

Vivid Imagination Presents...

First class musicianship
Top notch vocal harmonies
Choreographed dance moves...
So put on Your Lucky Star,
Get Into the Groove
and let's Vogue!

Dress You Up!

An 80s Summertime Spectacular

Hosted by
Poison Waters

Disc Jockey
Gregarious

Direct from San Francisco

MANDONNA

the all-male, all-live tribute to the material girl!

Saturday, July 9, 2005 - 9pm doors
Crystal Ballroom 1332 W. Burnside
Tickets \$20.00 Advance \$25.00 At The Door - All Ages
Ticketmaster.com - 224-4400, Balloons on Broadway - 241-3336 or Crystal Ballroom - 225-0047

www.mandonna.com

ESSENTIAL

lotions & oils

Come visit us at our new
look in Lloyd Center on the
...
...
all of your... favorites
and longer... hours
for your convenience.

As always, you will also find us at
3638 SE Hawthorne Blvd
503.236.7976
and on-line at
www.essentialonline.com

**When an ordinary
Realtor simply
won't do...**

Portland's Alternative Realtors
www.climbatree.com

3144 SE Belmont
Portland, OR 97214
office: 503-238-7617

NORTHWEST news

STAYING ALOFT

Balloons on Broadway owners celebrate 14 years in business
by Rebecca Ragain

When Ron Pitt and Gary Hopping met nearly 20 years ago, neither one planned on making a business out of balloons. Yet in early June they celebrated the 14th anniversary of their joint endeavor, Balloons on Broadway.

The two gay store owners have evolved a two-pronged approach to their business. Pitt handles the balloon side of things—event decorating and bouquet delivery—while Hopping masterminds the retail portion of the downtown store, which includes a wide selection of quirky cards and gifts.

Despite the one-sided name, the two aspects of the business are equally important to the financial health of Balloons on Broadway. On

new addition—is also very gay-oriented. Hopping first started by playing music from his own collection to set a fun, upbeat tone in the store. “It kind of has that nightclub-with-the-lights-on feel sometimes,” says Hopping.

Customers enjoyed the music and wanted to know where they could buy it. Pitt and Hopping stocked the store with a test-run strip of five CDs, and it just kept growing from there. Now Balloons on Broadway’s selection of hard-to-find music is so well-known that local DJs come in to browse and talk shop.

“That’s where we got quite a strong following with the young gay crowd,” says Pitt.

The music choices also appeal to the store’s bread-and-butter customers: straight, middle-aged women who work downtown, many of whom live in the suburbs.

“We are opening the gay world to them: gay music and gay humor and just a gay sensibility,” says Pitt.

In this manner Hopping and Pitt feel like they’re helping bridge a cultural gap. But that gap is no longer as pronounced as it was in the past, like in the mid-1990s, when Pitt had to threaten legal action to get the store listed in the yellow pages under the heading “condoms.”

“We’ve gone from pushing the gay issue, because we have progressed so far here in Portland. Now it’s more of social issues, progressive social issues,” says Pitt.

Though they’ve always been true to themselves in their business dealings, they are now consciously taking more of a stand within the space of the store, using humor to make political statements.

“People who come in and see some of our jokes about George Bush get all disgusted and walk out.... It got pretty vitriolic during the last election,” says Pitt. “And I know we lost customers—people who’ve been longtime customers.”

It’s not easy seeing customers walk out when you’re trying to thrive in the challenging retail environment of downtown Portland.

“Downtown retail is very difficult. We’re competing with so many places, like Bridgeport Village,” says Pitt.

Still, they don’t plan to tone it down anytime soon.

“We just simply are who we are.... We’ve never really compromised. We know we’re not everybody’s tastes,” says Pitt.

On the flip side, being themselves has also won them a lot of customers. In an age of box stores, many people recognize that such a unique retail combination is a rare find. Where else do librarian action figures, erotic board games, mullet magnets and bacon air fresheners all share the same shelves?

“We’re kind of a dying breed. It’s tough to find quirky stores these days,” explains Hopping.

As a result, the store has become a destination in and of itself through the years. For instance, out-of-state flight attendants have been known to specifically request the Portland route when they run low on greeting cards.

“People come to us. And we like that. We like to be able to hold court where we are,” says Pitt. “You know, the two queens holding court.”



Gary Hopping (left) and Ron Pitt have been changing the retail climate of downtown Portland for 14 years.

some days, card sales in the store are jumping but balloon orders are slow. Other days the scenario is reversed.

On both sides, return customers are what really keep the business afloat.

“We have really regular business, consistent repeat business,” says Pitt.

The bulk of their balloon work is for non-profit organizations—fund-raisers, silent auctions and the like. They’ve been doing the main arch at the Pride Parade since Balloons on Broadway opened, and they decorated for Peacock in the Park every year.

Their balloon creations also have become an integral part of corporate events like the Portland Marathon and many of Nordstrom’s in-store promotions.

“Balloons have become a really big part of Nordstrom’s sale marketing,” says Hopping.

The two business partners have a talent for recognizing and filling a niche, which has been a large part of the success of the retail store. For instance, Pitt and Hopping felt like there was a dearth of gay-supportive ticket venues in the downtown area. So during the past couple of years the store has become a ticket outlet for gay events like the Red Dress Party and *The Rocky Horror Show*.

The store’s music selection—a relatively

BALLOONS ON BROADWAY is located at 617 S.W. Washington St.