

## Ringling the Bell

“Wow!” I exclaimed when my spouse told me in 1999 that we had to move overseas for his new job. I was so excited, and many questions started passing through my mind when I got the news: where are we going to live? new culture? new friends? new everything? Finally, the time arrived, and I realized I was living on another continent. All was fine in the beginning until I started noticing that I was spending too much time at home. I expressed my concern to my husband, and he told me, “Sweetheart, do your research and see what kind of opportunities are out there.” Putting his words into action, I started searching for a job the next day, but I did not find anything attractive. As an emigrant, my opportunity to work was limited; all the interesting jobs were for American citizens only. “Well,” I said, “eventually I will find something; it is just a matter of time.”

One evening my husband and I decided to dine out. We went to the most popular Mexican restaurant in the beautiful city of Kaiserslautern, Germany. While having our meal, a woman who worked at the restaurant approached us and asked me where I was from; and I answered, “From Panama.” She smiled widely and replied, “Me too.” We clicked right away. After a few minutes, my new friend surprised me when she asked me if I would like to work for the restaurant? “Of course!” I responded effusively. In one moment I had a job. I started working, and I got along with everyone, even with my boss. He was nice to me, but I observed the way that he treated the employees in the kitchen; he was not that nice to them. He always yelled at them. The situation started to bother me; I knew that I would say something eventually. One day my friend and I coincided in our lunch time, and I threw out the question to her, “Why is Mr. Ferrante always mistreating the kitchen staff so badly?” She said, “I don’t know, but no worries; he won’t treat you like that.” Without any more questions, I decided to keep myself quiet for a bit.

Time went by, and I got promoted. My boss handed me the key to open the restaurant

twice a week. One morning, driving to work, I saw from a short distance his luxury Mercedes Benz parked right in front of the entrance. I got a little nervous. I checked my watch to look for the time; I was early, and I said to myself, “Girl, there is nothing to worry about. You are fine.” When I walked in, the first thing he said to me was “buongiorno!” which means *good morning* in Italian. I started doing my work, in the meantime enjoying the coffee’s aroma. After a few minutes he came to me to invite me to have a cup of coffee with him. Obviously, I could not decline his invitation. He was “the boss” and also the owner of an important place. The light turned on in my mind, and I thought that today might be day to find out a few things. We sat at a table for two. We talked about many things. He even made me laugh, and to be quite honest, he was fun. Looking at the wall clock, I saw that the time to open the restaurant was getting closer. Putting myself at my own risk, I said to him, “I have a question for you.” He said, “Go ahead, feel free.” I then asked him, “Why do you always yell at the people who work in the kitchen?” He looked at me, and the conversation paused for a few seconds. The smiling face got reduced to a confused one. Without losing his composure, he replied, “Very interesting question, young lady! No one asked me this before.” At that moment, I thought that he would fire me, and he did not respond to my question at all. What he said was, “We have to open soon; however, we have a conversation pending.” Days passed by, and I was wondering if he would let me keep my job and also if he really wanted to continue our conversation. I certainly kept my position, for many years. A few weeks later, something caught my attention. He had changed somehow the way that he talked to those people. It was much better, believe me!

The people who worked in the kitchen were hard workers with a low level of education but such bright guys, in my opinion. I never put them down because they differed in a few aspects from me. My interaction with them was always pleasant, and I enjoyed dialogue with them. I considered myself in the middle class; I never felt superior to them. A few of my coworkers used to tell me that I was too friendly with them. I always said, “Why not? They

are like you and me, people who also deserve respect and to be treated the way that you would like be treated. I do not mind being friends with them.” The work environment was good, but the place was divided: some people over here and the cooks way over there. No one wanted to socialize with them because of their appearance, the way they dressed, and because they work behind walls. People considered them as ignorant individuals because they could not afford to buy glamorous things, in other words, because of their low class life style.

I waited three months until finally I got invited to have another cup of coffee with my boss. I knew that he wanted to conclude the conversation that he had left incomplete. Indeed! Here is what he told me, “I have been thinking about your question, and I have to tell you that I never think why I scream at them like that. I looked at myself in the mirror, and I found myself evil. I talked to my wife, and she was upset because I let you interrogate me with such an inappropriate question, but I don’t care what my wife said. I believe when someone comes to you and rings the bell is because you need to change something. Either in your life or your business. And you rang the bell.” I was totally in shock! A rich person and owner of four restaurants told me such a thing. Speechless!

Concluding our discussion, I told him, “Thank you for the coffee. I never meant for you to change the way that you run your business, whatsoever, but I think those people deserve to be treated better. The fact that they differ from many of us economically or because they work behind those doors they are not less than us. What would you do if they resigned their positions right now? It would be like a bomb, ah?” Adding a little more, I also told him, “The success of your business is based on what you offer to your customers. If you have good food, it means you have great chefs, and your business would be always good, beside other things, of course.” What a meaningful chat we had. Many ideas got exchanged that morning. He was frankly honest when he decided to be a better boss. Forgetting who he was, the Mr. Italian boss changed for good. I could see how he improved the dynamic between him and the kitchen staff. The results were a

noticeable improvement without a doubt

Wherever we go we can see social class. In fact, I believe the world is divided between low income and upper levels. However, I believe the people who are in the lowest class should never be treated badly. No one has the right to behave toward them with a bad attitude or with bad behavior.