

Time passes strangely when you're downtown

SHOP TALK



NICOLE STAFFORD

Gift shopping, Y2K worries, post-season bargain hunting - all long gone.

It only made sense downtown Birmingham was taking a well-deserved winter break. Or, so I concluded last Wednesday in between sipping my Starbucks latte and heading down Maple Road to check out spring clothes at a local clothing boutique.

Outside Starbucks coffee house, a few of the baristas were chatting and joking around while one of their co-workers replaced outdoor light bulbs.

Across Old Woodward, a man strolled along the sidewalk, carrying a cell phone between his ear and shoulder, smoking a cigarette. He, too, seemed to be partaking in casual conversation, as opposed to one of those "important-matter-mean-I-need-to-be-on-the-cell-phone" dialogues we've all tired of witnessing. (Is anything that rush, huh?)

Bumbling around the corner came another cell phone user. She, too, appeared aimless in direction and conversation. I never imagined finding cell phone use refreshing, but, at that moment, cell phones looked better than shopping bags.

The American Flag perched above the Limited Express building seemed to flap in slow motion.

Other than a woman eyeing sofas in Jennifer Convertibles' store front, nobody seemed intent on anything, especially shopping. A few love birds, walking hand-in-hand, paused to look inside The Gap's windows. Just about everybody else simply drifted by, sipping warm coffee house drinks or talking and laughing.

Walking back to my car, the salt on the road and sidewalks cracked. A few cars sailed by, but their roars were shallow and soft. There were a few season leftovers: a sale sign at Art Leary's, a row of flashing Christmas lights in the Subway sandwich shop; a pile of "Y2-K9" tins on a table inside Three Dog Bakery.

These were carefree and peaceful times in downtown Birmingham, a respite from the hurried, uneasy and fussy world of selling and buying. I was pleased to conclude. I took a sip of my latte and turned the key in the ignition. And, then, like a New York - or should I say downtown Birmingham - minute, it was over.

Across the street was a woman overloaded with purchases, two shopping bags perched atop a large box, leaning towards the southwest corner of Maple and Woodward. Worse yet, she was headed towards a sports utility vehicle "parked" illegally at the intersection with its emergency lights flashing.

A man in a leather jacket, out of Wachler Jewellers carrying a small shopping bag, barely missing the woman and her bag-and-box balancing act.

Then, as if time had reverted, delivering people and place back into the hustle and bustle of late December, a slew of people came marching across Maple carrying bags of newly purchased goods.

The cars, too, seemed to be moving more quickly. Within minutes, they were backed up on both sides of Maple under a green traffic light. Then, more people, some walking quickly, some with shopping bags; the sound of a car horn; a woman leaving Three Dog Bakery with two bags of bones for Spot; and thumping hour music coming from a teenager's stop ped car.

Doesn't this place take a break, I asked myself. Isn't a downtown about more than just hurrying and getting things done and shopping? Do we peep ever just hang out, look around, take things in?

The clock read 2:45 p.m. About 15 minutes had passed.

But, I rationalized, I suppose that's all that we can ask. There are still birthday presents and wedding shower gifts to buy. Valentine's Day is just around the corner. And, surely, there are few teenagers with leftover Christmas money to spend. Spot probably misbehaves without his gourmet dog bones.

That's when I realized I had been privy to something rare, a time of rest, what felt like a moment, in downtown Birmingham.

It's true time flies when you're having fun. But with all the rushing around we do in our favorite downtown districts, how much fun can we be having?

Next time you're downtown, look around, listen. You, too, might pay witness to something unusual.



Just like home: Marna T. Nemon, of Clarkston, sips coffee while Garrett and Guilford Guthrie, also of Clarkston, enjoy Ray's ice cream and play with toys at the quaint and cozy Union General Sweetshop and Cafe in downtown Clarkston.

Downtown java

It's not Main Street without the coffee house

BY NICOLE STAFFORD
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Let's face it. Downtown coffee houses are nothing new; if you haven't ventured into one yet, surely you've spotted their trendy store fronts on the way to your Main Street florist, clothing boutique or gift shop.

But there's no denying the everyday importance that coffee houses have assumed; the chilly weather only makes it more apparent. Main Street wouldn't be complete without a cozy coffee house into which to retire.

"There needs to be a gathering place. That's kind of important to keeping the homey feel of a downtown," said Ann Stevenson, owner of the Union General Sweetshop and Cafe in downtown Clarkston where local residents frequently stop to sip espresso drinks and spend time with friends and family.

Clarkston-area teenagers also regularly gather at the cafe, at 50 S. Main, to meet friends after school and socialize, said Stevenson.

Trend-setting downtown Birmingham has been home to several cafes for years. Today, four cafes, including

Starbucks, serve espresso drinks to customers who work and live in the area; and, it's not uncommon to hear the cafe's baristas call out regular customers' drink orders before a request is made.

In downtown Rochester, home to a Coffee Beanery and newly-opened Starbucks, getting coffee is a "morning regiment" for people who live and work in the community, said Kristi Trevarrow, promotions and marketing director for the Rochester Downtown Development Authority.

In downtown Plymouth, the Coffee Studio across from Kellogg Park not only provides java for a host of regular customers and is a gathering place for local teenagers but also serves as a meeting place and activity center for the town, said Paulette Wisnom, owner of the two-story, studio-style cafe.

"It's relaxed enough for people to meet each other. I know many people who have met in the cafe," she said. "The way society is going there is so much isolation and I don't think people have opportunities to meet up as much, especially in suburbia ... but this is conducive to that."

Coffee house identity
Coffee houses don't just serve us. They influence and reinforce our

sense of ourselves and our downtown districts.

In downtown Rochester, news of Starbucks' plans to open a cafe in the district meant "we were finally getting into the 90s," said Trevarrow.

Blessed with large windows, wood floors and a second-story loft seating area, the Coffee Beanery satisfies Plymouth residents' taste for a dose of Soho, Wisnom said. The cafe even hosted a series of drum circle sessions. "We're sort of a haven for those who don't want a chain coffee house."

Likewise, the 12-seat Union General cafe is tucked inside a mid-17th century house and sports an eclectic mix of vintage furniture and accessories, in keeping with downtown Clarkston's character.

"We have creaky doors and wooden floors - all that stuff that gives us a lot of character," said Stevenson.

"The modern coffee house probably wouldn't be appropriate for here - say what you'd maybe see in downtown Birmingham," said Stevenson. "I think you need to have a coffee house that fits the community."



Modern and alry: At Paulette Wisnom's Coffee Studio in downtown Plymouth daylight pours in through large windows, and patrons can recline with their espresso and a good book in the coffee house's second-story loft.

Leiber handbag designed for Troy fund-raiser

The folks at the Henry Ford Heart and Vascular Institute have put their hopes in one bag.

A one-of-a-kind Judith Leiber bag to be precise.

The famous handbag and accessories designer has created a sparkling maudiere bag to auction Friday, Jan. 28 at the institute's annual "Red Heart Blues ... and all that Jazz" fund-raiser at Troy's Somerset Inn.

In the meantime, anyone who's interested in seeing the heart-shaped bag, which forms hearts and musical notes and out of Austrian crystals and features a

semi-precious stone clasp, can do so at Neiman Marcus' Somerset Collection store in Troy.

Leiber, who is known as the last hand-assembled handbag couturier in the United States, designed the handbag specifically for the fund-raising event to reflect its themes.

Leiber's handbags cost as much as \$7,600 and are carried by some of the world's most famous women, including Elizabeth Taylor, Barbara Walters and Queen Elizabeth.

Money raised at "Red Heart Blues ... and all that Jazz" benefits research and

treatment for the prevention and cure of cardiovascular diseases at the institute.

Dinner, dancing, the sounds of jazz, a silent auction and award presentation are also slated for the event, which will be announced by WDIV-TV 4 health reporter Lila Lazarus and begins at 6 p.m.

Attendance at the event is not required to bid on the Leiber bag. For event tickets, priced at \$200 and \$300, or to place absentee bids call Henry Ford Health System's special events office at (313) 876-9269.



Dazzling heart: Judith Leiber's heart and musical note purse, on display at Neiman Marcus, is made of Austrian crystals.

Retail, style and special store events are listed in this calendar. Please send information to: *Malls & Mainstreets*, c/o *Observer & Eccentric Newspapers*, 805 East Maple, Birmingham, MI 48009. Fax: (248) 644-1314. Information must be received by 5 p.m. Monday for publication the following Sunday.

BRIDAL SHOW

Brides-To-Be Inc. presents a show of bridal fashions, trousseau wear and men's formal attire at the Hyatt Regency in Dearborn, noon-5 p.m. For more information, call (810) 228-2700. Tickets are \$7 at the door.

MONDAY, JANUARY 24

CALVIN KLEIN TRUNK SHOW
Neiman Marcus, the Somerset Collection in Troy, presents a trunk show of Calvin Klein's spring collection, 10 a.m.-4 p.m., Designer Sportswear, third floor.

WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 26

TOWN TRUNK SHOW

ADDED ATTRACTIONS

Spring gowns and formal attire for women are informally modeled at Hudson's, the Somerset Collection in Troy, 10 a.m.-4 p.m., second floor.

THURSDAY, JANUARY 27

ERIC GASKIN'S COLLECTION
View Eric Gaskin's spring special order collection for women at Saks Fifth Avenue, the Somerset Collection in Troy, through Jan. 29, 10 a.m.-5 p.m., Designer Salon, second floor.

STORE RE-OPENING
Fashions by Maria Bridal and Tuxedo host a champagne reception to celebrate the bridal salon's grand re-opening at Mandowbrook Village Mall in Rochester Hills, 4-9 p.m. For information, call (248) 375-4696.

FRIDAY, JANUARY 28

GIORGIO ARMANI TRUNK SHOW

View Giorgio Armani's spring and summer Black Label collection for women at Neiman Marcus, the Somerset Collection in Troy, 10 a.m.-4 p.m., Designer Sportswear, third floor.

SATURDAY, JANUARY 29

PINWOOD DERBY

Wonderland Mall in Livonia hosts the Livonia Family YMCA's Annual Pinewood Derby, 8 a.m.-4 p.m., Food Court. For more information, call (734) 522-4100.

SUNDAY, JANUARY 30

DONCASTER SPRING SHOW

View a private trunk show of Doncaster's spring attire for women through Feb. 4, at a local representative's house. For more information or to schedule a personal consultation, call (734) 418-8838 or e-mail Stylemedeas@netcape.net.