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Beleaguered beauty shop tries to bounce back

BY EMILY WEHUNT

NNB Student Reporter

ST. PETERSBURG
– When the Sweetbay Supermarket pulled out of Tangerine Plaza in February 2013, business at Meme’s Beauty Gallery came to a screeching halt.



Emily Wehunt | NNB

When Sweetbay left Tangerine Plaza, Jamekka Harris said, her income fell dramatically

Business at the

beauty shop had been booming, said owner Jamekka Harris, 39. She had seven employees and a steady flow of traffic, most of it from the grocery store a few steps away in the shopping center at 22nd Street S and 18th Avenue.

Then Sweetbay departed and the bottom fell out, Harris said. She lost more than half her income and struggled to pay her bills. She laid off her employees, and for a few months she worked alone.

“I had thoughts of closing down,” she said.

But Larry Newsome, the head of the company that runs the shopping center, persuaded Harris and other Tangerine Plaza tenants to stick it out. He worked with those who couldn't pay their rent on time, she said. With a Walmart coming to replace the Sweetbay, he said, surely their sales would rebound.

His counsel proved wise. Since the Walmart opened on Jan. 29, Harris said, business has picked up, although it is still not as brisk as before. She has three employees and they see 10 to 20 customers a day.

For years, Midtown did not have a supermarket. Residents had to leave their neighborhood to shop at a full-service grocery or else pay higher prices at nearby convenience stores.

The city spent heavily in the quest to bring a supermarket to the neighborhood, according to the Tampa Bay Times. It paid \$5.1 million to buy the land at the northeast corner of 22nd Street and 18th Avenue and tear down the buildings there. It loaned another \$1.4 million to a nonprofit to build out the inside of the store and spent \$400,000 to bury power lines.

Then it leased the shopping center to Urban Development Solutions, which is headed by Newsome.

It took several years for the city, Newsome and private entrepreneurs to persuade Sweetbay to put a store in the low-income neighborhood in 2005. And when Sweetbay pulled out eight years later, it took several months to land Walmart as a replacement and several more months for Walmart to upgrade the space and move in.

In the meantime, Meme's Beauty Gallery and other shops in the shopping center watched their business drop dramatically.

Harris said that she has lived in Midtown her entire life and that five generations of her family have grown up in the community. She began doing hair when she was 16 at a salon on the corner of 22nd Street S and 15th Avenue.

"It was my first job," Harris said. "It's all I know."

She continued her education and got her cosmetology license from the Pinellas Technical Education Center. She opened her salon in Midtown in 2007 because she loved the community and wanted to give back.

When business dragged last year, Harris still kept her salon open every day. The construction upgrades for Walmart made things even worse. Some people thought the shop had closed.

"Thank God for the regulars; they are what kept us going," said Harris.

She said she has been working on marketing the business more and hopes to eventually hire a larger variety of licensed staff, including nail technicians, estheticians and makeup specialists.

Harris believes in the community and is looking toward the future.

"It's a great area," Harris said. "We just need the community to strive together and keep supporting each other's businesses."

Information from the Tampa Bay Times was used in this report.

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