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Museums' shopkeepers sell memories

BY CLIFF RADEL
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Over lunch, the museum shopkeepers of Cincinnati share trade secrets as readily as they devour the slices of cheesecake gracing their dessert tray.

No one at these monthly meetings claims to be on a diet when it comes to sampling sweets. Nor does anyone let a sense of competition get in the way of swapping secrets. They do this for the good of their organizations as well their customers.

“We compete for the same dollar,” said Ruth Ann Spears, manager of the Krohn Conservatory. “But, we are in the same business.”

“There's a camaraderie between us,” said Pegge Garfield, manager of Hebrew Union College's bookstore.

“We represent the places that make this city a good place to live,” continued Irene Light, shops manager for the Hamilton County Parks.

“And, we are friends,” said Treva Lambing, manager of the Taft Museum's store. “I can call anyone and ask them how an item is selling. And they'll tell me. “I spent seven years with Lazarus and I would never tell someone at another store how I managed to blow out a T-shirt over a weekend.”

Nine heads nodded in agreement at a meeting room in Howard Hall, a sturdy brick building standing in the towering shadows of Covington's Cathedral Basilica of the Assumption. The museum shopkeepers were my hosts for this week's “Lunch With Cliff.” That's where I share a regular midday meal with people to find out what's on their minds.

Elaine Michael had note cards on her mind. The manager of the Public Library of Cincinnati & Hamilton County's gift shop passed around the just-printed cards featuring the system's Carnegie libraries. Questions followed: How much did the cards cost to print? Can we sell them in our shops? Elaine told all.

Next, the shopkeepers took turns sharing what kind of business they did during Tall Stacks '99. Comments ranged from “terrible” to “wonderful.”

Debbie Molzberger, manager of the Cincinnati Art Museum's shop, noted, “during Tall Stacks, we had a celebrity guest, Jennifer Lopez.” Leaving her limo by the museum's front door, the singing actress wore a fur coat and carried her toy poodle. A diamond tiara sat on the head of the pooch. Its owner wanted to walk the dog and tour the museum. Pets

are not permitted in the galleries. So, the poodle waited outside with Jennifer Lopez's bodyguard. Inside, the singer spent \$500 at the museum's gift shop. "All the male guards came to the front to look at Jennifer Lopez," Debbie Molzberger said. "All of the women went outside to see her dog and talk with her bodyguard."

More than souvenirs

Museum shopkeepers enjoy customers like Jennifer Lopez. Not because she's famous. But because she spends scads of money.

"We are in this to make a profit for our organizations," admitted Tammy Ketter-Edds of the Krohn Conservatory.

"But we are more than just retail outlets, selling T-shirts," Irene Light said. "We educate the public about our particular cause whether it's art or conservation."

Running the Basilica's gift shop has been an education for Rita Neville. In another career, she traveled "back and forth, year after year, to New York, buying the most gorgeous gowns. Now, that seems like a waste compared to seeing the beaming faces of the people when they come into my shop after touring our glorious cathedral."

As a first-grader, Barb Witschger visited the Natural History Museum and bought a jar of rocks. Today, as director of merchandising for the shops in the Museum Center at Union Terminal, she's "ordering the same kind of rocks for first-graders to buy when they visit." Those rocks, as with so many other museum-shop purchases, have an intrinsic value. They represent a good time someone had at a special place. That place could be a museum, a park or one of Greater Cincinnati's architectural wonders, Union Terminal or Covington's Cathedral.

The shops in these special places are not just offering refrigerator magnets and T-shirts. Or rocks. They're selling memories.

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