

Rogers Jewelry: A Retail Mainstay In Quincy Center

Mark Bertman calls it a "great journey." He also considers himself a retail survivor. But he's much more than that. Mark has become an iconic presence in Quincy as much as the family business, Rogers Jewelry, that first opened its doors at 1402 Hancock St. in 1960.

Today, 52 years later, Rogers Jewelry is the longest continuously operating retail establishment in Quincy Center. The glass and granite facade store is as much a mainstay of downtown Quincy as the Granite Trust Building where it is located.

Mark, who comes to work virtually every day the store is open, is the company treasurer. His wife, Isabel, also works at the store. Their son Jeffrey, one of the store's two graduate gemologists, is company president.

Over the last 52 years, Mark Bertman has seen virtually everything in the retail district of Quincy Center. That journey has seen the downtown's ups and downs.

Mark, an early business leader who's remained active in civic affairs for many years, had a front row seat to Quincy Center's hey-days as Shopperstown, U.S.A. That nickname surfaced in the 1950s while Quincy's downtown was a retail destination with dozens of storefronts. Those years lasted throughout the 1960s but began to fade in the early 1970s as some anchor stores like Sears migrated to the shopping malls.

Other stores closed for other reasons. Some lost customers with decreased foot traffic. Family businesses shuttered because there were no heirs to keep them going.

It wasn't only retail. The number of banks has dwindled. Bertman can count off seven banks in the downtown at one time. Today, only one remains: Bank of America.

If you think Mark Bertman is nostalgic for those Shopperstown days to return to Quincy, think again.

"Quincy was a shopping center and I still hear that and people still talk about it but there's no place in the country that is still what it was 40 years ago. It's not just here. Gimbel's is gone. Jordan Marsh is gone.

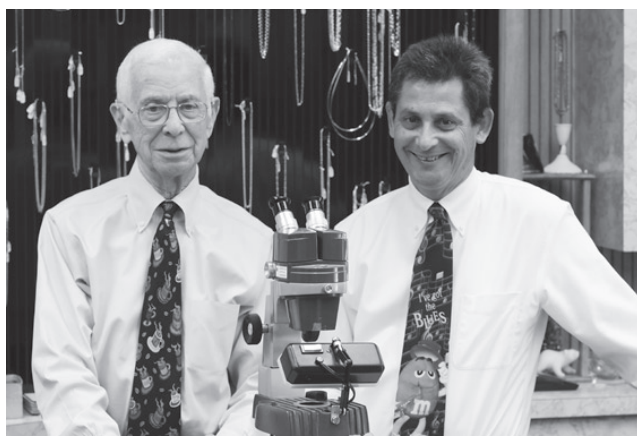
"It hasn't happened anywhere in the country. New York City has reinvented itself somewhat through smaller merchants but it's certainly not those huge stores and that type of operation of what it used to be. Plus, there's all new merchants. Everyone has changed the direction they are going into and the goods they are selling and what's going to attract customers."

With the construction phase of the first two buildings of the city's \$1.6 billion downtown revitalization



Son Beams

By ROBERT BOSWORTH



ROGERS JEWELRY has been a family business at 1402 Hancock St. for more than 52 years. Mark Bertman (left) with his son, Jeff Bertman, a graduate gemologist.

Quincy Sun Photo/Robert Bosworth

project scheduled to break ground early next year, there may be some citizens who think the center will return to its Shopperstown hey-days.

But that's not really the idea.

The downtown project has more to do with creating a new vibrant neighborhood with high-rise apartment and condo buildings, a hotel, movie theatre and new retail specialty shops. So while Thom McAnn, Remick's and Sawyer's are not coming back, new specialty stores will be the fabric of a new Quincy Center "retail quilt," officials say.

"I think we could use a nice gift shop, maybe a stationery store or a good card store," Bertman says. "There are people who are creative who will come in and sell things that we can't even think of. People always think of new things."

But to drive a new retail engine downtown, it's going to take people and foot traffic. That's why Bertman and others who support the project believe the most important component initially to the downtown plan is the residential aspect.

People living downtown will shop downtown.

One good indication that the center is on the upswing is its thriving restaurant climate.

"Look at how the restaurants are doing," Bertman says. "They're doing pretty well at night. People who are frequenting the restaurants are coming from out of town because the reputation is there is good food here.

"People are interested in coming here so when more and more people are living here, I would think 10 to 15 years from now stores like us will have to be open late at night again. It will be a throwback because there will be business at night.

"You stay open when there's business. You close when there's nothing. You don't want to disappoint people when you're not there but sometimes it doesn't make sense to stay open (at night)."

Bertman, who recently celebrated his 80th birthday, summed up Rogers' business success with "three" words:

"Service, service, service. That's how we've been able to stay with the coming in of other jewelers, all of the nail parlors, the lack of foot traffic. We've adopted a number of customer-friendly policies like return privileges, cash-back, and various things like that.

"We've been fortunate that children and grandchildren and so forth have continued to become customers. We become highly recommended."

Building relationships with suppliers, manufacturers and customers has been important as well as being active in civic affairs.

Mark is a longtime Quincy Rotarian, former Quincy College governor, and one of the original members of the Quincy Partnership. Comprised of active business and civic leaders, the Partnership has raised funds for city-wide improvements including new "Welcome to Quincy" signs, exterior lighting at several historical sites and the bronze Adams statues in Quincy Center.

Bertman has been at the forefront of business

groups, including the former Quincy Center Business and Professional Association that he helped found in 1973. The organization advocated interests for the business community downtown and help run people-attracting promotions like the Sidewalk Bazaar.

Recalling the days that led to the group's founding, Bertman said, "For the first time we had a really active, business-orientated mayor in Walter Hannon who understood business and wanted the downtown to prosper but it was starting to fragment itself back in the 1970s. We just felt together we could succeed. One person couldn't make it on his own and no one person could ever really attract enough people to the downtown."

Among those who were also instrumental in launching the QCBPA were Win Sargent at South Shore National Bank and Bob Coleman, who owned Colman's Sporting Goods and served as the organizations' first president. Bertman was the first vice president and second president.

The QCBPA remained an active organization for many years. It merged several years ago with the new Quincy Chamber of Commerce.

While he's very optimistic about the downtown's future, Bertman has also real concerns about what construction will do to foot traffic in the area. The first phase – called Merchants Row – will take place near his storefront at the 1400 block of Hancock Street.

"I am frightened at the prospect of the construction being right in the middle of it. We have no choice but to stay because of our vaults and everything that's here. It would cost us a fortune to pick up and move for two years and then come back two years later.

"We will attempt to maintain a business presence and continue to attract people to our business. Frankly, there are not a lot of people downtown now that come in. Saturday has become one of the worst days of the week because there's no foot traffic outside. None of the other businesses are open. What's there to come down to except a nail or a hair appointment or something like that?"

He adds:

"We've been very lucky to build up our collateralized lending business and our purchase and resale of gold. We have put up a competitive website that features all recycled jewelry. Things that we've purchased from estates and have been fixed up and placed in stock at very competitive prices.

"People seem to go on the website and then come into the store to look at the item. I still think that in jewelry – unlike a lot of other things – people like to touch the item and see the item. They want to see the sparkle and talk about it.

"Between that and people coming in, we hope that will be enough to sustain this first phase of construction."

Bertman says he also concerned about parking and traffic flow after vehicular patterns change because of the Adams Green project near City Hall and United First Parish Church.

But he's also convinced Quincy Center's best days are ahead.

"I am unbelievably encouraged (about the new Quincy Center). This is a great opportunity. We could be the gem of the entire South Shore.

"When you think about how many schools are within 10 miles of Quincy and four subway stops in Quincy. That means people like to live here so that they can work in Boston and most of the apartments are all rented out. It's a lot cheaper living here than in Boston and I think this first concept which is mostly apartments and some retail stores will do very well.

"I think Quincy College moving back downtown will do very well, too."

"People," Bertman adds, "is what we live on."

The Quincy Sun



(USPS 453-060)

Published Weekly on Thursday by
The Quincy Sun Publishing Co., Inc.
1372 Hancock St., Quincy, MA 02169

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Publisher and Editor

Henry W. Bosworth, Jr.
Founder
1968 - 2009

75¢ per copy. \$25.00 per year by mail in Quincy
\$30.00 per year by mail outside Quincy - \$38.00 out-of-state

Telephone: 617-471-3100 Fax: 617-472-3963

email address:
thequincysun@verizon.net

Periodicals postage paid at Boston, MA
Postmaster Send address change to:
The Quincy Sun, 1372 Hancock St., Quincy, MA 02169

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