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HOME A & E CUTTING THROUGH THE CLOUDS IN OLD TOWN

Wednesday, February 27, 2008

Cutting through the clouds in Old Town

by *Tamera McBride*

The Capital City certainly offers a challenge to its residents. Everywhere I turn, people are complaining about the economic state of affairs in Michigan and Lansing in particular. Virtually everyone I encounter asks me why I moved back, especially after living in seemingly more desirable, sunny places like San Francisco, Orlando and Las Vegas.

When my husband and I landed here last summer, I began to realize how much our view of this town differs from most people, until we went to Old Town's First Sunday Gallery Walk. There we encountered an enclave of engaging people and bubbling energy in the four-block radius of what used to be an unsavory section of Lansing. Old Town is showing us how life is grand, right here at home.

Old Town isn't just a geographical spot on Lansing's map filled with your average cafés, shops, lofts and offices. It represents a promise of a brighter future. It's not just a pipe dream for someday, because "someday" is right now in Old Town. Bustling businesses have made it past the magical five-year mark and are still going strong. Budding startups are filled with the same Old Town enthusiasm.

After some sustenance at Vernadine's, we braved the soggy, wintry trek to the first gallery. There we met a llama farmer selling homemade treats, each artistically packaged in embellished sundae cups and decorative boxes. Far out of her comfort zone, she managed to captivate nearly every patron who walked through the door. Without even trying, she seemed to sell something to everyone.

Intrigued with this new spirit, we stopped in at the Artisan's Circle co-op, where a diverse group of artists work together to sell their wearable and otherwise functional, art. The artist tending the shop graced us with a refreshing, non-competitive nature, touting each artist's wares equally. Within minutes, she had a new customer, and we had a new, hand-stitched quilt in the making. Our experience at the Artisan's Circle demonstrated a simple business practice with exceptional results: Great service. Great product. Great price. Great economic sense.

The experience in Old Town gave me more than sunny greetings on a cloudy February day. It gave me hope that I wasn't alone in my view of this city, nor was I alone in my new hometown.

I was raised in the Detroit suburbs and have family here, but that isn't why I moved back. I moved back for the quality of life and what I remember to be a work ethic that is second to none. I have lived and worked in thriving cosmopolitan cities across this country, but in all my travels, I have never experienced a more solid work ethic than right here in Michigan.

So what happened? Where's the passion? Where's the die-hard attitude of knowing we're the best and working to stay there?

With so much talk of our poor economic outlook, it's no wonder we are a city of oppressive gray haze. I think it's clouding our judgment, our spirit. But in Old Town we can experience a sense of promise of how it can be better, because in Old Town it is better. If a llama farmer can turn cooking creations into saleable works of art, I figure just about anything new is possible.

This type of effort and entrepreneurship needs to be encouraged and rewarded to make this city thrive again. These are tough times, but so what? We can sit back with a sense of entitlement, or we can light a fire under our I-a-7-Rov butts

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and figure out something new to try, do and be.

And speaking of new, there's something new in town, and it's Old Town, where they're getting it done right instead of doing it the same old way.

Old Town embodies a sense of camaraderie from yesteryear and business practices that made this town a success in the first place. We have so much to be proud of. So let's peer past the clouds and take a sober look at doing things differently, the Old Town way. It's a perfect place for Lansing to start reweaving its economic fiber.



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