

Bea Gerber

Short Shorts

The summer camp I work at has a very loose dress code. Basically, as long as we aren't naked, we're fine. Kids run around in anything from sweatpants to booty shorts, and nobody pay any mind.

Last year was my first summer as a counselor, so I was working full time in the kitchen along with 7 other kids my age. Each day, we got up before the campers, prepared the meals, served them, and cleaned up after each one. We worked for almost 10 hours on our feet daily. It was exhausting. No one in that kitchen had any extra energy, and the little that we did have was surely not spent trying to 'look cute' for anyone. We wore what was comfy and would keep us cool in the stuffy kitchen. That's it.

One day I came into the kitchen late after returning from the nurse's office. Rowan, my best friend at camp, and I were working near each other. She called me over without looking at me, like it was some sort of secret, and I walked towards her slowly before asking what was wrong. She turned around. I saw an apron had been tied around her back along with the one we all wore on our fronts. She told me that Ms. Peggy, the head chef, had yelled at her in front of everyone in the kitchen for her shorts being too short. She'd made a scene and forced her to wear the apron backwards, which was not only mortifying, but painful as well; I could see the top loop pulling back against her neck. I gave Rowan a hug and told her how sorry I was. It wasn't fair at all to talk about her clothing choices when the length of her shorts wasn't affecting the quality of anyone's work, especially so publicly. Being old fashioned wasn't an excuse to make her feel uncomfortable. I felt instantly less secure in the kitchen even though I'd done nothing wrong.

As I walked back to my station, I heard Ms. Peggy yell my name, and immediately knew it was my turn. She continued to shout that there would be no butt-cheeks in her kitchen and that I was not being lady like. I was told to go change right away, and Rowan and I ran out of the kitchen, unwelcome tears in our eyes.

With the kitchen doors shut behind us, we both realized just how frustrated we really were. We felt caught off guard by the attack because of the usual lack of dress code. Nothing we were wearing had any negative effect on our work or anyone's around us, and we were tired of constantly being told by the world that showing skin is a 'distraction' to men even if we feel beautiful in what we're wearing. We felt powerless in the situation when all we needed was a little strength. Neither of us had ever been yelled at or objectified by a boss like that before, and we didn't know how to handle it. We'd done nothing more than wear clothing that made us feel comfortable, and yet the chef had made us feel like we'd done something wrong. She had so easily stripped us of the safe space that had been created for us and made us feel oversexualized in a summer camp kitchen. It was something so small, but it had made both of us feel so incredibly uncomfortable in our workplace that we knew we had to say something.

That day, we talked to the head of the female counselors. From her, we received only sympathy and disgust for the way the situation was handled. She made us feel valued and respected which was exactly what we needed to hear. After reassuring us that everything would work out, she sent us back to the kitchen, but told us not to change our shorts if we didn't want to. I'm a firm believer in being comfortable in your own skin, and feeling confident in what you're wearing is crucial. We changed our shirts but kept our shorts. We weren't letting anything bring us down.

Once we were back in the steamy kitchen, we felt 100 eyes on us, but we plowed through our day and pretended not to notice. We worked hard, kept our chins up, and didn't let

the head chef get under our skin. I ended that day feeling more proud of myself than I had in awhile, and although it felt never ending, I'm a stronger and much more empowered woman because of it.