

## WAF F L E

## H O U S E

ELON  
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Managing Editor

It's 3:27 on a chilly October morning. Church Street, running through downtown Burlington, is all but empty, except for the occasional police car driving by. A burst water main on a side street seems to be the only activity going on anywhere in the city.

Just down Alamance Road, next to the I-85/40 ramp, however, one business thrives late into the night. Bright lights appear to be a beacon, bringing in the steady stream of night owls, early risers, long-haul truckers and local college students. The yellow and brown striped awnings outside and orange and brown motif inside have not changed in years.

Fifty people can sit comfortably at the numerous booths and counter seats, although weekend nights can pack in almost twice that with more waiting. A jukebox sits alone in the back, breaking the silence as it starts to play a Backstreet Boys' song without any prompting from a customer.

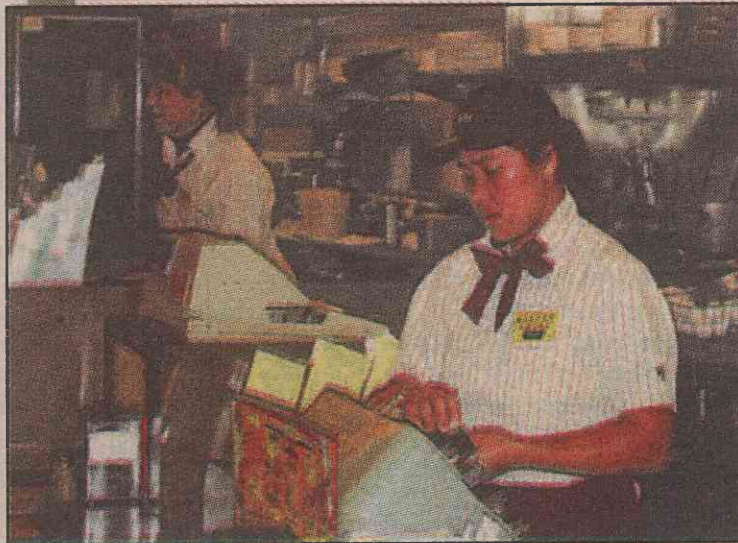
Servers bustle from table to table during heavy business, greeting customers with a smile and friendly



Jessica Vitak/Photographer  
Senior John Kline enjoys spending late nights at the Waffle House with friends.

while their backgrounds may be different, these people share a common bond through their patronage at the only 24-hour-a-day, 365-day-a-year diner in Burlington.

For waitresses like Vicki, a cheerful and easy-to-talk-to Burlington resident who has worked at the Waffle House for the last two and a half years, the best



Jessica Vitak/Photographer

*One of the reasons so many customers say they keep coming back to the Waffle House is the friendly service. Waitresses chat with customers while providing fast, efficient service.*

chatter that belies the late hour. When it slows down, they usually stop to talk a little longer with customers or take a quick cigarette break. Coffee is a mainstay of operation for everyone, while burgers, hash browns and eggs fly off the grill every minute.

Welcome to after hours nightlife in Burlington. Welcome to the Waffle House, a 1,300-unit chain of restaurants spread across 26 states, 68 of them in North Carolina.

"It's a great place to come with your friends and just talk about things on your mind," Elon University senior John Kline, a regular patron of late-night Waffle House visits, said. "Sometimes, this time of night is the only time we can get together because of our schedules."

Busy schedules aside, the average person would probably not consider going to a restaurant in the middle of the night to be a good idea. It is a separate breed of people the Waffle House sees each night between midnight and 5 a.m., and

part of the job is definitely the customers. The regulars she knows by name, not even needing to ask what they are going to order.

"Quick, Katie, put on a new pot of coffee, he'll want it fresh," Vicki said as an old truck pulls up and an elderly man steps out, walking to the newspaper bin before turning to come inside.

Vicki prides herself on knowing her customers. "It's nice when you know what someone wants before they even step in the door. It makes it easier for us that way," she said.

On most nights, it's not uncommon to hear customers ask for the usual. For Clyde Jones, a retired mechanic originally from Miami, this is an egg sandwich and a coffee, which he eats at the counter while he reads the morning's paper, which arrives each night at 2:15, give or take a few minutes.

"I guess I'm just a night person," Jones said, smiling in a grandfatherly fashion as he takes a sip of coffee. "Oh yeah, and the coffee is

good. I do like the coffee."

Coffee is not the only reason customers like Jones come back to the Waffle House again and again. With affordable prices (a bottomless cup of coffee costs less than one dollar) and friendly service, there are many reasons people come back to the Waffle House night after night.

"It has a relaxed atmosphere and I always get good service," Jones said. "You get used to going to the same place. The waitresses are nice and they take good care of me. Sometimes, they take too good care of me," he said, laughing as Vicki filled his coffee cup to the brim one more time.

College students sit scattered throughout groups of locals. With the stress of papers due, procrastination often sets in and many students turn to the Waffle House as an alternative to work.

With a paper due at 9 a.m. the next morning, Elon freshman Katherine Walker decided to see if the Waffle House really was as great as her friends had been telling her. Originally from Lewisburg, W.Va., she had never been to a Waffle House, so at 2:45 a.m., she and two friends came in to get a late-night "snack."

"I can't believe I have class in six hours and my paper isn't done yet," Walker said as Katie brought over a feast of breakfast foods, with heaps of hash browns the way only the Waffle House makes them -

scattered, smothered, covered, chunked, topped, diced and peppered. "I was a little disappointed they don't have pancakes, but this is still great."

When asked if she thinks she'll ever return to the Waffle House again, Walker nodded. "I'll be back again, I'm sure. There's always going to be more papers, and I'll always be procrastinating," she said.

As the hours go by, customers flood in and out, some stopping in only long enough to get a couple coffees for the road, some staying for hours after they finish eating, talking until the early hours of the morning.

"I remember staying here until 7 a.m. two years ago," Kline said. "It was the week before the blizzard and we got seven or eight inches of snow that night. My friend and I drank coffee and Coke and watched the snow fall until dawn. It was great. It still is one of my favorite memories from my four years at Elon."

Whatever the reason, Burlington's Waffle House is almost never empty. They come to eat, read the newspaper or catch up with friends. They come alone, in pairs and in groups so large they take up multiple tables. They are from out-of-state, just down the road or the local college. It does not matter who they are. Everyone is welcome at the Waffle House, any day, anytime. All they need to do is sit back and enjoy the atmosphere.

## Waffles, waffles everywhere!

North Carolina is home to 68 Waffle Houses, many located in the Triad. Students can satisfy late-night munchies or fill up on coffee to last through an all-nighter at one of the many Waffle Houses within a short drive of Elon. Below are listed the closest locations.

## In Burlington:

Exit 143, Alamance Road (can be reached from Church Street)

Exit 145, Burlington

## In Greensboro:

Exit 124 (I-85)

Exit 217 (I-40)