

Down At Norman's Grocery

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Walking into Norman's Grocery store is a bit like going back in time.

An old wood stove and the aromas of meatloaf and barbeque pork chops greet customers coming through the door.

If the visitor is lucky, Reva Tutt, the owner, is sitting behind the cash register doling out a serving of old-fashion commonsense.

Road weary customers come in looking for a quick meal and solitude. Instead, they find a hot meal, cold beer and man who most likely knew at least one of their relatives.

On a recent night, CNN was thundering from the wide-screen television, when a tired-looking 30-something man walked in.

"What you got hot to eat," he asked, then telling of his 12-hour work day.

After receiving a thick barbeque pork chop between two slices of white bread, the man inquired if Tutt remembered him.

After saying the man's name, Tutt starts recalling stories involving the man's father. Ten minutes and a couple stories later, the man's girlfriend walks in, "You remember her," he asked.

"Yes, I remember her father and grandfather even better," said Tutt, stirring a pot of homemade chili.

A few more minutes, three stories and the couple is out the door with pork chop sandwiches and tales to tell around the dinner table.

Throughout the night, customers stop by the community store to purchase bread, cigarettes, soda, chips and water. More than a few stop in for a quick purchase, but end up chatting about family members, the weather and their community.

Tutt said operating a small, independently owned store is getting tougher as more grocery chains and big-box stores come into the area.

However, stores, such as Norman's Grocery, offer a service larger stores cannot.

"If you can recognize customers and call them by their name, they feel like you care about them. That keeps them coming back," he said.

"That's something bigger stores cannot offer."

Smaller stores cannot provide the conveniences chain stores can, such as curbside pick-up or internet shopping.

But locals continue to stop by his store, even for the smallest items, said Tutt.

"You got to have the personality. If you don't have a people personality, the customer isn't going to come back," he said

Yet, Tutt admitted, even with personality operating a community store is daunting in an area with changing demographics.

As the communities around the Norman's Grocery fade, so do the customers. The U.S. Census Bureau reports that Norman isn't large enough to be counted during the census, according to its web site.

Older generations remember the Norman area of Culpeper County as once having fertile fields, now fallow. The humming of tractors is now silent and a distant memory.

Not too many generations ago, they recalled, there were several community grocery stores along the 20-mile stretch between Sperryville and Culpeper. Now, those mom and pop stores are closed; the buildings are either abandoned or converted into art or antique shops.

Along Sperryville Pike there are only three independently owned grocery stores that remain open, as large grocery stores in Culpeper have siphoned off customers.

“It’s getting hard,” Tutt admitted, somewhat reluctantly.

Family tradition

While Reva Tutt has only been ringing up Vienna Sausages and Raisin Bran going on five years, a Tutt has operated Norman’s Grocery for nearly 120 years.

Reva is the third-generation of Tutts to run the store, which started in 1894 with his grandparents, Louis Henry and Mary. The original store caught fire in 1908. The Tutts moved a short distance to its current location, the town’s former post office, that same year.

“I learned to crawl and walk right here on this floor,” Tutt said.

In 1946, his parents Louis William and Sadie took over the store. Reva proudly remembers his father never operated a segregated store.

“My father always said their money is as green as ours,” Tutt recalled, with a slight snicker.

More than 50 years later, his brother, Louis William Tutt Jr. took over the store and ran until his death five years ago, when the current owner took over operations.

“Everybody speaks highly of him,” Tutt said of his brother. Inside the store, dozens of youth sportstrophies are displayed. Tutt explained his brother was active in youth sports, even sponsoring teams.

It’s unclear if a fifth Tutt will run the store in the future. Tutt’s daughter, Reba, lives and works in Brazil. Her husband, Ronald Ramon, plays professional basketball in a Caribbean league. Despite being thousands of miles away, Reba still helps out with the administrative side of the store, he said.

“I am hoping she comes back to run” Norman’s Grocery, he said.

Last week was an oddity for Tutt. For the first time this year, he had time off from his regular job, a mail carrier.

Tutt said work keeps him young and healthy. During a beer delivery, he checked the delivery against the invoice and stocked the coolers.

Between stocking coolers and ringing up customers, Tutt spoke about his work at the Post Office, a career he started four decades ago.

The most poignant started in the mid-1980s when he was assigned a new route. The postal customers quickly discovered their new carrier was an African-American and gathered more than 200 signatures protesting an African-American delivering their mail.

“I knew I had two options,” he recalled. “I could get upset or I could be determined that they knew I was reliable and trustworthy and to deliver their mail,” he said.

For the first few years, Tutt recalled receiving bitter treatment. However, after five years of reliable mail delivery he was accepted by those on his route.

“By year 10, if I wasn’t carrying their mail, they were calling the post office asking ‘where’s my mailman?’” he recalled.

Life’s biggest lesson

At twilight Friday, Tutt was parked in a green Chevy truck overlooking rolling fields, hay was baled and wood cut surround a white, simple, two-story farm house.

“This is where I go to think, where I learned to have a personality, to read people, to gather my thoughts,” he said, looking over the fields.

Cattle once roamed the fields, but no longer. Tutt recently sold the farm, just off of Route 522. It’s not something he wanted to talk about in detail. “I just had to,” is all he would say.

Tutt said at his age, life has taught him plenty. And often he is reminded of one of the most important lesson when customers talk about his late wife, Davina, who passed away 13 years ago.

“People come in telling me what a good woman she was. How they have fond memories of her,” he said. “She treated people with respect. It doesn’t matter what you acquired in your life, it’s how people remember you. People aren’t going to remember you drove a Maserati, they are going to remember how you treated them,”

Surrounded by stocked shelves of barbeque sauces, Hamburger Helper and white vinegar, Norman’s Grocery customers unexpectedly learn

some of life's most valuable lessons and a bit of common sense after a visit.