



Fairfield-Sun.com

Serving the readers of Fairfield, Connecticut



Ken Kleban, above, and his father Al realized their vision for The Brick Walk, after deciding to expand the commercial center to the east seven years ago. (Photos by Wayne Ratzenberger)

The Brick Walk: 'The best space in town'

Written by Bill Bittar

Thursday, 15 April 2010 17:21

Developer Al Kleban and his son, Ken, follow the practice of "target tenanting" to bring the right mix of businesses to The Brick Walk in Fairfield's downtown.

Take Island Outfitters, a clothing and accessories store with summer and beach ware. It has locations in Martha's Vineyard, Rhode Island ... and now Fairfield.

"We knew they were right for Fairfield, so we sent a driver up to get them and showed them around," said Ken Kleban, 51. "It wasn't easy, but we got them."

Then there's the mozzarella bar Al Kleban visited in New York.

"He was convinced that was a perfect tenant for this location," Ken Kleban said, "so he contacted their headquarters in Italy to convince them Fairfield is the place to be."

However, even Al Kleban has his limits.



"They were interested, but couldn't move fast enough," his son explained. "We found a replacement, and they're here right now. And it's probably the most successful business in Fairfield."

He was referring to Pizzeria Molto, a wine and mozzarella bar that's routinely crowded on Friday and Saturday nights.

Of the eight buildings on The Brick Walk's Post Road campus, all of the retail space is filled, and only a lone office vacancy remains.

"It takes hard work," Ken Kleban said. "My father is never tiring in attracting clients."

Kleban Properties owns commercial property in the downtown, from Patriot Plaza to the Border's-Victoria Secret building, as well as a number of properties with a partner on Black Rock Turnpike.

Since taking over management of The Brick Walk from his other partners seven years ago, Al and Ken Kleban have expanded and remade the center with new buildings at 1189 and 1215 Post Road, a brick promenade, an underground parking garage, and extensive remodeling to existing buildings on The Walk.

"We wanted to make it into a lifestyle center, a place where people can park their car and go to the dentist," Ken Kleban said. "They can shop. They can go to lunch and dinner — basically spend a good part of their day here, rather than getting in and out of their car on the Post Road."

The new buildings are mixed use with retail and office space, as well as a total of six apartments.

Kleban said people can live, work, shop and recreate — all in one location.

Meet the tenants

A baker frosts a cake inside Amore Baking Co., among the newer businesses in the Promenade of the Brick Walk complex.

Ken Kleban, clad in a black dress shirt and dark sunglasses, wore a look of pride as he walked along the sidewalk outside storefronts of The Brick Walk complex on the Post Road on a bright Thursday afternoon.

"We're getting Gofer Ice Cream next week, and The Brick Walk Fish Market just opened," he said. "That's very exciting."

Gofer Ice Cream has stores in Darien and Stamford and is in the process of franchising its product, according to Kleban.

He said Tommy Febbraio of Coldwell Banker has been instrumental in helping Kleban Properties find new clients, such as Fairfield Stationers, which moved from across the street.

Carrie Underwood's hit song, "Before He Cheats," played on the radio pumping through the complex when Kleban dropped in at Amore Baking Co.

The air was filled with the sweet aroma of confectioners sugar. A woman wearing her hair up frosted a cake behind one counter, and the owner, Patti Jonker of Fairfield, stood by the register.

"Do you want a cupcake, Ken?" a smiling Jonker greeted Kleban.

Jonker became a Brick Walk tenant almost by accident.

She was selling biscotti at the Farmer's Market on The Walk and telling a customer about her plans to open her own bakery, when Kleban overheard the conversation.

"Ken said, 'Do you want to see a space?'" Jonker recalled. "And here we are."

Kleban also went to Magnolia, a jewelry, handbag and accessory store, to see how owner Diane Byrne was doing before walking across the promenade to Vintage Garden and Island Outfitters.

Kleban noted how the design of the adjacent 1189 and 1215 Post Road buildings mirror each other with architectural details including the arches, "so people will think of it as one complex."

A European atmosphere

Lee Ann Womack's song, "I Hope You Dance," now played as Kleban entered Vintage Garden. Flowers and gifts filled the quaint shop.

"I'm coming up on my one year anniversary on May 1," owner Kathy Lee said from behind the counter.

Lee, a Fairfield mother of three, used to be a flower manager at Hay Day, a now defunct food store in Westport.

When she decided to open her own shop, she took a drive around town, when The Brick Walk caught her eye.

"I contacted my Real Estate agent because it was a beautiful complex," she recalled.

Clothing displays, a rack with pairs of flip-flops, and jewelry were among the wares inside Island Outfitters next door.

"It's going fabulous," manager Kathy Fish said of opening in Fairfield. "We love this location. It's like moving into a new neighborhood. Everybody gets along. We're all compatible."

Fish called The Brick Walk a fun, "almost European atmosphere."

"But it has a small town community feeling," added Stacie D'Eramo, the store's assistant manager.

She said it reminds her of Naperville, Ill., a Chicago suburb with stone streets, small eateries with patio seating and open waterways.

"I feel we have the beach and the Sound," D'Eramo said of Fairfield.

Call anytime

Bicycles in a variety of models and colors stood on rows of racks that climbed all the way up the high ceilings inside Trek, 1215 Post Road.

"Trek is the most dramatic retail space in Fairfield," Kleban marveled.

He said an employee will work in a concept store, eventually owning it, agreeing to run it as a Trek store supplied by the company.

Owner, Lisa Joaquin, a Connecticut native, "has already rocked to the top of the sales charts for Trek," according to Kleban.

The Klebans and their team of property managers ensure their buildings are well maintained, while catering to their tenants' needs.

"We're not the lowest priced space in town, but we want to be the best space in town," Kleban said. "I think when they meet my father and our property managers, they know we will go that extra mile."

"When we talk to a tenant, I give them my cell phone number, and I'm available 24-7," he said. "I get phone calls in the middle of the night and it's OK. I'll answer."

A big screen TV in the parking garage runs advertisements of The Brick Walk's businesses on a loop, and Kleban reaches into his own pocket to chip in when the stores pay for a newspaper ad together.

While Kleban and his sister were growing up in Easton, patronizing clients was an unwritten rule whenever family members went out to eat or shop, he said.

"We patronize our tenants," Kleban said. "That comes from my father and grandfather. It's a family tradition."

Family fun

Kleban, who has four children with his wife, Barbara, strives for a safe, family oriented experience at The Brick Walk. The complex is protected by security cameras around the clock.

Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny visited The Walk during their respective holidays, and entertainment on the promenade includes magic shows for children.

A pedicab — a three-wheel bicycle with a carriage — takes visitors around the campus.

“We run it during the Farmer’s Market,” Kleban said.

The Farmer’s Market begins June 5 and will be held every Saturday from 9 a.m. till noon.

Promenade Performances will begin in May with a Beatles tribute band, an Elvis impersonator, a hot dog eating contest and a classic car show on Thursday nights.

Kleban left his financial firm seven years ago to join the family business his grandfather, Irving Kleban, started when he bought properties on Black Rock Turnpike in the '50s. His father, Al Kleban, lives in Naples, Fla. for part of the year but is still active in the business at age 80.

Amid a national recession, Kleban said the right mix of businesses has put The Brick Walk in a strong position for the recovery.

“When the economy comes roaring back, we’ll come roaring back with it,” he said. “Everyone’s in this for the long haul.”