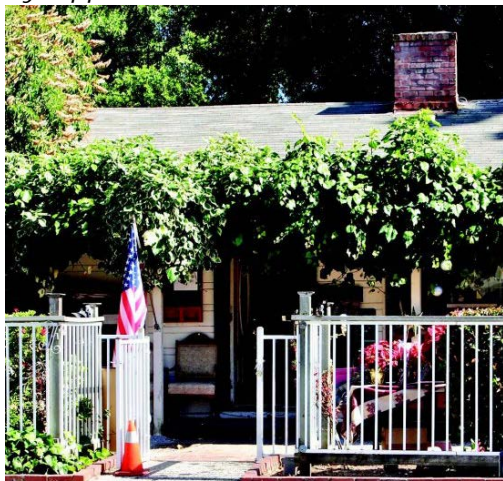


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Community saddened as Nifty Thrift shuts after 40 years

By Pippa Fisher



It is the end of an era for Nifty Thrift on Golden Gate Way, due to close July 15. Photo Pippa Fisher

For over 40 years the quaint little house on Golden Gate Way has been home to Nifty Thrift, a second-hand retail business. Operated under Futures Explored, the shop has served as a living classroom for developmentally disabled participants in its vocational program. But as of July 15 its doors will be shut for good.

Community members, customers, families, staff and of course participants are devastated, largely because the news seemed to come out of the blue, with little notice and even less communication.

Lamorinda Weekly reached out to Futures Explored Director Will Sanford via phone calls and email but did not receive any response.

A message on the Futures Explored website states, "After much thoughtful consideration, it has become clear that the cost to run this business due to increased operating costs and the steady increase in the state minimum wage has exceeded the revenue we can generate."

"It is a huge blow to us," said Pat Doyle, whose son has participated in the program for many years.

Longtime employee Store Manager Sheila Renfro reflects on the generations of families she has seen come through - both customers and families of developmentally disabled participants. "I have such an emotional attachment to the community. This is a family woven together with the participants in a viable space where they work as an interactive part of the community," she says.

Nifty Thrift grew from its start in 1975 - then operated by a grassroots group as a craft program offering woodwork, stained glass and sewing, according to Renfro.

Futures Explored's mission statement is to provide life skills and work-related training to adults with developmental disabilities. They have about 20 participants, most of whom work only four to six hours per week in the Lafayette store, although four work full time under the supervision of Employment Specialist Shabboo Navaii.

Staff members have been offered options for other employment, but Navaii asks, "What about the participants? What happens to them next?" Describing how upset they have been, she adds, "They didn't know how to handle it." She questions what has happened to the company's mission statement.

Navaii says that her heart belongs to these people. For her the money is not important. She explains she grew up in Iran - a country where she says people with disabilities such as these are kept hidden away. "This is a special place. There is no other program like this for our participants. I don't know what will happen to them."

Renfro and Navaii stress the importance and support from the community and say there has been such an outpouring of offers to help, including financially, but with no communication such offers appear to be falling on deaf ears.

Lafayette resident Effie Herrick, a retired special education teacher and frequent Nifty Thrift customer is frustrated with the lack of answers. "It doesn't seem right to drop something that's so successful and supported."

Futures Explored's Livermore Nifty Thrift is already closed and the store in Antioch is set to close in October.

The staff at the Lafayette store is marking the end of this era with a potluck party, the Nifty Thrift Farewell Bash from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. on July 11, as a token of their gratitude to the community that has supported them through the many years with their generous donations and purchases.

"I just wish we could have worked with the community to keep it open," says Renfro.

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