

Reflecting on 27 Years as a Valley Creek Mall Merchant

When Barbara Swenson opened her popular *Gem Classics* jewelry store in 1987, she couldn't possibly have predicted what would stay the same or change in both the jewelry business and at Valley Creek Mall, where her store has always been located.

For one thing, Valley Creek Mall was the only shopping center in Woodbury. Now, there are dozens. None, however, has space for community events like the interior of Valley Creek Mall, which, to this day, hosts over 30 free family events annually, many benefitting local charities or programs. Back in the 1980's, Barb recalls Valley Creek Mall contained a number of small family-owned and operated stores. Typically, customers shopped for groceries before stopping by the wide assortment of other stores to find additional items. Barb recalls that it was very common for customers to congregate at the Mall, because it was "A Happening Place." Shoppers had plenty of choices including a florist, a liquor, pet food, video, ladies' clothes, candy, and shoe store along with a collector's gallery of art work. Donatelli's drew crowds for dinner and store owners enjoyed mingling with customers as well as with each other.



Valley Creek Mall Property Manager,
Kathy Bayliss with Gem Classics Owner,
Barb Swenson

In those early days, the Mall began its now well-known tradition of drawing Woodbury residents to Mall-hosted community events. Curt Cruz, who currently helps coordinate the many yearly activities, has observed that the Mall attracts a wide assortment of exhibits and performers for just about every interest imaginable: for example, a pancake eating contest, an exotic bird show, crafts fairs, a women's expo, a fall expo, a classic car show, an Easter bunny, a Santa Claus and, even, several times over the summer, University of Minnesota-sponsored master gardeners who offer free tips for plant enthusiasts. For events with a charge, proceeds go directly back to the non-profit-sponsoring organization. Many customers return year after year for their favorite events, some bringing younger generations of Mall admirers curious about the "Happening Place."

According to Barb, whose 27-year merchant relationship with Valley Creek Mall will draw to a close later this spring, the jewelry business has undergone some significant changes. In the early days, Barb developed a loyal customer base, largely of 3M and Fortis Benefits Insurance Company employees who periodically patronized her store.. To this day, Barb and her husband socialize with some of these individuals, now mostly retired. For Barb, *Gem Classics* was far more than a job; it was a way of life.

The internet significantly impacted the jewelry business. Before its popularity, customers would visit the store to browse and purchase; now many prefer to explore products online and then either to buy electronically or to visit *Gem Classics* with highly specific requests (and price points).

Barb is philosophical about closing her store in a few weeks. She remembers that one of her daughters was five years old when *Gem Classics* first opened and she would occasionally bring her and her sister to work with her on Saturdays. With her granddaughter now five years old, Barb believes the store's life cycle has come full circle and it's time to begin a new chapter.

What will Barb do next? She expects to stay involved in the gem business, perhaps through a smaller venue than her current Valley Creek Mall shop. Though she knows she will miss her customers, she also looks forward to having Saturdays free and the opportunity to travel with her husband.

We, at Wellington Management, wish Barb well with whatever she pursues.