

15 MINUTES

A sunny morning for Sergio Cuevas

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The automatic doors opened, allowing two things in: heavenly, sun-soaked February air and intermittent crowds. They came into Wal-Mart's tall, bright entrance last Sunday morning, sleepy-eyed in flip-flops, pushing utterly amazed infants in shopping carts and dragging scowling little girls by the hand. Glowing teenage couples in love, a large Peruvian family which spanned three generations and freckled, sunburnt, no-nonsense shoppers, all had arrived at the discount store's supercenter on Colonial Boulevard and Ortiz Avenue.

"We're here to divide and conquer," said a rosy cheeked young woman.

"In and out," said her friend.

Both in cut-off jeans, sunglasses and tank-tops, they marched in the direction of the produce section.

Wal-Mart greeter Sergio Cuevas, 78, stood inconspicuously to the side, hands folded behind his back, face to the sun, smiling as the doors opened.

"Beautiful," he said, standing just over five feet tall. "This is a beautiful place to live."

Cuevas arrives at 7 a.m. and works until 4 p.m. five days a week.

"I come in, fix the carts, open the doors, try to make everyone happy," he said.

He is retired from the air conditioner repair and installation trade.

"I said, 'I can't just stay not doing anything, so I applied over here,'" he said. "I find people here are nice and I enjoy working with them."

Cuevas was born in Cuba into a family of eight, the oldest of four boys. He moved to Seattle, Wash. in 1948.

"I liked the cold weather," he said of Seattle. "Once in a while we got rain. We got snow, but not too often. Seattle is a beautiful place."

Cuba, he said, was also a beautiful place, but for Cuevas, those days have faded.

"I came to the states so long ago, I can't remember," he said.

Cuevas spoke of his life with relish, and as he talked, people brought various items they wanted to return: dog food, nicotine patches, radios, kitty litter, a watch. He put a pink stamp on each item before they proceeded to the returns desk.

The best part about his life, he said, is being married.

"Get married soon," he advised, "If you like the woman. And if you have children, have three or four. Don't get only one."

"And always enjoy life," he added.

Cuevas lives with his wife, daughter and sister-in-law in Cape Coral.

"I enjoy going out with my wife, or staying



FLORIDA WEEKLY PHOTO BY EVAN WILLIAMS

Wal-Mart greeter, Sergio Cuevas, doing his best to make everyone happy

home and watching a good movie," he said. "To me, John Wayne is one of the best."

Married 51 years, Cuevas is a champion of the long relationship's endurance test.

"Same wife," he said. "No others."

"I used to have an Uncle who used to say, 'A married life without fights is no good. You have to have some fights to enjoy your marriage.' That's the way he used to say it. And it's true."

Cuevas moved back to Cuba in his mid-twenties, he said, and there met his wife and was married in a modest ceremony. Before that, he traveled around the country.

"I used to go out dancing," he said. "At a salon, once in a while."

He was also in the United States Army in

the early 1950s. He doesn't recommend it.

"Life in the Army is different," he said. "Civilian life is better. You can go anywhere you want. Live where you want to, and you enjoy life better."

To that end, Cuevas takes his wife fishing any time he gets the chance, on the Caloosahatchee River. They usually bring two rods, coca-cola and sandwiches. It's pleasant to imagine them there, standing on a pier somewhere, unconcerned with the world, sipping cans of soda in the sun. They don't usually catch a lot.

"Once in a while a Catfish," he said.

If they do make a catch, it gets cooked at home. Fish is Cuevas favorite food.

"Any kind," he said, "And a good salad. And a glass of wine. It doesn't have to be expensive. I find wine between \$8 and \$20, and they are good wines."

He also likes to have a glass of brandy, "once in a while after dinner."

Cuevas' parents are from Spain, and even after he moved to the states, his Spanish relatives sent five to ten gallons of wine, every year to Cuba. It was good wine he said, usually 25 years old, but he prefers the younger, three-year-old wine he buys in the bottle here.

"We like cheese a lot too," he said, his voice growing deeper with these pleasurable thoughts. "Any kind."

And in the morning: espresso.

"Real black coffee," he said. "Real strong. One cup in the morning."

But cigars are out.

"Not anymore," he said. "I have problems with emphysema."

But if he has health problems, they don't show in his serene brown eyes, turned towards a middle-aged woman in a pink shirt who had just walked in. A breeze came through the doors, blowing loose a strand of his thick, neatly combed hair. ■

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