

Fast Food Worker Takes Wage Crusade to White House

KAREN MATTHEWS, Associated Press



Naquasia LeGrand speaks during an interview on Thursday Feb. 27, 2014 in New York. A few months ago, LeGrand was just another worker on the line at KFC, boxing up chicken and cole slaw in hopes of earning enough to live in one of the nation's most expensive cities. But since being recruited by union organizers, the 22-year-old from south Brooklyn has become one of the most visible faces of a national movement demanding \$15-an-hour wages for fast-food workers. (AP Photo/Bebeto Matthews)

NEW YORK (AP) — Naquasia LeGrand was frying chicken, sweeping floors and serving customers for \$7.25 an hour when she was recruited by union organizers to join a campaign for higher pay.

In the 15 months since, the 22-year-old KFC employee from Brooklyn has become one of the most visible faces of a [movement that has staged strikes across the country](#) [1] demanding a \$15-an-hour wage and union representation for fast-food workers.

She promoted the cause on "The Colbert Report," joined a strategy session with congressional Democrats and visited President Barack Obama at the White House.

"We never thought it would even get this far," LeGrand said. "We're just sick and tired of being sick and tired."

When LeGrand was first approached by organizers of the group [Fast Food Forward](#) [2], her grandmother told her to stay away from unions. "She just heard 'union' and thought maybe, like, I was going to lose my job or something."

"But you know, sometimes kids don't listen to their grandmas."

Her life has been a whirlwind since. She started organizing small fast-food protests and flash strikes in the city, and eventually in more than 100 cities across the country. A newspaper profile of her led to the Jan. 16 appearance on "Colbert," and

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that led to her trip to Washington.

She laughed when host Stephen Colbert asked, "Are you at all afraid the colonel might come after you?"

But she stuck to her talking points.

"I worked at two KFCs and still couldn't make it," she told him. "These corporations are making billions and billions of dollars," she added later.

"It's an opportunity for me to represent all of the workers around the country," she said in an interview last week. "So I got to make sure I do things right, make sure I get our message out there, what we want, what's our demands and, you know, set it straight."

While these have indeed been heady days, the reality for LeGrand is as close as her next shift at KFC, where she tries to make enough to get by in one of the nation's most expensive cities.

Six feet tall with cheeks that dimple when she smiles, LeGrand was interviewed near the two-bedroom apartment in Canarsie she shares with her grandmother and other family members. She said she was tired after closing the store at 1:40 a.m. and making it home at around 4 a.m. thanks to a complicated subway commute.

Most weeks LeGrand works just 15 hours. She had a second job at another KFC but it closed, so now she has lots of time for organizing other fast-food employees.

"The first thing I ask them is 'What's your biggest issue?'" LeGrand said. "'Talk to me first.'"

Kendall Fells, the organizing director of Fast Food Forward, said LeGrand runs citywide meetings and deserves credit for building much of the campaign in New York.

Last month, LeGrand was invited along with other fast food workers to watch as Obama signed an executive order requiring federal contractors to pay \$10.10 an hour.

"I don't care if I was in the back, I was in the White House with the president in front of me!" she said.

She also attended the House Democratic Retreat in Cambridge, Md., and spoke at a workshop on raising the minimum wage moderated by Rep. Keith Ellison of Minnesota.

"Movements will throw up leaders," Ellison said. "This low-wage worker movement has thrown up Naquasia."

Restaurant industry representatives say the campaign's demands are unrealistic.

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"Economics won't allow for a \$15-an-hour wage," said Jay Perron, vice president of government affairs and public policy for the International Franchise Association, which represents franchise owners.

Perron would not address LeGrand's specific situation but said entry-level fast food jobs can lead to something better.

"These jobs can turn into really good, high-paying jobs if you go from an hourly worker to a manager," he said.

KFC spokesman Rick Maynard said franchisees pay competitive wages and provide training and development so employees have an opportunity to build their careers.

Backers of Fast Food Forward say the chance to advance in the industry is minuscule. The National Employment Law Project, citing data collected by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, says just 2.2 percent of jobs in the fast food industry are in managerial, professional, or technical occupations.

LeGrand said she likes serving people but never planned a career at KFC.

She once thought of studying graphic design but now sees herself more as an organizer. She even won over her once-skeptical grandmother, who now proudly introduces LeGrand as "my granddaughter, the activist."

"I have a good way of talking to people," LeGrand said. "So maybe that's why the movement kind of worked out. I talk too much."

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[1] <http://www.foodmanufacturing.com/news/2013/12/photo-day-fast-food-strikes-push-higher-wages>

[2] <https://www.facebook.com/FastFoodForward>