

## Dishwashers: Workers in a Low-Wage Occupation Robert D. Strassel<sup>1</sup>



### **How to Become a Dishwasher?<sup>i</sup>**

There are no educational or licensing requirements to become a dishwasher. Typically, dishwashers are trained on the job by experienced co-workers. Some employers require employees to complete educational materials addressing issues including safety guidelines, equipment maintenance, and cleansing procedures.

### **What is the Work Environment Like for a Dishwasher?<sup>ii</sup>**

Dishwashers spend most of their time on their feet, carry heavy items, and perform repetitive work. The work is relatively safe, but dishwashers are asked to use potentially harmful chemicals and handle sharp objects such as utensils and broken dishes. Outside of cleaning dishes, dishwashers are asked to perform a wide variety of tasks including assisting co-workers with food preparation, assisting wait staff with clearing dishes from tables, item stocking, and cleaning kitchen equipment.

### **How Many People are Dishwashers and What do they get Paid?**

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Most dishwashing jobs are part-time and offer varied hours. According to a recent article by the National Employment Law Project and the Center for Urban Economic Development, approximately 23 percent of dishwashers, cooks, and food preparers in the United States experience minimum wage violations, approximately 68 percent experience overtime wage violations, and approximately 70 percent experience meal break violations.<sup>iii</sup>

As of May 2008, there were approximately 500,000 employed dishwashers in the United States with an average hourly pay rate of \$8.54 and average salary of \$17,750.<sup>iv</sup> As of 2009, there were approximately 36,000 employed dishwashers in New York State with an average salary of \$16,950.<sup>v</sup> As of 2009, there were approximately 3,240 employed dishwashers in the Western New York region with an average salary of \$17,290.<sup>vi</sup>

### **Experiences of a Dish Dog<sup>vii</sup>**

The following experiences of a being a dishwasher were taken from an interview conducted with a person who works fulltime as a dishwasher in New York State. Ialways Makeitsparkle<sup>viii</sup> stated that he completed high school, had no college education, was trained on the job by experienced co-workers and was trained through educational materials provided by his employer. Mr. Makeitsparkle stated that the above description of a dishwasher's work environment was an accurate description of his personal work environment, but stated that his employer followed all of the labor and employment laws strictly.



### **What are the Positive Aspects of the Job?<sup>ix</sup>**

Mr. Makeitsparkle stated that the most positive aspect of being a dishwasher is the autonomy that comes with the job. He stated that managers pay particular attention to the dining area and the kitchen and pay little attention to the dish room, which results in a relaxed environment. Because of the relaxed environment and the degree of separation from the scrutiny of management, he has good work relationships with his co-workers. Working in a restaurant has informal benefits such as the free availability of food when there are mix-ups in orders or when there are mistakes in food preparation.

### **What are the Negative Aspects of the Job?<sup>x</sup>**

Mr. Makeitsparkle stated that the most negative aspect of being a dishwasher was the dirtiness of the job. He has to spray dishes off before loading them into the dishwasher and the back-spray often leaves his arms and face soiled, and his apron and shirt wet. He also has to be careful when handling certain cleaning chemicals and broken dishes, which often leaves him with minor chemical burns and minor cuts.

### **What are the Challenges of Living on a Low-Wage Salary?<sup>xi</sup>**

Mr. Makeitsparkle stated that he was hired to start washing dishes at his place of employment approximately two years ago and started at an hourly pay rate of \$8.25, with an option to enroll in employer based health insurance. Mr. Makeitsparkle made it a point to mention that only full-time workers (+35 hours) are eligible to enroll in the employer based health insurance. His employer pays a certain amount of money each year towards health insurance. This sum usually is large enough to cover an entire policy unless an employee would like a plan that offers more benefits. Also, there is no union to join at Mr. Makeitsparkle's place of employment. Currently, Mr. Makeitsparkle makes an hourly pay rate of \$8.75 and has enrolled in the employer based health insurance with his employer covering the entire premium.



Mr. Makeitsparkle must keep to a strict budget in order to afford his housing, transportation, food, cable and electricity. Mr. Makeitsparkle lives alone and only has to support himself. Currently, he does not receive any public assistance and believes that he would not be eligible. He currently has no desire to find a second job because he believes that his free time is more important than any material goods he would be able to afford. He often declines invitations for any substantial assistance from family members but will accept smaller assistance such as food and transportation costs.

Mr. Makeitsparkle stated that if he follows his strict budget, his wage is livable but can be limiting in some regards. He would like to own a home instead of renting and would like to be able to entertain himself more, but his strict budget does not allow these things to happen. He stated that his low wage has made him more resourceful in finding ways to entertain himself which include taking walks and using the public library.



### **What is the Outlook for Dishwashers?**

Due to the exposure of helping kitchen staff with food preparation, Mr. Makeitsparkle stated that there is a significant chance of advancement at his place of employment. Additionally, because his employer offers educational courses which promote advancement into other parts of the restaurant including food preparation, cooking and management, there is a far greater chance of advancement. Mr. Makeitsparkle stated that he likes to assist the kitchen staff and hopes to take advantage of his experiences soon.<sup>xii</sup>

As of December 2009, the United States Department of Labor has forecasted a 10 percent increase in food and beverage service jobs for the years between 2008-2018 which will include dishwashing jobs and promote advancement for that job into food preparation, cooking and restaurant management as time progresses.<sup>xiii</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> United States Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Occupational Outlook Handbook 2010-11 Edition, Food and Beverage Serving and Related Occupations” (Dec. 2009). <http://www.bls.gov/oco/ocos162.htm#related>

<sup>ii</sup> Id.

<sup>iii</sup> National Employment Law Project, “Broken Laws, Unprotected Workers; Violations of Employment and Labor Laws in America’s Cities” (2009). <http://www.nelp.org/page/-/brokenlaws/BrokenLawsReport2009.pdf?nocdn=1>

<sup>iv</sup> United States Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Occupational Employment and Wages, May 2008, Dishwasher” (May 2008). <http://www.bls.gov/oes/current/oes359021.htm>

<sup>v</sup> New York State Department of Labor, “Occupational Wages in New York State, Dishwasher” (2009). <http://www.labor.state.ny.us/stats/lswage2.asp#35-0000>

<sup>vi</sup> New York State Department of Labor, “Occupational Wages in the Western New York Region” (2009). <http://www.labor.state.ny.us/stats/lswage2.asp#35-0000>

<sup>vii</sup> Personal Communication, March 22, 2010

<sup>viii</sup> Ialways Makeitsparkle is a pseudonym used to protect the identity and privacy of the interviewee.

<sup>ix</sup> Id.

<sup>x</sup> Id.

<sup>xi</sup> Id.

<sup>xii</sup> Id.

<sup>xiii</sup> United States Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Occupational Outlook Handbook 2010-11 Edition, Food and Beverage Serving and Related Occupations” (Dec. 2009). <http://www.bls.gov/oco/ocos162.htm#related>