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Local businesses continue to struggle post-pandemic

By Vera Kochan



Rheem Valley Pet Shoppe closed on Dec. 31 after over 30 years in business. Photo Vera Kochan

Many local businesses began to experience a decline in foot traffic when the pandemic first struck the U.S. in 2020, which is understandable and obvious. However, much of the shopping public has gotten used to making purchases online, causing a stagnation in recovery for local retail.

Case in point, Rheem Valley Pet Shoppe, a staple in town for over 30 years, closed its doors for good on Dec. 31. According to Moraga Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Katie Bidstrup, "We're all busy in our lives, but shopping local is important. The Chamber is trying to remind residents how important it is. The convenience of having things delivered to your door is wonderful, but it's not helping locals."

Bidstrup spoke with several of Moraga's business owners asking them what they'd like residents to know about their post-COVID comeback and the struggles they still face. Moraga Cleaners Owner/Operator Debra Le said that up to 60% of her business has returned from COVID. People are going back to work, but they are dressing more casually which often doesn't require dry cleaning. There was an uptick in business during the holidays, because more people were willing to go to parties that required "dressing up." Le wants people to think about using Moraga Cleaners for their household needs such as sleeping bags, bedding or curtains. She has no idea what the next 2 to 5 years will bring, but regrettably she will have to raise her prices to make up for the loss in patronage.

Not having any pre-COVID experience in town, the owner of Jang Acupuncture, Andrea Jang, took a daring leap of faith in 2020 by opening her Moraga business in the middle of the pandemic. Once she was able to safely treat her clientele, "people thanked me for being here locally. Acupuncture has never been better in Moraga. People seem so grateful to have wellness service in town, because they used to commute [to] other locations." In fact, her personal success story has encouraged Jang to open Higher Ground Wellness Center with a scheduled grand opening on Jan. 18 in Moraga.

The owner of an auto repair shop in town told Bidstrup that "revenues are about the same, but the net is not. There's only so much you can pass on to the consumers when your stock's prices have risen, and in order to retain your staff you have to deal with payroll increases." He mentioned knowing that several businesses have had to shorten their hours, because they are short-staffed.

According to Bidstrup, many of the town's restaurants continue to struggle, and anyone who does the family grocery shopping will attest that food prices have sky-rocketed to unreasonable heights. Restaurants are loathe to raise their prices, but find themselves in a Catch-22 situation.

One business owner in Moraga expressed how difficult it is to hire and keep workers. Potential employees come to town in the middle of the day for an interview and assume that traffic is basically non-existent. These workers typically come from outside the town limits and are shocked when they are stuck in rush hour congestion trying to get to the freeway. Even though they love the town, the length of time spent in traffic, especially the Moraga through Lafayette corridor, is a game-changer.

Some retailers have difficulty keeping employees aged 18 and older, so in order to stay in business have begun hiring 16-year-olds (which is legal, depending on the task). "There are always new laws that consumers never hear about, but affect how a business operates in the form of expenses," stated Bidstrup. She cited the new Paid Sick Leave law which, as of Jan. 1, requires that employers must generally provide 5 days or 40 hours of sick leave per year to their employees in California.

Bidstrup wants to remind shoppers to think outside the box "if you want something done by one of our businesses that's out of the norm; just ask them. You'd be surprised at what additional services they can offer that you're not aware of."

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