

Bear of a year

Multi-hatted businessman Ron Slinger has just had, in his words, the worst year of his life.

Restaurants and real estate.

Anyone who has worked either knows all about the 'bad year.'

A slump in the economy, a rise in interest rates, and before you know it your accountant is asking you for payment up front. No truer sign is there that

your portfolio is going south. Now think about a guy like Ron Slinger, publican extraordinaire, liquor store owner and longtime North Shore realtor.

You'd think a man who's been in both games for three decades would have some real war stories about 'bad years.'

Well, he does, but his bad year, which he's just emerging from, has nothing to do with business. It has everything to do with life. And death.

"In the past year I've lost both my longtime business partner and the guy who ran our business," the bear of a man was telling me the other day over lunch in his incomparable Black Bear Pub.

David Raht and Milos Indic each passed away in the past six months; Raht after a year-long fight with cancer, and Indic after just a month of some health complications.

Each man was integral to Slinger's success, particularly in the pub business. He and Dave Raht were friends and business partners for years. Together, Slinger and Raht built and established The Queen's Cross as the place for Upper Lonsdale-ites to have a cold one, eat a great pub meal and chin-wag with neighbours. The pair then took that winning pub recipe to Lynn Valley in 1997, and in less than a decade established the Black Bear Pub as the place for Lynn Valley-ites to, well, you know.

Indic was the man who for the past two decades ran Slinger and Raht's establishments, and up until his death was as big a reason for many regulars to drop into "the Bear" as is the flatscreen TVs, the cozy and friendly patio and the great pub grub. Sitting at his favourite bar-side table and sipping a red wine, Slinger's demeanor shows no outward signs of the scope and impact of the loss.

His booming voice rolls and pitches like a cargo-laden ship in stormy seas; his arms wave wildly to punctuate a point; and his eyes twinkle as he dances from one subject to another.

During our lunch exchange Slinger gave me his views on everything from North Shore restaurants (he's hot on Candela right now, a new restaurant where A Piece of Cake was formerly located on Esplanade); to North Shore real estate (still extremely undervalued in his estimation); to the liquor store business (his Spirits of Mt. Seymour shop turned two-years-old two days ago, and business is 'good') to the current economy ("For awhile there a few years ago nobody had any disposable income; but that's coming back in a big way.")

But what Ron Slinger spoke most often and most passionately about was the 12-acre or so site his treasured pub sits on. "I just want them to get on with it," he says with a boom.

In this case, 'them' is North Vancouver District council and developer Bosa. And 'it' is the long-awaited, much-debated transformation of the Lynn Valley mall and district library sites into a multi-use

community.

Slinger cites Bosa's highly regarded Newport Village development as the perfect model for Lynn Valley, and wonders why the two main players haven't done much to achieve that end in the past

decade. To date, the only action on the site is the District's very ambitious Library project, a \$40-million development that will serve as a community anchor to whatever becomes of Bosa's property.

When he tells me about his frustration with the slow proceedings, I can't help but think Slinger the pub owner has visions of lunch rush line-ups at the Bear if such a Whistleresque village was created on his doorstep.

I tell him as much. He puts down his salad fork, looks me in the eye and tells me a short story that has nothing to do with business, and everything to do with life.

The appeal of mixed-use development on the site would allow him and his wife Bobbi to stay in Lynn Valley, a community they've called home for 30 years.

"We're at the point, as are most of my friends and neighbours, that we're looking to downsize but can't find anything in Lynn Valley."

Build some residential on the site, he says, and you'd pre-sell every unit to locals who are in the same situation as he and his wife.

coffee
with

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BEAR'S DEN - Ron Slinger at his popular Black Bear Pub. *Daniel Pi photo*

At the end of lunch, I ask Slinger how the deaths of his two close friends have affected him. "I miss them every day. I'm still the positive guy I always was; that's not going to change," he says with a boom and a grin.

Prodding a little more, I ask if their deaths have him considering his own mortality, and if that in turn has him hot for a retirement condo in Lynn Valley.

Ron Slinger just smiles that big bear smile, gives me a big bear handshake and says with the most conviction and honesty, "I just love this community."