



Karmen Kareen Parrish

Beverage Supervisor and Activist, Restaurant Opportunities Centers United (ROC)
New Orleans, Louisiana

“That’s all I want. Fairness.”

New Orleans beverage supervisor organizes other restaurant workers for fair wages
and working conditions

Karmen Kareen Parrish began a career as a bartender in the famed party city’s hospitality industry. Today she holds a Bachelor of Science degree in Business Administration and licenses in both management and bartending. She puts her education to good use as beverage supervisor for Centerplate, the company that holds the contract to service the Mercedes-Benz Superdome, the Smoothie King Center, Champions Square and other well-known venues in New Orleans.

With more than 13 years of bartending experience, Parrish has seen and experienced the good, the bad and the ugly on the job. She recruits fellow restaurant workers to join the New Orleans chapter of ROC, a national nonprofit organization that supports restaurant workers in gaining their voice and victory over wage theft, discrimination, sexual harassment, and other injustices rampant in the field.

ROC’s work is especially important given the vulnerability of restaurant workers. Nearly 17 percent of restaurant workers live below the poverty line, compared to about 6 percent of workers outside the industry. Women, African American, and Hispanic workers are more likely to fall below the poverty line than all other restaurant workers. African American workers, for example, are more likely to work as cashiers and counter attendants, the lowest-paid occupations in the restaurant industry. In addition, less than 20 percent of all restaurant workers receive employer-provided health insurance and less than 9 percent are included in an employer-provided pension plan. Given the importance of collectively addressing these issues, Parrish has a passion for organizing restaurant workers, especially African Americans and other women of color.

Similar to other women profiled in the report who work and organize outside of unions, Parrish reveals the innovative way that black working women outside of unions are a vital and vibrant part of the labor movement’s present and future.

I'm a beverage supervisor. I do a lot of inventory and make sure that the bartenders are following policy. I love what I do, and I will until I die. It's just that the politics and the behind-the-scenes stuff in this industry get kind of overwhelming.

I have over 13 years of experience bartending in high-paced environments—such as Bourbon Street and the French Quarter. But even after I got my bar management license, it was difficult to get a job in the areas with frequent traffic where

The website talked about sexual harassment and fairness for women of color. I had no choice but to jump on board.

At ROC we push for fairness. You know, that's all I want. Fairness. I don't feel as though I'm owed anything or entitled to anything but a chance at life. Women of color have no chance against a white male. And I think that's unfair. I know many people who aren't of color making well over \$75,000 in these tip positions. These positions are often looked at as something to just get you by

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I would make money. I thought my education was all I needed, but that wasn't enough. It was very hard for me to get my position. For people of color, their education isn't looked upon as highly as someone else's. And I've still dealt with all of the issues—the pay, the sexual harassment and all of that.

There are a lot of men where I work. Women are a little outnumbered. And the majority of the women are women of color. Being a woman of color, I've had many, many obstacles and detours. But I made it.

I found out about ROC from a work colleague of mine. We got to chitchatting and she heard about my experience and thought ROC would be something I'd want to join. So I Googled it.

while you go through school. But you can actually make a very good living off of tip positions if you're white.

I get an overwhelming response from the women I talk to about ROC. They're on board. They believe in it, and they see that we're all living the same experience. It's nothing new. I can relate to them. That's why they want me to come and tell my story. So I tell my members and potential members that it can be done. When I go to work and I see a bartender or a server or a chef that I know has potential and drive and passion, I'll try to bring them into ROC.

With black women, there's this sense of drive. There's not this sense of entitlement. We know what we need to do, and we know we have to

work harder for it. It's very personal for us. I've done the school thing—higher education, grad school, graduation. I need to get out in the forefront, get my hands dirty, and make it easier for the next person of color.

ROC is not a union. We do advocacy—meaning we offer protection, I guess you could say. It's going to take something short of a miracle to get equal rights for restaurant workers in Louisiana. We're still working on increasing the \$2.13 minimum wage for tipped workers in Louisiana, a wage which has remained the same since 1991. Now a lot of restaurants we have are with ROC.

We have a group of restaurants that offer benefits and higher wages and opportunities for Hispanics to learn English. But it is a very high hurdle that we're working on.

For my members, I want us to do great things. I'd like to make it easier for a person of color. Everyone should have a fair wage to be able to live. That's it. But, sometimes it's hard to get people to get on board because it can seem overwhelming. When I first got involved, I remember thinking, "What am I doing?" But if I can make the smallest difference for the next woman of color, or person of color, then it's all worth it.

Nearly **17%** of all restaurant workers live below the official poverty line.

Only **6.3%** of all workers outside the restaurant industry live below the official poverty line.

Source: "Low Wages and Few Benefits Mean Many Restaurant Workers Can't Make Ends Meet," EPI Report, August 21, 2014, <http://www.epi.org/publication/restaurant-workers/>.