Local Jewish business owners remain positive amidst uncertainty

BY ERIC BERGER, ASSOCIATE EDITOR AND ELLEN FUTTERMAN, EDITOR

In early April, the Jewish Light reported on how Jewish small business owners in the St. Louis area were doing after they had to either close shop or drastically alter how they operate because of the coronavirus pandemic. Both St. Louis city and county officials ordered some businesses shut in mid-March and then allowed them to reopen in stages beginning mid-May.

This week, we revisited some of the same business owners as well as a few others to see how they are faring. What continues to be a dominant theme among them is while all may not be back to normal — whatever that means these days — they are optimistic and remain appreciative of the support the community has provided them.

Clean life influences restaurateur’s focus on safety

If anyone has reason to feel dismayed, it could be Aaron Teitelbaum. Last Saturday night, his upscale restaurant Herbie’s, located in Clayton, was fully booked. Of course, fully booked these days means only 25% of capacity given the coronavirus guidelines, but still.

Unfortunately, the night before, a restaurant customer had eaten at Herbie’s and learned on Saturday that she had tested positive for COVID-19. Her party contacted the restaurant and Teitelbaum agreed to a 3 p.m. to relay the news. By 3:45, staff had cleared every customer there, called all the reservations to cancel and shut down.

“I don’t know when we’re going to reopen but it will be by the weekend. The facility is ready,” said Teitelbaum. “We had City Wide cleaning come in and they cleaned the whole facility and bleached it. We’re just waiting on staff because on a Friday night 80% of my staff is working.”

Even though St. Louis County allowed restaurants to reopen May 15, Teitelbaum waited a week to reopen his three eateries. That’s because he needed more time to install plexiglass partitions at the bars at Herbie’s and his Kingside Diner locations in Clayton and the Central West End. He also invested in a super high-tech water sanitization system that makes seven different kinds of water, is chemical free and changes the pH level of water into natural hand sanitizer. Despite the setback at Herbie’s, Teitelbaum remains grateful and positive. He is thankful that he has received government loans to help small businesses. He is also thankful that he has “an incredibly loyal and amazing staff” of 150 or so employees, nearly all of whom returned to work when the restaurants reopened.

“Over the last year, before this (pandemic) even happened, we really focused our company on who we wanted to be and how we wanted to be,” he said. “That’s how I have been making my recovery life and that has filtered into my company and my team. When they have somebody who lives the life that I live making decisions that aren’t based on business but on what’s the next right thing we are able to do, it makes us closer and a more compassionate company and I am proud of that.”

Online sales click with pandemic

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Why would people in West Hempstead and New Rochelle buy meat from a kosher deli in St. Louis rather than from the long list of delis locally and in New York City, just an hour away?

Some of it may have to do with the “Killer Pastrami” at Kohn’s Kosher Deli. The other part of the equation is the pandemic. When New York became a hotspot for the virus in March, people were, as the rest of the country now knows, told to stay home.

That’s where Lenny Kohn, the co-owner of the deli in Creve Coeur, came in. He had already done online sales to the East Coast via kosher coops, but in recent months, he has seen his online business increase by more than 50 percent, he said.

“We price it really well and they like the quality of our stuff and then they talk to people, and they talk to people,” Kohn said. “I personally talk to the people and will give them a call and throw in a pound of pastrami just to keep them going.”

The online business has helped to some-
what cushions the hit Kohn’s took from the lack of catering events due to the absence of Blues and Cardinals games, where the deli had sold its signature hot dogs.

“Really hurt our prepared food, wholesale catering business because there were no office functions, weddings, bar mitzvahs, no shows that were over 50 percent of people, and then [Washington University], which is a big account of ours, closed in early March, before Passover,” said Kohn.

But on the East Coast, some families ordered $50 worth of meat; the average was about $300, Kohn said. “We have been able to stay almost even, which is pretty good, I think,” he said.

Online sales have also had an impact on STL-Style, a custom apparel company located on Cherokee Street, which has transformed their retail shop into a fulfillment center for online orders.

“We had to recalibrate how do we do anything, and that has been a learning curve,” said Randy, who co-owns the business with his twin brother. That spike in sales is due in large part to the Vines’ creation of a facemask with the St. Louis flag. In April, they began selling them for $5.95 each, and $19.95 for a four pack.

“We sold out within hours of our first batch and since then, we have done tens of thousands of more,” said Randy.

That has meant the company’s sales are up significantly over the same time last year, Randy said. The brothers also designed a shirt with the phrase “Flatten the Curve” in an effort to limit the spread of the virus, with the St. Louis skyline. That proved a hot item, too.

The retail space remains closed to the public because of the virus. The brothers have cleared out the merchandise racks to make room for lines of bags labeled for curbside pickup.

They have been donating a portion of the proceeds from the popular items to worthwhile causes like Gateway 180 Homeless Services, a local shelter.

“There is no city that supports its own better than St. Louis, and the outpouring of support online has been overwhelming,” Randy said. “Like literally, overwhelming.”

Matt Litwack, a real estate agent with Land Litwack & Associates, said the pandemic has not hurt his business. In fact, the firm has added five new listings and later, info on Black Lives Matter protests.

Berkowitz admits “that it’s a bummer to know that communal events can’t take place like they used to. But I do think that there is a level of excitement, seeing how maybe bigger artists will start doing smaller shows. It’s upsetting but I’m hopeful that the industry may come back in a cooler way.”

No one is immune among these women

Elisheva Heit, Beckie Jacobs, Lori Shifter and Ann Mayer Eisen each see their businesses coming back – not yet at full steam but hopefully headed in an upward direction.

Heit owns Flamenco Flowers in the Delmar Loop. Jacobs owns Serendipity Cream, with a storefront in Webster Groves. Shifter owns the Silver Lady, an artisan jewelry boutique with locations in the Central West End, Delmar Loop and Maplewood. And Eisen, along with her husband, Jack, own Sitter Hound, which takes cares of dogs overnight while their owners are out of town.

“We turned a big corner and I’m not sure that’s good or bad,” said Eisen, who belongs to Congregation Shaare Emeth. “We have seen an increase in people traveling in the last two weeks. And this week things are ramped up because of the Fourth of July weekend. We went from nothing to something in about a week, though things look like they will slow down after the weekend.”

Heit, who is from Russia and the mother of seven, says her 25-year-old flower business started to bloom again right before Mother’s Day.

For a while, after we had to shut down, there were no customers. It was frightening. Then they started to trickle in. Online, too,” said Heit, adding that opening her own flower store was a 25-year dream. “Mother’s Day was very good — better than in other years. I am assuming everyone loved their mother this year and wanted to brighten her day. Now business is picking up since the store reopened (May 15), even with the protests and unrest, for which I am very grateful.”

Jacobs admits she is still feeling “tentative” about her ice cream business, though she is hopeful. Some of her wholesale business is returning and new customers have come on board as well. Her store is operating with a smaller staff and abbreviated hours, from 2 to 9 p.m. and closed on Mondays, but the weekend business is growing.

“Our daily sales aren’t as high,” she said, referring to before the pandemic, “but our sales per day percentage-wise are fairly strong.”

Amidst a spike in the number of coronavirus cases in southwest Missouri and elsewhere in the country, Jacobs, who belongs to Shaare Emeth, added, “I am concerned. No one wants to have to close down again.

Shifter feels similarly, though she adds that her sales are “miniscule” compared with numbers the same time last year. “I still do enjoy doing what I do and when people come in, they are grateful that I am here,” said Shifter, who has been in business for 34 years. “But at the same time, there is serious consideration looking at what . . . the rent is, what the traffic is and what the neighborhoods are doing to support us.”

Children still exhibit smiles

On Monday, Mayhem, a children’s science museum in Town and Country, reopened and had about 10 visitors.

On a good summer day last year, the museum would host about 400 people, according to co-founder Jeffrey Deutch.

Still, “it was fun hearing kids again, the noises they make and the fun and laughter,” he said.

Jeffrey and Jana Deutch opened the museum in 2012, but now Jeffrey says, “it’s like starting a brand-new business because you don’t know who is going to show up and you don’t what the future holds.”

As the Deutchs work through the maze of a pandemic, kids won’t be able to navigate the Myseum’s SeaSwamp, which features 3,000 pool noodles hanging from strings. They closed that to avoid children running into one another. They also removed the shared items like goggles and lab coats from their Dino Dig area to mitigate the risk of spreading the virus.

“We are hoping as time goes on, people will venture out, the economy will get better, maybe we’ll get a vaccine,” Jeffrey said. “And hopefully next year will be a good year for growth.”

Sarah Berkowitz has shifted her website, Do514.com, from promoting in-person gatherings to promoting streaming events.