

Commitment to community

Bicycle Rack & Handmade in New Paltz mark 50 years in business

by Erin Quinn

THERE IS A BIRTHDAY block party taking place on North Front Street in the Village of New Paltz that the entire community is welcome to celebrate.

Two longtime independent businesses — Handmade & More and the Bicycle Rack — have come of age, hitting the 50th anniversary mark since their businesses first opened their doors on a small side street in New Paltz in January of 1974. Though the two businesses are not directly related, they both share a half-century of peddling their services and wares on a steep one-way street that has evolved during their tenure from a predominantly residential neighborhood to one anchored by long-time independently owned shops.

Both owners — Mike Kilmer of the Bicycle Rack and Melinda Minervini of Handmade & More — were seasoned employees of the businesses they would eventually come to own. “Mike has worked at the Bike Rack longer than I have,” said Alan Stout, the original owner of the bike repair and sales shop that sits on the same property as The Bakery, another New Paltz institution



LAUREN THOMAS

On North Front Street in New Paltz, The Bike Rack and Handmade and More are celebrating 50 years of serving the community. Pictured standing (L-R): Mike Kilmer and Alan Stout. Seated is Melinda Minervini.

that is coming up on its golden anniversary. Stout owned and operated the bike shop for 30 years, while Kilmer began working there in 1990 and purchased the business in 2004, giving him the

edge by four years.

Minervini started with Handmade from Day One. “I was close friends with Ann Rodman [the original owner], fresh out of college, a potter and very

much a part of the arts and crafts world which was taking off at that time.” The original Handmade building had been a four-story carriage factory, then a gas station and finally a NAPA Auto Parts store before Ann and her husband Karl Rodman purchased and renovated it in 1974.

“Ann and I were good friends with [dancer and instructor] Brenda Bufalino, and they had this vision to create a place that supported local artists,” Minervini said. The concept was to have a dance studio on the top floor, the Dancing Theatre, and a place for craftspeople to sell their wares on the bottom floor, thereby fusing their passion for the artistic aesthetic. People would be shopping for handmade wind chimes or ceramic rice bowls or artisan jewelry while bare feet pounded above, leaping across the wooden floors, tap-dancing to some jazz or spinning in endless pirouettes in worn pink slippers.

The pairing worked well into the 1980s, until Bufalino became in such high demand as a professional tap-dancer and instructor in New York City that she could no longer fully commit to running the studio above Handmade. That was when Rodman and her employees decided to expand upstairs and open their women’s clothing line — something that, with the exception of fleeting local department stores, New Paltz did not have.

Both Minervini and Stout said that the businesses’ locations were chosen because they were available, and not because they were on a side street off Main Street where the majority of vehicular and foot traffic went past. “The New Paltz supervisor at the time owned a business on Main Street around the corner, and told me that I wouldn’t last a year on North Front Street because people wouldn’t know I was there,” said Stout.

“North Front Street is downhill; it’s a one-way street that most people from

Briefly noted | New Paltz

New Paltz fire recruit numbers trending upward — slowly

FINDING RESIDENTS WILLING TO volunteer to run into burning buildings has been getting harder for many years. While there may be plenty of neighbors willing to help neighbors, longer commutes and other obligations make it more difficult to be around when the calls come. In New Paltz, a recent spike gives hope to reversing course — but only if it continues.

Chief Cory Wirthmann understands those difficulties. A fifth-generation New Paltz firefighter, last year Wirthmann took a job in Beacon and can’t respond to calls during the traditional workday any longer. Balancing the needs of members becomes easier as the number of members grows. No one is expected to show up to every call, and with a larger pool of volunteers the residents of New Paltz continue to get the level of fire protection to which they have become accustomed.

“We’ve gotten six new recruits in the last couple of months, and they’re really active,” the chief confirmed. There’s been a push to encourage locals to sign up, with lawn signs cropping up around the community to remind residents that

their fire protection is entirely provided by highly-trained volunteers.

There are “ebbs and flows” in the number of volunteers as a matter of course, Wirthmann said, with many recruits coming from “high school students and new people to the area.” Even with six new recruits, though, “It’s still very low.”

It’s not just that modern-day pressures might make it feel harder to volunteer. New Paltz’s population is expanding, and there’s a push to build more to address a widespread housing shortage. More buildings means more areas where fires can start — and more automatic alarms, to which firefighters are obligated to respond. “It takes people to do that stuff. I’m grateful for what we have, but we need more. We always need more.”

An ideal candidate believes in the mission of fighting fires, and can work well in a closely-knit team. The fire company members not only save the lives of their neighbors, they put their own lives in each others’ hands. “That’s the mission.”

New Paltz residents who want to learn more are encouraged to stop by the firehouse on North Putt Corners Road on any Monday night, 7 p.m., which is when general training happens. “Talk to us,

and pick up an application,” Wirthmann said. Applications are also available at newpaltzfire.org.

— Terence P Ward

Historic Preservation Commission art show in New Paltz

THE VILLAGE OF NEW PALTZ HISTORIC Preservation Commission’s tenth annual juried art show will be on view from May 5 until June 30 at Elting Memorial Library’s Steinberg Reading Room. The show features pieces depicting local and area historic landmarks, architectural details and landscapes, as well as impressions of life within a historic context and preservation’s role in promoting equality and justice.

The commission invites artists of all ages to submit their artworks between April 26 and May 1 at Elting Memorial Library, during opening hours.

There is no charge for submissions and no charge for the public to see the exhibit.

Winners will be announced at 2 p.m. during a festive reception on June 1 from 1 to 3 p.m.

For additional information, including the guidelines for artwork, contact exhibit coordinator Kamilla Nagy at kamilla.nagy@gmail.com.

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out of town do not even know is here," said Minervini. "Ann and Karl bought it because it became available and they were able to renovate it to fit their vision."

Stout, who had moved to New Paltz from Illinois when he secured a job at IBM, said that he decided to open a bike shop because "New Paltz didn't have one." He had met his wife at IBM, and after a few years of working for the corporation, decided that "It wasn't something we wanted to make a lifelong commitment to." When he saw the classified ad for the building at 13 North Front Street, located right next to the New Paltz Food Coop (now The Bakery), he thought it would be a good place to get his business started. "I purchased the building from Gordon Kreth, who used to own the Locust Tree," where Garvan's is now, explained Stout.

The upstairs remained an apartment, but downstairs because his bike sales and repair shop. "We had to put in several additions, because bikes take up a lot of space!" he said with a laugh. "When Mike [Kilmer] has 50 of them to be repaired, plus the ones he's selling, that requires much more space than the building had originally." They built additions on the back and the side to provide enough square footage for repairs, storage and sales.

While the two businesses deal with very different products, all three of the owners light up when they talk about what they do and for whom they do it. "I'm an artist at heart, so I love being surrounded by beautiful aesthetics," said Minervini. Handmade & More has always been a place where people go window-shopping, eager to see the displays in the ground-floor windows.

Stout and Kilmer both talked about how much they enjoy "taking something apart and putting it back together again." "It's like a resurrection," said Kilmer. "Someone brings you this dead thing that they pulled out of their garage that doesn't work and is all busted up, and you can literally pull it apart, put it back together again, give it a heartbeat and an entire new lease on life. It's a very satisfying feeling." "It's always nice to sell a bike and to see the joy on someone's face when they find the perfect fit for a bike, but it's much more satisfying to repair a bike with your own hands," said Stout.

Asked what they believe have been some of the ingredients in their ability not only to survive 50 years in business but also to thrive in this New Paltz location, all of them agreed that it was their commitment to the community. "We're not the pizza store on Main Street that you pass by and grab a slice," said Kilmer. "People seek us out because they know we're here, they know who we are, and they know what kind of service they're going to get."

"We're the community's businesses," said Minervini. "Most of our customers live here and are multigenerational. We're not built around the tourists or the college students, although they do shop here, but we're built around the community and we're their stores. We know them and their kids and their

grandkids, and it's so rewarding to see someone who used to come in and buy stickers off our sticker roll as a 12-year-old come back with their child to search for that perfect gift."

"We've kept our hours the same since 1974," said Stout, "Tuesday through Saturday." He and Kilmer both said that they would get pushback from customers, particularly those who were here only on the weekend, because they were closed on Sundays. "It was a lifestyle choice," said Stout. "I could have made more money; Mike could have made more money. But we also have families, and they're in school Monday through Friday, and Sunday is family day."

The other winning formula that both shops have in common is that they've hired from within. Minervini worked at Handmade until she purchased it from the previous owner, Marge Schenk, who had also worked there and purchased it from Ann Rodman. Kilmer worked for Stout for years and then purchased the business from him when the founder was ready to retire.

The three of them are all big believers in being hands-on. "We wouldn't ask an employee to do anything that we haven't done 100 times," said Stout. "We repair the bikes and clean the toilets and mop the floors."

"I remember when there were two inches of standing water in the shop from a backed-up sewer issue at the [Elting Memorial] Library, and we had to tear up all of the rugs ourselves and get the water out," said Minervini. "There's always a situation waiting for you to figure out and to solve." While she admits that was not the most glamorous example, there are other complexities to running and operating a business that she sees as creating works of moving art.

Asked what was popular in the 1990s, Kilmer said, "Mountain bikes. They were all the rage. Road bikes were actually being almost phased out at that time." "I would say women's clothing. That's when the upstairs really took off," said Minervini.

When asked what was a strange or odd thing that has happened over the 50 years that they've been in business, the three of them all started laughing, recalling different scenarios.

"This is an old building," said Stout of the Bicycle Rack, "circa 1890. It has those old, wide floorboards with gaps in between them; and one day, before we had the no-pet policy, someone's dog started peeing upstairs and it came right through our ceiling and into our cash register. It short-circuited the cash register!"

Kilmer said he was sure it was a bunny; but regardless, a no-pet policy was quickly created and the two of them put up a light shaped like a bowl, directly above the cash register. "We might not have pets, but we do have college students, and we've had beer come through that floor," he said. "That lampshade has saved us at least three cash registers!"

Stout remembers talking with a customer outside of the shop when a grapefruit flew through the air to splat right next to them. "Two collegestudents who lived in the apartment across the way were having a spat, and one of them threw a grapefruit at the other one. But the window was open and they missed, and it landed right by our feet!"

Minervini trumped both of them. "One day we had a lamb running loose in our gift shop," she said. "A man, who I believe had spent ample time at P&G's prior to coming in our store, had purchased the lamb for Easter as a present

for his grandkids and came into the store with it, where he quickly lost control of the animal."

As for celebrations, Minervini said that they had a huge party for their 40th and will be planning something "extra-special for our 50th. It has to be a party, and the Bicycle Rack will be part of it. I'm thinking a live band, dancing, food and lots of fun!"

Whatever recipe it is that these businesses have been using as their special sales sauce has been working for more than five decades and continues to light up North Front Street with a sense of place and belonging and knowing that the person you see when you walk in is going to recognize you and ask what it is that they can help you with. Cheers to the Bicycle Rack and Handmade & More!

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4p + 7p The Taste of Things
Saturday, March 2
11a In Restless Dreams: Music of Paul Simon
11:15a Documentary Oscar Shorts
2:15p + 6:45p The Taste of Things
4p + 7:30p Perfect Days
5:15p The Teachers' Lounge
Sunday, March 3
1p Chitty Chitty Bang Bang • FREE!
1:30p + 4:30p + 7p Perfect Days
4p The Taste of Things
7:15p The Teachers' Lounge
Monday, March 4
4p + 7p The Taste of Things
4:30p + 7:30p Perfect Days
Tuesday, March 5
4p + 7p The Taste of Things
4:30p + 7:30p Perfect Days
Wednesday, March 6
4:30p The Teachers' Lounge
4:45p + 7:30p Perfect Days
7p Robot Dreams
Thursday, March 7
4:45p + 8p Perfect Days
5:15p The Teachers' Lounge
7:30p The Night Visitors

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Friday, March 1
4p + 7:15p Dune: Part Two
4:45p Anselm
5p The Zone of Interest
7:30p American Fiction
7:45p Drive-Away Dolls
Saturday, March 2
1p Chitty Chitty Bang Bang • FREE!
1:30p + 4p + 7:15p Dune: Part Two
2p + 5:30p Drive-Away Dolls
5p Anselm
7:30p Hundreds of Beavers
7:45p American Fiction
Sunday, March 3
1:30p The Boy and the Heron
1:45p Documentary Oscar Shorts
2:30p + 6p Dune: Part Two
4:45p + 6:45p Drive-Away Dolls
7p The Circulators
Monday, March 4
4p + 7:30p Dune: Part Two
5p In Restless Dreams: Music of Paul Simon
5:15p Drive-Away Dolls
7:45p Live Action Oscar Shorts
Wednesday, March 6
3:30p + 6:45p Dune: Part Two
4:15p American Fiction
5:30p The Zone of Interest
7p We Start With the Things We Find
7:45p Drive-Away Dolls
Thursday, March 7
4p + 7:30p Dune: Part Two
5p Hundreds of Beavers
5:30p Drive-Away Dolls
7:15p Anselm
7:45p The Zone of Interest

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