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Dan Coyro/Sentinel

Gertrude Carmely watches her new proteges at Cooper House juice bar.

'I'd sell it if I could...'

By MARIA GAURA

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SANTA CRUZ — The Cooper House has fallen on hard times lately, standing half empty and neglected on what was once the prime commercial corner on the Pacific Garden Mall.

But the magnificent old building still holds a bit of magic, according to Gertrude Carmely — who should know.

Carmely, known as "Gertrude the juice bar lady" to hundreds of loyal Cooper House customers, decided to give up her juice bar business last month after continuing conflicts with the building's owners had finally worn her out.

"I'm out of here as soon as I can," Carmely said Friday afternoon. "I'll walk away from the business if I have to, but I'm hoping someone will buy it from me. I'll take anything I can get."

And as she spoke, Kitty and Darrold Schwartz walked up to the marble-topped counter and bought the business from her, lock, stock and orange juicer.

The Schwartzes had overheard the interview as they strolled through the lobby looking at the "For Lease" signs, and in a flash decided that the juice bar was worth saving.

"This place will turn around eventually," said Kitty Schwartz. "I can just feel it."

Carmely opened her juice bar in the Cooper House lobby in 1980. The oak front on the juice bar still sports two brass buffalo head ornaments that Cooper House developer Max Walden cast himself.

"This is the last matching set of buffalos," said Carmely. "There were 12 or 16 of them on the old Oak Room bar, but they were all sold off."

For \$1,600, the Schwartzes acquired the oak marble-topped counter, the refrigerator under the counter, the frozen-yogurt machine, various juicers, blenders, knives, and the enormous oak-framed mirror hanging on the wall above it all.

And for goodwill's sake, Carmely threw in two weeks of her own time showing the Schwartzes the tricks of the smoothie trade. However rental arrangements are still unclear, as Carmely never negotiated a lease and paid her \$350 rent on a month-to-month basis.

"I'm not getting much out of this," said Carmely. "Except some good years in the business, and becoming famous, of course."

Kitty Schwartz is no novice at running her own business. Before moving to Santa Cruz she owned a dress shop, a health spa and a beauty shop in Tracy.

"I sold my business and thought I'd retire when we moved to Santa Cruz," said Kitty Schwartz. "But I got bored. I'm ready to start up again."

Darrold Schwartz works 10 days a month as a fireman in Tracy, leaving lots of spare time to pitch in at the bar.

The Schwartzes have been in Santa Cruz long enough to know about the troubles plaguing businesses at the Cooper House, but they feel they have the know-how and persistence to stick it out until the building sells again. The building is currently on the market for \$2.5 million.

"A deal's a deal, girl," said Kitty Schwartz as she and Carmely shook hands to seal it.

Later, as she began stacking her dishes and clearing up for the night, Carmely marveled at the neatness of circumstance.

"These are little miracles," she said. "There is still magic in the Cooper House. As bad as it seems, this place doesn't want to die."

"I think the juice bar has just been saved," she said. "I think the juice bar just wanted to save itself."

As she turned to clean up, two tourists walked into the door and looked around at the empty shops and the realty signs.

"This place used to be popular," said one. "Real popular."

REFERENCE

SANTA CRUZ SENTINEL
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