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## College Graffiti store closing after 30 years

By DON SERGENT [dsergent@bgdailynews.com](mailto:dsergent@bgdailynews.com) 22 hrs ago

College Graffiti owners Diane (left) and Jim Signorello (holding pet dachshund Hildie) and daughter Patty Gay are preparing to close down the Center Street store that has been family-owned since 1988.

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By DON SERGENT [dsergent@bgdailynews.com](mailto:dsergent@bgdailynews.com)

College Graffiti, the Alpha dog of Greek apparel and accessories for Western Kentucky University fraternities and sororities since before most of today's students were born, is fast approaching its Omega.

Diane and Jim Signorello, owners of the Center Street store located a short frisbee throw from the WKU campus, have decided that 30 years in business is enough and will close down gradually, beginning in mid-December.

For its many longtime customers and current WKU students, the news hurts worse than a Hilltopper loss to a conference rival.

“I spent way too much of my college money there,” recalled Hannah Murphy, a 2014 WKU graduate who still lives in Bowling Green. “It’s disappointing. There’s not another option in town. I don’t know where Greek students will go now, unless they buy online. I hate to see something like that close.”

So does Diane Signorello, who shed a few tears Tuesday while talking about the imminent closing and her memories of three decades in business.

“We’ve had some awesome customers and great employees who were WKU students over the years,” she said. “They’re our College Graffiti family, and we love ’em all.”

Standing among the T-shirts, sweatshirts, shorts and varied bric-a-brac bearing Greek or WKU lettering, the Signorellos and their daughter Patty Gay reflected on the store’s history.

“My husband and I just need to retire,” said Diane Signorello, 72. “I established the business, and three generations of our family have been involved. It’s just difficult these days to maintain a local business with competition from the internet and Amazon.”

Being left behind by the latest trend would be unusual for College Graffiti, which Diane Signorello started to fill a gap in Greek-themed merchandise.

“My daughters were active in a local sorority chapter,” she recalled. “Back then, there were no choices in Bowling Green (for Greek merchandise). I started going to other chapters for ideas, then I opened my own business.”

Signorello operated out of her home in the beginning, outsourcing the screen printing as she began selling shirts and other items to WKU sororities and fraternities. She opened a retail store at 1303 Center St. in 1991, then moved to the present location at 1231 Center St. three years later.

From those beginnings, College Graffiti evolved and now does its own screen printing and embroidery. Although Signorello says the business was “geared to Greek organizations” at first, it branched out to WKU gear and to personalized items for local businesses.

That personal touch, says 2013 WKU graduate Katie Pollard, is what set College Graffiti apart.

“I have friends who went to other colleges, and I would visit them,” said Pollard, who worked at College Graffiti during part of her time as a WKU student. “I’ve never seen a store like it in other college towns. It’s sad to see it close. They always had the best stuff.”

The Signorellos and Gay created goodwill with their homegrown products and through being community-minded.

“We’ve donated to every Greek philanthropy over the years,” Gay said. “They’re like our family.”

Gay and her mother took the College Graffiti brand on the road as another growth strategy, visiting the University of Louisville, Kentucky Wesleyan College and other campuses to drum up business.

The outreach and a strategy of keeping their products current helped the business grow. Diane Signorello said she and her husband calculated that College Graffiti did about \$2.5 million in sales over the past five years.

“We’ve been able to make a modest living,” she said.

Now that she is preparing to walk away from the business she created, Signorello is hardly giving a thought to dollars and cents.

“You get attached to people, and that’s hard to leave behind,” she said. “Each freshman class brings in a whole new concept. Then when they graduate, you start missing them.”

Now the Signorellos are preparing for a graduation of their own, although their immediate plans are about as unsettled as those of the undergraduates who visit their store.

The store will close when the WKU fall semester ends Dec. 15, Diane Signorello said. But she's quick to add: "We'll still help local (fraternity and sorority) chapters with the products they need. We just won't have a storefront."

"We're phasing out," Jim Signorello said. "We'll continue to have contact with the local chapters and do special orders, and we have a lot of stuff we need to get rid of. A lot of this stuff, you'll be hard-pressed to find anywhere else."

As for the fate of the College Graffiti building, Diane Signorello said: "Our options are open. We'd prefer to rent it rather than sell it. It just depends on what other people are interested in."

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