

COMMENTARY

The new Puritans



hilarity, either. Their own.

But like the Puritans of old, they aren't interested in equality under the law, or any place else. They figure that some adults should have the comfort of a good drink, or of the hilarious society that goes with a good drink, but not all adults.

As a result, if you're 18, 19 or 20 in the City of Palms, you're an adult without privileges downtown. You inherit all the risks and responsibilities society harnesses to an adult, but — at least in downtown Fort Myers — only some of the comfort. That's because the Puritans have seen to it for the better part of this decade that you can't enter the clubs, bars or taverns.

I don't intend to debate the massive hypocrisy of our federal drinking laws, or talk about how our youngest full-fledged grown-ups— let me call them Snub-Nose Adults — as of this month comprised almost 20 percent of the nearly 4,300 Americans killed and 31,100 wounded in Iraq since 2003.

I won't dwell on the fact that that they can vote, they can be tried under adult laws for crimes, they can wed, they can pay taxes (like business owners downtown) and they can dance the fandango. And I don't need to point out that they feel love or joy or despair in measures equal to those of Puritans, if not greater.

Not only that, but have you noticed? They often behave with a great deal more maturity and aplomb than their elders.

So why not grant them full access, like any other adult downtown?

Although other cities are successfully and lucratively managing entertainment districts that allow Snub-Nose Adults to be treated equally, while adhering to federal and state alcohol laws, Fort Myers has not been willing to do that.

We can send them to Iraq, but we can't let them play pool or listen to live music in the Indigo Room on the Patio de Leon, where Raimond Aulen — who doesn't drink — runs one of the tidiest and most enduring businesses the downtown can claim. His tavern is named for the beautiful and now endangered Florida snake, the Indigo (non-venomous, not dangerous to people, but very dangerous to rattlesnakes and others).

Strangely, Snub-Nose Adults can sit at the full-liquor bar in the French Connection, where co-owner Pam DeGeer (she grew up on a farm in Michigan) is one of the most stable, disciplined and capable adults you'll ever meet — but not because she's a good example of how they might behave (she is, obviously). Instead, they can sit there next to the boozers until closing time, buying soda pop or tea, simply because the French is classified as a restaurant.

Downtown is a compelling place now — a gentle, sophisticated, lively, architecturally appealing place. But it's also a place where businesses are desperately struggling, and a significant portion of the nighthawk population, the Snub-Nose Adults, are not encouraged to go share in the fun and spend their money.

By cutting them off from the society of older adults downtown, we've driven them to malls and other venues, and to the solitary fraternity of their own kind. That's not natural at any time, but especially in a day and age when they

already know more about the birds, the bees and the drugs, including legal ones such as alcohol and tobacco, than most other adults.

I've looked at the arguments a few city leaders champion to defend this local bias lately, and they don't hold water. Or beer.

City Manager William Mitchell says city "staff concerns" include:

A. "Allowing minors into places where adult themes are prevalent" (Hey Bill, see Florida Statute 1.01:13: 18-year-olds aren't minors).

B. Adults who sneak alcohol to Snub-Nose Adults (I'll bet we can man-up or woman-up and handle a few terrorists like that).

C. Cost and burden to a downsized police department (I guess it's too tough to put a sub station downtown, or add a few extra troops to the mix and actually support the downtown with energy and caring and enforcement, like other cities).

D. Programs to address vandalism (what about C, above?).

As far as crime goes, the older adults (the Long-Barrel adults, perhaps?) have the Snub-Nose Adults beat hands down. Drugs, shootings, fights, muggings, DUIs — statistics clearly show that the older you get, the better you get at causing trouble. If crime is the concern, we should ban the old fogies and leave downtown to the young ones. Much safer.

But that wouldn't be fair, either. So what do we do? The issue is coming up again in city government, shortly.

I say let's send the Puritans back to Massachusetts, and keep them there.

What do you say? ■

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