

How it started.

In early 2019, Lodestone had been open for about 1.5 years. We were all in our mid-to-late 20s, still in the “figuring it out” part of owning a small business, and we were doing poorly. We weren’t exactly broke, but we were definitely scraping by. We had a community, but figuring out how to stay profitable was hard.

In late March, we got word that a long-time friend and staff member had been selling some higher-value cards at events to other vendors. We were told it had been going on for about a year. At the time, we talked about it and didn’t have any hard evidence that the cards weren’t his. We all kind of sold stuff to other vendors from time to time, when the store couldn’t afford larger buys so we just brushed it off and continued with business as usual..

A few weeks later, some Modern cards I’d been planning to buy went missing, and all signs pointed to the same person. The same week, our general manager told me some money had gone missing from the safe. I reviewed hours of footage, looking for anything suspicious, and eventually found it.

This person had walked into the store on their day off, joked around with staff, and checked the high-dollar buys. After finding that I had emptied the buy box the day before they went into the back room, sat at the back desk, opened the safe, took out several hundred dollars, and put it directly into their pocket—all while continuing to laugh and joke with another staff member like nothing was going on.

I remember watching that footage from bed while my partner was asleep. I sighed loudly enough to wake her up. I kept looking for any reason to convince myself I hadn’t seen what I saw, but I couldn’t. I sent a message to the other owners explaining what I found and attached the video. The responses were filled with disappointment and the question we all dreaded: “Where do we go from here?”

This wasn’t just an employee. This was someone who had been part of our original crew and helped us open the store. They were a manager, trusted with access to nearly everything. More than that, they were my friend. We’d spent over a decade playing Magic, prepping for tournaments, and hanging out in hotel lobbies drafting cubes. Our partners were in the same sorority. We’d attended the same weddings, the same weekend parties, and this person even had a key to my house.

I couldn’t bring myself to be there the day we confronted him. I was too hurt. I just wanted them out of my life as quickly as possible. We didn’t press charges and agreed to stay quiet about it. When people asked, I’d say they left. I blocked their partner when she messaged me frantically. We removed them from group chats and didn’t tell our other close friends until they asked months later. After thinking about it for a few months with just rough estimations we would guess he stole thousands of dollars of cards and likely this was not the first time taking cash.

The months that followed were brutal on my mental health. I started showing up to Lodestone less and less, burying myself in my day job. I told myself I needed to focus on my career, but the truth was, every time I walked into the store, I felt hurt and sad. I'd sit in my car for half an hour, unable to make myself go in. I started canceling plans to meet friends there, and even talking about Lodestone with close friends or family felt impossible.

If I'd let something so bad happen in the place I cared about so much, how could I continue to be proud of it? How could I share my passion for it if I couldn't even get myself to show up? By late 2019 and early 2020, I rarely stepped inside. When I did, it was before opening or after closing to avoid seeing anyone. Once, I went during business hours and didn't recognize a single person working. It made me feel even more like a stranger in my own place.

It got even worse.

COVID-19 hit. By November 2020, after months of closures and less than 5% of our expected sales, we made the decision to close our doors when our lease ended in early 2021. I remember that Discord call vividly. The cold silence, the pacing, the tightness in my chest as we waited for the last person to join. We all knew the answer, but no one wanted to say it. When we eventually all agreed it just felt so cold. When the call ended, I sat on the floor and sobbed. It was the first time I'd ever felt so much emotion all at once.

I still read a text from Ryan that he sent me about 15 minutes after the call: *"I know you've got a good head about it and the writing has pretty well been on the wall, but I just wanted to say I hope you're proud of what you built and are able to hang your head high."* I didn't sleep that night and it was hard to sleep for a long time. I ended up taking leave at work for 2 months, and I just stayed home all day and would only leave the house if it was absolutely necessary. I told people close to me it was over and just dodged questions when anyone would ask.

Somehow, in mid-2021, we hopped on another Discord call and decided to give it one more shot. We got people more involved and started making short term plans. We took out a loan to get a small amount of working capital, and I started showing up again—reluctantly. I still felt like an imposter every time I walked in. All of the regulars I knew were gone, the staff had all turned over, the shelves were barren, the walls were empty and it felt like starting over.

Recovering

One night, Andrew asked me to help with Friday Night Magic. I showed up, and it was a small event—nothing like what I knew we were capable of. But Andrew asked why I didn't come more often, and I gave the same excuses: "I'm tired," "I've got stuff to do," "I have other plans." He saw through it and told me it seemed like I enjoyed working with people behind the counter. He asked if I could try coming in for just two hours every Friday, and I promised to try. The next week, I stayed until close. The week after that, I did the same. Soon, I started showing up on Tuesdays to play Modern. Slowly but surely, I started reclaiming the place I loved. One day at a time I got to reconnect with people and make new friends.

While I could elaborate more on the end of 2023 and 2024 this isn't really about that.

I saw the person that stole from us a few times in 2024 at events and I have been coming to terms with the fact that I am not the one that should be ashamed to be a part of the community. I didn't do anything wrong. I see them talking to people I like and that part still hurts a little, it feels like he is just looking for someone else to get one over on and I am generally pretty protective of people I care about. Maybe someday it will catch up to him but really I just don't care that much anymore.

Now, it's 2025, and I've just finished my first calendar year of feeling like myself while I'm at Lodestone again. Lodestone isn't perfect, but everyday I get to make it better. I'm proud of what it's become and what it means to me and our community. I brag about it constantly to my coworkers, friends, and family. I'm excited to see what 2025 brings and to keep pushing for bigger and better things. I owe a huge debt of gratitude to my partner Katie for putting up with me when I was at my worst, my friends for supporting me, my family for seeing how hard it was on me to talk about it and supporting me when they could, my co-owners and staff for being the absolute best team I could ask for, and especially everyone who stops in to play or to pick up coffee and games for allowing me to keep doing something I love for almost a decade.