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## Millennials downtown

Mar 24, 2017



**Myles Chase owns MC Cycle and Sport. (Adam Drapcho/The Laconia Daily Sun)**

**Bree Henderson owns Polished and Proper Barbershop. (Adam Drapcho/The Laconia Daily Sun)**

*1980-1990s generation leading the way in Laconia*



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By RICK GREEN, LACONIA DAILY SUN

LACONIA — On Main Street, Millennial Generation shop owners and employees were busy on a cold and sunny Thursday morning.

Rachel Jeffers slowly poured steaming water over ground Guatemalan coffee beans that were roasted on the premises in a \$16,000 machine the owners transported from Oklahoma City. The barista said it's important to start the pour with just a little water, so the coffee can "bloom."

A couple doors down, Breanna Henderson gave a man a haircut. She likes to provide straight-razor shaves in her barber shop and would give up cutting hair "if I could shave faces all day."

A few steps away is Local Provisions, where meat cutters trimmed fat from New Hampshire-raised beef. They like to use every part of the animal except the "moo."

These businesses, and others in the area, are run by a cadre of young entrepreneurs who are changing the face of downtown, while serving a clientele heavy with like-minded members of their own generation.

Christopher B. Leinberger, chairman of the Center for Real Estate and Urban Analysis at George Washington University, said what is happening in Laconia is being repeated in downtowns across the nation.

"The millennials are leading the way," Leinberger said.

They choose to live, work and play downtown.

Society's changing tastes and its aspirations can be seen in its television shows.

"When Baby Boomers were growing up, they watched 'Leave it to Beaver,' 'The Dick Van Dyke Show' and 'The Brady Bunch,'" Leinberger said. "They were all set in drivable suburban locations."

"In the 1990s and later, popular shows like 'Seinfeld,' 'Sex in the City' and 'Two Broke Girls' were set in vital, walkable, urban places."

That's no accident. Hollywood does extensive market research. Its shows reflect changing consumer tastes.

One of those changes is the taste for gourmet coffee.

At Wayfarer Coffee Roasters, 626 Main St., Reuben Bassett, 32, had a ready explanation for why he and others opened the shop two years ago.

"We wanted to create a community we were proud of," he said. "Coffee is a passion, but we also liked having a good coffee shop and there wasn't one."

His and other new businesses in the area have led to an increase in foot traffic as well as younger and more diverse customers. But more such businesses are needed, he said.

"There needs to be more of what Bree is doing and what Kevin is doing and what Myles is doing," Bassett said.



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Breanna Henderson, 28, owns the Polished and Proper Barbershop and Shave Parlor at 610 Main St. The business has all the trappings of an old-school barber shop, but many of the clients and their customers are under 30.

Kevin Halligan, 35, owns Local Provisions, the locally sourced butcher and seafood shop, 622 Main St. He also owns a nearby restaurant, and is proud that he is able to use almost all parts of the meat, including bones for broth and fat for cooking.

Myles Chase, 31, owns MC Cycle and Sport, 574 Main St. High school kids used to hang out in his store. Now many are married and buying starter bikes for their own kids. As a nod to the old folks, he has a 1960s-vintage Schwinn Stingray bicycle on display.

Many of these young business people and their employees not only work downtown but live in historic buildings nearby and walk to their jobs. Some live in condominiums in a former wood-turning mill dating from the mid-1800s.

Downtown living is a national trend as well, said Leinberger, who is also a nonresident senior fellow at the Brookings Institution. Young adults like to live in vital, walkable areas. Many older people also prefer not to have to get in their cars to get to restaurants and entertainment.

Suburban neighborhoods were overbuilt, creating a pent-up demand for urban residences. Developers have rushed to fill the void.

"From an economic development standpoint, if you want to survive as a town, you must have a lively downtown," Leinberger said.

Part of that is an "arts anchor," and Laconia's Colonial Theatre should provide that. A \$14 million refurbishment of the 103-year-old building and surrounding properties, including 14 apartment units and four commercial properties, begins this summer.

This is also part of a national trend. Once-grand theaters that have been chopped up into multiplexes are being restored as part of downtown revitalization projects.

Leinberger worked on such a project in downtown Albuquerque, and remembered strolling through a section of land where all the historic buildings, except the old theater, had been torn down.

He asked the city councilwoman he was with why that structure remained, and she told him that people had great memories of the building and did not want to see it go away.

"She told me, 'It was in this theater that I had my first kiss,'" he said.

Those kind of memories tend to save buildings like the Colonial Theatre, preserving it to serve a new generation of people seeking entertainment.

"I'm a developer, an economist and a market researcher," Leinberger said. "I tend to deal with numbers and facts, but memory is the most powerful motivator. Once a building is gone, memories are harder to keep in the front of your mind."

Between haircuts, Henderson, the owner of Polished and Proper Barbershop, said the Colonial Theatre project creates solid hope for further improvements in an area that seemed dead a few years ago.

"Just the announcement of that happening caused a change in the city's opinion of itself," she said. "A little pit of desperation was lifted.

"There was hope that this could be awesome, and that attracted new businesses."

**Kevin Halligan owns the Local Eatery, a restaurant, and the butcher shop Local Provisions. (Adam Drapcho/Laconia Daily Sun)**

**Rachel Jeffers is the barista at Wayfarer Coffee Roasters. She is making an "In like a lion" chai. (Adam Drapcho/Laconia Daily Sun)**

**Reuben Bassett, an owner of Burrito Me, and Ben Bullerwell, one of the co-owners of Wayfarer Coffee Roasters. (Adam Drapcho/The Laconia Daily Sun)**

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