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First Person Singular

Table talk

Victor Berger, 57, Arlington // Server, the Lafayette in the Hay-Adams

INTERVIEW BY AMANDA LONG

When I arrive at 6 a.m., I do not know what will happen that day. Will I serve a four-course breakfast to diplomats who only have 45 minutes to eat? Will families ask me about all the Secret Service agents and if anyone famous is sitting nearby? I don't like the same routine. Now, I don't love crisis and chaos, but I know what to do with it. I have four daughters; I know how to handle chaos. In soccer, you have to find the order in the disorder, be one step ahead of the action, be quick on your feet and have teamwork. That is the same here. In the midst of disorder, I see order.

I know that this is a city of big egos, but what I hope is that they leave their egos outside when they walk in and just be themselves. I see more big hearts than big egos. I think that is because everyone who works here has a big heart. I've received so much kindness and understanding in my 28 years in this job. I am a foreigner. I am proud of where I'm from, but it can be a challenge. I might say something incorrectly (Continued on Page 4)

(Continued from Page 3) when presenting the specials to the table. And a client — we have clients from all over the world — will say very inconspicuously, very kindly, "Victor, *this* is how to pronounce that." They are not correcting me; they are helping me. That makes my day.

I don't get nervous serving famous people. We make special preparations, of course. When an Orthodox pope was here, we put out only water, soda and juices. He came in with his golden baton, all this pomp. I say, "Father, may I get you something to drink?"

He says, "Whiskey, no rocks." We were all so worried about doing the wrong thing, but he's just another customer who knows what he wants.

My father loved America. He came here from Peru in 1928 to go to Columbia. My grandfather would send him money, but [my father] was a philanderer and wasted it. My grandfather cut him off. He sold apples and taught tango lessons to survive until he got a job in a factory owned by a German couple. He worked very hard. They liked him so much that they sent him back to Peru and paid for his

college. He became a civil engineer and would come to America often, bringing back these wonderful toys: planes and robots. We were surrounded by Americana. When he saw the corruption starting in Latin America in the '70s, he told my mother we should move here so we would know what it felt like to live with real freedom. He would be very proud of me, working here. To me, it is an honor. I tell my daughters all the time, "People come from all over the world to take a picture of the White House, and I'm looking at it every day."

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