

# Squeezed Out of the Squeeze Inn

LISA PALMER



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*WRITER'S COMMENT: When I was given the assignment to write a reportage or profile in English 100NF (Creative Writing: Non-Fiction), I had a hard time deciding what to write about. I flip-flopped between family stories, dog park cliques, and interesting things I had found in the news. With help from Professor Dave Masiel, I decided to write about something near and dear to my heart: burgers. Interviewing the owner for the Squeeze Inn, and trying to interview the woman trying to sue him, was quite possibly the most nerve-racking and rewarding thing I've ever done. The experience definitely opened doors to me, helping me to obtain an internship with the Sacramento Press, a local Sacramento news website. The Squeeze Inn has indeed moved to bigger and more accessible digs and business is thriving. I recommend every burger lover try a Squeeze with cheese at least once in their lives.*

—Lisa Palmer

*INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: The profiling of place can be tricky work, easily tending toward descriptions of static settings and characters walking in circles. Lisa Palmer's profile of the Squeeze Inn proves that where there's conflict, there's story, and where description and conflict are woven together, character and setting come to life. In "Squeezed Out of the Squeeze Inn," Lisa manages the considerable feat of blending not two but four distinct modes of development. She brings to life an iconic restaurant and its long-suffering owner, explains the legal wrangling over the Americans with Disabilities Act, and reveals the culinary secret of the famous "cheese skirt." She does it all with a riveting sense of story, told with a rare balance between wit and objective reportage.*

—David Masiel, University Writing Program

THERE'S A NEW SIGN OUTSIDE the Squeeze Inn on Fruitridge Road—a white sign that signals the surrender of its owner, Travis Hausauer, that tells anybody who's reading "I give up, you win! Please don't sue us again!" It informs them that the famous burger joint will be moving in a few months to a new location on Power Inn Road, just around the corner. This sign expresses Travis's frustration with the legal system and the ADA laws. As he tells me, "I put that up when I figured I had enough and we're going to move." He also tells me it's "nobody's intention to really discriminate, but there should've been some kind of provision to where old businesses were protected." While not his intention to discriminate, according to a couple of lawsuits filed against the Squeeze Inn, he did.

The Americans with Disabilities Act, passed in 1990, was put into effect to aid the disabled by pushing businesses to make all public parts of their establishments accessible to everybody, wheelchair or not. While Travis agrees that it's "a great law, because you don't want to shut the door on anyone," there are some problems with it—problems that allowed for the current situation at the Squeeze Inn. While all businesses are expected to comply, there's nobody to help them do so—unlike fire safety marshals that inspect a property for fire hazards, there's no accessibility marshal to help businesses understand the law and how to comply. Not only is there no inspection of the property, there is also nothing in the law that can stop somebody from suing without contacting or even visiting the business first. And there is no protection for older buildings—and this is where Travis's frustrations lie.

Despite the fact that The Squeeze Inn is housed in a building that has been around since the 1930s, long before the ADA laws were passed, Travis still has to make his building comply with these laws, or close it down. The orange building, not much bigger than a studio apartment, was once an entrance to a waffle house and a coffee shop before the previous owner bought it from a neighboring business about 30 years ago. But it is not exempt from the lawsuits pertaining to its accessibility for the handicapped—something Travis found out the hard way. Because he was unaware that old buildings are forced to comply with the ADA standards, Travis found himself in the middle of a legal pickle, faced with a lawsuit and renovations that would require more time and money than Travis has—a complete renovation of a building with a lot of history and character.

The Squeeze Inn is so small that even able-bodied people have trouble moving around inside. When I walk in, I'm immediately enclosed within an entryway big enough for about four people to fit into—squeezed, of course. Two benches made out of an old surfboard run along the entryway. Posters and vintage signs in the very picture of kitsch litter the old wooden walls and ceiling. Past the entryway, one gets the feeling of being stuffed into a favorite sweater that doesn't quite fit anymore. Twelve barstools line the front of an old bar, the people there literally rubbing elbows with each other as they eat. Even the employees are squeezed in here, the kitchen just big enough for a grill, prep station, and a deep fryer. This is where I'm invited to speak with Travis, who warns me to be careful of the slippery floors as I step into the kitchen. Food crackles and sizzles all around me and I get an instantaneous feeling that someone has popped an onion-flavored breath mint into my mouth.

Travis is just that kind of man—the kind who invites you to stand beside him and his grill for a chat. My talk with him feels more like two friends chatting than a person being interviewed by a stranger. He doesn't have a speck of mistrust of writers, reporters, or anyone who wants to talk to him—he seems entirely incapable of it. Because of his friendly nature and chatty personality, I feel like I can call him Travis . . . he doesn't seem like a last name kind of guy.

Travis continues to work as we talk—his rough hands moving fast as he plops a handful of shredded cheddar cheese onto a burger patty and places the top bun over it, artfully tossing ice onto the grill before covering the whole set up. This is the secret to the cheese “skirt,” a technique the previous owner learned from his mother, who would cook the burgers “at home in a cast iron pan, then she'd put ice on them and melt the cheese with them.” He takes pride in his famous burgers, telling me that people try to reproduce them in their own homes, only to return to him and tell him “they're just not the same.” He grins as he tells me “they didn't have the love cooked in them like I do.” This love is evident in the way he talks about the Squeeze Inn, already dreading the loss of the historic building.

Travis describes his restaurant as “the kind of place that is really . . . part of America that's gone and when they're gone, then you can't go back.” It's an old-style mom-and-pop shop reminiscent of another time, a place where you know the person working behind the grill and the people serving you food. Patrons get a feeling of a community, created

by the closed quarters and good food. “People are close to you, you can’t help but talk to them, you’re rubbing elbows with them and you actually talk to the person next to you. Instead of, you know, like our society’s becoming so sterile to where you’ll live in a house and not even talk to your neighbor for 10 years. This kind of makes you actually make contact . . . open up to them.”

Travis steps out of the kitchen for a minute when someone stops in and tells him “Come here, I’ve got something for you.” While he’s gone, I turn to my fiancé who has already ordered and received our majestic burgers and is now standing in the most out-of-the-way corner he can find. An elderly couple sits in front of him and they begin to ask me why I’m behind the counter. When I tell them about the interview, they ask me about the history of the place, jokingly questioning my interviewing skills and telling me that I’ll be graded on my response to their questions. What Travis says is true—there’s a certain, almost magical, quality about the combination of tightly closed quarters and good food that gets people talking and laughing. People you’ve never met before and will probably never meet again become good friends during that hour you spend next to them.

It’s because of the size of the Squeeze Inn—something that many say gives it the quaint charm that returns them to years gone by—that the business is under attack. There’s no ramp for wheelchairs to get inside the burger joint and no space for them to maneuver if they somehow did manage to get in. The Squeeze Inn was previously slapped with a lawsuit before Kimberly Block came around, before her wheelchair prohibited her entrance into the building. Travis was busy working with a man to fix the few complaints the suing party had. He put a rail in the bathrooms, paved the driveway leading to the back patio, and was trying to create a place for his handicapped customers to sit and enjoy their meals instead of ordering take-out. He was able to share the handicapped parking space his neighbors owned. Maybe Travis was expecting a bit too much credit for trying than Kimberly Block was willing to give, maybe patience isn’t her strong suit—maybe she just couldn’t wait any longer to sit down and enjoy the atmosphere and company that go hand-in-hand with those greasy, cheesy burgers.

Whatever her reasoning, Block wrote a letter to Travis detailing her frustrations with her inability to enjoy the restaurant, or even enter it. “So I wrote her back and said, ‘Please be patient with me. I’m working with

a person right now and I hired a consultant. These things take time.” The next thing he knew, the Squeeze Inn was trapped within the bowels of another monstrous lawsuit, one that required changes that would be impossible to make within the small boundaries of the burger hut.

Yet Kimberly Block remains elusive. Travis doesn't remember her trying to enter the building and neither do the girls serving, and there seem to be no customer accounts of her presence on the property. One can imagine her in her wheelchair, struggling against the loose gravel of the driveway leading to the back patio or hopelessly trying to make her way up the stairs and into the building, but one must be careful to stay within the realm of imagination, as her presence outside the little red building on November 10, 2008, remains a mystery. A mystery that not even the owners of the Market Basket in Del Paso Heights, the Quick Shop Market in South Sacramento, or Lil Joe's in North Sacramento—the three other businesses being sued by Block—can solve.

Coincidentally, Block is unreachable. Her phone number is unlisted, and it's her attorney's information, not hers, that is found on the lawsuit itself. I'm no secret agent or spy, so I don't know the tricks to finding somebody who doesn't want to be found. For now, I've settled on contacting Jason Singleton, the lawyer representing Block, and the lawyer who represented about 350 other similar suits regarding ADA laws, and am eagerly awaiting his reply.

Until then, the lawsuit seems to speak for itself. Block claims that from her experiences at the Squeeze Inn, she suffered “emotional distress, mental distress, mental suffering, mental anguish, which includes shame, humiliation, embarrassment, anger, chagrin, disappointment and worry, expectedly and naturally associated with a person with a disability being denied access to a public accommodation,” a laundry list of complaints that would seem fairly reasonable—if she was ever seen showing these emotions at the famous eatery, or even if she was ever seen at all. The wording of the lawsuit quickly gets ugly, claiming that the Squeeze Inn refused “to make remedial modifications and alterations to its accessible parking, signage, pathways, and other elements,” citing “an established policy, practice and procedure of refusing and denying entry,” and eventually declaring that the owner of this seemingly horrible establishment showed “malice and oppression toward Plaintiff and other disabled persons.” Maybe Travis puts on a good act of being a friendly, honest guy,

but something about this situation smells fishy—and I don't think it's coming from Travis or his burgers.

Of course, the customers are mad. On the whole, people tend to be wary of change, and when the change involves something close to their hearts and stomachs . . . well, that's how angry mobs are created. Opinions come easily on the subject of the lawsuit, but they share the same basic properties. They see her as an evil sue-happy bitch (which is a nicer word than many would use), one that had filed three other lawsuits against family businesses for many of the same reasons. Since she seems to attack the small, family-run businesses, reminiscent of an American tradition of good food and good people, well then, she must hate families and America. If Block is the Big Bad Wolf in this story, Travis is the poor little pig and the beloved Squeeze Inn his house of straw.

Travis doesn't seem to share these funny, but mean-spirited, perceptions of Block. Instead of picking up a pitchfork and joining in the witch hunt, Travis merely tells me, "The most frustrating part is that you can tell that this really just is for the money." He regrets that Block had not come to him personally to discuss the changes that she felt needed to be made, mourning the loss of yet another American tradition: when people settled arguments one-on-one instead of involving lawyers and money. He seems to feel sorry for Block for involving those things in her complaints. But while Travis may not believe in the Big Bad Wolf metaphor, he's lucky that his customers do. It's because of their reactions to the lawsuit that the Big Bad Wolf huffed and puffed, but did not quite blow the house down. Instead, she backed away from the straw hut, dropping her lawsuit while continuing to fight the three other businesses she's in the process of suing.

Even though the lawsuit no longer hangs over the Squeeze Inn's red roof, Travis is still stuck between two tough decisions—either keep his current location with all its charm and live in fear of another ADA lawsuit, or move. Travis decided to take the safe route, and while the Squeeze Inn will still be in the same neighborhood, just about a mile away from the current location, customers still feel as if they have lost something, knowing that the dive restaurant will never be the same. It will no longer be the greasy burger joint that everyone had grown to love, but a larger space, reminiscent not of years gone by, not of old fashioned mom-and-pop shops, but of chain restaurants and fast food places. It will become like every other business in town—sterile and big, with ample parking,

and, of course, ADA compliant. People fear that the charm of the place will be lost, the namesake of the Squeeze Inn gone for good.

Travis, however, remains upbeat. He shares stories of the massive amount of support received by regulars, people who have offered their time and services. “I had construction people say they’ll do everything for free, we’ll donate our time, materials, everything [ . . . ] it makes me feel good, it tells you that mostly people out there are good still. I always say it restores your faith in humanity. You don’t hear the good news; you may only hear the bad. But they really pulled together and it makes me stop and think.” Travis even had a lawyer, Michael Welsh, come in and offer his services for free, telling him “I’ve done some really bad things—as a lawyer, you do a lot of bad things you’re not proud of—but at least for once I can do something I’m proud of.” Welsh worked with Travis out of support for the family run business, and in return? “I take care of him,” Travis jokes about Welsh’s gift—a lifetime supply of free burgers.

While no exact reason is given by Block or her attorney, Travis speculates that it’s because of the public outrage and dissent that the lawsuit was dropped. Block and her lawyer “weren’t prepared for the circumstance publically; they wanted it to go away because it was making them all look bad.” Perhaps Block learned a valuable lesson in her fight against the Squeeze Inn—never come between people and their burgers, especially if their burger happens to have a halo of cheese surrounding it, massive amounts of calories, and a building that many have come to know as if it’s a close friend.