

Mika Neuparth
JOU3101

Unlike many other Gainesville restaurants, the employees and customers of Satchel's Pizza are staunchly loyal. Over the past four months since the fire, they have had the chance to prove themselves.

Dan Svonavec, a dishwasher at Satchel's, located at 1800 NE 23rd Ave., has been working at the restaurant for only two years. In comparison to most his coworkers, who have been there for seven to eight years, Svonavec barely has seniority. This, however, did not affect his decision to "stick it out through the fire," he said, and remain at Satchel's.

All of the employees except for two have made the same decision to stay loyal to the restaurant, just as Svonavec did. Customers remained faithful during the time of the fire by donating, as well as showing support on the reopening day.

"I love this job. It's the first one that I'd ever say that about, and I pretty much wrote off already that I would never say that about any other job," Svonavec said. "I generally hate work. It turned out that this is just a really unique place."

Satchel Raye is a different kind of owner. He runs things in a different way, and it works, Svonavec said. There is barely any turnover within the company because it takes a certain kind of unity and a certain sort of strength to be able to keep things rolling so well. So, when the right team is put together, "he's able to keep everything rolling like a well-oiled machine," Svonavec said, which is why Satchel likes to keep the same group of people to produce the same great results: a pizza beloved by the community.

"It's not necessarily that easy to get a job here because there's not a lot of turnover," Svonavec said. "So, when you do, it's like you've kind of become a member of the Satchel family, in a way, whether you want to or not sometimes."

During the four months of the reconstruction, some employees found another part-time job, and others collected short-term unemployment benefits. Svonavec chose to collect unemployment to avoid becoming acclimated to another job atmosphere or environment.

“I had really little doubt that I was coming back here,” he said. “If I got a new job, there’s a very decent chance that I wouldn’t ever have been able to say that I like my job again after having worked here. So I figured, why try?”

Raye set up an IndieGoGo donation Web page for his employees, and the response surprised everyone. This donation page also helped employees throughout the time of the reconstruction.

“IndieGoGo was amazing. When I first moved to Gainesville, I saw all the stickers and everything, and I thought ‘that must be a pretty cool spot, a very happening place,’” Svonavec said. “I could tell there was a lot of support from the community, but I had no idea that it was that strong. I was blown away. I got enough myself to live off of for that time.”

Wade McMullen, the general manager, was in the restaurant February 28 and first reported to Raye that he saw the start of the fire in the kitchen. Since then, Satchel’s has come a long way.

“Really, the community helped the employees out. Through the Indie GoGo campaign, the community donated over \$35,000 and that gave everybody an extra two-week paycheck, which helped a lot,” McMullen said. “The employees have been amazing too. There are only two people not coming back. One of them moved and one of them just found a job that better fit her schedule. So, surprisingly, almost everybody came back, which is pretty amazing for a four-month hiatus.”

Raye’s \$20,000 goal for IndieGoGo was reached within 24 hours.

During the four-month break, construction was constantly going on. Employees tried to reach out and help on days that they could with simple things, such as a cleaning day.

However, this was not the only time that the employees got together over the break.

“We put together some potluck dinners, just to kind of keep everybody close together,” McMullen said. “When you’re gone from something for four months, it’s easy get detached from it.”

Although insurance covered the rebuild, Satchel decided to take this time and this opportunity to improve and expand. The kitchen is now twice the size, with a new “prep room” and added ovens.

“It’s going to help with efficiency,” McMullen said. “We have more space in the oven, which is helpful because on Fridays and Saturdays, the ovens are always full. We’re waiting to put an uncooked pizza in the oven because it’s full. It’s one pizza in, one pizza out. So, it’s helpful to have some more oven space. It will also help us to be a little quicker.”

The back area, Lightnin’ Salvage, has been remodeled as well. It’s more of a bar atmosphere, that now includes draft beers. “There’s a new table in the back at LSE that has the last pizza that came out of the oven the day after the fire, which was burnt to a crisp,” McMullen said. “So Satchel put it in the table and polyurethaned over it.”

McMullen described it as a sort of scavenger hunt. “There are all kinds of new things that you’re just going to have to kind of look around and try to find.”

Satchel’s secretly opened two days before the grand reopening specifically for those who had donated to the IndieGoGo fund, McMullen said.

Last Thursday, the announced date of the grand reopening, was “really a big success...everything went really smoothly, considering that it was one of the busiest weeks due

to the reopening,” according to McMullen. T-shirt sales were high, and Lightnin’ Salvage Enterprises had done really well, selling a lot of draft beer.

“I think everyone was happy, everyone was happy to be at work, customers were happy to be here, everybody was really patient,” McMullen said. “So I think it went better than I expected, and I think everyone involved is really happy with it.”

Sources:

Wade McMullen and Dan Svonavec can both be reached at Satchel’s Pizza.
352-335-7272