

He Was Tens of Thousands in Debt When He Opened His Business. Now, He Has 27 Locations.

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Key Takeaways

- Elliot Nelson's first St. Patrick's Day at McNellie's Pub was such a disaster he hid on a keg, but that early chaos laid the groundwork for everything he built after.
- Nelson didn't just open concepts; he revitalized downtown Tulsa by creating gathering places that turned overlooked blocks into thriving communities.
- Guests still flock to McNellie's because they believe in the story and the spirit of Oklahoma hospitality that Nelson has championed across 27 locations.

Elliot Nelson thought he was opening a neighborhood pub. Instead, he opened pure chaos.

The very first day McNellie's Pub opened in downtown Tulsa was St. Patrick's Day, and the place was so slammed that Nelson did what any overwhelmed 20-something owner might do: He climbed onto a keg, rode the elevator up and down and hid from the world.

"It was a disaster," Nelson admits. "Brand new staff, nobody knew what they were doing, and we didn't have any systems for anything. It was just a complete bloodbath."

The pub had already drained more time and money than expected. Nelson was tens of thousands of dollars behind before the doors opened, and now his first big day had turned into a nightmare. By the end of it, he was sitting on that keg, avoiding everyone, wondering if he had just made the biggest mistake of his life.

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But quitting was never really an option. "There was some kind of hope or just that naivete of being young and not knowing any better that allowed me to keep going," he says. Those early months were survival mode, a blur of juggling bills and praying that cash flow would catch up before the creditors closed in.

Slowly, it did. The pub found its footing, new concepts followed, and soon Nelson had grown McNellie's Group into a handful of locations. Outwardly, it looked like success. Inwardly, Nelson was drowning. Every Saturday turned into what he called "forensic accounting," long hours spent trying to track where the money had gone.

That was when a friend stepped in. "He just said, 'Man, are you okay?' and I told him 'No, I'm not,'" Nelson recalls. "The next week, he called me and said, 'I think I can help you, and you don't need to pay me that much. My wife's got a great job. I'll come for reduced costs.'"

That friend became his COO, a partner who helped carry the growing weight of the company. Today, the kid who once hid on a keg runs 19 concepts and 27 locations across Oklahoma and Arkansas.

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Building a neighborhood

Surviving that first keg-hiding St. Patrick's Day taught Nelson a hard truth: If he wanted McNellie's to thrive, he needed more than a pub. He needed a neighborhood.

"When I told people what I was going to do, they said it would never work," Nelson says. "But my joke became we built a neighborhood pub, and then we had to build a neighborhood."

So he did. Over the years, Nelson added a German beer hall, a sushi restaurant, a diner and even a bowling alley. Some concepts hit, some did not, but together they transformed a quiet corner of downtown Tulsa into a destination. His projects grew alongside the city itself, eventually attracting a new minor league stadium and the kind of foot traffic that once seemed impossible.

Not every idea was easy. One Mexican restaurant nearly bankrupted the company. Others had to be retooled when they missed the market. Yet Nelson's vision was bigger than any single menu. "Our goal is to make our towns and our communities better, one restaurant at a time," he says. That meant creating spaces where people wanted to gather, even if it required stubbornness and years of patient investment.

The loyalty that resulted has been remarkable. People still pack into the original McNellie's, not just for a pint but for the story. "We weren't always great at running that restaurant," Nelson admits. "But the story was something people wanted to get behind. They wanted to support the kid who came down and tried to make his hometown better."

Ask Nelson what Oklahoma hospitality means, and he points to that warmth. "Tulsa is one of the friendliest places you'll ever find," he says. "People help each other out, and they welcome strangers. That's why I still love it so much."

Today, Nelson's 27 locations stand as proof that people rally behind more than just food and drink. They come back because they believe in the story, in the neighborhood and in the kid from Tulsa who refused to give up.

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