



if these
walls
could talk

by dena braun

If you're like most Paradise Valley residents, you've driven past the secluded Smoke Tree Resort located near Lincoln and Scottsdale Roads and never realized there was a resort there, much less the oldest family-run hotel in the Valley, with undoubtedly the most colorful history.

For those Paradise Valley residents in the know, The Smoke Tree Resort has served as a guest house to unload extra relatives, a place to stay during a house remodel or even shelter during a trial separation.





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e developed a reputation as the town's bedroom," joked Colin Williams, one of the owners. "We want to be thought of as the town's resort."

Since the Williams family took the property over in the mid 1960s, The Smoke Tree has catered to monthly rentals and snowbirds. But at the beginning of 2007, the current owners, Colin Williams, his wife Sherri and his brother Eric decided the time was ripe to reinvent the Smoke Tree and let the world in on this hidden gem.

The 26 bungalows that sit on the five-acre, park-like property were remodeled, each boasting a unique spin on modern Southwest design. The resort added a bocce ball court to complement its small swimming pool and Koi pond area.

"We don't use the word retro. We're just a classic Paradise Valley resort," said Colin. "Some people say it's Palm Springs style. We're not trying to be the Valley Ho. We're not hip."

Hip or not, The Smoke Tree is bound to become a hot spot when (or if) local celebrity chef Robert McGrath opens his new venture, REM, on the property, replacing The Other Place restaurant, a Valley institution for the past 37 years.

McGrath, who knew Eric from the time they both worked at the Fairmont Princess, approached him about starting a new restaurant at the Resort. According to Colin, McGrath's vision for REM is one of moderately priced California wine country cuisine. As of late, however, that vision has faltered. McGrath's investors have fallen out and one of the Southwest's very best kitchen mavens is looking for more funding to make REM a reality.

With the revamped resort, the Williams are implementing a new business strategy that includes retaining its local clientele, but also places an emphasis on the business traveler. With an increased presence on the Internet, the outside world is slowly finding out about the Smoke Tree. With a rate about half that of other Paradise Valley resorts, it's no wonder this hidden gem is finding the spotlight.

While the new business plan is pointing the Smoke Tree in a new direction, the Williams aren't forgetting the history that makes the resort so unique. Both Eric and Colin grew up on the property with their parents Curtis and Melinda; their family lived in what is now the Presidential suite bungalow.

"We basically grew up in the lobby," said Eric. "It was all we knew."

Colin continued the tradition, living in the same suite with Sherri and their children until the remodel began this year, and Eric had a bachelor suite, dubbed "The Love Shack," now a home for the new office manager.

Walk outside bungalow 20 and you'll see the hand and foot prints of Colin's son Lukas immortalized in the sidewalk. Walk

a few feet up and you'll come to the tree Colin etched his name in when he was a child. Thankfully, this history wasn't paved over or cleaned up during the remodeling. It's still there to add personality to the resort.

Much of the history of The Smoke Tree is less family-friendly than this. As we walked past one of the four original buildings located near the restaurant, Colin proudly announces that The Smoke Tree was a brothel at one point in its history.

"Before we owned it," he is quick to add.

In the midst of construction, with the yellow-flocked wallpaper still visible, I start to believe Colin may not be pulling my leg.

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her Dad who told me that he had personal knowledge of the brothel. He also said that the hierarchy of a major police department in the Valley used to frequent the place. He said it in such a convincing way that I had to believe it,” Colin said.

While the brothel was long-gone by the time the Williams family took over, The Smoke Tree did develop a reputation as the place husbands ended up while in the midst of divorce.

“We've actually helped patch together more marriages,” laughed Colin. “We seem to have carved out a niche as an informal rehab center. We befriend people and get to know them on a much more personal level than other resorts. More often than not, the marriage has ended up working out.”

Today, The Smoke Tree is taking on another form of rehab, having just partnered with a local company to coordinate stays for patients recovering from plastic surgery.

“We've always joked that we should write a book,” said Colin. “It's hard to articulate all the color of the place. We had a cousin stay here and she couldn't believe the drama and dynamics that happen every day.”

With the revitalization of The Smoke Tree and the opening of REM, it might be time to try out this once hidden property and make a little history of your own. ✨

