

15 MINUTES

Luck of the Irish

BY EVAN WILLIAMS

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Over a large glass of Michelob Ultra in the late afternoon, with “the usual suspects,” as some of the regulars at the bar refer to themselves, Barb Cox is counting her blessings. That includes her cleaning business, of which she is the sole owner and employee, something she’s run for 15 years; and a condominium she owns in a small, two-story complex just west of downtown Fort Myers.

“Now I’d also like to find a nice man, maybe get married,” she says. The crowd at The Indigo Room, a few permanent fixtures and one or two younger men, doesn’t seem to include any good prospects.

Ms. Cox is as Irish as it’s possible to be without being Catholic. She is mostly a beer drinker although she doesn’t mind a shot of whiskey once in a while. Her once bright red hair, which now at 54 has almost a winter wheat color to it, must have been almost a liability when she was a kid. The famous Irish temper appears to have abated years ago, but Ms. Cox said she was once “a very rebellious mean little girl” — beat up a pregnant classmate in ninth grade, and in 11th broke a boy’s heart so bad he killed himself.

“That was my first love,” she says in her sweet, diminutive voice.

Among her other transgressions include coming home from a double date, at her junior high school prom, with sloe gin on her breath. Her mother was aghast when she discovered it, kissing her good-

night. “Boy was she pissed at me,” Ms. Cox says.

But that was a long time ago, and she’s mellowed.

She follows some general guidelines now: to “not sweat the small stuff,” and a comforting belief that hard work pays off in dividends. She gets up early every day to clean houses or apartments, churches or schools, the Promise Land day care center.

“I look back and I say, ‘ya, you have your ups and downs,’” Ms. Cox says. “But I tell you what I’ve found out, if you’re willing to work, people will help you. People will bend over to help you. It’s worked out that way for me.”

She grew up on a farm with a foster family, just outside Terra Haute, Ind., surrounded by chickens, cows, pigs and other entertainment. Her other more tempestuous family, a biological mother and father and seven siblings, have also kept in occasional contact over the years. She ran track and field in junior high, and graduated from a high school in Dugger, Ind., in



Barb Cox

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1975. Ten years later, she would arrive in Florida via Corvette convertible.

Her best friend Bobby, a girl she had met in a bible study group, drove them the whole way to St. Petersburg; that is, Ms. Cox and a scared housecat, in the loaded-down convertible.

“It was quite a scene,” Ms. Cox remembered. She never did like to drive. It makes her too nervous, although she took a driver’s education course years ago. She usually gets around on a new Huffy bicycle.

A few months later, she moved to Fort

Myers looking for work, finding an odd job at some now defunct lunch spot called The Great Hot Dog Experience,” and many other places: a doughnut shop on Cleveland Avenue, downtown bars, Mason’s Bakery. Her friend Bobby, like a lot of people Ms. Cox knew “kind of went her own way” eventually. “And I stayed.”

“There’s a lot of people that’s very transient, come and go,” she says. “I just wanted to come to see what Florida would be like and that door opened up early with Bobby. To put a long story short, I wanted to get established.”

She has. A few weekends ago she took a trip with her friends at The American Legion to the Seminole Casino in Hollywood. On Sundays she attends a Christian church. She keeps track of her cleaning business clients. A few beers in the late afternoon is a routine. An occasional pancake breakfast at The Oasis is a rare treat.

She hopes one day to visit Ireland, and other than that has no desire to leave Fort Myers.

“It’s laid back, kind of low key here, not real fast-paced,” she says approvingly. “Good people here, too.”

Looking ahead with a practical and unsentimental eye on the future, however, she made funeral arrangements to be flown back to a graveyard in Indiana.

“My spirit’s going to go to heaven or hell. We’ll see what happens,” she laughs, a sort of light-hearted prayer offered up in the clear afternoon light of the bar. “I think I’m going upstairs.” ■

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