

Educated At Chuck & Sally's Tavern

When I opened the weathered tavern door to an olfactory assault of ancient hops, fetid cigarettes, and sweat, I had no idea I was about to learn far more than how to pour a frothy beer.

A lifetime of smoke painted the walls a mushroom brown, and the low, used-to-be-white ceiling made you feel like you were looking up at the ground. I'm not sure which was filled with more tar, the lungs of the customers or the blackened air vent. Thirty years of drunken feet had worn bare spots on the ash-pocked carpet, and the stools looked older than the three gray-haired crows propped at the corner of the Formica bar.

The bartender, sipping on her own beer, didn't look much better with her skewed grin, hazy eyes, and frantic hair that was fighting her hair tie for control.

Just five minutes earlier, I had peeped in the window ... and kept on walking. The patrons looked just as ragged and worn as the blotchy pool table, and made me think this joint might not be the best maiden voyage for this female bartending novice. But the bartender at the tavern down the street said Chucky & Sally's was the only bar in town hiring. So I put on my big girl shoes and walked the plank back to Chuck & Sally's creaky wooden door.

I didn't have any real bartending experience. The closest I came was pouring fancy 'cafe au lait' at a tiny coffee and sandwich shop in a mall. But I was determined to exploit that experience to land a bartending gig in my new city. I needed my days free to look for a graphic design job, so an evening gig would do to pay the bills.

I filled out an application, called back two days later—and got the job. None of the other applicants bothered to follow up.

Chuck & Sally's was a homegrown, blue-collar tavern, serving an abundance of over gray-haired men over 60. Younger construction workers, electricians, bikers, and random locals filled in the cracks on weekday evenings, along with the occasional local lady. Very few traveled from outside the three-mile neighborhood radius. If they didn't know a patron's name when he walked through the door—which was rare—they knew it before he left.

Growing up in a semi-rural area with a close-knit family, I hadn't been exposed to much diversity, so my perceptions were narrow. I didn't look down on those different from me; there were things I just didn't know, things I assumed from lack of experience—like, not all habitual patrons are alcoholics; not all alcoholics are lazy or weak; not all bikers are big, scary Hell's Angels bad boys—and those with the least to give, sometimes give the most.

Take "LaWanda" for instance. Probably not on the honor roll or homing-coming court in high school, her silhouette brought thoughts of a garden gnome. She stood barely five feet tall, with thick, coarse

peppery hair scanning her back. The same hair also made a slightly more subtle appearance on her upper lip. Over-sized, thick glasses squatted on her beak above a slight buck to the left front tooth.

She had her troubles. *Jack in the Box* was her career for eight years before she was fired for passing out drunk while slicing tomatoes after a “liquid lunch.” But even after she sobered up and secured an early morning job with Goodwill, she stayed with me after 2 am on my late shifts, drinking coffee while I closed the bar.

Often we were both accompanied by her adopted stray cat, BB. Why did she stay with me? I once mentioned that I didn’t like being in the bar by myself (mostly because I was afraid of the resident ghost). She therein nominated herself my protector. I don’t think she could have fought off a sleeping dog, but she was proud of her duty and I was grateful. What if the ghost stories were true?

Like LaWanda, most of the clientele I probably never would have crossed paths with if I hadn’t been doing time behind that bar. But in exchange for serving them liquid goodness, I was given the honor of hearing their stories and witnessing their hearts.

And what a motley crew of characters: “Pitcher Bob”, “Banker Dave”, “Indian Jerry”, “Chicago Jim”, “Electrician John”, “Pull Tab Betty”, and “Uncle Hal” to name a few. Nearly everyone had a nickname and was proud of it. There was Dreaming Clark who once said he wanted to buy me “chocolates and flowers”, but the tiny convenience store was sold out. So from behind his back, he revealed a bag of M & Ms and a potted plant.

“Sunshine” was an old retired sailor who brought me chicken teriyaki for dinner on my Friday night shifts. Old Linderman affectionately referred to me as “a God damn Kraut” (we’re both of German heritage). He also drove me across town one afternoon to retrieve a spare key for my car when mine was lost.

I wish I had the space to mention all of them; they all contributed to my “education.” Chuck & Sally’s customers taught me not to judge someone before you know their story. For them, what mattered most was a person’s character. Through those doors, social status and salary held no favors. I learned that sometimes the kindest hearts come from the dimmest bulbs, the poorest pockets, or the darkest histories.