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What's Up on Brown?

By Sophie Braccini



Steve Snyder, Jay Lifson and Norma Evans having a good time on Brown Photo Sophie Braccini

says Lifson, "the new businesses that are coming here are just making it happen." Carolie Hensley, owner of the Cotton Patch at 1025 Brown, could not agree more. "I've been here since 1983," she says, "the city has tried to decide what kind of business can go where, but I think that it is better to just let it be." Hensley has seen the changes over the years and is very pleased with the more sophisticated businesses that are coming in. "We've changed the dynamic of the street, don't put your fingers into it!" she adds.

Hensley has been active in making Brown a vibrant business street. "In 1994 I started to hold an outdoor quilt show, closing the street for one Saturday," she remembers, "and we did it for nine years." Hensley stopped because some residents of the area did not enjoy the party. "I'd like to learn more about what Carolie did with her Quilt Show," says Anthony Ruiz, owner of FastFrame, "I would love to be able to close Brown for a Saturday/Sunday art show."

FastFrame used to be in the Clocktower Building on Mt. Diablo Blvd. "We get as much business here as we did on Mount Diablo," says Ruiz, "there is less traffic, but we are a destination and we have much better parking." The additional benefit of ample parking is that Dave Simpson parks his 'Big Blue' book-mobile there every Saturday.

Ruiz, an avid reader, loves his partnership with Simpson. "Reading is important for the development of the brain," he believes, "it fosters a different type of thinking, like art, it's not linear, it is out of the box, you go somewhere in your mind." This partnership is just one of many Ruiz would like to see happen. The Chamber mixer, for example, took place on his parking lot and was co-sponsored by two other newcomers to Brown, Alternatives for Animals and Creative Alterations.

"I have had an eye on that location on Brown for years (number 1048)," says Creative Alteration's owner Josef Jamkochian, He particularly appreciates the better parking for his customers. Veterinarian Karen Retig, who opened her Alternatives for Animals clinic in a quaint cottage at 1042 Brown, agrees that business is good on Brown. "We are aiming at creating a little community here," said Retig, "we need to network more so we can address issues together." One such issue is that drivers does not always respect the 25 mile per hour speed limit.

John Marquez, of Artisan Bistro, does not see anything special about Brown. "It's just another street," he said. But if his business neighbors have their way, the creative and eclectic thoroughfare will become the place to be in Lafayette.

Other businesses on Brown include Cleanse and Wellness, Inc at 1030, Rosie's Upscale Consignments at 1020, Image Excellence Salon at 1038, and DTN Nail Care and Lafayette Auto Repair that occupy the two corners at Mount Diablo Blvd.

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"This is not just Brown Avenue, it's funky town!" exclaimed Jay Lifson, Executive Director of the Lafayette Chamber of Commerce, at a recent Chamber mixer on Brown Ave. Recently new businesses have moved to the strip between Deer Hill Rd. and Mount Diablo Blvd., and are bringing new life to this eastern area of Lafayette. These blocks on Brown Ave. have always been a mixed-use area, with destination businesses, apartment buildings and private cottages. "All roads lead to Brown," says newcomer Anthony Ruiz of FastFrame, who relocated to 1020 Brown two months ago, "we want to make this district an alternative to the downtown area."

When his father bought the building at 1021 Brown 45 years ago, Rick Humann, then a child, remembers that one of the first things they bought was an alarm. "I wouldn't say that the area was scary, but it was mostly run down residential buildings," he recalls. Humann Co., Inc. was then, and still is, a civil engineering, surveying and land planning consulting firm that does most of its work in Contra Costa and Alameda counties with a good share in Lafayette. "I think it is great to have more vibrancy on Brown," says the business owner, "and it is still less crowded because we are a bit removed from downtown."

"This area is part of the discussion of the Lafayette Specific Plan,"