

15 MINUTES

Experience of a lifetime

BY EVAN WILLIAMS
Florida Weekly Correspondent

Inside the salmon colored Ambassador Hotel on the river, in the bar, it is about 4 p.m. and bartender Liz Shepard, 56, is stocking up on ice and Budweiser, as well as a few six-packs of Samuel Adams.

"Did you want a couple of shots of 1800?," she asks a couple of guys (the only customers) playing pool.

She knows them and remembers their drinks.

"I have a good memory," she says. "I've been in this business almost 40 years."

Ms. Shepard is having leftover pizza for dinner as she works. She turns on the sound system; Billy Joel starts singing, "In The Middle of the Night:"

*Ooh Ooh Ooh Ooh Ooh
Ooh Ooh Ooh Ooh Ooh...
In the middle of the night*

A manager lurks behind the bar, taking inventory.

Beyond the floor-to-ceiling windows is a view of palm trees, the Caloosahatchee River, and the old US 41 bridge carrying sparse traffic, all with a bland, gray sky.

Ms. Shepard said of her own life that it has been tumultuous:

"Sometimes I feel like I was up in a plane and it exploded and I'm falling to the ground and I'm going 'What a rush!'"

She started in the service business at the age of 17 in a train station in Boston, Mass., where she sometimes did it all: took the order, made the burger and the shake, and served it up. She is originally from Charlestown, Mass., and lived off Bunker Hill Street, she said, "where



COURTESY PHOTO

Shepard in band photo, 25.

the revolutionary war was fought."

It was an "Irish Gangster Town" when she grew up there in the 1950s and '60s, (she said it was scary) and she was a wild child (Protestant, not Irish Catholic).

"I was sneaking into a 'bah'," she begins, with a bold accent. "I was underage. That's how I met my husband. He was an Army brat, in a band. His father was a drill sergeant and had a Napoleon complex. I learned to play bass to be in the band."

The band was called "Willie's Bandwagon" and they played their first gig in Jamestown, New York. The band, she said, was initially intended to be just a temporary thing.

"It was supposed to last 10 days," she said. "It ended up lasting about 10 years."

Other gigs led the band all over the South, Ms. Shepard said, including Mardi Gras in New Orleans.

"Lou Rawls asked us to have a drink with him," she said, remembering. "I saw Al Hirt.

That's when Mardi Gras was really cool."

She said her husband was the keyboard player.

"He's somewhere playing," she said. "We



COURTESY PHOTO

Shepard now, 56.

divorced about 25 years ago. We don't talk.

"I'm one of those survivor type of people — I persevere. I've got kids and a grandkid, so I try to be a better person. I've gotten rid of all my bad habits — except swearing."

She grew up the eighth child in a family of ten, with four brothers and five sisters. Her father was a professional boxer in Boston in the 1920s and 30s, she said, named Cecil Dora.

"I was his favorite child — at least that's what I intend to believe."

She named some family members who have died: her sister Janet died from cancer, her sister Judy died from falling off a second story, her niece committed suicide, and her brother Bobby died, she said, "probably from just evilness."

"If you looked up dysfunctional in the dictionary, you'd probably see a picture of my family, with my father leading the bunch," she said. "My father was very violent.

"We were the fighting Protestants," she added, putting up her dukes. "That's how we did it in Boston — we like to fight. That's how we won that war."

Ms. Shepard says she knows pretty much everyone around here. She was the head waitress at the country club on McGregor Boulevard before it became Brix and also worked at a Mexican restaurant on First Street, downtown, that has since turned into law offices.

She remembers her old boss, Joan, with a three-word hymn: "She's rip roarin' unbelievable!"

From the jukebox, Roxy Music's "More Than This" starts playing, Bryan Ferry moaning:

*You know there's nothing...
More than this*

"It's kinda fun being a bartender, you know," Ms. Shepard said. "I get to wear this shirt, and I play my music, and sometimes I dance a little bit."

Ms. Shepard danced over to the other side of the bar to offer the two pool players, who had already tossed back their tequila shots, the specials of the day: Grasshoppers and Brandy Alexanders. The best things about her life, she said, are her twin boys, both 36, and her grandchild, 8 — those flesh-and-blood gifts, along with the fact that she just got accepted into the nursing program at Edison College.

"That's a big deal," she said.

Ms. Shepard doesn't miss playing the bass or Massachusetts; she lives for her children and grandchild, Fort Myers is her home, and "once you get me mad," she said, "nothing scares me."

Still, like most people past the age of adolescence, she has some regrets.

"Some things that happen have a domino affect," she said. "I'm not like Frank Sinatra — 'I did it my way,' and fine. If I could go back and change things, I would." ■

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