



by Sean McLennan

They say, “Home is where the heart is”. By that same measure, Calgary’s MoneyPennies Restaurant and Bar is one of the homiest places you’re likely to encounter. When you sit down with the bar’s owner, Lorrie Murphy and her partner (in business and in life) Michele Flynn, you can’t help but be drawn in by their warmth and sincerity and you can’t talk to them long before you understand how important this Calgary landmark is to them and to their customers.

If you’ve even dipped your toe into Calgary’s “scene”, chances are you’ve come across MoneyPennies. It seems they’ve been around forever—in fact, this December marks their tenth anniversary! Staying afloat for a decade is a significant accomplishment for any small business these days, but on top of that, MoneyPennies’ Lorrie (even Michele acknowledges that the two have become synonymous) has achieved something elusive. They have formed a bridge between commerce and community; giving a human face to business that you just don’t get at Starbucks (or even Nellie’s!)

Although both Calgarians by choice, neither Lorrie nor Michele are Calgarians by birth. Originally from Blairmore, Lorrie moved around western Canada a bit and finally settled in Calgary after living in Vancouver for a spell. She had past experience as a partner in “Off Center”, another Calgary restaurant and bar, and decided to open one of her own. “MoneyPennies” came to her when she heard the James Bond theme while sitting outside a bank trying to think of a name. (Miss Moneypenny is of course the name of James Bond’s favourite secret-service secretary.)

Michele, originally from Regina, had been in Calgary for quite a while by the time Lorrie opened MoneyPennies; they met and fell in love about a year later. After nine years, they’re still in gooshy, gushy, “No, you hang up!” love—you know, that state that’s so endearing to those of us in our own gushy state, and so irritating to those who wish they were. Working together seems only to have drawn them closer; Michele came on as a full time partner about three years ago. She jokes that she stepped in for a couple of days to cover for one of the staff who needed a little time off and just never left.

The role that MoneyPennies has come to play in the Calgary GLBT community is no accident—from the very beginning, Lorrie intended the bar to be primarily a vehicle for social contribution and built the business around that goal. It’s clear that she understands that real community development starts with your immediate environment and the people in it. Love your work and it becomes your home; be sincere with your customers and they turn into friends; treat your friends like family, and that’s what they become. (It isn’t uncommon to hear Lorrie called “Mama”.)

Once you’ve established that core, you have the ability to reach out and influence the community at large—these days hardly a week goes by that MoneyPennies isn’t front and center in some sort of fund-raising or community activity whether it be sponsoring (and participating in!) local sports like rodeo, bowling, or ball-teams, supplying Christmas hampers to AIDS Calgary, going bald for cancer, drumming up the cash for custom wheelchairs, or supporting the “Cemetery Stroll” hosted by Heritage Funeral Homes. Lorrie herself is on the Millennium

Board, which supports a variety of GLBT causes, and this year she is acting as the Rodeo Director for the Canadian Rockies International Rodeo. I would say that Lorrie really understands what Gandhi meant when he said, “be the change you want to see in the world”.

When asked about their success, Lorrie and Michele are quick to give the credit to their staff and customers. Despite their growing public profile and reputation, they’ve never neglected the basic needs of their customers: feed ‘em when they’re hungry; shelter ‘em when they’re cold; make ‘em laugh when they’re bored; console ‘em when they’re down. And give them good quality and good value! All MoneyPennies’ food is homemade from natural ingredients and since they aren’t interested in gouging people to make money, the prices are all in a reasonable range.

In return, the community has never let them down. MoneyPennies’ biggest challenge came about six and a half years ago when Lorrie decided to buy the building at their present location (1742 10th Ave SW) and move from the original location on 15 Avenue and Center Street. She said when she walked in, “it was like a big warm hug”. Unfortunately, things turned out not to be that simple—new building codes and city zoning prevented the new location from opening for six months. Lorrie and Michele are not sure that they’d have done it if they knew beforehand that it was going to be such a long and complicated process, but are pleased with how everything turned out. When MoneyPennies finally reopened its doors, the customers came even though it’s a little off the main drag.

Although you’re not likely to happen across MoneyPennies without deliberately looking for it, the location has worked out well. The parking is good and the neighbours were happy to have them.

The bar increases the traffic through the area in the evenings and at night, providing the added security of a busy street. They even get along well with the Jehovah’s Witnesses right next door—a curious juxtaposition that no first-time visitor is likely to overlook—and a relationship that probably wouldn’t develop south of the border.

“In Canada we’re blessed,” Lorrie and Michele insist, comparing Calgary with San Francisco: in San Francisco, the GLBT community has much more political power, but they still can’t get married. Here, the labels are just less relevant, increasingly less so as time goes on. MoneyPennies’ philanthropy is centered in the GLBT community, but by no means limited by it; the same is true of their clientele.

Lorrie and Michele muse about how much things have changed: gone are the days of unmarked doors in back alleys and needing someone to vouch for you before you could get in. MoneyPennies has no one on the door, and all are welcome. They’ve never had to make any pretense, and have not had a moment’s trouble for it.

What’s in store for the future? They just take it day-by-day—there are no grand plans, just the opportunities that come. For now, they’re content to keep MoneyPennies “a place to meet friends you haven’t seen since last

night”.

The “day-to-day” future looks pretty hectic though; among the regular weekly events, which include pool tournaments (Thursdays), karaoke (Fridays), “Name-that-tune” (Saturdays) and Saturday and Sunday brunch (homemade Hollandaise on the Bennies!), there are a number of special events coming up. Don’t miss the staff show for World AIDS Day (Dec. 1st), the Toys for Tots fund-raiser (Dec. 4th), and “Happy New Queer’s Eve”. Details for all of the above events, regular activities, menu and more can be found easily on the MoneyPennies website at money-pennies.com.

I think the word Lorrie and Michele used the most when I was talking to them was “blessed”. “Blessed” to have each other, “blessed” to be where they are and doing what they do, “blessed” to have their staff, “blessed” to have their customers... They attribute their blessings to a faith in the universe: the universe takes care of them if they let it. I’m sure they’ll take care of you if you stop by.

On behalf of all of us, **Outlooks** would like to congratulate them on their Tenth Anniversary and give them a big warm thank you for everything they have done to make our community better—one drink and one penny at a time. ▼

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