

DOMESTIC WORKERS UNITED
INTERVIEW afc2015027_03300_ms03
Patricia Francois interviews Christian Lewis. Part 2

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Pat Francois interviews Christine Lewis.

00:00:00 Pat introduces herself and announces that this is part two of an earlier interview with Christine. Christine shares some examples of women being exploited due to their immigration status. Women being afraid to ask for what is theirs.

00:01:00 How personal life should remain personal life with employers because your immigration status can be used against you.

00:01:30 Women being threatened by employers, "call immigration."

00:02:00 Documentation status used as an excuse to deny women their back pay.

00:02:30 Employers use this ploy to stiff employees and intimidate them, while they are caring for their children.

00:03:00 Women fall for this without recognizing they have rights, until they meet DWU to learn about their rights.

00:03:30 Cultural heritage sharing on the job, Christine gives examples, foodways. Importance of shaking a drink so that 'sediments' would spread throughout the juice, this stuck with one little girl she cared for. Fried rice to help children eat vegetables.

00:05:30 A Calypso song example, for children who know nothing about Trinidad. Caribbean foods and spices, tea, patties.

00:07:00 Children imitating her ways of speaking (saying "tree" instead of "three"). A child found this funny.

00:08:00 Women can teach children about Caribbean culture, language, politics. She plays the steel drum for her children.

00:09:00 Story of how Christine can't strike a child to discipline, so on one occasion prayed loudly, to get the child's attention.

00:10:00 Using body language to get the child's attention.

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00:10:30 How this strategy worked. Child calmed down. Sharing dance with families, Cuban, jazz dance.

00:11:30 How she and other women may be overworked and underpaid but sharing the love of food and culture can still be rewarding. The children become 'well rounded.'

00:12:00 How a white child she took care of now has all black friends.

00:12:30 How she assesses family photos, to see if her white employers have any black friends. Reading books for the children also helps educate. She is amazed that this child has assimilated to having black friends now.

00:13:00 How this phenomenon is interesting. How does Christine balance personal life with work life?

00:13:30 It has gotten better from 25 years before. Taking care of her own child was a challenge back then. Sometimes she wonders how she did this.

00:14:30 She relied on a neighbor to her five year old daughter onto the school bus, because she had to be taking care of an infant early in the morning.

00:15:00 Allusion to the negro spiritual 'How did I get over?'

00:15:30 How child care always takes a village. Help from her family members. Looking back, Christine sees that her 'life belonged to the madam I worked for.'

00:16:00 If the train ran late there would be a quarrel. The employer would complain she would then be late for her job. Christine worked from 8:30am to 10:30pm during her daughter's growing years.

00:16:30 Problem develops with the microphone. Chris Mule fixes this and they continue.

00:18:00 Back to work/life balance. With those hours, 8:30am to 10:30pm, there is no balance, no time for her daughter.

00:18:30 Her daughter would stay out on her bicycle at night with her not there. She would have to rely on her sister, or the village, to take charge. Thankfully there was always someone there.

00:19:00 Christine again wonders how she did it. Even with fewer hours, employers call to say they'll be late, and she couldn't leave.

00:19:30 If you do leave, welfare and social services step in, police, jail. As she put it in one of her writings, 'My life belongs to madam on the plantation at easy street.' Now twenty

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years later (this was 1990) it's better. She works from 7:30 to 2:30. So she has free time afterward. That's full time. 7:30 to 2:30, 5 days a week plus occasional Saturdays.

00:21:00 Working as a musician is Christine's second hustle. She takes gigs on weekends.

00:21:30 How she and others work paycheck to paycheck. Sometimes you take the extra hours.

00:22:00 Her time doesn't belong to her if a friend invites her out. How she gets overtime but she doesn't get paid time and a half. Discussion of how they believe time and a half is a right.

00:23:00 Christine resolves to look into this and check the DW Bill of Rights.

00:23:30 How working on a holiday should be time and a half.

00:24:00 More discussion of overtime logistics.

00:25:00 Discussion of items she was not familiar with an eyebrow dab brush, a baby's teething necklace. These were items she was not familiar with, and her employer seems to have asked her about them (as if to insinuate that she'd taken them or misplace them perhaps?).

00:27:00 How she would use something different for teething, a pumpkin stem. Annoyance of employer asking her where things were, that she had lost herself: an air thermometer, her iPad tablet. Eventually Christine confronts her about this, to stand up for women, and herself.

00:29:00 Too many women don't stand up for themselves. She points out to her employer that she's responsible for the baby, but not for every object around the baby, sometimes babies lose things, so let's leave this alone.

00:30:00 How many women would be afraid to say what she said for fear of losing their job. Women are still lining up to get babysitting jobs in 2016.

00:31:00 It was important to Christine to point out, 'I don't want your eyebrow pencil. I don't want the baby's thermometer. I don't want your tablet, I have a tablet and a phone.' She pointed out that she had integrity and character.

00:31:30 Employer was a little stunned at these words.

00:32:00 So many challenges to deal with, trains running late, balancing her own child's care at home, dealing with these accusations. Child care is not easy work, it's real work.

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00:32:30 Back strain leaning down to diaper a baby. Constant interaction with a baby while also doing housekeeping. How she warns women to leave if they employer is 'getting on their last nerve.'

00:33:30 These jobs have no growth. She asks parents when she first joins them if they are anxious parents. Parents can be the problem. She reminds them she is not a doctor, but she has a mother's wit, having raised her own. Parents don't need to tell her how to diaper a baby, feed the child, or cook after being a mother for 30 years.

00:34:30 Babies are helpless. She's paid to replace the parent while she's there so she does her best. She and others work from a place of agape love, a motherly love for the children.

00:35:00 How does being a domestic worker impact Christine's family life? Her daughter has gone to Canada, no family life, organizing also takes her away from her partner. She lives the story. She lives her life through activism.

00:36:30 She answers to no one but the movement. Everything is centered around the work.

00:37:00 Reflects back again on ways she was not available to her daughter, paid little girls to walk her daughter to school, didn't always have time to do her daughter's homework with her. Couldn't walk in the park with her the way she walked in the park with the children she cared for. Pat observes employers sometimes say 'get a life' when the worker's life revolves around the employer's life. Pat recalls working many American holidays, even Labor Day, before she understood these should be holidays for her as a domestic worker. Labor Day is important to Caribbean people.

00:38:30 Labor Day is the time to connect with relatives abroad. If you work that day, you might not be able to visit with family who are visiting the U.S.

00:39:00 Christine recalls working while her father was visiting from the Caribbean. How she missed social events. How her employer would not let her go home at 6pm. She worked for a TV station. She would come home and eat her dinner, watching TV, while Christine stayed until 8 or 8:30, a 12 hour day. The little boy was a Caribbean adoptee so Christine regarded him like a son.

00:41:00 She left this job because there was no time to spend with anyone, she had no life. How she got up one morning and started writing and just kept on, didn't answer the phone any more. The woman moved, had been planning to move without telling her anyway. Other groups Christine belongs to, Public Theater.

00:42:30 How Christine used to feel isolated on the job but not now that she's organizing.

00:43:30 How Christine is also a pianist. DWU is something she had to look forward to,

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beyond the job.

00:44:00 It's good to be able to talk to other workers. Interacting with the baby is isolating. How she could never get used to her own bed. How she was always on edge, restraining herself, in another person's house.

00:45:00 She remembers a job in Tarrytown/Sleepy Hollow, very long commute to get there by bus, lonely house, worked three days a week for \$60 in 1990. How Christine didn't realize this was exploitation at the time. It seems like a lot of money to her. This was before DWU.

00:47:30 Getting out of the town was also difficult. Last bus was 7:50pm. How employer never drove her to the bus stop, she had to walk, was concerned about safety, someone jumping out of the bushes. The children grew on her although it was a strange family.

00:48:30 The job didn't last long. More clarifications about the hours, tasks involved. She would see other workers in the park or at the bus stop.

00:50:00 How Christine got involved with DWU. She was studying at NYU in 2001, and a friend recruited her as a spokesperson for the movement.

00:50:30 The history of black women organizing, from domestic work and farm work, slaves, and migration from the south to the north in the 1920s and 1930s. People in the Caribbean were going to England and the Americas. How women in 1990 were asking her where should they go for assistance at their jobs? One woman said her employer blew smoke in her face. Talking to other women in the park playground on 95th street. Being chastised for giving a child the wrong food (bologna) in a Jewish family. Christine jumped aboard DWU because 'it's our story.'

00:52:30 Being underpaid and overworked. How the job has been deemed inferior. How domestic work and farm work were excluded from labor regulations because the work was done by black folks historically. What the Domestic Workers Bill of Rights means.

00:53:30 "End of an era of exclusion." How women can now speak up and decide what wages they are willing to work for.

00:54:00 How women still can't assert these rights because they still need the job ASAP. How women line up for these jobs.

00:54:25 How Christine went through an Irish agency and was the last to interview but still the first to get a job. How employers interviewed 10 women and it is the same today, but now there is a safety net, an anchor, with the Bill of Rights. How women who are being stiffed can come to DWU. There is a sisterhood and a comradery.

00:56:00 The items that were 'chiseled off' the Bill of Rights should be added back in. Like

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paid sick days. More job security (no instant firings), more than 3 days off per year. Paid health insurance.

00:57:00 How the movement should go back to the table with legislators. The Department of Labor should enforce the Bill. Workers need education.

00:57:30 How the stigma on the work is a shame. There is shame and fear. Christine left Trinidad to do more than this kind of work. Latina women disliking the term 'domestic.'

00:58:00 How her family had helpers when she was young and she became a caregiver in turn upon coming to the U.S. How women in Trinidad sell their homes and land to go walk people's babies on the upper West Side.

00:58:30 How all work is good and whatever work you do you can be the best at it. How seeing a child look around for her even when his mother returns is her 'joie de vivre.' She treats him as her own, keeps him safe and happy.

01:00:00 The Bill of Rights needs to include more. Protection from harassment and sex exploitation is also important. Women need to be educated.

01:01:00 Aurora Levins Morales, Christine quotes her, a Jewish / Puerto Rican writer. 'Our stories are our medicine.' At DWU meetings, women can talk about what they went through and know they have a friend who has been through it. Women can stand together, listen to each other non-judgmentally.

01:02:00 Domestic work matters in the history of America. The 2010 Bill in NY was a model for other states. DWU has CPR class, nanny training courses, women call to find out what DWU has to offer.

01:02:30 If a worker has been stiffed, DWU also provides legal representation via the Urban Justice Center which takes cases pro bono.

01:03:00 Workers need to know they have these rights, also. How DWU is like church. Christine sings a hymn.

01:04:00 DWU is a refuge from abuse, wherever women work in the New York City area.

01:04:30 How some workers get isolated going out with families on vacation to the Hamptons, without their families nearby. How some women's husbands are not faithful when they take 2 to 3 week live-in jobs.

01:05:00 How domestic workers support their employers' marriages while their own husbands are walking away. Their children may die by gun violence because they're not home. They work 2 and 3 jobs to help send them to college and keep a roof over their head, clothes on their back, food in their tummy. Christine shares story about having her own hard

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times, and noticing black women still tithe despite low wages. Christine's problems with her landlord. How she shares the story to encourage others dealing with the same. How she has legal representation this time. No severance pay after 19 years working for a family.

01:08:30 She retains an affectionate relationship with these people but still has no severance pay, leaving her in dire straits for a year.

01:09:00 Importance of sharing the stories.

01:09:30 What employers need to know. The Bill of Rights is not being enforced. People don't know about it. It hasn't had the effect across the country because parents haven't gotten the memo.

01:11:30 There are conversations going on. The Bill of Rights was fashionable for a while, plenty of magazine coverage.

01:12:00 How employers assume black people don't read. New workers are not always active in civics. Not always interested in the pay conversation. Discussion of wage standards.

01:13:30 Bill of Rights is not effective. Some people are doing the right thing while others are not. The Department of Labor has a role to play. The big win in Albany, but no enforcement afterward.

01:14:30 Christine likens the trip to Albany to a Bible story of a woman pushing a judge to get what she wanted. It took 6.5 years for the Bill of Rights to pass. They have to do it again. Legislators didn't believe immigrant women could get a Bill of Rights but their minds have been changed.

01:17:30 Firing at will is wrong. How one family gave Christine a 'retainer fee' to stay available when they got back from Canada, though she was not paid while they were gone. How this can create problems in accepting other jobs. How she did not answer the phone when they returned. She took another job.

01:19:00 She took another job in 1997 and she kept that one for 19 years.

01:20:00 The Dept. of Labor should get back into the conversation about women's work. How Christine was offered an MFA in creative writing but gave it up to keep organizing. She is a published poet and still writes.

01:21:00 She is also a musician and an advocate for women. Some people go to school to be this. She might revisit the MFA to do it one class per semester.

01:21:30 How the scholarship was for St. Joseph's College. How the work is considered inferior but people bring teaching skills, nursing skills, health practitioner skills to it, but don't

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get paid for bringing that. People serve as masseuses, do social services, working on doctoral dissertations and work as nannies. Domestic workers are educated people.

01:22:30 'We didn't just come to wash the bottom of a pan and a pot.' What training did DWU offer Christine?

01:23:00 Christine says she came from a place of learning but it gave her a sense of sisterhood.

01:23:30 Christine mentions the courses again that DWU offers. Women learn assertiveness.

01:24:00 Sometimes women with training get told they are overqualified.

01:24:30 How some employers want women who won't ask questions, someone easier to fool and abuse. The work is 'steeped in servitude.' Slaves couldn't read and write and weren't allowed to, not allowed to be schooled. The Bill of Rights ended an era of exclusion. Black women of the past must be remembered because they paved the way for such conversations.

01:25:30 'Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen' (Christine cites some verses). Importance of the black power movement of the 1970s as well. Christine's final words: In solidarity we stand. We don't give up. Nothing is conceded without a fight. And still we rise (Maya Angelou). Christine's hopes and prayers for the continuation of the movement. Good moments from the most recent DWU meeting. How Black Lives Matter is important, and DWU has brought many different women together, different cultures, inclusive movement.

Pat thanks Christine.