Alone in a Crowd

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Although she does not consider herself to be a very strong person, Lydia Vasquez has struggled for many years to support her family despite race and sex discrimination and physical injuries. She attributes her perseverance to faith in God.

When I started school I didn’t know a word of English—only Spanish. But the teachers objected if we Mexicans spoke Spanish because then they didn’t know what was going on. What was I to do? The teacher would tell me to do something and I had no idea what she was saying. It made for a very difficult situation.

It didn’t last long though, because my parents felt girls didn’t need to go to school. Your life was cut out to be at home and raise a family. That’s the way it was among Mexicans. I quit school in the fifth grade when my mother was hospitalized for a long time. At that point I became fully responsible for cooking meals, watching six younger children, and keeping up the house. When my mother came home from the hospital I helped her until she was able to be up and around.

Then I started working for the white people in Los Fresnos, Texas. That was the town we lived in. I did their housework, ironing, and babysitting. That went on for a couple years until I got on washing dishes at Refugio Hospital. For fifteen days of work I got paid forty-five dollars. In those days that was a lot of money. I turned most of it over to my parents to help out. The little bit I kept went to buying clothes. I’ve always been clothes
crazy, but short on money, so I've forever been a person to dress off layaways.

I stayed at the hospital for two years until I got married. My husband made enough money as a carpenter that I didn't have to work outside of the home. We had three boys so I had plenty to keep me busy in the house.

When we separated after six years of marriage, I went to work in the fields. By that time I was already here in Washington—Sunnyside, Washington. I did all kinds of field work—thinning beets and mint, cutting asparagus, picking potatoes, and picking peaches, pears, plums, and apples in the orchards. It was very poor pay, always under minimum wage. The way you make better money is for families to work together, contracting out to work several acres a day. Even so, it doesn't pay. The hours are long and the heat is horrible. There is always poverty in people doing that kind of work, because they don't make enough money and it's seasonal. After doing work in the fields for a season I found work in town as a cook and waitress in a restaurant. After it closed down, I got a job packing Mexican sweet rolls and making tortillas. For the next three or four years I went back and forth between field work and temporary jobs like that.

In nineteen sixty-five I married my second husband, a service-man. I don't know everything he's done, but he served several years with the Green Berets and has been up at the front line many times in battles. At first I didn't work when we were married, but when he went overseas to Vietnam I started working in a day-care center in Othello. I really enjoyed those years in the day-care center. Even little babies can learn by how you treat them. I could see the difference in children when they'd be gone over the weekends with the parents. On Monday mornings it would be a disaster to see some children come back dirty from not being bathed over the weekend, and with a rash on their bottom because they were not changed frequently and cleaned properly. I felt my heart go out to the little ones. Ninety-nine
percent of the children were Spanish-speaking, so my being bilingual helped the white supervisor understand the problems of the children. When my daughter was born, I kept her in the nursery there while I worked.

When Rudy returned from Vietnam in nineteen sixty-seven, I left the day-care center because we moved back to Fort Lewis. In nineteen seventy-three I started working outside of the home again, because I knew things were so bad at home that I was sure we were going to end up in another divorce. I hated the idea, but I had tried the best I could for almost ten years. My husband felt he was always right and refused to get counseling from anyone. I started working so that when he went his way, at least I would be working, and the kids would be adjusted to that.

This time I got on in a Mexican restaurant. For three dollars and twenty-five cents an hour I did cooking, the inventory, ordering the day’s groceries, and helped out the girls waiting tables. I felt I was working too many hours and had too much responsibility for the money I was getting, but there was no sense in even talking to the owner about a raise. No one was getting a raise. So when a friend mentioned that there was an opening for a janitress in a machine shop, I went down and filled out an application. I was hired even though I had no idea what a machine shop even looked like. The pay was three twenty-five an hour.

Most other machine shops have men for this kind of job, but it was not a very big shop and the work was not tremendously heavy, so I fit in rather well. One day, after two weeks of janitorial work, I mentioned to the supervisor that the machines looked intriguing and if there was ever an opportunity I would like to run one. That two weeks were all of the janitorial work that I did, because after that I was put to work running machines. Of course, I was under a supervisor, because I had no idea how to run a machine or what to do with it. While there I ran a milling machine, a lathe, drills, a piece-marking machine,
sanders, and a sand-blasting machine. When I moved onto the machines, I got my first raise up to three fifty. By the end of three months I was getting three seventy-five, so I could see the raises were coming in quickly. At that point I realized there was more money in doing jobs that have been mainly men's work.

The men did not seem to have anything against seeing a woman running a machine there. They were so willing to help me do things, make a set-up, bring parts, or whatever, that I had no fears at all. If somebody was willing to teach me, I was willing to learn.

Like many small outfits in Seattle, the company did ninety percent of its work for Boeing. At this particular time, Boeing was going downhill and laying off, so all the smaller shops doing their work were affected by it. Naturally, being one of the last hired, I was laid off.

I knew I would not be able to live on unemployment alone, so I started to look for another job. I applied at different places, but mostly with machine shop in mind. SER, a job placement service for Spanish-speaking and other low-income people, referred me to a truck manufacturer. My first day of employment was February second, nineteen seventy-six. I don't know what I expected, but it was a much larger outfit than I anticipated. I guess I had just thought a machine shop was a machine shop, and when I went in there with all the different shops, it was just like a sea of machine shops all over. Actually they were all different departments, not everything was a machine shop. At that point, I became a bit fearful and kept getting the feeling it was not going to be easy.

I could see machines that I recognized, bench drills, lathes, and mills, so they didn't really shock me. But there were other larger machines doing different jobs and I started to hold back. I couldn't very easily say that I would like to know what's going on. I think there were about a thousand people employed there. The majority were white. I started on swing shift, where there
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were maybe thirty to thirty-five working in my area. None were women.

The swing-shift supervisor was careful about what he would ask me to do. He called me the little girl and felt I was too small for some of the jobs. As a result he tried to find smaller jobs for me to do. At first I used a hand drill. Later I was put to work drilling long aluminum pieces for sleepers on some of the trucks. The pay, five dollars and seventy-one cents an hour, was the most I had ever earned.

I was told that I would have to join the Machinists Union within thirty days. I didn't want anything to do with the union, because in one of my earlier jobs I had been in a union. When people had been injured the union had never done anything about it. So I had hostile feelings toward unions. If a union's not going to be for the people, why join it? But I had no choice, so I started paying my dues. I wasn't acquainted with anybody that had anything good to say about the union, so there was no reason to change my feelings.

In the first part of September, when my children started school, I was switched to day shift. Lord behold, day shift totally turned me around. Everything was so different. The supervisor, and even some of the workers, had a hostile attitude towards me coming on day shift in the machine shop. This supervisor didn't want women in the machine shop and tried to keep us away on nights.

That's when I started to learn what discrimination was. One time the supervisor suggested I slip him a five or give him a bottle to get a better job. That disturbed me because I was not used to buying my jobs by bringing gifts or giving money to anybody.

Everything that came from that supervisor was crude in some way or another. Once he said the reason I was brown was that I drank too much coffee. Since I only drank one cup of coffee before starting to work, I guess the coffee must have been an
awfully strong dye to make me turn brown before his eyes. He was always telling me that I should be married and at home. After hearing that particular line several times, I asked him if he wanted me married so bad why didn’t he marry me and support my family. I don’t think he ever mentioned my being single again. Another time that man told me, if I was going to do a man’s job, then I had better look like a man.

The lead man was no better. He always teased me about being short, brown, dumb, and about what an ugly man I made. “Here comes the ugly man” was his favorite line. He also put me down because some of the truck parts were made in a factory that they have in Mexico. He said the Mexicans were dumb and didn’t know what they were doing. Sometimes I think the harassment was more because of my race than because I’m a woman. I did get some support from other workers, mostly minorities and other women.

I guess the supervisor decided he was not getting rid of the women fast enough, so he asked us to do more and more. The lead man tried to intimidate us by saying that we had to do more, we had to hurry up, we had to speed up even though I was working as fast as I could. To him it was never good enough. Then they started giving me much heavier jobs. After awhile I began to have physical problems, especially when I was lifting heavier objects. Many of the parts I could barely move, let alone be lifting all day. Because of that I ended up having surgery on my right hand.

Then, after I had been with the company not quite a year and a half, I was terminated. It’s a rather involved story, but I had been in an auto accident the night before and called in the morning to let them know I would be late because I had to get three insurance estimates and make out some accident reports. When I got to work, my hair was down, and I realized I had been in such a hurry to leave home that I forgot my pins that I normally use to put my hair up. I did have a hair clip and a scarf, so I pinned the
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hair to the nape of my neck and put on the scarf. At about two-thirty the supervisor told me that I shouldn’t be wearing my hair down and put his hands on my hair, trying to stick it down under the band of my safety glasses. That really upset me, because he had no business putting his hands on my hair or head or anywhere else. I explained the reason my hair was down and thought everything was taken care of. It wasn’t, because at three-ten the plant superintendent came out to talk to me, and I went through the story again. Neither he nor the supervisor mentioned that having my hair down was going to hurt me in any way. Both of them seemed to accept my explanation.

The next day I came in with my hair up and was immediately sent in to see the superintendent. He sounded angry and right off the bat said, “You’re fired.” Then he shouted at me saying he had asked me to pin my hair up.

I said, “You didn’t ask me to pin it up. You asked the reason and you seemed to have accepted it.” He insisted that having my hair down was the reason he was firing me. It wasn’t fair because men in the shop had hair down to their shoulders, beards that would come down to their chests, and none of their hair constrained in any way. A lot of times they didn’t even wear a hat on their heads.

After packing up my tools, I immediately went to the union hall. The business rep could do no more than sit there and laugh when I told him my story. He couldn’t believe what I was telling him and assured me that he would look into it. At home I started thinking. What could I do? I couldn’t sit still; I had a home, I had a family and responsibilities, so something had to be done. Meanwhile, people at work passed a petition around saying I should get my job back and raised money to help my family out. Some of the people who helped me were close friends. Others I did not even know. I can never express what these people did for me.

Three days later I went back to the business rep at the union
and found out that he had not done anything at all. All of my anti-union feelings flared up and I said, "This is exactly what I meant when I said that the union doesn't do anything." Further, I told the business rep if he didn't contact the company he would also be hearing from my attorney.

At the union meeting that night there were men from day shift and swing shift. When the business rep saw the number of people there, he knew he had a real problem. The members passed a resolution saying they supported me in this action that the company had taken against me. It was the first time a resolution was passed in Local 79 to support a woman, and a Mexican woman at that. I felt really good knowing the people were behind me. For the first time I knew for myself that union members were the ones that'll either make it or break it. If they're gonna stick by you, then you can make something of it, but if the people aren't gonna stand by you, the name of the union doesn't mean anything. I really appreciate the support of the union members.

After several meetings with the union and personnel, we agreed that I was to go back to work and the union would continue fighting for my retro pay. Finally the union won me pay for eleven of the fourteen days I was out. I continued to fight my case with the Human Rights Commission and after two years ended up collecting my other three days. In fact I got a total of fifteen hundred dollars for damages, which is not to say that I got paid for the amount of time and harassment that I had to go through. I don't think you can measure in dollars what people go through in that place. Nobody could ever be paid enough for all the harassment.

I didn't expect it to be smooth going back, but I must say I was very proud to walk in there and to know I was right and that I wasn't going to keep quiet about it. The supervisors were very bitter that I'd gotten my job back and found ways to retaliate. They'd tell me to work on a machine that practically didn't
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work and expected me to do a perfect job when there was nothing around to do the job with. Some of the comments from supervisors and lead men were pretty nasty. A lead man in the tool room even called me a "fucking cunt." Others said things that were derogatory towards me as a Mexican. I think my race played a big role. If you were not white, you were not good enough. Just because you had a different shade meant you were dumb or an idiot or ignorant. To them only white was the supreme, the only ones that could do anything, even though many times I knew I did a better job than some of the white guys. But just because they were white it was all right for them to make mistakes. If we non-whites made any mistakes or scrapped anything, it was always pointed out. Race played a big part in this little game of theirs.

I think they wanted me to get hurt physically. For a long time I worked on radial drills, which are quite large. They're a high machine, so I had trouble reaching all the levers. So between working with the heavy objects, lifting constantly from the table onto the machine and running levers, my head had to be in a looking-upward position for long periods of time. Over a number of months I had constant pain in the back of my neck. It never went away and continually got worse. Finally, I couldn't take it any longer and went to a doctor, who took X-rays and had me go through a myelogram. The doctor said I had a ruptured vertabra. Now I'm not a sickly type person and never had injuries of this nature before I went to work there, so I'm pretty sure it was work related. The company fought me all the way, and I never got any type of compensation. In fact, somewhere down the line the doctor changed his diagnosis from ruptured to deteriorating vertabra. I feel there's a lot of difference between ruptured and deteriorated. Anyhow I had surgery to fuse two vertabrae and I was not supposed to do much bending. It left my neck stiff and hard to move. I could turn slightly to the left and it was almost impossible to turn to the right.
When I came back I was given the job of running the Heald, a borematic-type machine. The parts we ran on that machine weighed no less than sixty pounds. There were no hoists to help lift these heavy, awkward parts into and out of the machine. I had to handle each part three or four times before the process of running a piece was complete. By the time I was done with a part, I had lifted it four, five, maybe six times. I did that all day long. Due to this constant heavy lifting of parts I hurt my lower back. But to this day I have gotten nothing out of it. They keep saying it is the same thing I had with my neck and now my lower back vertebrae are deteriorating. I still find it hard to believe, because I never had any problems with my health before. Do they think I hurt my back pushing a broom at home?

I have not worked since December twenty-seventh of nineteen seventy-nine. I had a sinus infection, and the doctor said I should not use heavy vibrating tools for a short period of time. The supervisor said there was nothing, then, that I could do and terminated me. I haven't been able to find other work. It seems like the other places that I have gone to are fearful of taking someone who's been injured.

My body is all messed up now—my lower back, neck, and hands. But I have gained through my experience something which no one can take from me. Now I understand prejudice. Now I know what racism is. When someone is being discriminated against, believe me, I feel for them, because I know, and if I can do anything to help the individual I will. This knowledge is something which I have gained. Plus I gained a lot of good friends. I know there's still a lot of good people out there in the world. Had I not gone through all this, maybe I would not be the person I am now.