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Who Do You Think You Are?

Andreas Haffar

Iowa State University

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The IDs are checked thoroughly. The spills are cleaned up promptly. The food is delivered quickly. The bar capacity is at an appropriate level. Everyone is having a good time, everyone is safe and everything is under control. That’s because at Es Tas Bar and Grill, James Spruill isn’t just their bouncer — he’s the meticulous guardian that sees all things good, bad, ugly, funny and just plain wrong. Like a shepherd with his flock, Spruill ensures that all of the sheep are protected, that they aren’t behaving flagrantly and that the atmosphere is a welcoming and secure one — despite dealing with a boozed-up herd.
Ethos: How did you become a bouncer?

Spruill: Initially I didn’t have any interest in doing it. I ran into an old friend of mine a few years ago. He worked there at Es Tas and he mentioned to me that they needed some extra guys to work. When people think of the stereotypical bouncer they think of the big, mean, tough guy dressed in all black but it doesn’t always have to be that way. So they needed another bigger, more proactive guy, they said if I liked it I could stay, and I’ve been there ever since.

E: What are the duties of a bouncer, because it isn’t just being a doorman, is it?

S: On most nights there will be two of us, one person at the door checking IDs and another guy, the floater, he’s picking up glasses, delivering food, fixing things if they break — he’s an extra pair of hands. We both monitor the crowd too, we’re always trying to keep our patrons happy by getting their food on time and making sure everything is alright. We have to make sure nobody underage comes into the bar, we have to ensure that we’re not over capacity, we have to make sure people don’t get out of line, and we need to make sure everyone is out before bar close. This job isn’t really for timid people, I have to get the ferocity out of them so they can be confident and proactive in what they’re doing. You have to watch out for big groups too, because it’s likely that there’s someone underage with them, or that someone is drunk and stumbling in and you have to decide whether to let them in or not. If they’re drunk coming in, you’ll probably regret taking the risk of allowing them in.

E: When you were in school and working as a bouncer did it affect your academic or social life?

S: Being a bouncer improved my social life but at the same time it didn’t make it any better. My friends can come see me when I’m working which is nice but sometimes it sucks. I’m more concerned about making money and trying to get to graduate school. Bouncing is a temporary job but I enjoy it.

E: Do you feel more feared or respected with this position?

S: Personally, I’m very self-aware in many aspects and I’m good with people. I can gauge people, get to know them, feel them out and let them feel me out, and if you didn’t know me and didn’t see me smile, you’d probably think I was some mean guy. I’m more of a protector or the “teddy bear” kind of guy. At the same time, I handle myself accordingly at the bar, I’m laid back, I pay attention and deal with every situation as it comes. I’d say people respect me more. With bar patrons that I see regularly, we have mutual respect for each other. The same goes with my fellow workers so when something goes down, they’re on my side and know what’s going on. Honestly, I’m not there to be an aggressive person. If a situation arises, I’ll get to a person, talk them down and get them to where they need to be and either they calm down or they’re out the door. When I was in school, people recognized me. They know I’ve seen them at their worst but at the same time, they know I’m not there to judge them, and they’re not embarrassed. They like me because I like to think I give them a reason and encourage them to come back. Even if I do have to kick someone out, I escort them and find a cab to safely take them home.

E: What is your favorite part about working as a bouncer?

S: Definitely the social aspect of it. You’re a guardian but you also have to be approachable too. After taking this job, I’ve gotten to know a lot of the bouncers at the other bars and regardless if the other bars are busy or have long lines, they still let me in, which is nice. And of course it helps to work with good people, which I do, not to mention it’s a sports bar so I’m able to watch sports while I’m working. Es Tas is just home for me...I wouldn’t be a bouncer at a place that was just a bar. I take my job seriously but not too seriously to the point where I take it home with me — you can’t take it personally. People say and do a lot of stupid things but you’ll still see them back drinking next week.

E: What things do you least enjoy about the job?

S: Sometimes you have to be the party pooper. Also if my abilities are good enough, I’m going to catch you if you’re not supposed to be there, like someone who’s underage. What people don’t realize about being a bouncer is that you’re liable for many things. Someone could get hurt in a bar, you can get ticketed by a bar for being over capacity or for allowing minors in, even if you didn’t know it—there’s a lot of things that can affect you and put you in a financial and legal burden. I understand a lot of young people want to come out to the bars and drink, but not my bar. If the police come and fine me and the bar, I’ll lose my job and worse, face legal consequences. We have to take fake IDs if we catch kids with them and then I can use them as training references for new bouncers and teach them how to identify a fake. There’s a negative to the social aspect too, where bar regulars will get to know me and after a while some will try and persuade me to let their younger friends in. I’m like ‘thanks for letting me know where we stand’ because it feels like they were using me. I’m aware of that though. Cleaning up after people isn’t fun either, like with puke and other accidents.

E: What have you learned since taking this position?

S: Working at Es Tas has taught me a lot about myself but about other people too. One issue many people don’t like to address is alcoholism and many people, including college kids, find themselves becoming alcoholics. Drinking once in a while is fine but getting wasted every night is not. I’ve gotten to understand how alcohol affects other people and how it affects me too. Working at a bar has taught me how to enjoy myself and safely have a good time. Every time you go out it doesn’t have to be a party.

E: What are some of the craziest things you’ve seen or that have happened to you while working as a bouncer?

S: There are some occasions where women think that their prowess is stronger than my will. I’m not easily moved by a pretty face even though it’s tempting at times. There’s the occasional flashing, some women will flash me to try and get in but it never works. Sure, it’s nice to see a pair of boobs every once in awhile but it’s also disappointing. Like, tell me a good joke instead or something. In all seriousness though, I’ve never knowingly allowed anyone into the bar that wasn’t supposed to be there.

Some of the visiting parents can be outlandish, they usually get the drunkest. They’ll even sneak in their own alcohol and I have to confiscate it, it’s like babysitting them!

There was one occurrence on a Sunday night that I remember very well. The bar wasn’t very packed and there were these two guys, they were playing good music on the jukebox, they were really cool, kind of douchey, but cool. So they went to the bathroom and they were in there for a long time. They came out after about twenty minutes, and they were saying some weird stuff like ‘there’s a pile of shit in the middle of the floor in there’ and they’re coming out wiping their shoes off. I was taken aback. I go in there and in the middle of the bathroom floor is a perfect, soft-serve looking turd and it was cold too. I kept thinking ‘did they pull it out of their bookbag or did they let it cool or what?’ I didn’t know how they did that. I told them they had to leave but I wasn’t even mad, I was actually pretty impressed.