



Shopkeeper's illness forces sale of eclectic Naperville boutique

By Gerry Smith
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Many a Naperville resident in need of a gift for a wedding, baby shower or holiday party has relied on the eclectic taste of Gail Bivin.

She owns The Canterbury Shoppe, a downtown boutique where Naperville-centric items like Mayor George Pradel bobblehead dolls are sold along with Christmas ornaments, even in the middle of summer.

But this spring, Bivin, 54, discovered her breast cancer had returned. With treatment sapping her strength and making it too difficult to manage the store, she has decided to put it up for sale.

The decision is a loss not just to her loyal customers, but also to the downtown community as a whole, say friends, officials and local merchants. Since opening her shop at 175 W. Jackson Ave. in 1996, Bivin has been actively involved with charities and committed to helping other store owners flourish amid a landscape of larger chains, they say.

"Part of her success is that she immersed herself in the community and rolled up her sleeves to help out when needed," said Katie Wood, executive director of the Downtown Naperville Alliance.

Bivin opened her first store in Barrington in 1993, then moved to Naperville in 1996 after being drawn to the growing development along the city's Riverwalk. In 2005, Bivin acquired a neighboring shop, expanding her store by 1,100 square feet.

Bivin has been ever-present at the business, working the register, folding wrapping paper and suggesting wedding gifts, such as a new line of aluminum tableware.

Bivin, who went by Gail Andrews before her marriage last year, took an active role in promoting the commercial growth of downtown Naperville, uniting merchants and helping create the downtown alliance. She also remained close with many other shopkeepers. On the day in 2006 when Nancy Vass closed her store, The Children's Corner, after 27 years, Bivin stopped by to give her a Christmas ornament.

A former Kraft Foods employee, Bivin has raised money for Little Friends, a Naperville organization for children with developmental disabilities. She has been recognized for her philanthropy with the 2007 Small Business of the Year award from the Naperville Area Chamber of Commerce and the Naperville Jaycees Distinguished Service Award.

John Schmidt, president and CEO of the Naperville Area Chamber of Commerce, said the Canterbury

Shoppe "is the type of individually owned business that we really cherish."

Although the recession caused a drop in sales at the end of last year, Bivin said the store recovered this year. She credits the rebound to her loyal customer base, some of whom, such as Cheryl Weissenhofer, decided to work there. A longtime shopper, Weissenhofer said The Canterbury Shoppe has the feel of a neighborhood tavern.

Bivin said she is hoping to find a buyer who shares her taste in eclectic gifts and will keep the store open.

"We'd be happy for a new buyer to add their flavor to whatever they're doing, but we want the overall store to stay in place and be able to offer the same kinds of wonderful things to our customers," she said.

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