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## Monica Yant Kinney: Job opportunities with a cloudy future



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Is it really a sign of economic recovery when a highly skilled, but long unemployed, cement mason tells me he has reluctantly applied for a job that could harm his health?

With table games about to invade, Parx Casino has placed ads seeking scads of people with "style and personality" to relieve craps players of their cash in Bensalem. Harrah's recently held a job fair to hire "500 motivated, service-oriented people" for its Chester casino, scenically located next to a prison.

None of the job descriptions mentions the singular skill that will make or break any casino dealer: the ability to tolerate nauseating levels of secondhand smoke.

Thanks to gutless legislators, casino employees in both Pennsylvania and New Jersey are denied the basic right to breathe fresh air.

At least players can leave, presuming they find their way out of each hazy maze. Imagine being trapped inside a toxic workplace trying to make the mortgage without losing your cool or your lunch.

"I'd like to see Donald Trump sit in his office and have six people blow smoke at him for eight hours a day, five days a week," challenges Karen Blumenfeld, of Global Advisors on Smokefree Policy, an advocacy group aptly nicknamed GASP.

"Let's do a test, see how long he lasts. I guarantee he'd ban smoking in his casinos after one day."

### The smell test

Longtime Atlantic City casino dealers would rather not be a cautionary tale for folks contemplating the career in Pennsylvania. But these lifers have smelled it all, so they agree to vent at a smoke-free Starbucks.

"My husband and I have worked in the casinos since 1981," explains Debbie Ogle, a Caesars dealer and secondhand-smoke activist. "He's got chronic bronchitis and I have horrible sinus problems."

Sherrine Monk, a 25-year dealer currently at Tropicana, says she suffers from asthma. Another woman swears by Advair. One dealer begs for anonymity as she recalls the worst day on the job she can't afford to

lose.

"I threw up on a table in the baccarat pit," she admits, "after a cigar smoker kept puffing on me."

The half-dozen dealers tell me they disrobe and shower the second they get off work.

"Once, I was walking around my house thinking something was on fire or that my daughter was smoking," recalls Terry Shindel, a 26-year casino veteran now at Caesars. "I finally realized it was me."

The dealers cackle as they show me a staff memo urging them to help enforce the confusing smoking rules.

"We're constantly being evaluated on each shift to make sure we stay upbeat and positive," Shindel says. "If you say anything about the smoke, they write you up."

The truly disgusted often call in sick, forgoing tips to avoid shifts in noxious spots like the one Caesars dealers call "the Gas Chamber."

"The casinos say they oppose a total smoking ban because they're afraid of a loss of revenue," Ogle marvels. "But if you can't open a game because you don't have staff, there's no revenue coming in."

### Bring on the ban

The Pennsylvania Gaming Control Board stations inspectors in each casino, but it still hasn't fined a single operator or player for violating the state's lame smoking law.

In Atlantic City, a Casino Control Commission employee shrugs and tells me smoking "isn't our thing." That task falls to the Atlantic City Health Department, whose entire environmental unit consists of 10 people. Laments director Ron Cash: "I don't have the resources or staff to be omnipresent in all 11 casinos."

Since 2006, city inspectors have investigated 60 mostly anonymous, entirely after-the-fact smoking complaints. They've issued no fines, because they've witnessed no crimes.

"It really would be better," Cash says, "to have a total smoking ban."

Until then, the Atlantic City dealers will keep holding their noses, counting down toward retirement, and praying for newcomers who think they can stomach the smoke.


"If I knew then what I know now," Ogle says as she inhales the ocean air before walking into work, "I never would have taken this job."

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