

FALMOUTH REOPENINGS: *“We’ll Find Other Silver Linings.”*

BY LISA JOY

RAINBOW TOYS, on US-1 in Falmouth

A month into shutdown, Julie Steinbach, owner of Rainbow Toys for twenty-four years, didn’t want customers to miss out on Easter baskets for their children, so she created a half dozen or more combinations and posted photos on social media for phone orders and curbside pick-up. “I feel fortunate that our customers are so loyal,” she said, “and that they have the means to continue supporting this business.”

For eleven weeks Julie filled curbside orders as they trickled in until her June 2 re-opening and subsequent re-hiring of two teenagers part-time. “It’s been hard all around,” she said. “We’ll never get March or April back, and sales are off roughly fifty percent.”

Summer is when she usually places orders for Christmas, but Julie doesn’t know what to anticipate as supplies are limited, and even popular brand-name companies didn’t have things to ship in early July. “I don’t think people realize how interconnected the small business supply chain is,” she said, mentioning local sales reps who have become friends over the years and who were caught in a hard place at both ends of their middle-man role.

While closed to the public, Julie willingly shipped orders, which isn’t something she normally does. A month after re-opening, she was still providing curbside service. “Ninety percent of returning customers have said, ‘We’re so happy you’re here,’ Steinbach said. “They don’t want to lose us.”

“We have been the first store some people have come back to, not necessarily to buy toys,” she said, “but because they felt comfortable being in a local store owned by local people that they knew were doing the right thing in terms of cleanliness.”

Despite the degree and scope of uncertainty, Julie has reason to hope.

One husband and wife who had retained their jobs turned their stimulus check into a life lesson. They divided the money equally among themselves and their children, with the condition that each spend their share at a local business. The children chose their local toy store. “They wanted to show them the importance of where they put their money,” Julie said. “It’s a silver lining that people are thinking about this,” she said, “and we’ll find other silver linings, but right now it’s a little scary.”

COULEUR COLLECTIONS, on US-1 in Falmouth

Marcia Feller, who opened the immediately successful Couleur Collection shop 20 years ago this October, had her scare in April and May with a very large loss she characterized as “catastrophic.”



Top: Gretchen Barney of Falmouth keeps customers safe and smiling during curbside pick up. **Photo courtesy of Rainbow Toys** **Bottom:** Marcia Feller models for Curated to Go shoppers.

“In the apparel business,” Feller said, “April and May are just as big as November and December.”

Three things kept her going: her line of credit; a Paycheck Protection Program loan approved in ten days with money in her account six days later so she could pay staff; and, a 4,500-strong real customer email list. Her marketing instincts kicked in with an April 5 email responding to clients who had asked how they could help.

“I explained to them that if you’re a Macy’s or LL Bean, you buy from large global companies,” she said, “but I’m a small specialty store, so I buy from primarily small, family-owned businesses.” She featured photos of five such owners with short descriptions of their businesses based in three East Coast states and Montreal. Customers were invited to contact her to buy a gift certificate that would pay a vendor of choice. In addition, each customer would receive a 30-percent-off coupon with no expiration date.

“The results shocked me,” Marcia said. In the store by herself at the time, she spoke with each of the 185 customers who bought in to her proposal. “I cried every day,” she said, from their sharing of individual product experiences to their generosity. One gift totaled eight hundred dollars.

“And then another amazing thing happened,” Marcia said. A friend since the early ‘60s, who lives in New York, called. She also wanted to help, but knew there was no “shopping cart” on the website. Marcia knew her friend’s taste, and a few emailed clothing photos later, a “big box” was on its way. Others from their middle school circle joined in and soon boxes were off to six states.

Marcia’s next email officially launched “Curated to Go,” including a photo of her eleven childhood friends from an annual (since 1985) reunion, with Marcia and staff modeling items. Within three and a half weeks, she had shipped 223 units, with just a seven percent return/exchange rate (compared to the national average of online apparel returns of 50 percent).

In contrast, re-opening has been a challenge. “I thought being closed was the hard part,” Marcia said, “but the reality is that our customers are generally over 50.”

In early July her in-store clientele was 36 percent of normal compared to the national average of 20 to 25 percent. “Keep in mind,” she said, “that’s 64 percent down.” Meanwhile, her three full-time and seven part-time employees have settled back in, and television ads are drawing shoppers from Ellsworth to York.

BOOK REVIEW, on US-1 in Falmouth

Clare Lygo bought Book Review three years ago from its previous owner of 37 years. Since then, she has launched a website and begun marketing through social media.

“In the beginning [of the shutdown] loyal customers called asking ‘How can I support you?’ she said. With sales 10 percent of normal in April, part of her response was to direct them to a website developed to support independent bookstores without an online platform.



Sheri White Woolverton of Cumberland, right, purchases from Book Review owner Clare Lygo just before July 4th weekend closing time.
Photo by Lisa Joy

“Bookshop.org launched last year primarily to compete against Amazon,” Clare said, “and it was an absolute god-send during shutdown.” Every book purchased through the website’s link specifically identifying her store netted her 20 to 30 percent of that sale. In addition, she would receive a biannual distribution of 10 percent of the site’s regular sales divided evenly among all bookstore affiliates.

Just before Easter, longtime customers who often bought for their granddaughter asked Clare to create an Easter book basket for the child including a card and bunny. “I had 150 dollars to work with,” said Clare, who texted item photos for approval and dropped the purchase off at their home. She also helped a pregnant mother shop for Easter items by holding things up for Facetime viewing and selection.

When reopening changed from May 1 to June 1, Clare went back into the store by herself to fulfill curbside pick-ups and make “a lot” of home deliveries. “It was so rewarding,” she said, “because our older customers who could not go out for anything were delighted that I would drop purchases off at their house.” Some blew her kisses. “They needed a form of escape,” she said, “and I was bringing them joy.”

With no ability to do credit card transactions, Clare accepted checks by mail, trusting that they would arrive. “It was ‘old world,’ where you used to have a credit account,” she said. Some checks arrived in a card of thanks. “I have a few at my desk to remind me why I’m doing this,” Clare said. “It has not been easy, for sure.”

She lost two staff who found other jobs to keep working.

Though June was not as busy as she had hoped, her staff of four regularly worked six days a week. Clare noted that in addition to nearly all customers’ compliance with safe-distance guidelines, they are buying more cards and books than before the shutdown. “Our average sale per person has increased,” she said, and our demographic has seen a shift with more people under 50 coming in.

“It seems they are getting the message that if they continue to shop online, little shops will disappear,” she said. •