

# *Drowning in Dishes, but Finding a Home*

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The people who make a difference in your life come in all types. Some write on a chalkboard. Some wear a sports uniform. Some wear a suit and tie. For me, that person wore a tie with a Pizza Hut logo on it.

I started working at Pizza Hut in December 1989, when I was a freshman in high school. Parents in my small western Colorado town encouraged teenagers to work in the service industry after school and on weekends. It kept us out of trouble.

Having a job also kept me out of the house. I grew up mostly with my mother, and I never knew my biological father. My younger sister, younger brother and I went through a series of stepfathers. My relationship with those men was almost always fraught, and I was always looking for reasons to be away from home.

The Pizza Hut was old, and in the back it had three giant sinks instead of a dishwasher. One basin was for soapy water, one for rinsing and the other for sanitizing, using a tablet that made me cough when I dropped it into the hot water. All new employees started by washing dishes and busing tables. If they proved their mettle, they learned to make pizzas, cut and serve them on wooden paddles and take orders.

On my first night, the dishes piled up after the dinner rush: plates, silverware, cups and oily black deep-dish pans, which came clean only with a lot of soap and scrubbing in steaming-hot water. I couldn't keep up, and stacks of dishes formed on all sides of me. Every time I made a dent in the pile, the call came back for help clearing tables out front, and I returned with brown tubs full of more dirty dishes.

At home, the chore I hated most was dishes. A few years earlier, my mother's then boyfriend instilled a loathing of that task by making me scrub the Teflon off a cookie sheet, believing that it was grease, while he sat on the couch and smoked cigarettes. That boyfriend was gone, but another with a different set of problems had taken his place.

My shift was supposed to end at 9 p.m., but when I asked to leave, the manager, Jeff, shook his head. "Not until the work is done," he said. "You leave a clean station." I was angry and thought about quitting, but I scrubbed, rinsed and sanitized until after 10 that night.

I stayed on dish duty for weeks. My heart sank every time I arrived at work and saw my name written next to "dishes" on the position chart. I spent my shifts behind those steel sinks, being splashed with greasy water. After work, my red-and-white-checked button-up shirt and gray polyester pants smelled like onions, olives and oil. At home, I sometimes found green peppers in my socks. I hated every minute I spent on dish duty, and I wasn't afraid to let everyone around me know it.

One slow midweek night, when I managed to catch up on dishes and clean out the sinks early, I asked Jeff when I could do something different. “Do you know why you’re still doing dishes?” he asked. “Because you keep complaining about it.” Nobody likes to work with a complainer, he said. But, he promised, if I continued to leave a clean station and not complain, next week he would put me on the “make table,” where pizzas were assembled before being put into the oven.

A few days later, when I reported for my after-school shift, I saw my name penciled not in the “dishes” box but in the “make table” box. I was ecstatic.

Jeff had a special way of running his restaurant. From a crop of teenagers, he assembled a team of employees who cared about their work — and one another. Most of my best friends from high school also worked at Pizza Hut, and some of my best memories were made under that red roof.

Pizza Hut became not only my escape from home but also, in many ways, an alternate home. In my real home, I felt unstable and out of control. At work, the path seemed clear: Work hard and do things right, and you will succeed. This model had not seemed possible before.

For one of the first times in my life, I felt empowered. By the time I was in 11th grade, Jeff had promoted me to shift manager. By my senior year, I was an assistant manager, responsible for much of the bookkeeping, inventory and scheduling. I was in charge when Jeff was away.

Our staff was like a second family. We had all-day staff parties that started with rafting trips and ended with dinner and movies. Most of us played on a softball team. We went camping together. We had water fights in the parking lot and played music on the jukebox, turned up to full blast, after all the customers had left.

Jeff was the leader of this unlikely family. He was about 15 years older than me and had recently gone through a divorce. I never considered it at the time, because he seemed to be having as much fun as everyone else, but if I was using my job to create the family I wish I’d had, it was possible that he was, too.

Senior year arrived, and though I loved that job, I knew I would go to college the next fall. I was an A student in class but probably about a C-minus in applying to schools. My mom hadn’t gone to college, and I didn’t have a lot of logistical or financial support at home. I had received a pile of brochures from colleges, but I didn’t know where to start — and, at \$40, every application fee cost me half a day’s pay.

A guidance counselor persuaded me to apply to Boston University, which seemed great, primarily because of its distance from Colorado. The scholarship application had to be in by the end of November — and I was definitely not going there without a big scholarship. But maybe because of the fee or because of my sheer cluelessness, I kept putting off the application.

I still had not mailed it the day before it was due. At work that day, I offhandedly mentioned to Jeff that an application was due the next day but that I hadn’t mailed it. He opened a drawer and took out an overnight envelope. He told me to stop what I was doing, leave work and send the

application immediately. I protested about the expense of overnight postage, but he said he would cover it.

I ended up getting into B.U., with a scholarship, but I still had never even visited Boston. Though my mom worked hard to take care of my siblings and me, there just was no room in the budget to send me on a college visit. So I figured I would just see the school when I got there in August.

Jeff surprised me with an early graduation present: a trip to Boston. He paid for the hotel, the car and the plane tickets. We toured campus and visited Fenway Park and did some sightseeing around New England. We ate at a lot of Pizza Huts, and we judged them against ours. The verdict: None of them seemed to be very much fun.

Before I headed to college, I told Jeff that I would come back to work over winter break. While I was away, he was promoted to regional manager, and a different person was put in charge of our store. I went back anyway, and though I did my best to enjoy it, the magic was gone. The family had dispersed, and I felt free to shift my mind-set to college and the future.

I have kept in touch with Jeff over the years. We usually meet for lunch when I'm in town. Sometimes we even have pizza.

Washing dishes for Jeff was grueling, greasy work. But then again, making a pizza, or driving a truck, or baking a cake, or any of countless other jobs are not always enjoyable in themselves, either. Out of all the lessons I learned from that guy in the Pizza Hut tie, maybe the biggest is that any job can be the best job if you have the right boss.

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