

Frank: The “Boys” will miss you.

Friday night dinner with the “Boys” started in the late 1980’s innocently enough. Frank D’Alessandro was having dinner at Friday’s Restaurant with his best buddy from New Jersey, Todd Fitzgerald. I happened to be having dinner with my pal Dan Makowski on that same Friday night. We bumped into each other at the bar and decided to join forces for the evening and have dinner together. We had so much fun talking and laughing that we decided to do it again on the very next Friday night. And so it continued for the next two decades. As people learned of our “Friday Boys Night Dinner” held at Carabba’s for the most recent decade, we started to have a revolving door of guests join us that read like a “who’s who” from Lee County business and government. But the core group always remained Todd, Ski, myself, Bruce Frankel, Jerry Arzy and the star who always shined the brightest on these evenings was Frank D’Alessandro. Our regular waitress was always Jaime whose husband used to be our bar tender here as well.

But we had various rules for Friday dinners which included “No girls”. And of course every now and then a new guest not familiar with our rules would show up with a date or his wife. This would immediately inhibit us bold fellows for the rest of the evening and our conversation would be bland but polite because we are, after all, gentlemen, except for Jerry of course. And the “regular” from our group who had invited the offending party would have the responsibility of quietly informing him days later of the taboo so it did not happen again. We had all types of silly rules in our group that turned “Robert’s Rules of Order” into “Frank’s Rules of Disorder”. But boy was it fun. The only free passes given for admission to “Friday Boys Night Out” were for two kids and only on occasion. One pass was given to Todd Fitzgerald’s son Giovanni (AKA “The G-Man”) and the other was for my daughter Lauren. Lauren always begs me to take her to Friday night dinners. The boys always treated her like a Princess. Frank was best man at my wedding and I used to tease him that he was the reason for my subsequent divorce. So I had informed Frank in no uncertain terms (with tongue firmly planted in cheek) that he could not possibly be best man at my next wedding since he messed up the first one.

Frank was the butt of endless teasing because he always ordered strawberries covered in Grand Mariner for dessert. It cost \$12 and since we all shared the bill equally, we vehemently accused Frank of taking advantage of us while we financed his high lifestyle. We also used to tease Frank about his lack of seamanship judgment when he went boating. Just ask Todd about the time he went boating with Frank in weather so rough, that Todd jumped out of the boat off the beach at Naples and swam to shore and got a taxi ride home. We thought it was pretty funny at the time.

But apart from a night of fun every Friday, it has always been much more for us. The “Boys” were always there for any member who was having trouble in a relationship. You could always count on sympathetic ears from friends who were on your side. But then you had to put up with advice from each member. While not always helpful, it was always entertaining. And you always left our dinner feeling better because you had affirmation from your friends, regardless of the level of brutality in which it was given.

We used to joke that the reason none of us needed therapy was because of these Friday nights. We treated each others as brothers and were brutally honest with each other. That meant you didn't get a pass on anything. You got kidded about everything. And we laughed a lot. We used to tease Frank that his outdoor real estate signs were often bigger than the property he was trying to sell...and that his real estate company was merely a front for his real business which was making signs. He got a big kick out of that. It was the one night each week when everyone could just be themselves.

We hadn't seen Frank in a number of weeks because he had been spending so much time in New Jersey visiting his mom who was ill. But then he surprised us by showing up for dinner just two weeks ago. You could tell he was troubled over his mom and her future prospects. I wanted to help my friend so I told him a story of how my dad had prepared me for his eventual death. My dad simply wanted to minimize his child's hurt after his death so he had always joked about death growing up by saying, “Hey, no one gets out alive.” And as he got closer to passing, Dad pulled me aside once and said, “Look, after I die it will be natural to feel sad and mourn. You may cry

for a bit. But after a while you have to move on because life is for the living". Then he said, "But if you mope around for a long time feeling sorry for yourself because of me, I will come back and haunt you." Frank loved that story. And right after it, Frank turned to the whole table and said, "You know what will tough, is when one of us goes." Every single one of us nodded solemnly in agreement. Then I chirped in and said, "Well, I hope I'm the last one to go". Everyone laughed and then we all raised our glass in a toast and everyone said together, "Here's to being the last one to go."

Frank old buddy; I never dreamed it would be you to go first. You will be missed more than you know by me and the boys.

Your friend,
Mark Alexander