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Metro Columnist

At RFK, Using Manners to Surmount the Cultural Divide

By Marc Fisher

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The team on the field stinks, the stadium is crumbling, the games still aren't on TV in many homes and the political battles over the new ballpark just will not die.

But the new owners of Washington's baseball franchise are intent on making a visit to RFK Stadium a much better experience, so before tomorrow's relaunch of the ballpark, hundreds of workers are getting a crash course in, well, everything.

Improving the fan experience is not just about better food and faster service. It's a matter of being honest about a reality of American society that many of us would rather not face:

As the rich get richer and the poor get poorer, we tend to live in separate worlds, and the ballpark is one of the ever fewer places where all kinds come together. When the Potomac banker and the high school dropout from Southeast Washington meet, even in the seconds it takes to scan a ticket or sell a program, there's plenty of opportunity for mutual alienation and antagonism.

So the Washington Nationals have hired professional trainers to run 600 stadium workers through two-hour sessions designed to increase the odds that workers can handle basics that many fans take for granted in their daily lives: common courtesy, eye contact, audible responses, eagerness to please and pride in the place where they work.

I sat in on a session for stadium supervisors run by LRA Worldwide, a Pennsylvania company that promises to move "customers quickly from 'satisfied' to 'loyal' to 'advocate.'" I expected to hear a lot about helping fans find a restroom or deal with a drunk in the next row, and I did. What I hadn't expected was a quick course in Human Relationships 101.

"The reality of our society is we really aren't very integrated, and you see it in these interactions at the ballpark," says Conni Bille, the company's training director and a former public school teacher.

"As the culture gets ruder and ruder, we have to teach polite behavior more and more," says Bille, who has a keen ear for the inequalities that divide us. "For kids coming out of the D.C. schools, these are not things they necessarily know. Because schools have allowed the behavior norm to go down, it becomes okay beyond school. Some people just don't know that you let someone on crutches onto the elevator ahead of you."

The trainers urge supervisors to be sensitive to their workers' shortcomings. If the training involves reading rules aloud, supervisors must be careful not to call on staffers who'd be embarrassed for co-workers to discover their weak reading skills.

With attendance down by nearly a quarter this season, the Lerner family, which expects to gain official command of the Nationals this month, needs to lure back last year's fans and win new customers. Starting at tomorrow night's game, the Nats will offer outdoor festivals, new foods (half-smokes, cheese steaks, knishes, even brown mustard), more ice cream machines, a spruced-up stadium and workers with a new attitude.



The Lerner family is making changes it hopes will fill RFK Stadium. Above, Ryan Bourgard of Burbank, Calif., has room to stretch at an April game.

Photo Credit: By John McDonnell —
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"Day-of-game employees is the single most important way to enhance the guest experience," says Steve Ethier, the Nats' director of ballpark operations. If you shell out big bucks to go to a game and you run into a sullen usher, a brusque ticket-taker, an overzealous security guard, a monumentally dim parking attendant or a food vendor who sells in super slo-mo, you are not a happy fan. The new owners want happy fans.

Enter Bille and Joe Willmore, a dynamic trainer who stresses first impressions. He runs supervisors through guidelines that employees must adopt as their own, such as "Do not use words that make guests uncomfortable or street slang they do not understand" and "My hair color and jewelry are not extreme or distracting."

Through role-playing, workers practice "greeting using the 10/5 rule." How's that? "Smile at guests within 10 feet of my post and greet them within five feet."

"Guests show up at this ballpark and they feel alone," Willmore says. "You make eye contact, and bonds start to form."

Whatever their job, workers are asked hundreds of questions: Why are a few seats painted white? What does RFK stand for? Where's the baby-changing room?

The training includes a walking tour of RFK so workers can direct fans. But even more important, Willmore says, is "non-verbal behavior and appearance."

So supervisors watch and critique their colleagues dealing with situations such as an angry fan who wants the foul-mouthed people behind him removed from the stadium.

"It doesn't help to respond to anger with anger," Willmore advises. "It doesn't matter that you didn't cause the problem. Apologize for the experience -- 'I'm truly sorry for the foul language you're hearing; I can understand that's making it a bad experience for you.' "

Workers who listen well, stay calm and offer friendly suggestions get instant rewards -- Willmore tosses them chocolate Kisses.

"Senior management's real serious about this, and it's critical that you get this across," Willmore tells the supervisors. "This is going to become a class organization. All the employees gotta believe it."

Two hours of training can't replace a lifetime of learning. So trainers focus on getting workers to see that whoever they are at home, they play a role at the stadium. Here, they teach, you are listener and problem-solver. You thought you were just making a buck while millionaires play a game, but in fact, you are a bridge between distant shores in a nation divided.

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