



75th-Anniversary Heroes

Ernesto Fernandez, a veteran of 14 years at Green Acres Country Club, moved his family (literally) to Skokie Country Club in 1967. He would spend nearly 20 years there until his retirement in 1987. Young Fernando, the lone child of seven that would remain in the business, started at Skokie with his father in 1970. After 14 years, the last eight as the mechanic, he could see that his career was dead-ending a bit. John Berarducci let the up-and-coming Fernando know that a formal education would be required if he planned on moving forward in the business. Fernando went on to get a couple of two-year degrees and of course, was the superintendent at Green Acres for many years before growing in Black Sheep Golf Club. Fernando has also contributed to the industry by educating many Spanish-speaking workers in our area.

I thought it was a good time to remember the day-in, day-out efforts of our staff and highlight some of the long-term dedication in our business. As a group, we would never have come this far without the contributions of our employees, particularly the Hispanic community.

While Fernando has risen to the top of his profession, the vast majority of the Mexican-born contingent is laboring along, the physical engine of our operation. They are, as Paul Voykin from Briarwood states, “responsible for the greening of America,” and as we look back over the last 75 years, we salute this largely unsung group of heroes. Their story is one of longevity and of dedication.

It is my understanding that grounds staffs became integrated with Hispanic workers after World War II. The United States was recruiting laborers in all phases of the agriculture industry and as these jobs came and went, many of these same people transitioned into seasonal golf course employees.

The stories that have surfaced over the years come in many shapes and sizes. However, for longevity there are few that can parallel the Cabrera story at Bob O’Link Country Club. Humberto retired a few years back after 32 years. Humberto’s three sons (Jr., Gerardo and Raul) and his brother (Hector) all have double-digit years of experience. Superintendent Rick Bowden reports that Humberto passed on his strong work ethic and that all the family members have taken “ownership” in the course. Rick, himself in his 22nd year at the club, has seen this group grow as individuals, take on wives, raise children, become legal citizens and buy homes. Rick looks forward to employing their sons in the future. He also mentioned that Alonso Esquivel (23 years) has served the club well and is currently the irrigation technician/foreman and also helps to train the interns.

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At Medinah Country Club, Hector Tijerina has been on the staff since 1957. He handles everything irrigation-related and during my time on the property, kept the course looking as if it were watered wall-to-wall during dry periods. He could rotate those roller bases around like a machine. Candelario Espinoza started at Medinah in 1964 and handles all in-house project work. On three courses, there is plenty of that to go around and he has installed numerous tees, bunkers and cart paths over the years. Hector's nephew, Reynaldo, is one of the two superintendents on No. 3 Course and is a graduate of the University of Massachusetts short course.

Then there is Pedro Gonzalez at Mission Hills Country Club. He has been at the club for 46 years and is a member favorite. He told me that he cherishes the feeling of having done a good day's

work and that the pace of the work keeps him young. He tries to instill the feeling of "enjoying what he's doing" to the other staff members and feels most of the Mexican-born employees naturally have a good attitude for the job. Superintendent John Otis calls him "a walking as-built" with excellent mechanical skills. Pedro also raises Border Collies, in case you're looking for a goose-chaser!

Of course, I've got my own men to brag about. Abad Mejia (27 years) handles all of our landscaped areas, Jorge Villegas (21 years) is still our #1 cup-changer and Javier Solorio (19 years) sets up the tee markers, water coolers and handles the divots every day. His attention to detail is exemplary; I've never been to another club with cleaner green and tee equipment. They still don't like taking a day off and give me the evil eye every time one comes their way.

The list goes on and on: Modesto Sanchez is Paul Voykin's assistant at Briarwood. "Moe" is known up and down the North Shore and has been with Paul for 38 years. Moe's father, Gilberto, has been there 40-plus years! Paul reports that these two are loyal friends first and employees second. He hopes that every superintendent would have the good fortune of having employees that are as dedicated, hard-working and loyal. Junior Arredondo (27 years) and Antonio Vargas (24 years) round out the nucleus of Paul's staff.

At the Indian Hill Club in Winnetka, the story is a bit different. Ramiro Ruiz has worked in the grounds department since 1976; he was the club's first Hispanic employee and is now the head mechanic. However, a family tree with several very thick branches is woven into the club's history. Julius



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Horvath retired last December after 44 years of service. He handled the tennis court maintenance chores, the curling ice and "did it all" on the golf course. His brother Bela has been the chef for 28 years and had a group of Chicagoland superintendents in awe a few years back when he put together a wild game theme feast. The story doesn't end there; the Horvath brothers married two Irish sisters, Maureen and Anne respectively. Maureen is now retired, but Anne has been on the job for over 20 years in the clubhouse. A third sister, Nellie Kerrigan, has been employed at "the Hill" for 39 years! The Kerrigan girls have a brother (of course). Francis is the assistant superintendent and started at the club in 1970. Superintendent Dave Schlagger reports that this group came to the United States as immigrants, completely empty-handed. He admires that they have built lives for themselves, become citizens, put children through school and

bought homes (retirement homes, too!). Dave reports those on staff still have a sharp edge to them, paying close attention to detail and still possessing a deep desire to serve their membership.

In this special anniversary year, we naturally recall the past presidents who have provided leadership to our organization. We are also grateful to our vendors for the many contributions they have made. Their customer support has made the job of the superintendent so much easier and their generosity to the Association is well documented. However, I also thought it was a good time to remember the day-in, day-out efforts of our staff and highlight some of the long-term dedication in our business. It takes a special person to show up at the same place every day for 20, 30 or 40 years. They've rolled with the punches: different superintendents and evolving methodology, all kinds of weather,

angry golfers and long hours.

Many superintendents throw a picnic or two for the crew every year; taking a Monday afternoon off and enjoying some great Mexican-flavored fare. Consider doing something extra-special this year. Let them know that both our national and local chapters of superintendents are celebrating significant anniversaries. As a group, we would never have come this far without the contributions of our employees, particularly the Hispanic community. Have you ever advertised their efforts? Several years ago, I saw all of the grounds employees pictured in the locker room at the Indian Hill Club. What a great way to let your golfers know the staff and emphasize the long-term commitments many of them have made. And I know my staff loves having their pictures taken! Salute this group of 75th-anniversary heroes! 

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