

Hardware store builds neighborhood

• Article by: [NEAL ST. ANTHONY](#) , Star Tribune

Updated: July 10, 2011 - 10:41 PM

In the aftermath of the tornado that struck north Minneapolis in May, a small, surviving hardware store showed why it's prospering in a neighborhood other businesses left years ago.



[hide](#)

Darryl Weivoda, center, owner of North End Hardware and the Lowry Cafe, poses with day manager Steve Swinney, right, and night manager Jean Cerisier.

Photo: David Joles, Star Tribune

On the afternoon of Sunday, May 22, John Richards, a North Side homeowner, took a nap in his second-floor bedroom and woke up on the front lawn.

"I heard the windows shattering in the house and the glass exploded on me ... and it felt like the room was moving and the next thing I knew, I was on the front lawn, with my face still in that pillow," he recalled of surviving the tornado that cut through north Minneapolis.

"My legs were badly scraped but I was OK. About a day later, I could hardly move a muscle, I was so sore."

Not so sore that he couldn't take his broken windows to North End Hardware and Rental, a business that remains a cornerstone of the neighborhood and proved it after the storm.

"I brought the windows in on Monday and they were fixed the next day," said Richards. "Believe me, those guys were working overtime pushing out the windows."

The CEO of North End Hardware and Rental at Penn and Lowry Avenues is Darryl Weivoda, a neighborhood kid who worked at the business for 25 years before buying it a decade ago -- a time when the number of neighboring businesses had slid from about 50 in 1960 to just 10.

As the storm cleanup began, his store extended credit immediately to Urban Homeworks, PPL and dozens of other landlords and residential customers who lacked cash to pay for critical repairs.

"We are a stable business here to serve the people the best we can," said Weivoda, modestly downplaying the decision. "Everybody is still recovering. We've always extended credit to neighborhood customers and landlords we know. The key is how we can improve the neighborhood from here."

Weivoda, 54, a soft-spoken man who has spent a decade on what finally has become a promising turnaround of one of the North Side's landmark commercial nodes, has staked a lot of his time and treasure on that better future. There are about 15 going concerns at Penn-Lowry today. His store employs 10 people.

Making a comeback

And it takes more than a tornado, which missed Weivoda's corner by a few blocks, to derail the neighborhood's commercial comeback that has been incubating for several years. Crime has declined, according to police statistics. Commerce is up. Property values are slowly rising in the wake of the devastating housing bust.

"People are starting to invest in their properties again," said Weivoda, who expects revenue this year to be about 10 percent short of the record \$1.2 million in sales he generated in 2006, at the top of the housing bubble. "We'll be fine. We had to cut back some on employee hours during the recession and we only order what we need, not cases of inventory. Penn-Lowry is a diamond in the rough. This neighborhood is coming back."

Indeed, in January 2008, Weivoda and a partner had just raised \$265,000 to buy the dilapidated, abandoned building next door that once housed a windowless convenience market that attracted crime. They renovated it as a home for three new businesses on the corner.

That same month, Wellington Management opened its \$8 million Penn Lowry Crossings, just across Penn Avenue, including a bustling Aldi grocery store and renovated Family Dollar Store. Last summer, neighborhood resident Shantae Holmes opened All Washed Up, a coin-operated laundry. Neighborhood chiropractor Greg Olson expanded his gym and practice in nearby renovated space.

But Weivoda was unable to find an independent restaurateur for the building he renovated next door. So he and his wife mortgaged their home and invested another \$250,000 to open the Lowry Cafe in May. Weivoda and a store employee did some of the restoration work. Architect Pat Waddick, a North Side native, gave the restaurant the look and feel of the Lowry Cafe that opened on the corner in 1932, including spacious booths and tin ceiling.

"I dragged my heels," said Janet Weivoda, a CPA with her own practice, while enjoying lunch at the Lowry. "But this restaurant is beautiful. We're doing something positive. And the neighborhood is behind us."

The Lowry features good food and huge windows, serves breakfast and lunch daily and dinners Wednesday through Saturday. It plays to capacity for Wednesday taco nights, Fish Fridays and just introduced Saturday "date night" dinners, including a bottle of wine or two beers, for \$32.

First area restaurant in years

The Lowry is the first restaurant to open in the neighborhood in more than a generation.

"Economic development deters crime," said Minneapolis Police Chief Tim Dolan, a North Side native who has known Weivoda since they were kids. "Darryl is in a league of his own. He looks out for his neighbors."

Said Council Member Barb Johnson, who represents the neighborhood: "Darryl is a fixture, and he's driving some of the growth on that corner. Every civic event, every neighborhood meeting, he is there. He gives ... whatever is needed."

Weivoda hired Steve Swinney, a Chicago native and veteran of Granite City restaurants, who happens to be the brother-in-law of North End's window shop manager, to run the restaurant and its staff of 17 mostly part-timers.

It's working so far. A lot of neighbors are heading to The Lowry instead of the suburbs.

"It's his food and menu," quipped Weivoda of Swinney. "He runs it. He grew up in restaurants. I've offered to sell it to him for the amount of the mortgage ..."

Sarah Huss of Edina Realty, a North Side resident, said the corner of Penn and Lowry has become an attractive corner for prospective homeowners.

"People want a good grocery store, a coffee shop or cafe, a hardware store and an improving neighborhood where they can get a lot of house in a good deal," Huss said.

Neal St. Anthony • 612-673-7144 • nstanthony@startribune.com