

Kristin K. Neri

The hot line is running low and we are short staffed

The hot line is running low on food and we are short staffed, Thea is in the back making omelet prep for the next day, I am dashing between the line and the kitchen in a frenzy, while Thea is calmly and quietly peeling onions. Seemingly unaffected or possibly unaware of the bustling commotion around her, Thea just peels and chops. Usually, this is a good way to get on the bad side of your kitchen workmates, but when I approached her, before I could speak, in the sweetest tone she informed me that she would have liked to come help me out, but saw that I had been following a method that I had seemed to have perfected and she did not want to interfere with the success of my technique. I rather enjoy compliments and our superiors rarely acknowledge us for good work in the kitchen, so I recognized her words for what they were, a sincere acknowledgement of my abilities.

From the moment I met her, I knew Thea was unique. It was clear she saw things differently through a filter of simple clarity, but that was actually ingeniousness. Her forthright approach is apparent in her films and paralleled in her daily life. When there was something on her mind, she was going to share it with whoever was willing to listen—in some cases, even with those who were not! I particularly recall when she was filming and promoting *Nigger*, as we chopped vegetables we would have these profound conversations, something not often found in the kitchens of the dining halls, which gave me great reprieve from the mindless tasks at hand.

Thea would pick my philosophy-major brain, though I did not realize it at the time. She would discuss the use of the term among co-workers, curious about how it influenced me as a working class Caucasian, and was curious about the philosophical implications of the word as I understood it. Many in the kitchen were put off by her candid use of the term “nigger.” Some even complained, but every single response was her gathering information. In her films, you can see the multitude of responses from a single question. Her interview technique was

simple and non-invasive and yet she would receive such insightful responses to the questions she asked, due to their straightforward arrangement. The reactions of her subjects were visceral, allowing for true authenticity of responses. Her style was unlike any other I have encountered, inimitable and unmatched.

I left Syracuse University for career advancement, but when I incurred a head injury, I was forced to return to menial, mind-numbing tasks, due to cognitive deficits. Those who did not know me have never perceived me as disabled, but for those who knew me before, there was a professed difference. Thea has been working on a project called *DIScerning disABILITY*, which I only recently had the pleasure of viewing. I love that she told this story of conquering the social construction of disability and what it is to be different, or “regular,” without being in a single frame or making a single statement. Her ability to create such touching films while increasing awareness for the subject matter, without being overbearing or arrogant, was truly something exceptional.

Thea marched to the beat of her own drum. She could talk or listen endlessly. She was a special person, with a special place in our hearts, from our very first meeting. She was completely selfless and understanding. Friends describe her as always willing to listen, with “eyes wide and ears open.” She had special connections with everyone she met. But she was also human, with ups and downs, and she struggled with life as we all do. If you read her articles, you will find passion behind her words that could only exist from going through the moaning of life. But she had a way of changing the moaning into meaning.



Kristin K. Neri is a Library Technician and MSLIS Student at Syracuse University. She holds dual Bachelor degrees in Social Philosophy and Sociology with a concentration in Criminology. Kristin serves on committees including Syracuse University Library Assembly, SUL United Way and the Library & Information Science Student Assembly. She is a union Steward for SEIU Local 200 at Syracuse University. Hobbies include puppeteering and collecting antique oddities.