Akron restaurant owner dies hours after meeting President Obama

The Rev. Jesse Jackson and his son have stopped at Ann’s Place. So have several professional football players.

For Josephine “Ann” Harris, however, none came close to President Barack Obama visiting her West Akron restaurant. He was her hero.

“You know it’s great,” Harris, 70, said Friday morning, shortly after Obama left her family-owned restaurant on South Hawkins Avenue.

Harris, who didn’t know Obama planned to visit until earlier that morning, sat at a booth with a wet towel around her neck.

“He treated us like one of the brothers,” she said.

“He hugged all of us and ... got his picture taken with all of us.”

Within hours of Obama’s visit, Harris, who had been ill for some time, complained of fatigue and a tingling feeling. She was rushed to Akron General Medical Center, where she died about 11:15 a.m., according to the Summit County Medical Examiner’s Office.

Her family members and beloved customers were saddened by her death, yet they were pleased she was first able to meet the president.

“I’m sure this was her highlight,” said Frankie Adkins, Harris’ sister, who lives in Tulsa, Okla., and had heard about her sister’s sudden death from family members. “She loved Obama.”

The president’s campaign offered condolences to the Harris family.

“As a small-business owner, a mother, a sister, a grandmother, a great-grandmother and friend of many throughout the community, Ann led an exceptional life and will be missed by all who knew her,” Greg Schultz, the Ohio director of Obama’s campaign said in an emailed statement. “Ann and her family are in our thoughts and prayers.”

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Obama’s trip to Ann’s Place was his first stop in the second day of a bus tour through Ohio and Pennsylvania. He made campaign stops in the Toledo, Sandusky and Parma areas Thursday, then stayed overnight at the Hilton in Fairlawn. He concluded his tour Friday with an unannounced trip to a Boardman manufacturing plant and public events at an elementary school in the Youngstown area, then at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh.

The Ann’s Place visit

Obama’s motorcade arrived at Ann’s Place about 8:30 a.m.

“What’s going on?” he asked after bounding off his campaign bus and entering the small diner-style establishment, located near the intersection of South Hawkins and Vernon Odom Boulevard, just off Interstate 77.

Obama ordered two eggs over easy, bacon, wheat toast, orange juice and water. At the suggestion of waitress Toni Watkins, who has worked at Ann’s Place for 23 years, he added grits. (This was his second breakfast of the day; he ordered salmon and sea bass from the Hilton.)

Obama went around the restaurant, shaking hands and greeting each customer.

“Keep up the good work,” one customer called out.

“Thanks for joining me,” Obama said, as he sat at the counter with three Goodyear workers who were invited to dine with him.

Rick Nixon, a 20-year Goodyear employee, talked trade and tariffs with Obama, but also discussed the Fourth of July and their families. When Nixon mentioned his son is getting married today, Obama wrote a note to the couple that read: “To Lance and Erica, I wish you a lifetime of happiness. Congratulations. — Barack Obama”

Ann’s reaction

Harris had no idea Obama would make a stop at her small diner, which she had owned for about 30 years. Her daughter came and picked her up, and they hurried to the restaurant.

Harris said she and Obama hugged in the parking lot.

Wilma Parsons, Harris’ daughter, said they plan to enlarge a photo of the family with Obama and put it on display at the restaurant.

“Because that is something special,” Parsons said.

She received a phone call from the president expressing his condolences Friday afternoon.

Obama’s was the diner’s first presidential visit, though other notable people have visited over the years.

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“None of the other ones came in 30 years,” Harris said of past presidents. “We was happy for him to choose us for breakfast.”

When line cook Andrea Hubbard, Harris’ granddaughter, met the president, she mentioned that she is studying nursing and playing basketball at Ursuline College in Pepper Pike. Obama joked that they should play a little one-on-one.

“I was like, ‘Sure,’” she said and told him there were courts just down the street.

Obama demurred because he would get sweaty, she said.

“He had a very good sense of humor,” Hubbard said. “He was very nice.”

Ann’s passing

Harris worked daily at the restaurant until January, when she suffered a fall. She then had a heart attack, a stroke and another heart attack.

Harris, who mentioned during an interview Friday with the Beacon Journal that she hadn’t been feeling well, was at her Copley home not long after Obama’s visit when she complained about fatigue and a tingling feeling. As Copley paramedics rushed her to Akron General Medical Center, she went into full cardiac arrest. They attempted to revive her, but she was pronounced dead at the hospital, according to the medical examiner’s office.

News of her death quickly spread across the country, reaching her sister, Frankie Adkins, in Tulsa.

“It was just so fast,” said Adkins, who took on the role of family spokesperson after Harris’ death drew national media attention.

Ann Harris and her two sisters started the restaurant together. It has remained a family enterprise, with several generations working there.

“Ann is really the matriarch of the whole thing,” Adkins said. “She was the backbone.”

Adkins said other famous people had visited Ann’s Place over the years, but those occurrences “were not like the president.”

“They did not extend to caring for one person the way we all follow Obama,” she said.

Faithful patrons of the restaurant arrived Friday afternoon to find it closed as they learned of Harris’ death.

“So sorry, what a nice lady,” said Perry “P.J.” Johnson. “She made you feel respected, and you respected her. Even now — I live in Florida — when I come back home, I eat breakfast here every day.”

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Johnson and his buddy, Preston Flinn, both 66, have been eating there for decades.

Flinn, who lives in North Canton, stays in touch with his Akron roots at Ann’s Place.

“All the people we came up with around Wooster Avenue, most of them, you’ll see here in the morning,” Flinn said. “If a buddy comes from out of town, then we’re going to get breakfast here.”

Another regular, Ronald Parkman, stopped by the restaurant with his wife, Valencia.

Parkman said he usually sits in a right-side booth in a section known as the “Liars Club,” where patrons are challenged to tell the best whopper. He said Harris made everyone feel like they were more than just a customer.

“She treated you good,” Parkman said. “She treated you like one of the family.”