March 2004

Goodman Gyroman Councilman

Matt Christensen

Iowa State University

Follow this and additional works at: http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/ethos

Recommended Citation

Available at: http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/ethos/vol2004/iss2/9
Where does the story of Matthew Goodman begin? Kissing his girlfriend, Neysa, when he realized he'd been elected to the city council last November? Or maybe a few years ago, on the day he bought the gyro stand—the one where you buy your after-bar munchies?

No, these are both too recent. Perhaps it starts when Matthew came to Iowa State as a chemistry major more than 10 years ago? Or even further back, when Matthew was a standout wrestler at Oskaloosa [IA] High School?

No, his real story begins even before that: in a small Iowa town where the tears of a young Matthew ran down his cheeks and fell to the ground beneath the plastic tires of his Big Wheel.

This is one of his first significant memories of his childhood. Matthew was in second grade. One of his classmates, a popular kid, had been giving Matthew a hard time, doing his best to keep him out of the popular clique at school. He saw how easily this classmate allowed the other kids into his social group to follow him blindly, laugh when he laughed, and watch as he humiliated others only to boost himself. Matthew didn’t understand why, while so many others were being let in, he was being pushed away.

He knew the value of being friends with a kid like that. It meant being accepted. That’s why it hurt so badly when the kid finally told Matthew to get lost for good. That day, Matthew made the first hard decision of his life: to be his own person, even if it meant not always being accepted. Puck 'em, he thought as he pedaled home.
He began dancing as he cooked, sometimes stepping away for a moment to carry The Stand’s boom box out into the street with him as he hopped to the music. The customers loved it.

That’s pretty much the attitude Matthew took for the next 12 years. Sure, he did the normal stuff in high school—wrestling, drama, and even student council—but he always kept his distance, even from his friends. He took jobs where he didn’t have to deal with people. He worked long days detasseling corn and long nights flipping burgers at Hardee’s.

After high school, Matthew wasn’t sure what he wanted to do with his life, but college seemed like the next logical step. So, in 1991, he enrolled at ISU to study chemistry. He worked hard, got good grades, and transitioned easily into the college grind, but after a few months, the money he’d saved from working in high school was almost gone. He needed a job.

He found it at the gyro cart parked most nights in Campustown. He stood amazed and curiously watched people crowd around the cart buying gyros as fast as they could be made. He recognized the guy working the grill, a friend from back home, and wandered over. “Ohhh. This is awesome!” He was impressed with the speedy service and the size of the crowd waiting in line.

The cart needed a new employee, and Matthew jumped at the chance. He needed the money, and working at the cart combined the two things he loved best about his high school jobs: being outdoors and making food.

It wasn’t long before the gyro stand became the central part of Matthew’s life. And it wasn’t just a vendor cart selling gyros. To Matthew, it was The Stand, his livelihood. The Stand drove him, taught him to work harder and faster than he’d ever worked in any of his other jobs. Each night in Campustown, Matthew drifted into a zone where his thoughts disappeared and nothing else in the world mattered besides making the next gyro. Matthew was happy, and he loved his job.

But no matter how fast and efficient he was, something always crept into his mind as he worked. He couldn’t escape it. The drunks: rude kids stumbling around, shouting, making fools of themselves. Goddamn idiots, he’d think to himself as he worked. Who did these people think they were?

It was monotony, the same faceless jackasses every night. What started out as a general dislike for the customers turned to genuine hate. He wanted to reach across the grill and shout at them. Fools! Matthew worked harder and faster to make them go away, to get the anger out of his head.

One night at The Stand, a guy waiting in line whipped his penis out and proceeded to piss down the leg of the guy in front of him. Something had to change. The customers had not respect for The Stand, and Matthew certainly had no respect for them.

Matthew quit drinking for a year. Anything to set him apart from the people on the other side of the grill. The customers had short hair; Matthew grew dreadlocks. The customers wore nice clothes; Matthew wore shirts with holes. He even ambitiously promised himself he would never lie again.

It wasn’t just The Stand’s customers Matthew had no respect for. It went beyond that. To Matthew, the world revolved around him, and if you weren’t on the same page, then to hell with you. He’d worked hard to get to where he was and had no respect for people who just got handed things. He was haughty. If you were poor, you weren’t working hard enough. If you had money, you were just another moron in an Abercrombie shirt barking for a gyro.

The hate that had been building for years suddenly all melted away in one night, in one minute, in one second. It was a typical night—kids moving up and down Welch Avenue from bar to bar having a good time, some of them stopping to grab a quick gyro before heading home or to the next bar. Matthew was at the helm of The Stand cranking out gyros when he glanced up and saw a group of kids, a guy and a few girls, walking down the sidewalk. Nothing special, just kids goofing off. He watched them for a moment. They were smiling. The guy looked up, just for a split second, and made eye contact with Matthew. Then he was gone. In that one fleeting second, Matthew’s whole world changed. It was his epiphany. Warmth rushed over his body—he felt physically perfect. Matthew had looked through the hate and into the beauty of humanity. It was the first time he’d looked, really looked, at the students on Welch Avenue and seen them for who they really are: just people having fun. And who was Matthew to judge them?

That moment revolutionized his life. These people weren’t idiots and jerks, they were just students out having fun connecting with other people, connecting with Matthew. They were a lot like he was: kids out trying to do the best they could with what they had. And they were having fun doing it.

After that night, Matthew started having fun too. He began dancing as he cooked, sometimes stepping away for a moment to carry The Stand’s boom box out into the street with him as he hopped to the music. The customers loved it. The students carried the party out of the bars and onto Welch, sometimes dancing along. Buying a gyro became a show. A weird energy was in the air—it felt like anything could happen.

Matthew fell even more in love with The Stand. In 1993, when Matthew was a sophomore, he took a loan from his father and bought The Stand outright. Just 21, and still a student, Matthew was now an entrepreneur.

Matthew continued to capitalize off the energy his new outlook created for The Stand, which he named “Smiles and Gyros.” It was an experience a student couldn’t find at Subway or McDonald’s. What was once a generic vending cart was now a unique, crazy, fast-paced scene, an exciting synergy between Matthew and the town. The cops started calling him Speedy—maybe because he worked so fast, maybe because they thought he was on speed. Matthew forged a new concept for The Stand—not based on gyros, but on his newfound respect for others. His motto was, and still is, treat everyone fairly.

Matthew was riding high. He graduated in 1996 and went on to earn a master’s degree in biochemistry in 2000, but he couldn’t give up The Stand. Business was booming, and he loved The Stand too much to leave now.
Then last year Ahmed Merchant, owner of Jimmy John's, unleashed a barrage of grievances against The Stand to the City Council. For one, The Stand was responsible for trash in front of his restaurant. And he didn't want any of The Stand's customers using his bathrooms. Matthew was stunned to hear the accusations, which he viewed as frivolous and predatory. Matthew was convinced Merchant's real agenda was to force The Stand to move to a different location—away from Jimmy John's. The Stand was taking business away from Merchant and he demanded The Stand's license be revoked. The two battled each other in letters that ran in the Iowa State Daily.

When the two met, Matthew asked Merchant if he'd actually witnessed any students littering in front of Jimmy John's. Put on the spot, Merchant confessed that he was rarely around Campustown when The Stand was operating. Matthew went on to say that he personally cleaned up any trash in front of Jimmy John's most nights himself. And, with the help of The Stand's other employees, routinely walked four blocks of Campustown picking up trash before calling it a night. Merchant was surprised to learn that Matthew, a business owner himself, took such a hands-on approach to The Stand's operation.

The community rallied around The Stand, writing letters to the Iowa State Daily voicing their support for Matthew and their gyros. Kum & Go offered to let The Stand's customers use their bathrooms. Some students vowed to boycott Jimmy John's. Matthew saw the students fight to keep The Stand a part of Campustown not just for Matthew's sake, but for their own. The Stand had become an Iowa State icon, part of the Campustown experience. He saw them stand up and refuse to be railroaded out of their own community.

But the Jimmy John's fiasco also showed Matthew that the students had few leaders and no real voice in the community that could communicate their concerns to the rest of the city. The couch and occupancy ordinances, recently passed, angered students and created a divide between the city and the Iowa State community. Matthew knew how it felt to be turned away. He thought back to the day, now nearly 20 years ago, when he pedaled home in tears.

Matthew was inspired. If no one else would step up for the students, then he would. Afterall, it is the students who essentially pay his wages. It was time to show his thanks. Matthew and Neysa, his girlfriend, started to think about Matthew running for a seat on the Ames City Council. Matthew made the decision to run after someone came to his door collecting signatures for Joe Paulson. The next day, Matthew applied to participate in the Council election.

Matthew and Neysa sat nervously at a table in Café Beaudelaire last November. The votes were coming in from his runoff with Mary Ann Lundy. As each precinct reported the tallies, his lead grew. Neysa and a few of his friends were starting to smell victory. It wasn't until the last vote was in Matthew finally breathed a sigh of relief. He'd won in a landslide by 23 percent. He was the only person in town surprised by the outcome. Matthew had relied on the relationships he'd built over the past 15 years with community members—students, teachers, families, and other local entrepreneurs—to build a solid campaign. He was everybody's friend—the George Bailey of Ames—who knew their concerns, shared their values, and was always willing to help someone in trouble.

Matthew's spent the past 10 years trying to do one thing. Bridge the gap. His method is simple: always show respect. He brought a community together around a Greek sandwich that anyone could enjoy, and that takes a special person. He convinced Ames to listen to what students have to say, and that takes an even more special person. And he's done it all, since that night when he glanced up and saw some students just out being themselves, with a smile.