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Customer Service Agent Welcomed Back After Tackling Illness

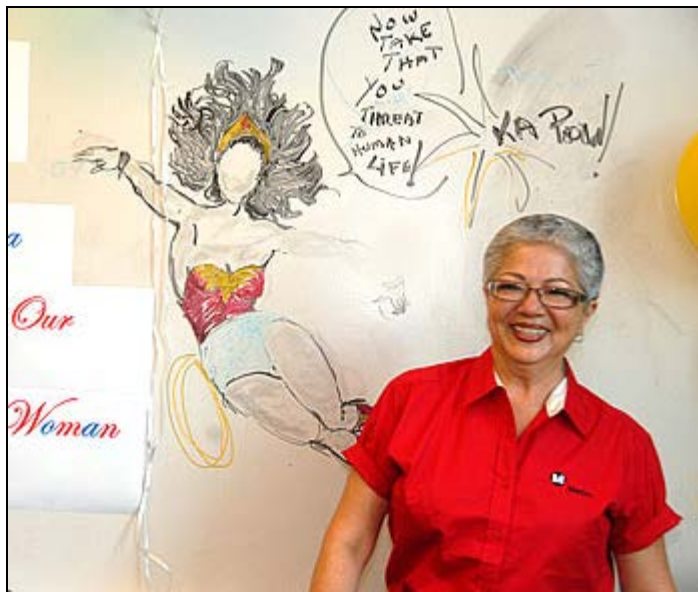
By Laura Kloth
Staff Writer

Nowadays, when she looks up to the sky, Customer Service Agent Maria Elena Diaz really takes in the spectrum of colors and surrounding views.

"Everything is so much more beautiful," she says with an impressive smile.

"Cancer has a funny way of waking you up, and when you become a breast cancer survivor, you can't help but recognize each day as a gift," Diaz explains.

Diaz returned to work in August after having been on sick leave for nearly a year. She was diagnosed with Stage 2 breast cancer in 2008 and underwent surgery followed by extensive chemotherapy and radiation treatments.



Wonder Woman: Customer Service Agent Maria Elena Diaz is welcomed back to work after a nearly year-long absence.

Photos by Gayle Anderson



Co-workers threw a surprise potluck breakfast to welcome Maria Elena Diaz back to work Aug. 30. Pictured here with Diaz, from left, are Tom Horne, Martin Buford, Marie Tervalon, and Gail Harvey.

A heartfelt welcome

Co-workers welcomed Diaz last month with a heart-warming brunch complete with Mexican food and a poem by Customer Relations Clerk Don Patterson.

Customer Programs and Services Customer Relations Director Gail Harvey said she was happy to have her "feisty" bilingual agent back at work because she was missed by the department. Diaz, who is bilingual, handles calls from patrons with reduced fares.



*"Your reason for leaving you did not reveal.
Ah, Maria you are loved by us all.
We asked did a tragedy befall?
Since you have returned,
We could cast those thoughts aside.
We can now honestly say,
It feels good to have you by our side."
—From a poem by Don Patterson*

Customer Relations Agent Marie Tervalon said she thought about Diaz often.

"Just seeing her -- she just gives us so much inspiration. She's always up, and we just had to welcome her back," Tervalon said.

Diaz clearly remembers the day she received the bad news. It arrived following a routine exam in an almost matter-of-fact manner, where her doctor bluntly announced that her tests concluded she would need surgery and further treatment.

Tears and awareness

Diaz, who has two grown sons, remembers feeling terrified and cheated.

"I was leaving the doctor's office and alone I'm in my car. I just started crying. I was so scared," she said. It took a while to accept the news. "I prayed a lot," she said and then decided, "You know, I'm going to enjoy every day of my life the most I can, and do the best of it."

After her Sept. 2, 2008, surgery and treatments, Diaz said she began reading about the possible causes and prevention of cancer.

"All the things that we eat, that's what is killing us. All this fried food, all these hamburgers, fried chicken, canned food, TV dinners," she said.



October is Breast Cancer Awareness Month and Diaz wants to remind women that she is living proof that routine mammograms do save lives. She notes that the year before she was diagnosed with cancer, her exam revealed only healthy tissue.

Diaz said she stuck to a regimen of breathing exercises, created a healthy

menu complete with specialized filtered water, and spent time with family and friends.

"I tried not to think a lot about it, and I had high hopes and a lot of faith," she said, reflecting back on the experience. "In my mind, I was thinking, I'm going to be better. It's going to be fine and I'm going to be ok. And I guess all that positive thinking -- it helps you a lot."

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