

Nick Nuccio Still Dazzles The Locals

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I was sitting in the front dining room at the Valencia Garden. It was lunchtime and, as is usually the case at the Valencia, the room had its share of politicians and business types on hand, wolfing down whatever with yellow rice.

Politicians these days are a little more health conscious and some of them were working over salads or maybe bean soup. They don't make them like they used to.

David Agliano, who owns the place, came over and said he had something he wanted to show me. He was carrying what appeared to be a hat box.

"It's Nick Nuccio's hat," he said, taking off the lid.

Sure enough, inside the box was a slightly stained grayish fedora. Inside the brim was the name of the hat's Italian manufacturer and the name "Nick Nuccio" printed along the side.

I thought back to the first time I'd seen Nuccio. I'd been assigned to do a school civics paper and had decided to go out to Lowry Park, where Hubert Humphrey was in town campaigning on the presidential trail.

It was late summer and sticky-hot, but the line for the free spaghetti snaked all over the park. I noticed a man in a dark suit and gray hat working his way down the line. It was Nick Nuccio, twice mayor of Tampa and forever on his own campaign trail.

It was like one of those wedding reception lines. Nuccio would stop in front of each person and give them a hug or a two-handed handshake. He was a sight to behold. It was as if he knew everyone. Maybe he did. Politics had been his life pretty much since dropping out of the 10th grade at Hillsborough High School.

I forgot about the easily forgettable Humphrey and did my paper on Nuccio.

Box Of Secrets

If there has ever been a consummate politician in this town it was Nuccio, whose days in office began before daylight at Cuervo's Cafe, where he apparently held court before the official business of the day began at City Hall.

His greatest stroke came when he was running for office the second time against incumbent Julian Lane. He produced a mysterious black box he said contained all of the secrets of the Lane administration and that he would open the box after the election.

The box only held some questionable lawn-mowing receipts, but Nuccio was back in office.

"So where did the hat come from?" I asked Agliano. "I mean, when people wear hats to a restaurant they don't usually bring along a hat box."

The Mystery

"You know," he said, "I don't have a clue. My grandparents ran this restaurant for 55 years and they had an apartment above it. Maybe the mayor was visiting Manuel Beiro, the owner and just forgot it. They were good friends."

"Nuccio sent me a Boy Scout knife when I was a boy but my grandparents took it away when I cut myself."

"I'm surprised I didn't do something stupid and just throw the hat away. When I took over the restaurant in 1979, I tossed out all sorts of stuff. There were even some cookie tins on top of a refrigerator full of crumbs I threw out. It turned out it was about \$10,000 worth of saffron."

I suggested he put the hat in a glass case and put it out for all to see, but he says he's nervous ever since someone stole his picture of the TV star chimp J. Fred Muggs.