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### Behind a Bottle of Polish and a File

You open the doors to a salon and the awful stench of monomer reaches your nose. You take a step further into the store and by the pedicure chairs, you see ladies crouching down on smaller stools, scrubbing the customers feet. You look and think to yourself, *“Feet? Ew...definitely a NO for me, I don’t even touch my mother’s toes, how do they even do that?”* But then the aromatic smell of lavender and steams coming from the hot towels distracts you from that thought and the stench of monomer. As you approach the color station, overwhelmed by the options, an Asian lady with long black hair, covered in dust, walks away from her client, heading towards your direction and says, “Welcome to Luxe Nail, can I help you?” When customers who are not immigrants, specifically non-Vietnamese, walk inside a salon, they question and quickly assume that nail technicians chose to this career, this kind of labor, because they are immigrants, people who lack the basics of education and common knowledge. In fact, nail Technicians are beyond talented individuals, who have acquired proper educations. They are not “immigrants”, but are humans, who are diligent, hard workers and should not be look down upon.

Nail technicians are often seen as uneducated people, who probably did not finish school or never even went to school. *“Being a Nail Tech is an easy job”* they say, as everyone is able to do it at home, *“just grab a bottle of polish, hold it, and paint away”*. What others don’t see is

behind that branding of a “Nail technician”, they are successful people with titles such as, entrepreneur, a graduate, a nurse, a student, a dentist, and so many more. While it is true that these days, everyone can give themselves the title of a “Nail Technician” by doing services within their bedroom or basement. There is one important thing that people seem to overlook and that is, “Are they Licensed?” or “Are they on the MN Board of Cosmetology?” In order to become a Licensed Technician, we have to complete 350 hours of school and successfully pass three state board exams. For a student like me, where high school ended at 2:20 and the Nail Academy thirty minutes away, closing at 8pm, allows for me to only complete 3-4 hours daily. This journey took me over 5 months to complete, as I did my best in balancing both educations at the same time. I was determined to attend and peruse Nails because I loved every aspect and especially the art in it. The process during school was not easy, as all the terminology was new and difficult to remember. I recall failing my first exam called “Law and theory” twice and passing it on my third try. Someone I met from nail school, Tina, who is now my coworker also passed it on her third try. Tina has been doing nails for 2 years now, her work is flawless, and her shaping is always on point. If you look at her, you will assume that she has been doing nails for a while because she is very skillful. What you would you never guess is that she graduated from a University in Vietnam and had been working as an emergency room nurse for over 5 years. Yet, she gave up her career and moved to the states to be with her husband and family, to start a new life here.

Therefore, being a Nail Technician is definitely not an easy process and in order to be working at a salon, everyone needs to be licensed. That means everyone goes through the same process of education by fulfilling the requirements in school. This includes everyone from teens to seniors, and for the people who don’t understand English, they are able to review the materials

in Vietnamese. It is more difficult for the students aging from 40-50s, as they are doing their best to understand the material, and successfully pass the exams. This truly shows their dedication and determination to become a Nail Technician. Every single Nail Technician is properly educated at least once if not many times, in their life, and so when it comes to education, we are definitely not lacking it.

The misconception that people post online regarding Nail Technicians in salons, is that the woman who is sitting in front of you, with wrinkles on her, speaking another language, is not considered a Nail Technician, but rather an Immigrant. An Immigrant, who seeks America for a better life, is now stuck inside a salon, providing services for your feet and hands. What people don't know is that not all Nail Techs are so called "immigrants". If I got a quarter for every time a customer asks me, "*Where are you from?*" or "*How long have you lived here?*", then my jar would be overflowing by now. The endless questions and curiosity people have related to "Where am I from", is always a popular topic to be discussed. A few months ago, I encountered this specific customer, I will name her Kim. She was in her early 40s, a nicely dressed businesswoman, who told me she owned her own clothing store. Kim was getting a service for her nails, and when I sit down, I would greet the customer and start small talks to ease the awkwardness. As I started a conversation with her, she seemed surprised and suddenly said "*your English is good*". I replied with "*thank you?*" and continued the service. Kim got curious and started asking me "*so, where do you come from*", I told her that I am from Blaine, MN, where she seems displeased. She followed up by asking, "*Do you not come from a country?*" I then responded with "No, I was born and raised here in Minnesota, but my ethnicity is Vietnamese if you were asking." The expression on Kim face was confused, as if that was not the answer, she was expecting from me. Throughout the service I was uncomfortable, she would

ask personal questions, curious about my mother and father, how did they meet, and wondering why they want to come to the US. There wasn't a single time where Kim asked about me, who I am, why I chose nails, or anything related to my job. It seems like those questions relating to "me", a girl born in the states, aren't interesting topics to talk about; but firsthand stories coming from "immigrants" and their hardships, are things to be discussed upon.

What people fail to realize is that we are all the same, regarding of our race, ethnicity, or occupation. Every single one of us is hard working and diligent in what we do. Not just Nail Technicians, but jobs like cooks, servers, mechanics, etc., are typically presumed as jobs for immigrants, individuals coming from another country. We all strive for success, and we work hard in order to make it happen. It is upsetting to see how people are treated differently because of their occupations and ethnicity. Everyone has to understand that they cannot go around, and judge others based on the outside. Looks do not determine anything at all, someone can look rich but in fact they are living paycheck to paycheck. So, we have to stop judging and discriminating others.

I hope that upon reading this paper, I am able to give others a little more insight about Nail Technicians, specifically the ones that work inside a salon. We are more than rumors of what you hear and see from online. I want people to understand the process it takes for us to become a Licensed Nail Tech, and how it may be difficult, but we are determined to become one. We are individuals who love our jobs, and we express them with quality services and artistry. So, the next time you walk into a salon, take a seat, and closely look at the Nail Tech in front of you. Forget what you just saw or heard on TikTok or Twitter about techs but think about who they can be. Who knows if they are a student, or a nurse that is doing this job for fun, or possibly the owner that owns a few shops. Don't be shy to ask us questions, but ask about our job, our

families, or simple things like plans after work. I can promise you; we can sit there and chat all day with you.