



Alan Berner/Seattle Times

Visiting football fans Hugh Roberts, left, Eric Paris, his brother Kevin Paris and Tony Laughton get a kick out of the flying fish at the famous Pike Place Market stand earlier this month.

Pike Place Market navigates path back amid pandemic

By PAUL ROBERTS
Seattle Times

SEATTLE — Like many vendors at Pike Place Market, Scott Chang isn't sure when business will resume its pre-COVID normal.

True, this summer brought welcome crowds of tourists and locals to the open-air Seattle landmark. Sales at See Lee Gardens, the flower business owned by Chang's family, are nearly back to where they were before the pandemic shuttered the market's picturesque warren of stalls and shops.

But there's another, more somber reason for See Lee's rebound: Several competing flower vendors haven't come back to the market, or are only here a few days a week. They now sell at other outlets that don't require the long commute into downtown Seattle.

Even Chang, for the first time, is selling some of his flowers elsewhere, partly as a hedge against future COVID-related disruptions.

"We're never going to quit Pike Place," says Chang, 36, of the place that has hosted his family business since the 1980s. But the pandemic "was a big eye-opener that we have to look for other venues."

Fifty years after Pike Place Market was nearly razed in the name of progress, the sprawling institution faces another, even more complex nemesis.

Although many of the market's more than 500 businesses saw solid sales this summer, visitor numbers are still below their 2019 levels. Many vendors and farmers are still on reduced hours, and dozens haven't returned or are squarely on the fence about coming back.

"It truly is up in the air right now," says Jim Johnson, owner of Olympia-based Johnson Berry Farm, a 22-year market stalwart that hasn't been back since last fall.

Even many of those vendors who have made it back did so by shifting how — and sometimes where — they do business

as they prepare for their second pandemic winter.

Collectively, it points to changes for an iconic, eclectic retail community that was facing challenges before COVID, including labor shortages and competition from online retailers and from a proliferation of farmers markets in virtually every town and neighborhood.

Although Pike Place Market remains the region's go-to source for a fully immersive "meet the producer" experience, "we can't live on it alone," says Mary Bacarella, executive director of the Pike Place Market Preservation and Development Authority, which owns and manages the 9-acre, 14-building complex. The market, Bacarella, "has to adapt."

That face-to-face quality is, of course, precisely why Pike Place Market suffered so deeply from COVID.

Even after the state reopened nonessential businesses in June 2020, the tourists who historically provide around half the market's sales were all but absent. Although loyal locals came out in droves, overall visitor numbers stayed at less than half their pre-pandemic levels into early 2021, according to data from the Downtown Seattle Association.

Fewer tourists meant fewer vendors, which in turn left the market even less attractive to visitors.

"One summer to another, it went from making hundreds of dollars a day to making dozens of dollars a day," says Daniel Fleming, 48, a photographer and digital artist who has rented a daystall in the market since 2007.

The entire market organization shrank. Revenues for the market's Preservation and Development Authority, which charges some tenants a percentage of retail sales, fell from a record \$22.6 million in 2019 to \$13.2 million in 2020, leading to cost cutting and layoffs of 15% of its staff. "They took a hit," says Bacarella.

Dean: Working on second suspense novel

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story about this guy," Dean said. "It's a suspense-thriller, and there's a lot of action."

The true story

"Dangerous Freedom" is inspired by a true story.

In his early newsroom days, Dean was a reporter covering courts and crime for the Idaho Statesman in Boise from 1988 to 1992.

In Boise, Dean interviewed Walter "Bud" Balla, who was an inmate at the state penitentiary and became the foundation for "Dangerous Freedom."

Balla was bringing a class-action lawsuit against the Idaho prison system alleging a variety of things, including poor living conditions and overcrowding, Dean said.

"This guy had a high school education and he's brought this lawsuit and won it in federal court," Dean said, adding that Balla's action resulted in major prison reform. Dean profiled Balla and covered the federal case.

"I was so struck by him that I always thought he's going to be a character in a novel I write," Dean said. "And I finally did it, I wrote this book where he's the protagonist."

Baker is named Bud after Balla's nickname as a tribute to the real-life inspiration, Dean said.

A second novel

"I've always had a lifelong dream of wanting to write books," Dean said, adding that the busy and unpredictable schedules he kept as a journalist precluded him from hav-

ing the time to work on his dream before he retired.

Dean worked his way up to a job at Newsday in Long Island, New York, where he retired about two years ago.

"There was no way I could find enough time to write novels during my career," he said. "All of these great ideas are pouring out of me now."

Dean moved from New York to Astoria about a year ago during the pandemic.

"There was something about that winter and the pandemic that forced me to concentrate," Dean said. "It was a bizarre silver lining and I took full advantage of it. I had a really good draft of the novel done in six months."

Throughout his career, Dean ran into a host of interesting characters, which now has proven to be boon for him in the novel-writing process.

"I don't know how other novelists come up with these characters if they didn't experience them. I feel like I have an advantage that I actually ran into these people," he said.

With "Dangerous Freedom" completed, Dean is now working on his second suspense book, "The Ghosts We Know." The novel is also a suspense story. The plot follows two aging war veterans who teamed up to hunt a child predator.

"It's gritty but it's also compassionate. I'm taking some bold steps in my writing development and I'm very excited about it," Dean said. While it's less journalistically inspired, the two characters also stem from real figures in Dean's life.

He anticipates "The Ghosts We Know" will launch in early December.

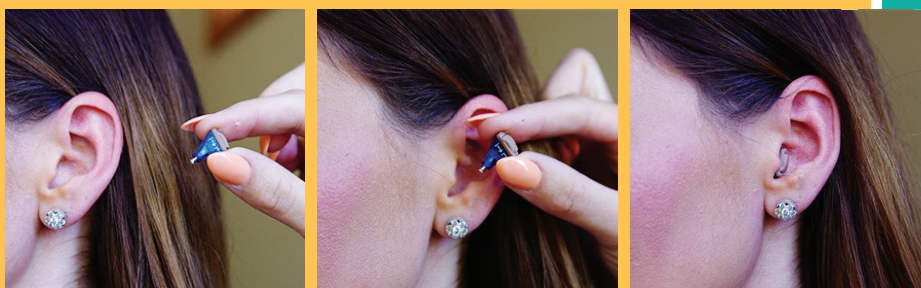
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