

A DAY in the LIFE OF...

A Bartender in Vermillion

By Alan Dale
The Plain Talk

To try and capture a day with a bartender during the apex of their work week would be tantamount to serving up a Skittles shot.

So this reporter decided to spend a few hours with Old Lumber Company's bartender Justin Wright this past Sunday as the customers came in, but not in a mad rush.

That allowed for Wright, a co-worker, and some customers to sit down with *The Plain Talk* and discuss a typical day in the life of a bartender.

Wright, 25, by way of Chicago, came to Vermillion a few years back to begin his studies at the University of South Dakota.

The young man decided to take a break from all things USD, moved to Washington D.C. for a period of time before he figured it was time to come back and finish his work on his degree in media/journalism specializing in media relations.

Then, suddenly last summer, without formal training, Wright became a barkeep at the sports bar located at 15 Court Street.

"At a young age I was exposed to alcohol," Wright said. "I was always curious about being a bartender. I was always on the other side of the bar, so I wondered what it would be like to be on that side of the bar."

"They were really personable and I thought 'I could do that.'"

The move to a new vocation wasn't as tough as one might think. After working as a Starbucks barista, Wright felt perfectly prepared.

"This is my first bartending job," Wright said. "I used to work at Starbucks and this is kind of like bartending, making drinks. Starbucks customers are a little crazier, that's about it. Those guys will chew your head off in the morning over light foam."

"Drunks can sometimes get a little..." Wright stopped and laughed.

It didn't take long for Wright to figure out the nuances between the two worlds and two types of



Justin Wright serves it up at the Old Lumber Company last weekend. A job of a bartender can be one part service, another part therapy.

THOMAS HATZENBUHLER / FOR THE PLAIN TALK

drinkers.

"A coffee drinker is someone who is going to work and needs a little pep in their step," Wright said. "A (alcohol) drinker is usually off work and don't have any extracurricular activities at home so they just go and socialize."

Tiffany Hrdlicka manages the Old Lumber Company for owner Chad Grunewald and Wright got the job after getting to know both of them when he worked at Wells Fargo Bank.

The adjustment to making drinks - especially with an unlimited menu of whatever the customer wants, wasn't near as daunting as one would expect.

"It's similar," Wright said. "Drink portions for espresso and milk is similar to whiskey and Coke."

The Ins and Outs of Tending Bar

Working at Old Lumber Company has its advantages for a new bartender.

Where one smaller facility would find people fighting over what channel the small television tucked in the corner should be on, Wright has little to worry about there since a sports bar like the OLC is stocked full of flickering sets throughout the facility.

Wright not only serves drinks but he also takes food orders and has to

do quite a bit of moving around on this Sunday.

If it isn't a father and son hanging out, it's a lady accompanying some younger girls for a pizza. Then of course a pair of couples sit only feet away from a handful of bikers who decide to stop in for a quick drink and a couple of laughs.

Then there are the regulars.

"We have one guy that comes in all the time," Wright said. "He actually falls asleep here. He will stay on my whole shift, tip well, drink the whole time - big beers."

During this recent spring break, Wright noted the locals or 'townies' were able to come on in and watch the shows and listen to the music they wanted without too much competition with the USD students that were mostly away for the week.

"They were tipping well because they were saying 'I can get the attention that I need, I can get the service that I need, and I don't have to compete with the college kids,'" Wright said. "College kids aren't really as needy and they don't really care about what a drink tastes like."

"You can make a completely wrong drink and they'll say, 'no, no, that's fine.' With an older person

they know exactly what they want and exactly how it should taste."

Locals like Andrea White appreciate what a bartender has to offer to the experience of going out for a meal and/or drink.

"In a college town they have the greatest job ever with good money and good tips usually," White said. "When I was in college it was the job to have. My roommate was a bartender and that's how we'd do our laundry - she'd come home with the Crown Royal bag full of quarters from tips."

White appreciates the role of a bartender that has to find the happy medium while working with persons with liquor in hand.

"They are easy to talk to especially when you are getting liquored up when you talk to them," White said. "I know they have to be really, really patient. I know on nights when I have been around people who were drunk when I was sober and it was really horrible."

"To be successful you have to show a lot of personality, get to know their names, remember what they want to drink, and get to know your regulars."

Zach Lewis is a cook at the sports bar and he has a lot of appreciation for what Wright and his ilk have to

do to be good at their job. "It's being able to know if you are timing it right and making a drink right," Lewis said. "I have so much appreciation because I know I couldn't do that job. They have to deal with drunk people and that's always difficult. They have to have a pretty big knowledge base too."

It can make a difference between being a good or bad barkeep.

"A bad bartender doesn't remember your name, doesn't remember what you ordered, and is slower getting back to you," customer Cameron Dyvig said as he wrapped up a meal and drink. "They probably aren't as social. It's the opposite of a good one. They interact with you about who you are, what you like, and what may have happened that day."

"When I travel, and I travel a lot, I will have dinner at a bar and they will interact with you. It makes it a little more possible for coming back. They have the talent and skills to interact with people."

How To Get the Job Done
Someone wants a pizza and they walk into a place that makes a pizza on a menu. Same goes for a salad.

But name the last time someone walked into a bar with a menu.

Why don't you see them? Because the act of imbibing has an unlimited scope. What is one man's drink is another man's gag reflex and vice versa.

Yet, now, if faced with an order that Wright doesn't know how to whip up, he is blessed with modern technology. Thank you Smart Phones and Google.

"Now I don't say, 'what's that?' I just Google it and there (the mix) is," Wright said. "My favorite drink to make is a Long Island Iced Tea. I like turning the bottles over and you turn five different ones over so it's fun."

"My least favorite drink is called the Skittles shot. I hate it because it's every Pucker mixed together to give it that Skittles taste."

When a customer comes in they want that one shot I have to flip over like six bottles for one shot. You

don't want to over pour it either so you hope they have more than one shot."

Wright said that the most popular drink is a Chuck Norris and of course good old, reliable beer.

"Ladies like their beers with tomato juice in it," Wright said. "Beer is easy; simple...you can't do that wrong."

Wright knows what it takes to be a success and the No. 1 skill is to be able to read a customer and their mood.

"You have to be sociable and you have to be able to talk to people," Wright said. "You meet a lot of different people so you have to be able to talk to anybody. When someone comes in by themselves they basically are just talking to you and you have to be able to hold a conversation."

"Sometimes someone comes in after having a bad day and now they are drinking alcohol. You have to read them and asses them. You keep it nice and brief and then you smile. The sad ones, I want to chat them up and make their day better."

Multi-tasking is an art in bartending as well when talking to a customer, observing others and making drinks sometimes all at once.

It also involves a lot of "intensive cleaning" when it's a bit slower and that gives a bar plenty of sparkle in between all the rowdiness.

Wright's also used the job to learn more about Vermillion, saying local politics has been the biggest downer to Wright in his role as a bartender. He also hates having to cut a drinker off because he hates to be a buzzkill, but he also has to protect the customer's best interests as well as his employer's.

Bartending does give Wright some neat stories to tell.

"I hear people talking about their weddings a lot," he said. "I love watching people have fun. A crowd of people having fun. On a Saturday night I am having fun working. I am laughing and we're dancing behind the bar. We are playing off the crowd's vibes."

"The tips are always nice."

Wakonda's Alsdorf to Serve Church Mission in El Salvador

SIoux CITY, Iowa - A young woman who has lived and worked in the Siouxland area for most of her life is heading to El Salvador to serve a mission for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Alexandria Rene Alsdorf, 22, of Wakonda, South Dakota, will enter the missionary training center in Guatemala for Spanish language training later this month and will then travel to El Salvador to serve in the El Salvador San Salvador West Belize Mission. The mission covers West

San Salvador, all of Belize, plus the islands associated with El Salvador.

Alsdorf is a 2011 graduate of Irene-Wakonda High School, and has attended the University of South Dakota. She is a member of the Vermillion Branch of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and the Sioux City Stake of the church. For the past 3 years she has worked at the Walmart in Vermillion and has been saving up for her mission. She and her family and friends will pay for her mission.

Alsdorf decided she wanted to serve a mission when she was 11 years old and learned that her older brother, Allen, then 17, had decided to serve. Allen Alsdorf subsequently served a 2-year, Spanish-speaking mission in Los Angeles, California. Her brother Adam Alsdorf has also served in Las Vegas, Nevada.

"I want to serve as a missionary because I want to learn, teach, serve, and inspire others," Alex Alsdorf said. "I want to be more culturally aware of the rest

of the world, and to give people the opportunity to have the gospel of Jesus Christ in their lives."

Alsdorf also hopes to give humanitarian service to those in poverty in El Salvador—something for which the church is known internationally.

"With poverty there is not a lot of hope," Alsdorf said. "The gospel strengthens people and gives them hope and purpose, and something to look forward to. I want to help them look upward toward the light."



EARTH From Page 1A

start selling it." Within the next year, the Wrights made about \$9,000 in sales, and about \$2,000 in profits.

"We don't do it to make a huge profit," Marije notes. "We just want enough to make ends meet, and make it affordable for our customers."

They decided to create their home-based com-

pany, God's Green Earth, in order to provide products that reduce toxic exposure within the home and products that do not negatively impact the earth. They have been in business for a little less than a year.

Crystal Solomon, owner of The Front Porch located on Main Street, has been selling the company's soap, shampoo, deodorant, and lip balm in her store.

"I get comments all the time from people who are familiar with their products," says Solomon. "We

get a lot of repeat customers - I have used some products myself and I've been pleased with the ones I've tried, like the lip balm and soap."

Liza Sandoval, current resident who grew up in Vermillion, uses multiple God's Green Earth products after seeing them at the Vermillion Farmer's Market.

"I've been using them since last summer - I love their hand soap, moisturizer and leave in conditioner, and Marije always makes

it easy to get her products," says Sandoval. "Their family is such a great addition to Vermillion, and their products are just an extension of who they are - good and wholesome."

According to the website, godsgreenearth.us, the company utilizes the cold process and hot process methods of making soaps.

The site also offers a wealth of information regarding soap-making, including scholarly articles and other information to help guide customers.

"One of our main goals as a company is to help people educate themselves," says Alafia. "We just want to make something that's

also attends the Spring Fling Vendor Event and the monthly indoor Farmer's Market at the 4H Building.



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