of the night shift with my coworkers. Almost all of the tables in the restaurant were empty, but we were waiting for a few more residents to head on home for the night. Some closing duties involved making silverware and napkin rollups, so myself and two other coworkers grabbed a mountain of silverware and set up camp in our lounge area just outside the restaurant, rolling them into napkins for the next day. As other servers finished up or waited for the last of their tables, they typically joined us and we would all talk and hang out for a little while.

A girl named Kelly walked up to our table, server notebook and printer report in hand. “Sof, can you check my section? I’m done.”

“Sure, Kelly.” I followed her over to her tables she had been assigned, looking for anything out of place or messy. I inspected the chairs for crumbs or stains, bent down to see if there was any trash or debris on the floor, made sure that she wiped down everything and refilled her salt and pepper shakers, as well as her sugar caddies. Everything looked spotless. “Looks great, Kel. Have a good night, and I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Thanks Sof. Have a good night too!”

I turned around and walked back to my station in the lounge, subsequently running into my brother who happened to be working a Security and EMS shift that night. He was patrolling the halls of our building since he was assigned to it that night, and often would pass by the restaurant and downstairs lobby area. But I was surprised since we didn’t usually work at the same time, and he didn’t tell me he picked up a shift.

I threw my arms up. “Hey!” I said. “What’s up?”

“Nothing much,” he replied. “Haven’t gotten many calls so I’ve just been wandering around.”

“Well, no calls means good news.”

“True.”

“Do you have a minute to sit down with us?” I asked.

“Yeah, I can chill until I get anything over my radio.” He walked over to the table and pulled over a chair. I sat down and began rolling more silverware, and asking how his shift was going. Some residents, were roaming the halls, heading home, or playing card games on the other side of the lounge area. We noticed one of our regular residents named Roberta. She was one of the ladies I mentioned earlier who gushed over our parents at the scholarship ceremony. In the dining room, students flocked to her table to say hello every night because of her radiant personality. She was always joking around and making her fellow diners laugh. It was way past closing time, but a lot of residents still waked the halls or places games in the common areas. We saw her take a book from the public book shelves and walk past our table. She noticed us and said hello.

“Well isn’t that a rare sight to see the two of you together!” she exclaimed. Ever since my brother transferred to another department and my sister left, we didn’t see each other often around the campus. He worked mostly midnight shifts, and I was there during the day. I also enjoyed the brief times I got to see him when he picked up an evening shift.

“Hi Roberta,” we both said.

She looked over at my brother, “I haven’t seen you in a dog’s age. You look great! How are you doing?”

“I’m doing good,” he said. “Trust me, if you see me during the night, it probably won’t be a good night for you,” he joked. Providing EMS services to residents, especially in the middle of the night, typically involved serious medical episodes, falls, and other emergencies. If he was there, it meant that something bad happened.”

“You’re right about that,” Roberta agreed. “But that’s okay. I am ready to go. If I were to go to sleep tonight and never wake up, that would be fine with me.”

We both looked up at her, and then each other.

“What?” I asked.

“Oh, don’t be concerned dear,” she said. “I’ve lived a good life and I have no regrets. I did everything I wanted to do, so now I am just going to sit here and play mahjong with my friends and spend time with my family until it’s time for me to go.”

“I’m glad you have no regrets Roberta,” my brother said tentatively. “But it just feels weird to hear someone say their ready to die.”

“Yeah, most old people start to feel like that when they hit their nineties. I am content with whatever may come next in this life. Well, have a good night kiddos, I will see you later. I want to start this new book I’ve been eyeballing on that shelf for the last week.” She turned away and walked down the hallway to her apartment.

That moment stuck with me because I couldn’t relate at all to what she had said. It even surprised me because of how cheerful she was about the whole thing. I had always assumed that older people in that age demographic were sad or even afraid about the possibility of death, because they were so close to it. But I never thought about how some of the residents had so

much life experience, that they were ready to pass when their time came. As a young person who has a fear of death and hasn't gotten to experience life to its fullest yet, I was stunned to someone say they were ready to go. It's no secret in a retirement community that death lurks around, since the elderly are reaching end of life care in this facility. Yet I never had a resident who spoke about it to me so openly and willingly. It gave me a new perspective of what goes on in their minds every day and a glimpse of what their thoughts are about death.

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There are many more memories that have come and gone at the time I've been at Bayview, and as my journey as a college student ends, I have gained a new career and left my waitressing behind. Before the start of my fifth year of college, I decided that it was time to move on from there and experience something new. On top of wanting to gain new experience, I also felt like it was a good point to leave because I didn't fit within the waitstaff anymore. Almost all of my friends had come and gone over the six years, and a new influx of young high school students slowly rotated in. I used to be friends with everyone I worked with and being the same age made it a lot easier. By as time went by, I found myself saying hello to less and less people I worked with. I suddenly was six or seven years older than some of the youngest people there and I felt like I had nothing in common with them. I started forgetting some of their names because we had new hires coming in almost every few weeks.

Although I cherished the place, it felt like I had grown out of it. And I was okay with that. The end of college is a turning point in everyone's life, and every time I came to work, I had a stronger urge to break off and try something new. This feeling was very peculiar to an introvert like me. But I was glad I didn't leave because someone or something chased me away. I was grateful that I left on good terms and was eager to start anew. The hardest part was saying goodbye to the kitchen staff. Although a few cooks had come and gone while I was there, the majority of them had been working with me the whole time. I'll never forget my last day when I hugged them goodbye. It wasn't like I'd ever see them again, but we never hung out outside of work, which meant my chances of the seeing them became very slim.

I walked over to Timmy, one of the line cooks, and one of the very first people I met when I was new.

“I can’t believe this is my last day,” I said, tearing up a little.”

“We are all gonna miss you, Sof. Who’s gonna give us the count now? He joked.

I laughed, “And who’s going to make me the best omelets?

“I’ll still be here whenever you want to stop by,” he said. “It’s crazy how long you’ve been here.”

“Yeah. I started as a sophomore and now I’m finishing college. Time is flying.”

“I know. I watched you grow up in this kitchen.”