

Interview with Jessica Louderback

For HUM 2504: Introduction to American Studies, Prof. Emily Satterwhite, Spring 2010

Occupation: Service Trainer, Olive Garden, Christiansburg, VA

Time and Place: March 4, 2010, 3p.m.-3:40p.m., Valley Cleaners, Blacksburg, VA

Interviewer: Sarah Grant, sophomore communication major from Blacksburg, VA

SG: Sarah Grant

JL: Jessica Louderback

SG: Can you please state your name, your job title, and the name of the organization that you work for?

JL: Jessica Louderback, a server and a service trainer for Olive Garden.

SG: And how long have you worked there?

JL: Two and two months. Two years, two months.

SG: Around how many hours do you work each week?

JL: I would say 25. I started out, when we first opened, it was like 70 some. Then it was 40. Since now I go to the university, 25 hours is all that I can handle, plus her [referring to her daughter].

SG: Can you tell me a little bit about your family background, where you're from and what your parents do?

JL: My mom and dad are divorced, so I put unknown for his job description; I don't know about him. But I grew up in Narrows, just about a half an hour from here; it's really small. Not a whole heck of a lot going on there. In fact, that's why I go to Tech, because it's kind of like what I was born into. We're talking about orange and maroon for real, you know. We went to the games as a kid and rooted for Tech as a kid.

SG: Can you describe a typical day at your job?

JL: Well, depending on how much detail you want to go into ... We go in and we check in and then we tell the host what section we're in. Then we stand in our section and for the rest of the day it is seating, serving, goodbye, seating, serving, goodbye. And in between, the only responsibility that we have that doesn't directly affect the service at our tables that we're required to do is to run hot food. What that means is that as soon as the dish is ready, there's someone responsible for standing there all day long who will pull it down, put it on a tray, and they'll literally holler for you to run it. If you're in the alley at that time, you're supposed to freeze, stop everything that you're doing and run food, you know.

SG: Is there a lot of side work and things like that?

JL: At the end of your shift, you're responsible for designated side work. The person that designates the side work is the trainer. Since I am the trainer, I don't have any side work.

But I have to stay and check everyone out, which means I'm the last person to leave every night. But trainers get privileges that make it worth it. We get the cream of the crop sections and nobody can say anything, because we're the last people to leave.

SG: How did you come to have the job, because you were there from the beginning?

JL: Well, my friend recommended I go there. I didn't think they'd hire me because Olive Garden is not like a Ryan's or an O'Charley's, so I thought you'd have to have some service experience. But I applied; I got hired. The reason that I wanted to go there was because up until this point, I'd been studying in community college, you know, online stuff. I got my associate's and I wanted to go to Tech and study full time. I've been managing different jobs since I was 21, which, to give away my age, I'm 28, so that's been a few years. And so I needed something flexible, but I'm a single mom and I have to pay the bills. This pays good money. I've never, my whole adult life, been able to work 25 hours a week to support myself, let alone another human being.

SG: In general, how much would you say you enjoy your job?

JL: There are a lot of pros, but there are some cons. The pros being, I can pick my own schedule. Depending on how much I want to work depends on how much money I'll make, so I'm in some degree in charge of my salary. I guess a pro would be for me, and not necessarily going into the job, but I've been there for awhile, so I have clout and respect, and I like said, I get kind of choice tables. And the cons being, it gets super boring, super quick. I mean, you meet different people every time, but you'd be surprised about how repetitive it actually gets. Plus, there's a degree of favoritism. I happen to be on the end of the favorite, but I can see that if that ever spun in a different direction, I would hate it.

SG: You mean the managers pick favorites?

JL: Yeah. I mean, they generally pick favorites based on performance. You know, they'll treat you better if you act better. But I've seen them be pretty petty once or twice. We'll see if that happens, because this is pretty much the only option for me right now. I mean, to be honest, can you imagine sitting down and going, "I need to go to school, school's my first priority, kind of, because I have to pay the bills, so I need to make a lot of money." You want a part time job that's not minimum wage? I just got lucky.

SG: What do you like least about your job?

JL: Well it may not look it, but it's hard physical labor. You hurt at the end of the day, whether you're skinny or big or old or young. So that would be the number one. And as far as perks go, you earn all of your perks. You get perks from your customer, aka tips, or anything. So there's really nothing ... They don't do anything for you; they don't do anything special. You don't get raises; you make \$2.13. They don't feed you for free, regardless of what people think. We get 50% off, but they try to tell you how to eat it, too. Sometimes you have to eat it standing up; sometimes you have to eat it while you're serving your tables. I think if they want you to not be able to break they should require a meal, especially spaghetti. I mean, what is that?

SG: Do you not get breaks?

JL: We do. But sometimes, we don't. I mean it's hard work. It's nonstop, too. Let's say one day you're sick or whatever. I mean forget it, you know? You have to have a genuine smile the entire time. If it's not genuine, you have to learn how to act.

SG: So servers always have good stories. Can you tell me your worst experience serving a table?

JL: Okay let me think. There have been some doozies. I don't have that bad of stories. I do a pretty good job; people seem to like me. But one time, I got a customer complaint, the only time I got a customer complaint. It's not that great a story though ... Yeah sure, I'll go ahead and tell you. I gave them great service, but at the end of it they made a complaint. My manager has had problems with them before. He feels like they're just trying to get free food, because Olive Garden's kind of known for, if you complain you're going to get money off the bill. And then one day they came in here recently and they sat in my section. I was like: "Welcome to Olive Garden," and I looked at her face and there was, like a flash of recognition. She recognized me, too, and I was like: "I won't be your server today, but we're going to go ahead and get you a great server. She was like: "Why aren't you going to be our server today?" I was like: "I'm going on a break." Well that was kind of awkward, because I was serving tables around her and obviously I didn't go on a break. But I told my manager and my manager said I didn't have to serve her. The server that took the table, I told them, because I didn't want to screw them over, I told them outright. They still served the table. He got a tip. I didn't get a tip, so that was good. But she's busted. She watched me the whole time.

There was a time, I had people one time who asked me to join in their sex. They're regulars of mine, so they still request me every now and then because I stopped talking to them. But that's awkward. I mean, what do you do? I didn't complain or anything because I still wanted my tip. But you know, I didn't like, entertain the offer or anything ... They tip excellent. Usually they leave me a 25 dollar gift card on top of a 20 percent tip. But when they ask you to join in ... So now, they just, are like: "Oh you didn't come by to say hi." And I'm like: "I was so busy." I don't care about the tip, because there's nothing worse than being stuck with people for an hour and feeling uncomfortable. That's the only time that's happened, though.

SG: Do you feel that the amount of pay, including tips that you get, is equal to the amount of work that you put in?

JL: Yes. Definitely. And I know exactly what you're talking about, because there's a formula, it's bs and pay. And if it's off kilter ... If it's off kilter in this direction, then you love going to work every single day. Oh man, you love your paychecks. But if it's off kilter this way, you hate your job. Even by a little bit. It may not be apparent in the beginning, but ... So yeah, I definitely make more than I have to put up with. But not everyone's going to feel that way. If they hire the wrong person, they're going to hate the job. They have to hire people who generally like people all the time, not just sometimes, not just during the interview, which would be hard.

SG: Can you talk a little bit about balancing, not only school and work, but being a mother, and how ... I imagine it's difficult.

JL: So this is going on the record right? I have a 4.0. I want to put that on record. Well, I'll tell you how it works out. I'm so glad that this is going on record. Everything that I do is multitasking. I'm interviewing with you while I'm doing my laundry, you know. Everything that I ever do is multitasking. Except for next week, next week is going to be awesome. I have a laptop and a desktop. So I can sit with Lily and we can watch TV, or she'll practice doing her lines and stuff. She's doing pre-handwriting stuff, like tracing lines and whatnot. So I can be on my laptop; she has, like a baby laptop, so sometimes she'll be on that. Or sometimes she'll watch cartoons while I'm on my laptop. If I'm not doing homework, we'll be hanging out ... Also, there's lunch at the Chinese restaurant; they're making it right now. So we're doing three things, technically, right now. I have it set up so that while I'm in class she's in preschool. I don't want anything on my busy, busy schedule to affect her to where she's falling behind. So she doesn't go to a babysitter, she goes to preschool. And I specifically scheduled my classes so that we're multitasking, again. Gosh, just anything you can name. Anything you do on the regular, I'm doing that, plus hanging out with my kid. Or when I'm at work, I'll print out pages of my book or a study sheet or whatever. I'm working and I'm studying. It has to be that way. She goes to bed at nine, I go to bed at 11. Two hours every night I'm studying. Except for next week. Spring break! It's going to be great. My sister's coming. I'll get to do the weird stuff you never get to do. We're going down to IKEA. I'm trying to be more specific. As far as like, normal daily activities. It's just all double double double double double. Oh, and here's another important thing that goes into that. Even though me and her father are no longer together, he does keep her every weekend. That's why I work Friday night, a double Saturday, and a double Sunday, maybe thirty hours. But it's only three days. I don't do anything schoolwise those three days because I have all of my classes on Tuesday and Thursday, so I don't have any assignments due Monday. So those three days, I'm working like a dog and at night I get to spend time with my friends. So Monday through Friday, again I can be a full time mom. But on the weekends, her and her father can have their quality time and I don't have anything to worry about. In the fall I plan on going to Tech full time. I'm only going half time right now, that's another thing. In the fall, I plan on going full time, in which Lily will be going to preschool full time. Again, as long as my ambitions don't affect her, it's all for her. My mom is an RN now, but when I was growing up, she didn't have a college degree. It wasn't, you know a big deal. I don't think my dad does still. My grandmother doesn't. No one in my family really did that until they were an adult. Granted, it's taking me longer than if I had just did it. But I feel like, you know, my family, if they don't do it the first time around they go back.

SG: Have you ever considered quitting your job?

JL: No, but I've considered quitting school. I can't quit my job, you know. The job is the ... If I quit my job then we're going on welfare. That's not a possibility. Or if I quit my job, we're going to have to go to some low-income housing were there's drug dealers all around, so that's not a possibility. School is a necessity. It's also an expenditure. I can't quit work. The only reason I'm going to school full time is because with Tech ... I'm a single mom, so

qualifying for grants isn't at all an impossibility, but you're only eligible for that stuff at Tech if you go to school full time. So I'm not getting any kind of anything, except for the basic, basic grant. So I'm racking up thousands of dollars of student loans. So if I go to school full time, even though I'll have to work less and I'll probably have to take student loans out just to subsidize my income, in the end it will be a lot cheaper. And I'll graduate next year, finally. But I can take it slow slow slow getting my master's, as slow as I want to.

SG: What do you think is important for people to know about what you do? As far as, how should customers be different?

JL: That's a good question. Everyone has their own expectations for what good service is. I think people expect perfection, and there's just no way. You might have perfect service sometimes, but you can get the same server every single time and there's going to be some times that they don't give you perfect service. For example, like I told you before, they'll yell at you and tell you to run hot food. At that moment, you have to stop what you're doing and you run hot food or get written up. In that case, that particular customer that might have had you before might have told you right then and there, "I'm really, really thirsty, I need a diet coke immediately." And then they see you at some other table, running food. So people have to have their expectations for humans, not some sort of weird outer space alien that can do everything every time. I think as long as people are working hard and genuinely happy, that's 20 percent. A lot of people have different expectations of what a good tip is, too. There's a standard, it's just not written on the bottom of the ticket, which I would like Olive Garden to start doing. 20 percent, it's the standard for good service. I would say 25 percent for excellent service. And if you got bad service, unless the server was particularly rude to you, I think they should still get paid. Ten percent if they sucked. The lady that complained to get free food, don't come. Go to Ryan's where a five dollar bill is huge for them.

SG: What kind of advice would you give to someone who just started serving?

JL: To move faster than they're moving. I am a trainer, so I see it all the time. I'm like: "You're doing a great job, but I just want you to know that you're not moving fast enough." And here's the reason why, because you are totally responsible for making your own tip. So if you get their salad out to them faster than any other server ever has, then you're going to get a bigger tip from that customer than any other server ever has. And the faster you move, the more times you can flip your tables, but not rushing guests. In fact, I see that a lot, too. When you walk up to your table, you have from zero to three to four minutes to build a rapport with that particular guest. That's basically when they decide what your tip is. So the rest of the experience, as the guest is eating, they're, in their head, unconsciously or consciously, subtracting from the tip they decided you were getting. So don't rush the beginning. Make sure you get their food, time it well, because that's what they want. They want to see you as a person, but they want to get out, but without you pushing them out.

SG: Do you feel like people treat you like a person, or do you feel that they treat you like someone just there to get them what the need?

JL: Sometimes they treat you like a person, but most of the time they treat you like a server. There are two different styles of serving. There are the servers that participate in the dining experience with the guests and then there's the silent server. And there are two different kinds of guests, people that like silent service and people who want a dinner and a show, you know. You never know which one they are. You can kind of read it, depending on ... I like to come at them, you know. You can tell, they'll be like this, "Diet coke." And you'll be like, silent service, do it. And that's awkward too, because you'll be performing for these people and just serving for these people and even though that's the cue they gave you, they might feel like, "Oh, she's preferring them."

SG: Where do you see yourself in five to ten years, once you have graduated?

JL: In five to ten years, more so in the ten years, I'll have my MBA. I want to be an HR manager. I don't want to limit myself. Virginia Tech has a management program and you can emphasize HR, but I wouldn't want to just be an HR, I wouldn't want to go out there and say, "I'm here just for HR." But those are pretty much the only managers that I can think of, if you can think of anything I'd love to hear it, that have more of a 9 to 5 schedule. And being a mom, she's going to be going to school, I would like to see some of that 9 to 5. Any other management whatsoever, including the management jobs that I've worked, has been ridiculous hours. But the only reason that I'm going into management is because I've changed my major too many times and I don't want to throw my resume away. In a different world, I'd like to be like, I don't know.

SG: I think I got through everything that I was interested in, but is there anything that you would like to share about your job or your life, being a mother, school? Anything particular that you want to add to your story?

JL: Our uniforms are ridiculous. You have to wear a white oxford shirt. They must have the buttons on the collars, buttoned to the tip top. You have to either have it to, you know, like the appropriate length for your arm or it must roll up at least twice. You have a choice of up to four ties, which all have to be clean and whatnot. Since they're a part of your uniform and since your uniform comes into contact with the guest's food, they have to be tucked into your apron. Your apron has to be wrapped around your waist and tied in the front, folded over and the tie's tucked inside. The apron can't be folded over more than once, because some girls fold them over a lot so they're really short like a mini skirt, and it's just an apron, you know. You have to have black pants on. If the pants have belt loops you have to wear a belt. They can't have pockets in the back. Shoes have to be slippers, black dress. Hair can't be wild. You can't have more than two earrings in each ear. Earrings can't be bigger than a quarter. You can't have obtrusive rings on your finger. You can't have more than one ring on each finger. You can't have any facial piercings or visible tattoos. You can't cover your tattoos with a bandage; you have to cover them with clothing. So if you were to have a neck tattoo or a facial tattoo or a hand tattoo, you wouldn't even be able to work there. Your shirt has to be completely pristine, so I spend a lot of money on clothes. That's it. So if you can get someone out there to hear about the uniforms, too. You have to wear black socks, not ankle socks.

SG: Going back to what you want to be, an HR manager, do you think that's because you're a people person?

JL: No, it's just for the schedule. I'm done picking occupations because of what I like. I just want to make a lot of money. I used to be a dreamer. Back in those days, my dreams would change often. I started out as a Spanish major because I wanted to travel the world. I wanted to meet different people and help teach English as a second language. But then I fell in love with a boy, so I couldn't travel the world anymore, so I had to change my major. Then I had a class in that major that I just didn't like, so I changed majors again. I changed majors enough to where I'm 28 and still working on my bachelor's, so I'm not changing majors again and I'm not picking anything because of what I'd like because I'd probably be disappointed with the job.

SG: All right, well I think that's it, unless you have anything else you'd like to say. Thank you so much. I really appreciate it.