

Come all ye faithful

The lead up to Christmas is the time to get behind the local businesses that battled through lockdown, writes Andrea McCullagh

Everything just stopped. The phone was silent and the emails ground to a halt. Graphic designer JoEllen Henderson always had a steady flow of work from her corporate clients and bounced from one project to the next. But as soon as the COVID-19 lockdown came into force her business changed suddenly.

"Nobody even said anything," Ms Henderson said.

"Nothing happened. No emails, no phone calls. It's like everything slowed down.

"I didn't take it personally. I almost felt it was like a self-imposed holiday and I didn't feel bad."

For the first time in her life she felt it was acceptable. The shock of life in a pandemic was palpable in the wider community and she simply decided to stop and wait. The ups and downs of running a small business over the years gave her the resilience to deal with the sudden shutdown and within a few weeks work started coming her way. New clients, keen to work on rebranding their businesses, got in touch.

The slowdown was also a chance to pour her energy into the Crows Nest Mainstreet business group where she volunteers as a director. It understandably had to cancel the annual Crows Nest Festival, which attracts thousands of people to the suburb, and instead she helped organise a smaller and COVID-safe alternative called Back to the Nest. Paced out over two days in mid-October, it welcomed buskers and street artists to

the village and offered deals in the local eateries for locals and visitors. Supporting other small local businesses is important to her.

"Absolutely. Haven't we gone through the stage of the massive big shopping developments being key and smaller village type places suffering. But they are coming back into their own."

Across the north shore there have been a range of responses to the pandemic among the local business communities. Some areas have gone into decline, while others are thriving.

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Peter Vickers, who serves as both President of the Ku-ring-gai Chamber and secretary of the Lindfield Chamber, is well placed to see the differing responses.

Lindfield's business scene has remained steady through the pandemic but in the greater Ku-ring-gai area it's a different story. While cafes and restaurants are mostly doing well, with some even increasing their trade, quite a large number of shops became vacant.

"The business owners (at Lindfield shops) managed to survive quite well because they worked hard at it," Vickers says.

"But in all of Ku-ring-gai there are quite a large number of vacant shops where certain businesses said 'it's time for me to retire'."

He has noticed that more people are supporting local businesses now as a large group of the population is vulnerable to the virus. Taking a trip to a large shopping centre means mixing with more people than a small local street.

One of the businesses to survive, and actually thrive under these conditions, is Dutch Hideout. Located on Lindfield Avenue, the store is run by friends from the Netherlands, Bianca Hirst and Linda Coenen, and sells a range of fashion and gifts. It took several years to establish the business and they had just celebrated a successful 2019 when COVID-19 hit.

"It was like 'oh God'. We thought 'this is it'," Ms Hirst said.

They scrambled to develop a website and business was bad for the first few weeks. When people started to venture out again after the shock of lockdown, the unexpected happened.

"They actually liked the small stores," she says.

"We got ourselves on the map more so by COVID because people didn't want to go to the big shopping malls anymore, they didn't want to go to Chatswood and they wanted to experience the chitchat about the neighbourhood.

"We are doing quite well."

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Graphic designer JoEllen Henderson at her office in Crows Nest. Picture: John Appleyard





Linda Coenen (left) and Bianca Hirst from Dutch Hideout in Lindfield. Picture: John Appleyard

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Ms Hirst believes the pandemic has changed people's mindsets in a positive way about shopping; it's not all about following the crowd to the mall anymore. She can see a swing back to the local shops and a desire for a community where the shopkeepers know your name.

This traditional ideal is what their shop is all about; they essentially created what still exists in their home country.

"It's really old-fashioned, like what it used to be in the old days. I like that. We wanted something like that because in Holland you've got things like that. It's nicer."

"If you support your local, it comes back to you. It's that whole cycle and I think a lot of people understand that."

Lockdown also proved to be a time where people reassessed their

priorities in life. Petrina Liyanage runs Swim with a Smile in Greenwich and was on maternity leave at the start of the year when the COVID-19 crisis was unfolding.

Her business focuses on helping adults learn how to swim in one-to-one lessons and while she was on leave a lot of people started to get in touch. Many were working from home or had been made redundant, and now had the time to tick off an important goal.

"I had a surge of registrations during the lockdown," Liyanage says.

"As soon as I started teaching again I had quite a backlog of registrations from people who wanted to get started as soon as possible."

When the restrictions lifted in mid-June she was straight back into teaching and didn't have to

change her business model in terms of social distancing. However, sanitising takes up time and she can no longer run back-to-back lessons, which means a lower income. To adapt she opened up her private pool for self-practice bookings and has also noticed an increase in sales of personal equipment to use during lessons.

"It's certainly been a learning curve. Just working through how to adapt and keep going," she says.

"There hasn't been any scientific evidence that Covid spreads in the water. That helps to reassure people that anytime is still a good time to learn how to swim."

The shopping hubs in Chatswood have been affected by the crisis. Chatswood Chamber of Commerce has noticed the retail outlets have been hit but that the

food scene is ticking along. Many of the Chamber's members have found social distancing hard.

Networking events were a key part of the organisation and the members regularly enjoyed casual coffees and lunches out together.

The meet-ups had to stop once the pandemic started and to fill in the gap the Chamber started online coffee mornings.

"That's been really hard for our businesses because everyone wants to meet but they can't," President Steve Hui said.

"Initially we had a fair amount of people. What happened is Zoom fatigue set in and people didn't want to meet anymore."

"Now we host them monthly and we used to host them fortnightly."

On the lower north shore, the Mosman Chamber of Commerce is

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also active in creating a community atmosphere. It has launched a campaign called Think Mosman First to encourage people to shop locally whenever they have a need for goods and services. It taps into the pride they feel for their local shopping streets like Military Road, where small grocers operate alongside chic cafes and designer fashion brands.

The Chamber, which is staffed by volunteers, dropped in specially designed window stickers and counter signs to every business to help launch the idea in the suburb. This visual presence on the streets is backed up by promotion online with photos of the retailers.

Mosman Chamber of Commerce President Pat Purcell's message is clear to the community.

"We know the locals are very supportive of their local shops. We now need you to be absolutely extra supportive," Purcell says.

"Everyone loves the fact that this (Military Rd) is still a shopping strip. If you want to keep it, you've got to support it. Otherwise we will have what everyone else has."

For a low-cost campaign, it's having quite the impact. Walking through Mosman it is clear the retailers have gotten on board as the majority have the sticker displayed prominently in their window and the sign sitting tidily on their counter. The message to support local business is hard to miss.

The Chamber is encouraging other local business chambers to be proactive and not to be discouraged by lack of funds. With an enthusiastic committee prepared to put the time in, having an impact is possible. PureFree founder Tamara Keniry is one of the volunteers who has put hours of work into the campaign and she believes other areas have the potential to be just as successful.

"This is the time your local community needs you the most. You really need to step up and try and come up with ideas," Keniry says.

"On a low-cost budget, you can actually make a difference."



Petrina Liyanage from *Swim with a Smile*, a learn-to-swim business for adults that Petrina runs from her Greenwich home. Picture: John Appleyard