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Human Interest

At Red Arrow centennial, regulars reflect on long-standing diner's place in many lives

By Josie Albertson-Grove Union Leader Staff Oct 15, 2022



Ami D'Amelio give the Red Arrow Diner mascot, "Moe" a hug during the 100th Anniversary celebration on Saturday in Manchester.

Union Leader Photo by Jodie Andruskevich

The Red Arrow diner is famously cramped, with room for maybe 20 people at its few booths and red vinyl counter stools — but as the restaurant celebrated its 100th anniversary Saturday, more than 100 diners were able to spread out on dozens of tables set up on Lowell Street, eating with Red Arrow staff to celebrate the outsized role the tiny diner has played in New Hampshire.

The humble diner grabs out-of-towners' attention about every four years, when it becomes a folksy backdrop for presidential hopefuls meeting voters. But for the rest of the last 100 years, the Red Arrow has been a constant in thousands of lives.

The Red Arrow is a place to get grub on the way home from the airport or a day in the White Mountains. The Red Arrow is the spot to get pancakes after last call. The Red Arrow is the backdrop for birthday breakfasts and everyday dinners. The Red Arrow is the place where just about every kind of person in Manchester can wind up jammed together, tucking into omelets or sandwiches much like they've done for the last century.

The diner was founded by a French Canadian immigrant, David Lamontagne, in 1922. An economic depression, a world war, and a global pandemic later, the Red Arrow is on its fifth set of owners.

Some staff have served for decades, like Anival Pascual. Now the manager of the Londonderry Red Arrow, Pascual started as a dishwasher almost 20 years ago and worked his way up through the kitchen. "They take care of their people," he said.

And the people aim to take care of their customers, said Sherilyn Milne of Auburn, who has worked at the Londonderry branch for five years. Milne said she likes meeting people from all over the country who flock to New Hampshire for the foliage every fall, and spending time getting to know different kinds of people.

"It is so much fun," Milne said. "Making new regulars, and just the upbeat, fun atmosphere."



Ray Lamontagne speaks during the 100th Anniversary Celebration of the Red Arrow Diner in Manchester Saturday. Lamontagne's father was the original owner. Looking on is current Red Arrow Diner co-owner Carol Lawrence.

Union Leader Photo by Jodie Andruskevich

Alec Guth of Peperell, Mass., has been a regular at the Red Arrow for years, making the 30-minute drive to Manchester about once a week just to eat there, and making a point to stop if he's coming back from a day of hiking. He likes the breakfast combos — the Queen Dinah or Moe's 3x3x3. Guth had to take a break from March 2020 to July 2021, to try to stay safe during the worst of the pandemic.

When he came back for the first time just over a year ago, he said, "I felt like I was home again."

Guth's mother, Tracy Guth, said she feels good knowing her skinny son is going to eat well when he goes to the Red Arrow, and knowing the staff will go out of their way to make him feel welcomed and comfortable.

"Everybody likes to know their kids, even their adult kids, are going to be in a friendly, safe environment," she said.

Elbow room

For the past few years, Milne said one of her regulars was repeat House candidate Matt Mowers, who won the Republican nomination in 2020 but lost the 2022 primary. "Matt Mowers has become my buddy," she said, after repeated campaign stops at the diner.

The Red Arrow has become a cliché of New Hampshire campaigns. But the chance to shake hands with the tradesmen, nurses, lawyers and service workers at the restaurant, and the chance to be photographed in the nostalgic diner behind an everyman meal of a massive sandwich and fries, has remained too good to pass up.

"I think it's cool to have a local place to see people," said Deb Eren of Manchester, about the cycle of political visits that intensifies around the presidential primary.

"I get kind of upset about the politicians pushing the locals out," said Mike Allard of Manchester. "Go have your town halls — don't disrupt my breakfast!"

Over the years, said Jayme McKenzie, manager of the Manchester diner, the staff have gotten practiced in the art of the candidate visit.

"My first time around, it was a lot," she said. Now, she's comfortable working with security teams and the Secret Service. "We are very well-versed with the dance."

The visits can get to be a lot, she said, especially in the years there's no incumbent. But she remembered one especially sweet visit.

When Mabel Lamontagne, wife of the first owner, celebrated her 100th birthday at the Red Arrow in May 2007, one of the people singing “Happy Birthday” was the then-junior Senator from Illinois — Barack Obama.

Even on Saturday, at least one would-be politician was making the rounds.



Union Leader Photo by Jodie Andruskevich Alexis Makis has some fun making a giant bubble at the Red Arrow Diner 100th Birthday celebration on Saturday in Manchester..

“There’s that Don Bolduc guy,” said Jenifer Tracy of Manchester to husband Chris as they waited in line.

Bolduc, the Republican running for U.S. Senate, leaned on a chair and chatted with diners as his service dog, Victor, lay at his feet. Bolduc’s opponent, Democratic Sen. Maggie Hassan, spent Saturday morning at a memorial road race for James Foley, the journalist and New Hampshire native killed in Syria in 2014.

Allard doesn’t care for politicians who want to shake his hand in the middle of breakfast, but he admitted it is a lot of fun when actors show up.

Waiting for Adam

For non-political junkies, the Red Arrow might look familiar for its role in an Adam Sandler movie – Sandler had a version of the Red Arrow built on a Massachusetts set for “Grown Ups 2.” Sandler attended high school at nearby Manchester Central, and the Red Arrow has photos from a few of the actor’s visits on its walls, alongside snapshots of Obama, Donald Trump, Al Gore and Chris Sununu.

Lana Forrester of Salem, Mass., came with a group of friends, all kind of hoping Sandler would show up on Saturday, she said.

But the Red Arrow itself was reason enough to make the trip to Manchester, Forrester said. She grew up going to the Londonderry Red Arrow for breakfast, lunch, or after a party, and still loves the diner’s Buffalo mac and cheese.

The Red Arrow’s marketing team tried to get Sandler’s attention on social media, hoping he might show up on Lowell Street for the centennial. Sandler was a no-show on Saturday, though he is scheduled to perform in Manchester on Oct. 22.

Like mom’s

Some regulars measure their time coming to the Red Arrow in years and decades, but Kathy and Dave Beliveau of Keene have been coming to the diner for just a few months – ever since Kathy’s mom moved into the Hanover Hill nursing home. The couple drives to Manchester after work to visit the nursing home, but by the time they leave around 9 p.m., there aren’t too many options for food.

The Red Arrow has been the place to get a meal after the visits end. Leaving her mom’s side is hard, but the staff at the Red Arrow are good at putting her in a better mood.

“They make me laugh and smile, and I love my American chop suey,” Beliveau said. With onions, peppers and big chunks of tomato, she said, “It’s just like my mother’s.”

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