

## Nick Coleman: After 30 years, Taco Bell didn't even offer her any hot sauce

By Nick Coleman, Star Tribune

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Nine years ago, Winnie Shilson stopped a bullet for Taco Bell. Last Friday, the company that owns Minnesota's Taco Bell restaurants emptied the other barrel.

It fired her.

Shilson will be 64 next month, and her story may illustrate how a fast-food society treats workers, especially its most experienced ones. After 30 years working for Taco Bell and the chains that preceded it, Shilson was fired Friday as manager of the Edina Taco Bell, dismissed without severance pay or medical benefits.

"Not even a taco," says her husband, Doug. "They didn't give her a thing."

Shilson believes she was the oldest Taco Bell store manager employed by Border Foods Inc., a Golden Valley-based firm that owns 175 Taco Bell, Pizza Hut, KFC and other eateries. Her firing followed a highly praised 30-year career that crashed and burned after two recent failed performance reviews.

Those reviews ordered her to fix problems ranging from building maintenance to food handling procedures.

"People come first," Julie Pung, the human resources manager for Border Foods said in an e-mail. "In the best interest [of] our customers, we take great care in our people selection and make employment decisions, including terminations, very carefully. Beyond that, we do not disclose confidential employee information."

Shilson thinks her dismissal was engineered in order to get rid of a veteran worker whose base salary was \$45,000.

"I bawled for three days after I got fired," she says. "I was the most loyal, dedicated employee they could have. In 30 years, I never called in sick or was late to work. Not once! And I was good at my job. Damn good."

Shilson started at the Zantigo on W. 7th Street in St. Paul in 1977 (Taco Bell later bought Zantigo). Her pay was \$2.85 an hour, not enough to make her husband, a truck driver (now retired), think that it was worth the inconvenience of having his wife, and mother of their four kids, take a job.

"He wouldn't even look at my paycheck the first two years," she says. "Then one day, I said, 'We need a new clothes washer' and he said, 'We can't afford one.' That's when I said, 'Well, / can!' That changed his mind."

Shilson rose rapidly, working 60-hour weeks and becoming general manager at the W. 7th Street store and, later, at the Richfield Taco Bell. She was robbed at gunpoint twice, including the time she was shot while opening the W. 7th restaurant one morning in 1998.

A gunman made her open a safe, but there was a 10-minute delay on the lock. The impatient robber started shooting the safe. A ricocheting bullet hit Shilson, wounding her in the left knee.

When the cops came, she was in shock and called Doug, asking him to bring her a clean uniform. Why, he asked. "Because the one I'm wearing has holes in it and there's blood all over."

Paramedics intervened and took her to the hospital. She had two operations, but the knee still hurts. Other than a severe car accident that required a year's recovery, nothing kept her from work again.

"Border Foods was very good to me," she says, referring back to the days of her convalescence from the car accident. "They paid me disability until I went back to work, and they spent a lot of money on me. At that time, I thought there was no better company to work for."

Times have changed.

Corporate cost-cutting has eliminated benefits and brought brutal pressure on many American workers, including fast-food restaurant managers.

The Edina Taco Bell, at 66th Street and York Avenue S., is one of the highest-volume Taco Bells in the area, with sales of almost \$1.5 million a year. Shilson was brought in to run it three years ago, after she had earned two top Taco Bell employee recognition awards (it's called the Golden Bell, of course).

Shilson says she was rated "superior" in a company performance review last spring, but that her supervisor added personal comments that she needed improvement. She says she felt she was being prepared to be pushed out.

"I was set up," she says flatly.

This summer, company supervisors put her on notice, criticizing her performance. She says company cost-cutting and the loss of experienced staff left her without resources to fix the problems.

Also at issue was Shilson's reluctance to vary her schedule in order to close the restaurant a couple of times a month. The Edina Taco Bell stays open until 3 a.m. on Friday and Saturday nights, and Shilson says she was told before taking the job that she wouldn't have to close the place. But this summer, she was ordered to change her shifts. She declined.

"The last year was very stressful on me," says the grandmother of six, who has lost more than 20 pounds. "I felt so harassed and there was so much put on me that I could hardly cope, and yet I did. I went in every day and smiled and hired people and trained them."

The ax fell during a visit to her restaurant by two supervisors who told her last Friday that she had failed to meet performance goals set in August. They didn't offer Shilson another position or a demotion, which she might have accepted because she says she wants to work until 70 and needs health insurance.

Shilson tossed her restaurant keys on a table and left in tears.

All I know for sure is that if someone made a mistake in hiring Winnie Shilson, it took 30 years to figure it out.

Shilson recently received a 15-year service pin recognizing her years at Border Foods. On Monday, she called the unemployment office.

"I worked for Taco Bell for 30 years," she told a clerk.

Then what, the clerk asked.

"Then what?" "Then they fired Grandma."