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## UNHAPPY MEALS

### UNDERCOVER PROFESSOR FINDS MCJOB IS NOT MCEASY

By JEREMY BROWN March 26, 2007

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ONE chilly Sunday morning upstate, Jerry Newman took his teenage daughter to breakfast at a local fast-food joint, where she discovered a condom peeking out of her egg sandwich.

"Great," thought Newman a professor at the University of Buffalo School of Management, "I'm going to have to give the birds-and-bees talk here in this restaurant."

As it turned out, the contraceptive condiment was just the sliced-off tip of a plastic glove, but the experience was enough to get him thinking: Just what the heck happens on the other side of that counter?

So he went back there. Seven times, to be exact.

The result is "My Secret Life on the McJob," Newman's first-person account of a 14-month undercover odyssey working at fast-food restaurants from Detroit to Jacksonville.

While fellow McMuckrakers Eric Schlosser and Morgan Spurlock have exposed high-level industry malfeasance, Newman was interested in a griddle-level view of how they operate. What he found was that there's no shortage of intelligent and hard-working people under those polyester uniforms - and that the burger biz is tougher than it might seem.

"Lunch rush is the biggest pressure cooker I've ever been in," said Newman, 59,

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who took home between \$5.50 and \$6.50 an hour for his labors.

Hunching over red-hot griddles for hours on end and speed-walking with heavy boxes across grease-caked tile floors are daily chores, and Newman earned himself three herniated discs for his trouble.

"I was popping pain pills left and right just to survive," he says.

Being a management professor, Newman was interested in some bigger lessons as well, and his book takes aim at the way corporations that dictate everything down to the number of pickles on a cheeseburger have few rules governing employee treatment, opening the door for abusive managers. The worst bosses dismiss the job as easy, fail to provide adequate training, then pepper flustered employees with put-downs when errors inevitably occur, he says.

One such "toxic manager" didn't bother to acknowledge Newman's presence until his fourth day; another forced him to squeeze into a skintight shirt when a larger one couldn't be found, doing little for his sense of dignity.

"In over a year I was complimented maybe 10 times."

Among his co-workers, Newman found several breeds. Some were part of a "gypsy culture" of folks endlessly drifting from store to store, unfazed by their station in life. Others were "way-station workers," striving toward something better.

For the most part Mr. Jerry - as his younger associates often addressed him - grew to admire them for their diligence and pride in the face of thankless menial labor - like one young colleague who'd ride his bike to work every day in the 19-degree Buffalo winter.

During a shift at the front register, one of Newman's customers, perhaps impressed by an eloquence befitting a lecturing professor, offhandedly remarked that he was too good for his job - a sentiment with which Newman privately but resolutely disagreed.

"I've found many bright people in fast food," he says. "Seldom are they told this."

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