

'Festive and in Good Spirits'

Written by Mindy Lucas, Staff Writer

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Spirits are high for Beaufort retailers bracing for this year's holiday shopping season.

By Mindy Lucas

Jennifer Wenk started thinking about the holiday shopping season and how COVID-19 was going to affect her Bay Street business back in March.

S.C. Gov. Henry McMaster had just signed an executive order to close all bars and restaurants and many Beaufort business owners like Wenk, owner of Beaufort River Glass, feared they would be next.

And they were right.

On March 31, while residents were asked to shelter in place, the governor moved to close all

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non-essential businesses, entertainment venues, recreational and fitness facilities.

“I could see the domino effect coming and that it would affect us for quite some time,” said Wenk from her shop recently. “And going into the New Year and that’s certainly proving to be true.”

As Americans have turned more and more to online shopping this year in response to the spread of the coronavirus, small businesses and those who rely on a more tangible, or in-person experience have been concerned they might be left out in the cold.

In fact, according to the CNBC All-America Economic Survey, 55 percent of those who responded said they would do most of their shopping online, compared with 43% a year ago.

As Wenk explained, the pandemic has affected everything from what she carries to how it leaves the store. Case in point: even the gift boxes and bags she usually uses, which are part of her brand, have been hard to come by.

In addition, her usual stock of handcrafted pieces has been off.



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Normally Wenk attends a number of trade shows over the summer to peruse and purchase what glassmakers and other artisans from around the country are offering. While she carries a number of pieces from local artists she also relies on goods from these “big shows” to fill her store.

But many of those shows were cancelled as COVID began to spread across the country.

Normally by August, she would have purchased or had all her stock ordered and her holiday plan in place, she said. But of course this year, everything was upside down due to COVID.

“It’s a dilemma because I don’t know how to plan for this,” she said.

Still, the little shop known for its cool and colorful vibe is doing OK, she said. People are steadily coming in.

“I don’t know what the end of this month will be like, but right now we’re on track,” she said.

Over in Port Royal, Nancy Harris Vista had also started feeling the pinch earlier in the year.

Owner of Nuances, a clothing, jewelry and gift boutique on Paris Avenue, Harris Vista also had to close her doors in March and stay closed for all of April.

“Unfortunately, April and May is when we do a lot of spring apparel,” she said, adding that she’s been trying to make up for the loss of sales since.

Part of that strategy has been to run sales and hold special events at the store. She and a friend organized the parties, even required masks and took temperatures at the door, and had no more than a dozen at a time to attend.

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She also used the time to create a website, something she'd been meaning to do for a long time.

“I figured it was time to join this century,” she said laughing.

While these efforts have proved somewhat successful, it's still been exhausting – trying to adapt and stay on top of everything.

“It was like you worked twice as hard for less money,” she said. “But I try not to complain. We're healthy, we have a roof over our head and we still have our business.”

In the meantime, spending might be a little off, but people are still shopping, she said. If there's an upside, it may be that people are celebrating or focusing on the important things in life “a little more” she quickly added.

“People have inquired about when I was going to put out our Christmas stuff,” she said. In fact, she'd just finished decorating.

Still, the affects of the pandemic have been humbling, she said.

“I feel grateful to the community and to God because it's been a tough year,” she said, adding that many of her regular customers have become more like friends in the 17 years she's been open.

“I feel really blessed, because when times get tough, they are the ones who have pulled me through,” she said. “But it seems people are still pretty festive and in good spirits.”

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Back in Beaufort, Jennifer Wenk echoed Harris Vista’s thoughts.

“I am so grateful and feel so fortunate for the business that I have been able to create and maintain,” she said, adding that she was also grateful to live in an area that supports small businesses and attracts visitors.

She said she tries to remember people aren’t just coming in necessarily to shop or purchase something. They’re also coming in for the experience – whether it’s to marvel at something beautiful or handmade or to simply forget themselves for a little awhile.

“A lot of people are down,” she said. “They might be losing jobs, or have COVID or have lost someone to COVID.”

That’s why she tries to make her store a fun and funky place to visit, she said.

“The simple answer is you keep it lively, you keep it happy and you keep it energetic,” she said.

If You Go

Many downtown Beaufort businesses are featuring extended hours and are open until 7 p.m. on Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays. You can check out Nuances’ new website at www.nuancesportroyalsc.com