

“Sign of the Times”

Marty Tarnelli was a third generation Italian-American with grandparents from Sicily and Rome. His grandfather on his father’s side, Joseph Tarnelli, first opened the family restaurant on Market Street in 1922. Joseph worked six days a week, tirelessly building his business into a neighborhood icon. He proudly passed the eatery on to his eldest son, Louis, when the work became too much for him to handle. Louis inherited his father’s work ethic and the restaurant continued to flourish, even through hard economic times. Eventually, Louis passed the business onto his only son, Marty, who also worked hard to keep the traditions started by his grandfather.

Tarnelli’s became the place to go when visiting the city. Tourists from around the world stopped by the beloved bistro to feast on Tarnelli’s famous stromboli. Local politicians, professional athletes, famous actors, and chart-topping singers were known to stop by from time to time to get a bite. Marty became a local celebrity, and he even enjoyed such perks as discounted dry cleaning, low-cost trash removal and free baseball tickets. He also traveled to other restaurants in the city and the owners greeted him with great fanfare. He loved his city and the citizens loved him back.

The city’s demographics shifted over time, and soon, more and more non-English speaking folks began to take up residence. Though he would never turn away a paying customer, Marty began to tire of trying to understand this new customer base when they ordered their food in less-than-perfect English. So one day, he decided to do something about it. He quietly posted a sign on the front door of the restaurant that read: “You are in the United States, please speak English.”

At first, few people complained about the sign. It usually drew some laughs from the regulars, and some patrons even congratulated Marty for his bravery. However, complaints did begin to trickle in, but Marty turned a deaf ear to them. Some folks then began to write to the mayor and members of the city council, asking them to force Marty to take down the sign. The local newspapers picked up on the controversy and it soon became the subject of talk radio shows in the city.

The hubbub did nothing to hurt Mary's business. In fact, more people visited the restaurant just to see what the fuss was all about. While some people protested in front of the eatery, others had their pictures taken in front of the famous sign. Meanwhile, the battle raged on in the media. Was Marty a bigot? Or was he just voicing a concern that others didn't have the courage to talk about? One area paper polled its readers and the voters were split down the middle. The ruckus became a distraction for Marty, who simply wanted to provide good food and customer service to his community. He spent less time at the restaurant as he granted interview requests from local radio and television stations.

Marty's stance in these interviews remained firm. He said that people visiting their city should be able to clearly speak the language of the populace, especially when dealing with businesses providing valuable goods and services. His comments eventually caught the attention of national news outlets that also contacted him for interviews. His appearance on the National News Network's primetime newscast drew a record audience for that month, and viewers flooded the network with letters and emails that were again an even split.

The heated controversy finally became too much for City Hall. Mayor Abraham Wilson had remained silent on this issue, but he realized that he had to take a stand. He listened to his advisors and weighted the pros and cons before finally reaching a decision. At a news conference at City Hall, Wilson told the media that despite his long friendship with the proprietor, he felt that the sign sent the wrong message about the city to visitors and residents. He also said that he would arrange a private meeting with Marty to discuss this important issue.

Mayor Wilson and his entourage arrived at the restaurant the next afternoon. Marty greeted his old friend and escorted him to a private table, while journalists and photographers lined up outside the eatery to capture the event. Marty and Wilson sat across from each other, with just a pitcher of iced tea and two glasses between them. The mayor's bodyguards stood close to the table to block the view of the gawking patrons and the curious media members.

The meeting lasted for only twenty minutes. The mayor offered his thoughts on the controversy and he asked that the sign be taken down. Marty listened intently to his friend, but he refused to change his mind. Then the mayor told him that members of the Commission for a Better City were looking into possible sanctions against Marty's business. Marty smiled and told the mayor that he doubted that anything could be done, since the sign was protected under the First Amendment. The mayor then reiterated his request and wished his friend the best of luck, before he and his entourage departed.

The mayor's visit kept Marty's story on the front page of many newspapers. The protests outside his restaurant grew and Marty began to feel the stress of the hullabaloo. He knew he needed a break, so he took one of his frequent trips across town to visit a

popular restaurant in the city's Chinatown section. Along the way, he enjoyed the peaceful, classical music that flowed from his car's stereo speakers. As he entered the enchanting neighborhood, his mind began to wander and he didn't see the piece of debris along the side of the road. Suddenly, his right, front tire struck the object, which punctured the tire and caused his car to pull abruptly toward the sidewalk. Marty slammed on his breaks and managed to bring the vehicle to a safe stop. He got out of the car and inspected the damage. Cursing his bad luck, he reached into his coat pocket for his cell phone, only to discover that he hadn't brought it with him. Not wanting to change the tire himself, he decided to find a phone and call AAA.

Marty entered the first open establishment that he found and he quickly walked up to the counter where a man was speaking Chinese to a couple as they placed their order for food. After the couple paid for their takeout and moved aside to wait for it, Marty addressed the man behind the counter. He asked if he could use the phone to call for a tow truck for his disabled car. Suddenly the man shook his head and pointed to a sign above the counter. It read: *You are in Chinatown. Please place your order in Chinese.*

The next morning, Marty Tarnelli took down his controversial sign.