

Voices Across America

Opinion: This one goes out to every whiny brat restaurant customer



A crying-baby mask sold at the American Visionary Art Museum gift shop in Baltimore, shown in 2019. (Marvin Joseph/The Washington Post)

By Daphne Crawford

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You know how, as a kid, if you were behaving like a whiny brat, your parents would say they hope you have children one day so you'll find out what it's like? Spoiler alert: No need to wait until parenthood. Just take a job in an American service industry.

When I hear about the "Great Resignation" and the government report last week that a record 4.4 million workers quit their jobs in September, nearly a million of them in the hospitality business (The Post recently reported on "the fast-food workers' season of rebellion"), I just feel jealous.

I live in Georgia and work at a chain restaurant, where my weekly paycheck depends on the \$7.25 minimum-wage-plus-tip-share combo. With taxes and other fees taking out a depressing amount, and inflation hitting 6 percent last month, the 40-hour workweek and the stress it brings make the job seem hardly worth it.

From customers berating me and my co-workers because we're out of ranch dressing for their takeout order (we all know you have some at home) to being yelled at for things I can't control (I didn't overcook your steak; I've never cooked a steak, period), to closing up after a double shift at 11 p.m. and getting less in tips than you'd see in a street player's guitar case on a Tuesday afternoon, I'm quickly running out of patience and the willingness to work.

On top of this, I'm a high school senior taking four Advanced Placement classes, dual enrolling at my local university, submitting college applications and trying to do enough extracurriculars to convince admissions officers that I'm the next Mother Teresa or Elon Musk.

Some friends tell me I should “just not work.” Really? In this economy? My social-worker mother and construction-manager father simply don’t make enough to pay — along with supporting my siblings and taking care of all their other financial responsibilities — for what might be tens of thousands of dollars in tuition. My average \$350 weekly income is my measly attempt to make up the difference that federal student aid, scholarships, tuition assistance and student loans won’t cover.

My deteriorating state of mind struggles to accommodate the degree of suffering inflicted on grown adults by the unavailability of ranch dressing.

I have six co-workers in the restaurant’s to-go department. Several of them are working second and even third jobs. I’m the youngest; the oldest has two school-age children. I think it’s fair to say we’re all tired, overworked and (mentally) beaten down.

We serve all kinds of people. Some of them I go to school with; some are stressed parents; some are kind and some are awful; some are retirees; some don’t know how many are in a dozen. From the restaurant worker’s side, the impact of each interaction with customers rests on two things: the tip amount and how the customer behaves. We’ve received \$5 tips on \$180 orders, and we still remember the customer’s name. We’ve had a woman scream at us in a crowded parking lot during a Saturday night rush, and we still remember which car she was driving.

Don’t get me wrong. We have lots of good tips and see lots of good people, too. But these negative interactions are by far the most memorable — and they’re the ones that make us want to walk out midshift. They are the ones that make me go cry in the freezer, the ones that make me wonder whether my dream of going to a good college, even if expensive, is worth it.

So, a word to all those spoiled, apathetic Americans collecting their restaurant orders during the pandemic (or, if pandemic rules allow, sitting in restaurant booths and mistreating the wait staff): Try sympathizing with a 17-year-old trying her best at a job that generates 100-plus orders on weekend nights and might require preparing \$3,500 catering orders even though it makes zero difference to her paycheck.

Sorry if this seems angry or spiteful, or just a way to yell back at every nasty customer. Maybe it’s a way of telling my managers how done I am. Or maybe it’s just a message to the industry generally, because I’m so done with how unfair and degrading it is to the workers who make it run.

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