

They told him he'd go broke in six months, but

Failure Was Not on the Menu

by Jonathan Byrd
Greenwood, Indiana



Their car had been struck head-on by a drunk driver. In the silence of that sad living-room, I knew that all the money in the world wasn't worth being in any way responsible for such a tragedy.

But a lot of knowledgeable people had a different view.

"Jonathan," advised a business friend, "here you're planning a restaurant with big function rooms for weddings, banquets and other celebrations. If you won't serve liquor, why, you're writing your own ticket for bankruptcy."

When I explained that I felt the banquet rooms would be used by church groups, he snickered. "You probably won't make enough off *them* to pay your light bill."

"Well," I said, "I guess I'll have to leave that in God's hands."

God hadn't failed me in my 36 years. But that didn't mean life had been easy. Mom and Dad weren't well off, and to help make ends meet I started work as a youngster selling a skin salve door-to-door. Next I sold tomatoes, then raised sheep, and by the time I was nine I had a thousand dollars in the bank.

My whole dream seemed to come crashing down one hot August evening four years ago as I slumped, dejected, at an old picnic table in the middle of the construction site. Dark steel structural girders loomed over me, seeming to overshadow any hopes I had for making a go of the cafeteria I was building.

I had been in the restaurant business most of my life, and for years I had dreamed of building the best cafeteria in the world. Yet now many people were predicting it would fail.

Why? Because I did not plan to put alcohol on the menu.

It wasn't that I had anything against other restaurants doing this; I simply felt God didn't want me to do it. One evening long ago when I was 18, I made a church call with our minister on the grieving kin of a whole family who had been killed outright.



With an 88-foot chow line, Byrd's cafeteria has enough variety to suit everyone. Clockwise from below: hot food, salad bar and baked goods.



mate gathering of all, those awed men sitting down to a meal on the eve of Jesus' crucifixion.

The summer I was 15, Dad became ill, and I took over the responsibility of our restaurant and its 60-some employees. I worked 80 hours a week, convinced this was my calling in life. Dad eventually retired and I went on to Cornell University's School of Hotel Administration. I got a Kentucky Fried Chicken franchise and through the years expanded that into seven KFC restaurants. All the while my dream of opening a cafeteria was growing.

Why a cafeteria? When we were kids my folks often took us to a local cafeteria after church. I loved being able to pick out just what I wanted from the foods displayed before me. Even my little sister, Janeen, a finicky eater, always found something she liked.

In the early 1980s, the dream became more persistent as it took shape



Meanwhile Dad and Grandad had started a small ice cream stand on U.S. 31 in Greenwood, just south of Indianapolis. Eventually it grew into the Kitchen Drive-In, and soon I was flipping burgers, making shakes and greeting customers.

I loved the restaurant business. It touched me to see folks enjoying good food the way I did. Mom said I had a big hole in my stomach that no amount of food could fill. Still, back then I was so skinny I had to wear suspenders to keep my pants up.

I was impressed by how many significant biblical events involved people eating together: Jesus feeding the 5,000; His grilling fish on the beach for the disciples; and that most inti-

in my mind. I wanted to serve delicious food with the greatest selection possible at economical prices. For quality control I planned on modern kitchens with computer-controlled menus, which had never been tried in a restaurant before, only in hospitals and institutions. Since I wanted to offer at least 200 items each day, I figured the cafeteria line would be almost a third as long as a football field. I began to see I was thinking about what could well be the world's largest cafeteria.

But would there be enough customers? Jesus told a parable advising that a man who builds a tower should count the cost so he knows he can finish the job (Luke 14:28-30). I had done my homework. Indianapolis was a fast-growing city, and I had picked out a good location near one of America's major crossroads—just off Interstate 65 in Greenwood—where we would serve not only the local community but also many travelers passing through.

After a lot of prayer, I burned my bridges by selling the Kentucky Fried Chicken restaurants. On March 1, 1987, in a dedication service, we turned our first spadeful of dirt on what would be a colonial-style building covering one acre of ground.

But from then on, it seemed every worldly thing set out to stop us. We figured on spending \$25,000 for permits; they ended up costing 10 times that. Then we had to truck a huge load of dirt off the site to bring it to proper grade. This cost another \$86,000. The contractor advised me to cut back on the quality of materials, such as the raw oak trim throughout the vast dining room.

"No," I said, "I'm putting my name on this place. My wife, two boys and I are going to eat here along with, I

hope, a lot of other people. I want it to be right."

The concrete was poured, the structural steel erected, and the walls started going up. But a big storm hit us in July and blew down most of the roof trusses.

Then, in August 1988, came that worst day of all.

My pastor showed up at the work site and passed on a prediction from a fellow church member who was in the restaurant food-distribution business. "He is terribly worried about you, Jonathan, and so am I," he said. "He says you'll go broke in six months, and I thought I'd better come down and warn you." My pastor felt the same way I did about liquor, but he was also sincerely concerned about my well-being.

As he drove away, I sat down at the splintery old table and began calculating my extra costs. By now I was \$500,000 over budget.

Early dusk had fallen as I sat alone in the tomblike silence of the unfinished restaurant. Then other headlights flashed across in front and a car door thumped. A man in a dark business suit strode up the wooden plank into the building and began peering around. I rose and approached him. "Can I help you?"

The man eyed my old work clothes. "Oh, just looking around," he said. "I own a chain of funeral homes, and I hear the owner of this place isn't going to serve alcohol." He cocked his head. "He'll be bankrupt in six months. With all this space, I figure this could be the biggest funeral home in the Midwest." He shot me a quick smile. "I just wanted to see it now because I figure I'll be buying it from the fool who's building it."

After he left I slumped down at the picnic table and put my head on my

arms. An evening breeze blew an old newspaper around my feet. "Oh, Lord," I groaned, "is there any *good* news?"

At that another car pulled up. *Oh, oh*, I wondered, *now what?*

Two men and two women stepped out of the car. One man began telling the others, "There will be a dining room seating five hundred, an eighty-eight-foot cafeteria line, and some beautiful banquet halls seating six hundred . . ."

He stepped around the corner, and his face lighted up. "Jonathan! I'm just showing my friends your place."

It was Dr. Gene Hood, pastor of the Nazarene church in nearby Beech Grove. "What's the matter?" he asked. "You look down. Had a tough day?"

"Well, you kind of picked the worst day of my life." I recited my troubles, ending up with the "funeral" the local undertaker had just conducted.

He laughed at the story. "Well, I'm excited about your plans." he said. "I

can just see all the Southern gospel singers in your banquet halls."

Gospel singers? What was he talking about?

Dr. Hood leaned across the table. "If you have enough faith to build this place, I have enough faith to help you keep those banquet halls filled with great gospel singing groups."

That was the encouragement I needed. Three months later, on November 7, 1988, we opened our doors. Customers began streaming in, and they have been crowding Jonathan Byrd's Cafeteria and Banquet Hall ever since. Dr. Hood was true to his word; every six weeks our function rooms play host to gospel concerts. And even without liquor, our banquet rooms were quickly booked up, and churches began reserving them far in advance.

So the naysayers were wrong. We're thriving. All of which, I guess, proves that if you count the cost, stick to your principles and leave everything in God's hands, you'll have a menu that can't fail. ◀

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Guideposts

FOR BANQUET and CATERING INFORMATION

Jonathan Byrd's **CAFETERIA**

**LOCATION: I-65 at the Greenwood Exit (Exit 99)
Greenwood, Indiana**