

Harvard's Working Poor

WE have always admired the samizdat writers of Russia and Eastern Europe. Their work was produced privately and distributed illegally. They made journalism, fiction and poetry a potent source of political dissent. Maybe we are obsessed with photojournalism in this country because we fear literature has lost its power to rouse people in this way. Images are no more "political" than words, but they are more visceral. And when they join words in a text that has a sense of narrative motion, a dramatic arc, the result is powerful and surprising.

"Harvard Works Because We Do," a book of photographs and interviews by Greg Halpern, began as a collection of samizdat-like texts. These first-person narratives were copied and passed around by hand in the midst of a three-year struggle between the richest nonprofit institution in the world (excepting the Roman Catholic Church) and the employees who feed and serve its people or clean and guard its property.

Halpern is a Harvard graduate who worked with the Harvard Living Wage Campaign, an organization created to pressure the university to improve the standard of living of its workers, from its timorous beginning in 1998 to a major settlement in 2001. The results? A wage increase, and an agreement that Harvard would no longer pay "outsourced" workers (those hired through contractors) less than workers it hired directly. The city of Boston raised its minimum wage, other universities raised their pay scales, and Living Wage campaigns have started up on more than two dozen other campuses. A Harvard Workers' Center is still active.

These photographs of Harvard workers (and toward the book's end of a few demon-



is seen. Shakespeare Christmas, who came to Boston from Dominica, decided not to go to school so that his children could. Working at a university pains him: "Sometimes you have to swallow the shame and accept that it is a blunder in your life and one that you have to learn to live with," he says.

Cindy Huff is the oldest of five daughters and the only one who didn't go to college. "I was all set," she says, with grades her school said might get her into Harvard. Then a stroke (the effect of smoking and eating disorders) left her unable to read, write, walk or talk. She learned it all again — 90 percent anyway — and was hired as a dishwasher, thanks to a program for the disabled. She felt lucky, since many people in the program were placed at McDonald's.

The working poor know all about diversity. These pictures show Asians, Latinos, West Indians, Irish, Italian, Anglo- and African-Americans. Here are the contradictions of mood and tone that arise when someone really gets talking, the kind of contradictions playwrights and novelists want for their characters. Carol-Ann Malatesta likes being the only woman (the cleaning woman) at the all-male Phoenix Club. She gets more attention that way. If women joined the club they'd want to change things around, Malatesta says. The men wouldn't tell dirty jokes either. She finds some of them funny, "but I hung around guys all my life."

If you think you know this hefty, sharp-eyed woman or where her story is heading, you don't. "Guys like to be the hunters to get the broads. . . I'm just real cut-and-dry. . . I'm a battered woman if you want to put that down. Overcome obstacles. I am woman, hear me roar, I will survive." She left the man after going on a singles cruise with her girlfriend (who was being battered too). "I

figured he was going to kill me eventually, and I wanted to go on a cruise with my girlfriend before I died."

Now she cleans up vomit after parties, and takes home Chinese food she finds in the garbage. (If it's only been out overnight, "it doesn't go bad because of all the chemicals.") Her children are in Catholic schools, not public schools, and she makes sure they get weekly Italian lessons. The students are polite to her. "Working this job I get to be around intelligent people," she tells Halpern, "although I'm not always sure how intelligent they all really are. Like, I don't know if they're at Harvard because they're actually intelligent or because they have rich parents."

Bill Brooks is a custodian in the president's office. Now 65, he could retire — he has savings — but he is a workaholic. Born in 1935, raised in the "pit-bull style" of the segregated South, he hopped a boxcar north at 13 and never stopped working. "I'm depressed now and I was oppressed before, that's the way I see it," he says. That's one form of upward mobility.

In 1890 Jacob Riis published "How The Other Half Lives," his celebrated and moving book of reporting (with photographs) on life in the multiethnic tenements of New York. A modern piece of muckraking like "Harvard Works Because We Do," or Barbara Ehrenreich's stunning "Nickel and Dime: On (Not) Getting By in America," brings back to life the quotation with which Riis ended his book. It is from a poem by James Russell Lowell, Harvard graduate and professor:

*Think ye that building shall endure
Which shelters the noble and crushes
the poor?*

*Pride in doing one's work
well goes along with shame
at how that work is seen.*

strators) are emotionally and skillfully direct. (Not simplistic, direct.) Some people are at home; more are at work. Some paused to be photographed. From their expressions, (serious, rueful, focused, tired), they didn't stop for long. Some wear their uniforms: the white jacket of the chef, the crisp shirt and tie of the caterer, the standard-issue aprons and custodians' shirts, each with the worker's name sewn on the pocket. We also see the instruments of their work: the industrial mops, the huge garbage cans and trash-filled bags. And we feel the weight of their bodies as they lean on a broom or kneel down to hose a corner of the floor or stand ready to serve diners.

There are the facts of their lives: getting up by 4:30 to be on the job at 7 a.m., often rushing to a second job after 3 p.m.; getting home by 10:30 or 11, just in time for four to five hours of sleep, but not in time to see their young children. Pride in doing one's work well goes along with shame at how that work