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FEATURED

After owner's death, Mangrove Mike's operating 'like he is there'

By ELLIOT WELD Free Press Staff
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Mangrove Mike's Café continues to operate as business as usual since owner Mike Forster's death.

Photo from Facebook

ISLAMORADA — Mangrove Mike's Café has been a staple of breakfast and lunch in the village since 1998. Its late owner, Mike Forster, once called it a halfway point between Miami and Key West and his sister, Jo-Ann, said the restaurant has an “iconic legacy.”

In the wake of Forster's death from COVID-19 on Sept. 6, the popular diner is operating under business as usual.

"It's totally operational and doing extremely well," Jo-Ann Forster said Wednesday. She added that the eatery is functioning "like he is there."

Forster did not have a will, according to Jo-Ann. Pam Schmidt, who has been the manager of Mangrove Mike's for the last 10 years, said the business' ownership will go into Forster's estate and they won't know anything further until it goes through probate legal proceedings.

In the meantime, the restaurant will stay open and is being run by Forster's "No. 1 lady" and longtime secretary, Susanne Bloy, Schmidt said.

Schmidt said the restaurant will probably have some sort of remembrance for Forster at a later date, but they have not had much of a chance to discuss what that will be as of yet.

"It was kind of get back here in the morning and let's go," Schmidt said of the day after Forster's death.

Schmidt said that they have been "very blessed, the community has just had an outpouring of love."



Like others in the community, Schmidt described Forster as a generous and caring man who was deeply invested in the people of Islamorada.

“It’s the old ‘Cheers’ kind of attitude. There wasn’t a person who he didn’t know their names,” she said, adding that is one of the reasons why “we have such a wonderful staff.”

At the outset of the coronavirus pandemic in early 2020, Forster set up a nonprofit called Mangrove Mike’s Endeavors with the goal of providing food to families struggling with the major economic and social disruption. The Keys were shut off to tourists for a time, which caused many layoffs and business closures, in an area that leans heavily on the hospitality industry.

At one point, almost 1,600 people a day were coming to the tents set up outside of Mangrove Mike’s to get food, Schmidt said. The arrangement was “just walk up and get what you want,” she said, and Forster partnered with farmers in Homestead and food providers such as Sysco and Publix to bring in food donations.

Mangrove Mike’s Endeavors had an original run of about six weeks, but it’s now being revived in the wake of Forster’s death. Schmidt said a board has been selected for the nonprofit, composed of herself and six others. She said they plan to “keep our hand on the heartbeat” of the community to see what is needed where. The particulars of the new operation are still being worked out.

“We didn’t want his legacy to no longer be,” Schmidt said.

A celebration of life for Forster is being planned by longtime friend Tony Hammon, a former pastor at Island Community Church. It was originally planned for Sept. 18 at Founders Park but was canceled due to concerns over drawing a large number of



people into a small space and potentially exposing them to the virus. A virtual event is now being planned for a later date. Schmidt said she and the staff of Mangrove Mike's will likely be in attendance at that ceremony.

In addition to being owner of Mangrove Mike's, Forster had a minority stake in the Rain Barrell shop center and had an auxiliary location of Mangrove Mike's at Bud n' Mary's Marina.

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