

LISA RAINFORD | Jan 17, 2011 - 4:50 PM | 1

AT ISSUE: The Junction capitalizes on the power of alcohol

Recalling a turning point in the area's economic history

When Maureen Lynett came across the travel piece 'Skid Row to Hip in Toronto' (New York Times, July 5, 2009) about her beloved neighbourhood, her eyes welled up with tears of pride and happiness. Once upon a time, the Junction - named for its proximity to four intersecting railway lines in the west end of Toronto - was not worthy of such recognition in one of North America's largest metropolitan newspapers.



AT ISSUE: The Junction capitalizes on the power of alcohol. Santa Cuda (left) owner of Flamingo Banquet Hall and Maureen Lynett of Lynett Funeral Home go through archived documents on the Junction's history at the West Toronto Junction Historical Society. The two were instrumental in ending the ban on the sale of alcohol in the Junction in 1997. *Staff photo/ IAN KELSO*

Lynett, whose family owned Lynett Funeral Home on Dundas Street West, just east of Runnymede Road from 1914 until a decade ago, can recall all too clearly the retail strip's demise that the article's 'skid row' reference touched on. In the 1980s to early '90s, the street was filthy and riddled with empty storefronts; the sidewalks were cracked and broken. There was little foot traffic and no night life - at least none of the upstanding entertainment sort, she said.

"It was a ghost town. People would come in, to destination places, and leave again. It was very sad," said Lynett, recalling the Junction's past prior to 1997 - a turning point in the area's economic history when the area won a referendum to sell alcohol after being dry for almost a century.

Joined by Santa Cuda, owner of the Flamingo Banquet Hall across from the funeral home, the two women recently spoke with The Villager about their plight to overturn the decades-long alcohol ban, which they say triggered the Junction's transformation from derelict state to the flourishing artist mecca with alternative shops and organic cafes it is becoming today.

"As much as 50 per cent of the Junction's stores were vacant," recalled Cuda. "A lot of the residents who lived on side streets were getting upset because they were seeing the deterioration of not only the business strip, but of their neighbourhood."

Dundas Street West lacked the presence of restaurants, just one of the reasons why it was difficult to attract people to the area. It proved challenging for any restaurateur to make a go of it without being able to serve alcohol. In order to get the economic redevelopment ball rolling, it became clear to

A BAN ON ALCOHOL

The Junction was a manufacturing community that experienced a boom in the late 1800s. Foundries, mills, wire factories and industries, such as Canadian Cycle and Motor Co., Dominion Showcase and the Heintzman piano company began moving into the area.

Other firms came because land, labour and taxes were cheaper than in Toronto. These are what attracted many immigrant or second generation Irish Catholics to the area, many of whom moved there from then poor, crowded tenement housing in areas of the city such as Cabbagetown and Brockton Village during the 1880s. Many also came from working-class English industrial cities such as Birmingham and Manchester. They were soon followed by many Macedonian and Croatian immigrants, many of whom worked in the meat industry.

Pubs and taverns had become permanent fixtures in the Junction at that time, as was the case with many railway and factory workers' towns. By 1903, alcohol was such a serious problem for families and a public embarrassment - drunks were visible from passing trains - that the Junction voted to go dry in 1904.

As the story goes, 10,000 men descended

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Lynett and Cuda, along with fellow business woman, Piera Pugliese, owner of the Italian eatery Vesuvio's Pizzeria&Spaghetti House and then chair of the Junction Gardens Business Improvement Area (BIA), the Junction needed to be able to legally sell alcohol.

on the Junction that day - Junction men out for 'last call' in the area, and also Toronto men whose bars were closed due to the election held in their own city.

Most of the area remained dry until 1997. One last dry pocket, bounded by the intersection of Dundas and Keele to Dundas and Humber side, began serving alcohol in 2000.

"All the businesses said we needed it," said Cuda, then chair of the Malta Village Business Association. "At every meeting the issue about alcohol came up. We needed to have restaurants."

The City of Toronto required a petition of more than 6,000 signatures from area residents in order to put it on the next election ballot. To win, they needed 60 per cent of the vote. It was a tough slog, the two women said.

"Some people were frightened," said Cuda. "The fear was that there would be drunk people in the street."

However, Cuda and Lynett and a team of volunteers, campaigning under the name 'Working for Equal Treatment' (W.E.T.), were able to convince people that the sale of alcohol would lead to the rejuvenation of the neighbourhood.

"We said, 'let's not make this political.' It was an investment in our community," said Cuda.

In the end, the wet vote won by a narrow margin.

"Mayor Mel Lastman's office called to say 'congratulations, are you sitting down? You won by 60 per cent plus one vote,'" said Lynett. "It was a civil campaign. It was hard fought, but civil."

True to their word, Cuda and Lynett did not just disappear once they met their goal of winning the referendum. The Junction's transformation from dry to wet was only the first of many steps towards its rejuvenation, which is on-going even today, more than a decade after the plebiscite.

While the neighbourhood and its retail strip have come a long way in the past decade-plus years, there is still plenty of work to do, agreed Lynett and Cuda. Many storefronts along Dundas Street West remain empty, said Lynett.

"What I think the Junction needs is more pedestrian traffic. It's been 12 to 13 years, the area is steadily improving, but it will take further time to get our stores filled," she said.

The area needs to attract more people from outside the neighbourhood, she added.

"What is very gratifying is our vision for what it could be - like Queen Street West - is happening. I'm so excited about the Junction," said Lynett.

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mayuus

Jan 18, 2011 10:26 AM

Junction success is due to government money and professional leadership

Also, the Junction did not just start to serve alcohol and make some money (many other areas do), but they did get a lot of money from the city and Ottawa. David Miller, Chris Korw in Kuczynski and Sam Bulte MP. Henry Calderon brought a lot of business into the Junction, as the paid representative of the Junction Team. It is just not alcohol, but money too. Lots of it and professional know-how.

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mayuus

Jan 18, 2011 10:22 AM

Why are some restaurants getting rid of their liquor licenses though? Even in the Junction?

Though I live near Bloor and Keele, I will occasionally go to a restaurant in the Junction and when I went to a Thai restaurant which serves excellent food I was told that they did not have a liquor license. They did before. I think that they had new management and decided they did not need it. Also there is an eat all you want sushi place at Bloor and Keele, and it does not serve wine. It used to have a liquor license when it was a Chinese restaurant. Taxi drivers tell me that their clients do much of their drinking at home now.

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