

THANKS FROM THE HEART: VALENTINES FOR WORKERS WHO BRIGHTEN YOUR DAY

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By Mary Amato February 4, 1999

I've been doing it for 10 years now. I send out valentines to people whose last names I often don't know. Brian, a supermarket bagger, is getting one this year. So are two librarians: Naomi and Anne. I don't know their full names, but I know that they brighten up my daily life. Brian does it by bagging with a seam-splitting smile; Naomi and Anne do it by creating a children's room at the White Oak Public Library that is as comfortable and inviting as a living room.

For 10 years, I've been sending out what I call "service valentines" -- notes of appreciation to people who deserve it. I started this tradition back in 1989 after a January that seemed overrun with rude receptionists and careless clerks. I blew a fuse when I lugged my old reliable sewing machine all the way home from a tuneup only to discover that it wouldn't sew a stitch. When I complained to the mechanic and was told without apology that it was time to buy a new machine, I asked for the manager's name. The mechanic wouldn't give it to me. My blood boiled. I made calls. I wrote letters. I filed with the Better Business Bureau. I was a consumer being consumed by frustration. In a flash of happy insight, I realized it wasn't worth it. What was worth it, I decided, was to focus on the positive.

Over the years, I've sent service valentines to store clerks, a minister, a janitor, a fast-food server. Seven years ago, when I was pregnant, I sent one to the guy behind the deli counter near my office who piled extra roast beef on my sandwiches "for the bambino." Each year, I try to send a copy to the recipient's supervisor in case the boss doesn't realize there's a gem on the payroll.

Once, I sent a valentine to the doctor who always took time to listen, and a copy to the head of the hospital. Later, my doc showed me a lapel pin of appreciation she received in response to my letter.

I'm sure my little notes haven't changed anybody's life; but the process of sending them has changed my life for the better. I notice when people give me good service. I look at the name tag of the person flipping my hamburger or ringing up my prescription. I view every person as a possible candidate for a service valentine. What's funny is that I've never had another January like the one I had in 1989. When you pay attention to the skilled and caring people whose work makes the quality of your life better, you'll be amazed how many there are.

Sometimes my valentines go to strangers like Kevin Henkes. I know his full name because it's on the cover of the book he wrote: "A Weekend With Wendell." Through his writing, Henkes gave my son the chutzpah to stand up to a domineering friend in a nice, humorous way.

Recently, as I was doing the yoga exercises that I've been doing every night for years -- the exercises that keep me feeling balanced and healthy -- I realized I owe my yoga teacher, Savitri, a long-overdue valentine. I realized this with sadness because she is no longer alive. Still, it's not too late. I will address my valentine to her husband and let him know that I'm grateful for the service Savitri gave in teaching. Sewing machines may die, but the good work of people who do good work will endure. That's worth 10 more years of valentines.