

ON THE SCENE: Working The Wall High School Snack Shack

Snack Shack veterans allow a neophyte to flounder around for a night

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One thing is quite clear upon entering the football stadium at Wall High School for the first playoff game: This is no night to be outside watching football.

It is cold. Wintry cold. Bone-chilling cold. The air is sharp. It bites your nose and numbs your cheeks. Without a cloud in the sky, there's no sign of it getting warmer, either.

The marching Spartans from Steinert High — tonight's rivals — are warming up, as is the Spartan football team, with Wall on the other side of the field, running plays and trying to keep moving to gird against the chill. There's a full moon above, and I wonder what that portends.

I make my way to the Snack Shack, where a crew of about a dozen inside is moving quickly across the tiny building, stocking shelves and cracking wise.

“It's much warmer in here,” says Patti Bartsche, member of the Wall High School PTO-Booster Association, the volunteer group that runs the Snack Shack. “Come on in.”

Bartsche will be my handler tonight as I work the shack, serving up fries and churros, hot chocolate and Sour Patch Kids to football fans on either side of tonight's contest.

Bartsche gives me a whirlwind tour of the shack, where everyone seems to know there's a stranger in their midst. I am not part of the regular furniture, and I'm disrupting the natural Feng-shui, I think. I may have thrown off their Chi.

I pay close attention to instructions: Chili and meatball subs to the left, pizza and churros in front of them; drink coolers with Pepsi products in one, Gatorade in another; candy under the serving window; hotdogs, fries, pretzels, coffee, from left to right as you face the kitchen.

Bartsche says many more words to me, lots of them in rapid succession as she moves around the shack, pointing at this, motioning toward that. I catch some of these words and pretend to understand the rest. It's exactly how I got through college.

"It's kind of trial by fire around here," Bartsche says.

I'm getting that, yeah.

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The Snack Shack charges minimal prices, is seriously fond of donations and is run entirely by volunteers, some of whom have kids in the high school, others who do not.

Like Ellen Macko, whose children have gone through and left Wall High School years ago. But Macko works the shack every Friday during the season anyway. To her, the answer to the question "why?" is simple:

"To give back," Macko says, leaning next to a giant vat of hot chocolate. And so she does, every week. "You just have to."

All the profit from sales is given to high school seniors in the form of \$1,000 scholarships. Last year, there were six given to deserving students, Bartsche said.

"I just love working here," says Anne Moonan, a Board of Education member who rarely misses a shift, according to shack staff. "It's fun.

We all have a great time here and it's all for a good cause. There's no reason not to like this.''

The Wall Crimson Knights are making their way to the field. They are led, as usual, by number 89, Danny Clayton.

His mother, Marilyn Clayton, is next to me in the shack. It's her first night working here as well. We're accidentally paired at the same window, the blind leading the blind.

Between customers and hot chocolate, she says to me that Danny, who has Down's Syndrome, is very pleased to be part of the team, to suit up, to be involved.

"He's real big into sports," she says.

He has even played in a couple of games this season, she says, here and there. That, she says, has meant a lot to Danny.

But Marilyn Clayton is a mother. She worries.

She worries about Danny, who is going to graduate this year. What's next for him? She doesn't know, exactly, she says. With Danny's condition, a good chunk of time and effort has been put into getting him to this point. After graduation, who knows?

"I guess it really depends on what he wants," she says, with a hint of hesitancy.

She's a mother. She worries.

My trial begins as time runs through the first quarter of the game.

At first, it's a few people here and there. Orders were fairly straightforward, mainly drinks. There was time for a little give-and-take with the customers, which, admittedly, was mostly me giving.

Until I met John from High Tech High School.

He's studying the menu from about three feet away from the shack. Knowing how far away the pricelist is, I envy his youthful eyesight.

I ask if I can help him. He tells me he's just looking. He stares a little while longer and leaves. A few minutes later, he's back.

"Would you recommend the chili?" he asks in full-on ironic deadpan. "It is three times cheaper than the fries."

I like him right away.

"I would recommend the chili, actually," I say with as much mock seriousness as I can muster. "I believe you shall be most satisfied with both its economic value and culinary delight. It is, after all, but a dollar. American, of course."

"Of course. And I concur," he says, maintaining his deadpan affect. "I shall invest in this chili."

Concur, indeed. I really like this kid.

This goes on for a silly amount of time, each of us trying to out-do one another without cracking a smile. I get him his chili, he pays and leaves, only to come back several minutes later for more chili, and our exchange begins anew.

I later learned that John from High Tech High also had a last name, age and class rank: Corbett, 16, a junior, in that order.

As the clock runs down on the second quarter, I notice over my right shoulder there's a mountain of fries in individual cardboard containers, with more continuously piling up. I remember thinking that was a silly amount of fries.

Then it was halftime.

I have worked in my share of restaurants. I have handled 15 years of deadline pressure in newspapers. But in no way was I prepared to handle the absolute crush of people waiting in line for one of everything that little Snack Shack could put out.

One middle-schooler wants Sour Patch candy, a meatball sub, a slice of pizza for his friend, an orange Gatorade and do you have cheeseburgers? Another family is waiting for three hot dogs, order of cheese fries, a coffee and two hot chocolates.

Okay. Two down. Shouldn't be more than, what?, 40 or so to go.

If movement in the shack was frenetic before halftime, it was simply berserk at the midway point of the game. I now know what a pinball feels like.

It lasts only a few minutes, but it seems like forever. Everyone is doing everything they can to provide what they can, as fast as possible.

But unlike restaurant kitchens I've worked in, no one says an unkind word. Even under the extreme pressure, everyone remains polite and courteous. There's an instant camaraderie among shack workers. People I had not seen earlier in the night suddenly were backing me up or lending a hand on a big order. I tried to do the same when I could.

I am proud to report that I only messed up one order that I know of. And I swear that girl said she wanted two Cup of Noodles soups, not just one.

"You did good," Bartsche says to me at the end of the night. "You'll have to come back and work Thanksgiving."

She's referring to the annual Thanksgiving game between Wall and Manasquan. Thousands come to see the Turkey Day tradition. It's the shack's busiest day of the season.

I think I may leave that one to the professionals, though. This amateur has been schooled enough.

Have a task, assignment or challenge for Keith Brown for the next installment of On The Scene? Send suggestions to: keith.brown@patch.com.