

Change a constant for Cross Keys stores

Merchants sponsor movie nights to generate interest

By Larry Perl
lperl@patuxent.com

Posted 6/24/09

The Rouse Co.'s Village of Cross Keys shopping center was at a low ebb in January of 2001. The merchants called an emergency meeting with management. The bookstore Bibelot went out of business. The women's clothing shop Octavia, one of the original tenants of Cross Keys in 1965, moved to Pikesville.

Eight years later, Rouse is gone, new owner General Growth Properties is reorganizing under Chapter 11 bankruptcy; the center is for sale, and at least four retail spaces are vacant, including a void left by the departures of the independent men's clothing store George Howard, another original tenant, and the national women's clothing chain Ann Taylor.

J. Jill, which occupied a large space in the shopping center, is closing its Cross Keys store. A date has not been set, but the store is having a going-out-of-business sale.

It's not all doom and gloom for the center, however. In the past year, merchants have had several nice surprises -- including the return of Octavia, at least in spirit although with a different name and style of clothes.

Octavia's Betsy Dugan closed the Pikesville store last year and this winter opened a store called Bettina Collections at Cross Keys. She's back in the same shopping center where she once grouched about Rouse's high rents and refusal to offer any abatements for renovations or build Octavia a separate entrance from the parking lot so customers wouldn't have to walk through the Cross Keys courtyard.

"There's no place like home; there's no place like home," Dugan said, acknowledging that a lot of her longtime customers at Octavia in Cross Keys never came to the shop in Pikesville -- and that a lot of those same customers now are turning up at Bettina Collections in Cross Keys.

"It's all about the neighborhood and synergy with other merchants," said Dugan, who said she opened a new store with a new name to try something a little different and to change with the times.

Foot traffic

Another pleasant surprise for merchants has been the consensus success of the Village Square Cafe, which opened in December and draws about 1,500 customers a week, according to Robert Glick, of Mt. Washington, who opened the restaurant with his wife, Roseann.

Located near the Radisson Hotel, the Village Square Cafe started out serving breakfast and lunch, and now serves dinner Thursdays through Saturdays.

It's also starting to draw some of the Baltimore business crowds that the old Village Roost eatery was known for in the 1970s and 1980s, and it was the site of a recent party for Urbanite magazine in exchange for free advertising, Glick said.

Several merchants said the cafe brings foot traffic to their stores.

"I think he has definitely brought a lunch crowd to the center," said Schneider, owner of the Pied Piper.

Also bringing foot traffic, albeit in the evening, when many stores are closed, is the most welcome surprise at Cross Keys these days -- a Saturday night outdoor film festival in the Cross Keys courtyard for the month of June.

Sponsored by merchants -- who shared the cost of \$10,000 to \$20,000, including a 20-foot, inflatable screen, hundreds of seats and a red carpet -- the popular movies are all set in Baltimore. John Waters' "Hairspray" was first. It drew a younger crowd of 225. Barry Levinson's "Avalon," the next week, drew a crowd twice as large and more varied in age.

The June 20 showing of "The Accidental Tourist" was postponed due to the threat of severe thunderstorms (they never materialized). The rain date is July 18. Meanwhile, a final film in the festival, Waters' "Cry Baby," is set for Saturday, June 27, at 8:30 p.m.

The fest, organized by Betty Cooke Steinmetz, of The Store Ltd. in Cross Keys, and Blake Goldsmith, who runs Extraordinary Events, a marketing and promotion company, out of his home in Roland Park, is helping to raise money to renovate Roland Park's aging firehouse. Village Square Cafe and Donna's restaurant are donating a percentage of their dinner proceeds to the firehouse fund.

Goldsmith said the fest was also a way to take the edge off the area's tense year, as the Roland Park Civic League successfully fought a plan by Keswick Multi-Care Center to build a retirement center on 17 acres of Baltimore Country Club land.

He said he hopes to resume the movie fest in September.

For merchants and management, movies are also a way to promote the shopping center, which is easy to miss as one drives past the 5100 block of Falls Road.

The center is always looking for promotional events, but the movie festival has been especially successful, said Samantha Harris, general manager of both the Cross Keys center and Mondawmin Mall.

Harris said the festival brings people into the center and reminds them, "Oh, I forgot (the women's clothing store) Joanna Gray was here. Oh, they have a new store called Jean Pool."

"You're not really getting a lot of walk-in traffic. It's a matter of letting people know we're still here and we're interested in you," said Cathy Baggett, manager and former co-owner of the salon Carl's Intercoiffure, one of the two original tenants still left, along with The Store Ltd.

Holding on

New stores like Jean Pool and Bettina Collections have somewhat offset the pain of losing the George Howard store and Heirloom Jewelers, which had been there since 1972. But there are mixed feelings about losing national retailers like J. Jill.

"It's going to be an eyesore now," lamented Rosemary "Cookie" Schneider, co-owner of the nearby Pied Piper children's clothing store. In these economic times, "It's going to be very hard to fill that space," she predicted.

But a long-running debate continues over whether Cross Keys should have only independent, upscale boutique stores or a mix of independents and chains like J. Jill, Williams-Sonoma and Talbots.

"It's the general feeling of many of the (merchants) in Cross Keys that they would like to see it get back to being all local (stores)," Schneider said.

"I think we look at the merchandising mix, what works well together," said Harris, the general manager. "What has worked in the past has been the smaller, upscale boutiques.

"But it's very cyclical. The next 10 years it may be big boxes."

For now, Cross Keys is going with the flow, hunkering down in the recession.

"Things come and go," said Baggett of Carl's Intercoiffure. "We're doing OK. It depends on the day. The weather has a lot to do with it."

Business at the Pied Piper isn't as good as last year, "but it's pretty good," said Kitty DeVincentis, co-owner and Schneider's mother.

And she said that struggles are the fault of the economy. "It's definitely not the center," she said.

Business as usual

Despite the unsettled future of a shopping center that's up for sale and an owner in bankruptcy, "It's business as usual" for the merchants, DeVincentis said.

General Growth, one of the nation's largest mall operators, included Cross Keys in its bankruptcy petition in April. The company also owns the Mondawmin Mall, Columbia Mall and Towson Town Center, financially healthier holdings that were not included in the filing, as well as the struggling Harborplace, White Marsh and Galleria malls, which were included in the filing, according to published reports.

Harris said whatever ownership changes may come will not affect Cross Keys.

"The Village of Cross Keys has a long-standing history," she said. "We're not going anywhere."

user comments (0)