

MALLS & MAINSTREETS

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B4



Mike Wagner, 3, on his Fisher Price Jeep.

New toys invite childhood glee

BY DONNA MULCAHY
SPECIAL WRITER

My dad fell in love with it and just had to get it for me, the story goes: A bright red, pedal car fire engine, complete with a bell to clang and a working steering wheel.

He and my mom gave it to me for my second birthday, and that made me pretty popular for a while, because all the little boys on our block wanted to ride it.

The trouble was — and this is one of my earliest memories — I didn't like my fire engine very much because every time I rode it, my knees would bang against the metal rim below the steering wheel and it hurt. So my dad gave the toy away to someone he knew would appreciate it.

Two years ago Hallmark came out with a tiny replica of my old fire engine, as part of its *Kiddie Car Classics Christmas* ornament series. Proof that if we still had that fire engine, it would be a collector's item.

I was thinking of that the other day, when my little neighbor Michael was out riding a toy he received recently for his third birthday. A realistic, black and yellow battery-powered Jeep Enforcer, made by Fisher-Price. The impressive two-speed machine can go up to five miles an hour and it comes equipped with a siren and police lights.

I told Michael's mom that he's going to be the most popular kid on the block now. And watch, someday his jeep will be a collector's item and miniature versions of it will hang from Christmas trees.

The Jeep Enforcer is part of a series of motorized Power Wheels kiddie vehicles made by Fisher Price. They're recommended for children ages 3 to 7, and Toys R Us is one store that carries them. The vehicles, which include a Barbie Sun Jammer Jeep, a Barbie Beach patrol jeep, a Jeep Wrangler, a Bigfoot monster truck, a motorcycle, and a junior freighter and loader (for tiny tots), range in price from \$59.98 to \$299.99.

If you're looking for inexpensive outdoor kiddie toys to occupy your children or grandchildren now that spring has sprung, here are some ideas: • **Koosh toys.** Talk show hostess Rosie O'Donnell loves them, and I think they're destined to be classics, just like Slinky and Hula Hoops.

If you've never seen a Koosh ball, it kind of looks like a balled-up porcupine with spines made out of soft, flexible rubber, that fits in the palm of your hand. When you squeeze a Koosh ball it feels, well, cushy. Maybe that's how it got its name.

I couldn't find the catapults that O'Donnell uses to shoot Koosh balls into her audience. But I did find a lot of other Koosh toys at The Channel 56-WTVS Store of Knowledge at Somerset North, Troy, including a soft, padded ball and ball set, a hockey set (complete with two oversized sticks and plastic blades instead of pucks), a foam sure-grip football, a Koosh ball, yo-yo, a nylon flying ring (kind of like a nylon Frisbee with a large hole in the center), a basketball set, and kid-friendly lawn darts.

I also found Koosh toys at F.A.O. Schwartz at Somerset North and at the Toys R Us in Livonia. Most Koosh toys are for kids ages "3 to 17," are for both indoor and outdoor use, and range in price from \$5 to \$25.

Who doesn't like blowing soap bubbles? Well maybe anyone who's ever had to clean up spilled bubble solution. But now there's a product to prevent such accidents from happening.

Little Kids Inc. makes a No-Spillbubble tumbler. A specially designed slot in the container allows the bubble wand to pass through, but prevents bubble solution from leaking out, even when the tumbler is tipped upside down. The tumbler, which includes a bottle of soapy solution and a wand, is for ages 18 months and up, about \$7 at The Store of Knowledge and Toys R Us.

A lot of bubble-blowing toys are also on the market, including the Incredible Bubble Bomber Flying Bubble Disc, which is like a Frisbee that blows bubbles as it flies (ages 5 and up) \$3.95 at The Store of Knowledge; and the Fisher-Price, crank-operated Bubble Blower, which can blow leaves as well as bubbles (ages 3 to 7) \$14.99 at Toys R Us.

Donna Mulcahy is a Livonia resident who writes about the newest merchandise in Malls and Mainstreet shops. You can leave her column ideas c/o (248) 901-256; Fax 644-1314.

Birmingham changes signal new directions



BY SUSAN DEMAGGIO
EDITOR

At first glance, the recent rash of closed shops in downtown Birmingham leaves passers by with a chilling feeling.

Were all the doomsayers of last year correct?

Did the August opening of the swanky Somerset Collection North mall less than three miles away in Troy kill the retail business in the neighboring Main Street shopping district?

After all, Roots, The Polo Store, Victoria's Secret, all left their Birmingham leases for spaces in Somerset.

And now, The Mole Hole, Sam Goody's Record Town, Sherman Shoes, Hit & Miss, M&G Bike Shop, Irving Kay, Le Chateau, Wildwings Gallery, Tremonti and Brown, and The Body Shop are all in various stages of closing shop.

Add to that the news that the Kathryn Scott dress boutique on Pierce has been sold.

"Nothing is as dire as it seems," reassured Gail Gotthelf, director of Birmingham's Principal Shopping District. "All the vacant spaces are accounted for by newcomers, except for the Wildwings Gallery on Bates and Le Chateau on West Maple.

"Plus we have a waiting list with companies like Einstein Bagels, Starbucks, Barnes & Noble, Big Sky Bread Co., Baskin & Robbins, and St. Louis Bread Co. wanting space in Birmingham."

Gotthelf said in an odd turn of events, Roots is back, looking for a space in town.

She provided this update: • **Article II**, an upscale men's sportswear shop is coming into the former Roots location on Maple.

• **Wyland Galleries** (specializing in whale murals and marine art) is moving into the former Tremonti & Brown store on Merrill Street.

• The Irving Kay building on S. Woodward was bought by the owners of The Pita Cafe who plan to add a bakery at the site and offer the remaining 1,400-square feet for retail.

• **Air Touch Cellular** will open in the former Mole Hole gift gallery on S. Woodward.

• **Bruegger's Bagels and Cafe** is coming to the old Victoria's Secret spot on Maple.

• **Ex-Sherman shoes employees** will open a new shoe store at the same location on Maple.

• **Imolda's Closet**, selling women's shoes, accessories and baubles, moves into the former Urban Walker space on Maple.

• **Moose Jaw Sporting Goods** is coming to the former Hit & Miss on Hunter at the end of May.

• **Masterpiece Galleries**, specializing in French antiques is settling in the old Sam Goody's spot.

• **Cycle & Fitness** replaces M&G Bikes on S. Maple.

• **Trumbull's Antiques** is back in town, on the lower level of the Michigan Shop on Pierce.

• **The Wabek Building** on West Maple is up for sale.

• **LeChateau** is leaving as the parent company closes all its U.S. stores.

• **The Body Shop** will close as the parent company has filed for Chapter 11.

Kathryn Scott owner Linda O'Scannon explained her decision to sell the specialty clothing shop after one year of business to former radio personality Colleen Burcar. O'Scannon bought the shop from pal Katie Pryor.

"I just couldn't continue the long hours it takes to run a successful store," O'Scannon said. "I'm going to be married in September and we're building a house on Orchard Lake."

My future husband wants me to start traveling overseas with him, and I miss being home for dinner with my daughter who's a junior in high school."



Beat of the street: Some say downtown Birmingham has a European flair — sans the sidewalk cafes.

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Burcar, running the shop for less than two weeks, said the opportunity to own the classic apparel store represented "a dream come true."

"I'll be an empty nester in August when my daughter leaves for college so I can devote my energies to the store. I'm bringing in some new blood while maintaining the traditions of the shop. It's very exciting because from my store window I see a Birmingham that is alive, fun, bustling with people, with an energy that is so refreshing."

Many long hours

Gotthelf said O'Scannon's reasons for selling the shop are also the reasons many small shops go out of business — people underestimate the hard work involved with running a retail operation.

"It's truly a 60-hour week, plus, if it's done right," she said.

Gotthelf said leasing stores is just as time-consuming. She said it can take as long as three years of negotiations to bring a new retail concept to town.

"In the case of Imolda's Closet, the PSD first began working with them in 1994," she said. "But we're selective. We want tenants with the

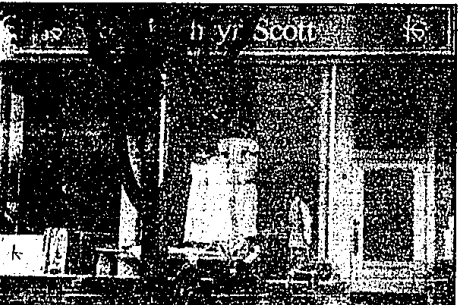
goals of our recent Green Group marketing study in mind. We want to try to reduce the food uses in Birmingham while maintaining and expanding our mix of independent men's women's and children's clothing stores, one-of-a-kind shops and unique boutiques, as well as some national retailers."

Richard Astrelin, jeweler and community activist, said the changes are for the better in Birmingham.

"We've got a nice blend of diverse merchants that other towns envy," he said. "We've got something for everybody."

Gotthelf pointed out that the latest study by the Metro Detroit Visitors and Convention Bureau listed downtown Birmingham as the 11th of 20 favorite destinations of out-of-town guests. Shopping was named as the top favorite leisure-time activity, translating into 31-cents of every tourist dollar.

She said current rents in Birmingham range from \$22-\$30 per square foot along Maple, to about \$27-\$28 per square foot along West Maple, \$23 per square foot along Pierce, and \$18-\$22 per square foot along Bates. The PSD travels to the International Council of Shopping Centers trade show in Las Vegas next week to continue marketing efforts on the town's behalf.



Changing hands: Kathryn Scott, 148 Pierce, is now the proud possession of Colleen Burcar who plans to carry on the tradition of personal service in an urban setting.

News of special events for shoppers is included in this calendar. Send information to: Malls & Mainstreets, c/o The Observer & Eccentric 805 East Maple, 48009; or fax (810) 644-1314. Deadline: Wednesday 5 p.m. for publication on Sunday.

SUNDAY, MAY 11

Dinosaur exhibit/fun

"Blat from the Past" features eight moving, roaring dinosaurs in natural setting, plus related activities, information booths, and classes by Cranbrook Science Center staff for school groups. Through July 7. Co-sponsored by Blue Care Network, Cranbrook and the mall. Dinosaurs by Kokoro Dinosaurs of Los Angeles. Oakland Mall, 14 Mile/John R. Troy. (248) 686-4114.

TUESDAY, MAY 13

Health/Safety events

Livonia Police

The Livonia Police Department presents law enforcement displays, demonstrations and more in center court. Highlights include K-9 unit demonstration, SWAT Team equipment show, child ID program, time for questions. Repeated May 14 at Laurel Park Place, Newburgh/Six Mile, and May 15 at Livonia Mall, Seven Mile/Middlebelt. Also, at Wonderland Mall, May 13-14, it's Project Health-O-Rama with low cost health tests and information booths from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Wonderland, Plymouth/Middlebelt. Livonia. (313) 421-2900, ext. 305.

ADDED ATTRACTIONS

WEDNESDAY, MAY 14

Walkers Meet

Garden City Hospital's Ms. Schmidt discusses *How To Stay Healthy* beginning at 9:15 a.m. at the lower level community room. Doors open 7 a.m. near Olga's Kitchen. New walkers welcome. Westland Center. Wayne/Warren. (313) 425-5001.

Spring plant sale

Cranbrook Gardens 25th annual spring plant sale with Michigan wildflowers, woodland ferns, miniature roses, orchids, garden sculptures, herbs and much more, 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. Repeated May 15 from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Free parking and shuttle from Cranbrook Church parking lot. Proceeds used to maintain and improve gardens. 380 Lone Pine. Bloomfield Hills. (248) 645-3149.

THURSDAY, MAY 15

Rainforest exhibit opens Now through June, Twelve Oaks presents "educational" rainforest-themed activities that include a real, "portable" alligator; a 200,000-pound rainforest made of sand; interactive computer activities; musical performances and scavenger hunts. May 17-18 at 11 a.m. noon, 2 and 4 p.m. Living Science Foundation presents "Rainforests of the World" in JC Penney Court — complete with live animals! Also hear "Forest Trails and Jungle Tales" by the Children's Theater of

Michigan at 1 and 3 p.m. in JC Penney Court. Free admission. Bring your camera! Twelve Oaks, 12 Mile/Novi. Novi. (248) 349-9438.

Sewing Seminar

Sweep 'Sew show presents quilt designer Dian Barnard demonstrating machine techniques and offering tips, 10:30 a.m. to 1 p.m. and 2:30-5 p.m. \$10 fee includes gift bag of sewing notions and books. Country Ridge Commons. Haggerty/14 Mile. Farmington. (248) 661-1668.

Puppet Performance

Sudecky's Puppets perform a double feature, *Swiss Family Robinson* and *Judy and the Beast* at 1 and 3 p.m. Free. On stage near Crowley's. Livonia Mall, Seven Mile/Middlebelt. (248) 476-1160.

Community Garage Sale

Semi-annual sale hosted by Westland Chamber of Commerce in City Hall parking lot. Residents and local businesses can sell items too, by renting a table for \$20-\$25. Sale hours: 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Ford Road between Wayne/Newburgh. (313) 328-7222.

FRIDAY, MAY 16

Kid appreciation Day Kids and Clothes United (KCU) offers an afternoon for children 1-6 p.m. with punch and cookies, plus 20-percent off on regular-priced summer merchandise. Century Plaza, Rochester Road. Troy. (248) 624-2302.