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Albany Story: Drinks to Go, the Pandemic and Lobbyists

Takeout drinks were legalized early in the pandemic, but only temporarily. Lobbyists for liquor stores headed off a move to make them permanent.

By: James Barron

The memories of all that



via Gary Merjian

[Gary Merjian](#) (left, above) signed on as a management trainee at the [Waldorf Astoria](#) the day after he graduated from college in 1985. He found his niche when he got to catering and was assigned to work on one of the glittery charity benefits that took place at the Waldorf night after night, week after week.

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"They had my favorite disco people performing, [Ashford and Simpson](#), who came out of a clamshell," Merjian recalled, referring to an effervescent pop duo. "I called my mom and said, 'I'm going into the world of catering. I don't know what it is, but my office will be the grand ballroom of the Waldorf.'"

It was, for 14 years, as he worked on staging benefits and birthday parties.

Now, even though the Waldorf is closed for a top-to-bottom makeover, the hotel's managers have chosen him as the winner of an [oral history contest](#). A spokeswoman said it was open to former employees (but not current ones) "because we wanted to hear as many first-person stories as possible from the people who truly lived it."

Merjian's contest-winning memory was about Frank Sinatra, who had lived in the Waldorf in the 1970s in what had once been Cole Porter's suite. Merjian was introduced to Sinatra after helping to plan a Friars Club event for Sinatra's fourth wife, Barbara. "I said, 'Mr. S., I've been a fan of yours since I was probably 12,'" recalled Merjian, now the general manager and chief operating officer of the Pelham Country Club in Pelham, N.Y. "He said, 'Nice meeting you, kid. I'm looking forward to a great evening.'"

It must have been, because several years later, the hotel assigned Merjian to coordinate the party for Sinatra's 75th birthday. He had a brainstorm: Why not close the lobby to everyone but the 200 invited guests. "We never closed it for anybody," he said, "but we did it for Frank." And when Sinatra's handlers asked to have the marquee over the hotel's Park Avenue entrance say "Frankie's Place" on the night of the party, he worked out a slipcover that fit over the Waldorf sign.

He also worked on the party for President Bill Clinton's 50th birthday. "Hillary asked me to find the person to make the birthday cake," he said. ([He recommended the bakery William Greenberg Desserts.](#)) By coincidence, Merjian left for the St. Regis soon after Sinatra died in 1998 and worked there until it shut down in the pandemic.

The prize in the contest is a weekend at the Waldorf after it reopens next year. Merjian said he was looking forward to taking his wife, Heide. They met as co-workers and were married on the famous Starlight Roof.

This time around they would have to put on their bathing suits if they return to the spot. "Where we got married is [going to be a swimming pool](#)" once the renovations are complete, he said, "but that's O.K."