Arianna Long

Dawson’s Kitchen: Struggles of Employment Through COVID-19

While it seems as though things are shifting back to “normal,” there is one thing that COVID-19 has changed about businesses forever.

Many businesses are still experiencing a lack of employees to hire. Not only is this a setback, but this issue grants extra power to the workers, as they are needed to keep things running.

Dawson’s Kitchen is a Southern Cuisine Restaurant that experienced ups and downs with employment throughout the pandemic.

The restaurant opened in 1996, where it had originally been a market. Over time they added a kitchen and bakery in the back. The owner, Dawson Moore, passed away due to cancer in November 2020. All of the restaurant’s recipes come from 76-year-old Patsy Bivins and Miss April, the backbone of Dawson’s Kitchen.

When the country first went on lockdown after COVID-19 surfaced in March 2020, Dawson’s kitchen never shut down according to Lorraine Knight, manager of the restaurant.

“We all just kept coming to work. Through everything, we didn't shut down one single day throughout 2020 or 2021,” Knight said. “I actually had a newborn in the beginning of 2020. And so it was like the middle of February, he went to daycare for like two or three weeks, and then the daycare shut down for six months. So I was bringing him up here with me every single day until the beginning of August. So I was working and taking care of him.”

The biggest difficulty the restaurant faced at the time was trying to find someone to fill the spots of employees who had tested positive for COVID-19.

Knight said, “I mean, we kept a consistent, like 15 employees. And there were quite a few days where it was like six or seven hours and you're working all day long. Our lines were out the door from all the other businesses closed. So we got a lot of business, which was a great thing, but it was very hard to keep up.”

At the time, most of the employees of Dawson’s Kitchen were making less than people who had unemployment businesses.

“I probably would have made a different decision than I did, knowing how it all worked out for everybody who stayed at home. But I mean, I'm glad we stayed open,” Knight said. “We got a lot of new customers, but it was rough. It was rough. And like I said, it was kind of a slap in the face, like everybody working so hard every day and getting paid less. I would have been at home with my son.”

There were several large companies that removed some rules and regulations for the hiring processes, such as no drug tests and sign-on bonuses. Due to this, Dawson’s Kitchen lost some employees.

“I'm not mad about anything. I mean everybody's gonna make their best decision for themselves, of course. So many changes happened so fast. For us being a small business, it's hard to keep up. We make our wages and are able to pay our bills off of what comes through the door,” Knight said. “And so for me to give out raises, or to even try to compete with them, our plates were gonna be sky high. And I try to avoid all that.”

After struggling for a group of stable employees to work, Dawson’s Kitchen just started getting better in 2022.

Knight said, “My standards for hiring these days are low. I had quite a few people who were supposed to work five days a week that would only show up for two, and I couldn’t fire them. Those two days they did show up, I needed them. When they showed up, I literally had to be like ‘Thank you for showing up today,’ after not showing up for three days.”

In the past two to three months, it has gotten a lot better. Dawson’s Kitchen has really good help currently. Everybody shows up and it has evened out. Knight hopes it continues to get better.

Knight said, “If I go to restaurants, people are rude. People don’t care. Unfortunately there’s nothing that managers can do about it, it’s just a sad thing.”

Dawson’s Kitchen is back to “normal” business-wise, however Knight is not sure if employment will ever be the same.

“I don't know if managers will ever have complete respect or control again, because it's definitely not how it used to be. Like, I've been working for 16 years. I've grown up saying, ‘boss,’ you know, ‘Yes, boss,’ that kind of thing, and never thought twice about it,” Knight said. “My job to this day is 90% of arguing with customers and employees.”

Knight understands that employees have gotten a hold of how much power they have. She does not think this is a bad thing, however. She believes people need to recognize how hard they work, but that there is a leveling point to it.

Knight said, “Nothing has changed with the restaurant too much since COVID-19. We have a full bakery and kitchen that operates the same. We did get extremely busy in 2020, so I had to hire two or three more people and open more positions. We haven’t changed in 25 years.”

Dawson’s Kitchen is currently open Monday through Friday, 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. As well as Saturday from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Their bakery opens at 10 a.m. on these days.

It is located at 3360 Brookdale Avenue, Macon, Georgia 31204.