NEWS

"If you walk away, everyday it'll rain, rain, rain"
IT WILL RAIN BRUNO MARS

This rug store has woven the Elm City's fabric for five generations

BY NORAH CHOWDHURY
CONTRIBUTING REPORTER

Down Elm Street, just past the New Haven Green, an Americana-style sign emblazoned with "Kebabian's Rugs" juts out above the sidewalk.

A peek into the store, where Persian rugs are spread over every visible surface, offers New Haveners a glimpse into a bygone era. Kebabian's represents the old and the new — a family business that's been carrying traditions for 144 years while adapting to the new customs of each era.

Kebabian's was founded in 1882 by Turkish-Armenian Yale student John C. Kebabian, class of 1888. He imported rugs from Constantinople to pay for his tuition. Now, the store is run by fourth-generation owner John P. Kebabian Jr.

The business is involved in every step of the rug-making and maintenance process: Kebabian's helps customers source designs and imports them from countries like Nepal, India and Afghanistan. It also cleans and helps restore older rugs. The Kebabian family prides themselves on a quality-first philosophy, with a strong emphasis on the humane treatment of workers, both in the store and overseas.

The New Haven storefront employs mostly refugees from the countries their rugs come from, John P. said, both out of a desire to help people in need and because they have the most experience dealing with textiles.

"People from around the country buy the rugs from Kebabian's because of the quality," Thomas Masse, a lifelong New Haven County resident, said. "When I did go into the store, my first time, I found it to be a very pleasant, helpful, educational process. Just a very nice buying experience."

Kebabian's makes rugs meant to last at least 100 years, Joshua Kebabian, John P. Kebabian Jr.'s son, remarked — the only problem is that there are no return customers. For Joshua's father, the hand-made rug business is especially satisfying because of the immense effort and expertise it requires.

"I know from start to finish who touched that material and the final product," he said. "It's rewarding when you see the final product, and the smile on the face of the customer."

In the early years of the 20th century, the rug store's next-door neighbor was a tack shop. But unlike the saddle store, Kebabian's was able to survive both the arrival of automobiles and the shifting tastes of local consumers. Although family heritage and history still matter deeply for the Kebabians, John P. and Joshua said they've taken the business in a more modern direction. Nowadays, the store's main customers are interior designers looking for custom rugs.

"We can make it exactly the way they want it: exact size, exact texture, exact color," the elder Kebabian said.

Given the store's age, many patrons have purchased its rugs across generations, and many New Haveners consider the store a community fixture.



ETHAN SULLIVAN / CONTRIBUTING PHOTOGRAPHER
Kebabian's on Elm Street has produced high-quality rugs for many New Haven patrons, including Yale affiliates, since 1882, when a Turkish-Armenian student at Yale started the business to help pay for his tuition.

"My daughter now lives in Puerto Rico, and she is getting all of her rugs from Kebabian's," Stephanie O'Malley, a Yale psychiatry professor, said. O'Malley said three generations of her family are Kebabian's customers.

"It's an institution," she said.

Over the years, the Kebabians have witnessed the evolution of downtown New Haven, and have mixed feelings about the city they call home. As a child, John P. saw downtown New Haven lose its status as Connecticut's premier shopping destination with the rise of suburban malls. The family also recently clashed with city leaders over a proposed bus rapid transit system, which would see a fast-moving bus lane created along Elm Street. The plan would effectively eliminate the parking spots for many Elm Street businesses.

Despite occasional disputes with local officials — and conversations about moving out of New Haven during the 1960s and 1970s, when New Haven's downtown was in decline — the Kebabians feel strongly that New Haven is their home. John P. said that over its five generations, the store has provided Yale with almost all of its rugs.

"I see New Haven as a very unique city, with tremendous potential," he said.

Kebabian's is located at 73 Elm St.

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After 13 years, a revamped New Haven newspaper returns to print

BY DIYA SHRISHRIMAL
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13 years after ceasing publication, the New Haven Advocate is back on local newsstands.

Earlier this month, volunteers distributed 10,000 copies of the publication, a now-quarterly arts and culture newspaper, across the city. The Advocate ran as an alternative weekly — an independent paper typified by The Village Voice in New York — from 1975 until 2013, when the Tribune Company, the then-owner of the Hartford Courant, bought the publication and rebranded it as CTNow in 2013.

The revived paper's small editorial team, which operates the publication from New Haven coffee shop Spruce Coffee, said the reboot follows years of preparation and described it as a return to the community-authored journalism and traditional print media that characterized the old Advocate.

"If you make something that's supposed to appeal to everybody, it loses 100 percent of its spirit and relatability," John Guillemette, an editor of the relaunched Advocate, said. "We're just trying to make something that is for the people of New Haven, and it's very clear that that's the case. It's of high quality. There's a lot of substance. You can really sink your teeth in."

Tom Smith and Colleen Van Tassell, both former writers for the New Haven Advocate in its first iteration, partnered with Guillemette — a writer, artist and cartoonist — to relaunch the publication. The new Advocate's first issue, published on Sept. 1, included feature stories, profiles, humor writing, commentary and writing about the local arts scene.

Van Tassell said she wrote for the Advocate from 1996 through 2004, contributing columns and features. For the last five years, she said she had been hoping that the Advocate would come back, and when she met Guillemette at an event last year at Yale's Schwarzman Center, she said, her "pipe dream became a reality."

Guillemette said he was interested in the project because of its print format. The newspaper's webpage features a map of locations where readers can pick up the Advocate, and some stories are only available to read in the print issue.

"While it's technically possible, please don't read us online," the website's homepage reads. "We're too sexy for that."

Van Tassell and Guillemette said they met two days after Guillemette had finished putting together an exhibit at Lost in New Haven Museum focused on the history of New Haven's newspapers. After seeing print publications disappear during his childhood, Guillemette said that working on the exhibit was akin to "the process of watching newspapers die again."

"Cartoonists face a lot of the same challenges that journalists face in terms of reckoning with media conglomerates who have taken everything over," Guillemette said. "I like engaging with a real piece of paper: it gives you way more lateral. The uniqueness takes a huge hit when you go digital."

Van Tassell said that the new Advocate is not exactly like its predecessor, which was published on a weekly basis. The quarterly does not currently include "listings" that showcase local venues and restaurants, for example. Van Tassell said she's received requests to re-incorporate "personals," a feature of the old Advocate through which people could leave messages to other readers.

While the Advocate's editorial staff is small, Guillemette said, "the contributors are large."

"Our only submission guideline is that the piece pertains to New Haven. We are decentralizing the media out of the conglomerate and returning it to the hands of people," Guillemette said, adding that 35 writers contributed to the fall edition of the publication.

Smith explained that the publication, penned "by the public and for the public," is trying to carve out its own lane in New Haven's media landscape.

"We are not trying to compete with other news outlets in town. We think there is an opening for the stuff we are planning to provide," Smith said.

On the publication's launch day, Van Tassell said a truck carrying 10,000 copies arrived at Erector Square, where volunteers met to pick up and distribute papers. Within two hours, 8,000 copies of the Advocate "were all over the city." A launch party for the publication drew guests in their 20s and in their late 70s and 80s.

Smith said the group "keeps running into people" who say the new Advocate reminds them of its predecessor.

"'It looks like it. It reads like it. It smells like it,'" Smith said, recalling readers' observations of the revived publication. "'Must be it.'"

The New Haven Advocate is set to release its next issue on Dec. 1.

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DIYA SHRISHRIMAL / CONTRIBUTING PHOTOGRAPHER
Earlier this month, the New Haven Advocate re-launched as a quarterly alternative newspaper more than 50 years after the publication's debut, featuring news, commentary and humor.