75% of polled Norwin High School students visit Irwin at least occasionally

25% of those students visit Irwin often or always

10,000 people attend Light Up Night

UPS AND DOWNS IN OUR DOWNTOWN

By Maddie Butina

Woleslagle Interiors

When Lois Woleslagle opens her shop Saturday mornings, the scent of baked goods wafts up 4th Street and muffled Christmas music plays from distant speakers. If not for the COVID-19 pandemic, bustling holiday shoppers would fill the sidewalks and shops; and parades, cookie walks, and shows would drown out the quiet background music. Despite the shutdown , downtown Irwin is far from boring this year, especially thanks to the efforts of community and small business leaders.

Over the course of 50 years, Lois Woleslagle, owner of Woleslagle Interiors, has seen both change and continuity within the Irwin area. Though the town is doing well, COVID-19 is posing struggles for small business owners. To combat this, Woleslagle and other business owners are innovating ways to modify promotional events, which have been successful due to the support and spirit of community members.

"Everybody is slow right now because of COVID," said Woleslagle. "Everyone's business is down because you know, people aren't really out shopping right now. Because they're afraid."

This pattern Woleslogle describes is not just impacting Irwin, it can be seen right now in small towns and businesses across the globe. According to The American Bankruptcy Institute, it is predicted that the total number of small businesses that will file for bankruptcy could increase by 36 percent in 2020.

However, small business owners in Irwin are not standing by. Just like in the past, community and business leaders are taking initiative to draw in business.

"We have a group of all-volunteer business owners," said the owner of the Cheesecake Caffe, "that comprise of the Irwin Business and Professional Association. They're the ones that put on the 19 free events that you can attend in Downtown Irwin."

Under normal circumstances, promotional events like these bring attention to the town and it's businesses. However, these traditional events obviously needed to be modified in order to fit our current situation.

They've [The Irwin Business and Professional Association] done an amazing job of changing with the times and keeping things safe for everyone to enjoy- and that goes for the changes this year as well with COVID-19, " said owner of the Cheesecake Caffe.

"We've adapted those events. We've been able to continue some of those and have been able to have some of them, and are looking for ways to continue being able to have some of them as we enter the new year."

Promotional events only do so much on their own. To be successful, they need the support of a community.

The annual Light Up Night holiday parade looked different in 2020, but Main Street was still decked out for the holidays!

"This is a town that continues to grow and thrive not only because of the small businesses support of each other," said the owner of the Cheesecake Caffe. " but because of the amazing community that we have."

"I like the feeling of community when it comes to parades and other events, ", said Norwin High student Elizabeth Long. "It is just a joyous time for everyone, and it really makes you feel like you belong."

Among this "amazing community," there is a surprising population of Norwin High School students who are loyal patrons to Irwin businesses and frequent attendees of the town's events.

A local poll among high school students revealed that 75 percent visit Irwin at least occasionally, and among that number, 25 percent visit Irwin often or always. The reasoning for this occurrence is varied, but is mostly a result of atmosphere, events, and the desire to support community businesses. Some students have always been enthusiastic patrons of the downtown area.

"I go to Irwin when I am looking for gifts, when I want food and to go to The Line or to get SALSA SAMS!!!" said junior Abigail Knouse.

Still, there are some Norwin High Schoolers who have different preferences.

"I feel like I would rather go to Pittsburgh because there's a better variety or restaurants and stores," said another student.

A large number of students cite the scenery or "charm" of the town as one of the main reasons they visit.

"I love how old timey it looks. It's just so breathtaking when I walk down the sidewalk," commented a freshman student.

Heartwarmingly, it seems that the support of patrons has solidified over the COVID-19 pandemic, as junior Triniti Joy stated, "My family and I have tried to visit more Irwin businesses to support them during this hard time."

Small towns are facing unprecedented challenges as of now, and Irwin is no exception. Fortunately, the dedication of local business owners and community members are maintaining the special qualities of our town.

"At one time, " said Woleslagle, "we used to look up to Greensburg and Ligonier, but now they're looking up to us. And we're doing very well, considering little towns right now."

The Cheescake Caffe

Activities in Irwin to Cure Your Boredom- Pandemic Edition

- Visit Irwin Park
- Walk around town and look at art on display (it's everywhere)
- Order takeout from your favorite local restaurant
- Shopping (if able, if not: window shopping)
- Buy a mystery movie pack from Wyld'n Wooley's
- Visit the Farmer's Market

Local art displayed on the side of a building

A Community that Cares

If there is one thing that tells you about the Irwin community, it is the Care and Share food pantry and library.

The stocked shelves ensure everyone in need has access to food and reading materials. They rely on the honor system and the generosity of neighbors.

The most popular...voted by Norwin students

Event: Light Up Night

Restaurant: Tie between Colonial Grill and Burgher Burger

Shop: Main Street Music

Activity: Visit an antique thrift store (like the Fleatique)