

# Walsh's Tavern makes final call with teary celebration

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In a small West Philadelphia bar yesterday, green-clad celebrants clamored around a bar singing along to "When Irish Eyes are Smiling" while sharing memories of previous St. Patrick's Day gatherings. But although Walsh's Tavern has hosted such celebrations in the past, this year's Irish-inspired festivities took on new meaning for Mickey Walsh, owner of the bar on 43rd Street between Locust and Walnut. Walsh -- who has owned and managed the tavern for 40 years -- chose St. Patrick's Day as the night he would close the tavern's doors forever.

Walsh's deceased father, Harry, opened the bar, originally called Walsh's Classic Tavern, 65 years ago. "This place has meant an awful lot to my family," Walsh said. "I was brought up to be a part of this business and so were my children." He explained that all of the members of his family have worked in the tavern over the course of their lives. Walsh's sons Joe, Dave and Harry joined their father last night to remember the good times they shared there as a family.

Mickey Walsh described the tavern as a place of continuous harmony. "Anyone could come here -- from hospital workers to policemen -- people knew they could find a friendly face," he said. And Joe Walsh said he would miss the close-knit community of the regular patrons. "It's sad to know that when people leave here tonight, they'll never be part of your family again in the same way," he said.

He explained that Walsh's has always been a place where all people, regardless of religions, races and sexual orientations, could congregate without feeling self-conscious. "This tavern is like a safe haven to get away from the outside world," he said. "It will be a void that can't be filled."

Although Mickey Walsh said he is closing the tavern in order to retire, his sons said they believe the city's increasing pressure on small businesses pushed their father to his limit. "My grandfather founded this place with the idea that the working man could have a place to go without having to pay through the roof," Harry Walsh said. But he explained that once the city implemented a 10 percent tax on the tavern, it was difficult for the business

to survive without raising its prices. "This kind of crackdown on small businesses takes its toll on owners after a while," Joe Walsh said. "The question is when will it take its toll on everybody?"

And the Walsh brothers all expressed concern about the future of community-based businesses in Philadelphia, including fears that a "domino effect" might wipe out other community taverns and businesses. Andrew Coyle, a 1995 College graduate who returned to Walsh's last night for its final celebration, said he was one of many people who would be sad to see the tavern close. "It's a really relaxed atmosphere," Coyle said. "This is the kind of place where you find dedicated customers -- you'd know 90 people of the people here."

College junior Ahmad Bashi -- who said he frequently visited the tavern -- recalled many happy nights spent there. "I come here and do things I don't normally do, and I don't feel sick doing them," Bashi said. "It's not a cheesy pick-up scene -- it's just a really easy-going place."

By the end of the evening, Mickey Walsh received many letters and phone calls from people across the country who had been benefited from the tavern's family atmosphere at some point in their lives. And although he said ending the era will be difficult, he plans to enjoy his free time. "I'm going to Disney World," Walsh said. "Or at least Ireland."