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The Neediest Cases

From Low-Wage Jobs to a Dress-for-Success Tale

By ABBY AGUIRRE

When she started her latest job search in the spring of 2008, Monica Mateo had had her fill of low-wage, mind-numbing work.

She had taken customers' orders at Kentucky Fried Chicken, Pizza Hut and Burger King. She had passed days making copies of bootlegged DVDs. And she had endured a series of less-than-ideal security-guard posts, most recently in an apartment building in the Bronx where, she said, some second-floor occupants were operating a brothel.

Ms. Mateo, 28, decided to enlist the help of the New Heights Neighborhood Center, a nonprofit organization that had helped her find work seven years earlier. In regular meetings, a caseworker there began to assess Ms. Mateo's work experience and her performance at job interviews, as well as her eligibility for public assistance.

"But I don't need welfare," Ms. Mateo recalled saying. Her mother relied on public assistance while raising her, her brother and her sister in Washington Heights. "I just need a decent job."

In mock interviews with her caseworker, Ms. Mateo noticed that she said “um” between most sentences and “yeah” instead of yes. She noted, too, that her answers to questions could be imprecise and that she tended to explain things more than needed.

When, some weeks later, she was invited to interview for a patient–escort position at a Manhattan hospital, she felt prepared. She borrowed a pair of black slacks, paired them with a brown blazer and set out to apply her newly acquired insights.

She walked out of the interview feeling troubled. She sensed that something had gone awry, but could not put her finger on what. She was disheartened by her interviewer’s seeming preoccupation with her twisties, the braidlike strands into which she had styled her hair. Her clothes, which had seemed very smart before the interview, suddenly felt less so. “I guess I don’t look right,” she concluded.

Ms. Mateo did not get the job, and her caseworker at New Heights, a beneficiary agency of the Community Service Society, one of seven organizations supported by The New York Times Neediest Cases Fund, then tapped the fund to take Ms. Mateo shopping at Loehmann’s, a store that sells designer clothes at a discount. There, Ms. Mateo ruled out three pantsuits — “too big”; “too conservative”; “too ’70s”— in favor of the one she took home: a \$125 black, cotton–blend, classic–cut.

At her next interview, for another position as a patient escort, at New York University Medical Center, Ms. Mateo felt markedly more confident. She did not feel as though her appearance had been “broken into pieces,” she said. “I felt whole.”

Not long afterward, in August 2008, Ms. Mateo was offered the job. She began bringing home about \$700 a month and, most days, a sense of satisfaction and pleasure derived from helping patients.

There is one task she does not enjoy — taking deceased patients to the morgue. She does not like the cold there. She does not like the sight of

swollen feet. She does not like lifting a body from a gurney onto a metal tray and sliding it into the wall.

“When you move the patients that are alive, you get them a pillow, you make sure they are comfortable, you make them feel good,” she said. “You don’t do that for the dead bodies.”

To stave off morgue gloom, she sometimes thinks of an e-mail message — a printout of which she keeps in the tiny bedroom she still shares with her brother, sister and mother — written to her boss by the wife of a patient about to be discharged.

Rather than leave the patient in a wheelchair at the lobby’s revolving door, as is the normal procedure, she took him to the curb, because of his fragile state. She and another escort then lifted the man into a car, all the while being “exceedingly pleasant and helpful,” the patient’s wife wrote.

Ms. Mateo’s supervisor remarked, in a note accompanying the forwarded message: “To bring joy not only improves our patients’ experience, but truly demonstrates what a quality person you are.”