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JOURNAL REPORTS: RETIREMENT

Second Acts: Retirees Find New Jobs—and Dreams Fulfilled—at the Ballpark

Three people—a former lawyer, director of communications and secretary—who work at the stadiums of their hometown teams. And love it.

By Julie Halpert

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Many kids dream of playing baseball when they get older. Many retirees come as close as possible to fulfilling that dream.

They have found second acts working for their hometown Major League Baseball teams.

Here's a look at three such people. Two are ushers, one gives stadium tours and all three wield major-league social skills. For each, it's about feeling the excitement of the ballpark, hearing the crack of the bat, soaking in the roar of the crowd. And for these three lovers of baseball, it was also about going to the World Series.

Of course, with the beginning of the baseball season on hold because of the coronavirus, so are these ballpark second acts. But these veterans of the game have every intention of returning as soon as it is safe to do so. In the meantime, for the baseball fans who fantasize of following in their footsteps (or just like to wonder what it would be like), here are their stories.

From lawyer to usher

Brion Thompson, age 68, of Takoma Park, Md., spent 38 years as a staff attorney at the Securities and Exchange Commission, working for the division that regulates mutual funds.

But before he became a lawyer, he was a baseball fan. Growing up in Camden, N.J., near Philadelphia, Mr. Thompson rooted a long time for the Phillies, he says. When the Nationals arrived in Washington, D.C. in 2005, though, he started going to their games.

The Nationals weren't the greatest team back then, but the games were fun. And, over the course of several seasons, Mr. Thompson became friends with an usher who told him how much he enjoyed his job—and how he thought that Mr. Thompson would like being a Nationals usher, too.

Intrigued, and starting to think about what to do in retirement, Mr. Thompson discovered that at Nationals Park, ushers were called upon to do a lot more than show fans to their seats. The Nationals organization counted on the ushers to help make sure the ballpark was still a fun atmosphere—even when the team was losing.

Ushers “don't have any control over what's happening on the field, but we have influence over your enjoyment of the game,” Mr. Thompson says.

He started out part time in 2011, working evenings and weekends, greeting and helping fans in a section where he says it was difficult to see much of the action. Not that he missed that much. The Nationals finished third in their division that season, with a record of 80 wins and 81 losses.



Brion Thompson, an usher at Nationals Park, pictured here in 2019, says he'll be “first in line” when baseball starts again and the stadium reopens.

PHOTO: MAURA FRIEDMAN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

The following year, fortunes improved for both Mr. Thompson and the team. The Nationals won 98 games and made it to the National League Division Series, though they lost in a five-game series to the St. Louis Cardinals. Mr. Thompson, meanwhile, was assigned to a new section, nearly at field level just behind home plate—affording a perfect view on a near-perfect season.

After that, Mr. Thompson was hooked. In 2013, he retired from the SEC and became a full-time usher at Nationals Park, working pretty much every home game.

For the past four years, he's had the ideal spot, he says, working in the Diamond Club, behind the dugout.

“I’m ecstatic. I’m now almost behind the plate, watching the game every day in close proximity to the field,” he says. This position also gives him an even better opportunity to form relationships with the customers. They’re season-ticket holders, so he sees them regularly. And he relishes his interactions with the players and their families as well.

On May 15, 2018, he was performing his routine duties making sure guests in his section were having a good time, when the rookie Nationals outfielder Juan Soto came up to bat for the first time in the major leagues. Soto’s family was sitting nearby.

“He hit a home run, and the whole place went bonkers,” Mr. Thompson says. “When you’re a fan and *they’re* a fan and things happen in the game, you get those immediate explosions of excitement.” The Soto family still recognizes Mr. Thompson, and Soto’s father routinely gives him a hug, he says.

Nothing compares, however, with going to the World Series.

“It was so improbable,” Mr. Thompson says of the Nationals finally winning the NL championship last year. “We had to beat the Cardinals and the Dodgers, two teams in the past that knocked the Nationals out.... To be able to beat those teams set off a feeling of euphoria.”

“The place just exploded,” Mr. Thompson says of the moment his team clinched their World Series berth. “One of the prime reasons I worked for the Nationals was just to get to the World Series and work a World Series game,” he says.

The Nationals wound up winning the World Series, beating the Houston Astros in a seven-game series. Still, the three games that the Nationals lost were all home games—the games that Mr. Thompson worked.

“When we got to the third game, it was going to be the last game at Nationals Park for that year,” Mr. Thompson says. “There was a bit of despair but happiness that we accomplished as much as we accomplished.” At the end of the game, he says, “everyone was hugging each other because we won’t see each other until springtime.”

But then, in Houston, things turned around.

“During game six in Houston, I would turn the TV on, then turn it off, then turn it on. I was just crazy,” Mr. Thompson says.

And during game seven, when it appeared the Nationals would win it all: “I ran upstairs and told my wife. It was this feeling of ecstasy. To be a part of a World Series winning team, it’s hard to describe how happy it made me.”

Mr. Thompson and his wife, Denice Dishman, are currently practicing social distancing in their three-bedroom house in Maryland. They are both well, says Mr. Thompson. He adds that, at his age, he is aware of his own mortality, and a bit nervous about coming in contact with crowds again whenever the baseball season does begin. MLB on its website says it will be guided in its decisions by recommendations of “public health experts.” When a decision to open Nationals Park is made, says Mr. Thompson, “I’ll be there. I’ll be first in line.”

Still a Dodger fan

James Drew, age 58, grew up a Dodgers fan in Iowa, like his dad.

Mr. Drew lives in Pasadena, Calif., now and commutes back and forth to Dodger Stadium, a 10-mile drive, where he gives tours year round.



James Drew, a tour guide at Dodger Stadium in Los Angeles, says people on his tours “are stunned” by his enthusiasm.

PHOTO: JESSICA PONS FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

“It’s a dream,” he says. “Every day when I walk in there, I just look around and say, ‘Are you kidding me?’ It’s unbelievable.”

“People are stunned by the amount of enthusiasm I put into the tours,” Mr. Drew says. “This is part of my heart. This goes back to my connection with my dad. I’m grateful for all of this.”

Mr. Drew, a former director of communications for a school district in Colorado, says he applied for the job after getting a phone call in 2012 from his boyhood hero, former Dodger Steve Garvey. A close friend of Mr. Drew’s met Mr. Garvey at a golf tournament and persuaded him to make the call.

“We talked for about 10 minutes,” Mr. Drew says. “I was numb all day.”

He did some calculations afterward and figured he could swing an early retirement, at 51. So, the following spring, he moved to California, where he now enjoys giving Dodger Stadium tours—and watching the game.

Most of his tours start in the highest seats with an overview of the franchise and stadium. Next stops include the Vin Scully Press Box, the memorabilia hallway “with old stuff from the Brooklyn years,” and the trophy gallery.

Each tour ends, though, down on the field. “I give them 10 minutes to have their Dodger moment in the dugout,” Mr. Drew says.

When the Dodgers made it to the World Series in 2017 and again in 2018, Mr. Drew attended all of the home games. The highlight was 2017, he says. “We had not been in the World Series in 29 years, so it was really special....I remember walking around the stadium taking it all in.”



James Drew, right, who joined the Dodgers organization after a career in communications, leads a tour group at Dodger Stadium in 2019.

PHOTO: JESSICA PONS FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

Sadly, for Dodger fans, the team lost both series.

“We’re still waiting for that championship,” Mr. Drew says.

Mr. Drew recalls that his father never made it to Dodger Stadium or Ebbets Field, in Brooklyn, where the Dodgers played until 1957. His father died in 1984 at the age of 64.

“During every game I go to, I look up at the Dodger logo, and that’s my moment with my dad,” Mr. Drew says.

Mr. Drew, who is sheltering in his apartment with his cat, Laluna, says, “I miss seeing everyone at Dodger Stadium: fans, players, ushers, security folks, vendors, cleaning staff, and my terrific tour-guide teammates. We really are a team.”

The first pitch

Lenore Pressel, a Chicago native, has been a Cubs fan all her life. She recalls heading to Wrigley Field with her mother on Ladies Day, when women got in free, and, later, how taking her two sons to the ballpark felt like a family vacation at a time when they were living on her secretary’s salary.



Lenore Pressel, a lifelong Chicago Cubs fan, worked for years as a secretary for the Defense Department. Now she's an usher at Wrigley Field.

PHOTO: LUCY HEWETT FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Now, at age 69, Ms. Pressel is an usher at Wrigley—and loving it.

It's not something she planned for much. About 12 years ago, she and her co-workers were at a Cubs game on an office outing (Ms. Pressel was a secretary for the Defense Department), when she asked one of the ushers how she could get on the volunteer list for the job.

Pleased to learn it was a paying position, and already qualifying for a decent pension from the government, Ms. Pressel soon retired from secretarial work and started the very next spring as an usher at Wrigley Field.

Her first two seasons, she scanned tickets and handed out promotional items like bobbleheads, jerseys and caps. After that, she worked several different areas of the park.

In 2011, she was Outstanding Employee of the Year, and got to throw out the ceremonial first pitch for a game against the Milwaukee Brewers. Concerned she wouldn't do the job justice, Ms. Pressel practiced with two neighborhood boys.

"I made it over the plate—and it was televised," she says.

Perhaps her biggest reward, though, came in 2016. Two things happened that season: Ms. Pressel was moved to a section close to the dugout, and the Cubs finally won the World Series—their first since 1908.

"There was electricity in the air. It was just amazing," Ms. Pressel says.

She and other Cubs employees received a ring as a memento.

"I wear it to every game and share it with everyone around me," she says.



Usher Lenore Pressel talks to Cub fans in her section at Wrigley Field in Chicago during a game in August 2019.

PHOTO: LUCY HEWETT FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

Back when she started at Wrigley, Ms. Pressel says, she couldn't have fathomed that "all these awesome things would have happened."

She plans to be an usher as long as she's physically able. She had a knee replacement in December 2017. Ms. Pressel already has her five- and 10-year-service pins.

"Could I get up to 30?" she asks. "I would be 88. That would be awesome."

Ms. Pressel is sheltering at home with her husband, Jim Pressel. On Easter, she says, she wore her Cubs T-shirt. She is staying safe and only goes to the store for essentials, wearing a mask her good friend made for her and gloves that she had in her Cubs backpack.

“I do try to take short walks around my neighborhood on the days that are nice,” she says. “But mostly I have been baking.”

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