Between them they have provided more than 100 years of service to students, faculty members, the external community and their fellow staff members.

Be it making sure that a college commencement ceremony runs smoothly and memorably, faculty searches stay on track, students get the answers to their queries on classes, proper supplies are ordered, maintaining the quality of water found in campus swimming pools and fountains or keeping a recalcitrant tractor boat engine or electric vehicle running — these three campus veterans are the go-to people in their areas.

When they joined the campus, there were fewer buildings, fewer majors, fewer procedures. But like today, their goals were the same — meet the needs of the campus in its mission of educating tomorrow’s businessmen, educators, scientists and leaders.

Jill Rodriguez

When a student calls the Office of the Dean of the College of Health and Human Development frustrated that he can’t get a class, needs commencement tickets or has some other concern, Jill Rodriguez not only understands where they are coming from, she’s been there. She was once a student on campus, graduating with a bachelor’s degree — “after only four years!” she remembers.

In the summer of 1968, she and two friends — all recent graduates of Vista High School in north San Diego County — came to Orange County to attend the 11-year-old campus. They settled into the then-campus dorms just south of the campus (now the student housing at Hope University).

“We didn’t want to go to San Diego State, it was too close to Vista,” said Rodriguez, laughing in memory. “We spent two years in the dorms. Way back then, you had to have your parents’ permission to have a key for the front door, otherwise you had to be in at a certain time. Later, we got an apartment close by. And I still see all three of my roommates and several of those who lived in the dorms at the same time we did.”

Her mother, a widow, managed to cover her student fees and housing costs from her husband’s pension, but anything else, Rodriguez had to come up with. Her first job was as a student assistant in the Economics Department. When the department’s clerical assistant went from full- to three-quarter time, she stepped into her first staff position.

“It was only two hours but it paid better than the student assistant position,” she said. She moved into a three-quarter time position in the Management Department about the time she earned her bachelor’s degree in sociology, in 1972.

“I still wanted to go to college, so I applied to a new interdisciplinary program in social,” said the administrative analyst who earned her master’s degree in 1983. “I had met Sandy Sutphen (emeritus professor of political science) while living in the dorms and she helped me to get into the program.”

During her master’s studies, Rodriguez worked to replicate Herzberg’s Motivation-Hygiene Theory about factors in the workplace that cause job satisfaction. “Basically, he found that there are intrinsic rewards to job satisfaction, so I interviewed secretaries on campus and found out what motivated them, why they liked working here.”
In 1989, Rodriguez joined the then-School of Human Development and Community Service. She has stayed ever since. A long-standing responsibility has been as the college’s coordinator for commencement. “I think I have done it longer than anyone,” she says with pride. “My first year was 1990, when the awards ceremony was just before the commencement ceremony. In those days, ceremonies were held by department and the president attended each and every ceremony — through all the different versions and the various protocols.”

That first year, when she oversaw the college commencement planning and program, was also the year her daughter, Angela, was born. Today, her daughter is student on campus, studying human services.

“It’s really been very nice,” she says. “I never wanted to work in industry … I still enjoy the work and the people I meet and work with.”

Tony J. Espere

It was in 1971 that Tony Espere decided that he was tired of working construction and odd jobs and decided to apply to Cal State Fullerton as a custodian. But his first application went nowhere.

“I got a letter saying thanks, but no thanks,” he said during a break in working on an electrical cart. Espere started packing bags to go up north and join a friend, but his mom, who worked in payroll, called and urged him to wait. “Don’t go anywhere,’ she said. ‘One of the hires didn’t show up.’ I called my friend and he, too, said don’t leave.”

His first job was as a custodian. “For my first 18 months I never missed a day and I worked three years on the graveyard shift, but then everyone in custodial services came in for graveyard. We worked from 10 p.m. to 6 a.m.”

He says he worked in just about all of the university buildings during his eight years as a custodian — “although there were only five buildings at first.”

Espere remembers particularly the partnerships the custodians would develop to get through the various classrooms before students started to arrive. “One of us would pull the desks and chairs out of the room, while the other was stripping and waxing the floor. Working as a team, we would get half a building done in a night.

“After work, I would drive to Newport Beach, sleep for an hour and then go body surfing,” he said, laughing. He admits he loves the outdoors, fishing and camping.

In those days, Espere applied for any job that opened up on campus. He worked with plumbers, electricians and carpenters, and remembers one time helping out with a large electrical shutdown of the campus “to clean all the switches. It was supposed to be a Friday-Saturday project, but it ended up lasting through Sunday.

Eventually, Stan Blood (emeritus supervisor of building trades) asked him if he wanted to work in the Auto Shop, where Espere is charged with maintaining most of the campus vehicles — from personal watercraft and a boat to tractors, forklifts, trucks and cars. He also maintains the campus emergency generators.

“We used to have lots of fun,” he explained, remembering the early 70s and 80s when the campus was much smaller. “We had softball, basketball, volleyball teams made up of members of the trades, athletics, custodians, police and EOP. Even Jay Bond and Paul Miller played with us. We played against other campuses like Long Beach State and won trophies. One of the trophies still sits in the carpenter shop. We used to hold picnics with our families.

“People have kept me here,” he says, looking up and smiling at his supervisor, Ut Le, another long-serving staff member. “Students, staff and faculty that I have met on campus... I still run into them off campus.”

Juan Espinoza

As a kid living in Placentia, Juan Espinoza used to go to the movies in the theater (now part of Hope University) located on the corner of Nutwood and Commonwealth, just across the street from the fledgling campus of Cal State Fullerton. Little did he know that shortly before his 21 birthday — in 1976 — he would be working at the state university.

“I was just starting out when I came here, looking for more steady work,” said Espinoza. “There weren’t that many buildings then — McCarthy, Langsdorf, the library, PE, humanities, engineering — but no computer science — the old performing arts... the Educational Classroom Building had just been built. There’s certainly been a lot of changes since then.”

He spent his first five years on the job as a custodian, then became a laborer and mechanic helper in the Auto Shop with fellow veteran Tony Espere.

“I remember the 1984 Olympics. We had special parking passes — couldn’t park anywhere near the PE building where the team handball competitions were being held in Titan Gym — and the crosswalks had been painted in the Olympic colors.”

In the early 1990s, like today, the state economy floundered and the CSU faced cuts in its budget. Eventually, the decision was to institute furloughs as a means of reducing the budget — except in trades. That union opted for layoffs; both Espinoza and Espere were let go.

It was a rough time and some areas in the “trades,” went down to a single individual, including the auto shop, said Espere and Espinoza. Espere returned to campus just a week after his 1992 layoff, but Espinoza was out of work for nine months.
Espinoza eventually got the call to return in 1993 to a new position with another campus veteran, Jim Corbett, serving as his supervisor. Corbett, now associate director of projects in facilities operation (formerly physical plant) needed someone who could be dedicated to keeping the university’s pool and other water-related facilities clean and operating safely.

Espinoza became the central plant’s go-to person — a self-taught mechanic dealing with everything related to water, from the water treatment plant, steam boilers, cooling towers, to the numerous fountains around campus. He is now a certified pool operator, as well as certified to repair and replace asbestos, which he has also done on campus. In addition, he is in charge of air quality — inspecting, cleaning and changing filters on the hundreds of air handlers and other equipment in all the campus buildings. Espinoza estimates that there are about 1,800 filters installed throughout the campus.

“It’s a good place to work,” he says while sitting beside the Kinesiology and Health Science Building swimming pool, where he had just tested chlorine levels and checked the pool pump to make sure it was properly functioning. He remembers the 35 years he has served on campus, the friends he has made. “Yes, it’s been nice.”

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