

# **The Chicago's Most Influential Bartender**

**By Earl Winfrey**

If you work in Chicago's bar scene, chances are you've heard of Earl Winfrey.

Well, I'm Earl Winfrey — and I believe my story deserves to be told. Even if no one else wants to tell it, even if those closest to me don't know the full picture, it's time to put it out there.

Back in high school, I joined a program called CWT — Cooperative Work Training.

It started during my sophomore year. In CWT, you went to school for half the day, then worked for the other half. It was a way to prepare us for the real world.

My first assignment was at a store called Cosmos, an upscale men's clothing shop downtown Chicago.

I'm pretty sure I was sent there because I had been voted "Best Dressed" in high school.

But when I arrived at Cosmos, they immediately turned me away.

No interview. No conversation. They simply asked me to leave.

That was my first real encounter with racism — and I was only a teenager. This was 1978.

The next day, I explained what happened to my CWT counselor. He shook his head sadly and found me another job placement.

This time, I was sent to the brand-new Chicago Marriott Hotel. They hired me immediately as a busboy for Allies Bakery, a medium-upscale restaurant on the fourth floor.

And just like that, my career in hospitality began — a career that, over 40 years later, I'm still part of.

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### **Rising Through the Ranks**

After about a year as a busboy, I was promoted to server while still in high school — making about \$100 a night in cash tips.

Not bad for a teenager.

After graduating, I planned to go off to college, but life had other plans.

An old coworker who had moved to the Hyatt downtown suggested I apply there.

I did — and got a job as a Room Service Server.

Less than a year later, I was promoted to Room Service Captain.

That meant running the entire room service operation day-to-day. It was high energy, high pressure — and I

was perfect for it.

I quickly became the youngest and best supervisor on the team. Even though a few older guys were jealous at first, after working alongside me, they respected me. They knew I earned my position.

I was always focused on logic, efficiency, and improving systems.

For example:

- I reorganized the department's layout so servers never had to walk backwards for anything.
- I changed the practice of parking fully set-up tables in the service area. Instead, servers placed them outside, freeing up space for smoother operations.

It's simple changes like those that showed I wasn't just a good worker — I was a real leader.

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### **The Invisible Ceiling**

I was the best busboy.

The best server.

The best supervisor.

I trained over a hundred people during my time in hospitality.

Many went on to become General Managers.  
Some even became my boss.

So why didn't I move up to bigger things?  
One word: **racism**.

In my decades in the business, I've only ever seen one  
Black assistant GM.  
The racism I experienced wasn't just real — it was  
relentless.

At one point, while I was Room Service Captain, my boss  
offered me a promotion to Assistant Manager.  
But the pay would have dropped from about \$50k a year  
(with tips) to \$30k a year — a ridiculous cut.

I declined.

When I asked about moving into banquets — where  
captains earned \$100k a year — my boss promised to  
make it happen. I was to start as a server, learn the ropes,  
then move into the captain role when it opened up.

I trusted them.  
Big mistake. I didn't get it in writing.

When the manager left and a new one took over,  
everything changed.  
The new manager made it clear he wasn't going to hire a

Black captain.

Despite two banquet captain positions opening when Big Sam and Denny (both Black) retired, they left those spots unfilled for **two years** rather than promote me.

When I finally went to HR to complain, they pulled a move I had never seen before:

They **eliminated** the assistant manager positions and demoted the two current assistant managers to captain — thus filling the open spots without promoting me.

**That's how powerful my influence was.**

I forced them to change their entire system — just to avoid promoting a Black man.

I later learned the banquet manager said, "A Black man doesn't need that kind of money."

I had no choice. I left.

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### **Reinventing Myself**

I took a server/bartender job at a hotel in Oak Brook, IL. Good money, but the same old racism.

When a banquet captain position opened, I interviewed. When asked why I didn't get promoted at my previous hotel, I told the truth: **racism**.

They rejected me, claiming I didn't "take accountability."

Later, when the position reopened, they created a test to determine promotions.

I scored second-highest.

But when another captain got fired unexpectedly, instead of promoting the next-highest scorer (me), they skipped me and hired someone else — no explanation.

Tired of fighting battles I couldn't win, I focused on bartending.

It was the hardest job to land — and the most lucrative.

There was a seniority system: those with the most time got the best shifts.

After 15 years, I was near the top.

But just as I was about to reap the rewards, they **changed the system** — saying it was "unfair."

Now everyone got the same number of shifts, no matter how long they had been there.

Everywhere I went, my presence forced systems to change — not because they valued fairness, but because they were determined to keep me from success.

When the pandemic hit, everything shut down.  
I was working on-call at three hotels: The Westin Lombard, the Fairmont Chicago, and McCormick Place.

When hotels started reopening, I waited for calls to return to work.

They never came.

At The Westin, I ran into a Hispanic former trainee — someone I had trained personally — who asked why I wasn't back.

"Everyone's back," she said.  
Everyone except me.

Same story at the Fairmont.

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### **Final Thoughts**

Over my 40-year career, I endured blatant racism, broken promises, and countless closed doors.

Yet through it all, I made an undeniable impact — forcing change wherever I worked.

Whether they wanted me to or not, I left my mark.

I may not have gotten the titles or the money I deserved.  
But I earned the respect of my coworkers.

And I shaped the industry in ways no one else did.

**I am Earl Winfrey — Chicago's most influential bartender.**

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