

At the bar, driving home the benefits of moderation

By Erica Noonan, Globe Staff | September 5, 2007

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WALTHAM - Moody Street has a hip and thriving dining - and drinking - scene heavily populated by young professionals and college students.

Restaurant row is regularly hopping until last call at 12:30 p.m. Even then, some people aren't willing to call it a night. The sight of giggling drinkers pouring onto the sidewalks and staggering into the darkness frightens Don Yovicsin, owner of Jake's Dixie Roadhouse, a popular barbecue joint situated at the center of Waltham's dining zone.

Moody Street hasn't had a headline-grabbing drunk driving or alcohol poisoning tragedy since it became a trendy destination about seven years ago, and Yovicsin and other Waltham restaurateurs are determined to keep it that way.

Last year, they formed the Waltham Restaurant Association and made their first major push to both control underage alcohol consumption and make drinking safer for those who, in Yovicsin's words, have had "too much fun."

The stakes are high - one accident can ruin lives, reputations, and livelihoods. Losing a license for a day or two, a typical penalty for an establishment that serves someone under 21, can be costly. A lawsuit brought by someone harmed by someone who got drunk on Moody Street could easily put a local restaurant out of business.

"Operators are scared to death," said Yovicsin. He said the WRA is pushing its 40-plus members to send their bartenders and servers to a two-hour alcohol responsibility training course, called TIPS (Training for Intervention Procedures).

Constant training is crucial in an industry that has near-constant turnover of employees, said Yovicsin, a 30-year veteran of the restaurant business. He bartended for five years at the Omni Parker House in Boston, a famous watering hole where tourists and after-work drinkers line up three deep for beers and martinis.

He said bartenders and food servers, often young, part-time workers, have to make split-second decisions on whom to serve and whether an ID looks legit. The choice they make to pour a drink - or cut someone off - can have far-reaching consequences.

The TIPS course curriculum, developed by Virginia-based Health Communications Inc., can be tailored to employees of universities, package stores, casinos, stadiums, and even senior centers. The WRA has geared its version to the local restaurant scene - focusing on the fine art of scrutinizing IDs, sniffing out underage posers, denying drinks to customers who've had too much, and gently coaxing them into a cab.

A recent session, sponsored by the local restaurant owners and the Coors Brewing Company, was held at the Arthur J. Clark Government Center in Waltham and led by Coors field manager and TIPS trainer Ed Van Den Aemele.

About two dozen employees from the Elephant Walk, Joe Sent Me, Solea, Watch City Brewery, the Sons of Italy, and other Waltham eateries watched training videos of actors posing as sloppy drunks staggering from table to table, spilling drinks, talking loudly, and fumbling with utensils.

But not every inebriated patron is so obvious, Van Den Aemele told his students, most in their early 20s, clad in halter tops and baseball caps. "If you think someone is underage or had too much, just don't do it."

He debunks urban myths about drinking - that big people can drink more alcohol safely than thinner ones (body fat doesn't absorb alcohol) and that mixed drinks get a person drunk more slowly than shots of liquor (carbonation can actually increase absorption of alcohol).

The session also offers a heavy dose of public relations training. Bartenders are taught how to finesse awkward situations: Don't embarrass or pick a fight with someone who's drunk, for example. Instead, smile, be kind, and be sneaky - slow drinking down by not refilling someone's glass as much, and push water and soda instead. If there's a sober friend present, enlist his or her help.

Servers also learn to cope with what in pub parlance is called a "foreign load." That's an inebriated customer who has been kicked out of a bar up the street but managed to pull himself or herself together enough to walk into your place and get served again.

Julie Diduca, 26, a Jake's bartender who went through the TIPS training a year ago, said it has helped her at work. "You get a lot of tips on how to read people, which is key," she said.

Diduca, who has been bartending for nearly six years, serves mostly beer and what she calls "fun drinks" - sweet, potent mixes with names like "Moody Street Blues" and "Trailer Park Magic" - to a casual, barbecue-chowing clientele.

"I learned how to say stuff in a better way. You say, 'I'm looking out for you' rather than 'Get out, you drunk.' You can be nice about it and take them aside and say, 'I think you may have had a bit too much.' "

Nearly all WRA members have sent their employees for a TIPS session, and the effort appears to be working, said Waltham Police Detective Lieutenant Steve Champeon, who biannually oversees alcohol enforcement stings of city restaurants and package stores.

At a June check - which for the first time involved two visits in the same day by an underage agent or an officer without proper ID - only four out of 172 establishments broke the law.

The result was "phenomenal from a law-enforcement perspective," Champeon said.

Champeon said his department is trying to change a long-standing reluctance on the part of Moody Street restaurant workers to call the police. Many bartenders worry they will get themselves or their restaurants in trouble if they call authorities for help with a drunk patron who is being disruptive or intending to drive home.

"We know there's a reluctance to call police, and some servers have been told not to do it," Champion said while observing the TIPS training session. "But we are trying to give our assurances that we'd much rather be called early on, before the person has a chance to leave and maybe get in a car."

The WRA hopes to take its alcohol responsibility crusade even farther. It has partnered with Brandeis University researcher Brad Krevor in a new effort to use Waltham as one of a handful of pilot communities in a nationwide academic study examining techniques that reduce underage consumption of alcohol.

The restaurant association also launched a voucher program with local cab operators and bought piles of free-ride-home coupons for their members to distribute to customers they believe would be dangerous behind the wheel. Moody Street restaurants have given away dozens in the past year, Yovicsin said.

"It's a win," he said of the alcohol-awareness efforts. "The community is safer, the guests are safer."