

Halley's Comet disappears from the University's galaxy

By Lynda Westcott
Emerald Contributor

What happened to Halley's Comet?

No, not the world-famous Halley's Comet last seen shooting across the night skies back in 1986, but the University district's Halley's Comet that offered Allan Bros. coffee, frozen desserts, lemonade and video-arcade games to weary students seeking mental diversion from the bleary-eyed academic routine of homework and exams.

Owner Richard Aiello said his "Comet" faded into oblivion from the impact of not one, but several, occurrences: an insidious decline in video-arcade interest; the denial by his bank to grant a loan needed to complete an expansion and a rent increase. For these reasons, plus the prospect of decreased business during the winter school break, Aiello closed Halley's on Nov. 27, 1991 after 10 years of business.

Aiello opened Halley's Comet in September 1981, and rent has gone up 70 percent since that time, he said. The commercial scale for monthly rent in the University area ranges from 70 cents per square foot to \$1.70, and his was at the top of the scale, Aiello said.

"With 2,500 square feet downstairs and 750 square feet of office space upstairs," he said, "I could no longer make a go with just yogurt, games and coffee."

To increase revenue, Aiello had planned to add a "healthy Mexican fast-food service" in the larger downstairs back space and had already started remodeling for this addition. "When the bank failed to approve my equipment loan," he said, "I had no choice but to close."

The locked wrought-iron security gate and an orange and black "For Rent" sign abruptly announced the closing of Halley's to the neighborhood merchants and, more importantly, to the students who liked to hang out there because of its congenial atmosphere.

"It was a place that was friendly," said Luke Strahota, a student at Lane Community College.

"I could have gotten a cheaper drink at the 7-Eleven," Strahota said, "but every day I'd go there and buy a Pepsi on my way to work because the owner was so nice and fun."

Strahota, who has worked at Kinko's for more than a year, said he spent most of his work breaks playing pinball at Halley's.

Stacie Williams, a speech pathologist pre-major at the



Photo by Sean Poston
Owner Richard Aiello stands in front of the E. 13th building that used to house his Halley's Comet. He shut it down in November for financial reasons.

University, said she was in Halley's Comet three or four times a week. "I liked the soft yogurt and the place was so friendly," she said. "(The owner) knew all of our names and I liked to go there to study."

Williams said she will especially miss the freedom allowed the customers of Halley's, adding, "you could even go behind the counter and get your own water and no one said anything."

It is the strawberry lemonade that University freshman Sheri Waterman will miss the most — and "the nice people working there," she said.

One commercial neighbor, The Shutterbug manager Lou Melick, said Halley's Comet is a landmark and "a part of our daily schedule." Although Melick, like Waterman, will miss the daily strawberry lemonade, he says it is Aiello's personality he'll miss most.

Where will these particular Comet fans go now for their regular fix of camaraderie, snacks and video games? They all agree that the loss of this familiar part of their daily routine is a problem, and most are going to the 7-Eleven.

What's next on this tail-end strip of 13th Avenue that supports 22 businesses — eight of which offer some type of food? It is likely students can look forward to, yes, another restaurant. According to the CPA firm of Charles E. Stewart, which is handling the financial leasing arrangements, there are three or four serious contenders for the space, and all are food-oriented.

Shirley McDowell, a partner of MTR Company, owners of the building at 880 E. 13th Ave., refused to discuss the potential tenants or the pending proposals for the space, saying there are too many variables to know now who or what will replace Halley's.

Aiello said he hopes Halley's Comet can be restructured to make another appearance in the same location. "I'm putting together a proposal that would involve other businesses sharing the space with me," he said. "But, it's not something I want to go into right now because it's very much in the planning stage."

What Aiello did want to go into is he misses the business and the playful interaction with the students. "I always told the kids, 'Buy a Coke and get a free joke,'" Aiello said as he reflected on his 10 years with Halley's Comet. And, apparently, it is this out-going, friendly nature that the students don't want to lose.

Williams said it best. "(Aiello) made the place great, so I wish it would work out that Halley's could stay," he said. "But I just wish he would still be there."

For now, Aiello is remodeling a house in the University area, but if all goes according to his plan, Williams will get her wish. And if not? "Yesterday's history and tomorrow's a mystery, and life goes on and so do I," Aiello said.

For now, Aiello and Halley's Comet are gone, but like the heavenly Halley's, they leave a notable image in the memory recesses of many.

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