

My View: Goodbye, Mr. Bill's, a neighborhood 'living room'

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Poof! There goes that job that I loved so much. I didn't even know it was gone until I returned from vacation.

The answering machine announced: "Sunday 6:47 p.m." Then, a familiar voice: "Hey. It's Larry, I don't want to ruin your vacation, but Mr. Bill's closed, effective today."

Like the death of a terminally ill friend, the demise of the Cheektowaga restaurant Mr. Bill's mixed sadness and relief.

Bummer number one: Thirty people lost their jobs. Bummer number two: The neighborhood lost a living room. On the plus side, maybe the very nice owners can finally get a good night's sleep after a couple of stressful years.

A neighborhood restaurant that welcomed locals and newbies with equal enthusiasm, Mr. Bill's had about a 25-year run. In the bar business, that qualifies as forever.

A few years ago, I started there as a part-time bartender. (For the last 40 years, I have spent nearly all of my Friday and/or Saturday nights behind a bar somewhere. Part addiction, part affliction, I self-identify as a bartender, even if it is just one of my four jobs.)



Marty Walters.

When you work in a restaurant, you join a surrogate family. Mr. Bill's was a pretty special family. Everyone had a role to play.

John was the friendly owner who signed the weekly paychecks. Carrie, the manager, was a great judge of talent (she hired me on the spot).

Much of the front of house staff had been there for many years. Larry, my Buffalo Bartenders Hall of Fame colleague, expertly mixed countless classic cocktails at Mr. Bill's for 25 years.

Classic cocktails are not to be confused with craft cocktails. We proudly did not serve absinthe-infused grapefruit shrubs as part of a curated cocktail program (then again, maybe we should have?). We had something called a drink list, and served 100 proof Southern Comfort Manhattans in pint glasses.

Brenda and Carol, two professional servers, brought their A-game every shift for many years.

Servers named Lisa, Lisa and (not to confuse the issue) Lisa, Leah and Nico, made coming to work a joy. Kaylee and Jake were busers, young folks with great futures.

For many years before I arrived, the kitchen staff was a well-oiled machine. Bill, Doug and Jim cranked out mass quantities of high-quality fish fries. The pace at which they operated during Lenten volume was amazing. Upon leaving, they passed their institutional memory to Jessica.

My role was the happy goofball. My modus operandi? Arrive smiling and bring chocolate. Help people have fun, and strive to treat guests and staff as I would wish to be treated. (Note to servers reading this: try the aforementioned approach for one week. If you do not make more money and/or have more fun, feel free to revert to your grumpy old self. Or find a new line of work.)

As much as restaurants mirror families, neighborhood barrooms function as communal living rooms. Because Mr. Bill's bar was L-shaped, it was easy for folks to engage with each other, exchange banter and make new friends.

Goodbye, Mr. Bill's, and thank you.

Marty Walters, of Derby, is newly available on Friday and Saturday nights.