

RHODE ISLAND

On the job: Hope Harris, Chafee aide

Hope Harris, 72, the receptionist in Sen. Lincoln Chafee's Providence office, likes looking out from her desk at 170 Westminster St. The view from this

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11th floor aerie is striking, and, she says, "It gives you a sense of being close to the Lord."

Harris is the voice you are likeliest to have heard if you've phoned the Chafee shop during the last quarter century. For most of that span, of course, the senator was John Chafee, Lincoln's late father.

Harris is enthusiastic, pleasant, and at peace. She has an advanced case of cancer that has spread from her liver to her breast area. She comes in now only four days a week; if she tires, she goes home. I find it remarkable that she works at all, but Harris says, "I love what I'm doing."

Barbara Berke, a Harris pal and former colleague, says, "She's happy and she wants to make the world happy."

Chafee marvels at Harris's patience in fielding constituent calls. "People like to tee off, they like to vent, and sometimes they go over the top," he says.

How ironic that some people don't realize Harris is black.

A man phoned to grouse about Jesse Jackson. Harris, no Jackson fan, said she wouldn't argue. But then the man said, "I wish they'd put him on a boat and send him back to Africa — and all the rest of them, too." Harris said, "Well, I didn't do anything. I don't want to go to Africa. I don't know anybody there." The man laughed and said he didn't mean *her*. By the end of the conversation, Harris says, they were friends.

Once a man who'd called for years came in to meet her. "He looked at me. He said, 'Are you Hope?' I said, 'Yeah.' He said, 'You're black!' I said, 'I know. What should I do?' He said, 'Oh, nothing, it's all right.'"

Harris hears from people with immigration problems, or folks looking for a job reference, or who think Republican Chafee should bolt parties, or who are lonely, or who have strong views on abortion — including backers of legislation outlawing a form of late-term abortion and who talk about fetuses having their brains sucked out. "They want me to get the willies," she says. (Like Chafee, she opposes such bans.)

Harris adds, "Everybody that calls here is somebody important to me because they're a voter. . . . When they are abusive, when I'm through with them, they're nice. They calm down. John Chafee said, 'Hope can tame the wildest beast.'"

State Rep. Maxine Bradford Shavers, D-Newport, Harris's sister-in-law says the key to understanding her is that "she's a Christian."

While Chafee press aide Debbie Rich, who is Jewish, sits by and listens, Harris defines "Christian" this way: "It means that Debbie and I have the same blood running through our veins. If Debbie bleeds, I get the Band-Aid. If I bleed, Debbie gets the Band-Aid. If I know you're hurting, I will get you water. I love you with all of my heart and I love everybody."

As Harris, who was raised a Baptist, mulls her cancer, she says her life is in God's hands and she has no fear. She knows who she wants to speak at her funeral, which will be at Beneficent Congregational Church, more spacious than the Providence Church of God where she currently worships. She has picked out some hymns, including "How Great Thou Art."

When I talk of death, I say someone has died. But you might hear Harris say "passed." She explains, "It means they go from one degree of grace to another. They pass over." Though her body will return to dust, "My spirit will soar."

She declares, "In my heart, I just look to the heavens and I think, 'My God! Some day I'll see Him face to face.'"

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