

The Rambler



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Worcester, Massachusetts

All aboard one last time

A family bids adieu to the Whistle Stop

In a symbolic gesture, Jason Niemszyk points to an exit sign as the Betley/Niemszyk family prepares to relinquish ownership of the Whistle Stop Bar & Grill in Oxford, ending an almost twenty-year run. Mike and Tina Betley are joined by Jason's friend Josh Dolbec who is like a brother to him, and Jasper Niemszyk. All have been integrally involved in the operation of the business.

THE COVER STORY

A tearjerker of a goodbye

By ROD LEE

Tina Betley was bagging trash outside the Whistle Stop Bar & Grill in Oxford when I arrived early for an eleven o'clock appointment on a Friday morning—July 28th to be specific. “A restaurant owner’s work is never done,” I thought, getting out of the car and spotting a woman I was sure was her.

I noticed right away that she wears a perpetual smile and is refreshingly upbeat. She quickly dropped what she was doing and invited me inside. I had only visited the Whistle Stop once, for dinner with my son, and it had been a while. Now the place seemed even more like a dining establishment than I had remembered and certainly than it was when Mike and Tina Betley bought it from Cheryl and Todd Mandella and Kim and Peter Boin nearly twenty years ago. Cheryl and Kim, Tina explained, are the nieces of Manny Leo who owned the Whistle Stop long before the Betley/Niemszyk family came onto the scene.

“We kept the name for the historical and sentimental significance,” Tina said. Most appropriate, I thought, in that the building sits hard against railroad tracks that cross Main St. a little ways north of the Webster town line.

SHE GATHERED granddaughter Jasper Niemszyk, son Jason Niemszyk and Jason’s best bud Josh Dolbec around a table in a corner of the dining room, explaining that Mike Betley, who is CFO at Cogswell Sprinkler in Worcester, would be joining us, and that daughter Jessica (Niemszyk) Carella is “in California.” Together they represent three generations of the family that has run the Whistle Stop since the late 1990s. Tina and her family are in the pro-



The ties that bind. Tina Betley, second from the left, with some of the Whistle Stop staff: Nate Confer, Mickey Keefe, Amy Largesse, Erin Carraciolo, Kim Myers, Nate Earnest and Brittany Seraphin.

cess of turning the entire property over to Eli Moussa and his son Chris of The Lodge in Webster. Chris is Eli Moussa’s youngest son and will be operating the Whistle Stop. The two families know each other and have exchanged courtesies.

She could not be leaving the restaurant in better hands, Tina said, but that doesn’t make it any easier to let go. Most if not all of the staff including Justin Leduc, a valued cook, is going to stay.

“I am emotionally very attached to the Whistle Stop,” she said. “The Moussa’s have respect for what the Whistle Stop has become.” Tina’s family takes pride in having transformed the place. “Years ago it was only a bar with a pool table and jute box and no kitchen,” Mike said. Chiming in, Tina said “our mantra was ‘we are not what we appear to be’” in asserting to passersby that they should give the restaurant a try, for the food.

WHILE WAITING for the liquor license to be transferred, Tina and her family are saying their farewells to customers, some of whom she refers to as “our Board of Directors.” Also, she said, “we are making a big deal of our years here with 19.5 retro sunglasses and all of the members of the staff are getting sweatshirts that say ‘Whistle Stop 19.5 Oxford, Massachusetts.’”

“It’s melancholy,” she said, of the parting. “We are family” is a common refrain and in fact the theme of a staff Christmas party that was catered by The Lodge this past December.

“People start talking about it in March!” Josh said of the annual event.

THAT TINA Betley has taken seriously her proprietorship of the Whistle Stop is reflected in the several pages of handwritten notes she compiled before the interview and shared with me afterwards. She talked about how Jason and Josh have been friends since the age of three, how Josh “moved in with us” when his family left the state, how the Whistle Stop was “a good opportunity for the boys right out of high school,” how Jess “worked here all through high school, how “the components to our success” included “family, staff, customers and vendors,” how the Whistle Stop is “a living, growing community of people” in which the relationships that have been forged create “a welcoming, nurturing environment...our customers look out for us along with staff...”

She told a cute story, Jasper sitting on a stool at two years old, the kitchen staff singing “put the lime in the coconut” and she in return saying “flip the bacon, flip

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—Whistle Stop

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the bacon!”

Josh, who studied culinary at Assabet Valley, and Jason “had immediate roles” in the kitchen and/or busing and Jason “had dreadlocks down to his knees,” Tina said.

A different atmosphere gradually developed around the food and the interaction of staff and customers. “Some of our customers are here every day. They are such a part of the tapestry,” she said.

“A lot of customers say we’re like the local Cheers,” Jason said.

The menu evolved.

“We were looking at the logistics of the kitchen” (which was, and is, a challenge for its smallness) and what we could do,” Josh said. “We started build-your-own-pasta-bowl on Wednesday nights. Those became too popular!”

“We focused on working with what we had,” Tina said. “The cooks in the kitchen are our unsung heroes.”

Jason grew herbs and vegetables next door and everything was made from scratch including the mozzarella fritters—hand-cut and breaded.

“We created each dish to order right down to the sauces,” Tina said.

“Customers said ‘we’ll wait a few minutes for the dish we want.’”

The Whistle Stop made it worth their while, Mike said.

Once, on Valentine’s Day, Jason said,

“the smoke alarm went off. It was one of our busiest days, fifteen slips hanging in the kitchen. It was one of the craziest things I’ve ever seen.”

“Our staff stayed!” Tina said.

“Customers came back in and said ‘I never paid my tab.’”

WHEN THE FAMILY entered the picture “the boys were just coming out of high school,” Tina said. “The restaurant seemed like a great fit. Josh met his wife here. Jason loved the farm aspect. Jasper is

staying on with the new owner, getting ready to go to college. When we got ready to sell we called the Massachusetts Restaurant Association and were told it takes two to three years to sell a restaurant. We had offers within a day and a half.”

From the start, Tina said in her notes, “we always had a team approach. Mike and I kept our day jobs so that the dollars from the Whistle Stop were used for improvements and growth.” Staff meetings, soliciting input, were conducted with “mutual respect” even when staff and management/ownership “saw things differently. Your staff is your face [of the business], an extension of your visions and beliefs about the restaurant. They project your image. They have to be appreciated and valued because they are who interacts daily with every customer who comes through the door. You show them that appreciation by supporting their concerns, giving them family time, honoring their requests, accepting their input. It’s give and take. You have to be in charge but you have to keep an open



Let the good times roll...the annual Christmas Party at the Whistle Stop Bar & Grill, a festive tradition.

mind and open heart and listen, really listen, to what they have to say.”

Tina’s feeling too was that “you have an obligation to respect and be thankful to customers for their business. You can’t take a customer for granted because there’s always another restaurant happy to have them.”

She treated the vendors the same way. “Not only the sales reps but the delivery people,” she said.

A winning formula, for nineteen and a half good years.

The Rambler

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The Rambler is a literary journal dedicated to commentary and reflections on life in Massachusetts. It is produced at the discretion and whim of Founder, Editor & Publisher Rod Lee.

Submissions of up to 1000 words on Arts & Culture, Business, Crime & Punishment, Education, Entertainment, Politics, Sports, Volunteerism and other topics of interest to the general public are welcome.

Contributors receive a small stipend for their efforts.

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A gathering place. The bar at the Whistle Stop.



MY BACK PAGES

Robert E. and we Lee's

There can be no explanation other than that the world is going to hell in a handbasket which is an expression no one seems to use much anymore. Hate-spewing white supremacists on the right, “let’s-set-the-record-straight” revisionists on the left, a president right in the thick of it.

What this country needs is not a good five-cent cigar (another once oft-employed lament) but a healthy dose of common sense.

A standing joke within the family when I was growing up back in Endicott, New York was that Robert E. Lee was a distant relative. This was an easy claim to make even though Lee was a Virginian and my forbears came out of northeastern Pennsylvania; what possible connection could there have been? But this didn’t stop us. We had two Robert’s already: my Uncle Bob who owned a door and window company and his son Bob-



(by the way, I am thinking now, who is to say my mom didn’t choose “Edward” as my younger brother Roger’s middle name in tribute to Robert Edward Lee?). So there was nothing to prevent us from bringing into the fold the most celebrated Lee in American history, son of Henry “Light-Horse Harry” Lee (1732-1794) of Revolutionary War-era cavalry-officer renown: a giant of the republic and the father of a man in Robert E. who followed his footsteps into a life

of public service.

There was no reason to conclude that Light-Horse Harry Lee and Robert E. Lee were not worthy of our admiration. For starters, there was the elder Lee’s antipathy toward the oppressive dictates of the motherland (he was closely associated with Thomas Jefferson and Patrick Henry), which resulted in a resolution he penned that led directly to the writing of the Declaration of Independence in 1776. Then, faults Light-Horse Harry Lee found with oversights in the Constitution led to adoption of the first ten amendments to that precious document.

As for Robert E. Lee? In my compulsion to refresh the education I received in my hometown I picked up an old copy of *Webster’s American Biographies* from the bookshelf in my office and turned to Page 620. There I was introduced once again to Gen. Robert E. Lee (1807-1870). Second in his class at West Point. Hailed for his work on Mississippi River flood control and Atlantic coastal defenses. Made a colonel after distinguishing himself in the Mexican War. Appointed superintendent of the U.S. Military Academy. Maintained “a devotion to the Union and [an abhorrence] to slavery.” Declined an offer of command of all federal forces at the onset of the Civil War “because he would not fight his own people.” Hoped to stay out of the hostilities but was drawn in. Championed as a “masterly strategist” in “the Seven Days’ Battles”—forcing Gen. George B. McClellan to retreat from his position threatening Richmond. Defeated Gen. John Pope at the second battle of Bull Run (Manassas). Suffered disastrous defeat at Gettysburg. Surrendered to Grant at Appomattox Courthouse on April 9th, 1865. Immediately released on parole. Became president of Washington College in Lexington, Virginia, a post he held until his death.

As the monuments come down, I can’t help but think “Gen. Robert E. Lee in the same category of disrepute as Saddam Hussein? How is this possible? For answering the call of duty, over and over and over again? With a heart that screamed in agony for the preservation of the Union?”

Indeed, where does it end?

Will environmentalists in their zeal demand that the portrait of George Washington with his white horse that hangs in Mechanics Hall be removed because he chopped down a cherry tree? Or will those activists seeking to erase from the landscape all remnants of the Confederacy ask the same because the father of our country was a slaveholder practically all his life?

Will the Red Sox go ahead with their plan to rename “Yawkey Way” because as owner Thomas Yawkey was the last to integrate a major league team even though in a book due out in February Author Bill Nowlin (and Pumpsie Green and Reggie Smith) says he found no evidence that Mr. Yawkey was a racist?

What will happen to the legacy of Walt Disney in the aftermath of Meryl Streep’s now three-year-old contention that he was a racist, “a hideous anti-Semite” and “a gender bigot” as well because of his company’s policies toward women (esteemed animator Ward Kimball said Mr. Disney “didn’t trust women or cats”)? Should Disneyworld be dismantled? Ms. Streep’s indictment, after all, was in fact given a ringing endorsement by Mr. Disney’s grandniece Abigail Disney—a filmmaker herself—who said that the Disney movie *Jungle Book* set forth the unmistakable message “stay with your own kind.”

So it goes.

Airports, schools, libraries, museums, whole towns all subject to being given new identities. Vestiges of the Old South being carted away and maybe smashed to smithereens.

Is anyone keeping things in some kind of perspective?

Is anyone looking at the big picture?