



PUGET SOUND BUSINESS JOURNAL



SEASONS OF **RETAIL IN THE AGE OF COVID**

IT TAKES A VILLAGE

The challenges facing brick-and-mortar retailers were clear before the pandemic, and shops at University Village were not immune. But the outdoor mall is mounting a comeback.

MEGAN CAMPBELL | 13



'Project Roxy' arrives
 Amazon plans to move into a 2.8 million-square-foot fulfillment center in Arlington dubbed "Project Roxy," which will be the company's largest warehouse in the region. **MARC STILES, 5**

T H E L I S T
LEED-certified projects **30**

Parting thoughts
 During his seven-year tenure as head of Seattle Foundation, Tony Mestres helped to quadruple the organization's annual grants. Now he's preparing for his next venture. **MARC STILES, 42**

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Street Fare outdoor dining between Tommy Bahama and Joey Kitchen at University Village was created as a way to safely serve customers during the Covid-19 pandemic.



PHOTO BY ANTHONY BOLANTE | PSBJ

SEASONS OF **RETAIL IN THE AGE OF COVID**

BUYING THE VILLAGE

Its location and design helped retailers at University Village endure 2020. Now, small business owners are plotting the resurgence of brick-and-mortar retail.

STORY BY **MEGAN CAMPBELL** | PHOTOS BY **ANTHONY BOLANTE**

Tenants have called Susie Plummer the “retail wizard” of University Village. ¶ The outdoor retail center has long been a coveted destination for businesses. And landing a spot on Plummer’s roster is not an easy – or cheap – endeavor. “To be able to say that you’ve met the litmus test of University Village really is a calling card for other developers,” said Maria Royer, principal at Seattle-based Real Retail, which has helped clients like Amazon Books, Shake Shack and Evergreen Salads land spots at University Village. So when the pandemic turned the brick-and-mortar retail landscape inside out, Plummer adapted the 23-acre shopping center, which usually benefits from steady foot traffic and high sales volume. While some national brands like Microsoft closed stores, most of the U Village’s 134 businesses dug in. The outdoor shopping experience, as it turns out, was uniquely suited for the Covid era. **Continued on Page 14 ►**

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 13

“They work their businesses day in and day out,” said Plummer, whose previous experience includes Nordstrom and The Rouse Co. “There is a positive nature about these small business owners. ... To be honest, they’re able to be nimble, cut their expenses and they are in front of the customer every day. They’re definitely invested.”

Last April, Plummer recalled pulling up in her Volvo to pick up handmade Easter baskets from The Confectionery, where owner Kristi Holmes donned an apron and loaded treats into vehicles for curbside pickup.

The candy shop is just one small business at University Village that endured pandemic restrictions with an exceedingly uncertain future. Nonessential businesses were closed to the public, but Holmes, who lived in the same dorm building as Plummer at Washington State University about 30 years ago, never stopped working.

Through Covid-19 restrictions, case spikes, social unrest, air pollution from wildfires and record snowfall, small business owners at University Village and elsewhere have faced a litany of external pressures – not to mention the growing behemoth that is online shopping.

Last March and April, when foot traffic plummeted to between 31% and 43% of 2019 levels, University Village retailers were forced to adapt.

“Some days we pivoted six or eight times, constantly coming up with a better way to do it,” said Gillian Mathews, owner of Ravenna Gardens, the retail center’s only garden shop.

University Village, which is privately owned by Stuart Sloan, identified consumer changes early on, establishing curbside pickup locations and later pulling every chair and table out of storage for outdoor diners. Plummer even worked with the city of Seattle to erect a 500-foot “Street Fare” from Tommy Bahama to Ba Bar restaurant.

Despite a severe dropoff in business last spring, University Village had better foot traffic than many indoor malls, said Jens Tellefsen, senior vice president at Orbital Insight, a global geospatial analytics company.

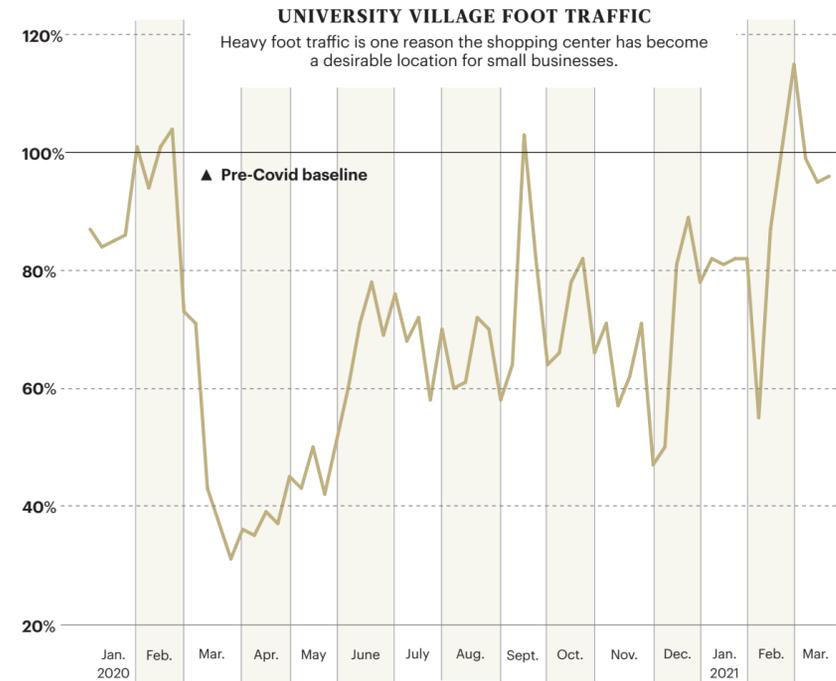
“The rebound of the mall is happening, and this is good news for brands that have endured a very difficult year,” Tellefsen said in an email. “With Covid-19 changing so many aspects of how we live, the viability of the brick-and-mortar store has been in question. The data we’re seeing at open-air megamalls like University Village show that shoppers are returning, for now.”

Washington state health officials, noting a surge in Covid-19 cases since moving to Phase 3 of Gov. Jay Inslee’s reopening plan in March, are fearful of setbacks. This week, three counties – Pierce, Cowlitz and Whitman – were downgraded to Phase 2, which lowers



University Village Vice President and General Manager Susie Plummer, who removed her mask briefly for a photo, has helped create one of the most coveted shopping centers for small business owners in Seattle.

PHOTOS BY ANTHONY BOLANTE | PSBJ



SOURCE: ORBITAL INSIGHT

capacity limits in retail settings, among other restrictions.

But Plummer doesn’t want to dwell on a possible return of tighter Covid-19 restrictions in King County.

“Everyone is very bullish on the spring and summer optimism and consumer optimism moving forward,” she said. “It would be another setback, negative, if we had further restrictions.”

The outdoor setup of University Village, sandwiched between residential neighborhoods and the University of Washington, mitigates some of those concerns.

“It became abundantly clear last June as stores were able to open up that the customer was craving an outdoor experience,” Plummer said.

Like all retail-dependent businesses, University Village has a seasonality to it. Foot traffic goes up in the fall when college students and their parents come into town for the start of the school year and in late spring for graduations. Business during the holiday season and summer is brisk, as well.

With 500,000 square feet of retail, the shopping center attracted enough shoppers throughout the pandemic to keep most of its businesses afloat. This is in part due to a 20,000-square-foot Virginia Mason clinic and the QFC grocery store that neighbors University Village remaining open.

The attractive location, however, comes at a price as many small business owners say they pay a premium in rent. Due to nondisclosure agreements, no one the Business Journal spoke with



“Some days we pivoted six or eight times, constantly coming up with a better way to do it.”

GILLIAN MATHEWS, owner of Ravenna Gardens

would say exactly how much they pay in rent. Royer, however, said that “rent is comparable to other top-line, open-air centers.”

“Rent is a calculation of sales and profitability, so it’s a direct reflection of sales,” Plummer said.

The cost of doing business may be high, but many owners said it is worth it.

“This place is a goldmine,” said Rachel Marshall, owner of Rachel’s Ginger Beer, an original Pike Place Market business. “Susie is a retail wizard. ... Geography absolutely has something to do with it. Everywhere you go it’s a cute sidewalk (or) ‘oh maybe we’ll stop in here,’ and ‘maybe we’ll stop in here,’ all on the way to your car. That’s no mistake. I think that’s just brilliant architecture.”

Marshall said what she pays at Pike Place Market, \$75 per square foot, is competitive with University Village.

“You’re not just getting great real estate. You’re getting beautifully manicured grounds, you’re getting security, you’re getting spaces that are always updated,” Marshall said. “Most importantly, you just have that population density that you need if you’re going to sell something as specialty as ginger beer in a cold-weather city.”

The stories of small business over the last year are as varied as the products they sell. The Village banded together, pooled their collective know-how and relied on Plummer’s retail acumen to chart a path forward.

MEET THE TENANTS



DIRECTORY

These are the stories of University Village’s tenants who have endured an otherwise brutal year for retail.

SPRING AND SUMMER 2020

A look at spring and summer 2020 as Covid-19 walloped small businesses.

COMPANY	OWNER(S)	PG
Rachel’s Ginger Beer	Rachel Marshall	16
Delfino’s	Jay Cascio	16
Mr. West Café	Henri Schock and Soni Davé-Schock	17
Ravenna Gardens	Gillian Mathews	18
Village Maternity	Anna Capretto	18
Ba Bar	Eric and Sophie Banh	19

FALL AND WINTER 2020

A look at fall and winter 2020 as Covid-19 cases soared and the weather worsened.

COMPANY	OWNER(S)	PG
Hello Robin	Robin Wehl Martin and Clay Martin	20
The Confectionery	Kristi Holmes	20

SPRING 2021 AND BEYOND

A look at spring 2021 and beyond as vaccines roll out and the weather gets better.

COMPANY	OWNER(S)	PG
Molly Moon’s Handmade Ice Cream	Molly Moon Neitzel	21
Market Optical	Jamey Balousek	22
Metropolitan Pilates	Silvia Furia	22



DELFINO'S

OWNER | JAY CASCIO · delfinospizza.com

Jay Cascio left TV production before purchasing a pizza shop in 2010.

He bought Delfino's in University Village from the original owners who had owned it for 17 years. Cascio's mission was to find alternate ways to distribute the authentic Chicago-style pizza.

It started with catering, then third-party delivery and finally a food truck. From 2010 to 2019, he had doubled revenue without bringing on additional employees.

"There was a lot of wasted capacity," he said. "Our oven can cook 35 large pizzas at a time. So we do the quick math on that, each pizza can feed four to five people, you can see how we can cater to a large party and very quickly."

When the pandemic hit in March 2020 and large gatherings ceased almost overnight, Cascio leaned into delivery and sent the food truck into neighborhoods.

"We've gotta sell X amount of

pizzas to break even," he said. "In the back of my mind, throughout all this, I knew I wasn't going to make any money. I just wanted to break even. But my main goal was to keep my employees employed."

He has kept his 22 employees working, taking advantage of the Paycheck Protection Program and other grants when available.

"If it wasn't for those third-party services, there would be so many more businesses out of business right now," he said. "And thanks to (Seattle Mayor) Jenny Durkan for keeping the commission at 15% (for third-party delivery fees) — it's one of the best things that's helped me through this."

Business was down 28% compared to 2019 at the end of the fiscal year, but Cascio still feels fortunate.

"Being in a position of being able to have a business where you're not losing money, in this environment, I feel extremely lucky and also very thankful to our customers," he said.

PHOTO: Owner Jay Cascio sits in the reduced-seating indoor dining area of Delfino's Chicago Style pizzeria at University Village. He briefly removed his mask for a photo.

PHOTO BY ANTHONY BOLANTE | PSBJ



RACHEL'S GINGER BEER

OWNER | RACHEL MARSHALL · rachelsgingerbeer.com

Rachel Marshall started selling her ginger beer at farmers markets before she opened her flagship, 1,300-square-foot store at Pike Place Market in 2013. After a couple of years, she was looking to expand, but wanted another location where she had a "captivated audience" like the market.

The answer: University Village. "Pike Place Market is a little bit of a false economy, and of course this was pre-Covid," Marshall said. "If a ginger beer store is going to survive anywhere, it would be Pike Place Market. So then I thought, where else in the city do you get that kind of a concentration of people that will pay \$6 for fresh juice soda?"

After talking with Molly Moon Neitzel, owner of Molly Moon's Handmade Ice Cream, she focused on University Village. "She was so right," Marshall said.

It took about three years before Plummer would let her in due to ongoing construction projects. But, Marshall said, it was worth the wait.

University Village, home to the second location of many Pike Place

10%

The University Village Rachel's Ginger Beer location ended 2020 10% above 2019 in annual revenue.

Market businesses, including Starbucks, amounts to the second busiest Rachel's Ginger Beer concept after the market — that is, before the pandemic.

Marshall's Pike Place location dropped to nothing, and her downtown location by The Spheres closed completely. Her Capitol Hill location would later be disrupted by the Capitol Hill Occupied Protest and the confrontations with the Seattle Police Department's East Precinct.

But her University Village store soared.

Pivoting to curbside pickup and delivery, plus taking advantage of the state's liquor and cannabis board allowing the wholesaling of alcohol, Rachel's Ginger Beer was well suited to survive a pandemic, Marshall said. That location finished 2020 10% above 2019



in annual revenue.

But the year was not without its challenges.

"Let me tell you, even when there's no traffic in Seattle, it's a logistical nightmare to deliver all over the city," she said. "It was right when the West Seattle Bridge got messed up. ... It was such a slog, but honestly to see people through the window and wave, people were so happy to see us."

TOP PHOTO: Rachel Marshall of Rachel's Ginger Beer momentarily removes her mask inside her University Village store for a photo. Customer safety has been paramount this past year.

BOTTOM PHOTO: Rachel's Ginger Beer store at University Village

PHOTOS BY ANTHONY BOLANTE | PSBJ



MR. WEST CAFÉ

OWNERS | HENRI SCHOCK AND SONI DAVÉ-SCHOCK
mrwestcafebar.com

For some small business owners at the University Village, the worst day of 2020 came when they had to lay off most or all of their workforce.

That was true for Henri Schock, who owns Mr. West café with his wife, Soni Davé-Schock. He had his second location at University Village only six months before the government-mandated shutdown. He built his café around community — a place where you could have a morning coffee or a mid-day cocktail or an early evening glass of wine while working on a laptop, or a place to conduct a business meeting.

Throughout the fall and much of winter in 2019, the shop had been hitting its revenue goals. January 2020 was a little slow, but everyone expected it would pick up again around the spring holidays.

By mid-March, as Inslee shut down nonessential businesses, Schock went from 80 employees to fewer than 30.

"That was the hardest day of my

life," he said. "It was a really tough go, losing all of our built-in business and having to basically build it back up."

He wrote to those employees every week to check in.

After slow months, the business gradually regained momentum when Inslee announced his phased reopening plan. People were coming to the village again.

"Things were looking up," he said. "The village came back in full force. Not only were the businesses pivoting, but they were like, 'OK, how can we reimagine in Covid?'"

Susie Plummer worked with the city to obtain a special permit to create a street dining area, which extended down the boulevard to Mr. West.

"It was incredible," Schock said. "Literally going from 10% of our revenues slowly building those up north of 50% to 60% felt like we could actually get through this. We can do this amount of business and totally sustain (ourselves)."

PHOTO: Owners Henri Schock and Soni Davé-Schock, a married couple, stand near the "closed during pandemic" bar at Mr. West café and restaurant.

PHOTO BY ANTHONY BOLANTE | PSBJ



RAVENNA GARDENS

OWNER | GILLIAN MATHEWS • ravennagardens.com

People were buying vegetables, and Gillian Mathews was thrilled.

Mathews, owner of Ravenna Gardens, had been in University Village for 22 years, living through the 2001 recession and later the Great Recession.

But "2020 was like nothing you've ever experienced before," she said.

Early on in the pandemic, Inslee said garden stores could remain open as essential businesses because they sell food plants.

"But no one could come in the store," she said. "We had to develop a way to make that work."

Ravenna Gardens didn't have an e-commerce website other than a place to sell gift cards, but they did have a really good mailing list.

"We worked out this system where every Monday we send out this list to all of our customers of all the plants that were coming in that week. The idea is that they would either call us

or email us back with their orders for curbside pickup," she said.

Sales were down 40% March 2020 through June, Mathews said.

Ravenna Gardens closed for about a week at the end of March 2020 and laid off all its employees, but with a \$125,000 Paycheck Protection Program loan, Mathews was able to bring her employees back and ended the year only down 7%.

"There was a huge influx of new gardeners," she said. "Last year, people were home and, you know, I think they thought about vegetable gardening and decided they were going to give it a go and made it a family project."

The business grew from 17 employees to 21 to accommodate the new way of doing business.

"The PPP loan was what really gave us the comfort level to bring people back and take a bet on what was going to happen," she said.

PHOTO: Ravenna Gardens owner Gillian Mathews has been in business at University Village for 22 years.

PHOTO BY ANTHONY BOLANTE | PSBJ



VILLAGE MATERNITY

OWNER | ANNA CAPRETTO • villagematernity.com

When Village Maternity closed in March 2020 and owner Anna Capretto was forced to lay off most of her staff, she thought she'd move up her summer remodel. The 1983 business founded by her late mom hadn't been updated since the early 2000s.

"I decided, OK, we're going to be closed, let's just go ahead and remodel now thinking that we would only be closed for a month or two and the pandemic would be over. How naive I was," she said.

After the remodel of the 1,000-square-foot space, she reopened in mid-July when restrictions had eased a little and people were returning to the Village.

"We worked with a local artist to do a new mural. We updated our colors. We change the flooring. We took out some fixtures to allow more light and we just sort of opened up the store a little bit more," she said. "I loved the idea even before the pandemic, but since the pandemic it's been nice because it does allow a little bit more

room for people to be able to feel secure when they're in the space. And because everything was brand new, it just felt really clean and nice."

Despite being closed an additional month for the remodel and not having revenue in June, July 2020 outpaced 2019. Ultimately, business was down 30% by the end of the year, but mainly because of the remodel and four-month closure.

She said that first weekend was the best days of the pandemic.

"It was when I realized my business is going to survive," she said. "We probably had a great Saturday or Sunday and I was just thinking, 'Oh, hallelujah, the customers came back, our staff is there, our remodel is done.'"

She felt like she could finally exhale.

While closed, Village Maternity launched a website. Capretto says she had always been hesitant to make the move online because it felt like starting a new business.

“

"The village has always been really supportive of us and other small businesses, and I think it's really nice to be in a shopping center where people are looking for those local and unique businesses."

ANNA CAPRETTO

PHOTO: Owner Anna Capretto briefly removes her mask for a photo with her 6-week-old son, Bowman, inside Village Maternity.

PHOTO BY ANTHONY BOLANTE | PSBJ

"I just felt like so much of our special sauce was in the store and in that connection," she says.

There are a lot of reasons her business is successful, and location is a big part of that, she said.

"I look at a lot of different shopping centers to open up in a second location, but I think U Village has something magical about it that I just haven't been able to find anywhere else. So, I will not be opening any more brick-and-mortar stores," she said.

Apart from consistent traffic, she's not competing with big department stores like Nordstrom or Macy's.

"The village has always been really supportive of us and other small businesses, and I think it's really nice to be in a shopping center where people are looking for those local and unique businesses," she said.

Thanks to a partnership with Virginia Mason, which has space in the southern area of the shopping center, Village Maternity receives a lot of referrals.

"They've done a really lovely job of making the Village a great destination for families," she said. "It feels safe. There's the water features, there's the playground, there's great places to eat. It's a nice place to go with your family."

The day the threat of looting loomed

In late May, as Black Lives Matter protests organized around Seattle and Bellevue, business owners anxiously watched.

Looters broke off from the peaceful protests, smashed downtown business windows and stole inventory.

Business owners at University Village caught word that looters coming their way.

Many Village proprietors rushed to their stores to load up their inventory.

It would have been financially and emotionally devastating had the village security and police not stopped people from entering the outdoor shopping center, Ba Bar co-owner Eric Banh said.

"We were very nervous, because how do we replace a window if it's broken?" he recalled. "To deter potential looting, we removed all our liquor from the bar shelf. Literally all. We put a sign that said 'We're local' and 'Please be kind.'"

For Marshall of Rachel's Ginger Beer, it was the worst day of the pandemic.

"I pulled up in my pajamas because I had to get there right away to get the money," Marshall said.

She recalls pulling up and seeing Kristi Holmes, owner of The Confectionery, with a crew of people loading up jars of candy from her shop.

Holmes said if her store had been vandalized and her candy stolen, "I don't think we could have come back from that."

There was one man boarding up windows for a \$600 fee, Marshall said. Rachel's Ginger Beer was the last to be boarded up, but because of potential looters waiting on the parameter, she had to be escorted to her car and out of the Village.

"It was scary. It was dystopian. There was not a single person left in U Village but cops," Marshall recalled.



BA BAR

OWNERS | ERIC AND SOPHIE BANH • babarseattle.com

When Susie Plummer offered Eric Banh a corner restaurant space, he took it.

Because when Plummer offers you a space at University Village you take it, Banh said, even if the rent seems high.

He opened Ba Bar there in 2017, almost 20 years after he opened his first restaurant in Seattle, Monsoon, with his sister, chef Sophie, on a shoestring budget of \$175,000.

"Truthfully, we didn't want Ba Bar at U Village to be that large, and I remember asking, 'Uh, hey Susie, can we cut the back portion and have a smaller space so the rent will be affordable?'" She said this: "We make it affordable for you already. You take it or you leave it," Banh said. "I say this with

admiration. They made it possible for us to move in."

When you open a restaurant, Banh said, you want the cost of rent to be about 3% to 6% of your revenue. His space there is about 8% of his revenue.

When the pandemic hit, Banh leaned heavily on takeout and delivery, relying on third-party apps. Banh, who runs five restaurants, cut staff across the board, going from 220 to 160 employees. March was a "disaster," he said, and April was bad, too. "Nobody can make money during a pandemic," he said.

Banh said the business ended 2020 with 65% of normal sales. U Village gave the restaurant three months of reduced rent, he said.

PHOTO: Chefs and siblings Eric and Sophie Banh opened Ba Bar at University Village in 2017. They removed their masks briefly inside an empty restaurant for a photo.

PHOTO BY ANTHONY BOLANTE | PSBJ



THE CONFECTIONERY

OWNER | KRISTI HOLMES · theconfectionery.com

Candy would seem to be recession proof, right?

"I wouldn't say it's pandemic proof," said Kristi Holmes, owner of The Confectionery. "(But) people will come out and get something — just a little something small to boost their mood or boost their day or make somebody else's day special with their favorite candy."

Her 54-year-old business, which she took over in 2001 after working as a candy girl, is seasonal around the holidays, Easter being the second-busiest candy holiday.

"We were fully packed, at the height of inventory, and then no one could come in the store," she said of March 2020. She went from doing an average of \$2,000 each day to \$65 per day.

"The day before Christmas, the day before Easter, we could do \$10,000 to \$14,000, plus building up to that," she said. "So we really rely on holidays."

The Confectionery remained open throughout the pandemic, except for a few days in May.

Holmes' business was down more than 40% in the second quarter of 2020, but around Halloween, business started to return to normal.

"For fall, my business really came back, and corporations were shipping employee appreciation gifts. We did a lot of fun Halloween boxes to different companies," she said. "We did a lot of neighborhood trick-or-treats, like

elderly people coming in for a special treat for their trick-or-treater. We had a busier Halloween than normal because people kind of shifted how they were doing Halloween."

During the pandemic, Pagliacci Pizza partnered with many small businesses, including The Confectionery and Hello Robin in the early days, to help keep their businesses afloat. Holmes had to lay off some of her employees, but through the program, her sales picked up, and she was able to rehire.

Her best day was in October, when the neighborhoods made a huge effort to create fun activities for children.

Her first holiday of 2021, Valentine's Day, was thwarted by a record-setting snowstorm in February. It was a \$15,000 loss, as "candy holidays tend to be last minute," she said.

Her husband, another small business owner, was shoveling snow that day.

"I was so mad. I was just so bitter at Mother Nature," Holmes said. "We are open. People get down here."

But March brought hope. "Every week I'm seeing new customers come back that I hadn't seen since the start of the pandemic," she said. "The elderly customers that are back, they are just so full of joy. I told one customer, 'It's great to see you,' and they said, 'It's great to be seen.'"

PHOTO: The Confectionery owner Kristi Holmes bags some candies in her store at University Village.

PHOTO BY ANTHONY BOLANTE | PSBJ



MOLLY MOON'S HANDMADE ICE CREAM

OWNER | MOLLY MOON NEITZEL · mollymoon.com



HELLO ROBIN

OWNERS | ROBIN WEHL MARTIN AND CLAY MARTIN
hellorobincookies.com

Hello Robin, a Capitol Hill cookie shop, opened its second location in University Village amid heavy smoke from the wildfires in September 2020.

Owners Robin Wehl Martin and Clay Martin, a married couple, had signed the 10-year lease right before the pandemic took hold and were on the hook for the location's build-out while their first store was closed for three months.

"So in the middle of this pandemic, we're able to open, and then the smoke hits from the wildfires and we just think: What else, is there going to be a plague of locusts next?" Clay Martin said. "But actually it worked out pretty well, because we were able to ease into it, starting kind of slow with fairly minimal traffic and then building up over the months."

Mid-build-out, they changed their construction plan to include a walk-up

order window, which ended up being a great and envied idea during the pandemic, Wehl Martin said.

The worst day of the year for Robin Wehl Martin and Clay Martin came in March 2020 when they had to lay off all 14 staff members and close their Capitol Hill store.

But the best day quickly followed when Pagliacci's, which partnered with many small businesses during the pandemic through its support program, put in an order for 8,000 cookies that they paid full price for and gave away with their pizza.

The Washington-based pizza chain later placed two more orders: one for 8,000 cookies and another for 4,000 cookies.

"It just turned what could have been a really horrible and depressing time into this fun and really exciting opportunity," Wehl Martin said.

PHOTO: Hello Robin's Robin Wehl Martin, left, holds a tray of oatmeal chocolate chip cookies with her husband, Clay Martin, in their University Village kitchen and store. They briefly removed their masks for a photo.

PHOTO BY ANTHONY BOLANTE | PSBJ

Molly Moon Neitzel doesn't expect her namesake ice cream shop to turn a profit again until 2022. That's when she expects samples could come back, she said. But she doesn't know for sure.

Molly Moon's Handmade Ice Cream wouldn't have made it through the pandemic, Neitzel said, if not for grants, programs and government aid. The last year has brought on some of the lowest lows and one very big high.

She opened her ninth and flagship location — the largest yet at 2,600 square feet — in Bellevue last summer. And now, thanks to the latest round of government aid, she's back to hiring seasonal employees for this spring.

Her 775-square-foot University Village location at times feels crushing, with lines down the block.

Over the years, she's made adjustments, remodeling to include another freezer and expand the transaction capacity. This year

“Because I love to worry about things at night, a little worry in the back of my head is, what will happen to U Village when Susie Plummer wants to retire?”

MOLLY MOON NEITZEL

PHOTO: Molly Moon Neitzel briefly removes her mask and holds pints of ice cream for a photo at her University Village store.

PHOTO BY ANTHONY BOLANTE | PSBJ

she's going to remodel again in the spring to include an "in" door and an "out" door to increase capacity and help with flow.

Neitzel was scared to enter the Village community. Rent was double or triple what she paid at some of her other shops, but around 2012, when the village was working on the southern building that Virginia Mason now occupies, Neitzel thought it might be time.

Shortly after giving birth to her now 8-year-old daughter, Neitzel landed a meeting with Susie Plummer thanks to her broker, Tracy Cornell.

"I think my baby was 3 days old," Neitzel said. She was on maternity leave, but Cornell told her to bring the baby to the meeting.

"I did take her, and Susie held her, and Tracy held her. Tracy has four kids, and Susie has had three babies, and she was great. I liked her, and she liked me," Neitzel said. "I think she loved that I brought

my baby to the first meeting, and we're just going to make it happen and we did."

But Neitzel was still hesitant to enter University Village market and asked for the smallest space available.

"I think (Plummer) thought I was cuckoo bananas when I wanted the tiniest space she could possibly draw. And she was right," Neitzel said. "I've been in business at U Village almost 10 years, and it's incredibly worth it. It's one of the profit engines of my company. It's one of the reasons that I can do extremely generous things with my employees — it's because of the profits that U Village generates."

She said the mix of small businesses and larger companies is what makes the Village work.

"Because I love to worry about things at night, a little worry in the back of my head is, what will happen to U Village when Susie Plummer wants to retire?" Neitzel asked.



METROPOLITAN PILATES

OWNER | SILVIA FURIA • metropolitanpilates.com

Silvia Furia opened her Metropolitan Pilates boutique gym with co-owner Dorothee VandeWalle in the University Village in 2003.

Her 2,740-square-foot business was stable, with about 300 clients coming for personal sessions with about 10 instructors a week.

When business closed, she thought it would only be for two weeks. She told her employees to take a vacation.

She had heard about Covid-19, but she just thought it was a bad flu.

"You never thought it was going to be like that movie 'Contagion,'" she said. "In a way, it ended up being that way with so many people dying."

She held onto hope that she'd be able to reopen each week — but that didn't officially happen until July. She finished the year down 30% in

revenue.

She's still hopeful.

"The great thing about the pandemic is that it opened this whole other door to teach people online," she said.

Her business moving forward will continue to be a mix of in-person and online instruction, reaching people all over the world.

"I was never worried," she said.

"The business had been managed well. It wasn't like we were bleeding money. We're pretty solid, plus the PPP and the grants."

The biggest thing, though, were her clients — only a couple asked for a refund. The rest went virtual and never looked back.

"I think 2022 is going to be a great year," she said.



MARKET OPTICAL

OWNER | JAMEY BALOUSEK • marketoptical.com

Market Optical, originally a Pike Place Market business with its second location in University Village, is expecting to open a third location in Idaho this May.

Owner Jamey Balousek, who bought the business in 2019, likes to say he's owned the business longer during a pandemic than out of one.

"We are going to be expanding into Meridian, Idaho," Balousek said. "It's a market that's growing. ... We saw a need for a luxury optical boutique in that market, and we thought this was the time."

As an essential business, Market Optical remained open during the pandemic.

"We have first responders, doctors, you know, anybody that wears glasses — if they are without their glasses,

it's obviously a challenging problem. You'd be surprised at the number of people that fall asleep in their glasses or bend them somehow, and so we are there to serve the community and help in those situations," he said.

They partially reopened in April 2020 and then by appointment only in May. He didn't have to lay off any of his 15 employees. He ended 2020 down 25% of prepandemic revenue.

Over the last six months, he's seen demand for Market Optical's services come back and has hired two employees, bringing the staff to 15.

"We're able to expand using just our own resources," he said. "All things considered, we're happy with where we are today. If you had told me a year ago this is where we would be today, I would be ecstatic."

PHOTO: Owner Silvia Furia, left, briefly removes her mask for a photo on the exercise floor as instructor Jenna Ingraham works out at Metropolitan Pilates.

PHOTO BY ANTHONY BOLANTE | PSBJ

PHOTO: Market Optical owner and CEO Jamey Balousek removes his mask for a photo inside his University Village clinic.

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