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# The Working Life

Posted on [March 12, 2016](#) by [cindyricksgers](#)  
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Soon after moving to Beaver Island, I started my job at the Shamrock.

I was scared to death. I was shy, timid, clumsy and uncoordinated. In other words, I had almost *nothing* needed to be a good waitress. Still, this was a new place; I could reinvent myself, couldn't I? Things did not need to be true just because they had always been true. That's what starting over is all about!

So, I dressed in the ugly green and white pin-striped polyester seersucker uniform that had been provided. I rolled and twisted and safety-pinned the elastic waist of the slacks, to make them fit. I pulled my hair back into a ponytail, and practiced saying, "Hello, how can I help you?"

I arrived on time. Barb, the owner, was there to greet me. She introduced me to her mother, Betty, who was one of the cooks, and Catherine who was the other cook. She taught me how to brew the coffee, where to get the ice for the bin behind the bar and where the cups and glasses were kept. She explained how to put placemats, napkins and silverware in front of the customers. She introduced me to Walt Wojan, the first customer in the door. She watched me bring his coffee, reminded me to keep smiling, and left.

I found, over the next few weeks, that Barb had a very minimal training style. A few pointers, and there you go, you're on your own.

I nearly panicked, but didn't. I fell behind, but kept going. I messed up, but not as bad as I could have. At one point, I did something wrong, and Betty came out and yelled at me, shook her head, disgusted, and said to the customer, "These dummies we get...they don't know anything..." Well! The first chance I got, I marched right in to her kitchen. She started to tell me I didn't belong there. I silenced her with a wave of my hand.

"I am *new*," I told her, "I have never waitressed before. I was given very little instruction. I made mistakes. I will try my best to learn this job...but I will not *ever again* have you talk to me that way or talk to customers *about* me that way. If that happens, ever again, I will go home, and I won't come back."

"Okay," she scowled, "Get out there. Get out of my kitchen. Go back to work."

And that's what I did.

That wasn't the last disagreement we had. It wasn't – by far – my last mistake.

It was significant only because it was the very first time *in my entire life* I had ever stood up to someone in my own defense like that. For me, that was momentous!

I came home after my first day, told the girls to play quietly in the living room, and collapsed, exhausted, on the sofa.

Working at the Shamrock was one of the hardest jobs I'd ever done. I was not particularly good at it, not at first, anyway. Still, I loved it! I met wonderful life-long friends there. In that first year they were Emma Jean, Chris, and Diane. When you work with people in a stressful, difficult job, a bond is formed that supersedes differences in age or lifestyle. Catherine, it turned out, was my father's first cousin. We found we shared an irreverent sense of humor and a love of word games. Though forty years separated us in age, we giggled and talked and shared secrets as if we were sisters. Even Betty and I developed a respect and sincere fondness for each other, as time went on.

Customers, too, became like family to me: sometimes annoying or demanding, and always with their little quirks, but dear in their own ways.

Tips, in case you've never worked in a job where you might receive them, are *fantastic*! I do believe I could learn to love almost any job, if people would just toss money my way every so often. I felt appreciated. Eventually, I got to be very good at the job. Always, I felt my contribution was necessary to the smooth execution of getting coffee and breakfast to dozens of people before they went to their jobs or boarded the morning ferry.

Working at the Shamrock Bar and Restaurant was a life-altering experience, and one of the best gifts Beaver Island brought into my life.