

# Bye, Bye Bert: Downtown Beloit staple to close

By JENNIFER TRANMER Staff writer | Posted: Tuesday, March 22, 2016 4:00 pm

BELOIT — The light from the front window illuminates the smile on her face as she recalls 20 years of memories from her time owning The BOP.

Bert Ciulla gets a little teary when she thinks about closing her doors because, she said, after more than 40 years in the restaurant and bar industry, she's going to miss it.

"I love the people. I'm a people person," she said, standing behind the bar Monday morning. "That's the biggest thing that I'm going to miss."

With a final closing date of March 31, Ciulla said she felt it was time to hand over the reins. Donta Evans approached her about leasing the bar from her, and she felt like she could trust who she described as a "nice young man" to run a new establishment called Royalty.

The Beloit City Council approved the transfer of the liquor license from Ciulla to Evans of Evans Group, LLC at Monday night's council meeting. Ciulla signed an agreement with Evans Group to lease the property and operate a bar at the site, 530 Grand Ave., which will take effect April 1.

Ciulla said she's seen a lot of positive changes in the downtown area. She previously owned two restaurants with her husband, Tony, who passed away in 1992.

"That was a big reason why I sold the second restaurant," she said. "We were open seven days a week, worked 17-hour days. I did that for 27 years ... Owing The BOP was a piece of cake."

Ciulla opened The BOP in October 1996, with the help of some TKEs, a Greek organization on campus.

She said she is thankful to her family for understanding how much she had to work over the years, recalling how there were birthdays and holidays that were celebrated at her various establishments.

Looking around The BOP, also known as Bert's Other Place and then Bert's Only Place, Ciulla



## Fond farewell to a downtown business

Roberta "Bert" Ciulla poses for a photo in her bar, The BOP, 530 Grand Avenue, Monday. Ciulla will be closing the bar March 31 after nearly 20 years of business. With more than 40 years in the customer service industry, she said she will miss the people the most.

recalled story after story of memorable moments, many from “the kids,” or Beloit College students who visited her often. Each item on the walls — from the signed and illustrated dollar bills left as tips, to the plaques she received as thanks from Greek organizations, to the zebra in the cowboy hat, to the bottles painted with colorful flowers — each carries a memory.

She often acted like a mother figure to some and recalled when a student came in with a torn fly.

“He was so embarrassed,” she said with a laugh. In true Bert form, she offered to stitch up his pants to save him from any further embarrassment.

“I liked being around the college kids and that’s because they’re always looking forward,” Ciulla said. “They’re always very positive so that’s refreshing.”

Lynn Vollbrecht, a former tenant of Ciulla's and also a longtime friend, said she got to know Ciulla when she was a student at Beloit College. She recalled working on her last paper before graduating, sitting with a warm breeze blowing into the bar. She said Ciulla was encouraging her each time she finished a page.

“Bert Ciulla has been a den mother of sorts to generations of Beloiters and Beloit College students, and she is, frankly, irreplaceable,” Vollbrecht said.

Patrons would often see her standing, ready to offer a drink and catch up right when they walked in the door. Or, they’d see her perched on her stool, crocheting away to keep herself busy.

Tawny Gustina, who has known Ciulla through her years at Trump’s and The BOP, said she remembers her longtime friend as being up on the latest celebrity gossip or sports. She would be reading a magazine or book, ready to engage you in conversation.

“She just knows you and can pick up from the minute you walked out the door 10 years ago,” Gustina said. “She can always pick right back up where you left off. No matter how long it has been, she remembers your name.”

Ciulla said in her retirement, she’s looking forward to working in her garden this summer. She said she thinks she’ll get a job in the fall, however, because she likes to stay busy having worked since the age of 7.

“I worked so many years I don’t know what I’ll do,” she said. “To me, this was never a job.”

She said she has no plans of hosting a big send-off, but invited the new owner to come down and meet some of the crowd on her final night. She said some patrons, however, want to have something for her on her last night, when she will be passing the torch and celebrating her granddaughter McKenna’s 18th birthday.

“I would just rather fade away. It’s going to be so emotional. ... I’m going to miss it,” she said. “Some people get rich in money, I got rich in memories. ... I don’t regret anything I’ve done.”