

# ELLICOTT CITY

## ONE YEAR AFTER THE FLOOD

WINES AND DINES ANEW



By Teddy Durgin

**T**he bars, restaurants, businesses, and good people of Ellicott City, Md., are all looking forward to July 30 ... and they are dreading it. It was one year ago on that date when a summer storm dropped six inches of rain in two hours on the Howard County suburb, resulting in a flash flood that caused major damage to the city's Historic District. A state of emergency was declared, and it's taken many being highly involved this entire year to recover.

First and foremost, no one-year retrospective would be complete without first honoring the two people who lost their lives that night. They were 38-year-old Joseph Anthony Blevins of Windsor Mill, Md., and 35-year-old Jessica Watsula of Lebanon, Pa. Their bodies were found nearly two miles down the Patapsco River in Baltimore County.

Several Ellicott City businesses ended that night, too, including such popular eating and drinking establishments as the Rumor Mill Fusion Bar and Restaurant, Johnny's Bistro, and Cacao Lane. **Maureen Sweeney Smith**, Executive Director of the Ellicott City Partnership, is among the many still feeling the loss. "I was really sorry to see Rumor Mill go," she lamented. "I really liked [co-owner] Lexi Milani, and they had such good food. Johnny's Bistro was a really good lunch place, and Cacao Lane had been a mainstay of Ellicott City for years. The owners have decided not to keep it as a restaurant, but turn it into retail."

For the most part, though, the story that has been written since July 30 ~ and the one that this journalist is intent on writing here ~

is one of triumph. There are a lot of victories to report one year later with regards to the food and beverage trade. One of the most notable has been The Phoenix Emporium, which re-opened for business on Jan. 30 six

months to the day of the tragedy. Proprietor **Mark Hemmis** remarked, "The most rewarding part has been getting my employees back. My 'newest' employee prior to the flood had been here for two and a half years.



They're more like family to me than employees."

He continued, "We've hit a surge in business since we've been back open, too. We've even had to bring in new staff. And let me tell you, it is difficult to vet restaurant employees! I have a manager who has been with me for 10 years, and he told our newest waitress, 'We don't have a training program,' because we haven't hired people in so long!"

Also remarkable is that Ellicott City is attracting new businesses. One of the most promising is the new Manor Hill Tavern under the supervision of **Randy Marriner**, President and CEO of the Victoria Restaurant Group and Manor Hill Brewing. He stated, "We actually purchased the property on July 1 last year, and the flood was on the 30th. Great timing! We own Manor Hill Brewing, which is located on our farm in Ellicott City 10 minutes from the Tavern. So, we had decided to open Manor Hill Tavern to showcase our beer."

Of course, there have been challenges to both returning to Ellicott City and starting anew. "The most challenging part of the whole process was just the lack of knowledge," Hemmis said. "I had assisted in building restaurants before, but I didn't have the depth of knowledge needed to really understand what I was undertaking. I had to bring in contractors and plumbers and carpenters and electricians and HVAC guys. Most of it went really well. I will say I have become a much more well-rounded business owner as a result."



Marriner added, "Bringing any older building up to date is challenging. Our buildings were constructed in 1830. The exterior 'look and feel' is controlled by the Historic Preservation Commission, so any changes have to be approved. Low ceiling heights, narrow hallways, sagging floors, little to no insulation, inadequate HVAC, unworkably small kitchen are just a few of the issues we had to overcome."

And, of course, some operators are still struggling to re-open. Portalli's, for instance, was one of the absolute hardest hit. It's grand return has been delayed a few times already this year, and owner Evan Brown is now hoping to be back up and running by the one-year anniversary.

"The hardest thing we've had to deal with is getting through all of the bureaucratic obstacles that come with rebuilding," he commented. "We continue to get through permitting to get the necessary approvals. It's a combination of everything. It's being in a historic district. It's Howard County being such a huge county, with a lot of development going on. We just have to stand in line with everybody else, and that's fine. It's all a process."

Everyone interviewed for this piece, though, had nothing but positive things to say about the community's response to the flood and the amazing drive and good will that has built up to returning Main Street to its former glory. Smith beamed, "The region has definitely responded. We're seeing double the foot traffic, and everybody's coming in and having a meal. And there's been the industry support, too. It's hard to think of a restaurant that didn't do a fund raiser for us. We really are seeing the best of human





nature."

Hemmis added, "Most of my employees had gotten decent work after the flood. We're certainly grateful for all of the restaurants and bars that hired our staff [while we rebuilt]. For the most part, they've all come back."

And for a number of the businesses, the flood ended up having a definite silver lining. It gave them a chance to modernize their operations. Smith noted, "Many had to start anew and have taken this opportunity to tweak their concept a bit and certainly to renovate their buildings. The county has required everybody to be up to code. For example, Howard has required everybody to put their electrical boxes up higher. Many people had to move their whole electrical system as a result. Others got all new point-of-sale systems. We're kind of getting a whole, brand-new spankin' town out of this horrible disaster."

A brand-new spankin' town that retains a lot of its historic flavor, but an age-old hamlet that has added some new ghosts. July 30 will definitely be a "turn-the-page" for Ellicott City. And much is being planned to mark the occasion, most notably the reinstallation of Main Street's famous clock that got destroyed in the flood.

Not everyone will be present, though. Hemmis, for one, plans to be away. "I still have a lot of processing to do, I guess," he acknowledged. "When that one-year anniversary comes up, we'll be open. But I made the decision to go on vacation with my family that weekend. It's just a little too raw still. I'm sure it will be a wonderful day, and part of me regrets that I won't be here. But another part of me doesn't want to rehash it. I got a wonderful bit of advice from a friend I ran into at the grocery store. She told me, 'Celebrate the one year anniversary of when you re-opened. Celebrate on Jan. 30th of next year.' I think I'll be able to handle that a lot better."

Brown is just hoping to be back in business. He envies colleagues like Hemmis and Marriner. He just wants his old life back. "I'm really looking forward to seeing all of our regular customers again," he concluded. "Hey, I'm just looking forward to seeing all of the people I would pass on a daily basis on the path I walk from my parking spot to the front door ~ the other shop owners, the locals. It'll be nice to get back on the other side of this. ■

# OLD ELICOTT CITY

# ELICOTT CITY TRAGEDY HAS SHOWN THE BEST IN FUNDRAISING

By Teddy Durgin

**T**he July 30, 2016, flood that wiped out businesses in Ellicott City's Main Street historic district and cost two people their lives was indeed tragic. But from out of that tragedy rose a charitable spirit that showed the very best in humanity. That charitable spirit manifested itself in a number of fundraisers, many of which were held within the first couple of weeks. Others are still being planned today.

On Aug. 10, 2016, for instance, Smaltimore hosted a fundraiser to benefit ECStrong, the fund established by the United Way of Central Maryland to help Ellicott City. The Canton-based bar offered a half-dozen Jailbreak Brewing Co. beers, six Manor Hill Brewing Co. beers, and Smirnoff orange drinks for \$5, with \$4 from each drink sold going to the fund.

Speaking of Jailbreak Brewing Co., it hosted a huge fundraiser on the Thursday immediately after the flood. The Laurel-based brewery offered free tours, with donations encouraged; contracted with such food trucks as Giggy's BBQ and Catering and Kona Ice; and opened up two additional bars that served what ended up being around 2,000 attendees. A large percentage of the proceeds from the seven-hour event went to charities aiding in Ellicott City's recovery.

Jailbreak's social media manager Elizabeth "Liz" Shear played a key role in the planning. She recalled, "[Co-owner] **Kasey Turner** called on Sunday and said, 'We should do this!' An hour later, we had a flyer made up. Then, an hour and a half lat-





er, we had it on Facebook. Within minutes, it had been shared hundreds of times. The phones didn't stop ringing. The e-mails didn't stop coming in."

So, what are the keys to putting together a good fundraiser? Turner was quick to answer. "Don't make it about yourself. What we did wasn't about Jailbreak Brewing. It was about Ellicott City. We wanted to allow people who didn't like beer or didn't like our beer, specifically, to still have a place to come to and grieve and support the cause. It helped start the healing process."

**Tim Kendzierski**, co-owner of the Ellicott Mills Brewing Co., agreed. "Start with your core," he added. "Start with your people, your regulars, and then branch out from there. It's also good to get as many of the businesses in your area as possible involved. That way, you're not just multiplying the amount of money you're going to raise, you're multiplying the marketing. If people are walking into every store in town and seeing the same flyer, it looks like a big deal."

He continued, "Facebook and Instagram and other social media outlets are also key. We do about six fundraisers a year for different charities, and it's changed the way we raise funds and awareness. And I think it has doubled, even tripled the amount of money we've been able to raise. We used to hand out invites for our anniversary party. This year, we didn't do invites at all. We just did Facebook, and we had three times as many people

as we normally do. People's lives are so busy that social media is a great way to remind them without e-mailing or cold-calling them."

Ellicott Mills Brewing was one of the Main Street businesses impacted by the flood. Fortunately, it was on the upper end of Main Street and was able to get back up and running before others. Still, it held some fundraisers with everyone from Della Rose's Avenue Tavern in White Marsh to Bare Bones Grill and Brewery in Ellicott City. "All that money went directly to the staff that lost work while it was happening," Kendzierski said. "We took care of just about 80 percent of what they normally make. The funds ran out just as we were getting ready to re-open, so it worked out nice."

Other places got creative. The River Hill Sports Grille in Howard County put together a cornhole tournament with a \$5 entry fee. All of the money was donated to Ellicott City relief. Still others looked to appeal to area foodies. Petit Louis Bistro in Columbia hosted a \$195, four-course dinner that benefited flood victims. Not to be outdone, the Iron Bridge Wine Co. in Clarksville hosted a six-course wine dinner, with 60 tickets made available at \$275 each with 100 percent of the proceeds donated to the Ellicott City Partnership.

Some interesting partnerships were also forged. AIDA Bistro & Wine Bar hosted a fundraiser with Blossoms of Jobs in which those whose employment was disrupted by

the flood were paired with potential employers. Black Flag Brewing Co. in Columbia hosted a donation-based "HopAsana Yoga Fundraiser," in which all proceeds went directly to the Ellicott City Partnership. The brewery stayed open after the yoga class, and all attendees over 21 received one free pint of beer.

When asked what are some of the common mistakes made in putting together fundraisers, Maureen Sweeney Smith of the Ellicott City Partnership replied, "Trying to put one together too fast. It takes quite a bit of work to get all of your ducks in a row. You have to make sure you have all of the components. We saw people who tried to do fundraisers, but didn't really have the time to put into making it a good one. Most of that was due to not properly getting the word out."

Turner chimed in. "A lack of focus will also doom you. You can get too broad with these things, and the message gets muddled."

And even in the worst of times, all interviewed for this article spoke of the amazing and sometimes unexpected side benefits that came from being involved in such fundraisers. Smith marveled, "We're still seeing a spirit of cooperation on Main Street. People are now working as one commercial district instead of a bunch of independent businesses." ■

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