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Every Day Is Christmas For The Johnsons

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by Mackenzie Blue



Sam, Noah and Rachel in front of their blue Christmas tree. MACKENZIE BLUE PHOTO

SOUTH CHATHAM – For most people, the holiday season usually starts in November and ends around mid-January. For the Johnson family, owners of Christmas Joy in South Chatham, the holidays are year-round.

Fourth of July brings red, white and blue ornaments. Their annual Christmas in July on July 25 has been a roaring success. Halloween means an orange and black Christmas light display in the parking lot.

The shop on Route 28 has been a part of the Johnson family for well over two decades and a part of the town for over 75 years, although no one is truly certain of when it originated.

“As far as we know, based on people coming in and saying, ‘Oh, I was coming here back in the 1970s, 1960s,’ [our estimate] is the 1950s, 1960s,” said Sam Johnson, son of owners Gus and Colleen Johnson.

Gus and Colleen were interested in purchasing the store and started working a trial period in the late 1990s. They officially bought it in 2001 from the previous owner, Arnold Everson.

Since taking over, the Johnsons haven’t changed much about the shop, to customers’ delight. The only major brick and mortar shift came after one of the major recessions. Gus and Colleen decided to downsize and rent out the space next door as an art gallery. During that time, they continued to see support from the community and felt encouraged to keep the shop open.

Due to the nature of their products, the Johnsons see a steady stream of customers all year long. Visitors in the summer stop by to purchase a memento of their travels, while locals enjoy the seasonal cheer it brings starting in the fall. They’ve also benefitted from the shoulder season travelers who seem to be extending their trips further and further into the year.

With over 23 years of ownership, Gus and Colleen have gotten to watch their two children grow up with the joys of the holiday year round.

Sam and Rachel, now grown with families of their own, have never really known a life without Christmas Joy. The shop was always sponsoring local fundraisers and Gus would dress up as Santa every year, so it was always a running joke with the kids at school. It wasn’t until they grew older that they realized how unique it was to have the shop be such an integral part of their memories.

“The school bus dropped us off and picked us up here,” Rachel said with a laugh.

Once COVID hit, Sam and Rachel moved back to the Cape from jobs that drew them both south. Rachel worked for a tugboat company in Texas while Sam worked at Disney and ESPN in Florida.

Now they are thinking outside the box to help the store grow without changing its essence. Since returning, Rachel and Sam have built a website that hosts online sales, created a social media presence and started annual events like Christmas in July. You can even catch Sam in his Buddy the Elf costume annually.

“People will post on Facebook [and say] ‘We’re coming down this weekend from Illinois, will Gus be there?’ and [our dad] is like ‘Oh yeah, that’s Leslie,” said Rachel.

They believe the success of the shop can be attributed to two things: nostalgia and their parents.

Rachel and Sam will earnestly say that Gus and Colleen are still the heart of Christmas Joy. Gus will make time for all of his customers, new and returning alike. “He’ll talk with you, he’ll make you a cup of coffee if you want,” said Rachel.

Whether it's grandparents bringing their grandchildren in and happily remarking upon the lack of changes or newer generations looking at the Christmas villages on display and reminiscing about their childhood decorations, everyone seems to find a part of the store that brings them joy.

Christmas Joy has always sold locally-made, one-of-a-kind holiday decor — in fact, it's one of the things that sets it apart from big box stores. They are proud to offer Cape-specific and custom ornaments, even down to the beach names. “Whether it's a Forest Beach ornament, or Cockle Cove, it's very local to this area,” said Sam.

While Gus and Colleen still own and operate the business, Rachel and Sam have taken a keen interest in learning the ropes, hoping the shop will stay in the family for generations to come.

And the next generation is not too far off. At the right time, visitors may find Rachel's 4-year-old son Noah greeting them.

Christmas Joy is located in South Chatham at 2624 Main St. (Route 28). It is open Monday through Sunday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. and closed Wednesdays.