I Stumbled and Got Back Up

Abad Villanueva


As a little kid, I was raised to be more silent than the other kids. I was afraid to come out and play because of the violence in my neighborhood. My mother was single and always struggling to get us a meal. My father was forever far away, so I had no father figure to teach me. In my life, strength was a must. I learned to be tough and to stay silent. The pain inside me made me want to provide for myself. I harnessed the virtues of patience and resilience to guide my work ethic.

One day, I found an opportunity. A business called Thrifty’s Beer and Beverage/Trash for Cash gave me my first job. Their concept was “One man’s trash is another man’s treasure.” I learned how to be a “people person.” I managed to get my driver’s license, forklift certificate, and a lot of experience in everything from cleaning to driving the company’s trucks and operating different machinery. I started off as an average Joe, but I rose to the position of Assistant Manager and then Manager. With happiness in my heart, I worked with total and absolute dedication. It was hard to please those that gave me this opportunity, but I stayed with it and managed to overcome adversity.

What was the nature of this adversity? My boss was very strict and very militant without being in the military. We received no benefits and no vacation time or sick time. If you worked, you got paid; if you didn’t work, you didn’t get paid. We weren’t allowed to stop for a second to take a breather. “I don’t pay you to take breathers,” he would say. I never got a raise or a bonus. “What am I paying you for? Move it! Nobody goes home until all the work is done,” he would say. We had to work like there was no tomorrow. The

Quiz: Your Rights at Work

After reading Abad’s article, discuss whether any of his rights were violated on the job. Take this true/false/depends quiz to test your knowledge of workers’ rights. (Answers on p. 39.)

1. Workers have the right to one unpaid half-hour break for every 8-hour shift.  
2. Workers have a right to unpaid sick leave.  
3. Workers have a right to paid vacation days.  
4. If your boss is a bully, there’s probably not much you can do about it.  
5. The law may not require an employer to provide benefits, but you can still bargain to get them.
boss would get mad that we had to go eat lunch. I worked five years for that man, and I didn’t have much to show for it—no savings, no career pathway, no safety net.

**Injured with No Safety Net**

And then I found myself in the emergency room! In 2012, I was in a car accident, and I broke my femur and received a blunt trauma to my head. I became unemployed. I lost everything. I lost my job. I lost my car and apartment. I faced abandonment from friends and family because nobody wanted to take care of me. I was forced to live in a shelter and forced onto welfare due to a lack of income. I did not receive unemployment. I suffered from major depression.

**Back on My Feet**

But 2017 is a new year, and it is a good year for me. I have healed from my injuries, and I’m back to being strong and not feeling sorry for myself. I am resilient. I’m heading up the ladder again starting with my GED.

Abad Villanueva is a 36-year-old Gemini. He is quiet and soft-spoken, and he is in school to better himself. He is working on his GED at the Mid-Manhattan Adult Learning Center in New York City. He has a wife and three boys whom he loves!

**Answers to p. 38 quiz:**
1. D. Federal law does not require employers to provide an unpaid meal break, however, some states do. New York, where Abad was working, does require meal breaks. 2. D. The Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA) requires employers to allow employees to take up to 12 weeks of unpaid medical leave. However, FMLA only applies to employers who have at least 50 employees, and to employees on the job for at least one year. 3. F. The U.S. is the only advanced economy that does not require employers to provide vacation time. 4. T. OSHA may protect you if you are a “whistleblower,” and physical and sexual abuse are against the law. However, bullying is not against the law. 5. T. Especially if you are in a union, and you can bargain collectively.