

# Mr. Hospitality

## Common Man owner proud to serve his customers

By **BOB MARTIN**

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**A**lex Ray is a man whose mind just doesn't stop going. As he sits in front of the fire place at the Common Man Inn in Plymouth, he notices something slightly out of place and shifts it. He continuously asks if you would like coffee, truly because he wants to make you happy.

This is what Alex Ray is all about — making the circle connect between him, his restaurants and the customers in which they serve.

Ray has been like this for as long as he can remember — called rebellious by former teachers and always thinking a bit outside of the box. Now he is the founder and owner of the Common Man family of restaurants, one of the most beloved chains in the Granite State that is devoted to the comfort of the guests as well as its employees.

Ray was not always from New Hampshire, but says he doesn't plan on making anywhere else his home. He originally hails from northern New Jersey, where he was born on April 6, 1945. Ray has been in the area since 1959, where he went to high school in Conway. He explained that school was not always his best quality, saying that his choices were pretty limited when he was done with high school. From there he worked as a dishwasher at Mount Cranmore and also had a stint at the Poland Spring Hotel. He finally went to chef school in New Haven, Conn.

at the Culinary Institute of America.

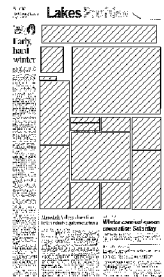
Ray openly loves New Hampshire for its beauty and the community that surrounds him. He said that he loves that you can call any government official with questions and most of the time they actually call back. Ray said that he feels incredibly lucky which is why he wants to keep it as his home forever.

"To be honest, once I got to New Hampshire I didn't want to leave," said Ray. "I love the area. It's just so much less commercial than most places. I actually never thought I'd go into the restaurant business. It took me a few years to realize this."

Ray bought the site for the Common Man in Ashland in 1970. It opened in 1971 with a capacity of about 40 people. Ray did everything from dishwashing to running the restaurant here. He said that while it is not the biggest or most extravagant of the restaurants, it has always been considered a sort of homebase.

Ray said that the Common Man family didn't grow too much until the late 1980s, when he put a restaurant in Lincoln. He then converted an old Howard Johnson's in Concord to a diner and spread throughout the state. Since then the Common Man family includes 13 restaurants and one store in Ashland. There are four restaurants in Meredith alone, which Ray admits is strange. But he said that each is so different that it all works out perfectly.

"It's fun for us not to just have the cookie cutter restaurant chain with the same thing everywhere you go," said Ray. "But they all operate the same way with the



same systems. It's the presentation and the menu that is unique."

Ray said that it is difficult for him to choose a favorite out of all of his restaurants, but said that a clear emotional fa-

vorite has to be the one in Ashland. He explained that this is where it all started and that it is hard to duplicate, having a new building that feels aged. Lincoln is also a special spot to him, with it being the restaurant that caught fire but is still running strong today. But material objects are material objects and Ray said that the thing he was happy about was that nobody was hurt.

Ray has long been known for his philanthropy around the Lakes Region and beyond. He has donated money and helped those in need for years, including donating large sums of money to Hurricane Katrina victims. But Ray, being the humble guy he is, plays it off like it is just a good ethical business practice and not charitable.

In recent years Ray has opened the Rise and Shine Cafe and Frosty Scoops at the Common Man Inn in Plymouth. These shops are entirely run by teens

from CADY, Communities for Alcohol and Drug Free Youth. The teens work during the summer in a positive workplace, learning the business world and maintaining a good quality of life.

The Common Man also works with areas schools such as Plymouth State University and St. Anselm's College in various events, most recently a Primary t-shirt competition. Many of the top Presidential candidates now own some of these T-shirts, as shown on the Common Man website [thecman.com](http://thecman.com), where Barack Obama is shown posing with a shirt.

In his 37th year of owning the Common Man family of restaurants, Ray said that he focuses on completing what he calls "the big circle." He said that over time he has realized that this is a process that truly works, because he wants to keep oiling the machine that is the Common Man family.

"It's really not about making money anymore," said Ray. "The objective here is to have the best crew that can be as happy as possible. This makes the customers happy which makes me feel great. It's all about the big circle."

Ray's current project is a bit different from the normal Common Man experience. He calls it the Webster Place Recovery Center, which is a drug and alcohol recovery facility located in an old

Catholic Convent in Franklin, which was also a Civil War orphanage and a spot owned by Daniel Webster.

The center is scheduled to open in March and has been under work for several months now. It will be a residence for recovering adults and will be self-admission. There are 40 beds available and there are currently five clients waiting for the building to be completely restored.

Ray admits that he is not much of a planner and often takes things in stride. He said that on any given day, he can't tell you what he'll be doing several hours from then or where he'll even be eating later that evening. He entrusts in his staff to carry forward in their restaurants and prefers to check up on things after hours to not intimidate his employees, who he constantly commends for the tremendous job they do on a daily basis.

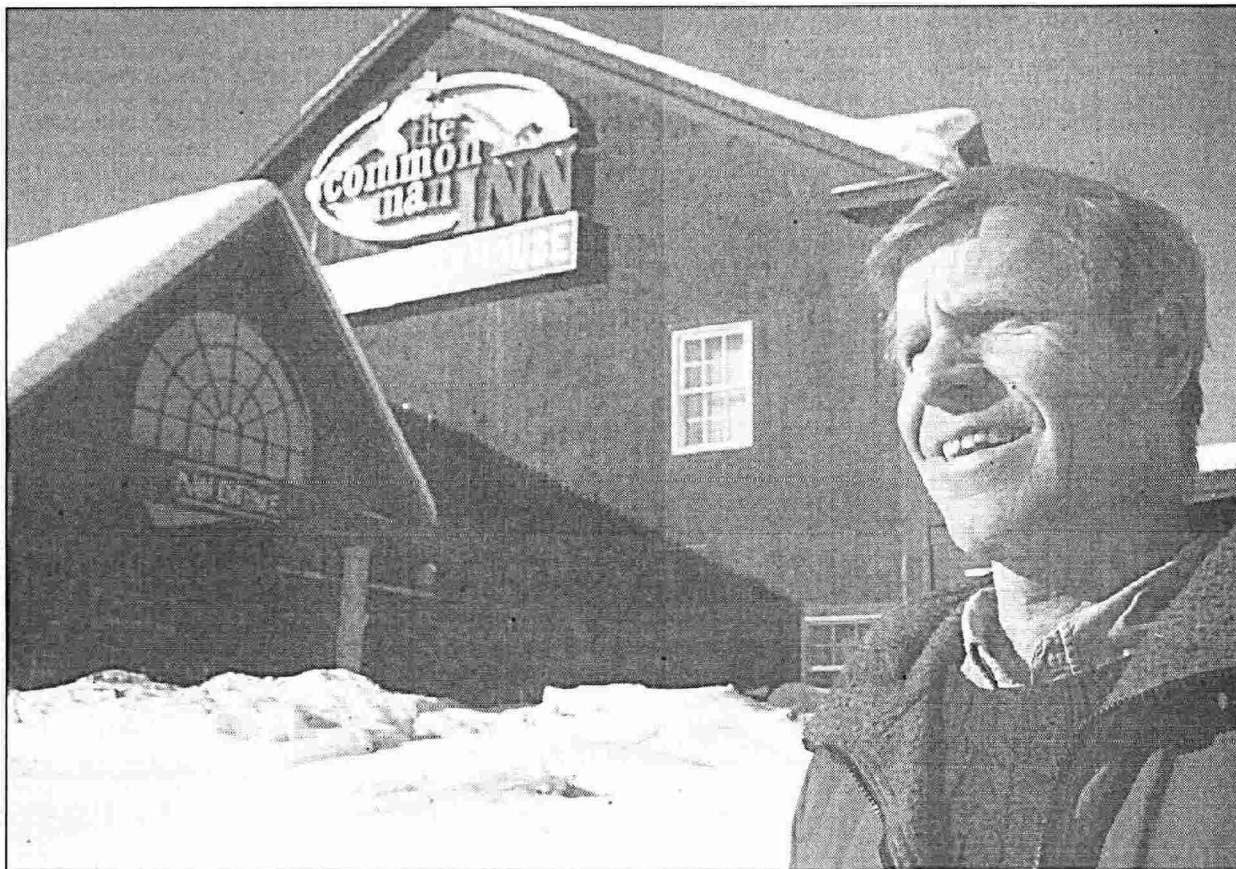
"I like to go when the restaurants are empty to look for suggestions," said Ray. "I can still see how it is operated without coming in and making people nervous. I don't like to feel like the boss. I feel that this business has grown beyond my personal leadership skills. The culture is so great that it carries by its own strength. I am just sort of the guiding force now."

For more information about the Common Man Restaurants log onto [thecman.com](http://thecman.com).

# The Citizen

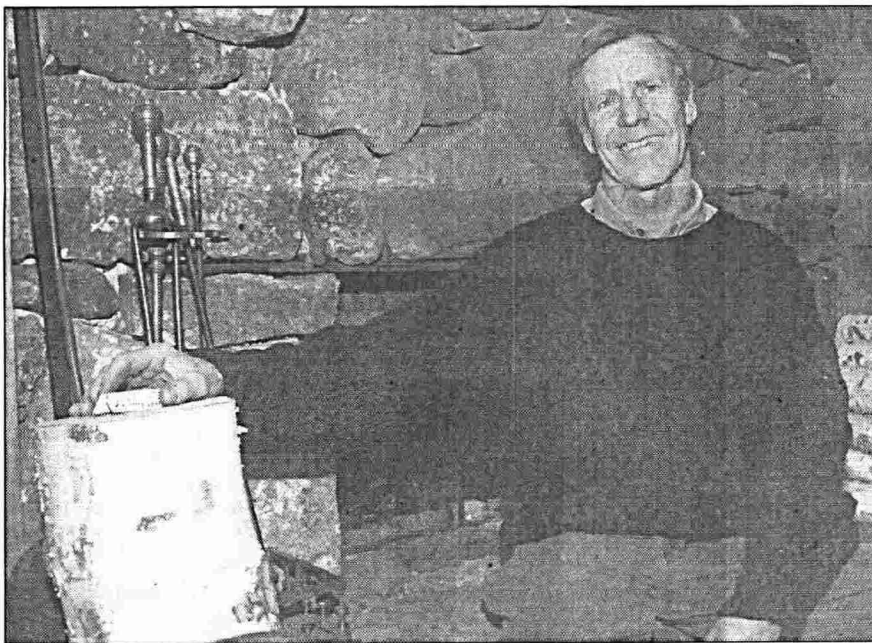
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DARYL CARLSON/CITIZEN PHOTO

**ALEX RAY** is owner of The Common Man family of restaurants, which locations throughout the Lakes Region, as far north as Lincoln and as far south as Manchester.



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**ALEX RAY** of The Common Man

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