



The Strangers Club

# Twenty Dollars at a Time, Employees Only Team Opens Bar in Panama

A longtime emergency fund led to the debut of The Strangers Club

by [Bennett Marcus](#) | Aug 22, 2017, 11:22am EDT

**S**teve Schneider and five other bartenders from **Employees Only** and **Macao Trading Company** have just opened a bar in Panama City: an independently owned venture separate from EONY called The Strangers Club that came to be thanks to their emergency fund.



The emergency fund was established about seven years ago, when a dishwasher at EONY became terminally ill, and the staff put some money together to enable him to go back home to be with his family. Shortly afterward, a server riding her bike was hit by a car, so the staff collected cash to help her out.

“And then we had the idea to just put money aside in case something happens,” says Schneider, who has worked for Employees Only for nine years. T

he bartenders at EONY and Macao Trading kept it up by putting \$20 each per night into this emergency fund, and it has since come in handy: A couple of people’s dogs got sick, running up massive veterinarian bills. Then someone broke his ribs in a skiing accident and couldn’t work, so the fund tided him over. One guy was depressed after a nasty breakup with his girlfriend, so they gave him a month off and took care of his bills.

Then came a couple of disaster-free years, and the fund grew so large that the general manager told them they needed to do something with the money. So Schneider and the others used some cash for a trip to Mexico to visit the Tequila Cabeza distilleries, and the following year they decided to go to Panama City and tour the distillery where the bar’s best-selling rum, Caña Brava, is produced. (Both liquor brands are under the umbrella of **The 86 Co.**, in which two of the original EONY founders are partners.)

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“As soon as we landed, we just fell in love with the place,” Schneider says of Panama. “It was so chill, and had this super old-world Latin American vibe.” An owner of the rum distillery, Carlos Esquivel, thought something like EONY would do well there, and he and his girlfriend, Celia Cañizales, a businesswoman not involved with the rum company, told the group that if they raised the money to open a place, they would match it.

They checked out the bar scene in Panama, and decided they could bring something different to the market.

This was three years ago. The partners pooled their own savings while the two Panamanian partners found the space and obtained the proper permits. The place opened in July and is self-funded: They have no outside investors.

The space, in a building over 100 years old, is on a prominent five-point corner at the edge of Casco Viejo, Panama City’s historic old town. “It’s like a movie set of a town, the stuff you’d see in old postcards,” says Schneider. The area is popular for dining and nightlife.

The original Strangers Club, a famous bar that operated in the city of Colon during the Panama Canal’s heyday of ocean travel, was the inspiration. Amelia Earhart, the Queen of England, and Einstein all went to the canal, and they all allegedly patronized the Strangers Club.



EONY

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“So we took that name, and the idea, and that’s kind of indicative of who we are,” says Schneider. “We’re just six partners that came there on a holiday, fell in love with the place. We’re six strangers: Half of our team is from Belgrade, one guy is from Albany, I’m from Jersey, another partner is from Dallas, Texas. So the name of it, and how it rings to Panama, makes a lot of sense.”

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They enlisted designer **Warren Red**, and created a Latin American bistro with natural lighting, wood, pastels, and light colors with palm trees outside. A curved, S-shaped bar pays homage to Employees Only, where they all met. Next, they plan a more high energy, high volume lounge on the second floor, once they have the money.

The six New Yorkers, Bratislav Glisic, Mitar Prentic, and Ulysses Vidal of EONY; and Ivan Radulovic and Gabriel Carney of Macao Trading Co., share a two- bedroom condo

they rented, and they rotate, each doing two-month shifts twice per year. They return to their New York jobs in between.

Right now, Schneider is doing a stint in New York, and staying in one of the partner's apartments in Astoria. "He took my place in Panama, and I took his apartment, and his shifts at Employees Only. So it's like we made a swap."

As for the emergency fund, Schneider says, "It brought the whole team together, to spark the idea. And it's something we still do to this day." ■

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