

Two Independent Lafayette Retailers Plan to Close Doors

By Sophie Braccini



Louis Richard with a customer from Alamo



Photos Sophie Braccini Regina Craig who worked at Handlebar since 1991

When Handlebar Toys finally closes its doors at the end of April, more than 40 years of Lafayette history will come to an end. Not too far away along Mt. Diablo Boulevard, another independent business in Lafayette will soon disappear: Sandy's Unique Boutique.

"My sons were sad when they heard Handlebar was closing," said Rosylyn Stenzel, mother of a second- and fourth-grader in Lafayette. "Last night we took a walk to the shopping center to see if it had closed yet."

The toy store, established in 1970 by Freda Challis, was first located along the Plaza and moved in 2007 further west on Mt. Diablo

Boulevard to the shopping center housing Diablo Foods, CVS and Trader Joe's. Lance Ghulam, who started working at the store in 1997 and bought it in 2008, has seen consumer behavior change a lot over the past 15 years. "With the economy being tough, people are watching the money they spend and going for better deals."

Stenzel's kids are into Legos and always want the latest sets. She said she buys toys at Target, Toys 'R' Us and on the Internet. "My kids even compare prices themselves online," she said.

Ghulam is convinced, however, that there is a place for stores that offer a different experience to young customers. "We were so proud to

offer something magical here," he said. "We had music, themes, different areas. Coming here was nothing like going to a big box store."

According to Ghulam, stores that purchase large volumes of merchandise get better pricing and priority when new merchandise is released. Handlebar continued to have many faithful customers over the years who would rather shop locally, just not quite enough to make ends meet. "Last summer it was so slow that we didn't have any cash to buy new inventory," he said.

"We used to go there to buy birthday presents and little gifts," Stenzel said. "We are sad to see it go."

Sandy's Unique Boutique's cus-

tomers are also unhappy to see their store close. A few months ago, Sandy's – which sells a unique mix of dress-up and party dresses, and accessories – moved from the prime location along Mt. Diablo Boulevard next to Postino where it had been for years to a side store in that same building while the sidewalks were re-done and the owner remodeled. But when the main store was ready to be re-occupied, owners Sandy and Louis Richard had second thoughts.

"There would be a lot of work to install the new store," he said. "I think it is time for us to retire." The store was created by the couple 34 years ago. Unfortunately, Sandy was diagnosed with Lupus and has

been through a lot. "If it was not for the pain, she would be here working," said Richard. "Sandy has been known to all for her courage and determination over the years. The store was an embodiment of her feminine and creative personality."

One Alamo shopper said she will miss the unique boutique experience. "I used to come here once a month to check out what was new and interesting." Sandy's is scheduled to close the end of May. Until then, there are many treasures still available to find.

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business briefs

ECOlunchbox and Clocks, Etc. Recognized in Lafayette, www.ecolunchboxes.com, clocksetc.net

Sustainable Lafayette announced the 2011 City of Lafayette Green Awards April 22 at Earth Day. In the Business Category, Clocks, Etc. and ECOLunchbox (which was featured in Lamorinda Weekly's November 2008 issue) received the Green Award. Sandra Ann Harris, a Lafayette mom who was confronted by the endless waste of plastics in her children's lunch box, developed a 100 percent machine-washable lunch bag with matching napkins, an alternative to the less environmentally-friendly options. "Our hard work has paid off," said the very proud ECOLunchbox president. Steve Richards of the City of Lafayette Environmental Task Force told Harris, "Your efforts impressed the Task Force and met the criteria of reducing your environmental footprint, helping the city achieve its environmental goals, and being an inspiring example that can be emulated by others in the community." ECOLunchbox was also recognized at the City Council meeting on Monday, April 23. Clocks, Etc. was recognized by Sustainable Lafayette for being "an active example of what businesses can do to reduce waste and adopt green practices to help Lafayette reach its waste reduction and environmental goals."

Mike Hamiche Named April's Moraga Employee of the Month



Safeway checker Mike Hamiche (center left) is pictured with Safeway manager Bonita Vigil, Rotary president Nora Avelar and Chamber Vice President Kevin Reneau. Photo by Ryan Koss

Mike Hamiche, who has been charming Safeway patrons for the past seven years as a checker, has been named April's Moraga Employee of the Month. Hamiche is the second recipient of the new monthly award, sponsored by the Rotary Club of Moraga and the Chamber of Commerce. His friendly manner and excellent customer service as a checker at Safeway has consistently drawn favorable comments from the store's customers. He scored a rating of 98.76 percent in an internal Safeway customer service rating system. "Mike provides world-class customer service to all of our patrons," said Safeway manager Bonita Vigil. "He is universally liked by both our customers and our fellow employees." Hamiche speaks many foreign languages and often greets customers in their native tongue. In addition to his work time at Safeway, Hamiche also attends DiabloValley College with plans to earn an engineering degree. In winning the award, the Rotary and Chamber presented Hamiche with a \$50 gift card to Orchard Supply Hardware as well as a \$50 gift certificate to Michael's Ristorante in Moraga. Hamiche was presented with his award and gift cards at the Moraga Rotary luncheon Tuesday, April 24.

Owner of Very Nice Pools returns to Korea for Pool Maintenance, 3379 Mt Diablo Blvd., Lafayette

This April, Paul Barendregt celebrated the 35th anniversary of Very Nice Pools, the business he founded in Lafayette, and at the same time was called to return to Suwon, South Korea to maintain two school pools he built almost 20 years ago. "The construction of a new school was awarded to Oakland Contractor Branagh," said Annie Barendregt, Paul's wife. "There were not that many private pool specialists at the time [in South Korea], so they hired my husband to build two swimming pools at the school." While everything had been working well since he built the pools, he was asked to replace some of the equipment. This Korean construction site is not Barendregt's only international experience; he also was hired 11 years ago to repair a pool in the Seychelles Islands, in the Indian Ocean. Although Barendregt has an international reputation, most of this local company's work is done in the East Bay. "He does everything," said his wife, "from building, to remodeling, to servicing pools."

News from the three Chambers of Commerce

Lafayette

Ribbon Cutting for Mike Rose Auto Body, April 26, 5 to 5:30 p.m., 3430 Mt. Diablo Blvd., Lafayette.

Monthly Mixer, May 9, 5:30 to 7 p.m., Round Table Pizza, 3637 Mt. Diablo Blvd., Lafayette.

Save the date for the 10th annual Taste of Lafayette, 5:30 to 9 p.m., Tuesday, May 15. Tour Lafayette's finest dining establishments and sample the signature cuisine of each restaurant. The tour begins at Elam and Margaret Brown Plaza (corner of Moraga Road and Mt. Diablo Blvd.) From there, ticket holders will go at their own pace to any or all of the participating restaurants. The evening wraps up back at the Plaza with dessert and coffee, more music, raffles, and a silent and live auction. The Taste benefits the Lafayette Community Foundation and the programs and services of the Lafayette Chamber of Commerce. Cost is \$45 per person, reserve by mail to Chamber Office or register online at Lafayettechamber.org

Moraga

The 6th annual Moraga Community Faire is scheduled from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturday, May 12 in the Rheem Valley Shopping Center. Attractions will include a classic car show, wine tasting from local vineyards, cool music from our schools' bands on stage, and oodles of activities for the kids (crafts, bounce houses, carnival games, dunk tank, chalk art, and more). This event is planned and organized by the Moraga Chamber of Commerce, in cooperation with the Town of Moraga. The purpose of this community gathering is for businesses to come out to meet and greet the public.

Orinda

No news this week.

If you have a business brief to share, please contact **Sophie Braccini** at sophie@lamorindaweekly.com