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Profile: Three single working mothers in Auburn, Maine

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MICHELE NORRIS, host:

The person who takes your order in a restaurant could be one of those struggling to make a living. Waitstaff often work for half the minimum wage and depend on tips to add up to a good night's work. This year NPR's Noah Adams has been reporting on the low-wage work force in America: a home-based child care provider in Baltimore, thoroughbred stable workers in Kentucky, a Pennsylvania mushroom picker. And he's been traveling in the state of Maine to talk with single working mothers, women trying to hold a family together and hang on to a job at the same time. His first story is from the city of Auburn and a downtown restaurant called TJ's.

NOAH ADAMS reporting:

The towns of Auburn and Lewiston, old Maine mill towns, sit side by side across the Androscoggin River, and TJ's is on the first floor of a red brick building close to the bridge.

(Soundbite of restaurant activity)

ADAMS: It's a medium upscale restaurant, businesspeople talking at lunch; at dinner, tablecloths and candles and wine. Crabmeat ravioli is one of the autumn specials at 12.95.

(Soundbite of ice clinking)

ADAMS: Almost all of TJ's staff are single mothers. We will meet three of them. Tammy Ogden is 38 years old, the mother of three.

Ms. TAMMY OGDEN (Single Working Mother): I was 17 when I had my oldest. I had children early. I was married and divorced.

ADAMS: Rebecca Brown is 22 years old, hasn't married. She has two young boys.

Ms. REBECCA BROWN (Single Working Mother): I had kids early. I was 17 and 20. I was still in high school for both of them.

ADAMS: And Deborah Simpson, who's now 41, has always been single and has a 12-year-old son.

State Representative DEBORAH SIMPSON (Maine; Single Working Mother): I was 28. Three weeks later, I was 29.

(Soundbite of laughter)

ADAMS: We have our conversation at TJ's after lunch, after the doors are locked at 2:00. They'll have a three-hour break before the dinner shift starts, and they like having a split-shift workday. It leaves the afternoons free for their kids. The waitstaff jobs at TJ's are usually part-time.

Rep. SIMPSON: You can make a lot of money waiting on tables per hour, but you don't work 40 hours.

ADAMS: Deb Simpson says especially for the older servers, a 40-hour week would be exhausting. When TJ's gets busy, your legs get tired, your knees hurt. It takes energy to keep on smiling even as the tips mount up--some nights well over a hundred dollars. But busy is far better than slow. The previous evening, only two customers came in. They were served by Tammy Ogden.

Ms. OGDEN: People just did not want to come out to eat at TJ's last night. (Laughs) The pay rate for servers is 3.18, so I made 3.18 an hour for the three and a half hours that I was here, and I got one tip. The tip was well--I--well, \$17. I, you know, made \$17, but that's the kind of time where you--'Well, if it's going to be like this why don't I just go home?' You know, 'Why wouldn't I just be home when I can be there with the child?' You know, supervising him.

ADAMS: Rebecca Brown works backstage amid the steam and noise of the kitchen as a dishwasher, an intensely physical job--almost fun--if you're in good shape.

Ms. BROWN: I don't want to say I'm buff, but it's not really that bad. I mean, if you can beat the heat, you know, and dress well--don't wear nice clothes. Sweat pants and T-shirts, I mean, stuff you don't care about getting ruined, you know. Grease flies everywhere. It's disgusting, actually, but whatever. It's a job and it pays, so I do it.

ADAMS: Brown says she works slower here at TJ's than she does at her own house with a two-year-old son. Deb Simpson agrees. She's been a mom for 12 years, a waitress at TJ's for 13.

Rep. SIMPSON: I like waiting on tables. I like people. I like to see people. I like the sort of social interaction you have, and that's fun for me. I don't like that some people think because I wait on tables I'm a lesser human being.

Ms. OGDEN: If you're out in public in general, and you know, 'Well, what do you do?' And, 'Well, I'm a server.'

ADAMS: Simpson's co-worker, Tammy Ogden.

Ms. OGDEN: And even some people go, 'It's a new term for waitress.' 'A server.' Some people say, 'What's that?' 'A waitress.' 'Oh, you wait tables?' It's just that look. They give you this look like, 'Oh, well, she probably didn't finish high school and she, you know, probably, you know, got in trouble a lot or,' you know?

Rep. SIMPSON: There's some people that you wait on...

Ms. OGDEN: ...(Unintelligible).

Rep. SIMPSON: ...and they don't actually look at you. There are people I've waited on for years who I've seen at functions and then, you know, introduced myself and I know--they look at me as if they just met me.

ADAMS: Deborah Simpson is proud to hand you her business card, listing her phone number at the Maine state Capitol. She ran for state representative and was elected, and six months a year, she's a lawmaker instead of a waitress, making the daily commute to Augusta, bringing, she says, a working family's perspective to the Legislature.

Rep. SIMPSON: I did get to vote to increase the minimum wage, which increased the wages for the waitstaff, 'cause the waitstaff gets paid half the minimum wage.

ADAMS: Did you ever say on the floor of the Legislature, 'Look, you know, I make minimum wage'?

Rep. SIMPSON: I didn't. It didn't even occur to me that I was increasing my own pay. It was kind of--I just think about these things in an abstract kind of way. I don't think about myself.

ADAMS: Simpson's salary as a state representative is \$9,000 plus health benefits, which the restaurant job doesn't provide. The legislative session runs from January until around June, and then she goes back to TJ's. She lives near the restaurant in a two-family house, she and her son on the top floor, paying rent to her parents who live below--handy for baby-sitting. Both Rebecca Brown and Tammy Ogden live in public housing apartments. Rebecca's two-year-old is in subsidized day care. And Ogden, these days, is walking to work. Because she has a teen-age son, her car stays parked in the driveway.

Ms. OGDEN: Can't afford insurance with a 17-year-old male and a brand-new license. If it was just me, there would be no problem. And I live in the neighborhood, so I walk to work. You know, I have nobody else to rely on to get me to work except for my own two legs.

ADAMS: How much would it cost--car insurance? Did you check?

Ms. OGDEN: Yes, I did. I've shopped around. The cheapest I've come up with for six months for my son and myself would be \$1,500, so that's 3,000 a year. It's a big number.

ADAMS: The budgets are frustratingly tight for a part-time, single-mother household, especially when a child can see a great pair of sneakers in the mall that cost \$198. Tammy Ogden gets some money from her 17-year-old's father and pays child support for her 10-year-old son. Rebecca Brown, the part-time dishwasher at TJ's, has her two-year-old at home; her five-year-old son is with his father.

Ms. BROWN: I mean, I used to pay child support to my oldest one, but lately I haven't had the income to do it so me and his father just talked about it, and he said when I start making more money again I can start paying again. But right now I really can't afford it, so--but I've never collected from my youngest son's father--nothing.

ADAMS: How are you able to make it through a month just working a couple of shifts here?

Ms. BROWN: I usually keep a second job.

ADAMS: What other kind of work have you been doing?

Ms. BROWN: Working at a DVD store. Just buy, sell and trade DVDs, retail, anything. But I haven't had any hours lately 'cause my boss didn't give me any hours for, like, almost two weeks now. So I'm actually out there looking for another job this week, and when I'm not working here I'm out looking for another job. Two jobs--I'd rather work one full-time job, but if I have to work two jobs I'm going to. I've got to pay the bills and I've gotta buy diapers and stuff, so...

ADAMS: Rebecca Brown, in fact, has now given notice and is leaving her part-time dishwasher's job for full-time work at McDonald's. Deborah Simpson has been filling in as the manager at TJ's, a job she'll leave in January to go back to the Legislature. We spoke with Simpson and Brown and their co-worker Tammy Ogden earlier this month at TJ's restaurant in Auburn, Maine. Noah Adams, NPR News.

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