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Villager photo by Robert Stolarik

Richard White at his R.J. White jewelry store on Christopher St. a few weeks before closing for good after 50 years.

Small businesses are finding it harder to survive

By Lincoln Anderson

Whether because of high rent or the high cost of doing business, recent weeks have seen a spate of several decades-old small shops and boutiques in the West and East Village shut their doors.

After 50 years on Christopher St., Richard White closed his small jewelry shop at the end of last month.

“I started out in 1954 at \$60 a month rent,” he said. “I was paying \$1,600. The landlord wanted to go up to \$6,500.

“I had a stroke over this,” said White, 72, who hand makes all his jewelry. “I still have to go for therapy and I have to walk with a cane.”

White came to New York from Boston at 18 and stayed. When he opened his shop at 107 Christopher St., the strip had fallen on hard times. “Christopher St. was all boarded-up storefronts,” he recalled.

Without some sort of commercial rent control or government assistance, small businesses just can’t make it anymore, he said. “I think the mayor should do something for small businesses,” he said.

There are also rumors that Li-Lac chocolate store at 120 Christopher St. might be moving after 81 years on the block. Martha Bond, Li-Lac’s owner, said she hopes to keep her manufacturing operation at the Christopher St. location for a while, but felt the whole business might have to move.

“We had very reasonable rents for a long time,” Bond said. “These unique Village places are being forced out.”

Speaking last month, Steven Croman, who purchased the Christopher St. building containing Li-Lac six years ago, said he hoped the store would remain a tenant.

“We’d love to have them stay. We don’t want them to leave,” he said. “They’re a great tenant. They’re an institution.”

Croman said he had been “going back and forth” with Li-Lac in hopes of working something out. “For a tenant like that, we’re not looking for the top dollar,” he said.

White contends that Croman — dubbed one of the city’s worst landlords by the Village Voice six years ago — is also landlord of 107 Christopher St. However, Croman denies he’s ever had an ownership interest in the building.

“Never have. None whatsoever,” Croman said. He did admit both buildings have the same contractor doing work on them.

Another timeworn business in 107 Christopher St., McNulty’s coffee and teas, there since 1895, is said to have two years left on its lease. White predicts they’ll be the next to go.

However, Department of Finance records don’t show Croman as 107 Christopher St.’s owner. A Finance spokesperson said it’s hard to uncover a property’s true ownership if shell companies have been set up to obscure it.

According to the Voice, Croman has had running battles with tenant groups in buildings he purchased on Mott and Mulberry Sts. and on 18th St. at First Ave.; four years ago, State Senator Tom Duane was working to create a citywide tenants group of residents of all of Croman’s building.

Beyond the problem of soaring rents, both White and Bond complained Christopher St.’s quality has dropped, affecting business.

“I’ve been working with a locked door for the last 10 years,” said White. He added that in the months before he closed, someone broke his store window and tried to swipe jewelry.

Said Bond, “People don’t come to Christopher St., because of all the X-rated shops and tattoo parlors. It’s become very sleazy. There’s not that many people that come to the street that have money to spend,” she added.



Villager photo by Elisabeth Robert

Taking advantage of the going-out-of-business sale at the Lumber Store on Eighth Ave.

Another longtime presence, the Lumber Store, on Eighth Ave. between 13th and 14th Sts., plans to close no later than Sept. 23. There has been either a lumberyard or lumber store at the site since 1848. Owner Saul Chapnick said doing business has become unaffordable.

“It’s because the mayor is very unfriendly to small business,” Chapnick said. “With the mayor’s ticket campaign and insurance costs and the cost of raw goods — rent, that’s least of my problems.”

The opening of a new Home Depot superstore on W. 23rd St. between Fifth and Sixth Aves. last week didn’t help matters.

“It wasn’t because of it, but let me say, when it was announced a year ago, it was kind of the last straw,” Chapnick said. “It’s very obvious the direction the city’s taking itself in. There’s just no room for the little guy anymore.”

In the East Village, another local mainstay, Eis, which sold refrigerators and stoves on First Ave. between Sixth and Seventh Sts., also has closed. Apparently, it may not have been chic enough for a new breed of appliance shopper.

“It was like a dark-looking store and all the neighbors went in,” said Anna Sawaryn, a St. Mark’s Pl. activist. “But the new people moving in there wouldn’t do it.”

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