

# Preserving a Hyde Park gem

Its owner's retirement threatened to close quirky shop, but a loyal customer saved it

By Glenn Jeffers  
Tribune staff reporter

He was delicate with the box, careful as he pulled it from the counter's glass casing and opened it with his fingertips. Inside was a hand-crafted mirror from China, decorated with a painting of a blue serpent.

Already hunched from a bad back, Richard Boyajian bent in closer and picked up the mirror by its gemstone handle. He had sold two oth-

ers like it that day, he said as strands of gray hair fell over his face. This was the last one in stock.

"No place else has this," Boyajian said.

At 82, Boyajian was retiring from the international bric-a-brac business. And for a while, it seemed as if Hyde Park would lose its home for incense sticks, beads, Kenyan soapstone carvings and other worldly wares.

But in buying the business this month, longtime cus-

tomers Alison Harris Alexander ensured that the quirky and cluttered Boyajian's Bazaar on East 53rd Street would live on in the eclectic South Side neighborhood.

"We had to keep it in the neighborhood," said Alexander, 44. "I think a lot of people would miss it if it went away."

She helped to keep alive a quirky corner of a nationally known neighborhood that, like many others in Chicago, has also become the home of coffee-shop chains and other businesses one can find anywhere.

"We have almost nothing like that anymore," said Jay

Mulberry, program director and vice president of the Hyde Park Historical Society. "We've been losing places like this for years."

The cozy craft store had developed a loyal clientele since opening 24 years ago, selling atypical knickknacks from such places as Egypt, Poland, Ghana and the Czech Republic. Shelves lined the walls, filled with stone and wood carvings, mother-of-pearl and brass candleholders made only in India, dolls from Africa and crystals from Austria.

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## SHOP: Gandhi was inspiration for business

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Boxes of beads sat in the middle of the store, stewing with the scents of exotic wood and incense. All the gemstone beads were from Hong Kong, Boyajian said, joking that he owned 1 percent of the world's beads.

"My intent is to be international," Boyajian said.

The beads attracted Alexander to Boyajian's store one day in 1984. She had moved from Albany, Ga., to run Alpha Kappa Alpha Inc., an African-American sorority based in Hyde Park. As she headed to a grocery store, Alexander walked past the store.

"I ended up buying beads and coming back year after year," said Alexander, who uses them to make jewelry and decorate dolls for friends.

When Alexander heard in September that Boyajian was retiring and the store could close, Alexander inquired about buying the business from him.

Boyajian plans to help Alexander understand the business before he and his wife move in January to a retirement center in Olympia, Wash. Alexander takes over Wednesday.

Boyajian said he would bring as much of his inventory as he could to the center and continue selling and fixing jewelry.

"We'll tell them, 'Bring what you got here,' and we'll try to fix it," Boyajian said.

Though Alexander plans to retain the store's name and ec-

centric fare, she said she would make a few changes. Gone will be the trademark cash box and itemized receipt pad that Boyajian used to add up and record purchases. Instead, Alexander will use a computer and point-of-sale software.

"Let's just say I plan on automating the inventory," she said.

Boyajian built his store along cottage industry principles he discovered while studying the beliefs of Mahatma Gandhi during a teaching mission to New Delhi in the late 1960s. Gandhi had advocated the home-based goods industry as a non-violent method to stand against British rule and industrialization.

The concept of peaceful protesting resonated in the Chicago-born Boyajian. After graduating from high school in the early 1940s, Boyajian joined the Enlisted Reserve Corps to avoid being drafted. Nevertheless, Boyajian was called up during World War II and served for three years.

After he returned to Chicago, the self-described anti-war advocate finished his graduate degree in biochemistry and became a teacher. He converted to the Quaker faith, which matched his pacifist beliefs, and he met his future wife, Polly, during a Quaker meeting.

Boyajian continued teaching at the University of Chicago Lab School after his trip to India. Retiring in 1980, he was determined to organize recycling in his neighborhood, work in landscape architecture, or open a craft store.

He abandoned the recycling program once the city started its own. The craft store idea finally won over his architect ambitions, he said.

"I was Gandhi in my thinking," said Boyajian. "The world needs help to get better."

He kept the store as minimal-

ist as possible. He wrote down sales on a receipt pad and added prices in his head, using a handheld calculator only to double-check.

He didn't advertise, and he didn't accept credit cards. Usually, pocket change was enough. On a recent day, a customer making her own earrings bought six earring backings, eight curved wires and two pins. The total: \$2.76.

Boyajian also reused what he could, from cardboard boxes with different brand names to plastic bags that had contained copies of The New York Times.

Boyajian donated a portion of his profits to charities, most notably UNICEF. After selling items at last year's annual meeting of Quakers in Milwaukee, Boyajian donated almost \$3,000 in profits to the American Friends Service Committee.

"I'm not sure how he became that way," said Boyajian's daughter, Laurel, 46, an artist living on Vashon Island, Wash. "It's linked to the Quaker philosophy to look for the good in everyone."

While on her way to a vegetable store one October day, Nancy Stonor-Sanders and her daughter Olivia took a detour into Boyajian's.

Stonor-Sanders bought a tiny, glass snail for her daughter, who had earned all A's on an interim report card.

"Remember, the snail is breakable," Boyajian said as he handed the item to Olivia, 10.

As the two spoke about their shared Armenian heritage, Stonor-Sanders learned that Boyajian was retiring. She told the shopkeeper she loved stopping by and perusing the store whenever she was on 53rd Street. "It reminds me of my childhood," Stonor-Sanders said of the store. "I always poke in and leave with something I didn't plan on getting."