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WEEKEND BREAK

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OUT OF THE BOX

Nikki Davidson/The Astorian
The Inferno Lounge is home
to one of Cari Carter's Magic
Box vending machines.

Astoria vending machine brings new life to discarded items

By NIKKI DAVIDSON
The Astorian

Cari Carter finds it difficult to turn down a deal, even if happens to be on an abandoned 600-pound vending machine.

The Portland resident is a self-described hoarder, collector and reseller. She pounced on the chance to purchase the massive box from a friend's bar for \$100 a few years ago, having no idea it would soon take over her life.

"I knew nothing about vending," she said. "I just knew I now had a machine, and I was going to figure it out."

When she got her hands on the vending machine, she decided to name it the Magic Box and filled it with brightly colored nostalgic mystery bags and risqué novelty items at the bar in Portland she was working at.

The items are the kind Carter would often find in bulk at garage and estate sales. "Just weird stuff," Carter said. "I've had cat pens, unicorn pens and just stuff that I think is bizarre and off-beat that'll make somebody laugh. If I think it's funny somebody else will usually think it's funny, too."

The Magic Box was so well received, she bought more vending machines. She now owns and operates three in Las Vegas, and 15 in Oregon, including one at the Inferno Lounge in Astoria.

Rich Ewing owns the Inferno Lounge and knew Carter through mutual friends. When she mentioned her vending machine business in passing, he was instantly intrigued.

"I thought wow, what a great idea. You better get one in here before I steal it," Ewing chuckled.

Carter gave Astoria's first Magic Box a makeover before transporting it here, painting the '90s machine gold to match the lounge's swanky interior.

"It's totally an icebreaker," Ewing said. "There are customers who come in that may not have a lot of action at their table. They are looking through their phones, maybe young in their social stages and not confident about how to start conversations. All of the employees here mention the magic box because it breaks the ice. It just wakes people up."

Ewing said the machine has been especially helpful during the coronavirus pandemic. As the limited lounge staff struggles to entertain a surge of customers without their usual live music from the DJ booth, the mystery bags and novelty items keep customers busy.

"The Magic Box is entertainment all by itself," Ewing said. "A bartender or somebody will turn them onto the Magic Box and they just take a peek, and all of the sudden the whole table starts laughing and getting lively."

But turning old, abandoned machines into a relevant business today doesn't come without challenges. A few months into her business, Carter realized vending machines like the one she had originally placed in Astoria before the pandemic needed a major update.

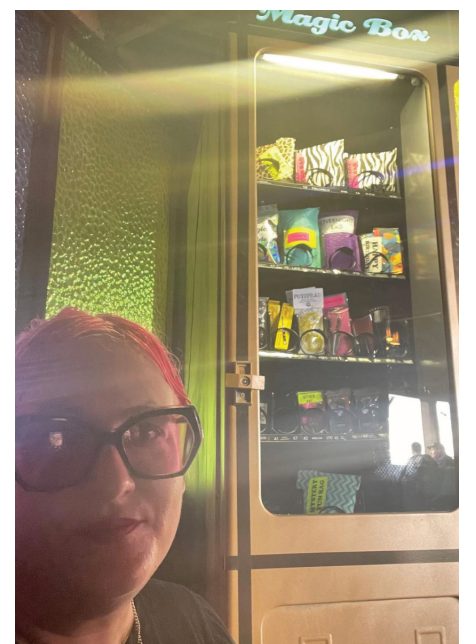
"What it boils down to, is when adults are having fun with other groups of adults these days, they don't have cash on them," Carter said. "They have credit cards on them. So I needed to bring out a vending machine that had a credit card



Carter fills her mystery bags with items she finds in bulk, like vintage trading cards.



The Magic Box in the Inferno Lounge is stocked with mystery bags.



Carter with her Magic Box inside the Inferno Lounge in Astoria.

CARI CARTER IS LOOKING TO EXPAND HER MACHINE'S INVENTORY. SHE'D LIKE TO INCLUDE NORTH COAST ARTISTS IN THE MAGIC BOX AT THE INFERNO.

reader on it."

Last month she replaced the original Magic Box at the Inferno with a machine she had fitted with a credit card reader. Her machines now offer a variety of mystery bags, novelty items and small pieces from artists in Portland. She'd like to continue expanding and

growing her business, but is hesitant to make many concrete plans.

"Last year was horrible for me because all of my machines were shut down, all of them, because they're all in bars," Carter said. "So, I'm cautiously optimistic right now. I'm not being as 100% gusto with it just because I don't

know if we're going to get shut down again, or if I have bars that might close if we get shut down again."

At the moment, Carter is looking to expand her machine's inventory. She'd like to include North Coast artists in the Magic Box at the Inferno, and is looking for artists who can produce 100 or more pieces that will be sold at price points under \$20.

"I want to include a lot of people and I want it to be a really good display of what's available locally," Carter said.

She encourages interested local artists to contact her on her website, magic-boxvending.com.