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## An Unemployed Cook Grasps a Bit of Hope on One of Winter's Coldest Days

BY RACHEL L. SWARNS



*Gregory Brandon, left, got advice from Carlos Fernandez, a counselor at a city-run career center, before a big job interview. Ángel Franco/The New York Times*

The night before his big interview, Gregory Brandon crawled into bed and prayed. “That I get the job,” he said quietly. “That everything will be all right.” Then he tossed and turned until he finally emerged from his blankets at about 6 a.m.

The weatherman was talking about 5 degrees, the coldest Jan. 7 in more than a century. But Mr. Brandon, 48, never considered skipping his appointment. He hadn’t had steady work for months. The unpaid bills were piling up. His wife was anxious.

He pulled on a pair of dark blue corduroys and a neatly pressed shirt. Mr. Brandon is a cook and he wears an apron when he’s working, but he wanted to impress, so he chose a button-down shirt in blue, his favorite color.

He packed his birth certificate, his identification card and seven copies of his résumé, which included his commercial cooking certificate from the Culinary Academy of New York, now part of Star Career Academy, that described his 14 years of experience. He thought about having breakfast, then reconsidered.

“Butterflies,” he said.

By the time he stepped onto the B train in Brooklyn, his stomach was in knots. In August, he lost his job at Resorts World Casino in Queens when a hernia kept him from working. He found a couple of temporary jobs, but none lasted for long. For months, he pounded the pavement, heading from his apartment in Coney Island to Manhattan, where he handed out résumés at restaurants, hospitals and upscale burger joints.

The response was the same: Nothing right now. We’ll get back to you.

Mr. Brandon, a bald man with a whisper of a mustache, hoped this day might be different. It was a brand new year and Buffalo Wild Wings, the national chain of sports bars set to make its Manhattan debut next month, was hiring cooks. They were talking \$10 to \$16 an hour. Sixteen an hour sounded just fine.

Mr. Brandon hadn't told his wife the details. He didn't want to disappoint her, if things fell through. But on that train ride to the city employment office in Harlem where the restaurant's recruiters were conducting interviews, he felt a sudden twinge of optimism.

"I got a good feeling," he said.

He sat down with Carlos Fernandez, a counselor at the Upper Manhattan Workforce1 center, one of 17 city-run career centers that provide job placement services and career guidance. (The centers also offer prospective employers like Buffalo Wild Wings space to interview job seekers.) Nothing was guaranteed. Already that morning, Buffalo Wild Wings had turned down one cooking candidate.

Mr. Fernandez warned that the restaurant wasn't the kind of place where a cook could get creative, adding a little of this and that to spice up the sauce. "But if you're looking for somewhere you can get your foot in the door, this is a good place," he said.

"And if I don't get this job?" asked Mr. Brandon, his nerves jangling.

"We'll continue to send your résumé out," Mr. Fernandez said. "How's your computer literacy?"

Not so good. Mr. Brandon, who has a high school diploma, knows cooking, not computers. Mr. Fernandez brought him to the center's computer room and promised that the staff would help him set up an email address and fill out the online job application.

"Don't get intimidated," the career counselor said.

Mr. Brandon stared at the screen. Slowly, carefully, he tap-tap-tapped.

"That stressed me out," he said afterward, vowing to follow his wife's advice and focus on building his computer skills.

Then it was 12:30 p.m. and Juan Sanes, an assistant general manager at Buffalo Wild Wings, was inviting him into the interview room.

"Tell me a little about yourself, something that's not on your résumé," Mr. Sanes said.

"I'm a family man," said Mr. Brandon, who is a father of two. Then he hesitated, his voice trailing off. "I've been looking for work."

He told the recruiter about his hernia and emphasized that he was ready and able to cook. Mr. Sanes quizzed him about food preparation and kitchen sanitation and explained that the pay was \$13 an hour, not the \$16 an hour Mr. Brandon had been hoping for.

Fifteen minutes later, Mr. Sanes stood up. The two men shook hands. The interview was over.

There are about 327,000 jobless people in New York City, labor statistics show. On a frigid day in January, Mr. Brandon's name was finally crossed off that list.

He walked out of the interview room and punched his wife's number into his phone.

"What's up?" Mr. Brandon asked her, playing it cool for a second. But when he finally broke the news, there was no hiding the joy in his voice: "I got a job."