

Rita Hunt Martin

Beloved Officer Retires From the Force

ARTICLE AND PHOTO BY CELESTE McCALL

Best wishes to Rita Hunt Martin, veteran Washington DC Metropolitan Police officer, who serves at the First District Substation at 500 E St. SE. After almost three decades on the force, Officer Martin. She will be 50 on July 18, making her eligible for retirement.

We've known Rita Hunt since the 1980s, when we used to hang out at the Ainilian Art Gallery on Seventh St. SE (across from Eastern Market) operated by the late Agnes Ainilian. I was a student in Agnes' informal art classes, and Rita knew Agnes from her "foot beat." A self-proclaimed night owl, Agnes—a talented water colorist—painted evenings before heading out in her vintage automobile for a midnight supper at a neighborhood eatery. Rita stuck around to make sure Agnes was OK (back then crime was a real problem, even around the Market). She still owns several of Agnes' colorful, impressionistic paintings; so do we.

A native of Beckley, West Virginia, Martin now lives in Upper Marlboro with her new hubby, Theodore Martin, her high school sweetheart. The couple reconnected after almost 30 years, and he proposed to her outside a West Virginia coal mine, where he works. (Both come from coal mining backgrounds; Rita's brother Mark drives a bulldozer (above ground, Rita assured us) at the Big Branch Mine, the scene of the April 5 explosion which killed 29 miners.)

However, Rita decided to come to Washington, where she attended the Metropolitan Police Academy near Blue Plains. She graduated at age 20. "I was still too young to carry a gun," she recalled. Since then, Rita has ably served her community, while garnering numerous citations, including the CHAMPS Community Outreach Award in 2003. You can see the framed certificate in the precinct lobby.

"What I have liked best about my job are the people....Capitol Hill is my community," she told me over lunch in her spacious, air conditioned office. "They just finished installing the AC," she laughed, over barbecued wings. "They put it in just in time for someone else to enjoy it. I socialize here on Capitol Hill...I have life-long friends here, and have formed many personal relationships over the years."

Naturally, police work has its down side, besides being downright dangerous. Martin is particularly saddened about the high suicide rate among fellow police officers, including deaths in her own precinct. Also, seeing the neglect of city youth on the family level (an example is the recent, horrific drive-by shooting in far Southeast). "Our hands are tied," Hunt laments. "We'd like to do something about it, but it doesn't work that way."

Probably the saddest point in Rita's law enforcement career occurred almost 20 years ago. Hunt's former partner, Jim Elliott, had retired from the police force and purchased the Lil' Tavern in the 600 block of Pennsylvania Ave. SE. (It's still there.) In 1992, Elliott was stabbed to death by an under-age customer he had confronted earlier. The killer was never caught; he had fled to Central America. The unsolved crime was featured on "America's Most



Wanted," and some of us watched the show at the Lil' Tavern, where Elliott's widow Gae was bartending. However, one positive thing emerged from this tragedy. Rita befriended actress Gail Alexander, who had portrayed Rita on the crime show.

Future plans? The mother of a grown daughter, Celia, and adopted 12-year-old Leeann, Rita, who recently underwent a hip replacement, plans to relax, and spend time tending her garden. "It was time for me to go from here," she said. She will be missed. ★

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