

The Life Expectancy of a Dish Washer

There are no available statistics for the average duration of employment as a dishwasher. That's not surprising. It's also not something I need for this paper, because I've been a dishwasher for the last three years so I have some familiarity with the subject. Too much familiarity if I'm being honest. Lack of vetted statistics aside, a person will normally be a dishwasher for only six to nine months for two reasons: they only accepted the job in the hope of eventual advancement, or they can't handle it and quit. My career as a dishwasher began in April '08 and has been exclusively with the Red Lion hotel in Kennewick. I had no plans for advancement, though I was assured it was "a *transient* position" (the then executive chef's words, reprinted for posterity. not mine.) and I would be in another department soon enough. As if that poorly worded promise wasn't enough, I also desperately needed work and this was the first opportunity I had in months. I wasn't about to turn my nose up at a job supposedly reserved for homeless people, so I accepted the position. I remember the rationalizations I made, of finding a better job or making my way to another position, but only one of them took root: I no longer had to deal with the general or shopping public.

Before dish washing I worked at an Amazon call center, and before that I worked at Hastings. For years my careers revolved around customer service and I had simply burned out on being helpful and courteous. Being a dishwasher meant zero contact with people that weren't employees, and that was all I needed to know. I took that idea, that simple notion of isolation, and I nurtured it. I could finally do a job without interruption, and I was sure that I could do it well. After a month of it, I wasn't. I wasn't fast enough, I didn't know where things went and I was sure that everyone hated me. The dishes were clean, which was an unthinkable prospect at the time, but it wasn't enough. The previous dishwasher, who became a cook when I showed up,

would constantly tell me how badly I was doing. Things like “You’re takin’ way too long washin’ them dishes. You gotta go faster, or else.” or, “You’re pissin’ off other departments by not keeping those silverware caddies full.” I would feel worthless and get infuriated to the point of desperately wishing I could quit, if just to make *her* be dishwasher again. She couldn’t even get things clean, which made my slow but steady output something of a revelation in comparison.

It would take another month before I learned where everything went, even longer for my speed to improve and accept that not everyone hated me. After four months, the executive chef that hired me was replaced, and my situation changed for the better in every way. Brandon had worked at the Richland property as a sous chef for years, so this was his promotion. He was closer to my age than anyone else in the kitchen, and that made it easier for me to open up and begin to actually enjoy my time at work. This became even easier when Mike, his friend and co-worker from Richland, came to work there as well. He was a few years younger, but we had much of the same interests and similar senses of humor. It was then that I began to develop actual friendships, and it made the sometimes difficult job of washing dishes somehow bearable.

When I reached my own six month mark, I wasn’t feeling the stress inherent to the position. I was having fun with friends where I also happened to clean bits of food from plates and assorted cutlery. At nine months I was more pre-occupied with my second quarter of college than I was with my dreadful job. I instead marked the year it had been since I left Amazon, and how nice it was to not have angry people screaming at me over the phone anymore. It would take roughly a year until I began to succumb to the pressures of being a dishwasher, aided entirely by the annual Mother’s Day brunch. In no uncertain terms, that event is responsible for more instances of employee self-termination (quitting, just so we’re clear) than any other. How I survived it the year before was due entirely to the help I received, and that help would no longer

be there. I arrived at 6AM, and I did not leave until 5:30PM. I worked practically non-stop, and when I finally got home I could barely speak, let alone sit upright long enough to have some of the delicious food from my family's own Mother's Day celebration. It was by no means a record, because in July of '08 I worked a 14 hour shift, 11AM to 1AM, with a single 10 minute break seven hours in. My family didn't know where I was and they even began to worry that I might have died. Nevertheless, that brunch is what started me on the slow decline into the distinct phases of burnout, apathy and genuine harm to my well-being.

Being employed as a dishwasher for a full year, I was drifting further away from the crowded median of that particular bell curve. I had reached a point where I knew what I was doing, and I was doing it well enough that I couldn't bear the idea of starting over at a new job. Not only that, I appreciated the fact that my work schedule never conflicted with school and my checking account was healthy. Reasons to keep my job appeared and became neatly appointed stacks that demanded compliance. What kind of job could I get with "Dishwasher: 1Yr3Mo" listed on an application, or even the slightly fancier "Dish Room Attendant: 1 ½ years" on a resume? My options diminished the longer I stayed, and so did my hope of getting out while I still could. I was becoming institutionalized in a way, all the while dragging myself further into outlier status: a lone dot, far removed from the normal dots huddled together in their 6 to 9 month stints as washers of dishes.

It was around my one and a half year point that my surroundings began to really affect me. Disorganization in the kitchen had a constant presence from the day I started, and I successfully corrected the bulk of it by this point, but of all its instances, improper stacking of plates could *not* be remedied. Every day when I come to work I walk through a short hallway, past the locker room, freezer and dry storage, temporarily unaware of the state of the dishpit. It's

not until I'm mere feet from it that I can see the amount of dirty dishes waiting for me. It takes another six or so steps until I come to the spot where my fellow employees put their plates. This is where I would regularly see the most harrowing displays of indifference from other staff members. The stacks of plates would be so mind-blowing at times; it's as if they were built from chaos and entropy. Like so many ceramic nuclear warheads, silently daring me to dismantle them without incident. They're an amazing testament to what laziness can accomplish. There were a few times that the offending departments were told to stack them properly, and they did for a month or two. Then the inevitable slide back to putting a plate wherever would leave more delicate heaps for me to disassemble. I don't know how many times I felt and fought the urge to give a measured tap to those messy stacks, but in all of my employment I never succumbed to that desire. I even managed to make a sort of open-ended game out of it, which I called Creative Dish Stacking. It was nothing more than making structures out of dishes that ranged from simple to exotic, but it was a huge boost to my sanity. Brandon caught on quick, and we were soon seeing who could out build the other. He took it a step farther and would make "stealth builds" behind me as I washed dishes. It's enjoyably disconcerting to turn around and see a three foot tall building made of black plastic tongs and metal plate covers. As fun as that diversion would be, it just wasn't enough to stem the tide of oncoming burnout.

Because I was the only dishwasher, whoever was cooking on my days off would be responsible for the dishes. It wasn't a problem at first, as the cook on duty would do a majority of the dishes, but the amount done became less and less until only the bare minimum was done. This made having days off a double-edged sword, since I would have to clean whatever was left when I got back. It was difficult to enjoy my time away from the kitchen because I knew the longer I was gone, it would be in even worse shape when I returned. There were times I'd come

back and see a mostly bare counter, but they were a rare exception to a depressing rule. Still, it's understandable, because the dish washing machine is a pain to work with. In all honesty, it's not even a dish washer. It looks and acts like one, and it might even say it is, but it's a dirty liar; it is a dish sanitizer, and nothing more. It works by pulling racks through with a set of six evenly spaced hooks while jets of scathing hot water spray the dishes. If any desirable results are to be achieved, each item must be scrubbed clean before being sent through and even that sometimes isn't enough. Also, one of the hooks will occasionally pop up, preventing the racks from going through. It has to be fixed manually by reaching into the machine full of 180° water, and pushing it down with a finger. It has to be done quickly because that water is constantly dripping in scalding splashes onto the arm being used. Using utensils like tongs or spatulas doesn't work, and even then the arm is still in there. I was once severely burned by the water when I accidentally left the hatch open and started it, and for weeks after I would flinch whenever I flicked the switch to ON. If that wasn't bad enough, just a few months ago the heating element shorted out, signaled by a loud bang and a puff of smoke. As I was standing next to it in a puddle of water, it's not a stretch to say that I could have been electrocuted. The machine is a piece of shit. No, I take that back. It was a piece of shit 15 years ago. Now it's a doddering old man with cataracts driving his Buick at freeway speeds through a school zone. That's the kind of dish washer I have to work with.

Putting up with circumstances such as these for three years is a feat best not repeated, though I admit that I have a sense of pride for having done it. Even then, it wasn't all bad. I've made good friends and had fun in my time as a dishwasher, and all the confounding behavior and forcefully applied incompetence can't dilute that. More importantly, my job allowed me to do something fairly surprising, considering the type of work I was doing; I could *think*. Washing

dishes is stressful, to be sure, but it's also not too terribly difficult. I could very easily slip into autopilot while alone in my dishpit, and think about any number of things: what I'd do when I got home, homework that was due soon, story ideas and even the direction my life was taking. I was in my dishpit when I decided to become a college English professor. I had visions of sitting in my office grading papers, when the clattering rumble of a cart outside my door would trigger a flashback to being in my dishpit. This menial task I was set to doing would let me appreciate my eventual career more than if I was working retail, or some other job fit for a college student.

Being a dishwasher is fine as a temporary measure, but prolonged exposure to it is unadvisable. In the last two months I've had daily migraines, near constant heartburn and I've begun to develop what I can only describe as borderline insomnia. It stems from my job, and I know this because two weeks ago I was given a week off, and in that time my migraines eased, my heartburn decreased and I could sleep easier. Those maladies may have temporarily subsided, but I could not stop reminding myself that I had to go back there. I tried enjoying my free time by going to movies and spending time with family and friends, but that nagging, gnashing idea of going back persisted. I decided on one simple thing during my time off; when I get back and it looks like I've been gone for a week, I'm putting my two weeks in. Sure enough, the kitchen looked the part. The silverware bin was full to bursting, none of the sheet pans were clean, and I found bits of mold growing in soup cups. At the end of my shift I wrote a note to Brandon explaining my decision, as well as my intention to train my replacement. Brandon understood completely, and he has been more than gracious. If anything he's surprised I stayed on this long. Today, April 22nd, is my last official day as a dishwasher. As I said I'll be training my replacement, whenever they are hired, because as much as I despise that place I don't want to

leave it the way I found it. My replacement also needs to know there is a life expectancy for a dishwasher, and they would do best not to exceed it.

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