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Clockwise from left: Cory Correia, owner and artist at Isthmus Tattoo & Social Club, stands in front of the plywood mural protecting his storefront. Ken Clary and employee Amber Meisel work the counter at Clary's Old Fashioned Gourmet Popcorn. Randall Elementary students paint murals on the plywood boards covering the Downtown Madison Visitor Center kiosk.

# DESPITE DAMAGE, STATE STREET BUSINESSES PRESS ON

Business owners get help with damage, but they openly wonder about their long-term future.

BY **KIMBERLY HAZEN**

On a warm June Saturday, after the police-involved murder of George Floyd sparked nationwide unrest, State Street was buzzing with activity. Friends dine together in an outdoor cafe at Nick's Restaurant, a street musician in front of Overture Center plays a haunting version of "What a Wonderful World," and onlookers take in the recent and severe changes to the historic area. During the previous week, peaceful daytime protesters were replaced by violent, destructive groups at night who broke windows, sprayed graffiti, set fires, and looted stores. A week later, businesses were open and serving customers behind plywood storefronts.

The destruction and thefts over several nights came just days after many downtown businesses were beginning to open following months of COVID-19 shutdowns. Coupled with a summer of canceled events including Maxwell Street Days, Art Fair on the Square, and Taste of Madison, many business owners on State Street feel less than optimistic about their survival. In a recent survey conducted by the Central Business Improvement District (BID), 40 of the 100 businesses polled revealed they are unlikely to reopen. What's more, these numbers could increase as more of the 152 businesses on State Street respond.

Ken Clary, owner of Clary's Old Fashioned Gourmet Popcorn, just steps from the Capitol Square, feels like there may be trouble ahead for his business. He calls the State Street destruction on the heels of the coronavirus a "double whammy." Although he is hanging on, it may be what shuts him down for good. He predicts his business will be slow for the next year. "I'm not very optimistic about how this will end up," he states. "It's going to be hard to bounce back."

Sandi Torkildson, former owner of A Room of One's Own and past president of the Greater State Street Business Association, says there is more at play here. "Running a small business is already tough, and summer in Madison is where these businesses make their money," she says. "This summer looks pretty depressing."

However, Torkildson added that while the pandemic and riots are two challenges, rising rent costs may be another. She explains that rent expenses downtown may be outpacing what small businesses are able to bring in each month.

Kyah Fuller, an employee/owner at Community Pharmacy, says that as devastating as things look, the State Street business community at least feels united. "The vibe here is that everyone is very supportive," she remarks.

That support is coming in the form of funds to help businesses with the costs of rebuilding. More than 3,300 donors raised nearly \$200,000 for the Boys & Girls Club of Dane County's Downtown Emergency Relief Fund. The fund-raising organizers are partnering with the BID to distribute funds for downtown businesses to help defray the cost of repairs.

Cory Correia, owner and artist at Isthmus Tattoo and Social Club, had not yet heard of the financial nurturing from the BID but says businesses need to look beyond damages to the whole picture. He knows that change needs to happen, and he has been joining protests and has planned an event to benefit the NAACP. "It's stressful for sure in not knowing where the future lies or where we're going, but I'm happy to see people out and doing artwork and being a community again," Correia says. "We're open and we're pushing forward. We're not giving up." ■■