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Celebrity, my check, please: Reporter becomes server to benefit charity

By Kelly McCann

Last week, I traded in my notebook and pen for an apron and friendly smile as I tested my serving skills.

Under normal circumstances, I would cringe at the idea of waiting tables, after two stints of it in high school. However, I put those feelings aside for one night to serve as a celebrity waitress at the St. Louis Crisis Nursery's Celebrity Waitress and Waiters Night.

On Thursday, Aug. 16, more than 500 guests enjoyed a fun-filled evening of fine dining and fund-raising at Monarch in Maplewood. Sponsored by Anheuser-Busch Cos., THF Realty and Forest Park Community Hospital, the event raised more than \$70,000 for the Crisis Nursery.

The funds enable the Crisis Nursery to operate its four, 24-hour shelters for children ages birth through 12 whose families are facing a crisis situation.

"The reason this event is a fixture on our calendar is because it's a different event," said Erin Tremain, public relations and events coordinator for the Crisis Nursery. "There are not very many events in which you can come free of charge to a restaurant and feel welcomed with St. Louis celebrities all over the place. It's a unique experience for anyone who gets to come."

The 17th annual fund-raiser featured local celebrities from television, radio, publishing, sports and business. In addition to ordinary folks like myself, other more-recognizable St. Louisians such as Heidi Glaus and Rene Knott of KSDK-TV (Channel 5), St. Louis Blues Hall of Famer Bernie Federko and Christy Bertelson of the St. Louis Post-Dispatch packed the restaurant.

Tremain said the Crisis Nursery approached Monarch about hosting the event three years ago, attracted to its central location and popular vibe.

Although typically an intimate and formal dining venue, co-owner Jeff Orbin said the Celebrity Night transforms Monarch into a more lighthearted and relaxed atmosphere.



Rick Graefe photo/ Kelly McCann, West County Suburban Journals reporter and online editor, demonstrates her versatility by pouring a glass of water without spilling it for customer Carole Bannen at Monarch in Maplewood.

"It's a different vibe than typical," Orbin said. "There is laughter and conversation and across-the-room interactions. It takes the edge off our ordinary formal service."

Orbin added the event is the restaurant's busiest night of the year, requiring extra service staff to accommodate the hundreds of guests.

"It's a busier night than usual due to the sheer volume of people," Orbin said. "We feel really strong about the organization and try to help in any way possible."

Many of the celebrity servers, myself included, attempted to assist the Monarch staff by serving water and bread and clearing dishes. At times, the celebrity waiters outnumbered the restaurant staff, adding congestion to the already packed kitchen and dining areas.

Our main task, however, was to mingle with diners, encouraging them to purchase raffle tickets and offer generous tips, which benefited the charity. Over the course of the night, celebrity servers took part in a friendly competition to determine who could raise the most money for the Crisis Nursery.

Kelly Gast of Monsanto Co. single-handedly raised over \$12,000 in tips and raffle sales, earning recognition as the "Celebrity Waiter of the Year."

Coincidentally, Gast's husband, Gus, was the lucky winner of the Dream Trip raffle, which included a seven-day cruise for two, courtesy of Norwegian Cruise Line, and roundtrip airfare for two from American Airlines.

At the end of my shift, I turned in my tips and raffle sales, totaling about \$300, and headed home for a good night's rest. I have a newfound respect for the Monarch staff after running back and forth in heels between the kitchen and the dining room.

Perhaps next year I will be more of a celebrity, but for now, I return to my notebook and pen as a Journal reporter.

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