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Something Rotten in New York City Nail Salons

By Erika Allen

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Sarah Maslin Nir spent 13 months investigating workplace conditions in New York City nail salons. The two-part series appeared in The Times this week.

Q.

How did you find this story?

A.

I went to a 24-hour spa for a pedicure. It was about 10 a.m. and I asked the woman, “Who works the night shift?” She said, “I work the night shift.” She said that she worked 24 hours a day, six days a week, that she slept in a barracks upstairs and that when people came in at night they shook her awake to do a treatment. On the seventh night, she said, she goes home to her apartment in Flushing, sleeps for 24 hours and comes back.

When I pitched it as an exposé, my editors told me to take a month to see if there was something broader. I came back and said, “Boy, is there ever.”

Q.

Where did you look during that month?

A.

With the help of six translators, two in each language — Spanish, Korean and

Chinese — we read all of the clips from the last several years in newspapers in those languages from across the country. We looked at court cases and realized that underpayment is a tremendous problem. People were trafficked, deprived of money; people were being paid a dollar an hour. These were just the ones that were cropping up.

Q.

How did you find the workers you interviewed?

A.

I found out about these pickup spots in Flushing, where manicurists wait, like migrant workers, to be taken to jobs. I would go with a translator, sometimes with a team of translators, and I would say, “We would like to talk to you about your job. Could we have your phone number?” We got tons of women’s numbers, but because of politeness a lot of them would say yes, but I had days where I was stood up 20 times by 20 different people. For the 100 people who talked to me, I probably approached 300.

Q.

It was your first time working with translators. What was that like?

A.

It’s a natural compulsion to try to comfort another person who is saying something upsetting and sometimes my translators, when I asked something uncomfortable, would then say it in a light tone or they would giggle. So I would tell them that they had to mimic my tone. The translators weren’t all journalists, so teaching them to break the rule of conversational convention was hard.

Q.

The racism in the article is so jarring. How did you discover that reporting thread?

A.

I realized this through keeping detailed spreadsheets of all the 100-plus workers that I interviewed. I had a page for Spanish workers, a page for Korean workers and a page for Chinese workers, and when I looked in the wage column, I realized that the Koreans were making \$80-something, Chinese workers were

making somewhere in the \$50 range and Hispanics were making \$40 or \$30, working in the same salon.

So I started asking, “Do you find that you are treated differently?” and then the stories came out. But you have to ask the right questions.

Q.

Like what?

A.

I learned not to ask, “Where do you live?” but, “Who else lives in your home with you?” Because when you ask where they live, they tell you in a one-bedroom in Flushing and you get a distorted image, but who else is in that bedroom? It’s carved up by curtains and there are 12 other men living in it.

Q.

Where did you conduct your interviews?

A.

I would go to their homes. In the beginning they were out in the open and in coffee shops, but little by little they would let me into their homes.

A lot of the interviews were done quietly while getting my nails done. They don’t have any time off, so I would go get my nails done.

Q.

What was the biggest surprise in your reporting?

A.

The racism.

Q.

The greatest challenge?

A.

If someone had told me before I started that I would be speaking to people who don’t speak my language, are in the country illegally, don’t have licenses, have every reason to never talk to me, I don’t know if I would have done this story.

There were times that were unbelievably deflating. One afternoon 12 people

stood my team and me up. We had high hopes for so many interviews and people would be frightened away. But if they'd given us an address, we would show up every day and eventually they would let us in.

One of the people who was initially resistant Facebooked me and asked how I am. She invited me to the christening of her daughter and begged me to come to the party. And these were people who wouldn't even talk to me.

Q.

The greatest lesson?

A.

There is no such thing as a cheap luxury. It's an oxymoron. The only way that you can have something decadent for a cheap price is by someone being exploited. Your discount manicure is on the back of the person giving it.

Everybody I asked said, "I know it's too cheap." Everybody knows that something is off, but I had no idea what the story would be.