

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 good beer.

In addition to the stench, a lifetime of smoke painted the walls a mushroom-brown, and murkier yet was the low, used-to-be-white ceiling. I'm not sure which was filled with more tar, the lungs of the customers or the gook-smothered air vent. Thirty years of drunken feet had worn bare spots on the ash-pocked carpet, and the stools looked older than the 3 grey-haired crows propped at the corner of the Formica bar. The bartender, sipping on her own beer, wasn't looking much better.

Just five minutes earlier I had peaked in the window... and kept on walking. The patrons, looking just as ragged and worn as the decades-old pool table, made me think it might not be a smart 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 front door.

At this point, I had only *tended bar* in 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. Needing my days free to look for a graphic design job, I wanted evening work to pay the bills.

So, I filled out an application, called back 2 days later, and got the job...because none of the other applicants bothered to follow up.

Chuck & Sally's was a homegrown, blue collar tavern where the majority of clientele were men over 50. Filling in the cracks were construction workers, electricians, bikers and random locals. Very few traveled from outside the 3 mile neighborhood radius. If they didn't know a person'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 was that of a garden gnome. She stood barely five feet tall, with thick, coarse grey hair scanning her back - which also seemed to make an 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 2am 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 due to the rumored 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.

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 to hear their stories and witness 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 proud of it. There was Dreaming Clark who 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.

There was "Sunshine", 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 sometimes the kindest hearts come from the dimmest bulbs, the poorest pockets or darkest histories.