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Out of Sight

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Out of Sight: Exhibition and Photography Book

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The following is an examination of my thesis work, which is a series of photographs designed in an art book. The following text is the content in which I researched and collected through ethnographic studies and practices. The final production of this project was an art book and a gallery show that exhibited in March 2019. You can find more of my images on my website, meibuzzell.com.

A summer job in hospitality changed my perspective on the industry, that employs nearly half of American adults at least once in their lives. June 2017 marked my introduction into the food service industry at a farm-to-table restaurant located in the Mountain View Grand (MVG) a historic northern New Hampshire resort hotel. MVG has an international clientele and is aptly named as it sits in the heart of New Hampshire's impressive White Mountain National Forest. I was trained in the main dining room on site by seasoned employees, many of whom were only slightly older than me but for whom the job was full time employment year-round. It was there that I learned the sometimes-monotonous rituals, language, and manners of service. I learned that taking and delivering orders to tables is only minor parts in service; replying to questions, accommodating requests, and talking guests up was where my money was to be made. My experience taught me how to communicate openly and professionally and how to engage and connect with each new table of guests, all the while balancing the myriad of emotions that come into play when in the service of others.

During the busy summer months, MVG employs its maximum number of workers to sustain the above average daily guest census. Coos County NH is where MVG is located. It is socioeconomically depressed and the population declines each year as people leave in search of better jobs. A declining workforce leads the resort to rely more on a U.S government exchange program to hire foreign or J1 Visa workers. Since 1961, J1 Visa workers have been allowed to work and reside temporarily and widely throughout the US.

The J1 program offers a range of work opportunities in large resorts, national parks, and other vacation destinations. The MVG workers come from various countries and are contracted to work in the U.S. for four months; in exchange the J1 workers are given limited opportunities to travel throughout the country at the close of their work term. J1 participants arrive in early June and I was their trainer after only a month on the job.

The photographs in this book document my experiences and those of my coworkers. The photographs depict my experiences in the service industry - with coworkers and patrons alike - including, but not exclusively, the hierarchy among workers and bosses. These hierarchies are an everyday fact of work life in the service industry but, when layered upon one another, they can

sometimes make for a difficult work environment. Lastly, the photographs show the collaborative efforts of the workers in a unique cultural community.

I have a keen eye for observing the fabric of individual bonds within communities. As a server, I was able to be a part of a unique community that has various permutations, which are repeated day and night all over this country. *Out of Sight*, connotes the reality of this work, that which is not seen at the front of the house. My hope is that the photographs will engender respect, appreciation, and mindfulness for those who serve during a dining out experience.

When I was growing up, my family did not often dine out. When we did, our laughs and conversations around the table those occasions were memorable. Sure, we had discussions about food and the service, but the service was never our main experience. I have no memories of my parents being upset about service or the food during any meal out. Alerting the restaurant manager during the meal or directly telling a server during service that they were doing a bad job never happened. It was here my experience became a new and completely unexpected reality of being a server.

The server is often absent for a handful of reasons; a coworker may have called out sick without providing time to find a replacement; there may be an unexpected surge of guests; the chef may have made a mistake with an order backing up orders behind it as the new one is prepared; a manager may have chosen an inadvertent time to get the servers together for an admonishment; a major spill may have occurred demanding a hasty cleanup.

We waited 10 minutes despite having had a reservation, then 10 minutes for the waitstaff to acknowledge us, 30 minutes for my wife's drink, almost an hour for the food, and then we had to cancel our 10th anniversary dessert because the service was so slow and we had made other plans. - Guest

When the service meets or exceeds expectations, recognition goes a long way to make one feel appreciated.

What a great meal we had! Our hostess was the best. Our server took awesome care of us. We liked our experience so much that we ate at the bar the next night and had amazing burgers! - Guest

Lunch was good. Dinner was awful. A limited wine selection. Slow service. Hostess at dinner was rude and overwhelmed. Service was awful. Seemed understaffed and overwhelmed. Very disappointed. - Guest

Working consistently through a long night at service pushes a person to their limits and the food service industry does not take holidays. In fact, holidays are often the busiest days in restaurants.

“Being stuck working another holiday but making the best of it with those who you were working with. For example, New Year’s Eve, we took a 5-minute break to watch the fireworks from a side room. We were all tired, sweaty, and ready to go home. However, those 5 minutes were simply beautiful.” - Julia, Server

Over this two-year period, I learned important survival skills to service. One, success requires physical endurance. Two, the presence of continuous pressure from the management and guests to provide them with what they want requires mental strength. Financial success is not guaranteed even when you master these skills.

They brought the wrong side from what my wife ordered. Ordered pasta with butter for my 6-year-old son. It came out with a side of butter so we dumped it on top. Turns out it was actually salad dressing so we had to send it back. They also never brought my son’s side of fruit which was supposed to come with it. - Guest

Management must supervise waitstaff and also answer to Resort Manager and this is a delicate balance sometimes resulting in harsh reprimands to waitstaff.

It was the beginning of the dinner shift and I had been at work since 6 that morning when the dinner supervisor came in and made the evening horrible, yelling me all night for the littlest things when I was running around, juggling a large party and several smaller ones. -Elise, Server

... we need to refocus on the guests. The team drama has provided too much distraction from our goal. -Manager

There is a wide variety of personalities choosing to be servers. The back hallway at the Harvest Tavern was a one room schoolhouse for me. This was the safe area for servers, porters, food runners, and managers to meet, place orders in, collect and deliver food to the dining area, grab condiments and cutlery, and any other non- food accessories; it was the pantry, storage room and meeting hall, all in one location. The back hallway was the space to hang out, talk, and create friendships working or otherwise. Some slow nights it became the hub of activity with talk, gossip and sometimes a “bitch” session until closing. This is where my story and memories were created while listening to everyone’s biography, imagined or true, all the while carrying out the business of the back hallway.

Most of the servers that I worked with had been in the service industry on average for eight years, but most of the servers were my age, low to mid-twenties. Only by necessity did MVG introduce diversity into their staff by using those on J1 Visas. This created a facet to the social culture.

“In my opinion, America has specific culture that is completely different from European standards. It is a mixture of food, languages, behavior and religions from all over the world that works in its own unique way. What I really enjoy about Americans is their openness and positivity, especially to complete strangers, which is hard to notice in central European countries.” - Klaudia, Server

J1 workers find the cultural norms of tipping and the American style of eating out different than in home countries.

“This is my first American dollar I ever earned. I was given this on my shift when two kind patrons complimented my service after breakfast. I keep it to remember the feeling of the job well done. I hope to spend it while traveling after the program, or I will keep it forever.” - Agata, Server

After finishing a two summers working for the MVG, I look back and I think about how much the experience means to me. The people I met, as co-workers or patrons, changed my life. For me, the memories of soured experiences slip into my subconscious and are replaced by joyful memories -it could be as simple as clocking out at night with the people you call friends.