

DEFECTOR

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A Grocery Store Clerk Keeps Living

by Lori Teresa Yearwood



Photo: Lori Teresa Yearwood

Welcome to [How Are You Coping With That?](#) a recurring column in which Lori Teresa Yearwood talks to people about how they are coping with hardship.

SALT LAKE CITY — I knew from the moment I spotted Ruston Kinney kneeling on the tile floor of a Salt Lake City grocery store, organizing bottles of

organic mayonnaise on a metal shelf, that he was working hard to keep up appearances. Not just the store's, but his own as well.

Perhaps it was the translucency of the skin around his hands, revealing the arthritic disjointedness of his thumbs. Or maybe it was the careful way he had swept his salt-and-pepper hair over the top of his head. His smile didn't declare happiness so much as evoke the feeling of an unanswered question.

"Life is a paradox," the 63-year-old would tell me at the start of his interview.

For more than a year, I had known Kinney as the cashier who was always been eager to strike up a brief conversation. He was the man who, on a day when I was struggling with a sense of the all-too-familiar reality of COVID-19 isolation, asked me how I was. I told him in a rather low tone that I was "just OK." He responded by walking over to the store's plastic flower bins, pulling out a bouquet of irises, and handing them to me while saying, "I hope you have a better day. Stay positive."

Amidst the late-afternoon bustle of pre-dinner shopping on a recent Wednesday, I asked Kinney how he was coping with this country's current inflation—the rate has escalated to 6.8 percent, the highest it's been since 1982.

"Low wages" are defined as two-thirds of the median hourly wage for full-time, full-year male workers: \$16.67 per hour in 2018, according to the Brookings Institution, a non-profit public policy organization based in D.C. The low-wage threshold varies, from \$13.10 in Beckley, W. Va., to \$21.60 in San Francisco.

Even low-wage earners who have received increases are seeing those gains taken away by an affordable housing crisis in which rents are expected to rise 10 percent in the next year, according to the Federal Reserve Bank of New York.

Meanwhile, personal income is projected to rise by only about .6 percent this year, says Eric Tars, legal director for the National Homelessness Law Center.

"With more than one in four renters already paying more than half their income on rent each month, and the cost of food and other necessities rising too, millions of people are going to be faced with impossible choices about paying rent or utilities or food," Tars says.

At the restaurant where Kinney works part-time, we sit over a bowl of chips and salsa, and Kinney responds to my query about his ability to cope with the tumult of the current economic climate: “I’m not doing so well.”

When we sit down to talk in the restaurant where he works his second job as a waiter, he tells me that until two years ago, he never wanted to live. “The world didn’t offer anything to me,” he says. He doesn’t know why. Maybe, he says, it has to do with the fact that he is gay and grew up in a religious family that denounced homosexuality.

Whatever the reason, his epiphany came in the most banal moment.

“I was laying in bed when I realized that I wasn’t going to die anytime soon,” he says. Meaning, everything he thought would have killed him by then—the AIDS epidemic that killed most of his friends in the ’80s, his fraught childhood in a religion that denounced his gayness, a life of drugs and partying, a diagnosis of atrial fibrillation—had somehow failed to end his life.

And so he looked at his own surprising ability to survive. And in that most ordinary of moments two years ago, Kinney, 61 at the time, considered the state of his life: the lack of meaningful social connections; the fact he didn’t have money saved for his retirement; the reality that his employment history consisted entirely of low-paying waiting jobs. And he decided he wanted to find out what it was like to actually choose life. “I decided to go for it,” he says.

Which was precisely when COVID-19 hit, and things got even more challenging.

He had to find a way to pay the \$900-per-month rent on his one-bedroom apartment while also covering the wage garnishments for overdue hospital bills resulting from his heart procedures and treatments. That care happened when he didn’t have health insurance, and didn’t care if he had bills, as he had assumed his death was imminent.

To make ends meet, Kinney added the full-time supermarket job to the part-time restaurant job, bringing his total number of weekly hours to approximately 60, he says.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, about 40 percent of people ages 55 and older were working or actively looking for work in 2014—a number expected to increase through 2024.

Kinney takes home about \$1,800 a month. After the garnishments, he barely has enough to heat his apartment, let alone pay for healthy food, he says. So he's adjusted his life in two major ways.

First, he cut back on food costs. Breakfasts consist of Jimmy Dean breakfast burritos that cost about \$1 because Kinney buys in bulk. Lunch is even more sparse: cereal. Between his shifts at the grocery and the restaurant, Kinney eats dinner at the restaurant for 50 percent of the menu price. And when his most lenient manager is supervising, Kinney gets to eat for free.

"I doubt there is anyone else in America who eats cheaper than I do," Kinney says with a smile, his eyebrows forming questioning peaks over his hazel eyes.

The other way he's cut back is cutting his social activities down to "absolutely nothing." He doesn't have the money to spend on movies and drinks at bars anymore. His friends who do have money for those luxuries have tired of his inability to keep up, he says.

"I've watched a lot of relationships die out because of the money factor," Kinney tells me. For him, navigating inflation necessitates a self-imposed isolation even worse than the expected confines imposed by COVID-19. For example, Kinney has a prepaid cell phone, but since he can't afford to pay more than what he has bought in any given month, he keeps his phone shut off, missing chances for social interaction.

Priscilla Dass-Brailsford, Professor of Psychiatry at Georgetown University, emphasizes that "poverty, which means low income, is a traumatic event."

Psychological consequences of trauma include a range of reactions from psychological reactions of anxiety, depression, sadness and fear, as well as behavioral reactions that include irritability, frustration, and impatience. Physically, a person who experiences economic trauma may express psychosomatic symptoms of chronic fatigue, migraines, nausea, and poor sleep and appetite.

Cognitively, it is common for people who are under distress and unable to secure economic resources to display an inability to think clearly and an inability to focus and concentrate, Dass-Brailsford says. Sadly, that can become a vicious cycle through which the resources needed to move ahead—such as a clear mind and ability to concentrate on a task—are also the critically needed traits impeded by economic trauma.

Finally, individuals affected by poverty often struggle to access the inner resources that can help them with tasks such as finding a job or securing an income. “Trauma pulls you down so much,” Dass-Brailsford says.

Kinney says he works to stay positive and grateful. He enjoys the conversations he has with coworkers on his jobs, for instance.

“They always include me and make me feel like I belong,” he says. “That’s a big thing to feel like you belong.”

But after he helps close up at the restaurant at night, Kinney goes home and watches television. That’s how he copes with being alone, he says. “My television is my best friend.” His favorite show: *The Golden Girls*.

He doesn’t have time or money or a pet, Kinney says. “I don’t even have a plant. If you can’t survive on your own here, you don’t live.”

Professor Dass-Brailsford points out that as members of society we have a responsibility to take care of each other to ensure the wellbeing of the collective. Some of the suggestions she gave: donating to programs that help the poor; working in soup kitchens; and perhaps most importantly of all, taking time to be observant of those around us.

“If we notice someone is in pain and suffering, we can offer a helping hand, this is a time when we need each other the most,” Dass-Brailsford says.

Inside the restaurant where Kinney works, he looks me directly in the eyes and says something I will likely never forget.

“I have a ‘do not resuscitate order,’ in case something happens to me. And I have a bottle of my pills that I could take—by my bedside—to end it all if I wanted to. But I don’t want to.”

Then why does he keep the pills, I ask him.

“For the willpower to get through this time,” he answers.
