

NEW BUSINESS

From page 1

numbers come from Realtors' associations, individual Realtors, economists, and state statistics reported in the daily newspaper.)

In other words, money is tighter than a plugged drain in August.

So why buy massively into lifestyle luxuries in a struggling downtown, then throw open the doors of your new shop and restaurant, and invite big spenders?

Why open a hairstyling shop, after spending thousands on the requisite real estate and equipment, when you could work for somebody else who takes the risks?

Why invent and then start building and marketing something right out of your living room, when you could just go to work at Lowe's or Home Depot, like so many others?

Most breathtaking of all, perhaps, is the person who embraces the residential real estate business. She abandons a secure career, earns a license as a Realtor just when the market crashes, then sticks with it. Sounds crazy, doesn't it?

But across Lee County some people possess the sangfroid to keep their own counsel and ignore the experts. They have opened inventive, energetic new businesses in a down market. And — so far, anyway — they are making those businesses work.

What becomes evident in each of their stories is a simple maxim, one often applied to old age, but just as true in new business: It's no place for the faint of heart.

These entrepreneurs, instead, are the full of heart.

Patti Price, Kara Mai Lifestyles, Fort Myers

At 52, Patti Price is poised and confident in her sprawling object-as-art concession downtown on Bay Street, where 2,300-square feet of new space is pregnant with the good things in life.



FLORIDA WEEKLY PHOTO

Patti Price is banking that Kara Mai will be a hit in downtown Fort Myers.

She's surrounded by Alexandria flame-free oil lamps with stone wicks, Mitchell Clay Pottery, the only line of Barefoot Dreams clothing in Southwest Florida, Swarovski fashion jewelry in 22 karat gold and rhodium (all of it hypo-allergenic and nickel free), along with natural turquoise and blue opals, and the exuberant French line of dishes and accessories, Comptoir de Famille. That's just to name a few.

But dressed in a cream pantsuit with burgundy blouse, and serving chocolate-covered strawberries and champagne or wine to her patrons on Valentine's Day, she is not so confident that she doesn't keep positive-thinking books turned upside down beside her cash register, so she

can read them when no customers appear.

And frequently since she opened the doors of Kara Mai Lifestyles in May (named for her three-year-old granddaughter), no customers have appeared.

That initial dry well sprang not only from the economy but from the lengthy streetscaping downtown, where officials closed and dug up Bay Street about the time she opened.

"Everything doesn't always go right," she notes philosophically. "I'm not without fear, but you have to have determination, to go on with it, in spite of it. Every day brings something new. I'd be stupid if I didn't say I wasn't afraid of the economy — I am.

"But I really believe in downtown. We started planning this about two years before we opened, and my husband and I did our homework, we saw what was happening. Maybe it will take longer than predicted, but it will happen. These condos will be filled, this city will be abustle again, just like it was a long, long time ago."

Beside the think-positive books she uses for inspiration stand photos of her mother. Artfully Done frames, handmade by the artist, enclose the black-and-white image of a pretty woman on a working-class street in Chicago in the mid-1950s, wearing a calf-length fur coat, high heels, a fine hat, and pushing a baby carriage containing a tiny baby-boomer.

Her mother taught that baby-boomer to seek what she wanted, Patti says, and the baby-boomer in question is now fully engaged in her first great business venture, after spending 25 years working in medical administration.

Together with her husband, podiatrist Dr. Michael Price, and their son Corry, she has opened not only Kara Mai, but purchased the comfortably upscale and cheerful Morgan House restaurant on First Street, where Corry is the general manager. A buzzing, robust lunch crowd at mid-week bodes well; but the night business lags behind, she says.

It's a huge venture. And the market is not the only difficulty she's faced. In addition to the streetscaping, she's restricted to minimalist signage.

Her landlord, however, has proven kindly, she says, allowing her to pay what she can now, until she can pay what he asks, later. And Patti Price aims to turn the south end of her shop, outside, into a deli and courtyard retreat, with a fountain.

"We have the plans; it's going to be beautiful," she says.

While she chats, shoppers suddenly arrive. The women apparently are startled by the banquet of the fabulous they've just stumbled upon.

"Wow," says one, eyeballing the long shop and its glittering wares, then moving eagerly into it, to finger and hold various items.

"You just have to love what you do, and I do," Patti explains, aside. "You just do the best you can. And that's all you can do. Tomorrow is going to be tomorrow."

Gail Day, Gail's Family Hairstyling, Buckingham

Gail Day's brand new shop lies a few hundred yards east of the Buckingham Road intersection with State Road 80, right on the highway, just before the country traveler comes to River Hall and Ritchey's Fresh Produce.

At 1,300 square feet, it's big and light and spacious — so friendly and accommodating that you can't help but think the building, in a small plaza with lots of parking, must be an extension of Gail's personality and spirit.

Which can be bold when it has to, as it did before Christmas.

It was then that she jumped out of her nearly 20-year employment with her friend and colleague, John Yeomans, almost at the speed of light, when he retired from the business.

At 41, a doting grandmother and the mother of three grown daughters, Gail is now a business owner, pure and simple. The sign on her window says, GAIL'S Family Hair Styling, something so novel



FLORIDA WEEKLY PHOTO

Gail Day opened Gail's Family Hairstyling in Buckingham at the height of the slowdown.

she says it's almost hard to get used to.

It also reads, "Men, Women and Children. Taper, fades, razor cuts, flat tops, perms, colors. 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. Mondays through Fridays. 8 a.m. to 1 p.m. Saturdays. Evenings by appointment."

What the sign doesn't say is good cheer, devoted attention and skill, wide-ranging conversation (the distinctive mark of any great barber shop), gentle teasing, and frequent kindness.

That's business, the way Gail Day does it.

Stress is business, too, no matter who is doing it.

"What's different about doing it this way or working for John is that there's more stress involved, since I have to pay the bills," she says, while curling the hair of an older woman on a recent weekday afternoon. Many of her customers have known her for years, and probably wouldn't go anywhere else. New ones are filtering in all the time, too, along with the new anxiety that chases any start-up business owner.

There is no complaint in Gail about any of that, though.

"Once the rent's paid (\$18 a square foot, which includes the common-area fee) and once the mortgage on my house is paid, I feel okay," she explains.

Then she thinks about her two employees, and suddenly she feels the stress again. They're hairstylists who came with her from John's, because they like her so much, they say: Richard Johns and Maureen Wall. Now she feels responsible for what happens to them, too.

"They're independent contractors so I don't have to pay health insurance, or give vacations or retirement. But I wish I could, for them," Gail observes. "I would love to be able to offer that."

Instead, she tries to make sure they have plenty of work.

This is a shop where the employees help each other, instead of shouldering each other aside for more business.

Financing it all came as a bit of a shock, Gail says. "The tough part's been money, of course, and I've been doing it step by step. I won't make an improvement unless I have the money. All I need is a bunch of credit card bills and no money to pay them."

Been there, done that, isn't going to happen, she says.

While she works hair, she also confers with a contractor who shows her plans for a wall that will give her an office space in the shop, which is now wide open.

On the walls and shelves appear fly rods and reels, spinning rods and reels (Gail loves to fish, with her boyfriend Gil Whitmore), artifacts from Florida Marlins baseball, Florida Firecats football, Buccaneers football, 'Gators football, and the ALVA ALL STARS. The blue Belmont barber chairs came from John's. On a shelf behind one stands a bottle of coke with the name, Paul "Bear" Bryant on the label, above explanatory words: "The winningest football coach in collegiate history...Coke and the 'Bear,' a winning pair."

The hair she cuts falls in thick banks,



FLORIDA WEEKLY PHOTO

Sherry Simes said it's tough selling real estate in this market but she's determined.

like clouds, around each chair — on carpet, which is rare. When she can, the carpet will come up and tile will go down, she says. Meanwhile, she brought her vacuum from home, an industrial strength version which does just fine in the shop.

It's business on a shoe-string, but these are tough times.

Never mind that. "I have a five-year lease here — or is it three?" Gail asks, chuckling. "I don't know. I'm so happy here. I'm here for 30 years."

Sherry Simes, Realtor, Access Realty, Lehigh Acres

Real Estate ain't nothin' but a hound dog these days, Elvis might have said. Not Sherry Simes, though. It's not the real estate, it's the agent who might take advantage of people, encouraging them to buy a house they can't afford.

There's your hound dog, and that's partly how the bottom dropped out of the market, in her opinion.

"Sometimes I come across agents who are not properly representing clients, and it makes me angry," Sherry says. "This is how the economy got into trouble: Greed. I know of a Realtor who contacted my buyer — which is against our code of ethics — and tried to get them to take a property as-is, without a home inspection. It was only a two-year-old house, but you don't spend \$160,000 without inspecting it.

"So that keeps me going in this business. I want to show people that there are honest Realtors. We're not all just used car salesmen. I could put people into houses that don't really, truly fit their budget, and some Realtors do. But no, I'm not like that. So we go to a lower price range. As heart-