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## Two Independent Lafayette Retailers Plan to Close Doors

By Sophie Braccini



Louis Richard with a customer from Alamo Photos  
Sophie Braccini

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 customers 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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Regina Craig who worked at Handlebar since 1991

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