

10. Iris Melendez_mixdown

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bar, community, business, iron sharpens, neighborhood, sammy, iris, gentrification, establishment, predominantly, iron, community organizers, melendez, salsa, people, owner, big, kindness, place, customers

SPEAKERS

De'Wayne Drummond, Leon Robinson, Iris Melendez

L Leon Robinson 00:10
Hey y'all, it's Leon Robinson here.

D De'Wayne Drummond 00:12
And De'Wayne Drummond. Welcome back to Iron Sharpens Iron.

L Leon Robinson 00:15
Weâ€™ll be talking to Philly community organizers about what's happening in their communities, what they're doing to make a difference, and what they've learned in the process.

D De'Wayne Drummond 00:24
Today, weâ€™re talking to Iris Melendez, owner of Sammyâ€™s Place in North Philly about engaging the community as a business owner, connecting folks with different identities, and how businesses can support their community.

L Leon Robinson 00:40
In 1993, Iris opened Sammyâ€™s Place at 5th and Jefferson. Back then, it was an old-school Latino bar, but today it is a lively bar where everyone is welcome, regardless of background or label. Iris sticks to her roots and promotes events via paper fliers in the neighborhood instead of social media, and for certain events, you can expect a whole pig roasting all day out back for everyone to feast on!

D De'Wayne Drummond 01:09
Iris, welcome to Iron Sharpens Iron. Tell us about your story. What led you to open Sammy's Place at Fifth and

Jefferson Street.

I Iris Melendez 01:19

Wow, that was a chance of life. I was with my son's dad at the time, and he was actually leasing a different spot. And this brought him up and it was a friend of his. So we switched. Oh, wow, that's 27 years ago.

L Leon Robinson 01:40

Wow. So you'd have been in bar business before this?

I Iris Melendez 01:47

Absolutely not? Absolutely. I never thought i i'd own a bar in my entire life.

D De'Wayne Drummond 01:54

We all know that this neighborhood has changed since 1993. Tell us about this change and what it meant for your business.

I Iris Melendez 02:11

Back to 93. It was predominantly a Hispanic and Black neighborhood but more Hispanic I'd say everybody knew each other. And everybody knew about somebody. Okay. And it was amicable. You know, it was amicable. As of now with gentrification, it's all gone. The gentrification in this neighborhood brought a lot a younger crowd, and they're very entitled most most of them come here and they have no regard for what is still left here of what was left here. You know, from what was and, you know, the camaraderie and the good mornings and trust me, I've tried. I've tried and and I can tell it with a handful you know, the people that you know, respond. With the true honest feelings like "Good morning," with a smile or, you know, "Hey, goodmorning", and, you know, or stare at you, or just mumble as they walking away. I don't know. But there's a lot of animosity, there's no comraderie, there's no friendliness around in this neighborhood. Actually, the dogs - every every family that has moved here, the dogs are friendlier.

L Leon Robinson 03:48

Yeah. Oh, that's sad. So. Iris, you gave us a makeup of what the neighborhood used to be mainly made up of Hispanics and blacks. So what is it made up now?

I Iris Melendez 04:02

Now it's predominantly white. And I say it's more blacks and Hispanics left now.

L Leon Robinson 04:10

And how has that business? How has your business changed as a result of this gentrification?

I

Iris Melendez 04:17

Oh, hasn't been easy. Um, I think my establishment is well was predominantly Hispanic With quarantine, it was mixed with black but more Hispanics. As always from my time and the owner prior to me its always been Hispanic owners and and what gentrif- with quarantine, I gained more black clientele. Okay. And my personal opinion and I speak for myself, there are more like takeouts and I think the fact that its a brown and black establishment predominantly stem from coming in and hanging out. They peek in and they make great reviews how beautiful it is, how lovely, how cozy, a lot of good props. But you know they'll come in and do a takeout at you know they're they're afraid that you know they're afraid. And I tried. I'm not a mean person, I am as easy as they come but if you don't have that wrong button you know, but I I you know try to conceal that button because you know, we all have that short fuse and and I refuse to let that fuse be ignited by anyone you know. So it's been, you know, a little struggle trying to get them in. So it is what it is I continue to do us. I continue to, you know, thrive with the business and you know, I've been doing some upgrades, little facelift here and there back in the days what we were calling mom and pop bar. It has matured into something a little bit more, and I want it to be a little bit more I want to change with the neighborhood. I want to change with gentrification, but I want to keep what I am. They're all welcome the you know, we're open from 12 noon to two in the morning. Oh, I am most of the time we close sooner. But they come in, hey We'll all have a great. Everything that we do here is all bilingual.

D

De'Wayne Drummond 06:38

Over the summer, Miss Winberg did an excellent, excellent story on you, in Billy Penn, she wrote, "Melendez has sewn together North Philly's Latino stronghold with her LGBTQ clientele in a lasting way. There are plenty of growing pains, especially at first. But eventually, two bars began to coexist naturally." What was your approach to building community?

I

Iris Melendez 07:14

Oh, kindness. Kindness and as I always say, it's not what you say, it's how you say it, you know, some things you have to sugarcoat so that people can see it from her perspective, the ones that know, they see the raw and accept it. So ones that are not so accepting, but want to, you know, you know you have to treat them in a different level until they feel comfortable enough to see the raw of the LGBT. So it was struggles, it was struggles, there was a lot of challenges. And but we overcame, um, and it was by, you know, having a firm hand also, you have to have a firm hand and one hand, you have kindness and the other one, you have a whip, you know, this is what we're doing here. And this is what we're not going to be doing - it worked out. It worked out. So but I think it's about respect. Back then, and weeding out the ones that you can't really reach to, you know, that give them a choice. You either accept and come here with respect, you don't have to like it, but you will respect it. If not, you will have to find another spot, you know, to enjoy yourself. And that was the bottom line.

D

De'Wayne Drummond 08:47

Has your approach changed any?

I

Iris Melendez 08:50

Absolutely not. I have gotten stronger and more firm, especially with the LGBT community has gotten an open a broader spectrum and many, many, many, many doors for this new generation of young adults that have come out. So with that said, I have more empathy, I have more love, I have more kindness. I have my spiels, my repertoires, and you know, I try to lead by example in positive ways. Before anything I taught anybody, whether you're straight, gay, bi, you know, trans, there's a time and place for everything. I will not allow that promiscuous, spit swapping, as I call it in this establishment. If you are gay or you're in the life and you come in with a partner, it's kind of obvious that you came in with a partner. And that's what we want here. Pure Love. Couples sharing love, not going through a phase and coming in here and showing off for the straight people that are here and you're gonna give them something to talk about. Because you're putting yourself out there. So certain things, you know, I'm very careful how I approach it because there is a free country. But this is my establishment and I am entitled to house rules. So all across the board, no matter which store you have you come in and I have for you come in with with respect, and that's all I request. And that's it. And we have great times we have great time to everybody together. And nobody judge anymore like they used to. It's just, it's just a way of norm here. And Sammy's Place is not a gay bar, it's a spot for everyone. So and they all come.

D

De'Wayne Drummond 10:58

Do you see Sammy's Place as being like a Safe Haven?

I

Iris Melendez 11:04

For the LGBT? No.

D

De'Wayne Drummond 11:06

For anybody.

I

Iris Melendez 11:09

No, Sammy's Places is uh - Well, my slogan is Sammy's Place - Where Friends become Family. Okay. Okay. We have the bbqs and you can reserve one of the grills because you're coming in with your family. Sunday is for family dinner, its what we do here. So Sammy's Place is not your typical corner bar and I'd be refused - I am not a dive bar.

L

Leon Robinson 11:37

Do you consider yourself a community organizer?

I

Iris Melendez 11:41

Always have been, and I hope that I continue to have the strength and the wisdom, the honest wisdom, to continue to help those that come knock on my doors, Or you know, for whatever the reason.

L

Leon Robinson 11:55

Is your business a family business? And how can business owners support the community?

I

Iris Melendez 12:00

Um, I would say that predominantly, I consider my business a family business because we have so many activities that include families. So yes, I don't want to exclude anyone and I do I'm big on fundraiser. So yeah, I'm a community base, you know, liaison spot and person.

L

Leon Robinson 12:21

When I say family business, I mean, is your family involved in the business? Any members of your family besides yourself?

I

Iris Melendez 12:28

My son, I have a son and a daughter, my son they help out randomly when he wants to, but you know how that goes.

L

Leon Robinson 12:37

Okay. Okay, De'Wayne you got the next question, here.

D

De'Wayne Drummond 12:42

Iris, have you worked with any business associations or any other partners?

I

Iris Melendez 12:49

No, I have always flown solo.

D

De'Wayne Drummond 12:52

Have any business association ever reached out to you? Like for some type of support?

I

Iris Melendez 12:57

Oh, yeah, absolutely. Well, I'm a big sponsors of the police department. I do that every year. Um Komen for women, they always reach out and we have team up in the past and done great big things in this neighborhood. Yeah, there's a few out there that reach out.

L

Leon Robinson 13:18

How can business owners support your community?

How can business owners support your community?

I

Iris Melendez 13:21

They need to stop being so bias to their own and open more doors and spread the word I remember when I first started in the 90s and early we had like a little bar commerce business thing. We would meet at one particular you know spot, and every owner had to bring their manager and two customers. Okay. And not, not only were we supporting that establishment financially that night, because back then predominantly all the bars were Latino or Spanish. So you're talking about maybe you know, let's say 15 bars, we will come in and bringing maybe 50, 60, 70 you know, people for a meeting and then we will troubleshoot and we will share ideas and we have one rule. If you were within three mile radius from each other, you cannot be a copycat. You could share that idea on a different day. Okay, because that was like taking from my day of business because you I'm doing good today Oh, um, so let me go copycat that that that was a rule. Now you know, everybody's for themselves. Now we are one of the few bars left and old timers. Now the new bars are younger, you know, in age owners, younger owners. So it was very different back then. So I have been trying to, because making it more of a family thing where everybody is welcome we're trying to like, take the bar image from it so that more people feel more welcome to come in.

D

De'Wayne Drummond 15:18

Iris, where can listeners find Sammy's Place? And what kind of events do you have coming up?

I

Iris Melendez 15:27

Well, every Wednesday, we have from eight to 12. Free Salsa classes with Frankie Cruz. And he does his time for free. And with one of our radio stations here. Wednesdays are increasing in couples that are coming in to dance. Learn the salsa, and they're really nice to see. And Thursdays we now have 70s and 80s oldies jams and Fridays is Karaoke, every Saturday, now we have salsa live bands to complement our Wednesday's. And I'm big on birthdays, we provide small cakes and balloons, you bring your guests. You want to bring in your palmaria you set up your table. And now we have one rule. No matter who's having an event here. Once you open your food, the whole bar eats.

L

Leon Robinson 16:43

That's good. That's good. That's really good. That's good.

I

Iris Melendez 16:49

In the Puerto Rican culture we are raised that you do not deny a plate of food to anyone.

L

Leon Robinson 16:55

Okay. All right. Okay,

I

Iris Melendez 16:58

and being that is a bunch of old heads, you know, having a few drinks. I have to feed them.



Leon Robinson 17:04

Okay. Okay. Let's give us that location address.



Iris Melendez 17:08

1449 North fifth.



Leon Robinson 17:11

Okay. All right. And what section of town is that? In



Iris Melendez 17:16

Oh what is it - Some of us call us Kensington.



Leon Robinson 17:22

Okay. You know, cuz you know, Philly is a community of neighborhoods. Okay. Okay. All right, Iris: Proverbs 27 inspired the Iron Sharpens Iron podcast, which says I, "as one iron sharpens iron, So one person sharpens another. " Tell us who has sharpened you at to sharpen your iron, you got any mentors, or whatever in the community that kind of has helped you? Or is helping you or whatever?



Iris Melendez 17:52

Well, I will say, I'm sort of like a self made woman, believe it or not, not to pat my own self on the back but maybe I should. But I would say my customers, I learned. Okay, good. I learn every day from my customers, I learn how to run my business, where my customers moods and attitudes. They teach you how to grow what to implement, they give me vibrant new ideas. You know what? What's going on now? So my customers are my greatest inspiration, and my biggest headaches.




Leon Robinson 18:36


Thank you for being our guest, one thing I can say about this podcast is it has culture to it, it has culture. And I think that one thing that this gentrification thing is that we want to make sure that no matter who comes in, they respect the culture that they come in into that and leave it there and leave it there and join us, but not try to take it away and make it not existing. You know, so I applaud you for that, for making your culture be sustainable, sustainable, and if that makes any sense.




Iris Melendez 19:13

Yes, it makes sense to me.

 Leon Robinson 19:16
Okay, great, great.

 De'Wayne Drummond 19:18
I also want to just thank you for coming on to Iron Sharpens Iron, something that Maya Angelou said she said, I have learned and we have learned a lot through this podcast today about owning business, gentrification, and also about building community and and we at Iron Sharpens Iron, we really, really appreciate you, Miss Iris for coming on this podcast, letting your voice be heard. And I want to finish this and say, God bless you.

 Iris Melendez 19:52
Thank you. God bless you all as well. Thanks

 De'Wayne Drummond 19:55
Thanks for listening to Iron Sharpens Iron. To receive the latest episodes of Iron Sharpens Iron, be sure to subscribe on Apple Music, Spotify, Google Podcasts, or wherever you get your podcasts.

 Leon Robinson 20:11
And leave us a review to let us know what topics we should cover and introduce us to the community organizers from your neighborhood who should join us on the podcast.

 De'Wayne Drummond 20:21
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