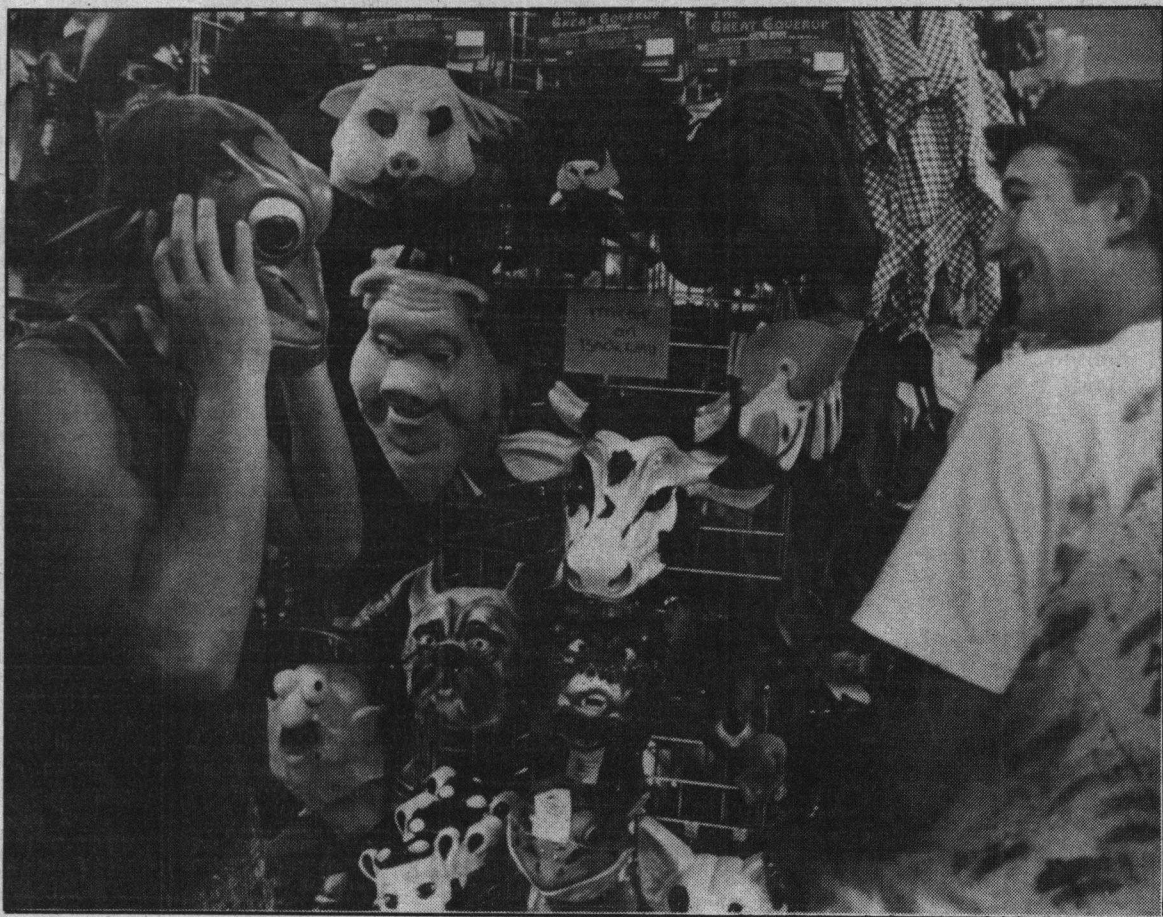


Building Leaping back to life



Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel

Trevor Merszei, left, and Johnson Gibbs couldn't mask their delight at new Lily Wong's.

Popular store back, for now

By TOM LONG
Sentinel staff writer

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SANTA CRUZ — Lily Wong's is back. For a while at least.

The popular variety store which closed last January has re-opened on Pacific Avenue, across from the Metro Center. For now it's simply selling Halloween items but, according to store manager Amy Middlekauff, the store's future is in the hands of its customers.

"We need to test out how the market in downtown is," said Middlekauff. "We're going to base (the future) on support from our customers."

Lily Wong's — which featured a wide range of eccentric gift items, clothes, toys and jewelry — was one of the most popular stores on the Pacific Garden Mall before the Oct. 17 earthquake. Store owner Margaret Wilson had put the store up for

sale prior to the quake, but after the quake destroyed much of the Pacific Garden Mall, Wilson became one of the driving forces behind the construction of the downtown pavilion tents which now house many businesses left homeless by the quake.

Still, Wilson decided to close Lily Wong's following the Christmas season after 10 years in business. She announced then that the store would not be re-opening, but said she planned to open a "Halloween" store.

Middlekauff, who managed Lily Wong's both before the quake and after it moved into a pavilion, took a vacation in Europe, then returned to open the predicted "Halloween" store. But the new store does bear the Lily Wong's name, and Middlekauff says it could turn into a smaller reincarnation of its fore-

runner... if business is good.

The new store certainly brings back memories of Santa Cruz's pre-quake love of Halloween. There are flame retardant clerical collars, witches hats and Ninja Turtle costumes. There are scant "sexy nurses" outfits, wigs, masks, pitch forks, fright gloves, fake noses and glue-on intestines. And there was a steady stream of customers checking out the merchandise.

"We have more than 3,000 items here. We're easily the biggest Halloween store in Northern California," Middlekauff said.

"We had the stock for Halloween and if we continue to have public support we'll stay open," Middlekauff said. "Lily Wong's is like a landmark in Santa Cruz. We were voted the most quintessential Santa Cruz store for a number of years."