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THE CONNECT

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SUMMER 2018



BLISS WARRIOR
LORI HARDER
WANTS TO RAISE
YOUR STANDARDS
AND CLEAN UP
YOUR TRIBE

'SHARK TANK' LEGEND

DAYMOND JOHN

ON THE MYTH OF
OVERNIGHT SUCCESS
& THE POWER OF A
DAILY GRIND

MEET THE MOM OF 14
WHO BUILT A
MILLION-DOLLAR
SKINCARE BUSINESS
FROM HER HOME

CACTUS MOON
RETREAT HAS
SERENITY SEEKERS
TREKKING TO THE DESERT



HERE'S WHY THE
MUSEUM OF ICE CREAM
IS ON EVERYBODY'S
SUMMER BUCKET LIST

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IN CIVIL RIGHTS HISTORY
IS SERVING UP SOUTHERN
CUISINE & STYLISH
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Cover Story 24 **'SHARK TANK' CONTENDER DAYMOND JOHN GETS CANDID ABOUT HIS PRIVATE MOMENTS TO THE TOP**

Reflecting on his journey from being broke — spent waiting tables and hustling his unknown brand of hip hop apparel out of a van — to building a legacy and sliding on pinstripe suits for millions of television viewers, John says to never underestimate the effectiveness of a daily rise and grind.

Features 14 **THIS NASHVILLE NONPROFIT IS BREAKING THE CYCLE OF ILLITERACY, ONCE CHILD AT A TIME**

When one generation is illiterate, the generation that follows is often plagued with the same epidemic. This nonprofit organization is determined to break the spell.

16 **CACTUS MOON RETREAT: THIS SUNNY RANCH IN THE MOJAVE DESERT HAS BECOME A MAGICAL SPACE FOR THOUSANDS**

Men and women travel near and far in search of connection, restoration and self-discovery underneath the desert sky.

30 **WHERE HISTORY, HOSPITALITY & RESTORATION COLLIDE: THIS ICONIC SOUTHERN EATERY WELCOMES ALL TO SIT AT THEIR TABLE**

Woolworth on 5th, a renovated landmark in Civil Rights history, is dishing out hot plates, wooing with swank, and serving as a poignant reminder of where we've been and where we're going.

34 **THIS SUPERMOM CEO EMPOWERS & PRESERVES THROUGH HER MULTI-MILLION DOLLAR SKINCARE BUSINESS**

Shea Terra Organics Founder Tammie Umbel is a mom of 14, yet manages to travel to Third World countries to source ingredients, all the while nurturing the coexistence of people and nature.

40 **WHEN CHILDHOOD DREAMS BECOME MASSIVE REVENUE: THE MUSEUM OF ICE CREAM PROVES THE POWER OF EXPERIENCE**

An Instagram all-star, this pop-up museum garners 1,700 visitors a day and is where diversity, progressivism and play come to life in a sprinkle pool.

44 **AN AMBITIOUS FORCE TO BEHOLD: BEHIND THE SCENES WITH RISING ACTRESS AVA JUSTIN**

She has a budding acting career and her own cosmetic line. This 12 year-old is wasting no time exercising her mission to entertain and inspire the masses.

45 **CRACKING THE CODE ON HIGHER-PAYING CAREERS**

This mother of three launched a medical coding academy with assistance from a non-profit lender.

48 **SELF-LOVE EXPERT LORI HARDER WANTS YOU TO HARNESS YOUR TRIBE & SOAR TO YOUR HIGHEST POTENTIAL**

This cover model, TEDx Speaker and *New York Times* Best-Selling Author knows a thing or two about following her bliss. She asks to help you become a warrior for your own.

Columns 8 **DO YOU WANT TO CREATE AN INCLUSIVE WORLD? IT BEGINS WITH YOUR KIDS**

If we want to create a world that feels safe for generations to come, we've got to show them how it's done — while they're young.

10 **HOW TO GET YOUR FOOT IN THE DOOR**

Show up and act. There is no more time to continue holding yourself back.

12 **GETTING NAKED: SHEDDING THE 7 LAYERS OF SETBACKS THAT INHIBIT YOUR SUCCESS**

The season has come to strip away those self-sabotaging layers of fear, doubt and regret. It's time to face your worthiness.

19 **ME, MYSELF & LAKE TAHOE: A LESSON IN SELF-CARE**

Adventure-filled vacations often create the most memorable experiences, but that won't always be the kind of trip you need.

20 **CHICKEN FEET FOR THE SOUL**

You don't always get what you think you want, but sometimes the "not getting" serves you with the lesson you needed most of all.

33 **WE WANT TO KEEP THE ROMANCE ALIVE, SURE—BUT HOW?**

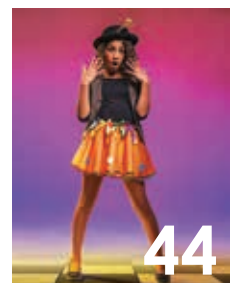
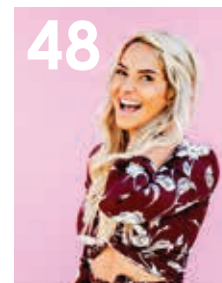
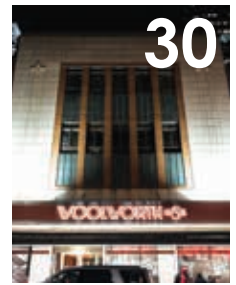
Fairytales are fiction, but love has never been a lie. Here's how to keep the passion thriving even when daily life seems to offer none.

36 **4 NEW & EFFECTIVE WAYS TO CONNECT WITH YOUR CUSTOMERS ON GOOGLE**

Don't dare miss out on the free tools that are guaranteed to magnify your online presence.

38 **THE KEY INGREDIENT TO UNSTOPPABLE ENTREPRENEURSHIP? IT MAY NOT BE WHAT YOU THINK.**

When it comes to creating a business that endures long after so many others have failed, the truth may surprise (and liberate!) you.



The Connect Magazine is a quarterly lifestyle publication and online media source committed to engaging our diverse audience through empowering and impactful stories of entrepreneurs, young professionals and businesses in pursuit of creating positive ripples throughout the world, through efforts large and small.

WHERE HISTORY, HOSPITALITY & RESTORATION COLLIDE:

THIS ICONIC SOUTHERN EATERY WELCOMES ALL TO SIT AT THEIR TABLE

WRITTEN BY: LACEY JOHNSON



“A lady named Francis came in to show me where she was when a white woman put a cigarette out on her arm,” says Tom Morales, successful restaurateur and Founder of TomKats Hospitality in Nashville, Tennessee, while attempting to convey the sense of purpose and responsibility he holds for his most recent venture — the renovated Woolworth on 5th.

“She still has the scar from it, too. But when I took her to the lunch counter and showed her around the restaurant, she was all smiles.”

Although the majority of Nashville residents likely remember the 30,000-square-foot building at 221 Fifth Ave. N. for its 20-year stretch as a Dollar General store, the space has long been packed full of chilling secrets that were not only significant to local history, but to United States Civil Rights history.

Having first parted its doors for the public as a five-and-dime department store in 1913, the Woolworth building became a hot spot for socializing. The lunch counter opened in 1925, where its bologna sandwiches and soda fountain were magnets for children, teens and young adults. But, more than 30 years later, it would become a history-making stage set for racial protest.

On Feb. 13, 1960, a group of African-American college students made their courageous trek through the streets of downtown Nashville, targeting two businesses: Woolworth on 5th and Kress and McClellan. Their goal was to desegregate Nashville lunch counters. They were not attempting to start a revolt with their fists, nor words shouted in angst. They merely planted their bodies into the counter seats as a request to be granted a primary right — to be served a simple meal like everyone else. It was something they demanded for themselves, as well as the generations that would follow them. But they were not granted this request. Instead, they were physically and verbally attacked, mocked, scolded, spit at and demanded to leave.

Two weeks later, the group returned — this time with 200 others marching in protest alongside them. This not only caused an outrage among the community, but led to a multitude of arrests — one of them being 20-year-old John Lewis, now Congressman and prominent Civil Rights leader — and spawned a fury of national media attention.

Morales, a Nashville native, grew up frequenting Woolworth, most often accompanying his mother on shopping expeditions as she browsed the sales racks. He laughs as he recalls having been bribed with sweet and creamy confections in exchange for good behavior. In his mind’s eye, he can still call upon a vivid image of what that space looked like in 1960. He can still smell the hot grille and taste the chocolate milkshakes he and his brothers shared at the lunch counter. “I remember being there once and asking my mother why the water fountains by the bathrooms were labeled ‘Colored’ and ‘White Only.’ I was about 6 or 7 seven years old then, and I remember it being so confusing,” says Morales.

When he stepped foot into the empty space in 2015, after having long held a desire to purchase and restore it, he was struck with the capacity of what it represented; he was standing on sacred ground.

Morales and his partners hurled themselves into its renovation process immediately, sensing the store’s essence was alive and ripe underneath so many years of having been covered up, though they had no inkling of how much still remained to be rediscovered.

“The Dollar General had drop ceilings, and only occupied a small amount of the building’s space. When we started the renovation, we didn’t know what we had, so we pulled the drop ceilings out, and what we saw was remarkable,” he says.

Morales recalls gazing up at the ceiling for the first time upon its removal, being riddled with chills. “We all looked up there and saw that all of the original air conditioning ducts, the railing, and all of the art deco crown molding were still there, totally intact. Then we took the air conditioners out and saw the original floors to the upstairs. We couldn’t believe it,” he says.

Its spirit had always been there, resting in waiting — as though asking to be returned to light.

“If you look at Southern history, particularly the Civil War, negative history is often covered up. People don’t want to talk about it,” says Morales. “That’s what happened with this space. But the things that happen never go away. So, in this situation, they covered it up, but we peeled it back.”

Morales and his crew saved the exposed tile that was up on the mezzanine, near where John Lewis was arrested. “People go up there and touch it,” say Morales. “Like they’re trying to connect with it.”

Perhaps as though to answer the cries of yesterday, saying, “We’re trying to make it right. Thank you for fighting so hard.”

Morales and his team were provided photographs from the Nashville Public Library, each plucked from its Civil Rights room. They studied every photograph diligently, being guided throughout the recreation of the lunch counter. Although they weren’t able to keep components of all remnants, they kept fragments of lots of things. The original crown molding was preserved and restored, as well as the display cases and terrazzo flooring.

Out of his string of successful projects parented by his company, which includes popular night spot Acme Feed & Seed, a revamping of the famous Loveless Cafe, elegant seafood-centric destination Fin & Pearl and a spread of others, Morales says Woolworth is the one that stirs him most. “From the history and from the heart, Woolworth is the most important project TomKats has ever been involved in, though it has also been the most challenging economically. We spent \$6 million renovating that building, trying to just save it.”

Morales believes the process has been carried by a force of divinity. “We have a very diverse group of investors, and I’ll tell you that a lot of them probably could have invested in things that would have given them a better return. I think all of our investors were led by their hearts,” he says.

Most significantly, the restaurant opened its doors, purely by accident, during Black History Month 2018. “It wasn’t planned or organized at all, it just happened to be the time that worked out,” says Morales. “And that felt like a way the universe spoke to us. It was overwhelming.”

But, for Morales, his sense of purpose stretches deeper than the specific events that took place on that February day in 1960. It’s about paying homage to an entire era.

“Along Jefferson Street and Charlotte, in that whole area of Nashville, there was a significant African-American music scene going on there in the late 50s and early 60s. Think Jimi Hendrix. Little Richard. Charles ‘Wigg’ Walker. All of them played down there. Well, I did some work for Chet Atkins, and he used to say to me, ‘Man, we used to sneak over and play with them cats...’ Then after a hesitation, he’d say, ‘... because them cats couldn’t come over and play with us.’”

In other words, back then, the white musicians were welcome in the black clubs, but the black musicians were never welcome in the white clubs. “That always struck me and haunted me. So we knew that we wanted to do more than recreate the lunch counter. We wanted to tip our hats to the African-American community and to that whole era,” says Morales.

Although the main floor serves as the primary dining quarters, the basement floor of Woolworth on 5th, once a dusty and neglected storage space, has been turned into a dashing venue called The New Era Ballroom, and is alive with the sounds of soul, R&B and big-band music every weekend. The likes of legendary soul singer Charles ‘Wigg’ Walker and iconic Gospel artist Bobby Jones pay regular visits to the venue, arousing the guests to their feet. Above the winding staircase, the upstairs mezzanine offers a full bar that is oozing with swank, offering a nostalgic celebration of the era’s mid-century style.



“The point is that we are featuring Jefferson Street African-American soul music from that era, and we want people to be able to come out and dance, and feel the spirit of that time. Where all can come and be served a meal and enjoy some great music,” says Morales.

Morales admits that, while they were influenced by the original menu, they did not necessarily borrow from it. “We decided to make our menu a culinary exploration of Southern cuisine,” he says.

Breakfast is served every morning beginning at 7 a.m., where sweet potato pancakes and jalapeño bacon are the standouts. The fried chicken, known for its moist and crispy perfection, is a lunch and dinner favorite, and is most often enjoyed with stewed greens and creamy mashed potatoes. The corn cakes, crafted with pimento cheese, were reportedly ordered by Oprah Winfrey during her recent lunch visit, and are always in high demand. Although Morales says a few dessert items were inspired by the original menu, like milkshakes and sundaes, they added other Southern staples like peach cobbler, banana pudding and coconut cake squares.

The response to the establishment’s debonair vibe, sparkling decor, mouth-watering menu and titillating offerings of entertainment have been met with roaring applause, but the success has been magnified by TomKat’s commitment to honor Civil Rights history. “We had Robert Kennedy, Jr., John Michael Seigenthaler and Ambassador Andrew Young in to speak as a panel beyond the counter. We had a breakfast on Martin Luther King Day, and the energy was indescribable. There have been some powerful, powerful events that have happened in the space,” says Morales.

Many of the sit-ins have returned for the kinds of visits that swarm everyone in the vicinity with goosebumps — including Rip Patton, Diane Nash and Francis, the lady whose scar from a cigarette burn is still visible on her arm. Lewis proudly joined them via Skype on the day of the restaurant’s opening. “Some of them get teary-eyed walking through it,” says Morales. “Some just smile from ear to ear. It’s amazing to witness that alone.”

Morales says their mission is to bring the heartbeat of the African-American community back to the central part of Nashville — encompassing its history, cuisine and entertainment. “Most importantly, we want to represent a place where people know that everyone is always welcome, and all will be extended absolute hospitality,” he says.

The ultimate dream had by Morales is for Winfrey to return for a visit on the 60th anniversary and interview Lewis right in the spot where he was arrested. “The point is not to appropriate history. We’re trying to save history,” says Morales. “To uncover the truth of what happened, while letting everyone see that — you know, what all those people sat in for all those years ago? What they fought for? Well, it did come true. It finally did.”

