

Closed Calkins House to sell within three weeks

Clients dispute accessibility

By David Rauzi
Emerald Contributor

By the beginning of last April, extensive business costs, management problems and drained monetary reserves caused Christian Gunther, owner of the Calkins House and The Great Society Cafe, 588 E. 11th Ave., to close his doors.

While people who used to

gather at the cafe wonder why it closed, Gunther is cleaning the grounds, preparing the house for its next owners.

The sale is two to three weeks away. Until then, as per buyers request, their identity, the sale price and the future of the house are being withheld.

The problems started, Gunther said, with "mismanagement in the early months. We played catch-up from then on."

In the end, he said, the mistaken decision was made to create a fine dining establishment rather than a simple cafe.

Gunther opened the cafe Nov. 28, 1988 with the intention of providing an alternative to other restaurants and cafes.

"We hoped we could serve the working community by day and students by night," Gunther said. "It was the ideal place for elderly people to come in for coffee and pastry and in the evening for people to pound beers. They did seem to co-exist."

Management problems arose due to large bills and overstaffing problems.

According to Gunther, another blow to the cafe came in mid-December. He claims the Eugene Commission on Rights of People with Disabilities sponsored a boycott against the cafe due to lack of handicapped accessibility. Gunther said he signed a promissory note saying when he acquired the funds he would provide access.

"In spite of my clear intentions of providing access," Gunther said, "they started a boycott and it hurt us."

Alicia Hays, head of the building committee for the disability commission, said the commission did not and is not able to call for a boycott. The commission is an advisory board set up to provide information to city council members, she said.

However, Hays said, the unavailability of access angered people, not only those who were disabled but also people who knew or worked with someone who is disabled.

She added that Gunther used

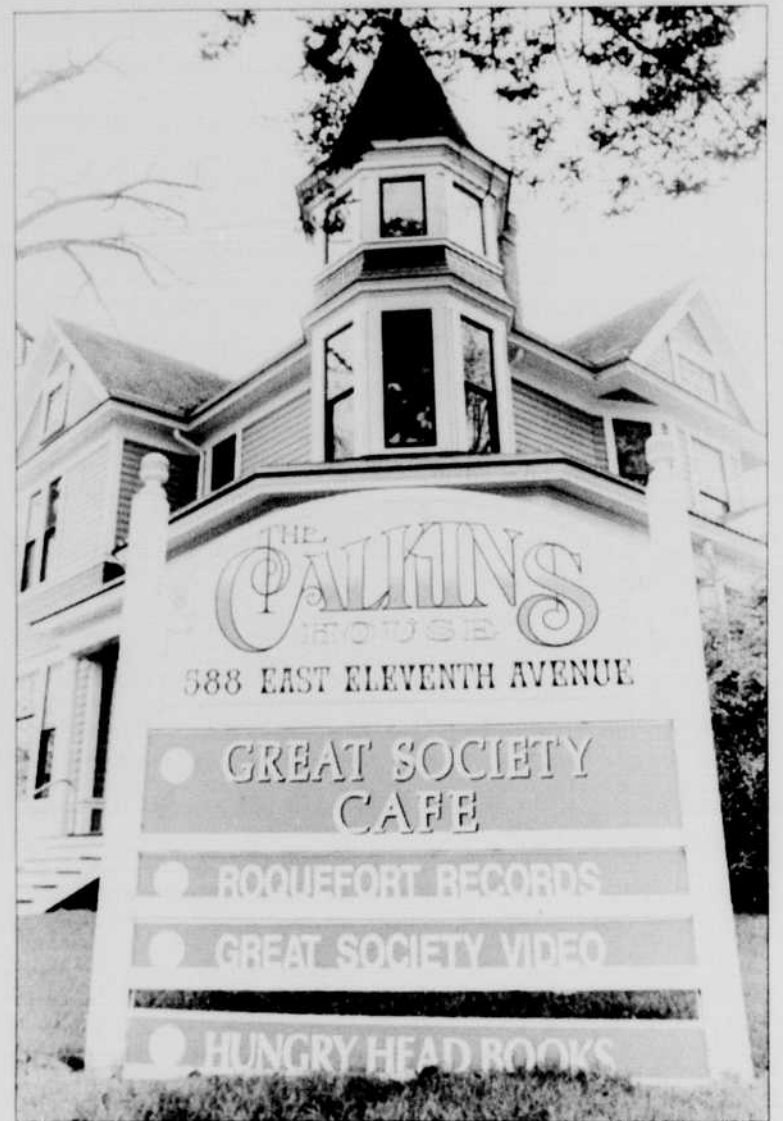


Photo by Sean Poston

After a short-lived existence as an eclectic collection of shops including the Great Society Cafe, the Calkins House will soon again be under new ownership.

every legal application he could so he didn't have to make it accessible.

"(Disabled access) was not a big priority (to Gunther)," Hays said. "He spent a lot of money on renovation, manicuring the lawns, paving the parking lot. Accessibility wasn't important."

In April, Gunther hired local

restaurant consultants to advise him on narrowing his clientele focus. Gunther then revised the menu, improved the kitchen and hired a chef. The result was that the cafe lost its identity. Students felt the cafe had changed into an "elegant sit-down restaurant" while the business crowd still associated the cafe as a "neobohehian hangout."

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