

Ray provided his own slice of life

Ed Grisamore / The Telegraph, Macon, GA

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Ray Mills lived in the margins of life.

Anyone who followed him kept an eraser at the end of their pencils. He lived under so many different roofs he would often head home trying to remember which key fit the lock.

The one place that was always home, though, was the Nu-Way Weiners at 430 Cotton Ave. For 32 years, Ray clocked in six days a week and saved his odd jobs for Sunday.

Oh, there were pockets of interruptions. He spent some time in jail. His personnel file was as thick as his fist.

But Nu-Way co-owners Jim Cacavias and Spyros Dermatas helped him clear his name, pay his bills and knock back the demons. After all Ray could handle the workload of three employees. And nobody took greater pride in their calling.

If you've ever eaten a chili dog or a slaw dog from Nu-Way, then you should bow your head in a moment for silence for Ray.

He made the chili and slaw for all the Nu-Way restaurants. He cooked nearly a half-ton of chili every week. He diced some 300,000 pounds of cabbage in his lifetime. Yes, he fought the slaw. And the slaw won.

"I doubt anyone else in Georgia can make claim," Centenary Methodist past Tim Bagwell said at Ray's funeral. "There aren't many people in Macon who have not at some point eaten Ray's cooking."

Ronnie Marshall worked side-by-side with Ray for more than 20 years. They shed a lot of tears together, mostly when they chopped onions. Ronnie would chew on a wooden matchstick to ward off the watery eyes. But Ray would always tough it out.

There were plenty of tears – hold the onions – a few weeks ago. Ray's three pack-a-day cigarette habit caught up with him, and the lung cancer ended his life at age 58.

He had blue-collar roots in south Macon. H once worked for the circus putting up tents and rides. Then he and his wife dined at the Nu-Way one spring evening in 1977, and his life changed forever.

Dermatas can still remember where Ray say (third booth from the door) and what he ordered (two burgers all the way with hot sauce.)

More importantly, he remembers it was the night Ray asked him for a job.

"He was like a jack rabbit, energetic and full of life," Dermatas said. "He was always eager to please."

“There were no limits to his work ethic,” Cacavias said. “He would get things so clean he would almost wipe the paint off the finish.”

It was Jim’s father, the late John Cacavias, who developed the local restaurant’s famous secret slaw recipe in 1980.

But it was Ray who made 250 tons of the stuff over the next 29 years. On July 4, 2002, the dining edition of The New York Times hailed it as the “best slaw dog in America.”

Ray didn’t own a car. He either caught the bus or walked. He knew every shortcut and every downtown alley. He was scrawny but strong, and he always to appear tougher than he was. He would sometimes arrive at work with tall tales of switchblade-wielding attackers.

He never traveled far. If he ever told you he went to the beach, he usually meant Lake Tobesofkee.

He always looked forward to going to Atlanta for the annual Taste of Macon during the state Legislature, too. Whenever someone would rave about the chili or slaw, he would raise his hand, thump his chest and proudly boast that he made it.

Ray couldn’t read, so it never really mattered that Nu-Way’s neon sign has been intentionally misspelled “wieners” since 1937.

He didn’t have any teeth either; the man could chew up an apple and gnaw down a piece of fried chicken.

Bagwell called Ray one of those “unknown faithful servants” who was “happy to the core.”

Despite his flaws and imperfections, he was genuine.

“He was a character.” Cacavias said. “One of a kind.”

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