

STARTED AS CREW (B): DARLENE CALHOUN AND MCDONALD'S

Darlene Calhoun began working at a Portland-area McDonald's in 1977. Her husband was pursuing a military career, and the family relocated every six to eight months when he was reassigned. Calhoun was interested in finding a position to supplement her husband's income, but their young child needed care during the day. New to the city, the Calhouns had decided not to hire a babysitter. But then Calhoun saw a McDonald's ad on television, "and they were talking about flexible hours and, you know, that was something that we needed," she recalled.¹ She soon began working at a local McDonald's as a cashier.

The McDonald's Work Experience

Promotion from within

In the "quick service" food industry, infamous for high turnover and poor training, McDonald's Corporation defied norms. The international fast food giant used a combination of promotion-from-within strategy and employee training programs to develop an abundant pool of human capital. The success of this strategy, built on the modest, hard-working ethic of company founders such as Ray Kroc and McDonald's Hamburger University creator Fred Turner, had an unexpected impact on the lives of crew members: The wages, benefits, and opportunity for promotion available to every employee of McDonald's gave thousands of workers the opportunity to lift themselves out of poverty.

¹ The source of this and all subsequent Darlene Calhoun quotations is an author interview with Darlene Calhoun, assistant supervisor of Lofton & Lofton Management, DePaul University, Chicago, 27 April 2007.

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Human capital

“It was pretty much hands on ... and you learned as you went.” Calhoun’s training at her first McDonald’s included cashiering and other aspects of day-to-day business at the restaurant. In 1979, she relocated to San Diego with her husband, and stayed with McDonald’s. After three months in San Diego, she was promoted to manager. “That was wow to me ... because I didn’t aspire to do that, but they saw something in me, and they sort of pushed me along.” As a new manager, Calhoun completed the training programs that would teach her some of the skills she needed to manage effectively, complemented by hands-on experience.

When her husband’s military service ended, the family returned to Chicago. At that point, Calhoun was an experienced restaurant manager. A McDonald’s field agent familiar with Calhoun recommended her to Jim Martin, an owner-operator running his first McDonald’s restaurant. Over time, Martin sent Calhoun through management training classes at Hamburger U—accredited coursework that could be applied to a degree program. Seven years later, Martin’s store was sold to another McDonald’s franchisee, and Calhoun stayed with the store.

In 2006, Calhoun was promoted to supervisor, overseeing five Chicago-area restaurants. She was in charge of training new employees and potential managers and overseeing the day-to-day operations of her restaurants. She considered the training to be one of the most positive aspects of a position at McDonald’s, particularly for the young crew members who came from low-income neighborhoods in which some of the stores she oversaw were located. The struggle of inner-city life was often difficult, but Calhoun held her employees to the same high standards she did employees at her other stores, and she found joy in seeing them succeed as they moved on after working at McDonald’s. “Circumstances that they have to deal with are tough,” Calhoun said, “so to make a difference for one is really, really, really heartwarming to me. I’m proud of it.” Calhoun identified, in particular, the work ethic that young crew members learned—“that structure that you get at McDonald’s will help take you wherever because of the training that we give ... and it makes us feel good, that we were able to instill something.”

From Cashier to Award-Winner

In 2005, Calhoun was honored with the prestigious Ray Kroc Award. The award recognized the top performing 1% of McDonald’s managers nationwide, and was “given to managers who deliver superior results in achieving operational excellence, reinforcing McDonald’s commitment to people, and building the business.”² Owner-operators and supervisors presented her the award during store hours, with balloons, flowers, and a prize check.

² “The Ray Kroc Award,” The McDonald’s Electric Press Kit, <http://www.mcdepk.com/raykrocaward2005/index.html> (accessed 15 October 2007).

The award came as a shock to Calhoun, who had never aspired to win it. “You don’t focus on trying to win awards,” she explained, “you’re trying to focus on that this restaurant is run the way it should run every day.” The restaurant’s location, on the west side of Chicago, was in a tough inner-city neighborhood. Nonetheless, Calhoun held her crew to the high standards of any other McDonald’s restaurant:

Because you’re in the inner city it doesn’t mean that because these folks come and spend their dollar it doesn’t mean that they’re not supposed to get what they get downtown ... So that was my goal. To make sure that even though I’m in a tough, tough area, these folks deserve the same kind of treatment.

As for the public criticism of McDonald’s, and the image of the McJob, Calhoun said, “We see it and hear it every day and it does not bother me at all, because I know what we do.” She saw the employee benefits and training and community service done by McDonald’s, and, as a company insider, felt that she could see the real McDonald’s. “It doesn’t bother me at all,” she reiterated, “because I’m proud of who I work for and I don’t think I would have it any other way.”