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ISSUE

AFFORDABLE HOUSING STUDY RESULTS // A PLAN FOR GREENLINK // MEET THE ANCHORAGE'S MILLS HIGGINS

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## HONORED

Lisa Roten Lorbiecki's new Greenville event benefits the Green Beret Foundation and remembers her brother, a special forces weapons sergeant killed in action in 2014

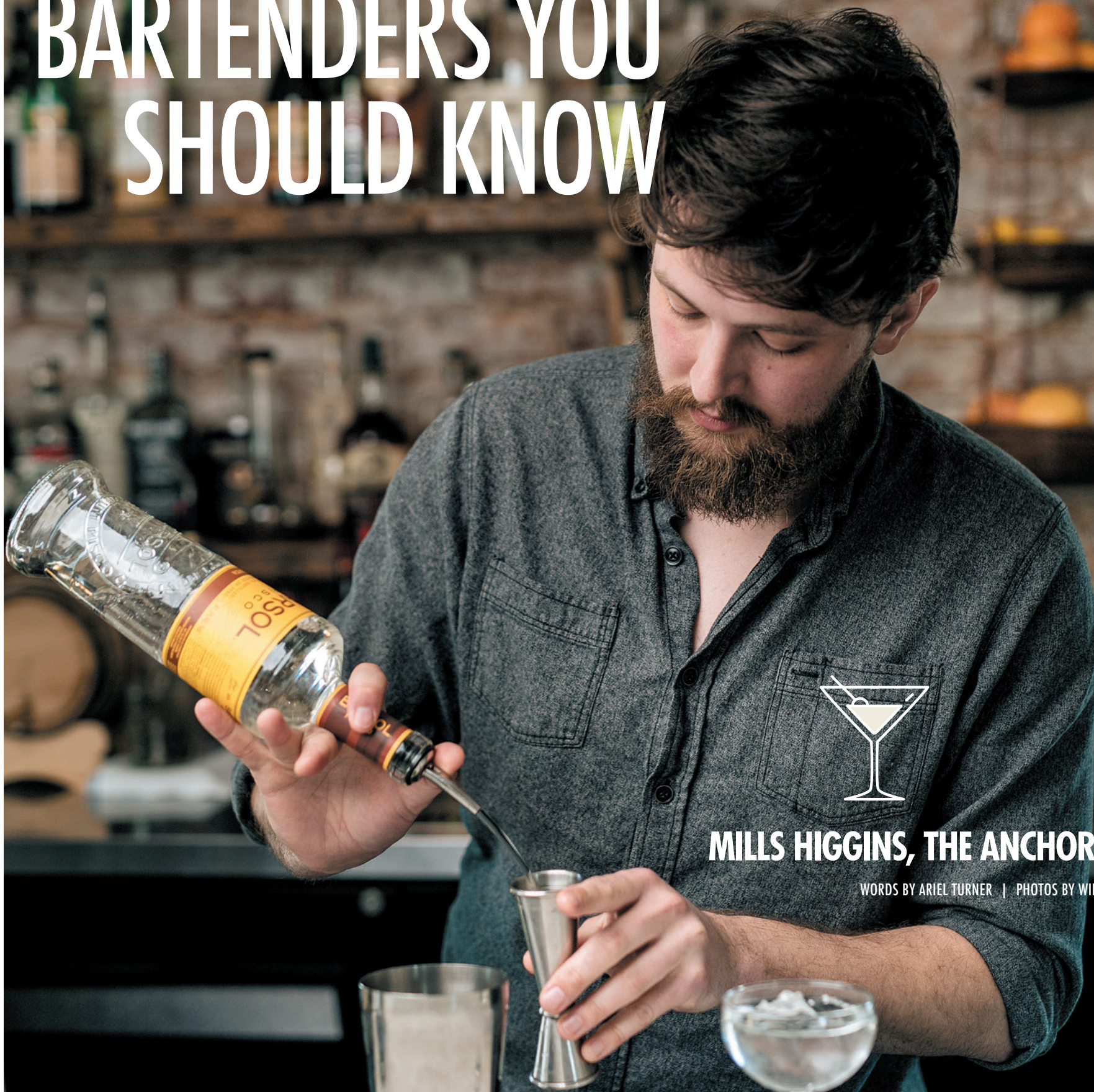
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# BARTENDERS YOU SHOULD KNOW



**MILLS HIGGINS, THE ANCHORAGE**

WORDS BY ARIEL TURNER | PHOTOS BY WILL CROOKS

**W**hen Mills Higgins was a banquet server at Cliffs Valley, a coworker recommended he try bartending.

"I thought, 'There's no way. I hate people. I'm very anti-social,'" he says.

But he gave it a shot and caught the bartending bug.

Fast forward a few years when he was bartending as well as working in the corporate IT world.

"I really enjoy the development side of it, but I didn't enjoy the corporate environment so much," he says. "I didn't enjoy being in a cubicle, not being able to interact. Basically, the anti-social kid found a love of talking to people."

Higgins, 26, who admits he hates olives despite great effort to the contrary, has worked behind the bar of the Anchorage in the Village of West Greenville since it opened in January 2017, where only fresh ingredients made in-house are used. He's been bartending full-time since he was 20, even while attending college to earn a degree in software information systems with a minor in criminal justice and then working a full-time in IT downtown Greenville.

"First year into the IT world I thought, 'This sucks. I've made a horrible mistake,'" he says. "I thought I would do something cool with forensics."

Instead, he ended up working at a bank, while still working or managing the bar at the Cliffs full time.

What took him from the shy, anti-social kid to a bartender who makes his living interacting with dozens of people each night was reading "The Joy of Mixology" by Gary Regan in his third year at the Cliffs.

"It changed my entire outlook on bartending," he says. "It was something fun that I

enjoyed doing. It paid the bills, but it really opened my eyes to the connection we have as far as using beverages as a way to really create a social bond among people. Whether it's my great-grandfather and his Miller High Life he would have every Sunday or my great grandmother's sweet tea or my other grandfather's Glühwein he would make every winter — all these little beverages were a way of building social traditions."

Higgins grew up 45 minutes north of Rutherford County, N.C.

"I spent most of my time running around in the woods," he says. "I grew up in a cabin. I didn't realize I was a hick."

His first taste of alcohol was mezcal his step-dad had smuggled under his shirt across the Mexican border into Texas in the '90s.

"Hence my love of mezcal," he jokes.

When he was 10 or 11 years old, his dad moved to Greenville, and he began spending weekends in the Upstate and eventually summers, which led to the job at the Cliffs. He had previously worked in a variety of jobs, clearing lands, landscaping, construction, and roofing. His first food and bev job was at Larkin's on the Lake, the original restaurant group in Lake Lure, N.C. There, he filled a variety of positions, doing line prep, dishwashing, hosting, and bar-backing.

Once he landed the Cliffs position and transitioned into bartending, it was a sharp learning curve. Cocktails were the easy part.

"Communication skills was the hardest part of the job," he says. "Cocktails to me are a lot like cooking. You just suck at it for a really long time, and the more you do it the less you suck, and you learn to improvise and riff and kinda play on what you've done before. Developing the social skills that I had at the Cliffs is what, really, was the challenging part of the job. I love what I do, but that is

still to this day the most interesting dynamic, because you can control your drinks, you can control the products you put out there, but people are always going to be fun and weird. That was definitely a little bit of a challenge."

Learning to bartend in the unique environment at the Cliffs prepared him for pretty much any type of bar.

"Being in that background, I was really fortunate in that I was exposed to a lot of environments," he says. "So you did a lot of clientele-based because you saw them seven days a week. You had to know their kids, their dogs, their houses, where they go on vacation, and you had to know their drink, and it had to be on the bar by the time they walked up. But I also did volume. We did a lot of private events, so I might have 400 screaming sorority girls. So I got to do a little bit of everything. I got to do craft work, customer relations. I got to do volume, which I really would've never had an opportunity to do anywhere else, so that, I think, rounded me out a little bit faster than if I had just been at Applebee's slinging corporate drinks."

While slinging the club-standard gin and tonics and bourbon and gingers, Higgins found time to start playing with his own cocktails.

"I also started experimenting with these weird, old, super sweet cocktails, and that's really what kind of pushed me into the tropical background that I have and loving taking these old classic cocktails that are traditionally served really sweet or really huge and kind of dialing them back," he says.

Those tropical cocktails — daiquiris, Palomas, rum runners — require balance to be elevated beyond a poolside beverage. He loves to throw in plantain bitters with a dark rum to bring out the banana flavor.

"The idea with tropical drinks is you want that sugar element to be present but you

also want that citrus there," he says. "You want your rums that are in the background to really be playing up and forward, but everything has to be balanced. If you make it too sweet one way, or if you push it too nutty another way, the drink doesn't really present as it should be."



Pisco Sour

## Favorite cocktail to make

### Pisco Sour

*Pisco, lemon juice, sugar, egg white, and chuncho bitters (Peruvian vanilla bark bitters)*

*"I love citrusy things and I love creamy things." - Mills Higgins*

## Craziest cocktail ever made

*Rum Runners at the Cliffs. Clear rum, spiced rum, aged rum, lime, pineapple, grenadine, blackberry liqueur, banana liqueur, blended all together and poured in a 16 oz. glass, then filled with cherries, pineapple wedges, and orange slices. "It was huge and atrocious and kitschy and totally delicious."*

