

Iron Event will raise funds for chef Dan Tracy who is battling Lou Gehrig's disease

Local chefs come together again to help comrade Dan Tracy, in his fight against ALS

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On Monday, a group of Buffalo chefs from some of the area's top kitchens will work for free.

They'll be feeding guests at The Iron Event, a "best bite competition" set at the Pearl Street Grille. It's a fundraiser for the ALS Association, the third in a series. There's \$1,500 worth of prizes for the winners, but the real reason the chefs are doing it is a guy named Dan Tracy.

The Grand Island native cooked at places like Mother's and Tempo before Lou Gehrig's disease ended his career at 32. In the kitchen at Black & Blue in Amherst, Tracy noticed that his hands could no longer reliably shuffle sauté pans and grip his knife. He was diagnosed with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis in 2010.

Of 11 competitors, one worked with Tracy. Some have never met him. It doesn't seem to matter. "It's kind of like the fallen comrade thing," said Steve Gedra of Bistro Europa, who first met Tracy shortly before the 2012 edition. "This could happen to any of us. Lord knows none of us really have health insurance."

“It’s as though Daniel is an inspiration for me to keep moving forward, no matter the circumstances,” said Christopher Daigler of Encore. “To cook with passion, knowing that tomorrow any of us could get the same diagnosis.”

In 15 years in the industry, Mansion on Delaware executive chef Jennifer Boye has seen this sort of kindness to strangers before, notably when chef Mike Andrzejewski was badly injured in a motorcycle accident. “I think it’s a close-knit community that will help any way they can,” she said.

On Monday, the lineup includes Pan American Grille, Oliver’s, Bistro Europa, SeaBar, Encore, Tabree, Osteria 166, DiCamillo’s Bakery, the Mansion on Delaware, M&T’s Executive Dining Club and Nickel City Cheese & Mercantile.

The restaurants are donating the food. The cooks are donating their time.

“If you’ve ever hung out with restaurant people, you know we’re very giving people. That’s why we do what we do,” Gedra said. He pointed to other chef-driven fundraisers like Big Fuss, the local farmer aid event set for Oct. 24 by Feed Your Soul Productions.

“The gift at the end of the day is putting a smile on somebody’s face, ’cause Lord knows we don’t get paid (expletive), on top of having no insurance. So that’s our motivation.”

Of course, cooks will get more than a warm glow in return if they can seduce attendees into later coming by for dinner.

They’ve been challenged to offer competition-level amuse bouche, one or two bites calculated to open eyes and excite palates. “I have no idea what I’m doing,” Gedra said. Last time it was house-made bacon, served chicken-fried-steak style with a crackly crust, and pickle aioli for dunking.

“It’s a great way for people to try the food from places they might not otherwise go,” said Boye. “I think there’s curiosity there, people can try things they can’t get every single day. So that’s a bit of a draw.” Not just regular restaurants, she pointed out, but her hotel, which only feeds guests, or the M&T Bank’s executive dining room, where

Chef Frank Mercado does not take reservations from outside the building. (Mercado plans to offer duck confit on foccacia with pickled onions and spicy truffle mayonnaise.)

Tracy's cooking days are over, but he helped organize the event, largely through Facebook and email. He gets around in a motorized wheelchair these days, and communicates with a digital speech synthesizer, affordable with proceeds from an earlier fundraiser.

Starting at 14 knocking out fish fries at a Grand Island pizzeria, Tracy pursued a cooking career through the Hard Rock Cafe, Mother's, Tempo, Seneca Niagara Casino, Michael's in Niagara Falls, Bravo and Black & Blue. At a time in his career that he hoped to be opening his own place, he had to put the knife down.

The disease snarls his hands but not his mind. Typing an email can take an hour, so he chooses words carefully.

"In 2010, JJ Richert from Torches offered to help me throw a benefit because I was about \$10,000 in debt from medical bills trying to reach a diagnosis," Tracy wrote. Lennon Lewandowski from Oliver's suggested a competition. Talking about Lou Gehrig, the famed "iron man" of baseball, Richert "blurted out the Iron Event, and I took it and ran with it."

Ask him why, and he'll explain. "Part redemption, part as a leader. I've always lived my life in service to others. Part because I can hope this will be my legacy and good for people to remember me by."

Lewandowski has known Tracy the longest, having worked with him at Tempo circa 2005.

"Dan is a very passionate cook," Lewandowski said. In the Tempo kitchen, Tracy wasn't "the rockstar type who when the wave comes in doesn't even feel it. He was the guy who would go a little slower to make it absolutely perfect."

Tracy had "some really big goals for himself in the future, and it's sad to see that wasted potential," Lewandowski said.

Tracy said that despite everything, he's still enjoying life with the help of all his friends old and new, his family and his fiancée Julie Knapp.

“Life has ups, downs and challenges for everyone, I’m lucky in that I don’t take a single positive moment for granted any more.”

As for the event, what started as a way to help Tracy cover his bills has the potential to outlast him.

“In my heart I feel like what he’s planted here could go on and continue to grow. There’s no reason it couldn’t continue to be a beacon in our culinary industry here in Buffalo, something that grows to way bigger than it is now,” Lewandowski said. “If he needs someone to carry it on, who knows? Right now he needs somebody to make some nice food and talk to people, and I’ll take a Monday out of my time to do that.”

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The Iron Event: Summer Harvest starts at 6 p.m. Monday Sept. 9 at Pearl Street Grille, 76 Pearl St. Tickets are \$30 presale, available at participating restaurants: The Pan American Grille, Oliver’s, Bistro Europa, SeaBar, Encore, Tabree, Osteria 166 and Nickel City Cheese & Mercantile, or through theironevent.org. \$35 at door.

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