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GREATER NASHUA

My Red Arrow
Diner surprise



MIKE MORIN

TELEGRAPH COLUMNIST

If you enjoyed a cup of coffee at the Red Arrow Diner this morning, you have a French immigrant to thank. David Lamontagne opened a modest lunch cart in Manchester in October, 1922, exactly 100 years ago. He and his family changed casual dining in New Hampshire that is still going strong today.

David's 80-something son Raymond, granddaughter Cynthia, descendants, relatives and current operators gathered to celebrate Saturday at the diner on Lowell street in Manchester. I was invited to attend, having written a book on the iconic dining place: *If These Walls Could Talk – Celebrating 100 Years of the Red Arrow, America's Most Beloved Diner*. The book will be released soon. My publisher is waiting for the ink to dry as copies roll off the presses in Hudson, just across the Merrimack river from the newest Red Arrow. The current owner is Carol Lawrence, who also has a remarkable story that I share in the book.

The most recent of the current four Red Arrows opened in Nashua where the Friendly's used to be on the DW. That was 2022, right about the time COVID took hold. Ironically, David Lamontagne's original Manchester Red Arrow opened about the time the Spanish Flu pandemic began to recede after taking 675,000 American lives. The growing and bustling mill town of Manchester was starving for quality food on a working person's budget. What surprised me most as I began interviewing Ray Lamontagne four years ago, was the surprising mix of very famous people who were a part of the local founding family's orbit.

Raymond Lamontagne, David's son, attended Yale and because of his interest in public service, caught the attention of former first

lady Eleanor Roosevelt, who personally invited him to visit her at her summer home. The New York Times wrote a story about his declining an invitation to play major league baseball so that he could accept a teaching fellowship at Yale-in-China, which impressed her.

He also had a summer roommate with a famous pedigree...Jay Rockefeller, son of John D. Rockefeller III and future governor of West Virginia. It was Ray's love of public service and this college connection that set him up after getting his law degree, to go on to a career with the Rockefeller family in their charitable works.

That also led to a lifetime friendship with actor Paul Newman. The blue-eyed Academy Award winning star who went on to build Newman's Own food empire benefitting children everywhere to the tune of over a half billion dollars.

I share these stories about Ray Lamontagne as an Ivy League success story, because his mom and dad, David and Mabel, were committed to having what David never had - an education. At 12 he fled from an abusive situation in Quebec, became a pro boxer and took his winnings to start the Red Arrow.

Uncovering all this was an amazing experience for me. Kind of wish I could be around to write the story of the second hundred years. I hope someone does.

Contact Mike Morin at mike.morinmedia@gmail.com or follow him on Twitter at @MikeMorin-Media. His column runs the first, third and fifth Sundays of the month.

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