

ShopTalk



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Editor, Mario I. Oña, x4-6803

The Post's Surrogate 'Mami' Or Matron Saint: The Northwest Cafeteria's Cece Rodriguez

I don't know when or how I met Cece, but the second time you talked to her it was like you'd known her for years," says current Post columnist and famed, former Sports Editor **George Solomon**.

And that's just about how most Post employees who know the Northwest cafeteria's **Cecilia del Carmen Rodriguez** feel about her. Though she works for Brock, she's

birth (almost) and won the affection of just about everyone she's ever met on the 15th and L quadrant.

Cece checked into The Post in December of 1976, almost exactly four years after the massive earthquake of '72, which claimed approximately 10,000 lives, devastated her native Managua, Nicaragua and left her, her six siblings and her already widowed mother homeless two days before Christmas.

"We were on the street after our house crumbled," she says. "We had nothing. There was no work, so I had to get out." She then says, "I was quite happy in my country before the earthquake. Everything was good."

After spending two years in Mexico, Cece spent a few weeks in Los Angeles, before reuniting with an older sister in Washington, D.C. A few years later, she started working at the Northwest building for a previous food vendor.

"When the pressroom was here back in those days, the cafeteria



Current Post columnist and former Sports Editor **George Solomon** takes care of his first order of business during his weekly visits: chatting with Cece Rodriguez.

worked 24 hours, so this was my second home," she says. "Since I lived nearby, they used to call me to fill in all the time, so most of the seven days, I was here."

In her 31 years serving—literally—The Post, she's only missed work for extended periods due to health problems: she broke each of her ankles and then required knee surgery after she banged it coming



COURTESY OF CECE RODRIGUEZ

Cece Rodriguez hand delivers aid to Hurricane Mitch survivors in her native Nicaragua in the fall of 1998.

as much a Post mainstay as the steel beams that hold up the Northwest building. During her three-decade (and counting) tenure, apart from her unmatched work ethic and always welcoming smile, she's befriended Post legends like **Herblock** and Solomon, she's learned English, taught Spanish, broken each of her ankles, given

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PHOTO - KEVIN CLARK

Farewells

Book World Deputy Editor Jabari Asim Departs

Book World Deputy Editor **Jabari Asim** recently left The Post after 11 years of bringing “energy, sass, innovation and wisdom to Book World’s pages,” as Book World Editor **Marie Arana** recently said. Asim is now working as editor-in-chief of The Crisis, the magazine founded by W.E.B. DuBois and published by the NAACP. He will be leading a journal of news and ideas that focus on social justice.



PHOTO - EMIL ROBINSON

*Book World Deputy Editor **Jabari Asim** receives a memento during a farewell ceremony held for him in the newsroom.*

During his tenure at The Post, he authored or co-authored “Not Guilty,” “The N Word,” “Whose Knees are These?” and “Daddy Goes to Work.”.

Asim aspires to continue making The Crisis a must-read for anyone interested in politics, social issues and popular culture, as it pertains to African American history. He hopes to continue publishing the most talented African American writers, reporters and critics currently working.



PHOTO - EMIL ROBINSON

*Publisher **Bo Jones** stops by to bid **Jabari Asim** a farewell.*

A few days before leaving, he said, “I had a great run here at the Post. I enjoyed every minute of it, and I especially appreciate the various colleagues who selflessly served as role models, mentors and sources of wise counsel. I’m also proud of my contributions to the nation’s best book review section, within the nation’s best newspaper.”

EDITOR’S NOTE: Emil Robinson contributed to this story.

A Familiar Voice Moves

People are always curious to see the face behind the voice. This is for you folks: meet **Grace Byrd**, the welcoming and kind voice at The Post switchboard. There’s a good chance that she’s either a) transferred a complaint like the one she recently received where a subscriber asked if Circulation can “deliver the newspaper to her front porch instead of the side porch to avoid walking four extra steps” or b) patched a Post foreign correspondent desperately trying to reach an editor or col-

league while serving in Iraq, in the brave new world of continuous news.

After 16 years on the switchboard, however, Byrd is moving to purchasing, where she looks forward

to using the degree she earned in business administration from Catholic University two years ago. During a farewell lunch for her, she discussed some of the more interesting calls she had during her stint.

“After Hurricane Katrina, I had quite a few frantic calls from reporters down in New Orleans trying to reach their editors,” said Byrd. “It was crazy.” She also recalls Chris

Matthews, host of MSNBC’s “Hardball,” calling in. “He didn’t identify himself, but I recognized his voice right away,” she said.

But by far, one of the toughest days for her, which she admits is “still difficult to talk about,” was Sept. 11. “We watched those towers collapse without knowing what was next. We were flooded



Grace Byrd on Post at The Post.

with calls. I was worried about my daughter who lives in Manhattan. When she finally got through to me on the switchboard, she told me, ‘Mom, get outta there now!’ She thought The Post might be next.” Byrd stayed at her post for the remainder of her shift. ■



*Communications and mail desk manager **Georgie Solomon** (left) and switchboard operator **Grace Byrd** during a farewell lunch for Byrd.*

out of the freezer.

"It was like five in the morning when I broke my ankle the first time. I broke it in three places in the back alley," she recalls. "I laid there for a few minutes before someone from the pressroom saw me and called Phyllis [Waslo], who came and got me in a wheelchair."

She broke her other ankle a few years later and then sometime after that, she had an emergency knee operation, after realizing her injury was much worse than she had suspected. "With the help of my kids, I recovered financially," she says.

Today, Cece has four kids and 12 grandchildren. As she tells me this, while sitting in front of her coffee cart in the cafeteria dining area, she



COURTESY OF CECE RODRIGUEZ

Two Post cafeteria staples: the deli section and Cece Rodriguez's welcoming smile.

looks over to the grilling area and nonchalantly points out, "My youngest daughter was almost born while I was frying eggs."

Noticing my expression, she laughs and explains, "I

was pregnant with Rosa Hildelisa [now 22] and my water broke before I was expecting it, so I almost delivered her on that grill! Everyone was running around going crazy and I told them to take it easy and that I would take a cab."

Leave it to a mother to remember the exact time their child is born. Without hesitating, she says, "I took the cab to the hospital around 7:45 a.m. and at 5:58 p.m. on March 6, 1985, my daughter was born."

Throughout the interview, we are constantly interrupted by passersby who just want to say, "Hola, mami" or "¿Como estas, sweetheart?" To which, Cece responds with an equally warm hello and then points out to me, "You know, I learned English in this building and people always want to practice their Spanish with me, so I guess that's fair."

One person who often exchanged pleasantries with Cece was Post legendary cartoonist, the late Herbert Block or simply Herblock. "He was such a gentlemen and one of my favorite people," says Cece. "He and his assistant

Jean Rickard were very nice, very amicable. He used to call me 'baby' and I used to call him 'mi muñeco' [doll face]. I don't ever remember him grumpy or mean. He always had a great sense of humor and a big smile. I desperately tried to go to his funeral, but wasn't able to



PHOTO - SHOPTALK ARCHIVES

After breaking her ankle, Cece Rodriguez's return to *The Post* is featured in *ShopTalk* (July 28, 1988).

attend his or **Mrs. [Katharine] Graham's** services."

"What that family [Grahams] has done for children, schools and the community has no price," continues Cece, before saying that Chairman **Don Graham** is someone she cares about tremendously because he's an "excellent, excellent gentleman." She explains that for personal reasons she can't give any specifics, but reassures, "I appreciate him very, very much."

"George is another great person," she adds. "I wrote a little something about him for *ShopTalk* [June 5, 2003 issue], when he retired from *The Post*." Solomon, who continues to write columns for *The Post*, says that he stops by almost weekly to say hello.

Cece, who loves staying at home and listening to "jazz and romantic music that breaks my heart," she says laughing, is not quite ready to retire. She would like to make some more money before returning to her country. "I'm dying to go back," she says.

As the interview is winding down, Marta Arias—a Brock colleague from Bolivia, who's been working at the Northwest cafeteria for seven months—feels the need to

interrupt us and tell me that Cece is the kind of person, who'd give you the "clothes on her back" and who "always has a huge smile, even if she's dying inside."

Cece interjects, "Well, sometimes you have to be like the clown: laughing on the outside, but crying on the inside. You have to check your problems in at the front door."

Knowing Cece is too humble to admit it, Arias says, "She's quite intrepid and has no problems making herself be heard. She resolves so many problems for us. I'm alone in this country and she's been like a mother to me. When I come in, I have to see her first—like getting my mother's blessing—before I start working."

Wiping her tears, but with a big smile, Cece says, "Shut up, woman! You're making me cry and speaking nonsense!" ■

Free Summer Jazzercise Classes

New Students can attend one free Jazzercise class during the summer. Classes are held in the Northwest Fitness Center and are also open to non-members. You can pick up your coupon for your free class at the Health or Fitness Center.

Schedule and Pricing:

Tuesdays and Thursdays at 6:30 p.m.
Monday Morning Express at 7:00 a.m.

Unlimited classes: \$75
6-8 classes: \$56
4-5 classes: \$35
Walk-ins: \$10

We advise bringing a small mat, small weights and drinking water.

Contact Beth Sanzone or Lynne Maloney at elizabeth.sanzone@hotmail.com or maloneylm@washpost.com for more information.

Stress-Relief: Meditation with Visit Yourself at Work

Does daily life—driving, working, family, finances—bring you to the breaking point? Scientific studies have demonstrated the benefits of mindfulness meditation in the reduction of stress. Practitioners commonly report an increased ability to relax, enhanced energy and enthusiasm for life, greater self-esteem, better concentration and an ability to cope more effectively with stress at work and in other areas of life.

Enjoy guided meditations and take a calming break in the middle of the workday. No need to change out of professional attire; meditation

occurs while sitting on chairs.

Five-week series with renowned meditation teacher Hugh Byrne will be on Wednesdays from 1:45 to 2:30 p.m., from Sept. 19 to Oct. 17.

Fitness Center (membership not necessary); \$75 for all five weeks. Email meditate@visityourself.net for questions or to reserve a space. Visit www.visityourself.com for more information.

Post Softball

John Mandish, College Park's assistant plant manager, is taking the lead on the annual softball tournament, following Mike Bahr's retirement. Anyone interested in participating should contact their departmental representatives. The eight-team tournament is set and will take place at 9 a.m. on August 19 at Wakefield Park, Va.

Contacts:

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Jim Brady (WPNI) - 703-469-2627 or jim.brady@wpni.com

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Contact John Mandish with any other questions or comments.

Events Calendar

September 10: *Being a Black Man* book release party

October 27: Marine Corps Marathon Healthy Kids Fun Run*

October 28: Marine Corps Marathon: The People's Marathon*



*PostPoints - earning event (usually 25 points for participation)

If you wish to include any events open to all Post employees, send an email to shoptalk@washpost.com.

Debit Cards at Northwest Cafeteria

Now you can use your debit cards at the Northwest cafeteria for purchases over \$3.50. Note: Northwest coffee cart and cafeterias at the plants are still cash only.

Additional Second-Quarter Advertising Award Winners

- CAU Outstanding Sales second-quarter award winner was **Matt Dunn**
- Vice President Club trip winners for second-quarter were **Nancy Parke** and **Eric Martin**.

Recognize Your Employees or Colleagues in ShopTalk

ShopTalk can be a tool for any Post manager or supervisor to highlight the achievements of an employee or a colleague. Please submit the name of anyone who has been promoted or achieved something important in their job or community. Send an email to shoptalk@washpost.com or onam@washpost.com. Include: person's name, department, job title and what they accomplished.

Marketplace

FOR SALE: 52-in. color television. Asking \$500. Contact Imani at 703-916-2220.

FOR SALE: Oak dining table, 36 x 60 with four chairs. Very good condition with a few barely visible scratches. \$800 obo. Contact Margaret at x4-4053 or home at 301-622-2272.

NEW MARKETPLACE DEADLINE: Noon THURSDAYS. Please include your name, extension and phone number. Ads are for Post employees only. Send ads to ShopTalk, seventh floor, or call x4-6803. To send ads via fax dial x4-4963 or to email send to shoptalk@washpost.com or onam@washpost.com. Ads run for two issues unless otherwise requested. One ad per employee. ShopTalk reserves the right to publish and edit all ads.