



ANN ARBOR'S RETAIL MENSCH

**How Mark Hodesh beat
the odds to become downtown's
most iconic retailer**

BY CHRIS HIPPLER

In a muscular building on the western edge of the Ann Arbor business district is Downtown Home & Garden, the warm heart and gritty soul of the city.

Joyous during the holiday season and earthy in the spring, the store is a melange of practical, fun and luxurious products year round.

Whether you drive into the “barn” or walk into the store, you’re likely to be greeted by the owner, Mark Hodesh, a big guy usually wearing a pork pie hat and a welcoming smile. He has lovingly but forcefully shaped the store to be a reflection of his values, personality and bone-deep commitment to Ann Arbor.

Hodesh will transfer ownership of Downtown Home & Garden, effective Jan. 1, to his hand-picked successor, Kelly Vore.

But make no mistake: He’s not going anywhere.

He retains ownership of the building, runs Mark’s Carts – a collection of eight food carts in a courtyard on Washington Street – and has a 50 percent interest in Bill’s Beer Garden, an urban beer garden that takes over the parking lot after the store closes. He plans to remain active in Downtown Home & Garden, too. “I’ll be the schmoozer-in-chief,” he says.

He has guided the store through recessions, urban exodus, online shopping, big box stores and gentrification while keeping it relevant, vital and distinctly Ann Arbor. At a time when other long-standing Ann Arbor retailers are calling it quits – Middle Earth, Seyfried Jewelers, Selo/Shevel Gallery and more – Downtown Home & Garden is thriving and planning for the future.

How did this townie of townies, a high school dropout, become a mainstay in downtown Ann Arbor and amass businesses and property worth millions? Here’s a glimpse at

How community-minded is Downtown Home & Garden? It hosts free, informal events year round, serving as a hub for foodies, gardeners, birders and more. Who else in Ann Arbor hosts an annual pickle contest, jam contest and Big Green Egg tailgate party? Even Lewis, the big tabby who sleeps whenever and wherever he wants, gets fan mail.

what makes him tick, his idiosyncratic business methods and lessons for other Ann Arbor retailers.

Hodesh first took root in downtown Ann Arbor in 1972 when he founded the Fleetwood Diner. But he put his taproot down in 1975 when he bought Hertler Bros., a feed and seed farm store built in 1906 on South Ashley Street between Liberty and Washington. By the mid-’70s, the store had become an anachronism and was being run, ironically, by a Hertler sister, Emma, 89 years old.

When the building and business came up for sale, Hodesh rolled the dice. He sold his half of the Fleetwood to his partner, Rich Alford, put down his life’s earnings of \$40,000 and jumped into the deep end of the downtown retail pool.

It was an emotional and impulsive decision. “When I first walked into the barn it was dark and uninviting,” Hodesh recalls. “A string of three light bulbs hung across the ceiling, and the roof leaked. But there was a

In 1975, what is now Downtown Home & Garden was still Hertler Brothers, a farm supply store.

dark mystery to the old building and I loved it from the first day.”

Undaunted by his lack of retail experience, Hodesh walked over to the downtown Ann Arbor Public Library for his first lesson in being a merchant. “I got a book on the history of Macy’s,” says Hodesh. Then came his second lesson: “After reading the book, I went to New York City and walked around the store.”

Hodesh attended Ann Arbor High School, now Pioneer, and by his own admission “was a horrid student.”

“Why didn’t I finish high school? I couldn’t do the homework. It was a term paper in English class that brought down the ship. Taking notes on 3-inch by 5-inch cards, research; I couldn’t do that.”

Back then, teachers could be brutal. “On my second trip through geometry, the teacher said, ‘Hodesh, I don’t know if you’re smart or stupid. Probably some of both.’”

After dropping out of school he tried his hand at a variety of jobs but it was a gig at Red’s Rite Spot that whetted his appetite for the exciting energy in the restaurant business.

Townies will remember Red’s as a tiny diner on East William that later moved to Maynard. Hodesh loved the hard work and hustle, and when the opportunity arose he bought the Fleetwood Diner where “everything clicked into place.”

Hodesh has actually built his store up twice.

From 1975 to 1980, he transformed Hertler Bros. from a faltering feed store to a successful retail store. So



successful, in fact, that Raupp’s Campfitters came knocking. They offered to buy the business and the building but “the building has never been for sale.” The timing was right, and so was the price, so Hodesh sold Hertler Bros. and extended a 15-year lease to the new owners.

After a few years, Raupp sold the business to John McGovern, the store manager. Meanwhile, Hodesh, ever the restless entrepreneur, bought an inn in Castine, Maine. While he, wife Margaret Parker and daughter Jean enjoyed New England life as innkeepers, business wavered at Hertler Bros.

In 1997, Hodesh and McGovern couldn’t agree on new terms so Hodesh chose not to renew the lease. McGovern removed the Hertler Bros. sign from above the drive-through, hauled away all of the inventory and left Hodesh with a big,

empty building.

The seed for Downtown Home & Garden was planted.

That was the year Susan Pollay met Mark. “I got to know Mark as many people did, as a customer,” said Pollay. “Every Saturday, I’d come down to the store to get food for the birds. He was always there and always fun.”

Pollay, executive director of the Ann Arbor Downtown Development Authority since 1996, has seen the influential role Hodesh plays in the community. “He understands that retail never stops changing because we, the customers, never stop changing.”

She also noticed the behind-the-scenes role of Parker. “Margaret is the secret sauce to Downtown Home

Before drive-throughs were ubiquitous in strip malls across America, the Hertlers were prescient in building a real drive-through in their downtown business. Originally for farmers driving their horse-drawn wagons, today it serves Downtown Home & Garden shoppers driving SUVs. Vehicles enter off Ashley Street and leave the building from one of two exits.

& Garden,” Pollay says with a smile.

The Margaret Parker Studio is on the second floor of the building but her touch is everywhere. She ➔

➔ designed the Downtown Home & Garden logo and guided the metamorphosis of the parking lot into an urban garden with a greenhouse and handsome iron-fence surround, crowned with an elegant pleached hedge.

Parker designs the colorful seasonal newsletters that are the primary marketing tools for the store. Each newsletter features her art on the cover as well as photos of employees in fun poses throughout the store highlighting different products. Hodesh writes most of the copy as well as a column where he recounts the history of Ann Arbor with visceral details.

Long before Shary Brown was organizing the Ann Arbor Street Art Fair as executive director, she was organizing seed packets, flower bulbs and tubers at Hertler Bros.

A townie's townie herself – like Hodesh, she grew up in the Burns Park neighborhood – Brown worked at the store in the late '70s, helping Hodesh establish his retail legs. She received her juris doctorate degree from Wayne State University in 1975, but after a few years of law practice, she wanted out, and Hertler Bros. was a perfect refuge.

"Mark has always seen the store as a service business more than a retail business," says Brown.

Brown earned a reputation as a tireless worker when she led the Ann Arbor Street Art Fair from 1998-2009, but she gives it up for Hodesh.

"He's got a work ethic like I've never seen," says Brown, opening her eyes wide for emphasis. "And he set high expectations for everyone who worked at the store.

"He's got this zest for life that is infectious. We called him Hodaddy

Mark Hodesh on ...

The future of Downtown Home & Garden:

"I sold the store to Kelly (Vore) because I wanted an orderly succession. She is very good and I didn't want her to get away. There's still a lot of room to amp up the business."

"A lot of what I'll be doing in the store is teaching. Want to know the fastest way to sweep under the staircase? Use the leaf blower."

His approach to business at DH&G:

"There was never any big idea. Opportunities came up and I made decisions."

"Anybody could be more profitable per square foot than we are but that's because we have a lot of square footage. It's a frivolous use of space. But it smells nice and I like it."

"Box stores use their size to make money. We use our immediacy and simplified system to make money."

"When I hire people, I'm not interested in experience. What we do here is not complicated."

Downtown retail:

"I don't believe lack of parking is a disincentive. If your store is good enough people will get to it. We've got a lot more parking here than Macy's does at 34th and 7th."

Customer service:

"People know when you're serving the community."

"Price is ephemeral. Being taken care of is what people want."

"Out-of-towners recognize the store as a place that could be in their town: 'I had a store like this in my hometown.'"

because we felt like a family and he was our leader."

Hodesh eschews business plans. "We've grown organically," he likes to say. He follows his instincts. Every morning, he looks at the front display windows for hand prints and smudges from noses pressed against the glass to see what people have been looking at.

Above all else, he listens to his customers and tries to feel the pulse of the community.

In the late '70s the oil embargo and high heating-oil costs had

homeowners scrambling for more economical ways to heat their homes. He responded by selling cast iron wood-burning stoves.

He picked up on the organic gardening movement very early and the store became a hub for serious gardeners looking for seeds, tubers and roots normally found only in catalogues.

The newest addition to the store is the clothing department featuring iconic American-made brands like Filson, Stormy Kromer and Carhartt. And the selection of hats has grown over the years from a few straw gardening hats to shelf after overflowing shelf of hats of all kinds.

The kitchenware section, though,

is closest to his heart. "My mother was an extraordinary cook," he says. "I saw her bouillabaisse shut down the conversation at the dinner table. Two martinis into the evening, people sit down, yakety yak. She serves the bouillabaisse. Silence.

"She influenced my perspective of the world."

Behind Hodesh's blue eyes lies a blue-collar sensibility that makes him good company for the food entrepreneurs at Mark's Carts, the truck drivers who deliver merchandise to the store and the customers who shop there regularly. But a scowl from Hodesh can send a shiver down the spine of any of them.

Years ago, while pitching in a softball game, a batter complained that the loft of Hodesh's pitches was too high. Hodesh thwacked the ball into his glove a few times, glared at the batter, then rolled the next pitch across the plate. "Is that better?"

He does not suffer crybabies, loafers or slackers.

Known for his generosity to employees, friends and in the Ann Arbor community, he is also a hard-nosed businessman who doesn't blink at the negotiating table. Witness the sale of the store and subsequent reacquisition.

On a cool, sunny weekend last fall, Hodesh's family of businesses was hitting on all cylinders.

Shoppers sifted through a new shipment of flower bulbs in the barn at Downtown Home & Garden while being treated to samples of savory barbecue cooked on the Big Green Egg, and delicious Fleetwood Chili that Hodesh cooked.

On the north side of the building, Mark's Carts was humming. The outdoor eating area, festooned with umbrellas and picnic tables, was packed as people decided between a rice plate and bun combo at San Street and burrito grande at El Manantial.

Saturday night, the action shifted to the south side of the store. When Downtown Home & Garden closes, the parking lot opens up like a night-blooming primrose as tables and chairs emerge, and Bill's Beer Garden comes to life. The malty smell of Michigan craft beers wafts together with talk and laughter.

As he has developed his properties, the value of his holdings has soared, but when asked about their worth, he becomes reticent. "Money is a logical end to a good idea and hard work," he says.

For nearly 40 years, Hodesh has been a leader, champion and investor in downtown Ann Arbor. His influence behind the scenes is broad but the seat of his

Bud Mosely, whose typewriter shop was close to where Bill's Beer Garden is now, was rocker Bob Seger's first manager.

power – the fiefdom where he is the Amaryllis king – is the block off South Ashley Street.

In downtown Ann Arbor, though, change is constant. The Ann Arbor City Apartments now casts its enormous shadow on Downtown Home & Garden in the late afternoon, but rather than being dwarfed, the building becomes more stalwart and resolute.

"He doesn't see the apartment building behind him as a bad thing," says Pollay. "It's a good thing. There are more customers, more people downtown to enjoy the things he enjoys."

Hodesh burns hot, drinks life in big, thirsty gulps, and loves a good party. At his 70th birthday bash last fall, Bill's Beer Garden was packed and Hodesh was dancing to an R&B band having more fun than anyone else. You would never know he had a double knee replacement earlier in the year.

Hard work is in Hodesh's DNA, and he's still restless. What will he roll the dice on next? Who knows, but you can bet his love for Ann Arbor will be a guiding force.

