

Area shops rely on ingenuity

By KATHY MISKILL
Of the Emerald

Fixtures for sale. No reasonable offers refused. Selling out to the bare walls.

The pleas on the windows of Holly's J mark the demise of yet another clothing store along the University's 13th Avenue business strip.

Although a favorable location for eateries, taverns and businesses that cater to students, the three-block area often tests the resourcefulness of business owners who struggle to compete with inflation — and each other.

The 13th Avenue location contains disadvantages for any small business, says Pauline Dorman, the manager of Holly's J. University students are irregular customers and, because of the economy, do not have much spending money.

Campus-area shops also experience a roller-coaster business cycle based on the different academic quarters.

"July is just a bummer — people just don't have excess money to spend," says Ruth Sylwester, co-owner of Sylwester and Acheson Books.

Students apparently spend little of their spare money at University-area clothing stores. The failure of Holly's J follows the earlier closures of Mattox Outdoor Outfitters, 13th Avenue Clothing Works and the Jean Machine.

However, Dorman does not attribute her shop's closure to the fact that it sells clothes.

"It's just due to the economy," she says.

Kaufman's, another clothing store located near Holly's J, has weathered student whims and the economy for 17 years.

Students continue to buy Kaufman's high-quality, designer clothing, says store manager Chris Higson, although inflation has hurt sales for the past year and a half.

Kaufman's credit account also gives the store an advantage over smaller clothing stores that operate on a cash-and-carry basis, Higson says.

The 13th Avenue retail community continues to grow as the University's population grows, says Chamber of Commerce Manager Ruby Brenne. However, the duplication of bookstores, camera shops and record stores makes it necessary for such businesses to specialize in their merchandise and services.

Sylwester and Acheson Books, located down the block from the University Bookstore, challenges bigger bookstores by offering a variety of unusual gifts, including handcrafted and imported items.



Photo by Bill Wack

"It's the only way a small business can compete with large ones," says co-owner Nancy Acheson.

Undaunted by the failure of the shop's former tenant — Merlin's Bookstore — Acheson says she thinks all bookstores must overcome a five-year hump before showing any sign of profit.

Walt Biddle, manager of Gerlach's Cameras, says that although student priorities are paying food bills, tuition and rent, students still buy more cameras than the general population.

Biddle says his camera shop relies on personalized service to compete with larger camera stores.

Compared to the other businesses, 13th Avenue eateries tend to stay in business longer, capitalizing on the lunchtime hungers and evening thirsts of college students.

Fall Creek Bakery owner Kimberly Murphy says the amount of foot traffic along 13th Avenue has helped her eight-month-old bakery.

"It's probably easier because you can count on people coming in every day," she says.

Murphy says any business that offers a service to students can succeed.

"I can't really think of any business that would be obnoxious to this area," she says.

The biggest problem facing 13th Avenue merchants is a lack of parking spaces, Murphy says. "That prevents a lot of people from coming," she says.

Other local proprietors agree that parking near the University is a major problem. The University Small Business Association, organized last spring, currently is working on a solution, says Biddle, the association's treasurer.

Although students' whims and an uncertain economy make owning a University-area business a risky proposition, the Chamber of Commerce still considers 13th Avenue a "valuable and necessary" part of the retail business community, Brenne says.

And soon, another small shop will try to tempt students at the former home of Holly's J.

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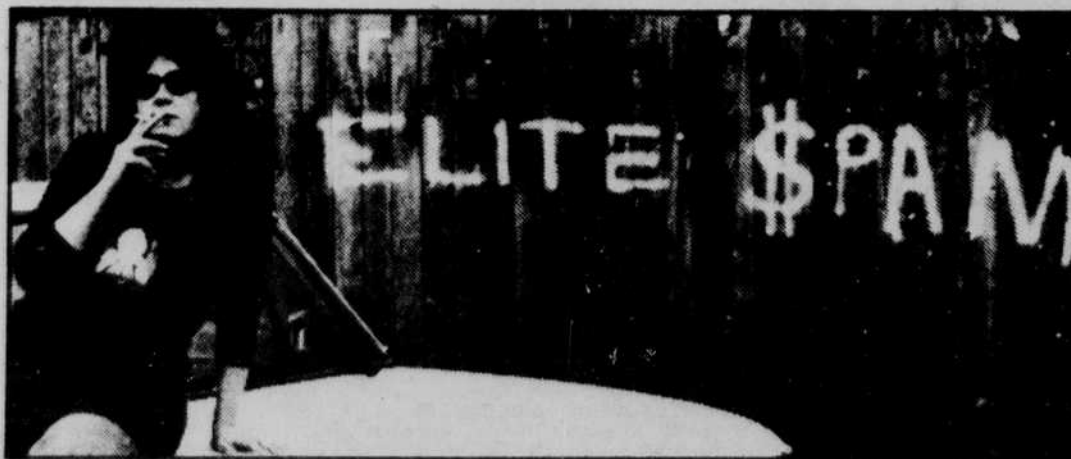
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