



This month's Newsmakers

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Proceeding with caution

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 at 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



Elisheva Heit, who owns Flamenco Flowers in the Delmar Loop, says online sales for Mother's Day helped to jump start her business reopening after it closed in March because of the pandemic.

invested in a super high-tech water sanitation 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 because of 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



Above: Aaron Teitelbaum (left) and Lenny Kohn

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

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-

Unsung Heroes returning in the fall

BY ELLEN FUTTERMAN EDITOR

No question that at six months into the year it's been a trying one, and everyone could use a boost. Frankly, we don't think there has ever been a time when we have needed the reassurance and reminder that there are true heroes within our midst more than we do right now.

That's why the *Jewish Light* has decided to reimagine Unsung Heroes, with stories about each hero and a virtual event to celebrate them planned for mid-to-late fall of 2020.

As you may recall, the *Light* solicits nominations from the community of those making a major impact without seeking substantial public recognition for their efforts. These people fly under the radar. Honorees can be individuals or groups who are either Jewish or non-Jewish making a difference within the Jewish community and/or Jewish individuals or groups making an impact in the community-at-large.

This year will be the 11th annual Unsung Heroes, and we expect both the heroes selected and the virtual event that pays tribute to them to be bigger and better than ever. Of course, we need your help in nominating someone — or several people — who you feel are deserving of this honor.

The *Jewish Light* will solicit nominations over the next six weeks online at www.stljewishlight.com/heroes. That link will also list all of the past Unsung Heroes from 2010-2019. You can also look for nomination forms in upcoming printed editions of the *Light*.

Nominations will be accepted until Aug. 15 and the heroes will be announced after Labor Day.

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Businesses: Local owners work to increase online sales

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what cushion the hit Kohn's took from the lack of catering for Jewish events and the absence of Blues and Cardinals games, where the deli had sold its signature hot-dogs.

"It really hurt our prepared food, wholesale catering business because there were no office functions, weddings, bar mitzvahs, no shivas that were over X amount 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 \$1,500 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. In fact, the effect has been so dramatic that the owners, Jeff and Randy Vines, have basically transformed their retail shop into a fulfillment center for online orders.

"We have had to recalibrate how do we do everything, 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 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," referring to the 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 pick-up.

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 also has not hurt his business because he was able to quickly make adjustments, like doing virtual tours and paying extra to produce professional videos. On a personal level, Litwack, a *Light* board member, no longer has "to do 50 tours" in a weekend — because of the pandemic — and as such, "life has slowed down a little bit. It's not so much of a rat race," he said.

Doing your best during difficult time

Sarah Berkowitz, who runs Do314.com, an event discovery platform, works in a coworking space, Nebula, a half-mile from STL Style.

In normal times, she would help promote or produce neighborhood events like Cinco de Mayo, one of Cherokee Street's biggest draws each year.

That, of course, wasn't possible this year, but that didn't stop Berkowitz from organizing an event so that people could still sip a margarita.

She produced Cinco de Mayo at Home, a Facebook Live event that generated more than 6,000 views and raised more than \$7,000 for Show Up for Cherokee, an initiative to help workers at the neighborhood's bars and restaurants who were laid off because of the pandemic.

The event included a "Cherokee Cheers" during which participants lifted a beverage of their choice from one side of the



ABOVE: Matt Litwack (left) and Beckie Jacobs

screen to the person "next" to them.

"That was a really powerful thing to be able to connect with people and push it out on Facebook Live where everyone could comment and experience the whole thing together," said Berkowitz, who grew up attending Central Reform Congregation.

Berkowitz and her brother Aaron started Do314.com in 2012 as a franchise of the original Do512.com in Austin, Texas with the goal of "making sure that everyone in St. Louis knows about all the cool stuff going on and [producing] an exhaustive list of anything from live music to art openings," Berkowitz said. Prior to the pandemic, "the site was doing really well."

But given that the site's business model is tied to entertainment venues and large gatherings, the pandemic has proved difficult.

"A lot of people had to take a step back in their ad spending; that's kind of the first thing to go when your company is in crisis," Berkowitz said.

Still, Do314 was able to generate web traffic by promoting streaming events, local places that sold curbside beer, job 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 woe is me 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 Ice 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 if that's good or bad," said Eisen, who



Sarah Berkowitz has shifted her website, Do314.com, from promoting in-person gatherings to promoting streaming events.



ABOVE: The Myseum, a children's science museum in Town and Country, features exhibits like a magnetic ball wall.



LEFT: Jeff and Randy Vines have transformed their Cherokee Street store into a fulfillment center for online orders.

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 3-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'm 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 onboard 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 similar."

Amidst a spike in the number of coronavirus case 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



ABOVE: Lori Shifter (left) and Ann Mayer Eisen

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, Myseum, a children's science museum in Town and Country, reopened and had about 15 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 Deutches work through the maze of a pandemic, kids won't be able to navigate the Myseum's Seaweed Swamp, 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."