

BUSINESS

Keil's Pharmacy still holding tight at 70

By ALICIA ZADROZNY
of The Montclair Times

In 1955, as Stuart Keil was about to take over the operation of Keil's Pharmacy from his father who was retiring, he asked his dad an important question.

He wanted to know the secret of the pharmacy's success.

"It's really easy," Herman Keil told him. "Everything matters all the time."

After 70 years in business at 732 Valley Road, Keil said this standard is still kept. Stuart Keil runs the business along with his son Andrew, 33. Their respective wives, Mona and Donna, have a hand in the business; Mona is in the cosmetics end of it and Donna is a practicing pharmacist.

Andrew Keil is not a pharmacist like his father and grandfather, but is a manager and is in charge of the surgical supplies, home health care inventory, and lymphadema and diabetes counseling.

"I respect what he does. He brought something new to the business," Stuart Keil said. "He's not a pharmacist. He's a better businessman than I am."

The Keils maintain a "smaller is better" attitude. Stuart Keil said the staff spends inordinate amounts of time with their customers, finding or explaining medications.

"It's beyond what economics allow." However, when asked if they should spend less time with their customers, he said, "I don't think Andrew and I could because this is who we are."

Something has been working all this time. The shop teems with faithful customers. Around town, one might hear stories about Keil's, such as one family who said the pharmacy hunted down a rare medicine for their daughter and delivered it to them late one night after it arrived.

Through the years, the business has more than tripled in size from the original 1,000 square feet. The pharmacy includes a sandwich shop, the Uptown Deli, which operates from a section of the building. Keil filled the business with an array of cosmetics and gifts.

Competition from chain drug stores and greater struggles with healthcare insurance, however, have accompanied the business.

When The Times spoke with Stuart Keil, he had just found out an order had come into his pharmacy that a customer had waited weeks for. He shook his head in frustration. The pharmaceutical company had delayed the order, he said.

Keil said that insurance companies have reduced the pharmacy's profit margins and look to reduce "the middleman" with more sophisticated, computerized methods of dispensing medications.



Keil said he did not "sign up" for these struggles.

"I would like to be a pharmacist. I like to advise people in health care," he said. "Now, I am an advocate for their insurance companies."

However, because of these issues, customers often turn to Keil's for answers that they can't get from their insurance companies, Keil said.

Not that Keil uttered the name, but he said his "competition," the CVS Pharmacy on Valley Road, "just doubled in size."

More and more, the success of the business relies on its gift selection. Stuart Keil recently spent four days in Minneapolis to start stocking inventory for the December holiday season.

Although Keil's is among a dying breed of independent pharmacies, the Keils refuse to consider their business some sort of throwback to the old days.

"We made a decision to succeed. We don't want to just hang in there," Andrew Keil said.

Stuart Keil added, "I'm not a niche. I'm a full-service pharmacy."

Keil's shares Montclair with another full-service, family-run business, Grove Pharmacy. The relationship between the two pharmacies is friendly and respectful, as they both attend to the same needs of the community and have the same issues, said Stuart Keil.

"We're both very fortunate. We're at different ends of town. We're friendly and we're fortunate that the town supports us," he said.

And Montclair has a third privately owned pharmacy, R. D. Bradner Pharmacy, at 33 Watchung Plaza.

They work hard at their business, the Keil father and son team recounted in earnest.

The pharmacy has an 18-person staff, including four pharmacists. They said their commitment to quality extends to all parts of the business. Andrew Keil said the person behind the cash register is just as important as the person filling prescriptions.

"[Customers'] overall shopping experience allows them to decide whether or not we're competent," he said.

Their commitment to his father's adage that everything "matters" has kept them at the forefront of their industry, said Stuart Keil.

"We're as current as tomorrow," he said.



Staff photo by Alan León

KEIL'S PHARMACY on Valley Road is celebrating 70 years of business in Montclair this year. Stuart Keil, right, and his son, Andrew, work together in the three-generation, family-operated pharmacy.