

Report by  
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Photos by  
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FLORIDA  
TODAY

# Canaveral's crews

The people & profits behind  
the port's cruise ship party



# 'I was in tears'

A collapse onboard a Disney cruise ship leaves Verus struggling to hold onto his life



MUMBAI, INDIA

Chapter 8

**WHILE PASSENGERS** sunbathe or shop, the Fantasy's housekeeping staff works the long corridors of cabins, making beds and hauling out trash and wet towels.

Dressed in simple dark uniforms, they politely say hello to those who pass them in the halls. In each stateroom, to please their guests, they leave behind a towel folded into the shape of a lion, camel or monkey. These workers, too, depend on tips.

Many are Filipino or Indian — people willing to work 12 hours a day, seven days a week for several months at a stretch. Filipinos are most heavily represented in the cruise industry, at 29 percent of the work force, according to a 2005 study of more than 12,450 workers by Cardiff University, Wales.

In the ship's hierarchy, these "hotel" cleaners and attendants are among the lowest-ranking seafarers. Brown-skinned workers from poor nations, including India and Indonesia, represent the bulk of them. Salaries are \$75 to \$100 per month plus tips.

They must get the dirty work done under tight timetables but without disrupting the guests' fun and relaxation.

## A hurting heart

Until a year and a half ago, Verus Cordeiro was among them, working as an assistant housekeeping supervisor aboard the cruise ship Disney Magic. For two weeks, Verus complained of shoulder pain he thought was an injury from carrying passenger luggage, one of the duties assigned to housekeeping staff. Ship medics gave him pain pills and suggested the pain was in his head. Verus pushed himself



**On his own.** Verus Cordiero found himself without his Disney Cruise Lines job after suffering heart problems aboard ship and subsequently undergoing heart surgery in Melbourne. Tonya Meister, an attorney specializing in maritime law, found a provision in his officer's contract calling for temporary and possibly permanent disability benefits. She is hoping to resolve the issue with Disney soon.



**Keeping the faith.** Verus, 39, carries his rosary everywhere he goes. Verus desperately wishes to get back into the cruise industry after undergoing emergency heart bypass surgery in





**Clearing clutter.** A crew member of the Disney Wonder empties trash from the hull in Nassau, Bahamas.

*Continued from page 28*

infirmary for a day until the Magic made it back to Port Canaveral.

"I was in tears when I was in the ICU of the ship, wondering what would happen to myself and to my family," Verus recalls. After a quick diagnosis at Cape Canaveral Hospital, Verus was rushed to Holmes Regional Medical Center in Melbourne for emergency seven-bypass heart surgery.

It was Aug. 15, 2003, and he had barely enough time to make a few short phone calls before his do-or-die surgery. He told his wife and children he loved them. He did not tell them how badly he wished they could be there. They already knew.

Verus had made peace.

"I was not afraid of dying," he says today. "I just wished that someone dear to me could have been at my bedside."

Hours later, Verus opened his eyes to find himself alive, in a stark recovery room of the Melbourne hospital. A doctor handed him a telephone. It was his wife, Susan, from India. She couldn't get a visa to visit with her husband.

"She was crying on the phone, wondering if the operation had been a success," Verus says, his voice rising and cracking. "She is a good woman and has been a very good wife to me."

Disney put him up in a hotel and covered his medical bills, yet the stricken cruise worker was on his own in a foreign land. According to a report from the International Transport Workers' Federation, Verus' case is common. Often, those injured or fall ill are shipped back to their home country once they are well enough to travel. They are rarely hired again.

He also, now, is responsible for his continued medical care.

Verus wanted to return to work. But when Disney sent Verus home to Bombay, it appeared his career was over. He applied for jobs with every cruise line. But once he disclosed his medical history during pre-employment physicals, they all declined. Pastor Bailey contacted his friend, Tonya Meister, an attorney specializing in maritime law. She agreed to look at the case for free.

"Disney wasn't returning his phone calls," Meister says. "It's amazing how fast they moved when I called." She found a provision in his officer's contract calling for temporary and possibly permanent disability benefits.

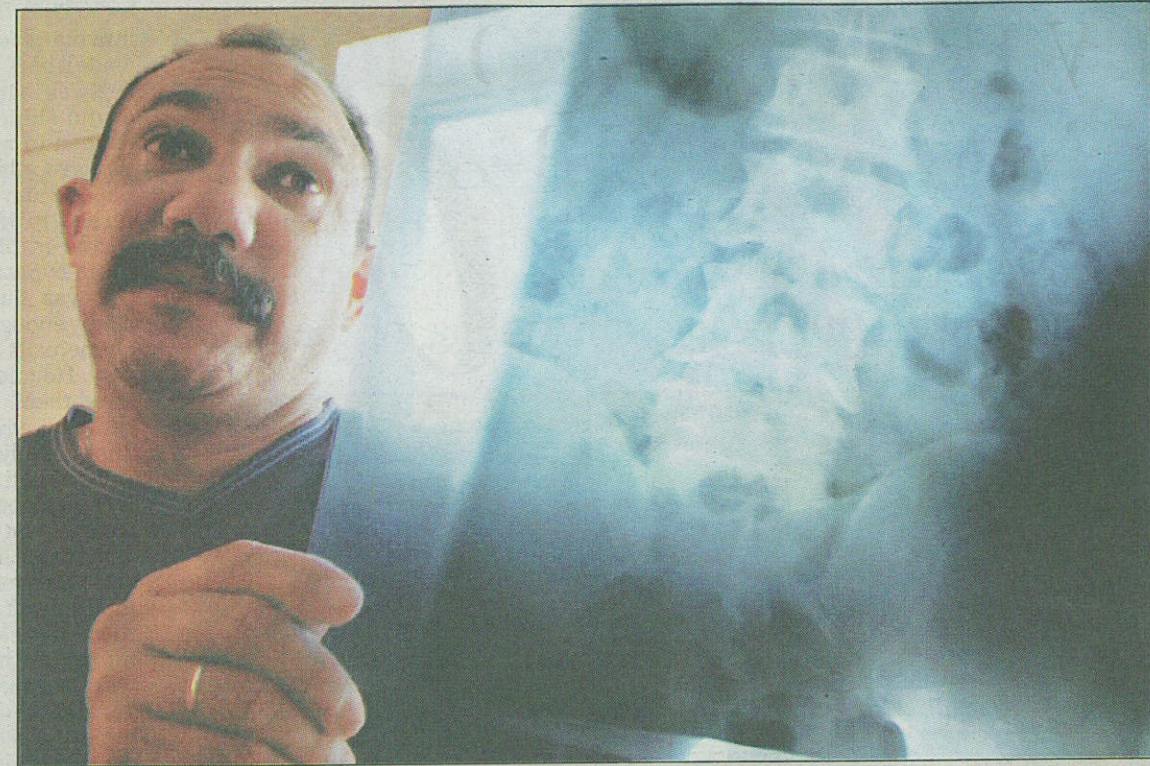
Still, Verus harbors no ill feelings toward the company that didn't want him back.

"Disney is the best cruise company to work for," he says. "They are totally professional, absolutely. Only the cream of the crop work there."

Meister says she hopes to have the issue resolved soon.

"He doesn't want to sit at home, that's why I advised him," Meister says.





**Hurting financially.** Jesus Banegas, 46, of Honduras, who used to work for Carnival Cruise Lines, displays an X-ray of his spine after an on-the-job injury. Carnival paid for the cleaner to see a doctor for a herniated disk, but he no longer has a job with the company.

## Medical woes sink cruise careers

COCOA BEACH — Jesus Banegas, stranded in Brevard County, wonders where his next meal will come from.

Carnival Cruise Lines paid for the cleaner from Honduras to see a doctor for a herniated disk. They paid for his lodging onshore. But they stopped paying him a salary.

"What is my family going to eat?" the 46-year-old asks, showing X-rays of his back injury. "When I hurt myself, I went to the doctor on the ship. But all they do is give you pills, they give you pills for everything. They are trying to tell me how it feels."

He's hurt, but wants his job back: "There is no opportunity in my country."

Banegas' case reveals the downside risk to hours of hard work on cruise ships and exposes the differences between American and foreign workers at Port Canaveral. Cruise lines are exempt from U.S. labor

right to seek damages in court.

Carnival, which employs 33,000 workers, acknowledges the hard work and hours.

"Because cruise ships operate on a 24-hour-a-day, seven-days-a-week basis, the workweek of a shipboard employee is typically longer than the average employee on land," says company spokesman Vance Gulliksen. "However, many shipboard employees earn much more than they could in their home countries."

Attorney Tonya Meister specializes in cruise ship complaints and lawsuits. She throws her hands in the air when discussing some of the complaints that have crossed her desk. She recently left the Brevard County firm of Morgan & Barbary to work in Miami for one of the leading maritime firms in the country, Lipcon, Marguilies & Alsina, where she handles boating accidents and seaman injuries.



**Advocate.** Tonya Meister, an attorney specializing in maritime law, handles cases in connection with boating accidents and seafarers' injuries.

"He nearly died aboard the ship," Meister says. "Then they believed him."

That man, Trajce Baramacev, was an assistant stateroom steward aboard the Carnival Fantasy when he complained of stomach pain on March 21. For days, he reported to the ship's doctor only to be given

him my poor status," Baramacev says from his home in Macedonia, in Eastern Europe. "I said, 'Doctor, what do I have to do, die in front of you so that you would pay better attention to me?'"

On April 1, in the Bahamas, his appendix burst, and Baramacev had emergency surgery.

"Usually, they get minimal medical care until they can either work or be sent to their home country," writes attorney Charles Lipcon in an information booklet for seafarers. Those sent back to their home country frequently are left with little money and no arrangements for further medical care, he writes.

Although seafarers (primarily those from Disney Cruise Lines) file some lawsuits in Brevard County, most sue in Miami-Dade County, home to Carnival and Royal Caribbean Cruise Lines Ltd., Meister says.

Attorney Stephen Moon at Port Canaveral explains that in most, if not all settlements, the cruise line insists that parties sign a gag order so that seafarers cannot talk about their lawsuits or problems aboard their ship.

"Americans don't get it. They don't get how hard these people work and why," Moon says.





**A window to wonder.** The Disney Wonder docked at Port Canaveral as seen from the Universe Lounge aboard the Carnival ship Fantasy.

### Sights, sounds & ideas online

- Check out video reports with footage from India, the Bahamas, and the Carnival Fantasy.
- Explore photo galleries of cruise workers and conditions in Mumbai, India.
- Read our tough questions for Carnival Corp., and its answers, in depth.
- Share your reaction and follow-up ideas at [floridatoday.com](http://floridatoday.com)

### On the cover

At 6 a.m., a Carnival crew member scrubs brass railing on the steps leading down to

### ABOUT THIS SECTION

# Our mission to reveal

"Florida is certainly the cruise capital of the United States, if not the world," a report by the International Council of Cruise Lines says. And Port Canaveral has grown into one of the cruise industry's busiest hubs.

Behind the glitzy ship lobbies, fabulous dinners and fruity drinks on the Lido Deck is a global industry with an international staff that earns billions of dollars in profits every year.

Our mission with this report was twofold:

■ Reveal the people behind the party — the seafarers' work, their histories, their hopes.

■ Unearth public records and follow the money from ship to port to Wall Street.

We started by going through the "front door," so

### Let us know

Share your reactions and follow-up ideas with us by calling (321) 242-3631. Or send e-mail to [mreed@brevard.gannett.com](mailto:mreed@brevard.gannett.com)

cruise lines for access. We asked to shadow crewmembers in their workplaces and quarters. We wanted to tour the ships and interview company officers about the business. The companies declined.

So FLORIDA TODAY sent reporter John A. Torres and photographer Craig Rubadoux to meet workers on their own and journey around the world to find answers. They booked a cruise to the Bahamas on the Carnival ship Fantasy and interviewed workers at

business stakeholders at Port Canaveral and Nassau, the Bahamas. And they flew to Mumbai, formerly Bombay, India, to meet seafarers' families and witness the impact of Florida cruise ship jobs overseas.

We obtained documents from the U.S. Coast Guard, the Centers for Disease Control and the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission. A Carnival Corp. spokesman agreed to answer questions by e-mail from company headquarters in Miami.

The result: A human story and news report that sheds light on a booming, complex industry in Brevard County.

Will it lead to change or help our new neighbors? That's up to you, the reader, now. But we hope you remember the people you meet on these pages.

— Matt Reed.



### John A. Torres

An award-winning journalist and author, John A. Torres has been at FLORIDA TODAY since 2001 covering social issues and the courts. Torres, 40, is a graduate of Fordham University. He has written more than 35 books. When he's not writing, Torres likes to fish and spend time with his wife and five children.



### Craig Rubadoux

An award-winning photographer, Craig Rubadoux has been with FLORIDA TODAY for 18 years. His work has been featured in *Time*, *Newsweek* and *Life* magazines. In his free time, he enjoys kayaking and spending time with family.

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