

Rebuilding our Economies

A strong 'hub' is key to Millbrook's success

Businesses, organizations collaborate to strengthen commerce and community

By Kate Goldsmith

From a distance, Millbrook seems unaffected by time. Its picturesque main street is a throwback to a simpler era, where neighbors catch up with each other at the diner and the hardware store. Around the corner, residents are greeted by name as they stop by the post office and variety store. Each in its own way, the farmer's market, local bookstore and wine shop create little social gatherings with special events on weekends.

"I love the small-town feeling that Millbrook has," says Paula Redmond, owner of Paula Redmond Real Estate and president of the Millbrook Business Association. "You can walk down the street and know most everyone. Also, the countryside has the most beautiful land that makes one feel very fortunate to be able to live here full-time."

Even on closer inspection, it's evident that Millbrook has an enviable community consciousness. Local organizations, businesses and individuals collaborate on events for all seasons, volunteering time and creative energy to produce, for example, a village-wide book festival in spring, a community day in autumn and a New Year's Eve celebration.

Despite all that Millbrook has in its favor, the village is not immune to changing times and the continuing repercussions from the Great Recession. Business is down; shops have closed.

Amid the uncertainty, however, is a deep pride of place that anchors the village as the way forward is charted.

"The people in Millbrook are very community-minded," says Scott Meyer, owner of Merritt Bookstore on Front Street and member of the Millbrook Business Association. "We may be a little shy if you're new, but we don't care if you're a celebrity or a stonemason; it's more important that you enhance our community than what you represent in the outside world."

Mayor Laura Hurley says, "I truly believe it's the people of the community that make [Millbrook] a great place." A lifelong resident of the area, Hurley also works for the Town of Washington as bookkeeper to the supervisor and assessor's aide; but she says one of the most important jobs she had was working at the old Corner News store (on the corner of Church Street and Franklin Avenue).

"That's where my real education came from," she says. "Being able to meet generations of families, sharing their joys and sorrows, has such an influence on everything that I do, including deciding to serve on these elected boards." (Until the March resignation of former mayor Andrew Ciferri, Hurley served as a village trustee).

The outside world associates Millbrook with great wealth. In reality, the population reflects a diverse socioeconomic range. And, in any case, spending has decreased across the board.

“Millbrook has not escaped the economic downturn,” says Meyer. He says local businesses are hurting, and urges residents to consider “shopping Millbrook first” before going outside the community.

“Millbrook, like many towns, faces some empty storefronts and high rents,” says Redmond. “We have a new mayor who is working hard to make needed changes and also to make for an easier approval process for new businesses to come to the Village.”

Hurley says, “Having a vibrant retail sector is what really brings strength to the entire community.”

She says she has noticed, over the last few years, that retail businesses have dwindled and professional and service-type businesses have increased.

Tara Wing, owner of the Pumpkin House consignment shop on Franklin Avenue, also thinks more retailers would benefit the village.”

“It would be nice to have a health food shop,” She says. Referring to the abundance of real estate businesses along Franklin Avenue, she says, “The majority of people [who visit] are not coming to Millbrook to buy a house. And people that move to Millbrook want to shop in Millbrook.”

Meyer uses the analogy of a wheel to describe the symbiotic relationship that he says is crucial to Millbrook’s success.

“The Village of Millbrook is a hub, and there are many spokes [on the outskirts of the village],” he says. Some of those spokes include the Cary Institute of Ecosystem Studies, the Millbrook Winery, the Millbrook School and Dutchess Day School. Meyer says the interaction between the village and these organizations is vital to the area’s overall well being.

He cites an example: “If Cary [Institute] wants a speaker and I have an author that’s appropriate for them, we [present] them at Cary,” says Meyer. “That way, the services and financial ability are flowing both ways.”

Similarly, Heather Malcolm, a senior research specialist at Cary, has volunteered to help organize the Millbrook Book Festival, which brings hundreds of visitors to the village in mid-May for author talks and panels, book signings and workshops. Malcolm also represents Cary through the Millbrook Rotary.

“This is one of the reasons Millbrook is unique,” says Meyer. “Heather is one of many people like that who care.”

Without these mutually beneficial relationships- if one of the “spokes” breaks- the “wheel” is compromised.

Even when everyone does work together, customers are a vital piece to the puzzle.

“You have to wonder during these times if people are ready to go back to spending,” says Hurley. “It’s a challenge for everyone.”

She is heartened by a proposal in front of the board to create an arts center at the Thorne Building. The historic building was given to the village in the 18th century by the prominent Thorne family and currently sits unused and deteriorating.

“I think that [arts center] would do a world of good, bringing a lot of excitement and energy into the area,” says Hurley.

Erica Downing is the principal and managing director of The Thorne Project Ltd. Along with her father, local businessman Mike Downer (owner of Millbrook Motors), Erica envisions a venue that will attract a wide variety of visitors and residents of all ages.

“It will be an arts education and performance venue, but plans are not limited to performing arts,” says Erica. “We will hold art gallery [exhibitions], show old movies and stream in special events, have professional storytelling and other like performances for children, antiques shows, especially considering the presence in that Village...if it’s interesting and arts-related, I would like to offer it to the community, and they can tell me if they like it or not. “

Equally important, says Erica, is the arts education aspect of the project.

“It’s terrible that this area is usually the first thing to be cut from school [budgets],” says Erica.

“What would human history really be without all these things? Benefits to the individual as well as the whole are profound and, unfortunately, very underrated.”

Plans include offering classes in music, dance, drama, creative writing and various art mediums. Erica is currently accepting resumes, which should be mailed to her attention at The Thorne Project Ltd., PO Box 1191, Millbrook NY 12545. For more information, email her at ericalouise859@gmail.com; or visit The Thorne Project on Facebook.

Erica and her father bring a wealth of varied experience to the project. Erica has a bachelor of arts degree from Berklee School of Music in Boston, where she majored in professional music and minored in music therapy/psychology. During college, she managed two bands in her spare time. She has performed in symphonic and chamber ensembles including the Northern Westchester Symphony Orchestra. Apart from music, Erica’s additional experience includes a position as an assistant property manager in Millbrook, a stint as an operator for Hammond Security and on the staff at Four Winds Psychiatric Hospital, where she was a therapeutic crisis intervention worker. Being a master mechanic is only one side of Mike Downing. For 20 years, he worked in Manhattan for a digital animation house-advertising firm, handling accounts like Nabisco, PepsiCo, American Express, Mobil, Pfizer, Hershey and Playtex. He was president of the Northern Westchester Symphony Orchestra in addition to being a percussionist. He is also the creator of MyMi Drums, a high-end line of instruments utilizing a free-floating suspension system he invented and patented. Mike has run Millbrook Motors with wife, Louise, for five years. Erica helps out, and says that customers frequently ask about the status of The Thorne Project.

“This is a high profile project, and the Thorne Building is close the hearts of many in this village,” says Erica. “So many people ask me about this every day. It’s amazing how much support we are getting from this community.”

There are still many details to be worked out before the Thorne Project becomes a reality. It’s been more than two years since the project was proposed to the village, and there have been stumbling blocks along the way. But the Downings are persistent, and Erica is encouraged by the mayor’s support.

“The communication over the past few months between board members is greatly improved, and Laura is a very intelligent woman and competent mayor,” says Erica.

With many of the pieces now falling into place, fund-raising is a major goal for the Downings. Erica says a building restoration fund is being set up to accept tax-deductible donations.

“There is currently a handful of supporters offering gifts of money, but we need much more of this kind of support in order to begin work,” says Erica. “We really hope that we can get even half as much funding as we’ve gotten enthusiasm, not only because of The Thorne Project’s value to the community’s culture and economy, but also because the building will not be around very much longer if we don’t.”

She adds, “We need to save this building and we need to get this running.”

Tara Wing, daughter of artists Peter and Toni Wing, shares Erica’s youthful “go get ‘em” attitude. At 33, she is a professional photographer, designer and businesswoman. Divorced with three boys, Tara is enthusiastic about The Thorne Project.

“I hope it happens,” says Wing, particularly the proposed arts education program. “[We need] something stimulating for children, [and] so you don’t have to drive to Poughkeepsie for music lessons.”

Wing’s Pumpkin House, in business for a year, is an eclectic and fun little shop offering just about everything from 25-cent lollipops to furniture costing \$1,000 or more. The specialty is gently used items on consignment, but many objects seem like new. Wing utilizes every inch of space, with eye-catching displays that demonstrate her knack for design. Ziggy, her colorful little bird, observes the scene from behind the counter.

“It’s like performance art,” says Wing, as customers explore the shop. She says her consigners run the gamut from wealthy young Manhattanites to elderly local couples living on a fixed income. In fact, she says, her father’s first-grade teacher recently came in with a few items she hoped to sell. “The Pumpkin House offers them an avenue to make a little money,” she says. “Not only does it help my kids, Pumpkin House feeds a lot of people.”

The Pumpkin House was inspired by Wing's time in Hawaii, where she lived with her then-husband and songs before moving back to Millbrook about three years ago. She would frequent yard sales, which always had an interesting mix of items to appeal to the tourists.

"People were always looking for stuff," she says. "I'd do these yard sales, find stuff on the side of the road, to supplement my income." She also began making jackets out of salvaged items, which she calls FuziBuGs.

When Wing talks about her love of yard sales and creating new items from old, discarded ones, it becomes apparent that the apple didn't fall far from the tree. After all, Wing's parents are renowned for creating their home, Wing's Castle, from recycled materials, not to mention Frankenstein's Fortress," a nearby haunted house and trail featuring set designed crafted with items collected by Peter Wing on jaunts to yard sales and junkyards.

"It's in the blood," Tara Wing acknowledges.

Paula Redmond thinks shops like the Pumpkin House could be the wave of the future for the village.

"I envision smaller and more boutique businesses," says Redmond. "By having smaller store fronts, this will mean lower rents. Most people do not need large spaces to run a business anymore. This will also make it more attractive for consumers to come to town and shop, since there will be more businesses to chose from."

Wing understands that the health of the general business population directly borrelates to her own success. She has the added determination of knowing she must provide for herself and her children.

"It's mind over matter; it [business] has to be successful," she says.

Wing sometimes gets frustrated at the pace of progress.

"We need stores to attract business," she says. "They have all this zoning. How can you have unique businesses? Everyone can't conform to the same standards."

Hurley says one of her board's first objectives when she became mayor was to see how current zoning code could become more business-friendly. Among items up for discussion are revising the rules on mixed-use buildings (there will be a public hearing on this July 27), a loosening of parking restrictions and portable A-frame signs for regular businesses to use on a rotating basis.

Millbrook's demographic covers a wide spectrum- "the richest of the rich and the poorest of the poor," notes Tara Wing. Business owners understand fortune's capricious ways; nothing can be taken for granted in these challenging times.

Nevertheless, the village still has a lot to offer its residents and visitors. Thanks to strong civic partnerships, events such as the Millbrook Book Festival and New Year's Eve Millbrook are major tourism draws that boost the economy. And everyone can enjoy the personal service and stress-free experience that local businesses provide.

“[Millbrook is about] the idea of community; everything ties in,” says Meyer. “Not asking what’s in it for me, asking what’s in it for everyone. We need to have the money to support all the good things we do.”