

COMMUNITAS

The Community Place



George Ducharme, Pat Beeman and Pat Jackson in the Community Corner

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Article from the Manchester Extra
A courant Community News Section
Thursday, Nov. 22, 2001

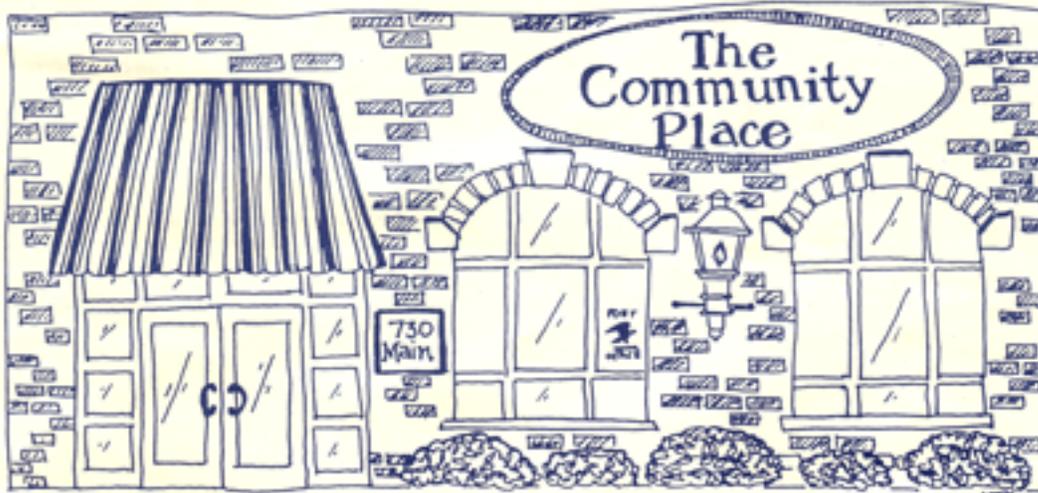
From a post office to a gathering space

BY BRENDA SULLIVAN
COURANT STAFF WRITER

Manchester _ A young man walks briskly to the back of the Community Place, holding a sheaf of envelopes and stops abruptly. "Didn't there used to be a post office here?" he asks, looking puzzled.

It is a question that will be repeated throughout the day as residents and employees of local businesses gradually discover the post office station that was housed at the card shop at 730 Main St. has moved. The decision not to renew the contract for the postal station when it expired on Oct. 31 was difficult because it served so many people

who don't have transportation, said the shop's co-owner George Ducharme. But it was necessary, he said. 'We have become a daily stop for many people, but the story of this place got buried by the tasks of the post office,' Ducharme said. In the last two years, the sheer volume of postal customers - particularly in November and December - made it impossible to concentrate on the shop, he said. The postal station served approximately 400 customers a day, not including the holiday months.



Now, the space that was occupied by the postal Station at the Community Place has been renovated to create what the owners call a gathering space.

Comfortable armchairs surround a large table decorated with fresh flowers. The space also includes a piano and a rocking chair that serves as the 'storytelling chair.' A cupboard filled with teapots and other supplies will come into play when the shop hosts "A Cup of Christmas Tea," from 2 to 4 pm. on Dec. 18.

The tea is one of several events the shop will host over the next months to bring people into the shop, for sharing information and building new friendships.

"The idea of holding these teas is to focus on slowing down and enjoying some peace," Ducharme said.

Earlier this month, the shop hosted presentations, readings and discussions on the Native American perspective of 'giving thanks.' On Dec. 5, a discussion on the meaning of peace from the Islamic perspective will be led by Fatma Antar, an economics professor at Manchester Community College.

And from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. on Saturdays throughout December, Brad

Barrows will perform carols, hymns & popular music. A former Manchester resident and assistant choir director for the First Assembly of God Church of East Hartford, Barrows will play the piano, accordion and pennywhistle. Local residents may take a while to catch on to the change at The Community Place, Ducharme said. After all, the postal service was housed at the shop for almost seven years.

The contract postal station was established in 1992 when the U.S. Postal Service decided to close the downtown office and build a new one on Sheldon Road.

The Community Place picked up the contract in 1994. At the time it seemed an ideal means of bringing people into the shop, particularly in light of the philosophy behind the business.

The Community Place shop is a function of Communitas Inc., a private nonprofit organization co-founded in 1988 by Ducharme and Pat Beeman.

The partners, who met while working for the state Department of Mental Retardation, share a common dream of developing ways to support people with disabilities as they work toward fulfilling their dreams, and to foster their inclusion in the general society.

"It is about celebrating gifts - the key is, most people don't see that those with disabilities also have gifts," Ducharme said. One of the success stories of what Communitas members refer to as "Circles of Support" is Cathy Ludlum.

With the support of Communitas seven years ago, Ludlum was able to get funding for the construction of an independent-living housing cooperative called the Common Thread Co-op on St. James Place. "What we strive to do is help people define what they want to do with their lives," Ducharme said. "Me Circles of Support are what help activate those dreams."

Items sold at The Community Place shop play a key role in the mission of Communitas. Each one of the hundreds of cards on display is hand picked by Beeman, who manages the shop, and Beverly Jackson, who serves on the Communitas five-member board of directors. Jackson, who has cerebral palsy, was persuaded by Ducharme to join the board eight years ago, "because Communitas isn't about client and service provider. It is about partnership," she said. Some cards are chosen to reflect human differences. Besides recognizing a variety of spiritual practices and ethnic heritages, there are cards celebrating other differences. A line of cards produced by Band of Angels Press, created by Cynthia Kidder, for example,

features her own children who have Downs syndrome. There also is a rack of cards made from an African plant cultivated in the United States, the kanef plant, which offers an alternative to tree cutting for paper production. Some cards also sell for as little as 40 cents. "Not everyone can afford \$1.50 for a card," Beeman said. "We are more than a gift and card shop," she added. "We are a socially conscious business first"

In general, cards and gift items are chosen to reflect the values of Communitas Inc., "such as social justice, support and inclusion," Beeman said. And whenever possible, Beeman chooses cards made by small local businesses. "We try to think Connecticut as well as regionally," Beeman said. Among local items on the shop's shelves is a series of coloring books produced in Greenwich by a company called Nana Banana Classics. Proceeds from the sale of these books go to various charities, Beeman noted. All of the shop's candles come from Bolton's Liberty Candle. "Another of our mottoes is Fair trade versus free trade," Beeman said. "What this means is we do business with companies that pay a fair wage to the person who made the product - and we offer a fair cost to the buyer." Choices also are based on how a product helps preserve a community. "This is a little more difficult to achieve." Beeman said. "But we choose recycled products - to help preserve the environment, for example, or products made by companies that are giving something back to their community." Cards in this category include a line produced by two retired pediatric nurses, under the name of Stroke of the Heart, that benefits health care for children.

It is a great relief to be refocusing on the mission of Communitas, including writing and publishing the organizations' own publications, Ducharme said.

Those who would like to attend and of these events are asked to call ahead to reserve a space. The shop can be reached at 645-3177 between 9 a.m. and 4 p.m. Monday through Friday and between 9 a.m. and 1 p.m. on Saturdays.

NOTE: The Post office is now closed – for many reasons, but the Community engagement continues with walks, events and networks of personal support. The 'format' shifts – but the people remain living full and committed lives.