

Sounding off – The Grill Sergeant’s Story

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Left to right, Mike Theesen, The Grill Sergeant; and the Tiki King. Theeson vows to soon return to the grilling days of yesteryear.

Solomons, MD - In early February of 2008, Calvert County resident Mike Theesen was driving with his daughter, crossing the Thomas Johnson Bridge. Theesen’s daughter noticed a vehicle stopped at the span’s highest point and a woman who appeared upset and out of the vehicle. It was immediately clear that the woman intended to leap from the bridge. Theesen stopped his vehicle, got out and held the woman back. “Whatever you’re going through it’s going to get better,” he told the woman.

Theesen, a career law enforcement officer with the U.S. Department’s Criminal Investigation Command, was making a name for himself in another field—serving barbecue in Solomons under the moniker “The Grill Sergeant.” His carryout was part of the complex known as the Tiki Bar.

Last month Theesen spoke with TheBayNet.com during a celebration on the day the Tiki Bar normally would have opened for the season. Dramatic events that have occurred over the past eight months might have Theesen now saying to himself, “whatever I’m going through it’s going to get better.”

Last September, Tiki Bar owner Terry Clarke died suddenly. Now the famous bar is up for sale and the subject of litigation. Last month, one of Clarke’s former business partners, Patrick Donovan, filed a suit against PT Tiki, claiming he was still a majority shareholder in the venture. On May 8 an emergency motion for a temporary restraining order and/or preliminary injunction was filed in Calvert County Circuit Court. A hearing on the matter is tentatively set for Friday morning, May 18 in Circuit Court. A call to the Annapolis area real estate agent handling the sale of the Tiki Bar on behalf of Clarke’s estate had not returned a call as this story was being filed.

Theesen and his attorney—Joshua Tarr, who is also representing Donovan in his suit—are considering also taking legal action. Theesen indicated that his years of service at the popular bar have been disregarded in the wake of Clarke’s death. Worse, his carryout has been shut down and representatives of Clarke’s heirs are demanding Theesen pay back rent.

“People who know me know I’m a kind-hearted person,” said Theesen. “Today’s the day I would wake up and be putting up palm trees. It’s a very sad day that the bar is not opening for whatever reason. I miss the good times, being part-owner for 10 years and being The Grill Sergeant.”

According to Theesen, in 2006 when Clarke and Donovan purchased the Solomons bar, he (Theesen) was asked to hold the liquor license “because I am a county resident.” His name was on the license until 2016. In order to hold the license, Theesen had to own at least 10 percent of the Tiki Bar. Tarr stated he believed Theesen held at least a 20 percent share. In 2016, the Tiki Bar’s attorney, V. Charles Donnelly took control of the license. Theesen declined to say why the licensee was changed.

Being the licensee required Theesen to be present for a series of hearings regarding lawsuits and alleged zoning violations. The litigation brought by a former Solomons resident—who was joined in two appeals by the Calvert County Commissioners and the Calvert County Planning Commission—was apparently settled in June 2014 with an “unreported opinion” written by Judge Deborah Eyler of the Maryland Court of Special Appeals.

“I worked more at the Tiki than I did at my own place,” said Theesen, adding that he was involved in every aspect of the bar’s operation. Those aspects included hiring, firing, dealing with liquor distributors, putting up palm trees, maintaining drink machines, booking entertainment and especially security. Theesen stated he created the bar’s designated driver program as well as Tiki’s state-of-the-art security measures, including a scam-proof credit card system and top-of-the-line identification scanners designed to keep those under the legal drinking age from being served alcohol. “It was a tough rodeo,” said Theesen, who proudly noted the Calvert County Liquor Board was so impressed by the Tiki Bar’s security plan they wanted the county’s other large bars to use it as a standard.

Theesen spoke fondly of his late friend. “Terry Clarke gave me a shot to be the Grill Sergeant,” he said. Theesen recalled speaking with Clarke prior to the surgery that occurred just before his death. Theesen was in Virginia training with other Defense Department law enforcement personnel when he received the shocking news that Clarke had passed away. “I cried in the streets of Norfolk,” said Theesen.

Theesen indicated that there never was any discussion between Clarke and himself about paying rent for the modest unit that housed The Grill Sergeant. Theesen stated that he personally constructed the interior to meet the legal standards and had a clean operation. “No alleged rent surfaced until after Mr. Clarke’s death,” said Tarr.

Of the Friday, April 20 party that was held at Buckets Sports Bar in Lusby to fill the void for the diehards who missed the annual party on the island, Theesen declared, “he [Terry Clarke] would have been proud.” While clearly disappointed with the developments, Theesen expressed gratitude to Clarke, Donovan and “the whole Tiki family for years of struggles, lawsuits I was involved in—best wishes to everyone.” Clarke’s passing, said Theesen, resulted in a lot of questions. He vowed that he would “continue to support the community that supported him [Clarke] to find the answers.”

Theesen declared he is ready for “the next chapter” and is in the process of relocating his iconic eatery. He said the new location will be in Calvert County, most likely somewhere in Solomons.

“We all learn valuable lessons,” said Theesen. “I always protected the interest of the place [Tiki Bar] and sometimes your heart isn’t enough. Loyalty and salvation lie within.”

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Previous Tiki Bar stories

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