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Music Store Narrows Its Focus

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In 1969, a man named Matthew Schwartzman opened The Candyman Strings and Things store in downtown Santa Fe.

"It was about 200 square feet," said Schwartzman's daughter, Sarah Schwartzman-Palermo. "Ten guitars, some sheet music, incense, rolling papers, candles, harmonicas. There was a harp — we found a picture of an actual harp — and a banjo here and there. And strings."

Forty years later, The Candyman continues to thrive as a City Different institution.

But 2009 has brought profound change for the store, starting with Schwartzman's death from a brain tumor in March, at age 67, and continuing with the closure Saturday of half its massive facility at 851 St. Michael's Drive.

There are still hundreds of instruments to buy at The Candyman. Acoustic guitars made of soft wood dangle from the wall in one room, candy-colored electric guitars in another. They're lined in rows, some too high to reach. When an amateur musician sits downstairs jamming casually, symbols on drum sets upstairs ring quietly along with the vibrations in the air.

The Candyman will never stop serving musicians; it's just stopped selling CDs and audio/visual equipment, which is ironic, because Scharzman's store was the first in northern New Mexico to peddle compact discs, Schwartzman-Palermo said.

"You can buy a CD at Starbucks," she said. "What makes it so special to come here and buy a CD anymore? ... I hate to admit it, but I buy stuff on Amazon and I download stuff onto my iPod. It's just the way it is."

The wooden bins that for years held all genres of music are empty now, surrounded by taped-closed boxes. The decision was made after Scharzman's death. Longtime manager Rand Cook, who now owns The Candyman with his wife, Cindy, said they're still juggling ideas about how to reopen that half of the store.

There is no doubt it will reopen.

"The bittersweet part is that this part of the business has run its life cycle," Cook said. "The things we want to do into the future, the opportunities that have opened up because of what we're doing to eliminate part of the business, are going to serve the community perhaps better than we could if we tried to maintain this. It's about greater (service) for the community and a better way to focus on where the business began 40 years ago and how we can strengthen it so we can carry on for 40 more years."

A fire and a move

It will be hard for many Santa Feans to imagine the store's next 40 years unfolding without Schwartzman. A savvy businessman with an intense love for music, Schwartzman captained The Candyman's expansion and move, all the while cultivating a community atmosphere that blossomed in the 1970s and hasn't wilted.

Not that there haven't been obstacles. In 1981, the store was located just off the plaza on Water Street when it was destroyed by a fire, along with \$250,000 worth of instruments, records and equipment. Schwartzman-Palermo sat across the street and watched her father's store devoured by flames, until he made her leave.

"It was traumatic, scary," she said. "My father built this place out of borrowed money from his parents and nothing. To see it go up ... and then you don't know what'll happen next."

What happened next was a move to St. Michael's Drive. A savvy businessman's move.

"Everyone shopped downtown when I grew up here," Schwartzman-Palermo said. "Your pharmacist was downtown, you bought your clothes downtown. It was all in the plaza, everything was concentrated. But as the town started growing, things changed. I think he really saw that. People thought he was crazy to come all the way out here to the middle of St. Micheal's. Who's going to drive out to there?"

Musicians, looking to buy or simply hang out. Part of The Candyman's wizardry over these last four decades is its laid-back approach to retail.

"If you come into The Candyman, you can walk around. You get help if you want it, but you're also left alone," Schwartzman-Palermo said. "A lot of musical places, chains, they want to sell you. They're not creating a musical experience, where someone can come in and noodle around on a guitar for four months, save their money, and then come back later and buy it without pressure. That relationship when you deal with customers playing music, it's all collaborative. That's the kind of relationship we have with customers."

A notable teacher

Schwartzman hired musicians almost exclusively, and he worked to educate them in how to properly run a business. Cook, who plays bass and enjoys writing music, remembered his job interview 20 years ago, when Schwartzman asked him to multiply seven times seven, then seven times 14.

"I said '98' and he asked me how I deduced that," Cook said. "I told him simply by doubling the original answer and I got the job. Lucky guess."

Said Schwartzman-Palermo: "My dad and numbers. It was all about 'What're you going to do as a sales person?'"

Cook: "Yeah. Are you going to make money or lose money? Do it right or mess it up? He wanted to see if I was Johnny-on-the-spot with numbers. He and I were close. We worked very well together for 19 years and he taught me a lot. ... He reared a ton of Santa Fean boys and girls from their early professional years and taught them to be a business person."

That job interview is not Cook's earliest memory of the store. Not even close. He said when he was 3 his sister took him into The Candyman. Even though he got a jaw harp that day, he was mad. He was 3; he wanted candy.

"I'm living through a little irony in my life in remembering that and having such a destined course with The Candyman," Cook said.

The Candyman misses Schwartzman, and so does Santa Fe. For more than 20 years, he served on the board of directors for the Santa Fe Opera. He did audio work on Zozobra and helped supply and install sound systems in Santa Fe churches and community centers.

The idea of community has always been key for The Candyman, Cook said, "and that tradition will continue. We're putting a lot of focus on the sense of community that The Candyman has had for the last 40 years."

The locked and empty half of The Candyman won't stay closed for long. There's tradition to be carried on. Now it's just a matter of how.