

The 'Burger Queen'

Woman celebrates 15 years at 'home of the Whopper'

By T. KEVIN WALKER
THE CHRONICLE

It's right up there with the cola wars.

The battle between fast food Goliaths McDonald's and Burger King has been a staple of American pop culture.

First McDonald's claimed supremacy, boasting that it had served "billions" of customers worldwide. And then Burger King retaliated with a claim that its "Whopper beat the Big Mac" in national taste tests.

Phyllis Simmons has witnessed the jabs from both sides and says that in this battle-of-the-big-burgers, the home of the Whopper is the undisputed "King."

"Burger King is the best. If you don't believe me ask the customers," she said with a broad smile.

But Simmons is a little biased. During the last days of 1998, the 57-year-old celebrated her 15th year as a food handler at the fast food chain's East Winston location.

To put it into perspective, when Simmons began her reign at Burger King, Reagan was just wrapping up his first term; Return of the Jedi, the last of the Star Wars trilogy, was tops at the box office; and a new form of music called rap was all the rave.

Surviving 15 years in a business that has astronomical turnover rates is no small feat. The restaurant's manager, Abdul Lateef Uqdah, said he has seen employees who work a day and then disappear, or even worse, those he hires who don't even

show up.

"If they last two years, you really have accomplished a lot," Uqdah said. "(Simmons) represents the epitome of what we would like an employee to be."

Simmons is taking the milestone fairly lightly. She's not that surprised that she has lasted at a fast food restaurant for so long. In fact, she pretty much planned it that way.

"Why keep running from one job to another," she asked. "I love my job...It takes care of me, and I take care of it."

Since leaving Martinsville, Va., to come to Winston-Salem around 30 years ago, Simmons has had only two jobs. The first was at a plant on Northwest Boulevard making supplies for the Vietnam War. But the plant shut down and Simmons found herself without a means to support her children.

For a time, Simmons went on welfare. The Department of Social Services helped her find the job at Burger King. Simmons hasn't looked back since.

"I couldn't stay on welfare all my life," she said, shaking her head slightly. "No, I'd rather work."

And work she has. Simmons is the first person in the restaurant every morning. She arrives at work at 5 a.m.; she made the trip to work by foot, for the first five years.

Simmons turns on all the lights, heats up the ovens and fires up the grills before the breakfast crowd steers through the drive-thru.

The employees that work beside her during the morning

shift say that "Ms. Phyllis" - the name her co-workers have affectionately given her - is the glue that keeps the restaurant together.

"If you can't depend on anybody else, you can depend on Ms. Phyllis; she's got your back," Burger King employee Maxine Fuller said. "The customers love her. Everybody that comes through that door, says 'Hi, Ms. Phyllis' before they place their orders."

Employee SaDonna Powell says even though Simmons is one of the oldest employees at the restaurant, most of her co-workers don't look at her as a mother figure.

"She's more like a sister to us," Powell said.

Simmons' 15-year tenure is rivaled only by a very few managers within the fast food chain.

But managers have extra incentives, like yearly bonuses and special benefits packages, to keep them on the job, Uqdah said.

Simmons - who has seen a great number of both employees and managers come and go over the years - says she has been offered management positions but that so far she has refused them.

"If I become a manager then who's going to fix my food," she said. "They need someone in the back who's good like me. I don't want to have to go off on people because my food is not ready."

Over the past week, Uqdah and his employees have tried to show their appreciation to Simmons in many ways.

Besides just saying "thank you" and "congratulations,"



Phyllis Simmons opens a gift as manager Abdul Lateef Uqdah looks on. Below, a surprised Simmons said she's enjoyed her 15-year stint as a food handler. "Why keep running from one job to another," she said.



employees used the marquee on the huge Burger King sign outside the restaurant, to tell the world about Simmons.

"Congratulations Phyllis Simmons, 15 years" reads one side of the marquee, which usually is reserved for specials or 2 for 2 deals.

Last Wednesday, a small party was held in her honor.

Employees presented Simmons with balloons and a cake. She was also given a dapper leather jacket embroidered with a special logo - Burger King's, of course.

They all were just a few tokens of appreciation to a woman who has become the queen of the East Winston Burg-

er King. Simmons says she'll continue to work for at least another five years. She says the job hasn't gotten boring. Plus she's grown attached to her customers.

"Some people say I own this place, and Abdul is just here," she laughed. "I say 'I don't know about that, but it sounds good to me.'"

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