

Many waiting to inhale

At a glance

Bars acclimate to new "normal"
Studies: Health, economic benefits

Peter Jones

pjones@ccnewspapers.com

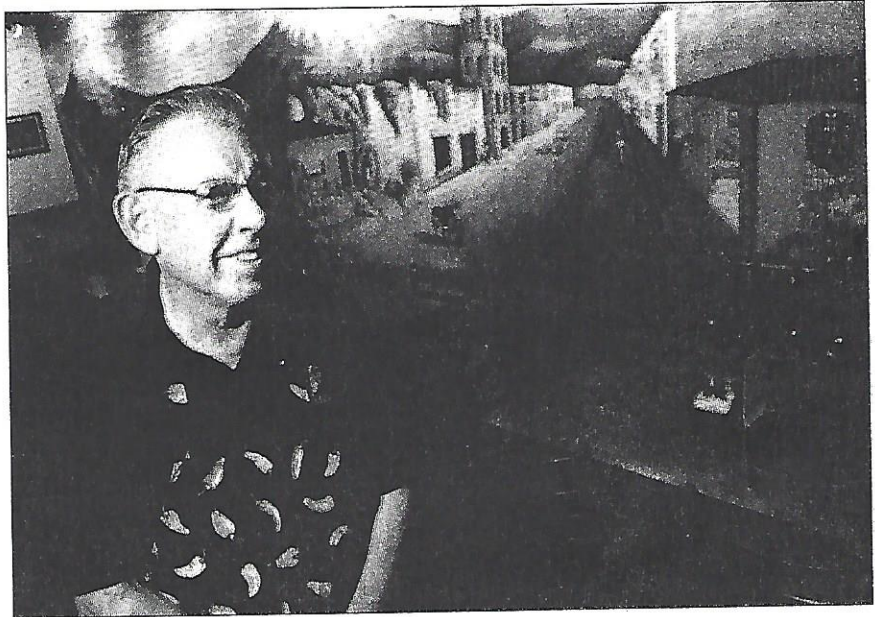
Two and a half years ago, one would not have expected to hear Dawna Schwiegerath, owner of Blondie Firehouse, speak kindly of Colorado's indoor smoking ban.

As late as 2006, while many bars and restaurants were preparing for the law's inevitability, Blondie's was bucking the trend by actively courting tobacco users. Signs on the walls of the Englewood watering hole blew smoke at the anti-cigarette movement by actively encouraging smokers to light up inside the bar.

Blondie's apparent defiance of the anti-smoking Zeitgeist was nothing more than a last chance at niche marketing in anticipation of lost business, according to Schwiegerath, who calls herself a "mostly nonsmoker."

"Smoking and drinking usually go hand in hand," she said. "So I just figured since everybody else was going the other way, I'd do something different. I knew the smoking ban was coming."

At the time, many bars and restaurants were complaining that the proposed Colorado Clean Indoor Air Act



Jose's restaurant, owned by José Trujillo, has been a fixture in downtown Littleton since 1976. Trujillo was ahead of the current law and banned smoking in his restaurant in the early '90s. Photo by Courtney Kuhlen | ckuhlen@ccnewspapers.com

would be a threat to their very survival and that nonsmoking policies should be an individual and market-based decision. Some became vocal opponents of the legislation that forced Colorado smokers onto outdoor patios starting July 1, 2006.

In the 2½ years since, Schwiegerath, a longtime veteran of the bar business, has come to see the bright side of Blondie's Firehouse involuntarily extinguishing cigarettes.

"I don't smell like a giant cigarette factory anymore when I go home, and it helps everybody's health regardless of whether they like it or not," she said. "My ceilings aren't dirty and things don't need to be repainted. It's all positive things."

Schwiegerath, who still has some mixed feelings, speaks almost timidly on the subject as customers mill

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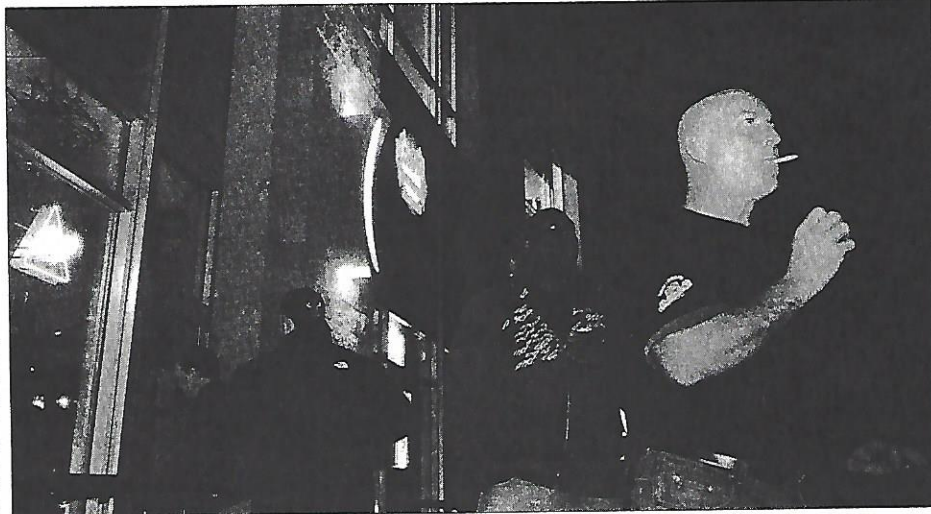
around her establishment underneath Bally's Total Fitness at the Englewood Civic Center.

"They were furious," she said of her smoking clientele's initial reaction to the ban. "There's part of me that thinks it's rude that people can't smoke in certain areas."

A period of adjustment

For many bar owners in Colorado, taking cigarettes out of bars made about as much sense as removing the beer, bar stools and jukebox. Schwiegerath says she saw a 20 percent drop in business during the first eight to nine months of the ban. As smokers have grown accustomed to the new "normal," however, Blondie's has recouped its lost business.

Most restaurants have successfully adapted to the ban, according to Pete Meersman, president of the Colorado Restaurant Association. The trade group's spokesman notes that 80 percent of Colorado restaurants were already non-



Joe Faucault, right, smokes a cigarette on the patio outside of Blondie's Firehouse in Englewood. Before the smoking ban in 2006, Blondie's courted smoking patrons. Photo by Courtney Kuhlen | ckuhlen@ccnewspapers.com

smoking when the ban took effect.

"Initially, there were some adjustments that needed to be made," he said. "But for most restaurants, there was no change. For those that still allowed smoking, there were some changes, such as outdoor patios being built. Restau-

rants are in competition with each other and with the supermarkets so we want to make the experience as enjoyable as possible."

Though Meersman and others in the industry concede that on balance the ban has not hurt restaurants in the long term, there is less

consensus on whether the lure of a smoke-free environment has encouraged nonsmokers to eat out more often.

Smoke Free Colorado, the umbrella coalition that backed the ban in the Colorado legislature, points to increased overall sales in the restaurant business during much of the last two years.

The coalition's Jill Bednarek, director of secondhand smoke initiatives at the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment, views the ban as a clear public-health policy success for Colorado.

"We have uniform compliance across the state and public approval for smoke-free policies has increased," she said. "We even have believers in the business groups that originally had concerns. In fact, in some areas, it really helped business."

For example, Fort Collins saw a 5 percent increase in business at restaurants and bars in 2004, the year following the institution of that city's smoking ban.

A statewide study has not yet been conducted and Meersman is not so sure that nonsmokers have become more frequent restaurant consumers as a result of the statewide ban. He points

to the economic recession as an example of how very little in the restaurant business can be definitively explained by external factors.

"It's hard to quantify. If the smoking ban would have went into effect Nov. 1, would we be saying, 'Boy, people sure aren't eating out because of the smoking ban?' — when really it's just the economy."

Nonsmoking trailblazers

Jose's Mexican restaurant in downtown Littleton was one of the 80 percent of Colorado restaurants that had already gone nonsmoking prior to July 1, 2006 — and it was reportedly the first eatery in Littleton to ban smoking completely.

Longtime proprietor Jose Trujillo enacted his nonsmoking policy in the early 1990s, in large part because of his daughter's asthma. The restaurateur said his decision to pull the ashtrays happened almost on a whim, well before nonsmoking eateries became trendy.

"After a while, the walls would get yellowish," Trujillo said of the days when he allowed customers to light up. "I had all these smoke eaters and air cleaners, but it just didn't seem to do the job. My daughter had a problem with breathing. And I just said, 'that's it, no more smoking. To hell with it.'"

Trujillo, a member of the Littleton City Council, estimates that he temporarily lost about a half-dozen angry customers and upset a few of his own employees over his trailblazing decision.

"If people had gone really negative, I probably would have just shut the doors," he said.

Jose's turned out to be an inadvertent trend setter in the local industry's move to snuff out public smoking. Within a few years, other restaurants in the area had also asked smokers to step outside.

In 1996, Boulder passed Colorado's first indoor

smoking ban, which is controversial move also included bars in its prohibition. Fort Collins and Pueblo soon followed suit with similar ordinances.

A decade later, Colorado became the 13th state in the nation to pass a sweeping statewide ban on smoking in restaurants, bars, workplaces and public buildings. A year ago, the ban's exemption for gambling casinos expired.

Breathing easier

As Colorado has taken various efforts over the years to limit where people can smoke, Colorado's collective health has improved as a result, according to the ban's proponents.

A recent study approved by the Centers for Disease Control showed the rate of heart-attack hospitalizations in Pueblo dropped 41 percent in the three years since that city enacted its ban on workplace smoking. According to the study's authors, the research suggests that secondhand smoke may be an under-recognized cause of heart attacks.

A study in Greeley found that city's ban was followed by a 30 percent reduction in smoking-related illnesses.

Others point to anecdotal evidence of the smoking ban's benefits.

Trujillo says his asthmatic daughter, who once had difficulty breathing in his restaurant, now comfortably works at Jose's almost 20 years after he instituted a no-smoking policy.

Even many of Blondie's tobacco-using customers seem to be smoking less since the ban took effect, according to Schwiegerath, especially during the winter months when going outside may be less than appealing.

Bednarek says she did not expect to see Colorado — smokers, and businesses alike — adapting so well to the smoking ban.

"I was pleasantly surprised how quickly the whole state really seemed to embrace it," the state health official said. "I hear people say, I can take my kids to a bowling alley now. I hear people say they go to other states and walk in a restaurant, and it's like, oh yeah, Colorado was way ahead of its time."

Even a bar owner like Schwiegerath, a mother of two, has learned to console her smoking patrons with even-handed consolation on the matter.

"I've been in both places and I listen a lot. That's what you do as a bartender," she said. "But ultimately, when you bring the health of innocent people into it, you don't want your children to be around that stuff."

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