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After yearlong closure, Flagstaff's Galaxy Diner returns to a very different world

Adrian Skabelund
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Ivory-Rose Martinez brings out a banana split and milkshake Thursday afternoon at the Galaxy Diner in Flagstaff, which has recently reopened under new ownership.

Rachel Gibbons, Arizona Daily Sun

Adrian Skabelund

Given the turmoil of 2020, many residents may be hoping to escape into another time. At least that is what Will Pillen is hoping after he reopened the Galaxy Diner last month.

The classic diner, with its walls covered in the portraits of Hollywood celebrities from the last century, had closed last year after JB's Family Restaurants, Inc., which had owned

the diner, declared bankruptcy.

Many of the pictures that have hung on the diners walls for years are actually owned by Pillen, who started putting them up after he began working as the diner's manager in 2006.

“My mother worked out of Hollywood. She was a model when she was young, so she had her connections and I inherited a lot of it,” Pillen said. “So I slowly put it up -- of course, I bought a lot of it too.”

Pillen continued managing the diner until 2014, but when he heard the news that JB's Inc. would be filing for bankruptcy, he said he began making preparations for how he might be able to keep the diner open. By November of 2019, Pillen said he had officially taken control.

As Pillen worked to reopen the diner this year, he said he didn't want customers to return to something unrecognizable.

“I didn't want to change anything, but I wanted to make it so that it was clean. Clean is something that I really focus on, I want a clean, safe environment for both customer and employee,” Pillen said. “So people will come back and say, ‘oh, it's the same,’ because that's what people wanted. In this town, no, don't change anything.”

Still, now that he owns the diner, Pillen said he has been able to make some of the repairs and improvements he wanted to make way back when he was manager. He is working to repair the neon sign.

Galaxy Diner's return has come as many other eateries struggle to get by in the midst of the pandemic. Just last month the similarly beloved hole in the wall Primo's Deli on San Francisco Street closed its doors.

And the pandemic significantly changed their plans to reopen, Pillen said.

Originally, Pillen had hoped to reopen in March, but the timing was forced back as businesses across the state were forced to close their doors. The pandemic also ended plans for a large reopening event, Pillen said.

“It's been a slow climb, but two and a half weeks out I'm not really worried, I mean we'll

get it back,” Pillen said of business so far.

Pillen said they have been getting about 30 calls a day from people wondering if they are open for dine-in service and many of the regulars the diner had before its closure are beginning to return.

But he said he has been somewhat surprised about how slowly that knowledge has spread, especially in a town like Flagstaff.

The pandemic has also prevented another group of customers to return, or even enter the country: foreign tourists. Attracted by the Route 66 Americana on display, large bus tours would often schedule ahead of time to eat at the diner between visits to the Grand Canyon or Monument Valley.

But that business likely won't be starting again for some time, Pillen guessed.