

# Immigrant Finds His Stride After Cancer Ends a Dream

By JENNIFER 8. LEE

If you don't have English, you can substitute endurance. That is the immutable law of the American food chain. Fruit picking, poultry processing, meatpacking plants, New York



City restaurants — all have a ravenous appetite for immigrant workers, legal or illegal. Feeding New Yorkers is a series of strenuous and physical tasks. It is an endless routine of 12-hour days standing in a hot kitchen, pedaling through snarled Midtown traffic or washing stacks of dishes.

Senxing Lin slipped seamlessly into the restaurant system when he arrived in New York City a decade ago. In Shanghai, he was an engineer for textile factories. In New York he became a deliveryman.

"We don't have a lot of choices," Mr. Lin, 45, said in Mandarin. The choices: inside the kitchen or outside the kitchen. Mr. Lin decided on outside, so he could see the city via bicycle and learn a little bit of English from interacting with customers.

In an economy where low-wage workers serve high-wage professionals, food is the most universal of demands. The workers slide in and out of the urban background, leaving scant evidence of their presence. But someone had to cut the California rolls in the corner Korean buffet. Someone wrapped the gourmet sandwiches at Pret a Manger in crisp celophane. Someone cooked the Gen-

**Immigrant workers have 2 choices: inside the kitchen or outside.**

eral Tso's chicken that arrived in the white takeout containers in the office lobby.

"They don't talk to you very often," Mr. Lin said. "Often you just knock and say, 'I'm delivery.' They will tell you to come up to what floor. Then you knock on the door, and say, 'This is your order.' They take the order, say 'thank you' and give you money."



Angela Jimenez for The New York Times

Senxing Lin was trained in office work after he became ill and could no longer be a sushi chef, which required him to stand for long periods.

So Mr. Lin didn't learn much of the English he was hoping for. Mostly, it was just a handful of essential phrases: "Thank you for tips." "See you next time." "Thank you for order for us." He supported a wife and a teenage son on \$1,500 or \$1,600 a month, working 12-hour days, six days a week.

Shrewdly, he decided that the fastest way up the restaurant ladder was to become a sushi chef: slicing raw fish pays well by restaurant standards and rewards deftness of hand.

The New York sushi industry is powered by Chinese and Mexicans, Mr. Lin explained. "They won't let the Mexicans sit up front because Americans think sushi is a Japanese product, but Chinese and Japanese basically look the same," he said. The Mexicans are in the back kitchen making the more frequently ordered rolls, he said.

Despite the delicacy of the sushi, the work is grueling. The chefs and their helpers nap between the lunch and dinner rushes by putting their heads on the table or lying across the restaurant chairs.

But while he was working at the sushi counter, Mr. Lin's English did improve. The sushi chef is a latter-

Previously recorded	\$3,216,835.41
Recorded Friday	\$47,661
<b>Total</b>	<b>\$3,264,496.41</b>
Last year to date	\$3,560,967.50

day bartender, a conversation magnet for lonely customers. "They are bored," he said. "We don't talk to them. They usually talk to us."

But in March 2004 he felt a murruring pain in his stomach. Without health insurance, he ignored it and continued to work. Months later, he threw up while at work and knew he had to go to a hospital.

A doctor told him he had intestinal cancer.

"I didn't understand what it meant," he said. Surgeons needed to remove 30 inches of his intestine, he said. As he lay in the hospital, he realized, "Oh, having cancer is actually a little problematic." The hospital helped him apply for Medicaid.

After the operation and a year of chemotherapy that drove the cancer into remission, Mr. Lin, who lives in Brooklyn Heights with his family, isn't able to withstand long hours on his feet. "I can't do sushi," he said. "My body is too weak."

But he did find another option. He began job training as an office clerk at WeCare, a program run by the Brooklyn Bureau of Community Service, one of the charities supported by The New York Times Neediest Cases Fund.

"I really got inspired by his intelligence, and how he wanted to deal with everything, regardless of what he went through," said Miriam Ramos, Mr. Lin's counselor. "And he's a good father."

WeCare's assistance did not end with job training. Besides helping Mr. Lin try to focus on a long-term future, the program has been an ally in meeting shorter-term needs.

Recently, it helped Mr. Lin, who had been out of work for more than a year, obtain \$425.98 from the Neediest Cases fund to buy clothes suitable for interviews, and winter coats for him and his son.

Mr. Lin's new coat was red — for good luck.