

 WORKING IN AMERICA

# I'd Probably Be Dead

[Editor's note: Becki Young takes us inside the story of an "illegal" ... a compelling reality of how the struggle for working in America can take on a drama beyond politics, borders, immigration and reveal how we compute humanity. We do not use his real name. MB]



BY BECKI L. YOUNG

the 11 million. The undocumented. The "illegals."

He is a self-made man and a self-taught chef, an exemplar of the "hard working immigrant" on whose back this nation was built.

From the start of his journey to the United States he worked odd jobs

— construction, cleaning, whatever he could get — to put food in his mouth and a roof over his head.

He arrived in San Diego in October 2002, then got a ride to Las Vegas. Walking the streets the day he arrived, asking for work, he encountered a Mexican who ran a stall at a flea market selling kitchen wares. That man offered him a job and a place to sleep, and for the next year or so they worked together, once a week waking at 4 a.m. to make the four hour trek

**“W**hat would you be doing now had you not come to the US in your late teens?” I query Chef Carlos. He responds without pause: “I’d probably be dead.”

I do a double-take, looking up from my notes to see if he is kidding. He isn't. The fact that Chef Carlos risked his life to come to this country makes his statement all the more striking. With amazing nonchalance he describes how he left his native Honduras at age 19,

**Chef Carlos is also one of the 11 million. The undocumented. The “illegals.”**

hitchhiking his way through El Salvador and Guatemala to Mexico, where he was deported 15 times (no, that is not a typo) before he finally made it to the northern border. And then he simply walked, by himself, through the mountains and across the border into the United States. To find his way he followed the sun. It was, he says, an adventure.

Chef Carlos is a master of understatement.

Chef Carlos is also one of

by car to Los Angeles to purchase inventory for the kitchen stall.

Chef Carlos' formal education in Honduras ended in the 6th grade, and his English was extremely limited when he arrived in the US. Within a month of working in the kitchen stall and observing those around him, he was able to conduct some limited conversations in English. He then enrolled in an English course at the Desert Rose Adult High School in Las Vegas.

For a while he worked two jobs –

## The Last Word

Out of a total of about 12.7 million workers in the restaurant industry, an estimated 1.4 million – both legal and illegal immigrants – are foreign born, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. According to 2008 estimates from the Pew Hispanic Center, about 20 percent of the nearly 2.6 million chefs, head cooks and cooks are illegal immigrants. Among the 360,000 dishwashers, 28 percent are undocumented, according to the estimates.

source: *The New York Times*

cleaning kitchens from 10 p.m. to 6 a.m., then construction from 7 a.m. to 4 p.m. I didn't ask him when he slept.

After two years in Las Vegas, Chef Carlos made his way to the East Coast, to reunite with a relative in Maryland. (In fact, when he first came to the US in 2002 he thought his mother was in the country, but later learned by way of a letter from home that she had returned to Honduras soon before he arrived).

It was in DC that his career in the restaurant industry began in earnest. Over the past decade Chef Carlos has worked his way up through some of the finest kitchens in DC.

In his first job at one of the city's top restaurants he started as a dishwasher, and then one day, he said, there was an opportunity to do salad. The next month, a chance to prep meat and fish arose. And then he learned the grill.

He was able to rise up quickly through the ranks in the kitchen because, he said, from the start he was “in the back, watching everything.”

He spent a few months at a high-volume restaurant in Georgetown working 12-14 hour shifts, but that schedule proved to be too exhausting, even for the tireless Chef Carlos.

Next he prepared hot appetizers at a tapas restaurant downtown. From there he was lured away to serve as a sous chef at a new

restaurant in the Virginia suburbs.

Then finally, in 2007, Chef Carlos landed with his current employer, a suburban neighborhood restaurant serving traditional Italian fare. He started as a sort of “floater” in the kitchen, filling in whatever role was needed and helping to create new dishes for the restaurant. In 2008 the restaurant owner and then – head chef had a parting of ways, and Chef Carlos was offered the chance to head the kitchen.

During this time he was taking English studies at the Carlos Rosario School, and completing prerequisites to enter the school's culinary program. In 2012, he graduated with a one year diploma in Culinary Arts Fundamentals.

Chef Carlos currently lives in the DC area with his wife and two-year-old son.

He could teach us all something about the words “grit” and “determination” and Working in America!

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