

ENTERTAINMENT

MARCH 6, 2024

Farewell to a breastaurant

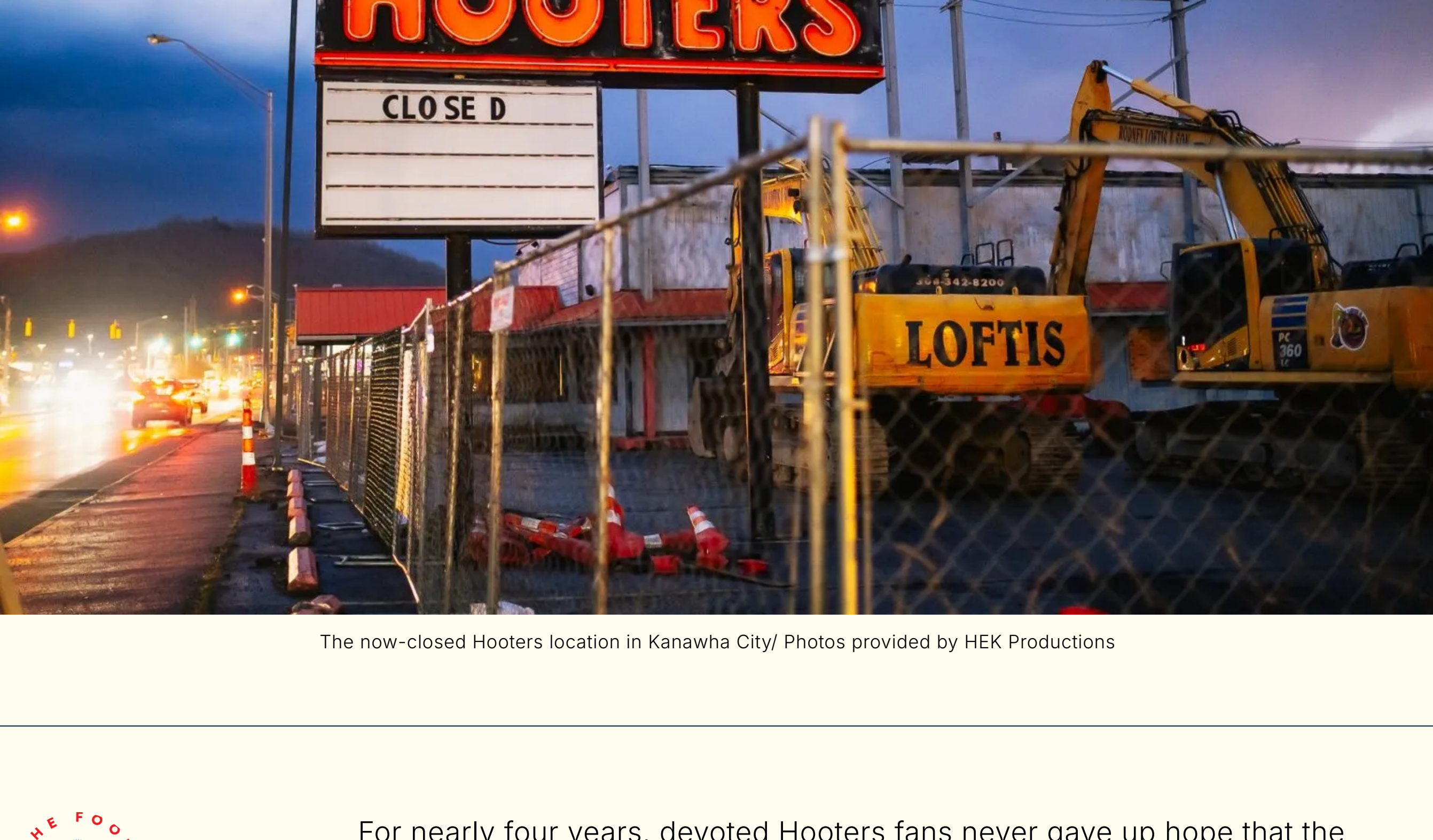
West Virginia mourns loss of state's last Hooters

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The now-closed Hooters location in Kanawha City/ Photos provided by HEK Productions

BY DAVINA VAN BUREN

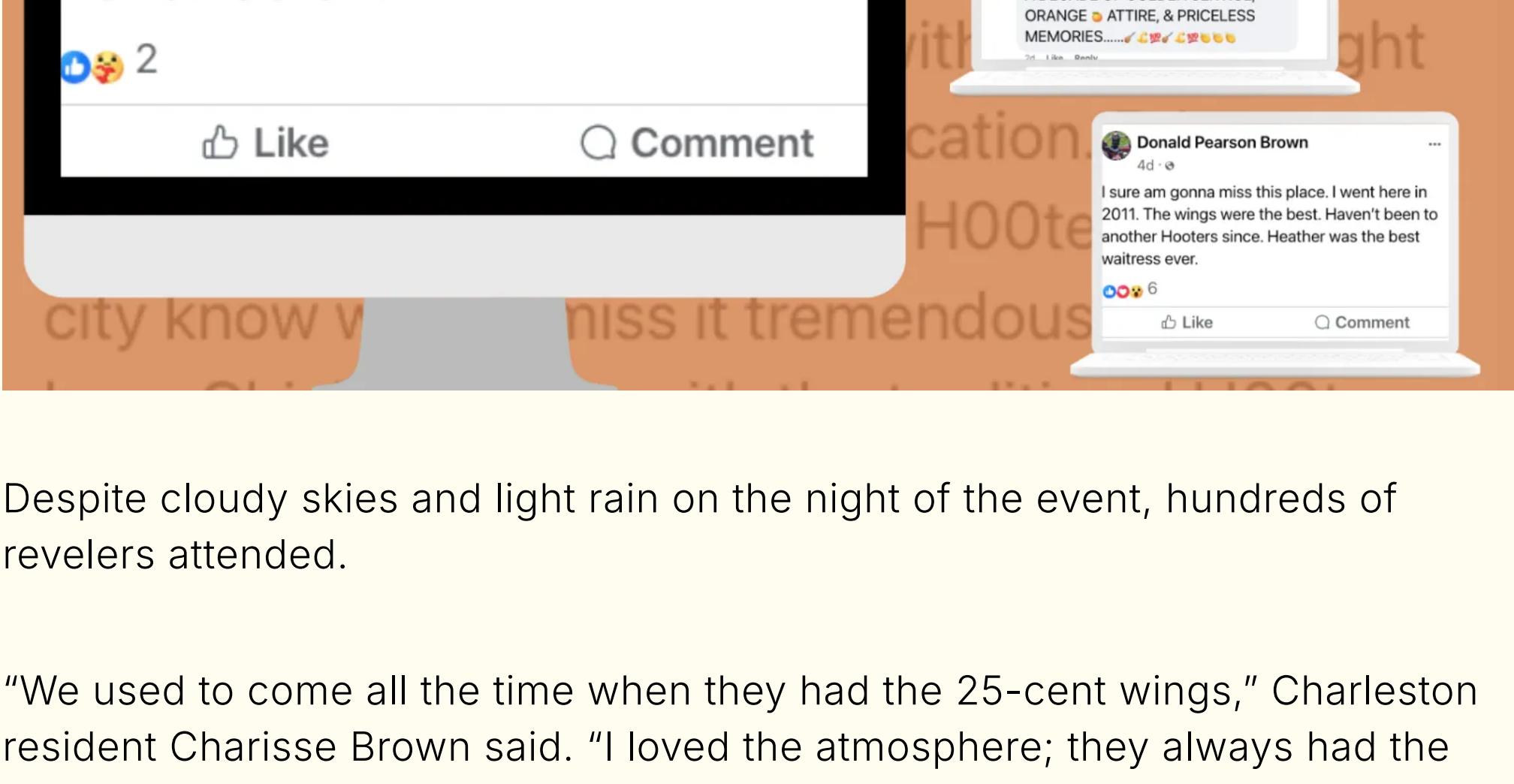
For nearly four years, devoted Hooters fans never gave up hope that the chain's last remaining West Virginia location—which opened in 1996 and closed in March 2020—would reopen. But when local supporters Leonard Browning and Drew Cook learned that Charleston's beloved neighborhood hangout would soon be demolished and replaced by a Sheetz gas station, they knew the community needed closure.

On February 15, Browning created the event [H00ters Candle Light Vigil \(Kanawha City\)](#) on Facebook.

Soon after, former guests and regulars began to share memories and photos on the event page, and word about the once-in-a-lifetime event began to spread—for better or worse. While some locals commented that the event made them feel “embarrassed” to be from Charleston, most recognized the event for what it was: a cheeky ode to what was essentially the Kanawha City neighborhood's *Cheers*.

David Aaron Boggs wrote on the event page, “I think of how many people worked there. That could have been their first steps to the future. Could have been what fed their families or paid their way through school. I hope former employees have a joyous reunion and wish them all safe travels!”

News of the event reached Hooter's corporate headquarters, which overnighted a case of Hooters' calendars to be raffled off at the event.



Despite cloudy skies and light rain on the night of the event, hundreds of revelers attended.

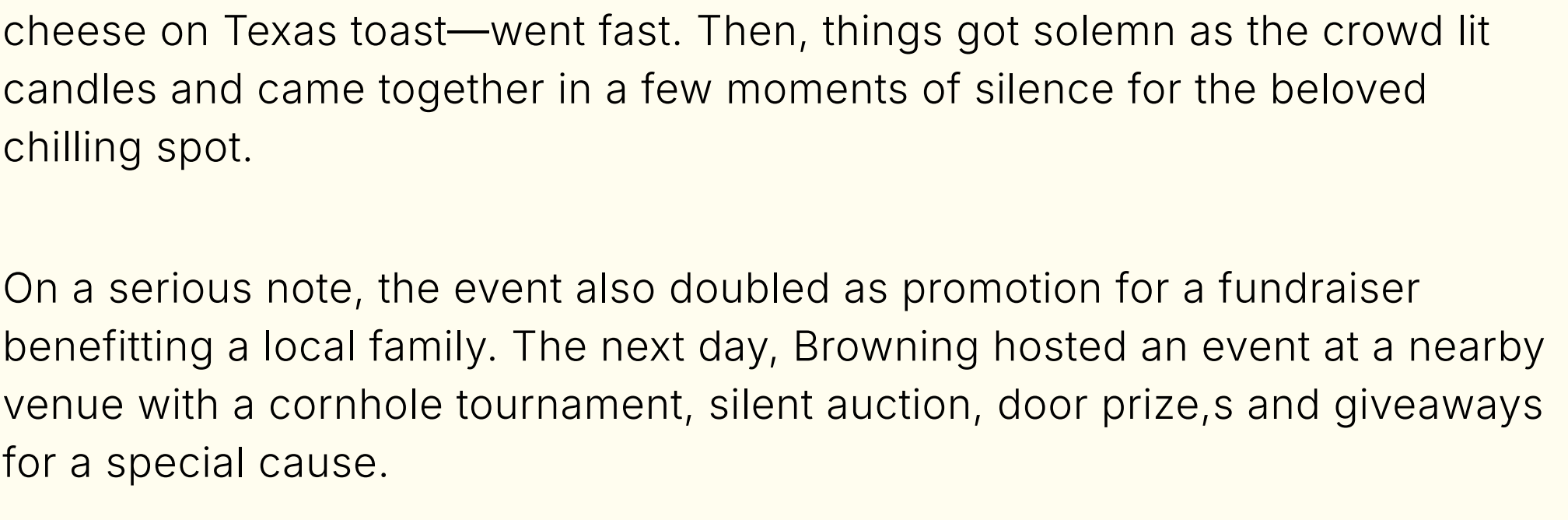
“We used to come all the time when they had the 25-cent wings,” Charleston resident Charisse Brown said. “I loved the atmosphere; they always had the game on. My favorite server was Sara and the last time we saw her, she was so excited because she was moving to Florida to go be a Hooters girl down there...I hope she's doing well.”

Even those who never actually dined at the Charleston location showed up in support. People from as far away as South Carolina were in the audience; some said they drove through the night to get there.

“I never visited this Hooters,” said 18-year-old Evan Gordon. “But when I saw the event on Facebook, I had to come check it out and pay my respects.”

Browning, Cook, and other event organizers emceed the event from a tent just outside the chain link fence surrounding the iconic Hooters building. VIP guests including former servers, cooks, and managers showed up—some in their old Hooters attire—to say a final goodbye.

“For all the naysayers, the doubters, the down talkers and whatnot...this building right here was a legitimate iconic figure to the Kanawha Valley,” Browning said, drawing cheers from the crowd.

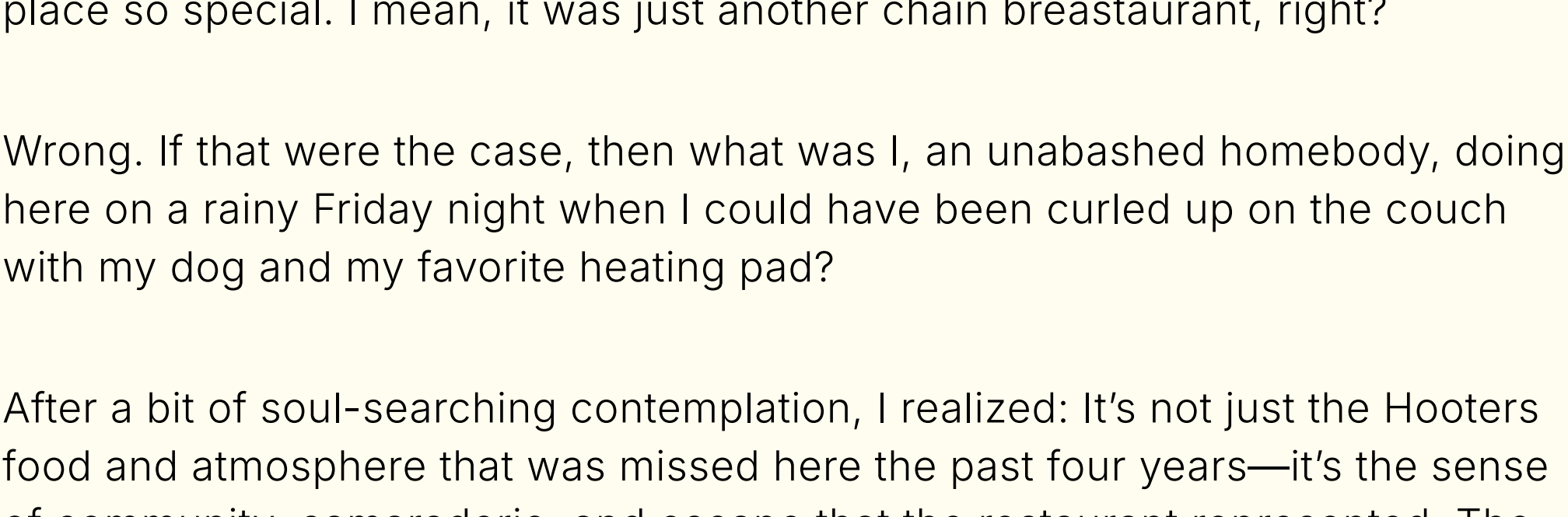


Guests reminisced about the good times they had at the location, listened to tunes provided by Charleston rock radio station The Mountain 98.7, and snacked on wings tossed in Hooters' signature sauce, as well as a limited supply of Browning's take on the chain's popular [Strip Cheese Sandwich](#). The sandwiches—breaded chicken strips tossed in Hooters wing sauce with cheese on Texas toast—went fast. Then, things got solemn as the crowd lit candles and came together in a few moments of silence for the beloved chilling spot.

On a serious note, the event also doubled as promotion for a fundraiser benefitting a local family. The next day, Browning hosted an event at a nearby venue with a cornhole tournament, silent auction, door prize,s and giveaways for a special cause.

“One of our close friend's daughters, she was just diagnosed with a very, very rare disease and it's very serious. If she don't get help, then she's not going to be with us much longer,” Browning said.

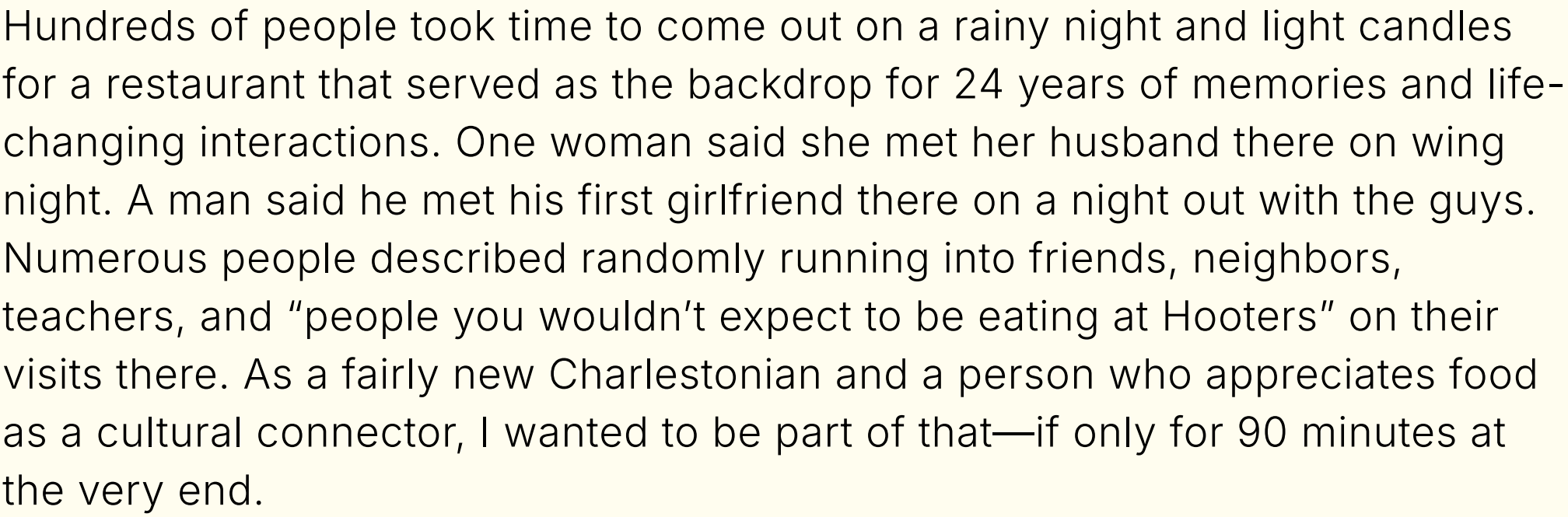
Later, Browning said the money raised will allow the family to travel to California for their child's treatment.



I never had the opportunity to patronize the Charleston Hooters, and I'm not a loyal fan of the chain. As I stood in the drizzle among hundreds of strangers, paying homage to a restaurant I'd never set foot in, I wondered what made this place so special. I mean, it was just another chain breastaurant, right?

Wrong. If that were the case, then what was I, an unabashed homebody, doing here on a rainy Friday night when I could have been curled up on the couch with my dog and my favorite heating pad?

After a bit of soul-searching contemplation, I realized: It's not just the Hooters food and atmosphere that was missed here the past four years—it's the sense of community, camaraderie, and escape that the restaurant represented. The attendees I spoke with all commented on how this particular Hooters was an oasis in an oft-fraught world. A safe place where people of all ages, opposing political views, and various sports team loyalties could eat, joke, talk smack, and laugh together.



Former employees of Hooters' Charleston location

Hundreds of people took time to come out on a rainy night and light candles for a restaurant that served as the backdrop for 24 years of memories and life-changing interactions. One woman said she met her husband there on wing night. A man said he met his first girlfriend there on a night out with the guys. Numerous people described randomly running into friends, neighbors, teachers, and “people you wouldn't expect to be eating at Hooters” on their visits there. As a fairly new Charlestonian and a person who appreciates food as a cultural connector, I wanted to be part of that—if only for 90 minutes at the very end.

Even though I never dined at the Kanawha City Hooters, I know that it was never the hot wings, the cold beer, or even the skimpy outfits that kept customers coming back here. It was the people. Charleston, West Virginia is not a glamorous place, but our citizens are the nicest, most down-to-earth people you'll ever meet. They are what made this restaurant special.

The building at 5615 MacCorkle Ave. SE may have been demolished, but the Hooters spirit lives on in locals' hearts.



681 words, 13 photographs, and 2 videos

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