‘Peachy’ puts it all on the record

Waitress recalls Unitas, Sinatra, single motherhood

By Mary Gail Hare
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A revolving rooftop restaurant in downtown Baltimore introduced Leonora DiPietro to waitressing more than 45 years ago. The stations, where staff picked up drinks and entrees, rotated constantly, too, which was too much for the new employee. She had locked herself in a linen closet to cry in frustration when her manager found her and spent the rest of the evening schooling her in the trade that would become her career.

Over the decades, she has served celebrities, politicians, sports figures and next-door neighbors, all of whom knew her as Peachy, the nickname the parish priest gave a bubbly little girl with rosy cheeks.

She was born in 1941 and grew up in Highlandtown, where she still lives. She added Dixon to her name about 20 years later and kept it, though her marriage failed. For most of her nearly 70 years, she has answered to Peachy.

She started at the Circle One Rooftop Restaurant and then the Golden Arm and Hausner’s, all of which are now closed. For the past 40 years, she has worked the evening shift at Sabatino’s in Little Italy, sometimes until 3 a.m., and there she has met Al Pacino, Will Smith, Harrison Ford, Tom Selleck and Frank Sinatra.

“Sinatra really had the most beautiful blue eyes,” she said. “And he was so nice. He talked to everybody. He came in every time he was in Baltimore.”

She recently released “A Peachy Life,” a memoir of life in the modest brick rowhouse where her parents raised their four children. She has remodeled the house but the echoes of the past still reverberate through walls decorated with family photos. She has written about raising two children alone while living on waitress tips.

“The restaurants, that’s the funny parts,” she said of the book, published by CityLit Press. “The family, that’s the loving parts.”

Phil Culotta, general manager of Sabatino’s for more than 30 years, described the work as difficult with long hours but rewarding. Staff, like Peachy, have many regular and loyal customers, some the third and fourth generations of families they have served, he said.

Dixon writes of her father, a Bethlehem Steel laborer, who came home every day covered in dust from the furnaces and tended roses in the backyard so tirelessly that they still bloom today. She recalls working at the Golden Arm for Johnny Unitas, the renowned Baltimore Colts quarterback who didn’t balk at doing routine housekeeping himself.

“On opening night at the restaurant, there was Johnny Unitas with a plunger, headed to unplug the pipes in the ladies’ room,” she said.

Her uncle, Dominic (Mimi) DiPietro, was an outspoken and colorful city councilman whose constituents relied on him for just about everything. “He once made sure a blizzard didn’t stop a wedding at Our Lady of Pompeii,” she said.

And she writes of how she took the unprecedented step, for a woman in her era, of leaving an unhappy marriage.

“The only good thing that came out of that marriage is my two children,” she said.

When a knee operation sidelined Dixon, she started to write about “all the people who have touched my life.” Dixon filled the pages with details of holiday celebrations: Christmas feasting started on Dec. 15, her younger brother’s birthday, and the DiPietros always hosted the neighborhood New Year’s party. She sprinkled in some of her mother’s recipes and reproductions of family photos.

She wrote in longhand before typing into a computer. She mailed her manuscript to a dozen publishers in New York, only to see it rejected. Then, CityLit Press in Baltimore saw in it a unique and powerful story, steeped in family, religion, and hard work, said Gregg A. Wilhelm, publisher and editor. He chose it for its regional nature as much as for its literary quality.

Many women can identify with the experience of growing up in the Baltimore of the 1960’s, he said, and the book documents many people and places that no longer exist.

“She represents women with strong family, ethnic and religious ties,” Wilhelm said.

Life will not likely change for Peachy Dixon, who said she has no plans to retire from Sabatino’s. She will still walk down to the Inner Harbor and back every day, and watch “The Ellen DeGeneres Show” as she prepares for her shift.

“She makes me laugh,” Dixon said. “I go to work with a smile.”

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