

Shared Memories

Fond recollections surround Gertz Department Store in downtown Jamaica

BY DEBORAH LYNN BLUMBERG

In October 2002 Margaret Hodges-Johnson, 47, a best-selling author of African-American fiction, signed copies of her new book "True Lies" in the African American bookstore in the basement of the Gertz Plaza Mall on Jamaica Avenue in Queens.

Mall patrons examined display cases of flashy gold chains and gigantic hoop earrings and browsed rich, silk African fabrics and dresses inside Ad's African Fashion. Young couples lingered on 70s-style orange plastic benches in the food court sipping coffee from plastic foam cups and eating greasy pizza.

For Hodges-Johnson, a Jamaica native, the book signing was not her first visit to the Gertz building. Some 40 years ago she and her mother took trips to the same location, then the site of the elegant, high-end Gertz Department store, with dim lighting and plush carpet. Well-dressed mothers and daughters spent full afternoons in the store shopping for high-quality gowns, gloves and coats. Gertz closed its doors in 1981, but it still stands out in Hodges-Johnson's mind as an important childhood memory, a place where she wore her finest clothes to help her mother buy stockings and shoes.

"Going to Gertz Department Store back in the '60s was great eye candy for me," she said. "We didn't have a lot of money when I was growing up, so any trip to Gertz was rare or for a special occasion. I remember how



Gertz sat vacant until it got some help from the newly formed Greater Jamaica Development Corp.



Gertz Department Store during the Great depression.

the noise of Jamaica Ave. disappeared the moment we walked through those glass doors with brass trim."

Shared Memories

Hodges-Johnson is not alone in her vivid memories of the store that was once known among locals as Jamaica's Macy's. Nostalgic former customers are still sharing strong feelings for the family-owned business that sold everything from books to bridal gowns, the likes of which many say no longer exist. Gertz lives on, at least figuratively, on the Web through postings on message boards and over e-mail.

In the Woodhaven guestbook of Neighborlink.com, a site that hosts bulletin boards and chat rooms for various New York neighborhoods, one former shopper remembers visiting Gertz's village of puppets at Christmas time and sliding down the store's escalators. Another posts memories of her first big day taking the train by herself to shop at Gertz. She also entered one of the store's modeling contests as a pre-teen and visited Santa during the holidays. Others recall shopping at the flagship Jamaica store's four branches in Great Neck, Hicksville, Bay Shore and East Hampton.

One customer reminisced about the Hicksville branch's ice cream malts — soft ice cream served in a glass and drizzled with chocolate or strawberry syrup. She and a female friend would indulge in malts after the young woman who personalized charms in the jewelry department handed out her mistakes to the girls. "Still miss Gertz," she posted on Neighborlink.com.

Some might compare Gertz in its heyday in the '50s and '60s to the modern-day Saks Fifth Avenue or Neiman-Marcus with its special events, individualized service and high-end clothes, cosmetics and accessories. The store was a place where parents instructed children to whisper and not to touch the bright display cases showcasing gold and diamond jewelry.

Gertz spanned almost the entire block at New York Boulevard and Jamaica Avenue and included seven floors of merchandise, a dining room and a beauty salon. In the "Long Island" dining room, waiters in pressed shirts and pants served Long Island Iced Teas to adults. For dessert, children gobbled down "clown ice-creams," a cone atop a ball of ice-cream with raisins for the eyes, nose and mouth.

Gertz organized an advisory council of female customers who suggested improvements to shopping and services. The store was also one of the first businesses in Queens to install escalators, said Toba Buxbaum, 78, granddaughter of Benjamin Gertz, the store's founder. "They put them in and everyone came rushing to see them," she said.

Recalling Their Past

James Gray, 65, was born and raised in Jamaica

and worked for 11 years at Gertz as a salesman and buyer of toys, furniture and records and cameras in the flagship store, which at the time was the largest retail establishment in southern Queens and one of the largest in the city. "I was one of the youngest buyers at the time by 10 years or more," he said. "Working at Gertz was the happiest period of my professional life." Gray hasn't returned to the building since it became a mall, because, as he said, he "did not want to see the destruction of a great store."

Audrey Lawrence, 48, Hodges-Johnson's childhood friend, recalls the day when her Aunt Dorris, who worked at the store for 25 years, arranged for her and a friend to perform a ballet and a tap routine at the store's annual employee award banquet. Her best friend's mother worked in the china department and would often take the children to the store's ice cream shop during her break. Lawrence remembers being scolded for slurping up the last of her shakes.

When Gertz closed, I felt like something wonderful had been taken from me.

Lois Hansler
Gertz Customer

"We only did it because the ice cream was so creamy and delicious," she said. "That shop had the best ice cream and I haven't found any other that has come close."

Lois Hansler, 56, born in Queens but now living in Florida, took her son to the store's dining room for dessert treats and to Gertz's Santa for his first Christmas Santa picture. "When we moved to Islip and my daughter Tami was born, we tried to duplicate our outings," she said. "It was fun, but not the same. When Gertz closed, I felt as if something wonderful had been

taken from me. But I still have the great memories of lots of firsts."

And the memories go on — of store festivals, of furniture sets that have lasted 30 years, of fathers selling gloves at Gertz during Christmastime to make extra cash for the holidays and of the store's petite sizes, sometimes hard to find in the '60s. Experts call these memories of past personal experience "autobiographical memory" and say that sharing these memories with others serves a social function.

Memories Matter

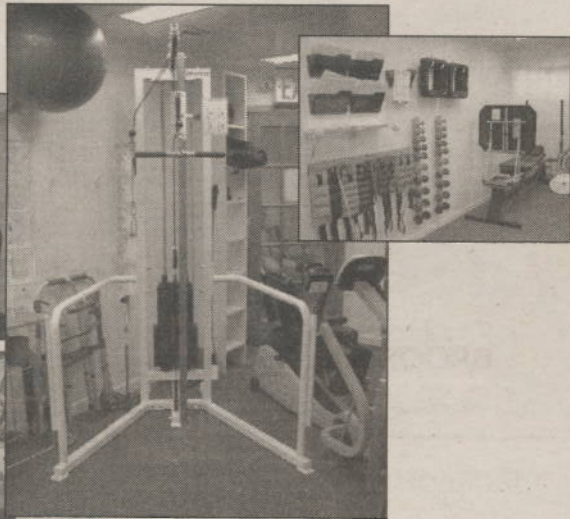
"Sharing a specific memory of the past is a way to connect and to build intimacy," said David Pillemer, professor of developmental psychology at the University of New Hampshire and an expert in autobiographical memory. "We don't have to always be together to have intimacy, a social relationship or social contact. If we can talk about specific things we did together we can create those bonds."

Reliving childhood memories can also affect people's current mood, transporting them from the frustration of everyday aggravations to a happy state of mind, said Pillemer. "When we think about times when we're happy or sad we do get happy and we do get sad. Sharing those specific memories will re-engage that feeling

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Sharing Gertz memories

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 and make you feel good right now.”

How It All Began

Gertz, a Russian immigrant, founded the family business when he opened a candy shop in 1912, which later turned into a dry goods store — in 1918 — that sold items such as newspapers, school supplies, fishing rods, watches, boxed cameras, record players and stationery on Jamaica Avenue. During the Great Depression, B. Gertz Stationery and Sporting Goods grew to become a major Queens department store.

Since the late-1960s and 1970s the neighborhood has changed from a middle-to-upper-class neighborhood into a mainly working-class neighborhood, but southeast Queens was once the city's third largest shopping district.

“When the First World War ended in 1918 my grandfather came back from the war, got married and opened the store,” said Buxbaum. “It started growing and growing until they started selling everything you could possibly think of — washing machines, clothing and furniture. My father would never let me go to any other store because everything was there. The only thing I can think of that we never sold was a car.”

In addition to clothing and furniture sections, the store housed a print shop, photography, hairdressing, knitting and

book departments and a toy section that spanned a whole floor. At Christmas-time, Buxbaum's mother, Sadie, ran half the department that was stocked with dolls and games and Buxbaum's aunt managed the other half, selling larger toys such as bicycles.

“It was a complete department store,” said Buxbaum. “Everyone in the family was involved somehow. My brother ran the lamp department and my cousin made deliveries. They don't have stores like that anymore these days.”

The Family's Success

Family business experts agree. Researchers suggest that today about 90 percent of businesses in the United States are family owned. Few make it past the first generation, though. Data collected on family-owned businesses since the 1960s has been fairly consistent, said Ira Bryck, director of the Amherst, Mass.-based UMass Family Business Center. “Two-thirds of these businesses fail to make the jump to the second generation, so Gertz did pretty well.”

After more than 30 years of family ownership Gertz changed hands when the family sold the store to the Allied Stores in 1941, but Benjamin's sons still worked in the store as managers. By the 1970s, Gertz was suffering losses as Jamaica's population shifted toward lower-income families and suburban shopping malls lured away potential customers. In the late 1970s several major local employers, including Macy's, closed or moved, and Gertz soon followed. In 1981 high rent costs and declining sales forced the store to close, and the building stood vacant for several years.

Rebirth

Though the Gertz family no longer owned the store, in the mid-'80s family members helped to revive what used to be a thriving shopping hub. Stanley Gertz, Benjamin's grandson who co-founded the not-for-profit Greater Jamaica Development Corporation, helped to bring in retailers to reopen the building as a retail mall and office building that now boasts 2,000 workers. Vendors offer shoes, sporting goods, cell phones and tattoos, beauticians style flat twists and hair weaves and the African American bookstore hosts nationally known authors.

Hodges-Johnson reflected on her childhood impressions of the department store, feelings that seemed to foreshadow its closing. “Overall, my memory of Gertz Department store was that it was a beautiful place beyond my means.” In her whimsical memories of the former store, perhaps Lawrence explains best why nostalgia for Gertz thrives on the Web. Gone are the days when children read the complete Bobbsey Twin book series courtesy of a department store birthday book club, when “Pie Club” members receive a free pie on their birthday or when shoe department attendants keep detailed cards on customer preferences.

“Going to Gertz Department Store was a childhood memory that still brings a smile to my face,” said Lawrence. “We were all sad when it closed. Some things you just never forget.”

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