



### **Dedication: Captain James**

“But do people actually live here?” people frequently ask us DC guides. One evening I hosted a father and two grown sons, on a business trip to Washington. “You know,” the father said, “I really appreciated the monuments and the stories, but I’d like to see a real neighborhood bar. Is there such a thing here?”

“I’ve got just the place.” I’d moved to Capitol Hill a few years before, when it was a scruffy neighborhood which welcomed all kinds of quirky characters. Taking guests would home be a real treat. “Have you ever seen Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives?” I asked.

We went up Capitol Hill, literally. Many visitors describe the neighborhood as “behind the Capitol.” Pennsylvania Avenue, SE, is a nineteenth-century Main Street, lined with three-story brick buildings. Neighbors hang out at sidewalk tables in front of our cafes and bars. We check in, face-to-face.

Our group went to the Tune Inn, a third-generation neighborhood bar. Since it was featured on TV, we saw tourists among the regulars. People researching at the Library of Congress, just three blocks away, come. Contractors, congressional staffers, police and firemen, retired military officers, a few tour guides . . . all come together.

Most strangers would pass by Captain James. His faded denim jacket with the Marine Corps patch on the back hung loosely on his 70-something frame. He had once been powerful, but now his faded denim jacket with the Marine Corps patch on the back hung loosely on his 70-something frame. The hair hanging down below his cap was scraggly. He jumped, with PTSD, at sudden sounds. It was obvious that one hand didn’t work properly.

Nevertheless, he was a neighborhood fixture. Young marines from the local barracks, the legendary 8<sup>th</sup> and I, would run by in the morning. They noticed his fraying old jacket and had chipped in to get him a new one, complete with the Marine patch on the back.

A few other things set him apart.

The books stood out. There was always a pile of scholarly histories, usually military history. James would not share his personal combat experience, in the 60s, but he could discuss strategies with professors and admirals. And they came to see him, preferably before midafternoon. They exchanged books, stories, and theories. But only a newbie would refer to “General Lee.”

“It’s Colonel Lee,” James retorted, “The highest rank he ever achieved in the United States Army was Colonel.” James was once fired from a Virginia teaching job for passionate Union patriotism.

The people around James stood out as well. James was “Captain” of a neighborhood group. We gathered at the bar, which he called The Chapel, before going to the church a block away. Homeless neighbors and veterans spread the word: “Captain’s cooking this Sunday.” Meatloaf, served on plates at tables, was one specialty. We always cooked from scratch.

Though James never went upstairs, to the actual church, one pastor would come by to write her sermons at the bar, with his advice. James, though he literally prayed to Alcohol, connected the Avenue bars to the Church. Contributing money and time brought people to the church’s ideals, and sometimes services. James, therefore, was something of an apostate apostle. So he called our group the Rogue Saints.

“We only have two commandments,” James said. “Do the Right Thing, and Take Care of Each Other.” What else do you need?”

A local paper featured an article about how the neighborhood came together to reconnect James with his son. There had been difficult times, and it took some neighbors many phone calls to Florida, and one Rogue Saint’s frequent-flyer miles, to bring James’s son to DC. They ended up cooking and hanging out together. The article had just been published, and my tourists were not only feeling part of the neighborhood, but also impressed. They stayed for dinner and a few more drinks.

Even celebrating, James was a curmudgeon. “Why would anyone read fiction when they could read history?” he would demand. “What’s in here,” he’d ask, thumping his pile of history books on the bar, “nobody could make it up. If Stephen King tried to put it in a book, people would say it’s too strange, this guy is losing it.” Captain would take a shot of whiskey to ease into his point. “See, fiction has to make sense. Or nobody will read it. History,” he’d thump the books again, “just has to have happened.”

Our visitors agreed.

Then James got my back. To make me look good, he explained how I organized the shopping, and mentioned that our costs were low. “We feed a hundred people real food for about \$200.”

My visitors were so impressed that they pulled out \$200 and said “Next Sunday’s on us.” It was the first time I got a tip for God. They came back and did the same a few years later, with more of the family along.

Captain James is history himself now. His memorial service wasn’t upstairs. It was, appropriately, in the basement where we served Sunday dinners. He wasn’t technically a church member, after all.

The minister spoke of the demons against which James rebelled. There was guilt over scenes from his service, over the drugs and time away from family. He could never quite forgive himself, she said. But he could rebel, in his way. Poverty, fear, loneliness: he fought them. He defended those less fortunate than himself. Always faithful.

As in life, he brought in quite a crowd. There was at least one Member of Congress, staffers, contractors, unhoused neighbors, other ministers. Fellow tour guides and I especially appreciate his history lessons. He gave us stories to pass on, to keep alive.

Mission accomplished, Captain.