



Ben's in Shirley Reopens Under New Ownership

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By Stacy Cox

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It took some patience and perseverance but it finally paid off for the Skinner family, the new owners of Ben's bar and restaurant in Shirley.

After more than 18 months of working through legal issues and then remodeling, the former popular Shirley business reopened on Monday, February 27.

Rick and Becky Skinner had always dreamed of owning their own business. They had also been long-time friends with former Ben's owner, Ben Polston, whose unexpected death in April 2004 placed the establishment's operations onto his children. They continued to keep the place open for a few months, with the help of Ben's employees, but eventually closed and the windows were boarded up.

Rumors began circulating almost immediately that the Skinners were going to try to buy the business and reopen it.

"Rick called me and said we should try to buy it," said Rick, speaking of his son, who is also called Rick. "It was kind of funny when he called because we had just been talking about it too."

Becky said this is when their long journey began and there were a few times when they thought everything had been worked out in settling Ben's estate, but something else would happen to cause delay.

Finally, in December 2005, the Skinner family - including Rick, Becky, their son Rick and his wife Jennifer - took over ownership of what was once Ben's Friendly Bar and what will continue as simply Ben's.

"After we talked to Susie [Ben's daughter] to see if it was okay, we had no doubt that we wanted to keep the name as Ben's," said Becky. Someone even located a photo of Ben and the Skinners had it enlarged. The photo sits on a shelf behind the counter, serving as a reminder that though Ben is gone but his spirit lives on in the place. Ben had built the Railroad Street building in 1972 and had operated the bar/restaurant until his death.

Becky said one thing they made sure of before they bought the business was to get former manager Pauletta Burrell to agree to come back. Pauletta said she is unsure how long she will continue but wanted to help the Skinners get up and running.

"It's nice to see the customers again," said Pauletta. "They're glad it's back open."

Besides the help of Pauletta, Brandy Coomer has returned to help tend bar and wait tables when the Skinners are not working, and Jason Austin has begun learning his way around the kitchen as one of the cooks. However, another person familiar to Shirley restaurant-goers will play a big part in the new Ben's.

"We couldn't have done this without Pauletta," Becky said. "But, when Darlene agreed to cook for us, we were thrilled."

Darlene Wilburn will provide the cooking for Ben's breakfast and lunch periods. Darlene is the former part-owner of Granny's where she became known for her wonderful homemade meals during that restaurant's operation in the 1990's on Shirley's Main Street.

Becky said their daughter, Misty Pastrick, will also help whenever she is needed.

The Skinners started out their new venture by first remodeling the interior of the building. Becky said nearly everything in the kitchen was replaced. They also repainted, scraped and shined the floor, installed new ceiling tile and added dozens of tracking lights to brighten up the atmosphere. "It's like the old Ben's but with a facelift," said Jennifer Skinner.

Though the physical changes will be noticeable, the Skinners are sticking with Ben's old menu - especially the steak dinner specials on Friday and Saturday evening - and using all the same vendors and suppliers. They do not have a permit to sell carry-out alcoholic beverages but joke that Ben's is probably unique with its still-operational drive-through window in the back of the building.

The Skinners have lived in the area most of their lives and all are graduates of Knightstown High School. Rick, a 1971 graduate, was employed at Firestone in Noblesville. Becky, a 1975 graduate, works at the Greenfield Post Office. Their son Rick graduated from KHS in 1994 and formerly worked at Guide Corp in Anderson and daughter Misty is a 1996 KHS grad.

Ben's will hold its official grand opening this weekend, March 10-11, with prime rib, steaks and other meals offered and a DJ playing music beginning at 9 p.m.