

VIRGINIA ALI'S MOTHER'S DAY LAMENT

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Ben's Historian

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Yesterday, Mother's Day 2020, I called my "mom," Virginia Ali, founder and owner of Ben's Chili Bowl, to wish her a happy Mother's Day. We had a pleasant talk. At 86-years-young she expressed how grateful she was for family, friends and good health. But she lamented that she could not be at The Bowl due to COVID-19. She said to me, "I need to get there and go to work, my son! I just can't be around the house all day. The Chili Bowl keeps me going."

I knew exactly what she was saying. So, I added my interpretation to her words. I said, "Mom, what is so special about The Chili Bowl is the energy that you feel when you walk in the front door. The Bowl exudes energy. It rushes into your body and spirit. Just being inside the place makes you happy."

She agreed enthusiastically and we both expressed a future happiness when The Bowl will reopen for business packed with people inside the four walls. This "happy place" starts with opening the front door **smelling** the sizzling grill exploding aroma into one of your **six senses**, then you **hear** the juke box blasting soulful sounds, then you **see** smiling customers with happy stomachs yearning for a chili dog and a wait staff eager to take your order often with a joke and a kind greeting. Ben's Chili Bowl experience begins with opening the front door shifting your six senses into high gear. Next comes the **touch** lifting the warm, soft hot dog roll toward your mouth for *la piece de resistance, la coup de grace*, the ultimate reason you came to Ben's - to **taste** the succulently historic chili dog with its secret sauce created just for you. Because you, the customer, are happy, Ben's becomes a happy place. Happy is the energy Mrs. Ali misses most.

But there is a sixth sense.

It is less tangible than the first five above. This sixth sense may be what Virginia Ali laments most on Mother's Day 2020. The trials and tribulations of COVID-19's pandemic could threaten to erase U Street's history and culture. The pandemic is ravaging people of color more intensely than others. It is an existential threat to African Americans in DC. Mrs. Ali wants to embrace more than the five traditional senses we all enjoy while at Ben's. What she yearns for is what she and her people achieved believing in those words of "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

Bear with me here.

Ben's is not just a hot dog joint, although that is, in its essence, what it is. A successful hot dog joint in and of itself is the embodiment of "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." Simply put, you are **free** to order what you want and be **happy**.

What establishment in our Nation's Capital exemplifies this philosophy more than Ben's Chili Bowl. Observe inside Ben's - witness all manner of race, creed, class, gender, ethnicity and political persuasion sitting side-by-side, laughing together, chowing down on a chili dog while be-bopping to the grooves on the juke box. Yes, Ben's is the embodiment of the American ideal of *life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness*.

But Ben's doesn't stop there.

What Mrs. Ali is really yearning to get back to is communing with customers from all walks of life and all corners of the globe sitting at the counter explaining to her that they came to DC to see the White House, the US Capitol, The Mall and eat at Ben's. What is more American than that? She is currently featured in a nationwide ad for Grub Hub with an image of her smiling and talking with customers across the counter.

When young 24 year old Virginia Rollins migrated from a small town in Virginia to the big city of DC, she came with **hope** and aspiration similar to six million other African Americans fleeing the repressive Jim Crow South to the big, open North with unlimited opportunities. She, like untold other young "colored ladies" in DC, imagined finding a young beau who was a student at Howard University becoming a doctor. Indeed, she found her beau, Ben Ali.

Her story, and that of Ben Ali, an immigrant from the Trinidad, is the quintessential American story. DC offers unlimited opportunity to "make it" in America. Virginia Ali comes alive with happiness every time she walks through the doors of Ben's Chili Bowl greeting people who, too, come through that same swinging door open for over 60 years yearning for a little slice of the American pie.

Virginia Ali becomes energized when she is at The Bowl because it is the essence of her aspirations as a young country girl. The Bowl's energy is the spirit of her existence, the spirit of American opportunity. The energy is the painful and colorful migration from a supporting family down south into a northern world of uncertainty and danger. Her history and her culture walks down U Street everyday looking for new possibilities, new opportunities. Just up the street from Ben's on 9th Street lived Carter G. Woodson, the father of Black History Month, who once said, "A people with no history and culture is a people with no soul." That **sixth sense is the spirit of the soul**, it is what Mrs. Virginia Ali laments most sitting at home during this pandemic. Her soul is at the Chili Bowl - her hard work, vision and belief in community created this iconic DC institution.

She **needs** to go to The Bowl in order to manifest the energy of hope in her America - her history and culture of hope - now hoping to reopen in a Post-COVID-19 future.

Mrs. Ali is the subject here but all DC business leaders are suffering her same fate. They pride themselves on building something, a business, a brand, a work-life family, serving their customers, hiring staff and watching them grow, adding revenues to a dynamic city - they are DC's local businesses and we should think of them first when advocating for our city - yes, *Think Local First*. We should thank them for being the soul, spirit and energy of our metropolis. They, like Mrs. Ali, build our history, our culture and our sense of self, soul and pride.

Thank you Mrs. Ali and Happy Mother's Day.

Your other son,

Bernie.

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