

Lafayette Institution is the Place to Find Scary Seasonal Novelties

By Victor Ryerson



Left to right, assistant store manager Susan Saltzmann, Orinda college student Tanya Salmeron, and Dalton Boswell, grandson of the store's founder, demonstrate some of the season's offerings -- including a very creepy clown.

Whether looking for a frightening Halloween mask or perhaps an even scarier cutout of a presidential candidate, Lamorindans in the know visit Boswell's Party Supplies, an unassuming concrete building on Mt. Diablo Boulevard that is filled with every manner of novelty items and party supplies.

"We have everything," says co-owner Mary Ellen Boswell of the

onymous mom-and-pop store. And, it seems, generations of partygoers and party-throwers know it. It is a rare resident that hasn't outfitted a birthday party, holiday party, or special occasion celebration at Boswell's. The fact that the mere mention of the store's name generally elicits immediate recognition from any child or adult qualifies it as a local institution, particularly during the holiday season.

Right now, of course, Halloween items are hot. Oh yes, and political novelties. "Halloween during an election year is always a little more fun because people like to make fun of candidates," says Mary Ellen's husband, Luke. Donald Trump is an easy target, he says. "We have been selling paper masks of Trump, as well as cardboard stand-ups."

The store started as an outgrowth of a business run by Luke Boswell's mother, Paula, out of her basement in the late 1970s. A German teacher, Paula needed supplies for an Oktoberfest. When she found them, she and her husband also invested \$500 in an inventory of carnival supplies to sell from their home. The couple attended trade shows and picked up more carnival supplies -- those little favors you win in the games at the midway, for example -- as well as doll house furniture, and the eclectic business was born.

Luke and Mary Ellen joined the business after graduating from college, and eventually bought Paula out. In the meantime, they started their first store in Lafayette in 1979, and then others in Danville, Pacheco and Pleasanton. Party supplies

were added later, and continue to be the mainstay of the business.

The recession was not kind to the business, and the Pacheco and Pleasanton stores closed, leaving the Lafayette and Danville stores to soldier on in the face of competition from big corporate party supply stores and online businesses. One thing that differentiates Boswell's from those competitors is that it still sells the carnival items, and bins of them are stacked from floor to ceiling on the back wall of the store. The Boswells attend trade shows and buy their stock from some 300 individual suppliers, Mary Ellen emphasizes, whereas their big corporate competitors get their inventory from a single source.

She is also quick to point out that they hire "a lot of local kids," not merely to staff the store, but also to give them an opportunity to work in the retail world and pick up useful business knowledge. The store is a colorful place, and the kids seem to have a lot more fun working there than they do behind a fast food counter.

The Boswells have made an effort to hire a significant number of youngsters with disabilities such as

mild autism, so they can learn social and business skills under close supervision. Many young workers have gone on to start their own businesses, according to Mary Ellen, who also expressed great pride in the diversity of their staff.

Whatever you might need to celebrate the season's events, you will probably be able to find it in the store's jumbled stock. "What we have seen over the years is that the sale of complete costumes is limited mainly to younger children, and adults who are willing to spend a lot of money," Luke says. "What that leaves is costume accessories, such as wigs, glasses, beards, hats, boas, etc. We have also seen people decorating their homes with Halloween yard decorations to the same degree as Christmas, and some people going crazy with scary scenes in their yard."

And if you want a full-size cardboard cutout of either presidential candidate to round out the scene in your yard standing next to a ghoulish zombie, you can find it there. Nobody says you can't have a little fun this season.

Lamorinda Weekly business articles are intended to inform the community about local business activities, not to endorse a particular company, product or service.

Business Bites

Compiled by Victor Ryerson

From left: Wendy Scheck, Fire Chief Stephen Healy, Captain Dan Dick and Kevin Reneau
Photo provided

First Responder gets Moraga's Employee of the Month Nod
Dan Dick, a fire captain for the Moraga-Orinda Fire District, has been named the Moraga Employee of the Month for September. Captain Dick has been serving Moraga for nine years, and an asset to the department since he began as a reserve volunteer firefighter in 2006. He is responsible for overseeing the fire station, crew and apparatus, as well as serving as the chair of the unit's Administrative Committee.
"Dan is a calm, thoughtful, mature and highly intelligent leader," said Fire Chief Stephen Healy. "He ... handles difficult situations with a thoughtful, big picture approach. We're lucky to have him in the community."
In winning the award, the Moraga Rotary and Chamber of Commerce will award Dick a gift card to Safeway and a gift card to Ristorante Amarama in Moraga. He will be presented with his award and gifts at an upcoming Moraga Rotary lunch at Saint Mary's College.

Snapspot is a Family Affair
Snapspot.co is a new company formed by the energetic Gonzales family, recently featured in this newspaper as Family Feud participants. Patriarch Ed and his wife Girlynda formed the company to teach their daughters how to start and operate a small business, Ed says, and the young women, ages 17 and 25, have been involved in every step from initial market research to website development.
The company, SNAPSPOT, LLC d.b.a.snapspot.co, utilizes the Selfie Station platform to enable a guest to take his or her own photograph with a high-quality professional camera, and then print, text, email or share it instantly by uploading it to social media accounts like Facebook and Twitter. Want to know more about how it works? Check it out online at the website, www.snapspot.co.

Wellness for the Ages
Home Care Assistance has recently opened an office near Whole Foods at 3518 Mount Diablo Blvd., Suite P in Lafayette to better serve the Lamorinda community. An Open House from 4 to 7 p.m. on Thursday, Nov. 10 will address the importance of bringing the Lamorinda community together to support the needs of the area's aging population. Educational talks from the Home Care Assistance team and Eileen Nevitt, LCSW, ACSW, CMC will focus on how each senior, their families and care teams can communicate effectively so the individual can reach optimal levels of safety, health and wellness. The event will also include a ribbon cutting with the Lafayette Chamber of Commerce and a silent auction with the proceeds going to support Mobility Matters. Please RSVP to Francesca Vogel, 925-989-6877.

Chamber Music
Lafayette Chamber of Commerce
www.lafayettechamber.org (925) 284-7404
Social Media Workshop, 6 p.m. Wednesday, Oct. 19, Lafayette Library Homework Center.
Mixer at Byron Park, 5:30 to 7 p.m. Thursday, Oct. 26, 1700 Tice Valley Blvd., Walnut Creek.

Moraga Chamber of Commerce www.moragachamber.org (925) 323-6524
Orinda Chamber of Commerce www.orindachamber.org (925) 254-3909

If you have a business brief to share, please contact storydesk@lamorindaweekly.com.

TRICK OR TREAT STREET

FREE SAFE FAMILY FUN

Trick or Treat at Participating Local Businesses in Downtown Lafayette!

Friday, October 28
4pm - 6pm

Recommended for children 9 & under.

#LafayetteEvents

Sponsored by the Lafayette Chamber www.lafayettechamber.org