

# “I WAS RAISED BY A SINGLE MOTHER”

Let's talk about what that means

BY JENNA MASON

COULTER FUSSELL HAS WAITED tables at Ajax Diner in Oxford, Mississippi, for nineteen years. She's bartended at Saint Leo for three. Coulter also owns YaloRUN Textiles, an experimental textile studio and supply store in nearby Water Valley, where she teaches sewing and native-natural dying workshops and crafts narrative quilts by hand. She's the full-time parent to sons Amos Henry and Booker, ages eleven and eight.

In January, Coulter was named a 2019 United States Artist Fellow in Craft for her quilting, an honor that comes with a considerable stipend—more than she would make in a year otherwise. Her story epitomizes everything I want to believe about single mothers. I want to trust that, with enough hard work, I can advance in my own career and piece together some financial security. I want to be the unstoppable single mom.

You know that mom. She is emotionally

and psychologically resilient. She sacrifices her own time and energy for her children's well-being. She works multiple jobs, budgets her income, puts away savings. She never complains and never slows down. Her children develop responsibility and grit. As adults, they praise her example as the key to their success.

I come from a long line of these women. My grandmother, stepmother, aunt, and stepsister all raised their children alone. Every one of them pulled it off by waiting tables. When I became a single mother, I took the serving skills I'd picked up as a young adult to an upscale, wine-driven restaurant just south of Oxford. After eighteen months, I moved to Saint Leo, an Italian spot downtown, where I've served for three years.

Waiting tables holds a specific appeal for single mothers. Flexible hours make it feasible to juggle another job with a serving gig. We often take tips home at



FROM LEFT: Servers Amie Irwin, Coulter Fussell, Katherine Montague, and Sarah Costa at Ajax Diner

the end of a shift, and that cash can bridge the gap between bimonthly paychecks. Since we're raising children, multitasking and anticipating customer needs seem like second nature. Hospitality consultants preach “swan theory,” the notion that a server should make her job look easy, no matter how hard she's working below the surface. That perseverance and positivity are already expected of single moms.

We also tackle unique obstacles in a restaurant setting. Many single mothers work day shifts while their children attend school, so they bring in fewer tips than night servers. School holidays, child illness, and summer vacation all mean wages lost, either to a sitter or by giving up a shift. A parent working in an office might use her lunch break to take a child

to the dentist; a server forfeits an entire day's work. Restaurants rarely offer health insurance or paid time off, and wages might vary dramatically by season. The no-whining mindset of the service industry makes it challenging to ask for special accommodations.

In a college town, waiting tables as a single mother can feel isolating. I serve alongside college students. I rely on them to cover shifts for childcare reasons or illness, and I can rarely return the favor. I seldom find time to bond with my co-workers over shift drinks. Most moms I know in Oxford work at the University or in the home, and I regularly decline invitations to spend time with them because of my serving schedule. I often wait on the parents of my kids' classmates.

Anxiety and guilt wear on me. Do my

Photos by Timothy Ivy



children resent that I can't attend every soccer game or invite their friends to spend the night on the weekend? Do my coworkers think I'm selfish or snobbish? Do my friends feel neglected? Do those parents think differently of me because I wait tables?

That feel-good trope of the fierce single mother easily morphs from empowering to impossible. I don't feel inspired by Coulter's success story. I feel inadequate. I feel exhausted.

To admit physical and psychological weakness contradicts the mantra I've learned from the waitress-mothers in my family: "Keep working, keep smiling, and laugh all the way to the bank." I want to do their legacy justice. I want to embody their resilience and strength. The myth is much more appealing than the truth.

The truth is, I don't feel strong when my daughter asks about the circles under my eyes. I don't feel invincible when she and her brother have to sit quietly through staff meetings or read a book at

the bar while I finish my sidework. I don't feel proud that I spend my Sundays catching up on sleep and housework and grocery shopping instead of giving them my undivided attention.

At one time, Coulter worked four jobs, waking at four A.M. and falling into bed at midnight. A soccer coach would take Amos Henry and Booker to practice while she shucked oysters at a Water Valley restaurant. She once had to dash to a game in her apron and boots when the coach couldn't spot Booker on the field. She occasionally arranged sleepovers for her boys so she could pick up a more lucrative night shift. Over time, she lost the gumption to ask any more favors of her friends. These details don't make it into press releases when you win a fellowship like Coulter did.

It takes more determination to tell these stories than it does to keep smiling while we work seventy-hour weeks. When we do exchange specifics of broken marriages and mom-guilt, Coulter and I coat the

conversation with nervous laughter and lots of wine. When we discuss work, we qualify every complaint with the recognition that we're luckier than most.

In Oxford, would-be servers covet positions at Ajax and Saint Leo. Both restaurants enjoy prime locations on the downtown Oxford Square. Ajax has been a mainstay for more than twenty years, drawing locals and tourists alike for meat-and-three plates, po-boys, and burgers. Three years after it opened, Saint Leo is still the shiny new kid on the block, serving wood-fired pizzas and thoughtful cocktails in a space that feels like a big-city neighborhood trattoria. Prior experience and connections in the Oxford restaurant scene helped Coulter and me secure our jobs. I learned about the opening at Saint Leo shortly after the restaurant opened through a chance conversation with beverage director Joe Stinchcomb. Coulter worked at Ajax in college, and owner Randy Yates was the best man in her wedding. When she wanted to return, he contacted her as soon as a position became available.

I split custody equally with my ex-husband, which allows me to work the busiest night shifts and keep a day job. In an SEC college town, most restaurants require employees to work during home football games, festivals, college graduation, and holidays like Easter and Mother's Day. Emily Blount, who owns Saint Leo, makes it a priority to accommodate time-off requests, even on these high-volume weekends. Though I've taken weeks away from the restaurant at times, Emily keeps me on the employee roster.

Randy lauds the mothers he employs (there are nearly a dozen on the Ajax payroll, about half of them single moms) as his most diligent and reliable employees. He dotes on their children and considers

them part of the Ajax family. The kids do homework in the booths while their mothers finish lunch shifts. The young ones earn a "Butter Bean Team" T-shirt when they try their first vegetable at his restaurant. Moms keep photos of their children in the wait station. This spring, Randy canceled Ajax's Easter Sunday brunch service when he realized several of the mothers he had scheduled were scrambling, unsuccessfully, to find replacements that day.

I'd rather celebrate employers like Emily and Randy than highlight the complexities single mothers like me navigate in the service industry. Maybe it was the industry that taught me never to show weakness; maybe it was my family. I'm doing my best to revise the lesson before I pass it on.

I expect my children to work in the service industry at least once before they graduate from high school. I expect them to cultivate a work ethic, contribute to a team, perform under pressure, and develop empathy. I hope they'll master swan theory. If they can thrive in a restaurant, they'll always have employment options.

These skills should prepare them to face life's most daunting circumstances. But I don't want their self-worth to depend on handling those circumstances perfectly every time. I want them to know that there's no shame in struggling. It can happen to any of us.

We can advocate for compassion in the industry, noting the tangible ways employers like Randy Yates and Emily Blount support their staff. We can urge politicians to back up their "I was raised by a single mom" rhetoric with policies that benefit single parents in general. In the meantime, we can listen, and we can tell the truth about being a single mom. Even if it requires a bit of wine. 🍷

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*Jenna Mason is the SFA's content and media manager.*