

## CAGNEYS

I'd like to tell you that everything would have been fine if the media hadn't been there but that isn't true. I could tell you that the media would never have been there in the first place if the mayor hadn't been on a "man of the people" kick. Then again the mayor never would have been there if I hadn't have suggested it in the first place. It was a simple idea. Feed the hungry. Three little words. I just wanted to feed the hungry.

We called the place Cagney's. Just Cagney's. More than once we got calls for reservations from someone thinking we were some sort of yuppie restaurant with gourmet salads and 7-dollar hamburgers. But that was okay. We wanted to feed folks who normally had to go to someplace called Seventh Street Mission. We wanted someplace that might offer some dignity. We were never worried about the homeless thinking we were an upscale place. I think every advertising exec ought to take a month or two off and live with the homeless. They have a network that you wouldn't believe. We no more put up a sign that said we were coming than we started getting walk-ins asking when we were opening and if we had any food to spare in the mean time. Everybody knew we were there.

It was a nice little two story building on the East side. It was probably a restaurant in one of its many incarnations. We borrowed some money and got some donations from that big church in the suburbs. My friends and I would run the place on faith and volunteers. We had a kitchen and dining room downstairs. Upstairs we created a makeshift church. Folding chairs and an altar we bought off a church when

they renovated. On the front we wall had a huge picture window. A local church youth group came in and painted it so it looked like stained glass. Mostly it looked like it was trying to look like it was stained glass but that was okay. It was a dozen colors with bright yellow cross in the middle of the window.

I got us on the list of every hotel and restaurant in town. We'd take their leftovers and whatever they could give us. Two supermarkets said they would send us produce that was on the verge of expiration. Church groups would collect canned goods. We were going to do well. There was a certain amount of unpredictability but that was exciting. The phrase "feed my sheep" didn't come with provisions. All of this would lead to some creative dishes since we had no idea what our ingredients would be from day to day. But we a cook from a local restaurant who said he could organize a schedule for all the local chefs to come in for one night a month.

We were scheduled for a mid June opening. Two of the major hotels in town said they would be able to send us wedding reception leftovers. I promised them both that I would be happy to thank them for their generosity when the news cameras started rolling. After all, the mayor was coming.

When the mayor's assistant called and asked what was on the menu all I could think to say was "Why?" She told me that the mayor would like to eat at the kitchen with the homeless but she wanted to be sure they weren't serving something that the mayor was allergic too. So she gave me the list of all the things the mayor wasn't allowed to eat when he came to eat with the homeless. She says she told me about the mushrooms. I knew about the mushrooms. What happened was an accident and was not her fault. She didn't deserve what the paper said about her.

The fight broke out before the fire. The newspaper got that wrong. They said the fire came first and then the fight. In the end it makes little difference. The line for Cagney's was a hundred people long when the mayor arrived. The "action news" van pulled up ten minutes before-hand to shoot some "background shots." I immediately told them to put the camera away. These men were entitled to a little dignity and not have their faces on the news simply because they needed a hot meal. If the lady news reporter wanted to talk to someone she had to get permission. The mayor arrived and I gave him the tour. It wasn't much but it looked nice on camera and were getting the word out that we existed and needed volunteers and donations. It was when I, on camera, invited the mayor to dinner that the trouble started. Why I asked the mayor to come into the dining room I do not know. In hindsight, which is always twenty-twenty, I should have asked the mirror to step in line. Technically I guess he should have waited like everybody else. The reporter for action-news obviously thought so because she went right to the guys at the end of the line and asked them.

I was in the kitchen at the time. I saw the edited version on TV. Somebody said something. Somebody yelled. Somebody yelled louder. A punch was thrown. A person was shoved and I ran outside to stop it. The fist that connected to my face was the opening shot of the 11:00 o'clock news. Thankfully they only showed it once. The fire however was shown just before every commercial break. "Coming up a new restaurant that feeds the homeless nearly goes up in flames."

"Goes up in flames" was an exaggeration. There was no danger. The fire was never really out of control. It was on the stove and confined to a small part of the kitchen. Our cook, a volunteer from a restaurant down the street, wasn't used to

cooking with a stove from the previous century and soon we were cooking with open flames.

The non-allergenic version of the night's meal was on fire. The fire was put out with a few aprons and a pitcher of nearby fruit punch. The plate with mushroom-less spaghetti sauce went to someone who could have cared less about allergies. The mayor however, was less fortunate.

The camera didn't catch his initial fall. They did however film him when the group of homeless men tried to lift him from the floor only to have him toss up most the meal he'd eaten so far. The news station decided not to air him actually vomiting but I'm told you can purchase a copy from the cameraman who made copies for Christmas, I guess.

The entire place reeked of smoke. The windows were open but the smell hung in the air and seeped into the walls. The mayor of our fair city was being helped to the car by two strangers who were probably used to having vomit on their clothes. The side of my head had swelled up to the size of an orange and was turning blue. I heard the young female reporter outside as the mayor's car pulled away. I heard her use the term food poisoning. I heard the word debauchery. I heard her use the phrase words mismanagement. The word failure was from my own lips which I said as I went up stairs to hide in the worship area after watching the whole thing that night on a little portable television set in the office.

It's amazing how easily you can hide if you just stay quiet. I learned that as a kid. Hide and seek is a lot about listening. The kids who get caught are the ones who can't be silent. I was filthy. I smelled awful. My face throbbed. Sitting alone in the church I was able to wait out the reporters and most of the crowd. I didn't have the heart to talk

to anyone.

Thinking I was alone I hit my knees and laid my dirty forehead on the cold edge of the metal chair in front of me. I whispered, "God, it's me. Remember me? I'm feeding the hungry. Remember? God why was this such a total disaster? I knew it would be work. I knew it wouldn't be easy time but I don't mind the work. It's your work. But why did everything have to go so wrong?"

That was when I started to cry. I don't know how long I was there but the voice startled me. It said "Man, you gotta keep it down. If they catch you they'll make you leave."

I turned around and saw a man sitting five or six chairs behind me. A large truck passed by outside and the headlights shown through our makeshift stained glass and lit the stranger in an orange and the purple hue.

"It's a nice place." The man said, "You don't want to get kicked out." I was silent and turned back toward the cross. I was about to tell him that I wouldn't mind getting kicked out when he started to talk again.

"Most places" he said "They talk to you like you're a little kid. They give you only so much on your plate and make you feel like you're stealing if you ask for more. Most places they make you feel like you should be satisfied with what you have. I like this place. They treat us like we're paying customers. They make us feel like they a real restaurant. I ain't eat in a real restaurant in three years. It was nice to have somebody treat me like I was a paying customer. You know what I mean? They do that for you to?"

He told me that he'd been watching the place for weeks. He said when we were

in the building at night the light shined through the window and you could see our stained glass cross for a whole block. He said he'd been looking forward to coming to place that put the cross up like that. He said he remembered hearing that Jesus ate with the people that nobody else wanted to eat with. Then he laughed and said "But I bet Jesus didn't throw up on himself and have to be carried away."

I laughed at that. We sat there and watched the window glass glow every time a car passed by. I said, "How long do you think we can sit here?"

He said, "Long as you sit quiet and they don't come up to check. If they do we just tell them we're praying and they might leave us to it for a little while longer." I sat quietly. Somewhere in the night I fell asleep with my head on my chest. I woke up and the man was gone. But it was dawn the light from the window was bathing the room in colors. I stood up and stretched my aching back. I touched the side of my face, which was still swollen and tender. I went downstairs to the office and started making calls to see what we could get for tonight's menu.