

15 MINUTES

The Fun Tree lives up to its name

BY EVAN WILLIAMS

Florida Weekly Correspondent

Skeletons and a zombie on a gurney appear in the window of a costume rental and party supply store called The Fun Tree, located in the no-man's land between Dean Park and Dunbar proper (a few blocks East of downtown Fort Myers), at 2546 Thompson Street.

The neighborhood is a peaceful mix of white, black, and Hispanic, overgrown lots, dilapidated houses for sale, and tenement dwellings, whose residents may be found in small groups, having beers on the porches in the evening.

Fun Tree owner Donna Faught was at her store late last week, in the big, un-air conditioned warehouse space, calling out from behind a row of costume jackets and masks.

"Over here," she said, stepping from behind a huge rubber Elvis Presley head.

Faught is 61 years old and shares an Aug. 8 birthday with The King; she is bright and direct, younger looking than her age, sitting in shorts and a T-shirt in a green antique chair, just beyond the late afternoon glow in the store-front's windows.

She makes a pledge to customers: her infallible ability to find a costume to suit any person, for any occasion.

"It's a gift I have," she said.

The Fun Tree's space, which Faught began renting in 2006, housed White's Furniture from 1958 to 1991, then sat vacant for 15 years. Eugene White still owns the building. Faught says it's not haunted, even though it might seem a little spooky, with so many disembodied heads everywhere — like Paris Hilton, George Bush,



PHOTO EVAN WILLIAMS

Left to right, Paris Frantz, Billy Ray Faught, Donna Faught

and the Grim Reaper.

"I do come down here at night," she admitted. "It's so pleasant, just to look at my costumes, to feel that it's all worthwhile. Sometimes it doesn't feel that way."

Hard times and the sadness of the world found a way to touch her too, Faught explains.

She is waiting for the promise of a bustling downtown to bring business, and waiting for customers to discover her off-the-beaten-path location. Faught's sister, Paris Frantz, said business needs to improve faster than Superman can leap over one of downtown's gaudy skyscrapers.

"If we don't make it through this season, we're gonna die," Frantz said.

Outside on the sidewalk in front of the store,

Faught's husband Billy Ray sits in a wheelchair in the sun, quietly sipping a beer, looking frustrated. He had a stroke two months ago.

"I can tell he's different," Faught sighed. "Normally he'd be over here telling me to say all the right things."

The Fun Tree has traveled to six Fort Myers locations in its history, escaping cramped spaces and money-hungry landlords, before resting, for now (and permanently, Faught hopes), on Thompson Street. It first opened in 1974 under the ownership of Faught's father, Dr. Clyde Miller, a general practitioner from Hollywood, Fla. He moved his family to Fort Myers in 1969, and started the business because there was no party supply store in town; a granddaughter's birthday brought him to this realization. The name The Fun Tree was inspired by Miller's favorite New Orleans gift shop, The Lemon Tree.

"You had to know my father," said Faught, the oldest of her father's three children. "You wouldn't want to miss a night out with him. He was quite entertaining."

Miller died on August 15, 1979.

"If he would've lived a half hour longer, he would've died on the same days as Elvis," she said.

Presley is one of the most popular costumes, Faught said, second only to pimps.

"We have 13 Elvis costumes to choose from and at least 20 pimps," she said.

The Fun Tree carries over 4,000 costumes, and heaps of embellishers like detective hats, ghoulish wigs, death-colored lipstick, and goofy gags like plastic vomit and insects.

"If people want to go to a picnic, they'll take a bunch of flies," she said. "Roaches are very

popular too."

Some of the outfits hang in the shop all year waiting for a single night of wear. The Joker, for example, is rented out once a year to the same man from Port Charlotte, Faught said. Other costumes, such as the slice of pizza, are used more regularly by local businesses; Publix once had good results with a strawberry cheesecake costume, she said. A very confident looking cardboard William Shatner stands, arms-crossed, in a corner. Opposite William Shatner, in the window: a gory re-creation of the infamous Wisconsin serial killer and cannibal Jeffrey Dahmer's refrigerator, which comes with a bottle of blood, and various body parts, Faught said.

"All you need to supply is dry ice," she added.

Costume rentals range in price from \$35 to \$50, Faught said, with furs, Elvis and pimps being higher end rentals at \$75. Costumes are mostly special ordered; a few are made by an in-house sewing specialist.

"She made us this one-horned, one-eyed, flying purple people eater," Faught said. "But we don't have the body for it yet."

Faught insisted that her favorite male costume is The Sheriff of Nottingham, the villain in Robin Hood tales; the Sheriff stole from the poor and gave to the rich, getting his values backwards. The costume has been used for marriage proposals and weddings several times.

Halloween is almost here, but you need no reason to visit The Fun Tree, and peruse this odd, unique, sometimes thrilling inventory, Monday through Friday from 9:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. or Saturday 9:30 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. ■

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