

# Betting on the Neighborhood

continued **▲** from front

Mongolian-style restaurants, especially after Chang's Mongolian Grill closed at Jantzen Beach last year.

Opening a restaurant with no alcohol will be a dramatic turn for the property, which was linked to a drug operation in 2009. James Yoakum, who worked as a cook at Yam Yam's, pleaded guilty to running a drug operation through the restaurant. Yam Yam's owner Larry Matthews was exonerated, but the business tanked by the following summer.

In the following year, the property had fallen into a level of disrepair that it needed four large garbage dumpsters to clear all the debris, Jonathan Park said, including chairs off the roof. He said the simple act of cleaning up the property has area business owners and residents stopping by to verbally applaud.

"People are always stopping by to say they appreciate what we're doing with the property," Jonathan Park said. "That makes us feel very welcome."

While the business sits outside

the kind of urban renewal district that that has helped other MLK ventures like Vanport Square, south of Killingsworth Street, the location is also without a focused business group. Just blocks away, there's the Interstate Corridor Business Association and further west the Kenton Business Association.

"We are kind of by ourselves here," Angela Park said. "It might take some time to get our name out, but there are plenty of people who like our food and there's no other restaurant like ours around here, so

that's good."

Jonathan Park said he's more than happy to enter into a tough situation having grown up in a poor section of Hawaii.

"This is right out of my background, so it's not something I'm scared of," he said. "The economy isn't all that strong right now, and this isn't an area that people might jump at, but the economy will pick up and the neighborhood is changing to be ready for a restaurant like this."

Angela Park emigrated from Korea two decades ago and said this kind of business challenge is straight from her past, too.

The Parks looked at the vacant building at MLK and Alberta, which once housed the Adidas Outlet

Store, but decided the space was too big even though it was within the urban renewal area. The former Adidas space will soon re-open as a Pizza Hut.

The Parks both say that while they feel the neighborhood is ready to support their restaurant, they can feel a muted sense of community loss from the closure of Yam Yam's, which had become a cultural landmark.

"When we first started to work on the building, a lady drove up and asked if she could take a picture of the sign," Angela Park said. "She said she was going to miss the restaurant because it had been there so long. We hope we're going to be here a long time, too."



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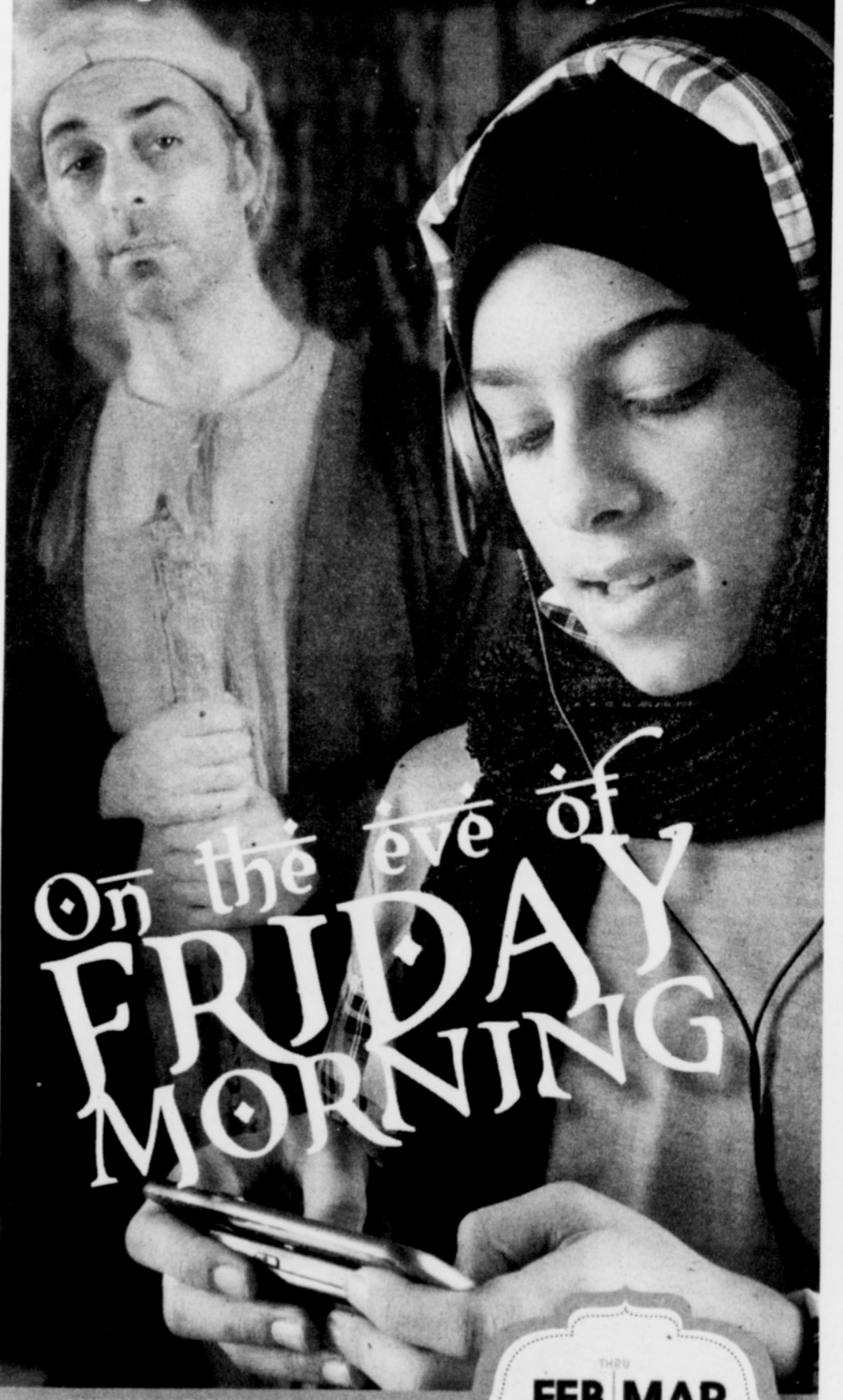
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