

My First Job

I've never forgotten my experience working as a restaurant dishwasher.

Do you remember your first job? Most people do. Some remember the money—even the most minuscule paycheck—accompanied by the feeling of budding independence. Whatever job it was—mowing lawns, babysitting, running the cash register at a store—some young people are inspired to go on and do great things. Others learn quickly from their experience what they *don't* want to do.

I'm originally from Mexico, and like many Mexican immigrants and countless other Americans my first jobs were working in restaurant kitchens. I'll never forget those places—hot and steamy, the stainless steel, fluorescent lights, the smells of discarded food, the greasy floors, and the long hours.

I started as a dishwasher, working for a verbally abusive boss who yelled at us as if we were cattle. One day we worked wading ankle-deep in water from a broken sewage pipe because this man insisted the kitchen stay open regardless. The pipe wasn't fixed until the next day, so we left that night soaked. This guy cared much more about squeezing out a profit than the health and well-being of his employees and customers.

To make matters worse, my paychecks bounced regularly—so much so that my bank stopped accepting them. I had to cash them in liquor stores, where I'd lose 7 to 15 percent of my pay in fees. Eventually, even the liquor stores got wise, and I'd have to drive for miles in search of one that would cash my check.

Being young, I started to believe that

it was normal to be treated this way at work. I felt powerless, and I didn't know I had rights. Fortunately, as a teenager living at home, this mistreatment did not threaten my very welfare. Most of my coworkers, on the other hand, had families to support. Some were undocumented, and one was on parole, so they were stuck—forced to stay silent.



Later, the restaurant closed, and I got another job in another kitchen, this time frying fish. But my experience there was like night and day compared to the previous place. The manager made sure I took my breaks, and the equipment always functioned. My paychecks never bounced, and I even got paid overtime. I also was continually trained on safety and health requirements. Sometimes the restaurant hosted staff-appreciation events. After a while, I got a raise and a promotion. In short, my employer respected my basic dignity.


These contrasting experiences profoundly affected me. Therefore, it was no accident that after I started law

school in 2001, I spent my summers assisting low-wage workers in Los Angeles. I volunteered at clinics to help garment workers, day laborers (*jornaleros*), and restaurant workers file complaints against abusive employers. I spent many weekends interviewing car wash workers—including the *propineros* who work just for tips—to document their horrible working conditions.

I also spent one summer taking declarations from janitors across California who had been cheated out of their wages by major supermarket chains.

Fast forward ten years: Now I lead a public-interest law firm, and it's my responsibility to set an example of doing right by our employees. I'm still learning as I go, and sometimes I struggle to make the right choices. But I am thankful that my early jobs

instilled in me a fundamental sense of fairness. They also taught me a valuable lesson: Good workplaces are *created*, not guaranteed.

It takes leaders with integrity, coworkers with courage, and yes, sometimes lawyers, to keep the workplace honest. And it takes even more than that to make a workplace great. At my firm, we often ask ourselves, "What can we do to make the workplace better?" After all, someone may come to us for his or her first job, and I want to make sure that person leaves knowing they're valued. 

Guillermo Mayer is the president and CEO of Public Advocates in San Francisco.