

Genuardi's packs it in

Written by Laura Stetser
Tuesday, December 11, 2012 02:04 pm



Shoppers, employees mourn closing of Fire Road supermarket

EGG HARBOR TOWNSHIP – Holiday music was still playing throughout the empty store, but the mood was anything but cheery at Genuardi's Tuesday, Dec. 11, one day before the 12-year-old grocery store was set to close "forever," according to a sign in the window. The doors will shut at 6 p.m. tomorrow.

Two cashiers rang up the few customers who were purchasing some of the scattered items remaining, on sale for 30 to 50 percent off, but most of the shelves sat bare, the aisles blocked off.

The rest of the employees, left with nothing else to do but wait, sat together in the food court, quietly talking about what to do next and how sad they are about the closing.

Announced in October by parent company Safeway in a form letter to employees, the closure leaves the nearly 90 local residents facing unemployment two weeks before Christmas.

"I've had a job since I was 15 and never been on unemployment. Guess I am going to have to now," said Bill Ravert of Egg Harbor Township, a 23-year employee of the company who, with the help of his wife, is raising their grandson.

Ravert said he has some employment prospects, but until an official offer comes in, he will have to sign up for the benefit he took pride in avoiding until now.

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He said that during his tenure with the company he opened several stores, but had never had to dismantle one until now.

Each day since the announcement, employees like Ravert have had to unravel all that they worked to build up since the store's opening in 2000, including the relationships they built with longtime shoppers.

"Grocery stores become like families," said bakery department employee Leah Chesterton of Egg Harbor Township, who has worked here since its opening. "We helped build up that department, create things and put everything out. To watch it go dark is sad. We've gotten to see customers' children grow up. They came in when they were pregnant, then came back in for baptism cakes and birthday cakes."

The Fire Road store also became a community gathering place of sorts, with some groups using the food court as their weekly meeting place, according to Donna Lake of Egg Harbor Township, who also worked in the bakery department for 12 years.

"We had a coffee klatch that met here each Sunday after church," Lake said. "Last week they met here for the last time and had a Christmas party, brought decorations and exchanged presents."

Lake said some of the elderly customers came in so regularly that the employees began to prepare their orders in advance of their arrival.

"We have this one man who would come in every Thursday and Saturday at 6:20 a.m. like clockwork," she said. "He would order the same thing every time. So the night before he would come in, we'd get his deli order ready so it would be ready for him when he got here. He'd buy three everything bagels and the same sandwich every time."

"For a lot of our older clients, this was their outing. They would come and socialize. Now I don't

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know where they are going to go.”

The closest supermarket is the English Creek ShopRite, more than 4 miles away.

The employees said that in the past few weeks, they have had customers sobbing in the checkout lanes, sending in cards and calling, thanking the staff for all of their years of service.

Lake said the employees have bonded throughout the years, but are unlikely to stay in touch as much as they would like after they go their separate ways.

“It’s like when you go to school and it’s time to graduate. You say you’ll keep in touch, and I hope we do, but life gets busy and things happen,” she said.

As for job prospects, she said she needs to get searching but hasn’t had the heart to delve into the task just yet.

“I am too old to want to look for something else and too young to not be able to,” she said.

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