

A Pancake on 12th St

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WASHINGTON-- A rainy Sunday merits a “God Bless You” greeting from a man with a cigarette posted on the stoop outside a small diner. He doesn’t say his name or offer any other explanation for his presence. He is comfortable on the stoop, though he does not seem to be affiliated with the establishment. Unknowingly, he acts as an accessory to their community based presence.

Murray and Paul’s is a breakfast/lunch joint on 12th ST NE, DC. It closes at 2pm everyday, but has no issue getting business in its limited hours it seems. They only accept cash. Beyond the CUA metro just far enough that they are not a part of the CUA college neighborhood, but just close enough that CUA students make the 20 minute walk on a nice day. This little hole in wall restaurant is Brookland’s bridge between the gentrified Monroe street, and the middle/low income homes.

Forks and knives clank and scrape against oval white plates. A man stands over a grill with at least 6 different meals cooking at once. A college aged boy behind the counter, greeting customers and taking orders, refers to a woman on the far side of the restaurant as his aunt. She stands overlooking the action in a motherly manner. According to her nephew, she is perhaps the most knowledgeable about the ins and outs of the small restaurant. She is the only person in the entire building who is not moving at all, and her stillness exudes a sense of status.

Teresa Gardner, a CUA student, is a long time Murray and Paul's customer who found the restaurant before even enrolling at Catholic University. She comes from a line of siblings who also attended CUA, and her memories of the restaurant begin with her brothers taking her there.

"My brother said it was one of his favorite breakfast places," Gardner said. "It's a lot of food and it's like five dollars and it comes with a free cup of coffee."

Gardner says she still visit the restaurant for a good meal around once a month.

Folks of all different shapes and sizes sit back to back and face to face in the booths lining the right wall. A couple shares a cup of coffee across from a college aged boy sitting at the bar eating pancakes, hiding from the gray weather bleeding into the establishment from the windows under a baseball cap. He looks on a seemingly choreographed dance the crew between the counter and the grill entangle in. There is one too many people stationed for the comfort of ordinary workers, the staff at Murray and Paul's show no sign that they mind the proximity, nor do the onlookers appear to experience any sense of discomfort. There is no present fear of danger or accident, despite the closeness.

Only about four bar stools and one booth were open for the taking this Sunday morning, and clearly Murray and Paul's is not lacking in popularity, but it is curious to consider how it came to

be this way and how its demographic of its common customer has shifted to reflect due to its proximity to CUA's campus.

Rebecca Malachowski, a CUA junior, says not as many CUA students know about Murray and Paul's as they should.

Gardner, however, thinks differently.

"I know there's enough [popularity among students] that there's an Instagram page that the Catholic U students made," Gardiner says. The instagram page doesn't appear anymore, when you search the restaurant on the social media platform, but Gardiner's comment about the page reflects just how connected CUA students felt to the small restaurant.

Ashton Shaffer, CUA senior, heard about the small restaurant from a friend.

"She was like 'Hey, there's this cute little place that makes good food,'" Shaffer said.

Shaffer agrees with Malachowski. Most CUA students don't find a reason to go past Monroe Street area— which houses a Starbucks, a Barnes and Nobles, a Chipotle, a Potbellies, and several other similar establishment—unless it is to go to Brookland's Finest, another restaurant further up 12th street, Shaffer says.

There is an charming imperfect nature to Murray and Paul's lightly yellow tinted environment. It doesn't feel sleek and clean, and the lack of perfection makes the inside feel relaxed and welcoming. Dark maroon booths complement the largely yellow and silver room. From the floors to the ceiling to the lights, a pale yellow gives Murray and Paul's a comfortable warm sense while rows of metal fridges and bar stools remind you of the practicality of the restaurant. A long off-white board spells out the menu and prices with black and red letter and number tiles. Accompanying the already extensive board, stretching across the length of the exposed grill, are pieces of white computer paper with additional menu items written carefully in thick marker.

Everything about Murray and Paul's has a transparency to it, and it leans into its small business identity. Everything is visible to the patrons. To get to the restrooms, you walk through an unfinished looking area, full of stock. There isn't one seat in the house that doesn't have a clear sightline to the grill, the only food prep station in the entire restaurant. And the relationship between the staff members goes deeper than just coworkers. Many of busy workers are family members or at least close family friends.

Paul Roeckell, a CUA senior who lives in the area, says he grabs a good breakfast at Murray and Paul's about once a week, counting on the well priced food "for what it is" and the pleasant atmosphere.

"The bulk of the [food] scene are chains and the rest are overpriced millennial pop ups that don't last long cause none of us can afford it," Roeckell said.