

AURORA

A man with glasses, wearing a brown leather jacket over a blue and white plaid shirt and a yellow safety vest, stands in front of a building. The building has large windows with blue lettering that reads "COLLEGE OF ENGINEERING & MINES" and "BUCKERING BUILDING". The scene is set in a snowy environment with falling snow.

Bathroom beer launches career: Glenn Brady '93

By Jeff Richardson

Above: Glenn Brady stands in front of the Duckering Building on the Troth Yeddha' campus. UAF photo by JR Ancheta.

During his final semester in college in 1992, Glenn Brady '93 was a poor, thirsty University of Alaska Fairbanks student on an exchange program in Sweden. He was craving a few beers but couldn't convince himself to splurge on the country's heavily

taxed alcoholic beverages.

So the lifelong Alaskan did what you might expect from a creative young engineering student. He gathered a collection of bottles and equipment and set up a home-brewing operation in the bathroom of his dorm. Soon enough, he had his own supply of mediocre low-budget suds.

“This was a matter of economics — it started as cost savings and efficiency,” Brady '93 said. “In retrospect it wasn't that good, but it achieved the desired effect.”

That modest experiment turned out to be a surprisingly pivotal moment. Nearly three decades later, as a full-time engineer and the co-owner of Silver Gulch Brewing & Bottling Co., Brady can credit that batch of bathroom beer for helping launch a diverse and fascinating career.



A window reveals a collection of kegs at the Silver Gulch Brewery & Bottling Co. in Fox, Alaska. UAF photo by JR Ancheta.

Unfortunately, that story added a few more layers in 2020.

As both a business owner and a leading voice for industry groups at the state and national levels, Brady has had an uncommon perspective on the enormous challenges that restaurants and bars have faced during a pandemic.

The Silver Gulch brewery in Fox, about 10 miles north of Fairbanks, gradually reopened in May after a long closure. The next step, Brady said, is to figure out how to reboot in a post-pandemic world.

“Even if things were to magically reset tomorrow, the damage is still done,” he said. “Even when we go back to normal, things are going to be different.”

A family tradition: Staying busy

Brady jokingly gives both the credit and blame to his late grandmother for his habit of following multiple career paths at the same time. Darlene Brown arrived in Alaska before statehood and built up a thriving earthmoving business, Cadwallader Trucking, during the post-pipeline era. She also launched a successful restaurant between major construction projects, operating the Sunset Strip off the Old Richardson Highway.

Brady credits much of his business acumen and mechanical aptitude to his grandparents and their “old school” values of hard work and innovative problem-solving. Some of Brady’s earliest memories include working with his grandmother in her restaurants in elementary school. His parents, Mark Brady and **Donna Brady ’90, ’92**, started Sun-Air Sheet Metal, where Glenn still works today.

That family business mix of hospitality and construction made an impression. Although he considered a career in the Air Force, Brady decided to remain home and study

mechanical engineering at UAF after graduating from Lathrop High School.



Glenn Brady takes a self-portrait in front of a U.S. Air Force C-17 plane in November 2018. Photo courtesy of Glenn Brady.

His job as a student worker at the campus power plant became a surprising influence. It foreshadowed Brady's engineering work in the decades that followed, which included jobs on almost every coal-fired plant in the Interior.

The UAF power plant was also where Brady bonded with **Charles “Chilkoot” Ward ’86**, a fellow homebrewer who managed the facility. During a particularly loose tasting session a few years later, they started pondering an interesting question: Why not start a brewery in Fairbanks?

“Beer was involved,” Ward said with a chuckle. “We were basically sitting there in my garage, making 10 gallons of beer, and it was one of those offhand comments. ‘For the amount of labor we’re putting in, we could make 600 gallons of beer.’”

Brady, it turned out, had a spot where it could happen. The Fox Roadhouse, an old tin-sided building owned by his grandmother, was still in the family. The spot was in need of major renovation, but it wasn’t hard to squint and picture it as the home of a brewery.

“I always felt like Fairbanks was lacking a venue like that,” he said. “Fairbanks needed it, and I kind of had the place. Logical isn’t the word I would use, but it was natural and obvious.”

Brady and Ward launched Silver Gulch in 1998, when microbreweries were still an oddity in Alaska. It was illegal to charge customers for on-site tastings, so they decided

to offer a few beers to people who volunteered to work on the bottling line.



Left: Brady uses a dozer to build the loading dock at Silver Gulch in 1997.

Right: Brady at the brewery's bottling line, 1997. Photos courtesy of Chilkoot Ward.

The resulting “free beer Fridays” featured more drinking than bottling, to Brady’s frustration, but he looks back fondly on that simpler era.

“I do miss those old early days,” Brady admits. “They were difficult, and it was a tremendous amount of work, but I was more closely connected to it.”



Photo caption: The Silver Gulch Brewing & Bottling Co. is located in Fox, Alaska, about 10 miles north of Fairbanks. UAF photo by JR Ancheta.

The business end of brewing

Silver Gulch has become a much different place in the past few decades, and not just because of Brady's business instincts. He's a prominent state and national leader in the industry, serving as a board member with the National Restaurant Association and the Alaska Cabaret, Hotel, Restaurant and Retailers Association, and most recently as chair of Alcoholic Beverage Control Board.

He lobbied Alaska lawmakers for changes that allowed breweries to charge for on-site samples and serve food, which allowed Silver Gulch to add a brewpub in Fox in 2007, followed by a location at the Anchorage airport in 2012. Since its launch 23 years ago, Silver Gulch swelled from having just a single employee to a payroll of about 150.

Then 2020 happened.

Brady has had an unvarnished view of the deep challenges the industry has faced in the past year. While the Fox location was shuttered during the pandemic, the Anchorage restaurant kept Silver Gulch afloat. Officials allowed it to remain open so airport employees would have a place to eat.

Industry observers estimate at least 25 percent of restaurants that closed during the pandemic will never reopen, Brady said. Those that survive will become something different as the pandemic wanes. They'll need to adopt a model that can operate amid their customers' divisions over masks, vaccines and the virus itself.

There may be less table service and more takeout. The menu could be smaller, as well as the staff. The challenge

will be managing the successes and mistakes while figuring it out.

“It’s like trying to change the engines on a plane mid-flight,” Brady said. “We’ve got to land somewhat gracefully, then we need to find out what it will look like when it takes off again.”

However, Brady said, he’s learned a simple fact in recent years as a community volunteer. He has worked with the Fairbanks Summer Arts Festival, advocated for mental health services and served on the military’s Alaska Command Civilian Advisory Board.



Dozens of kegs are neatly stacked outside the Silver Gulch Brewing & Bottling Co. UAF photo by JR Ancheta.

The people he meets are consistently excited when they discover that he makes beer, especially when offered a few samples. That response, which dates back to his homemade brew in Sweden, seems to span a variety of demographics and personalities.

It also offers some optimism for an Alaska brewer after a difficult year.

“The common draw of beer really has a great deal of gravity to it,” Brady said.

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