



For over 15 years I commuted more than 40 miles each way to work. A little quick math says I drove more than 3,000 trips and more than 1/4 million miles. In that time I had two children and I missed a bunch of their school activities and other milestones because I left for work early, came home late, or simply lacked the flexibility to get to a mid-day school event. Sometime in the early 2000's - post-9/11 - and weary of the drive and the customer-facing pressures of an independent consultancy, I started to explore alternatives.

I had spent enough time behind the wheel to speculate on what I might like to do. Something meaningful, of course. Something local to get out of the bloody car. And something my kids could understand. I know now that not a single kid wants to have their dad show up at career day and explain the intricacies of SAP Financial process design and configuration. "You simply cannot do enough integration testing and change management." Not my kids. Not any kids, likely. I knew this to be true when I picked up my kid from day care one afternoon (evening) and the teacher said as she handed my little boy to me: "I didn't know you were a fireman." "Oh?" I replied, completely puzzled by the statement.

"Yes, we were talking about types of jobs and your son said you were a fireman." Now I thought long and hard about that. And then there it was, the night before while considering my career options I lamented out loud that all I did was put out fires that day.

It was time for a change.

I researched and speculated what it would take to convert a nearby dilapidated mall with a serious dry-cleaner inspired brownfield haz mat situation into a curling rink. I was going to bring curling to the unwashed masses in America. Or at least Ann Arbor. That was dead-man walking from the get go.

I was inspired by the story of the Vietnamese man who came to Michigan and slept on the floor of his struggling bakery. As he became successful and expanded, he staffed a location near my home that was in a sorry state. While I enjoyed biking my kids there on Saturday mornings and noshing on his satisfactory donut selection, I thought it could do better. There was no espresso machine. The menu lacked pizzazz. I was pretty sure that for every coffee or donut that was sold, perhaps one or more was not being officially recorded nor deposited into the proprietors coffers. Cash business means you better keep your eye on the till.

So, with curling dead to me (do you have any idea how much that little ice-pebble Zamboni costs?), my next best option to pursue a career that checked my three boxes was the kinda sad donut shop down the road. With it came a critical foot traffic magnet - the anchor tenant, a monster-sized video store, had just signed a new lease and was sure to continue to bring in hordes of customers.

I bought a book. I made a business plan. I was ready to invest and commit to the physical presence to manage the flows in and out of the cash register.

“You’re buying yourself an exceptionally low paying job,” one of my restaurateur friends commented to me when I disclosed my plan.

But I was in love with the idea of remaking this donut shop in my own image. A little outdoor cafe set up that extended onto the scorching hot asphalt, maybe lure some of those seniors who wanted to wear knee high black socks with their sandals and complain about the government - yes those ones - to the back of the store and get some hipper eye candy near the front. But the As Is, as we say in the process redesign biz, was too mighty to give way to the To Be.

At about the same time, along came another contract in that boring Finance process optimization space that seemed to pay considerably better than slinging donuts to change-resistant clientele. And the landlord told me that I couldn’t have those cute little European chairs and tables encroach on the parking lot, under ANY circumstances. And then Viacom unloaded its Blockbuster stake, spelling the end of the strip mall’s fortunes and my cafe dream.

Until now. The dream lives. It is real.

Way back in 1984 Don Henley and assorted other comrades put out an album called Building the Perfect Beast. I was freshly out of high school and knew the lyrics by heart to every song on that album. As I think about what interested me in the cafe business, and today in building a support model for cafes everywhere, I think about the Sunset Grill song. Catchy percussion, cool synthesizer and the back up doo-wah girls to Henley’s smooth as silk singing made the song resonate. But it was the lyrics that stirs to this day this powerful feeling in me. The contrast between the seamier side of Sunset Boulevard and this homey cafe haven are stark, but the two worlds somehow live in harmony. It remains a real story of Customer delight, engagement and ownership, in spite of the odds.

“There's an old man there from the old world  
To him, it's all the same  
Calls all his customers by name”

...and...

“These days a man makes you something,  
you never see his face,  
There is no hiding place  
down at the Sunset Grill.”

I crave the personal experience and connectedness that a local cafe offers. I want to make access to these cafes universal. I want to raise awareness of the entire ecosystem that depends on local craft. I want to go down to the Sunset Grill, watch the working girls go by, and stare out at the auburn sky. And maybe use an app to preorder my coffee. Come along, we can all realize our dreams.