

# A little bit of everything: Mill District General Store in Amherst offers an array of items

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AMHERST — On her first visit to the Mill District General Store and Local Art Gallery, Hannah Staiger marveled at the array of items for sale inside the 91 Cows Road business.

“It goes on and on and on, it’s set up in a classy way and there’s so much selection for a local general store,” Staiger said while sitting on a bench outside the North Amherst store, as her son, Matteo, 6, enjoyed a lollipop on a recent afternoon. “If I needed anything, I could find it.”

Describing the store as “unsuspecting,” Staiger said she bought an artist’s flying pig magnets and a small balloon-powered toy car for Matteo — who also had a bag of free popcorn while they were browsing inside.

That any product imaginable might be somewhere in the store is the goal of management. The store is set inside some of the commercial space, overseen by W.D. Cows. Inc., that is surrounded by the North Square Apartments complex.

“We want to have something for everyone,” says manager Stacey Theriault, explaining that the store will carry essential products for the nearby residents, such as toilet paper and paper towels, but also items the larger community expects from a general store.

“Generally we will have everything you need, from unique to useful and helpful, affordable as well as high end,” Theriault said.

The selection of products includes food, pasta sauces, pickles and jams, penny candy and even freshly brewed Esselon coffee. There are toys, games, books and health and beauty supplies, pet food and pet toys and electronics. Wind chimes and hats are on other racks, and near the checkout counter are wooden signs for local landmarks like Puffer’s Pond, Lake Wyola and the famed Salamander Crossing.

Seasonal items include seeds and gardening supplies, and beach items, though those are being put away in favor of supplies people need to prepare Thanksgiving dinner.

At one end of the store is the Local Art Gallery, where local artists can display their works for sale. Hannah Rechtschaffen, who oversees the store and is director of placemaking for W.D. Cows, said 22 artists from 14 towns are currently exhibiting.

“We’re excited to create a hub for people right around here,” Rechsthaffen said.

Two new artists this month include Orlando Santos, of Holyoke, who has a display of acrylic paintings, and Zahava Friedman of Inner Light Pottery of Leverett. Each artist rents space on a monthly basis and the store takes a 20% commission, as well. Rechtschaffen said this hybrid model gives artists a sense of ownership.

She anticipates having more artists teach classes during the winter months and other programming both in the store and in the area outside, such as a winter solstice celebration.

Near the entrance to the gallery, an art supply section gives people what they need if they are feeling creative, such as acrylic and oil paints, brushes and canvases.

Theriault said the general store places an emphasis on local. “We’re making sure neighbors have the opportunity to put their products with us, their art with us,” Theriault said.

The general store will also support businesses that are nearby. As one example, with Balanced Birch Pilates studio recently opening a few doors away, Theriault said the general store will carry items that clients there can use in their instruction.

Minnie, a German shepherd basset hound Theriault owns, serves as the greeter when the store is open, weekdays except Mondays from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m., and weekends from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Also unique to the store are the two bathrooms, one with a jungle theme, with a prominent giraffe, created by artist Ivy J. Mabiuis and the other with one-way glass that allows the user to look out on the surroundings and has a sign at entrance reading “Novelty Bathroom for Thrill Seekers.”

The bathrooms fit the theme of a place that, for those who live nearby, may want to come to regularly, and visitors will revisit.

“We want to keep people on their toes,” Theriault said. “This can be a new adventure every time they come in here.”

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