

‘Have a good one’: Behind the scenes with Kathie Merrill

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It’s lunch time. The Bear’s Den is a zoo of people scouring the cafeteria in search of prey. They claw their way to the pizzas and fight over the last croutons of the salad bar as if they would never eat again before making their way to the lines, which now extend to the back of the space.

For those employed by University of Maine Dining, it’s another chaotic day.

But amid the carnage, she is calm and cool, poised to take on the challenge that is the mile-long line of students before her. She leans to her left, then to her right, swiftly scanning items and swiping cards as quickly as they come to her. She hardly has the chance to look up from her post before she asks if you would like a receipt. You’ll probably say, “No, thank you,” and she’ll respond with her signature, “Have a good one.”

She’s Kathie Merrill, the register on the right. Surely you’ve seen her — she’s been working for the University for 33 years.

Merrill grew up in Bangor, but moved to Albuquerque, N.M., where she graduated high school. She returned to Maine and studied business at Beal College in Bangor before, as she said, life became too busy and she had to leave school.

But she doesn’t have any reservations about moving back to Maine.

“It’s where I met the love of my life,” Merrill said.

When her late husband began working for the University’s Printing Services, Merrill made the decision to work for UMaine to save money on fuel costs.

That was 1981, and it didn’t take her long to make a name for herself. Merrill became the “salad queen” of Dining Services and held that title for many years.

“The salad bars were mine in the past. I came up with the recipes, the ideas,” she said, speaking about the earlier methods of food preparation before the dining facilities become institutionalized. “I had free reign. I could order what I wanted.”

Things have changed, but that’s not to say she doesn’t enjoy her job now. Merrill has been at the Bear’s Den Marketplace for 10 years. Prior to her stint at the main dining hub on campus, she

worked at UMaine's Bangor campus when it was part of the University and worked behind-the-scenes at Stoddard and Stewart Commons when they were in operation.

With such a history at the University, of course she has stories to tell. She still remembers one time when an unnamed employee — in attempts to either move or taste-test the product, she's not sure which — dumped gallons of blue cheese salad dressing on the floor of a walk-in refrigerator at the Bangor campus.

"We had to clean it up, but knowing what happened to the individual [...] it was okay," she said. "It was a good laugh."

And that laugh is heard today in the Union. It's lighthearted and genuine, and chances are you might have heard it if you have ever been one of the 2,000 students, faculty and staff going through Merrill's register line every day.

"I like interacting with the students, they make you feel young. I'm an old girl, you know," she said with a hearty chuckle. "They make my day."

Her jovial nature stems from her undying love of helping others. At 65, Merrill has committed her life to charity and helping those in need. Every Thursday night, she and others at the United Methodist Church in Bangor put on a free dinner for up to 200 hungry individuals in need of a hot meal.

To Merrill, helping others is just a part of who she is.

"I love it. I always have," she said. "I think everybody should reach in and help where it's needed. I was taught that from [childhood]. If you see a need you get in there and do what you can, if you can."

And what's she bringing? Salad, of course.

Charity aside, for Merrill, cooking just comes naturally.

"It's a passion," she said.

And it's a passion she wants to share with the world. In her retirement, she plans to write a cookbook and hopes to have it published. According to Merrill, she's been working on it for about five years. The book will feature classic recipes passed down through her family, among others she has adapted for herself. Salads will undoubtedly make an appearance.

And everything is done by her, from the recipes themselves to the photos of the dishes. Currently, she's working on designing the graphics.

"I'm not going to say, 'Oh gee, now that I'm retiring I'm going to dry up and die,'" she said, speaking about her upcoming retirement. "I hope not!" she added.

She certainly doesn't see her retirement as an ending. Instead, it's a new beginning, another chapter in her life. Merrill said that she will stay in Maine and, at the tender age of 65, plans to finish her degree in business. She says one is never too old to finish what they've started. Following the loss of her husband in 2004, Merrill is determined to live each day for herself.

"It was his time," she said of her late husband, "and I still have things left to do. You have to go on.