Hillers recall favorite Avenue shops of yore

Posted on August 13, 2020, updated on August 13, 2020 by Pete Mazzaccaro

View of Ladybug shop, east side of 8400 block of Germantown Ave. taken from across the street, circa 1960s/1970s, by Edmund B. Gilchrist, Jr. (Photo courtesy of the Chestnut Hill Conservancy.)

By Barbara Sheehan

Uncertainty prompted by the COVID pandemic has challenged our ability to “keep calm and carry on.” One thing that might distract us, however, is reliving pleasant experiences from the past.
Nostalgia might explain the overwhelming response to a recent post on NextDoor, the neighborhood social network, which asked, “What businesses do you miss the most that used to be in Chestnut Hill?” This simple query yielded over 450 responses.

The most common answer was Borders Bookshop. But others listed businesses such as the Tangled Web, the A&P, Citrus, Reese's Pharmacy, Cafette, the Newsstand, Marion's Girls and Boys Shop, Under the Blue Moon, Randolph's Jewelers, Nana Shop, the French Bakery, the Camera Shop, and even the Gap and Wawa. What is it we miss about these establishments?

For Roxborough resident Joanne Ledwith, 69, it was the whole experience of shopping at “a very cute small boutique at the corner of Germantown Avenue and Gravers Lane,” the Ladybug Shop.

“It was very ‘Chestnut Hill’ to wear Ladybug stuff,” she said. “This was the Sixties and image was part of life. Especially for dances at the Water Tower.” She treasured the little Ladybug straight pin that came with each purchase.

Dances at the Water Tower? As Ledwith remembered, “There was nothing fancy about Water Tower dances. It was just a large room with music. But we didn't miss one week...hoping to be asked to dance by a special someone. From there we would go to the Grove Diner for soda and fries. Those were the days.”

Claudia Raab, 70, of Mount Airy, knew the Ladybug clothing line intimately. Her father, Max Raab, who started clothing lines that included Ladybug, The Villager and J.G. Hook, owned it. A Philadelphia native, Raab's trendsetters included the shirtwaist dress and the use of bleeding madras prints that were included as “must haves” in the infamous “Official Preppy Handbook,” and that made him what the New York Times called the “Dean of the Prep Look.” (Max Raab's second wife, Mary Raab, ran the Ladybug branch of the business.)

Claudia Raab also had an interest in textiles and fabric design, but she was drawn to a different esthetic. An artist and importer of clothing and folk art, many on the Hill will know her as the organizer of the Annual Holiday Art Sale at the Water Tower Recreation Center.

Did she wear clothes from her father's lines? “No,” said Raab. Not her body type, she said, “the clothes were made for stick figures.” Raab elaborated, “My father was designing for people from Westport, Connecticut... I was a hippie into the Peace and Civil Rights Movement. I wore Mexican peasant blouses.”

Though she didn't wear the shirtwaist dresses her father sold when she was a teen, she really appreciates the quality of the clothes, admiring his “amazing eye for fabric and prints.” She also cited the effective Ladybug ads, many created by women in the ad business who impressed her. Here's an example of some of the literate prose that created the right mood for its target audience. “Whatever you do in a LADYBUG has a way of being wonderful. Like being in love, a LADYBUG adds a little something extra, a bit of snap and fun that makes ordinary things special and special things great.”

Max Raab also appreciated his daughter's tastes.

“He liked my business and thought it was cool,” she said.

Another family business that local residents miss was a popular toy store. O'Doodles grew out of O'Donnell's, the stationery store started by Henry O'Donnell in 1954. His sons Hank and Fran grew up in the store and eventually managed it, but when Staples entered the picture, they changed course. O'Donnell's became O'Doodles, prompted by Fran O'Donnell's sense of play and interest in toys that were “unplugged,” inspired creativity, and were not dependent on electronics. However, he said “When we switched from stationery to toys, my Dad recommended a back-up plan.”
Fran O’Donnell and store manager Leo Hesser setting up sparkling cider for the 2012 New Year’s Eve celebration at O’Doodles, held each year at noon for customers and their families. (Photo courtesy of Fran O’Donnell.)

So Fran O’Donnell studied for his real estate license during slow times at the toy store. The popularity of online sales was a challenge for the retail businesses, and the shop closed in 2014.

But not without regret. The toy business was a good choice for Fran O’Donnell, who admits to being a bit of a ham and “a kid at heart.” O’Doodles offered many special events and celebrations, such as the popular New Year’s Eve parties for families held at noon on December 31st each year. They offered their upstairs space for activities such as birthday parties, a karate class, and class in creative play for children on the autism spectrum. O’Donnell was often seen playing the accordion for Hill festivities and dressing in character costumes.

While he is very happy in his career as a realtor, he does miss some things about being in a business on the Hill.

He remembered in particular a father who walked to his store from Wyndmoor in a snowstorm to purchase a specific novelty item (a small stretchy tube that caught your fingers at each end) to help calm his autistic son who was afraid of the storm.

“You really entered into the lives of your customers,” he explained, “and they entered into your life.”

Entertaining as these memories are, can they help us to shape a positive future for the community? Eric Sternfels, of Mount Airy, shared this with neighbors on his NextDoor post, “As we reminisce about businesses loved and lost, I am reminded about the wise words instilled in
me (by someone much loved and lost): We must go out of our way to patronize the establishments we would be most upset about losing.”

That means continuing to patronize Kilian’s, Bredenbecks, McNally’s, Busy Bee Toys, and the many other favorite Hill shops, especially during this pandemic.

*Please take the time to support our journalism. You can do that with a subscription (https://www.chestnuthilllocal.com/subscribe/) or with a tax-deductible donation to the Chestnut Hill Community Fund, which launched a support fund for the Local (https://charity.gofundme.com/o/en/donate-widget/8415) to help us remain funded during this pandemic. Thank you for your support!*