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A GUIDE TO THE GREATER FORT MYERS BUSINESS INDUSTRY

Lulu's offers blasts from past

BY PETE SKIBA

Florida Weekly Correspondent

Walk into LuLu's Gift Emporium in Royal Palm Square for a glimpse of fresh-retro nostalgia.

The shop's colors and gift items fairly leap out at customers, while the scent of flavored candles brings a touch of the days when bobby-soxers ruled and every girl had stuffed animals crowding for space on her bed.

"LuLu's is a gift store at its heart that tells a story about a lifestyle in a more nostalgic time," said Michael Hayes, a merchandiser at the store. "You won't find the vintage-appeal items we sell at a mass merchandizing store."

Everything in the store from the candles to the stuffed animals to children's toys to the decorator items looks crafted by hand to give it the personal touch. The shop's name comes from a childhood nickname.

"I started out as a personal stationary and invitation store," said owner Laura Jane (LuLu) McGee. "I saw a need for a place that had unique gifts that would appeal to people and we grew."

Stationary and invitations to parties and weddings remain a good part of the store's business. A customer can have a consultation and get the exact type of keepsake invitation for a wedding they would like.

Brides can register at the store before their wedding. One former bride, now a mother, loves the products and the service at LuLu's.

"I have three kids at home and when I need a present for a birthday party I just call and they know exactly what to get for a 3- or 5-year-old," said Danielle Allen, a Fort Myers resident. "Laura



PHOTO PETE SKIBA FLORIDA WEEKLY

Lulu's owner Laura Jane (LuLu) McGee in her Royal Palm Square shop. Stationary and invitations are a big part of the store's business.

Jane even dropped off a gift at my house when I needed it."

The staff loves to help people and Janice Maxey takes real pride in her gift wrapping creations.

"I just love to make nice, really nice gift wrapping for people," Maxey said. "It brightens everything."

In business for five years, two at the Royal Palm Square Location next to the Shrimp Shack, the store's décor changes with the season. The shop's

décor now reflects the approaching Christmas season.

Adding to the retro feel, posters of McGee's family hang in different sections of the store. Baby posters are in the baby area for instance. Family Christmas photos sit in the windows.

"We like to evoke fond memories of childhood in the store," Hayes said. "There are also many gifts and cards for adults."

Royal Palm Square sits on the south

side of Colonial Boulevard just at the foot of the Midpoint Bridge. In addition to LuLu's, it features the Broadway Palm Dinner Theater, A Swedish Affair, a Scandinavian gift and food store, Nautilus Photography and many offices and stores among fountains and landscaping.

LuLu's is open from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday through Thursday; 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Fridays; 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturdays and is closed Sundays. ■

HeroCare helps community's finest

BY EVAN WILLIAMS

Florida Weekly Correspondent

Sporting a neatly trimmed goatee and pressed blue HeroCare shirt, Lane Houk slipped into the conference room at his yellow and blue painted offices on College Parkway and Winkler Avenue last Tuesday morning with a mission — to define what heroes are, what a community is, and how he's trying to bring local businesses together to help them all.

Houk's non-profit company ties local heroes — defined here as anyone who works for the government, the military, the school system, plus all firemen, policemen, and medical personnel — to local businesses that help them with all their financial needs. This includes home loans, insurance, financial planning and more.

These heroes call up HeroCare and a "conciierge" puts them in touch with the appropriate organization which helps them, often for free.

"The police officers and firefighters are stakeholders in the community" he said. "We want to be their voice, their



PHOTO EVAN WILLIAMS

Lane Houk

advocate."

Realtors, financial advisors, and other businesses provide Houk with a monthly donation to be a part of his network of services at HeroCare. Those businesses, Houk said, are chosen because they are "top notch in the industry," and adds that he's always adding new ones to his large, growing, HeroCare repository.

"This community has a lot of assets," he insisted. "But we're fragmented. There's a need to bring all of these community resources together. HeroCare is the middle-man, the connection to all these resources."

Houk says his company will help the Lee County community and beyond, to grow.

"We were losing teachers, firemen and police officers to other communities and states," he said. "When a teacher leaves their classroom, this school district has a challenge in replacing that teacher. And the school district is growing. When we lose a teacher, what happens to the quality of education for kids in that classroom?"

It's what he calls "The Negative Cycle of Growth," a cycle HeroCare aims to reverse.

Houk himself is a teacher on the weekends, for kids who play hockey. They practice at Germain Arena.

"It's a blast watching five- and six-year-olds play hockey in Florida," he said.

He also does a lot of reading. Top on his recent favorites list is the intense sounding "Firms of Endearment," by Rajendra S. Sisodia, David B. Wolfe, and Jagdish N. Sheth.

"It talks about how companies that have a 'soul' and treat their customers as though they have one are more successful than companies that don't have a passion and purpose," he said.

In Houk's case the passion is people, and the purpose is helping them financially.

"If I have anything to say to this community, it's that we have to take care of the people that take care of this community," he said. "The day we don't take care of those people is the day this ceases to be a community." ■