

Narrative: Mary Johnson Lee, Cashier, Dietrick Dining Center, Virginia Tech

Blacksburg, Virginia

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I am a Cashier at D2, which is Dietrick dining center. I have worked there six years now. Six and a half years. I live here in Blacksburg, Virginia. I am originally from Pulaski County. Well I was planning on moving to North Carolina, so a friend said so why don't you go move to Blacksburg, and I said well ok I will go and move to Blacksburg, and that's what got me here. Summer time is quiet, you're able to maneuver more as far as the traffic and everything. Everything is pretty much on a standstill, you know. But other than that I do like Blacksburg. It's really nice, you meet a lot of new people, you know. The landscaping is beautiful. The properties are nice, you know, for investments and stuff. So yes, I like it. I don't work at the school during the summer. I am off mostly in the summer. It is very enjoyable.

My hours are 6:00 am to 2:30 pm. So I usually get up between 4 and 4:30 am to be to work by 6:00 am. My typical day starts off with me getting things pre-prepped for the breakfast. We open our doors up at seven. The typical day starts around for me really around 4. But I go there, I pre-prepare everything for the breakfast and get that all ready, and then I have to go and count my cash in my drawer. When I say prep the food it means I am getting all the yogurts and all the jellies and all the breads and all the ladles and things all set up for the condiment bar. Then I go to my station and I put my drawer and stuff in and then I start my day, and I have to unlock the doors. We shut down at 9:35, and then I go and pre-prepare the lunch items as well. And then of course I have my lunch between 10 and 10:30. Then after that I go and make sure everything is kinda tidy up in the area, the windows and things like that, with the doors and stuff. I then have to unlock the doors, of course, again. Then eleven o'clock starts. Well, sometimes they're there before eleven o'clock. They're there at 10:45 or no more than 10:50, so there might be one student at the top of the stairs so I will tell him or her, "hey, please hold my line for me" and if they pretty much know the situation there, and pretty much know what I say or whatever, they will say, "ok, Mary, we will hold the line for you," 'cause I have to go up and unlock the doors and someone has to be there and make sure no one is coming in you know without paying. So I have a relationship with the kids and they are pretty much helping to make my job easier. Because ok, I am going to go down here in this corner for a little while and I can say you hold my line for me and they say ok. Great bunch of kids, I couldn't ask

for anything better. And then when 11 o'clock starts I am swiping everybody's card until 2:05, and then I have to go and lock the doors. A typical day is, after all of that, fun. Cause I am just sitting there, talking, gaining knowledge, getting to know someone, helping to solve someone's problem. I had one girl that came up to me, and I know her pretty well, and she said, "oh no problem with the line, Mother Mary is there." I said, "that's so cute, I like that." You know, so a typical day is great.

When it's busy I don't really actually feel stress. It's a good challenge for me. It really is. Sometimes the line is out the door. Almost like out the door. I am like gosh, see they are coming in here today, which I like, but at the same time I am like it's a good challenge for me to see how fast I can get them up there. So I laugh about it and they laugh along with me. [Laughs] Oh, my gosh.

Ok, we have a shortage amount that we can go over or go under. If we go over a certain amount then there could be some problems you know. But as long as it's under a certain amount then it's ok. So we do have to be very careful when we are handling a load of students or customers coming in. We have to be alert of what we are doing, you know, 'cause some of them may have cash, you may have someone that's asking you a question on this side, I got the walkie talkie going. You know, and you just got to, kinda like, you know it may be a day where you could mess up, you know a whole lot, you know. We have our rules and regulations at the registers, so I imagine some people say she just sits there all day and swipes the card, it's so easy. No, it's not. You know, I have these regulations I have to go by and umm, there is rules.

The first job I ever had was, I worked at the Marriot Hotel in Roanoke. And it was in housekeeping. And I wanted to try it just to see how it really was, as far as how these people are being treated. What is housekeeping? What is it really all about? So I done it. I don't like it. You know someone has to do it. We all here to service. No matter what type of degree we have or what title we hold, we are here on earth I believe to service in some way, you know. It just may be the pay scale is a little bit different, you know, but I think we are here to serve, you know, and I am really glad that I tried that hotel job because I see the, you know, the experiences that they go through, the people. Some people don't really care, you know, they just throw their stuff and it doesn't matter because they don't have to clean it, you know. So that made me realize, the hotel job that I was working at, that when I do stay at a hotel now I make sure that I try and leave it nice and clean so that it won't make their job harder, 'cause I been there and done that. I mean,

but with the hotel I did have sympathy, I understood what the workers were going through. One lady was saying that there was a wrestler there, you know, the WWE was there at the time, and uh, she said that he had bumped in the bed and he didn't leave her a tip or anything, now ain't that awful. Yeah. Yeah. And I wanted to just try it out to just to see what it was really like to go to be at a hotel every single day, going there trying to make a living, you know, and you know sometimes that's the only thing that a person really knows how to do and a lot of us don't appreciate it.

I said Virginia Tech was my last resort, really. So I said, ok, I am going to go and apply at Virginia Tech, so I ended up as cashier when I was working at Dexpress, yeah, so I use to go in like from eight till four and I use to do the pizzas, I use to do the pizzas and I was surrounded by, since I have been at Tech I have always been surrounded by the students. It makes me, my day, it makes me feel like so, like you know, 'cause some of the things they do and say it's just so funny and I am a kid at heart too, so you know [*laughs*]. You probably looking at this video saying she is so silly 'cause she is just laughing, but it's true, you know, I can only speak the truth, you know, so it's just more or less like it's fun.

Anybody who comes through that door is considered a customer as far as I am concerned. I had to learn customer service the hard way, when I first went into retail I didn't think that I even had the skills for customer service, you know, then a friend told me she said, listen Mary, she said you have to go out there and you have to be aggressive, you have to go out there to them. I was like yeah, ok, 'cause I use to just be kinda like just doing the stand up there at the cash register and they bring their clothes to me and she said no, you got there and you got to greet them, you got to see what their needs are, you got to do all this. So, and then it just started, I see myself going into customer service a whole lot but believe it or not I have the best time with the students than I did with the grownups. The grownups gave me a headache but the students don't. I mean, I mean, I guess, it's because, I don't know maybe it's the age difference or maybe they are just saying listen I am just coming for my lunch and that's it, that's all I want to do, I am going to my class, or I am going to sleep so maybe it really doesn't matter too much about the emphasis on me too much maybe it's just, you know, they are just doing what they supposed to be doing during that day, so students are much better than the older people, so I had to learn to grow into customer service so that's the reason why I might be a little aggressive upstairs when you all coming [*laughs*], when you all come around and some say well Mary

what's wrong you're not doing this or doing that, you know, and all y'all all get together and y'all pretty much know each other and y'all be talking and I am like, well, I might be sick or I am sleepy today, I just don't have much to say cause see you're so use to that energy, you know, so.

I like the hours 'cause I get off at 2:30, and in April and May before graduation sometimes the weather is great in April, I am out at 2:30, or it's like in the fall of the year and I am out at 2:30. As far as what I would change about this job, well, I would probably see if a lot of stuff would get done more, um... Instead of just sticking someone [a student worker] in a position and saying you can fill a position and they don't know nothing, I would ask a lot of questions as to why they would want to do this or do that. They would pretty much have to earn a position, or I would probably try and do a trial basis just to see how they would benefit from that position. I am a fair person; I try to treat everybody. You know, everybody is different and I don't expect for this student to be like that student or whatever, 'cause everybody is different. The way things are going on now in the world, some people are a little bit aloof to themselves, and I get a lot of that. But I am a very fair person and I would try and treat most people fair. And then if they wasn't benefitting from it too well, I would say I don't think this position is for you. So I would give them a trial period, and give them a raise, too [*laughs*].

In 5-10 years I will still be working D2. I'm only 48, so ten years from now I will be 58, so I will probably still be there, but to tell you the truth the more summers that I have off now the more I, it's like I just want to stay off, so I hope to try to retire at least at 58, if I can. If I don't retire at 58, maybe I can just work part time, that's what I am thinking, part time, not no 40 hours, just part time, hopefully. But I hope when 62 comes I am going to try and get on out there. I will miss it you know, I be probably leaving some students there that I met during the freshman year and stuff like that, but other than that, I got to go out and really actually enjoy what's left of me. I just don't want to work, work, work, forever, you know, if I don't have it by the time I am 60 it's not meant for me to have, let someone else have it, you know. I am just going to go enjoy what God give in front of me. They have retirement benefits for salary, but see I am not salary. I have been wage ever since I been there. So I have my own benefits and stuff.

Yes, the American dream is still alive, but we have to, as a whole, we have to stop using a lot of credit, and stop buying so much materialistic things we don't even need, and stop wanting so much. And if we do want something, we need to start asking why do we want it. We

need to stop... people get [*sighs*], 5 to 10 credit cards and they run 'em up and they don't have the money to pay it, because they don't have the income to fit it, and the more income you have the more credit limits and credit cards you get. So we need to start controlling our money more here in America so we can continue the American dream.

What our kids are learning now, and I have two nieces that's pretty much in that boat, they don't have to worry about getting jobs at 16, they are not outside riding bikes, they are not there playing, they are into computers, into T.V., headphones, and all this, instead of them trying to go out and get a job and work and see what it is to work and what it's like to earn a dollar or to learn how to save. If you can pay for stuff in cash, or half-way pay for it anyway and put your money to good use... I mean cars and sneakers, and watches, and jewelry, and all that stuff, it just comes and go, it's not going, it's not going to bring any revenue if you need it. But stuff like property will, because someone is gonna always have to have a place to stay, stuff like doing a good 401K or a Roth account, or IRA or whatever, is something really good 'cause you are saving up for your future. We have to think about the things before we do 'em, and stop making rash decisions.

I think it takes two people in the household to work, unless you got some good income. Or now I can understand if you got a wife or something, well, she might need to stay home and take care of that kid until they get to a certain age or they get ready to go to preschool or something, 'cause you know you just can't leave your kids with anybody. I mean if I was having to do that I would probably take time off from D2. I probably would have to quit until my child grew up. But my mom would probably keep my child...but she is getting a little older now. 'Cause you know, children want to go out and play, they want to do this, they want to do that, so I would probably have to quit work so I can raise my child. I don't want anyone else raising my child, I want to do it myself. I want to be there with them until they get to preschool and then someone else can teach them, then I would try and find another position. So there's a lot of things as men and women we have to think about before we start saying "I do."

So the American Dream is still, yes, saving, houses, family. Our family structure is, I think, is going downhill 'cause everybody is so busy, everybody is working. I remember a long time ago when my grandmother was living—my father is deceased now so I just only have the one parent—we used to have great big dinners. It was so much fun, you know. I didn't come from the perfect family. There was lots of little knocks and stuff going on, but it was a family

structure there, but now everybody is here and there and “I’m busy, I can’t do this, I can’t do that,” and it’s, it’s... The holidays are just like... everybody is all grown now, you know, so it’s just the way it goes.

But we still have the American Dream here in America. We just have to start spending our money much better. We are a folks of wanting everything easy, more money but less work, it doesn’t work like that; I remember my grandfather was telling me long, long time ago that when he worked at the pie shop in Radford that he use to work very, very hard for a little bit of money. Back then it was probably less money than you would make now. And we look at it now, how did they live? It was hard work, you know, people done lots of hard work. But now everybody is just more like everything is on a silver platter. The kids, like I said, the kids don’t have to work for anything ’cause mommy and daddy... And well, if mommy and daddy ain’t got it we’ll go to grandma and if grandma ain’t got it we’ll go to Aunt Sue or Aunt Betty or somebody. And it shouldn’t be that way. They should be able to clean up after themselves, get a job in the summer, and do something really good for themselves.

To read the complete conversation, please see the transcript.