

# HOSPITALITY LEADER

Online Newsletter

## Mardi Gras – Lost and Found



Bonnie arrived at the Brookdale dining room later than usual because her sister kept her way too long on their weekly phone call. Since most of the lunch crowd was gone, the room was relatively quiet, except for an orchestral rendition of “Do You Know the Way to San Jose” drifting down from the ceiling speakers.

There are many stories like this one that begin with an associate (whom we will call Dale) paying attention to a small detail. While Dale was cleaning off the empty tables, he noticed what might be a look of irritation on Bonnie’s face. He asked, “Is there anything wrong with your food?” Bonnie replied, “Oh no. This Chicken Marsala is excellent. I just can’t stand that elevator music they’re playing.”

As he moved from table to table, Dale asked, “So what kind of music do you like?” Bonnie explained, “I’m partial to slow jazz. I grew up listening to artists you’re too young to have even heard of, like John Coltrane and Louis Armstrong. After all, I’m 83.” Dale said, “I’ve actually heard of Louis Armstrong. Didn’t he play the trumpet and do a little singing?”



Bonnie perked up – “Oh yes. In fact, when he recorded the song “Hello Dolly” back in 1964 it knocked a Beatles song off the number 1 spot on the charts.” Dale was surprised that an old man topped the Beatles.

Suddenly, he had an idea – “I saw a flyer advertising we’re going to have a Mardi Gras party here next month. We’ll have gumbo, red beans & rice, crab & shrimp etouffee, jambalaya, and bread pudding. And I’ll bet they’ll be playing jazz.”

Bonnie stiffened and said, “Oh no. I just can’t. The last time I celebrated Mardi Gras, I was actually in New Orleans. That was back in 1968, 46 years ago. And I’ve avoided that day ever since.” “How come?” Dale asked.

Bonnie reminisced, “My husband Rick was a Lieutenant stationed at the Navy base near New Orleans. Most every Saturday night we would get a babysitter so we could go out and enjoy the French Quarter. At that Mardi Gras in ’68 we were lucky enough to get into Snug Harbor, the oldest jazz club in the city. A Louis Armstrong cover band was playing. It was a magical night.” Bonnie sighed, “But 3 weeks later, fun nights like that came to an end when Rick got orders to go to Vietnam.”



Bonnie then told Dale the story of how the Navy sent Rick to a base called Vinh Long on the Mekong delta. Seven months into his tour, while hitching a ride on a patrol boat to another base upriver, he was shot by a Viet Cong sniper from the jungle brush near the shore. At 37, Bonnie became a widow. She never remarried and never celebrated Mardi Gras again.



Dale was at a loss for words. All he could manage to say was, “I’m really sorry for your loss” and “I’ll see what I can do about that elevator music.” But Bonnie’s story haunted him. He shared it with Linda, his community’s Resident Programs Director who made a series of phone calls until she found and booked a small combo of retired jazz musicians with some Louis Armstrong covers in their repertoire.

Realizing that Bonnie would be reluctant to come to their Mardi Gras party, Linda then contacted Bonnie’s son, Rick Jr. (who came to be called Richard after his father’s death). Linda told Richard about their Mardi Gras plans and he agreed to work on his mother. But in spite of his cajoling, Richard was unsuccessful in persuading her – until he played his trump card, “If you come, I’ll bring the grandkids.” That did the trick.

As Richard’s family loaded into the car on the day of the Mardi Gras party, Richard popped the car trunk and stashed a garment bag inside. “What’s that?” his daughter asked. Her father answered, “You’ll see.”

As usual, the Brookdale Mardi Gras party was complete with New Orleans fare, décor, and dancing to classic jazz. Bonnie was glad to have this time with her family. But she could not escape the wave of all these sights and sounds that reminded her of her loss long ago.

During a band break, Richard excused himself from the table and walked over to the trumpet player to ask, “Can you sing ‘Hello Dolly’ like Louis Armstrong?” The trumpeter shook his head and said, “No, man. I can’t sing worth a lick. But our drummer can do a dead-perfect Louis.”

Richard said, “That’s fantastic.” He then leaned over to the drummer, whispered a special request and handed him a note. The drummer read the note, smiled and nodded yes. Richard then dashed out to his car to retrieve the secret package from his trunk.



As the band began their final set with the familiar intro chords to “Hello Dolly”, the drummer announced, “We have a special request to honor a long-gone war hero and his wife who were great jazz fans. This one’s for you, Bonnie.”

And with that, Richard re-entered the room, now wearing his late father’s Navy dress uniform. He walked up to his mother, extended his hand, and asked, “May I have this dance?”

A dining associate named Dale once took a few moments to listen to the story of a heartbroken woman who hated elevator music. Because he listened, her entire community of friends would now get to listen to a raspy soulful voice singing a familiar song – with just one name change. Those classic lyrics were now more poignant after the decades that passed –

**“Hello Bonnie. Well hello, Bonnie.  
It’s so nice to have you back where you belong.**

**You’re lookin’ swell, Bonnie. I can tell, Bonnie.  
You’re still glowin’...you’re still crowin’...you’re still,  
goin’ strong.**

**I feel the room swayin’...while the band’s playin’...  
one of your favorite songs from way back when.**

**So...golly, gee, fellas....find her an empty knee, fellas.  
Bonnie will never go away.  
I said she’ll never go away  
Bonnie will never go away again.”**