

## Street Smarts - Pearls of wisdom from the working class

by Catherine J. Rourke

*You can't let life ever get you down.*

-- The Good Humor Man, streets of Chicago

Wisdom is often nearer when we stoop than when we soar.

Indeed, the greatest wisdom sometimes stems not from the ivory tower or the pulpit but from the utter simplicity of a janitor cleaning a bathroom stall. It lies on the tongues of cashiers at supermarket checkouts or clerks at drive-up windows and truckers on the loading dock.

It's been another year of interviewing workers, business owners, economic analysts, union reps, think-tank experts, attorneys and even people on the street for my workplace reform stories. This included three weeks at labor conventions, two of them in Chicago listening to senators and labor leaders and one in Phoenix that included a protest at Qwest corporate headquarters over the loss of employee wages and benefits.

But through it all, it was the invisible people who left the most memorable impressions: the trash collector starting his truck before dawn on a bitter cold, windy morning; the EMT bending over an unconscious driver; the working poor waiting for a bus that never seemed to come; and the sweaty line of parched construction workers purchasing their six-packs at a mini-mart on a scalding summer afternoon.



It was the dedicated 911 operator who wouldn't unhook her headset so she could use the bathroom; the Good Humor man selling ice cream on the streets of Chicago during a heat wave; the homeless passerby who joined in the Qwest protest, chanting while pushing his wagon of trash bags; the waiter juggling *five* jobs and writing screenplays in his "spare" time; and the janitor hauling her squirt bottles in the wee hours as she rode her bike in a snowstorm because she couldn't afford a car.

In such ordinary and sometimes dire circumstances, these people somehow managed to find humor, resourcefulness and great resilience. In fact, many of this column's most hilarious and enlightening quotes came from those struggling in a moment of anguish on the job.

Chasing fire engines with EMTs, collecting stray wagons with clerks in supermarket parking lots, flushing toilets with restroom attendants, making beds with immigrant housekeepers, burning toast with waitresses, sitting at a disabled woman's hospital bedside, and waiting with a diabetic manicurist for a bus in a ghetto on Chicago's south side – in these trenches we found a treasure trove of brilliant wisdom, simple truths and astonishing beauty, along with brave smiles and bright outlooks toward their circumstances.

### **Lessons learned**

From the trash collector we learned about "going the extra mile" as drivers override the rules and get out of their trucks to pick up extra trash blowing down the street, even though they're not obligated to do so.

From the EMTs we learned about “commitment” as they pursue ongoing vigorous training in dedicated emergency response, often risking their own safety for strangers. While the job is not all flashing lights and daring rescues, it includes mundane tasks and routine station chores that employees take great pride in.

From the janitors we learned the importance of “humor” in facing unpalatable tasks while front-line service workers, such as food servers and bartenders, shared valuable lessons about maintaining compassion for people, “even the drunks and ‘deadbeats.’”

Suzanne Blake, a disabled woman hospitalized without health insurance after a hit-and-run accident, shared with us lessons of “faith and hope.” Although still struggling with staggering medical bills on a fixed income and the endless assault of ruthless collection agencies, Blake managed to say, “I’m grateful to have my life. I may be changed by what happens to me but I refuse to be reduced by it.”

These individuals taught us that one warm gesture from a customer can override subminimum wages and that a random act of kindness from a boss can supersede diminishing benefits. And there was wisdom from employers too, like the merchant who said: “You only have to give a little to get a lot back.”

### **Wisdom from the Windy City**

Loitering on the fringes of last summer’s labor conventions in Chicago were several prophets who had far more wisdom to share than all the canned press conferences combined: a pregnant bathroom janitor, a tuxedoed banquet waiter, a Good Humor ice cream vendor, a former slaughterhouse worker and a diabetic manicurist waiting for the bus to her ghetto home.

Linh Thi Nguyen, a 30-year-old pregnant Vietnamese restroom attendant, pushed her heavy cart of plungers and mops into a nearby restroom. The crush of labor delegates – primping and pumping hand dryers – hardly noticed her. Yet here was the essence of labor’s podium-pounding messages right under its very nose, in its own convention bathroom – the invisible worker, the immigrant, the working poor, the uninsured, the underpaid and the overworked. Linh Thi was all of them.

She never knew her father, who was killed in the Vietnam War. Her mother managed to flee their war-torn country for San Francisco when Linh Thi was just an infant. Beset by insurmountable housing costs, they eventually landed in Chicago for its more affordable housing – and for jobs as restroom janitors.

### **An attitude of gratitude**

What did she think of the convention just beyond her realm of perennially flushing toilets? Like most workers across the nation, Linh Thi had no idea what was going on, thanks to a media that was solely focused on labor’s schism and not on its platform for better working conditions. For her, it was just another convention that kept her furiously replenishing the toilet paper.

Linh Thi said she was grateful to have a job, one that would feed her and her baby. She was happy to be in America instead of Asia. Ineligible for Family Medical Leave or maternity benefits, she worried about how she would afford child care. Unaware of labor’s rally cry outside, she was more concerned about her own upcoming labor pains.

“I just try to do my job the best I can,” she said. “Hardly anyone ever notices me, even though I’m in my third trimester.”

Linh Thi would like to pursue a higher education – one day, if she can afford it. For now, she has chosen to be a mother and a janitor. Still, she saw her cup as half full, with a job, a roof and food on the table in America.

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### **Let them eat peanuts**

Lavish convention cocktail parties featured magnanimous open bars with top-shelf liquor and tables of sumptuous hors d’oeuvres – scallops wrapped in bacon, mini quiche, beef skewers and an opulent cheese tower built on a foundation of triple-crème fromage – brie, Stilton and gorgonzola – but no American.

A huddle of tuxedoed waiters surveyed the crowd. How did they feel about food servers' lack of representation in labor and in Washington? What could unions do to enhance their everyday working lives?

"First of all, I am *not* a server; my computer is," retorted Walter, a savvy career waiter identified by his nametag. "And, second of all, we're union members. They'd have to be out to lunch to hold their convention here if we weren't. But, you have to admit," he continued, adjusting his bow tie, "ain't it funny...all the fancy food and stuff? You'd think these folks would be serving cocktail peanuts or pigs wrapped in blankets."

Certainly one had to agree that hot dogs and peanuts were a more appropriate metaphor for unions rallying about the hard lot of the working class and concerned about their dwindling budgets. What other wise observations did the waiter have?

"For one thing, they should be talking about massive social restructuring, like replacing tips with wages, instead of burdening the public with having to supplement restaurant workers' pay," he said. "Now everybody's got a tip cup out these days because their wages don't cut it. The businesses have had their cake and eaten it way too long."

Check, please.

### **Frozen Assets**

A long line formed at the Good Humor Ice Cream truck parked outside the convention center as temperatures mercilessly soared to 104 degrees with 97 percent humidity. Rivers of sweat poured down the face of "Mad Macx," the Good Humor man and a self-proclaimed poet and science fiction writer.

What did he have to say about labor and life? Like Linh Thi, the unions had failed to reach out and touch him.

"Well, it only helps if you make cars or work in a coal mine," said Macx. "Most of us are left to scramble for our rights without a union. They need to get rid of all these suits – I can tell by their hands when they pay for their stuff that they've never done any hard labor. But what's needed is the input of real people – guys like me who served our country and got screwed."

A former Army sergeant who fought in Vietnam, Macx dreamed of finishing college and becoming a screenwriter. Instead, plagued by Agent Orange symptoms, he had his own scif-fi tale to tell – a story about time standing still, about loss and betrayal. His dreams were all frozen solid now, much like the toasted almond bars he sold on the street, in the only job he could manage with his disabilities.

Despite his plight and the heat, Macx rang his truck bells with a broad grin and warm smile for everyone he met. "I'm broke but not broken," he said. "You can't let life ever get you down. The problem in there," he said, pointing to the convention center, "is that labor gets too combative. Sure, we've got a lot to fix and it may be a battlefield. But I've learned that war doesn't get us anywhere. You've gotta bring everyone together to the table – the men in the suits, the working stiffs and the guys like me on the street."

### **Lessons from the slaughterhouse**

Leslie O'Rear loitered outside the convention hall at the Illinois Labor History Society table. The 94-year-old had seen it all as a young worker at the infamous Chicago Stock Yards more than 75 years ago. He began his illustrious career tying ham shanks "with string and a giant needle" for 25 cents an hour ("good money in those days") in the Armour packing house made famous in Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*. Published in 1906, the tear-jerking saga of workplace atrocities in the stock yards, such as laborers stumbling into the giant scalding vats, sparked a public outcry for meat inspection and labor law reform.

Vividly recounting a colorful era with "tons of saloons and a constant bustle," he described the sights and smells that permeated the vast complex, which "resembled an ant hill" and spanned for miles.

O'Rear worked his way up to the killing floors of the hog house where workers earned the highest wages under the most brutal conditions. In addition, there were only three holidays per year, unpaid, and no sick leave. There was no water or coffee on the job and bathroom leave was given only with permission.

"It was ghastly," he declared, explaining the gigantic wheel that spun shackled hogs before the "sticker," who slit their throats for 10 hours a day nonstop. "The poor devils had had no

fingernails left – only stubs – from having to hold the hide so taut.” These were the highest paid workers at 45 cents an hour, followed by the disembowelers and splitters.

“It was hot as hell in the hog kills,” he recalled. “With 600 hogs an hour, the noise and the body heat was incredible. In the summer humidity, the place was absolutely unbearable.”

It was on such a summer day that O’Rear and his co-workers initiated the first work stoppage until the demand for cooling fans was met. He later witnessed the organizing of the stock yards and eventually became the editor of a national newspaper called *The Packing House Worker*.

“In many ways, we’re regressing back to the working conditions of the packing houses,” he said, describing 12- and 14-hour shifts without breaks, overtime, mediation or grievance procedures. “You never really knew how long the work day would be. We need to take a look at labor history and see how it’s repeating itself in today’s anti-worker climate. We can learn an awful lot from the past. We must ask: How is the modern workplace like a slaughterhouse? Today’s deadly vats are the loss of overtime pay and health care,” O’Rear concluded.

### **A helping hand**

She waited impatiently for the bus that would take her south, deep into the heart of Chicago’s ghettos, near the old stock yard district. With neatly braided corn rows and perfectly manicured nails, Shoshanna looked like any other young black urban woman on her way home from work.

But she was different: the struggling nail technician was a single mom and a diabetic. Her well-groomed hands masked the fact that she was one of the working poor. Not only was her blood sugar plummeting in the searing heat wave, but her free transfer from the Loop had expired. That left her with only one choice: either purchase her bus fare or buy a Slurpee for a sugar fix and then walk the 18 blocks home. She simply couldn’t afford both.

The \$7/day commute to her salon was unaffordable based on her wages, so she relied on tips. But business had been slow that day, which meant no cash. Chicago’s public transit system didn’t serve her because, she said, her subway transfer always expired long before the bus ever got there. The manicurist now needed a helping hand because her labor failed to provide a living wage, right down to her transportation needs.

“I go crazy every time I hear one of them financial experts on the news,” Shoshanna said. “They assume we all got money and tell us we gotta save it all. How can I save for retirement when I ain’t got no bus fare to get to work? And I can’t afford no health care either and I got diabetes *and* a kid.”

Paying for Shoshanna’s bus fare, as well as her Slurpee, only temporarily solved her problems. Still, she offered words of wisdom.

“I tell ‘em they gotta consider the day-to-day reality of folks like me,” she said, referring to Congress and its anti-worker legislation. “I tell ‘em they should all come down here and live my life for just one day. We ain’t making it and they ain’t making it any better for us. But I’m not gonna let them make my life miserable. There’s gotta be a better way.”

Shoshanna got off at her stop and waved, disappearing in the glut of pawn shops, paycheck advance centers and Baptist churches surrounded by shabby row houses and the vacant stares of the exasperated working poor. They had, it seemed, something in common with the wretched innocent lambs that were once herded through the nearby stock yards’ massive stone gate on their way to slaughter.

### **Salt of the earth**

We salute all workers, the substance that makes our economy go ‘round. Without you, our streets would be filthy. Without you, our bathrooms would reek. Without you, fine dining would become self-service. Without you – our landscapers, housekeepers, bartenders, cooks and janitors – we’d have to pull our own weeds, make our own beds, mix our own martinis, flip our own pizzas and, heaven forbid, flush our own toilets.

You may have three jobs or do the work of three people in only one. You may feel robbed of your time and energy but they can’t rob you of your pride and dignity.

Hold your head high and be proud to be a busboy. Tomorrow you may be a congressman but, just for today, consider it a privilege to serve others. Likewise, the carpenters and manicurists should remember that even Jesus took pride in hammering nails and bathing the feet of others.

So we thank you all for your glorious service. Thank you for our cigarettes and six-packs at 3 a.m. Thank you for being on call for our emergencies. Thank you for our clean bathrooms and clean streets. And a special thanks goes to all the foodservice workers dishing out our dinners, pouring our cocktails and clearing our dirty plates for subminimum wage. We raise our full, clean glasses to you.

### **SIDEBAR: The Working Class Ten Commandments**

Here are some golden nuggets gleaned from this column's superstars:

1. Work with joy. No matter how humble or degrading, take pride in your job and the service it provides to humanity.
2. Respect others. Pretend everybody's a VIP. Celebrate your co-workers. Remember that everyone is a human being, from the CEO to the floorsweeper.
3. Never assume that a title guarantees good wages. In some cities, roofers make more than reporters and secretaries make more than a city councilmen.
4. Kill 'em with kindness. Compassion has the nuclear power to melt down the worst monster.
5. Forget academic snobbery and give someone without a sheepskin a chance. A workingman's Ph.D. can prove more valuable than a generic B.A. from a party school.
6. Treasure your employees; they are your gold mine. Treat 'em right and they'll give you all they've got.
7. Never underestimate anyone because of his or her job; try it for half a day first.
8. Give lavishly and expect nothing in return. Let go of what you have and you'll receive what you need.
9. Choose a job you love and you'll never have to work a day in your life.
10. Keep an attitude of gratitude, even when hell is raining down.