

The Adventures of Carolyn McHugh "The Traveling Apprentice" Spotlight on Jerry's Place

Have you ever been in a business and wondered what goes on behind the scene or what it would be like to work there? I'll answer those questions in coming months when I take off my Calvert County Chamber of Commerce president's hat and present myself for duty at a Chamber business, wearing my figurative Traveling Apprentice's hat. I'll do whatever it takes to get a feel for the business. No job will be too small, too menial, or too unusual for me to attempt.

My first Traveling Apprentice assignment was at Jerry's Place, a Prince Frederick restaurant owned by Debbie Nelson, who grew up helping her father, Jerry Gainey, Senior, in a restaurant he owned for over thirty years. Today Jerry, Sr., helps his daughter in her restaurant, as does her brother, Jerry, Jr., and an assortment of nephews, nieces, and a few other staff who aren't family but feel like family. My very first assignment? Hostess. What did I know about being a hostess? Nothing. The sum total of my food service experience consisted of slapping hamburgers at a Dairy Queen as a teenager. This was going to be interesting.

I quickly learned that I was a guest's first point of contact and that I set the tone for the dining experience, that a great smile goes a long way to making guests feel welcome, and that attention to detail and a genuine interest in ensuring that their dining experience is pleasant is essential. I learned that there's a right way and a wrong way to seat and hand menus to guests, and that I should never forget to introduce their server. So far, so good. I walked the floor to visit with guests, and learned that many had traveled miles because they think the seafood at Jerry's Place is the best in the area, and because the staff makes them feel like part of the family. The 'family' theme repeated itself so often I began to hum the theme song from the situation comedy Cheers, the lyrics of which intoned, "Sometimes you want to go where everybody knows your name, and they're always glad you came."

Towards the end of the evening I was feeling smug that I'd turned tables smoothly all night. And then a party of twelve arrived, a party that was obviously comprised of frequent guests who were obviously accustomed to the seamless service at Jerry's Place. I scanned the dining room and counted the number of tables I'd recently seated, then the number of tables I'd need to turn at the same time- - in the same area of the room- -in order to push tables together for the party. I counted and, when I realized I didn't have a clue about how to seat the party in a timely manner, my smugness jackknifed to anxiety. Across the room Jerry, Sr., the man with thirty-plus years of restaurant experience, saw my dilemma and stepped in to deftly orchestrate the situation like a seating maestro. I'd like to explain how he did it, but I can't. He just worked his magic and made the problem disappear. I knew it would be a long time before I mastered that hat trick.

To compensate for my inability to perform magic tricks, I pitched in wherever I could lighten the load of other staff members. I busbed and set tables, swept, and generally kept myself moving. I was tired by the end of the shift, but I enjoyed the experience. I must have passed some sort of 'hostess test' because Jerry, Jr., reportedly said I could come back anytime to work at Jerry's Place. I wondered if I'd get the same response when I visited another Chamber business.

P.S. "Buy Local" is a concept that is sweeping the nation, but Jerry's Place was doing it long before it became a fad. Whenever possible Jerry's Place purchases fresh produce from local farmers and fresh seafood from local fisherman- -a practice that keeps dollars local and ensures that Jerry's Place serves only the freshest items possible.



Look for next month's issue to find out about Carolyn's next assignment.

