

Honor the Work



Respect the Workers

Local 'lunch lady' serves homemade dishes

By Delia Guzman

Behind the steaming steel pots of hot food and the cool bins of the salad bar, Dora Blair is diligently working to achieve her goal: "to make everybody happy."

Dora works Monday through Friday as the "lunch lady" at Supelco, a company of more than 250 employees in Bellefonte. Her day starts at about 6:30 a.m., when she comes in to begin preparing the food that will carry the employees through their day. She doesn't leave until everything is put away, the dishes are washed, and the hot-and cold-food machines are clean—usually about 3 or 3:30 p.m.

"I plan my menus about two or three weeks in advance so I can order all the food from the commissary, or buy at the grocery store or another vendor what I can't get from the commissary. I buy everything for the salad bar at the grocery store. Then every day, I come in and prep, turn on the heating units for the hot food and the chillers for the salad bar, and mess with that crazy coffee machine," she explained.

Dora wages a daily battle with the industrial-sized, double-barrel (caf and decaf) coffee machine. The contraption seems to have a mind of its own, aided in its evil ways by well-meaning employees who, about once a day, start a new coffee cycle when the old cycle's coffee has not yet run out, causing a flood of the hot brown liquid to run out all over the counter and the floor.

The hardest days are probably Wednesdays and Fridays, when Dora takes it upon herself to make hot breakfast sandwiches. The food service company Dora works for only requires her to make lunch;

"I'm self-motivated!" she says. She pulls out the griddle from home and cooks eggs, sausage and bacon, add sliced cheese and puts together sandwiches on English muffins, white or wheat toast, or bagels. She also takes care to make special ones for certain customers. After three and a half

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years here, she has come to know all the employees, and their dietary habits.

"I make things that I know people like. I make cookies in the morning—a lot of chocolate chip, peanut butter, white-chocolate-macadamia...I'll make a breakfast sandwich without cheese for a guy who doesn't eat cheese and set that aside with his name on it." Or she'll make one without meat for a vegetarian, taking care to use a separate spatula and keep the bacon and sausage grease away from the egg, taking care of employees as though they were her own family.

"I like the people," said Dora, who's been in food service 8 years. "I used to work at a restaurant with a full-service menu, working my shift alone—doing prep, filling orders and, when we were short-staffed, doing the dishes and cleaning the floors too. I've waited tables. I like food service; I think I have a knack for it."

That much is obvious, judging from the steady stream of customers she rings up while talking—and while setting up the pub burger patties for lunchtime. She is a model



Photo by Delia Guzman

Lunch lady Dora Blair has worked in food service for 8 years and says she has a "knack for it."

of multi-tasking.

Sometimes she brings recipes from home—family recipes or recipes she's made up after tasting a dish at a local restaurant.

"I experiment at home, where I have bigger pots and a stove, trying to make the dish I ate at Olive Garden or wherever. I once had to make two trips to the restaurant to try the soup again just to figure out what ingredient was missing in my version. I once made white-chicken chili. Did you know oregano in a white sauce tastes totally different from oregano in a red sauce?"

Each day, she offers at least two choices for her customers, plus a full salad bar and

soups. "I try to make healthy foods, a nutritionally balanced meal. I do the same when I do catering for the functions here at the company."

When asked about her future, she smiles. "I like it here . . . but you never know. I have my real estate license, and I've sold jewelry. I stopped selling real estate when the market took a downturn. I needed a full-time paycheck because I had two kids about to enter college, so I went into food service. I just feel more adequate in a kitchen. I always wanted to go to culinary school, but I can't afford it. I figure I sent my kids to college—that's enough.

"I just try to please everybody. Especially the chocolate lovers."

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