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Dear Reader,

Off the Bluff was founded in newspaper format in 2000 to showcase student stories about Pittsburgh that were not a good fit for campus media, which rightly focuses on campus news and issues.

In 2005, Off the Bluff became a magazine. In 2007, the focus of the magazine became the Pittsburgh Neighborhoods Project, which is produced by my Magazine Journalism class each fall. We pick a neighborhood, study its history, its demographics, its trends, its problems, its movers and shakers, and then formulate a story budget that captures the diverse facets of the neighborhood. Some stories focus on individuals, some on businesses and institutions, some on history. Over the course of a semester student reporters spend many hours in each neighborhood getting to know its people and its character.

To date, we’ve featured Uptown, Polish Hill, South Side, North Side, Bloomfield and Lawrenceville. Each issue is available in pdf form on the Journalism and Multimedia Arts Web site (click on ‘student organizations’ and scroll down to Off the Bluff.) This issue brings you The Strip District – my favorite place in the city to hang out on a Saturday morning.

The students in my Fall 2012 Magazine Journalism class captured the amazing diversity of people, places, sounds, smells and tastes of Pittsburgh’s traditional market district. They plumbed its history and interviewed its characters – people who are prominent or work quietly behind the scenes to give the Strip its texture and flavor.

You’ll meet Italian bakers and Vietnamese grocers and skilled fishmongers, along with the dedicated servers who provide greasy nourishment to tipsy late-night revelers at Primantis ... and many more.

And you’ll meet them in more than words and pictures because this edition of Off the Bluff has an online counterpart at http://www.offthebluff.com/ where you will find, in addition to stories and photos, an interactive map, graphics and videos. My thanks to the students who produced excellent stories in the Magazine Journalism class, and to the production staff who put the magazine and Web site together, some in conjunction with my colleague Bea Wallace’s Media Lab class.

Enjoy. See you in the Strip.

Dr. Mike Dillon
Chair, Journalism and Multimedia Arts
Publisher, Off the Bluff Magazine
In March, the Journalism and Multimedia Arts Department hosted a celebration of excellence. Junior Mike Lynch received the inaugural Roy McHugh award for writing. The $2,000 award is made in honor of legendary Pittsburgh Press sportswriter Roy McHugh and endowed by Art Rooney II of the Pittsburgh Steelers.

In addition, WQED’s Chris Moore was honored as the Communicator of the Year. He received the Sean Doherty award, named in honor of a courageous WDUQ sportscaster who fashioned a successful career despite suffering a catastrophic injury as a young athlete. Sean passed away in 2007. JMA Day also featured an astonishing array of student projects – everything from video, audio, design and Web development to photography and kinetic type. “Our students are doing impressive work in so many areas it’s unbelievable,” JMA Chair Dr. Mike Dillon said. “We are definitely on the leading edge in media and multimedia.”
JMA International Media Event

Students share

The 2nd Annual International Media event, in which students of diverse nationalities share their culture's media products with the campus community, was held in the Ballroom. Students representing Italy, Nigeria, Columbia, Honduras, China and Peru explained, and demonstrated, their countries' media systems and programming.

Scenes from the International Media Event

Photos by Anastasia Farmerie
On Saturday morning, the Strip is buzzing. Penn Avenue is always packed with vehicles and parallel parking is a valuable skill. All kinds of people, locals and out-of-towners alike, crowd the sidewalks as they walk among a diverse choice of restaurants, coffee shops and specialty stores.

It’s the specialty stores that define the Strip District and offer tantalizing treats that appeal to all the senses. The aroma of Italian spices mix with Polish sausage and colorful Asian stir-fry.

In fact, the Asian presence in the Strip has grown over the past 25 years. Asian stores serve traditional Asian shoppers and Asian restaurants as well as adventurous shoppers from many other ethnic backgrounds. Two large Asian grocery stores punctuate each end of the strip with several others in between and many Asian restaurants that offer Thai, Viet, Filipino and Chinese cuisine.

At 2227 Penn Ave. you’ll find the Strip’s second-largest Asian grocery store, Wing Fat Hong Food Market. According to owner Mrs. Ren, the store has been at this location for 20 years.

A sign above the cash register reads: “Ask an employee if you need fresh large shrimp,” written in Vietnamese, Chinese, and English. Along the windows, columns of 50-pound rice bags are stacked about 6 feet high. Dozens of cardboard boxes, labeled in black Sharpie, contain a multitude of fresh products: Fresh Durian 2.39/lb, Fresh Duck Egg 99 cents/each, Coconut 1.99/each, Dried Squid 1.99/each. Customers shuffle in and out of the store, through thin aisles, surrounded by hundreds of items and boxes.

Near the cash register a cardboard box begins to emit loud clicking sounds. A customer stands by as employees open the box to examine the 12 large live crabs inside. After a few minutes, the customer buys the whole box, along with packaged vegetables, onions, garlic and a jar of red spice.

Mrs. Ren stands behind a cash-only register. Advertisements and posters of Asian pop stars and films decorate the walls, which are riddled with a variety of scripts from the diverse languages of Asia.

“I can speak a little Thai, but I really only know Mandarin, Cantonese, and some Vietnamese,” Mrs. Ren says as she packages new basil leaves.

Specific items, like basil, draw not only individuals but also neighboring restaurants and food stands. For instance, basil is perhaps the most important condiment in the Vietnamese traditional Phở soup. Bean sprouts, lemon, jalapeños or chili peppers, and...
basil contribute to the main vegetable condiments of this famous dish, according to Quang Bright, owner of the restaurant Pho Van at 2120 Penn Avenue.

“Our fresh condiments come from either WFH Food market or the Asian Food Inc. next door: we buy everything for the day in the morning – bean sprouts, basil, lemons, jalapenos, cilantro, mint, onions, lettuce, carrots and that kind of stuff,” he says.

Bright is always glad to introduce Vietnamese cuisine to people in the area. Many customers make eating there a weekly routine. The majority of Pho Van’s customers are not of Asian descent; rather, they are professionals, students, vegetarians, health conscious families, and local people who were recommended by word-of-mouth.

“I’m not sure if I am seeing a growth in the Asian community here. But I’m certain of one thing: there is definitely a growth in a taste for Asian food,” Quang says.

Framed plaques show the communities love for Pho Van’s cuisine: In 2011 and 2012, Pho Van was voted “Best Vietnamese Restaurant in Pittsburgh” by the student body at Pitt University. Quang believes people choose Asian foods because they are generally healthier, containing less fat and more vegetarian options.

“We attract a different demographic. Many times, people will come in and order our vegetarian dishes. Most Vietnamese food is already gluten free, and doesn’t contain fried items, fat or preservatives, and all of our food includes fresh vegetables,” he pointed out.

Robert Ching, owner of the Moon Light Express Asian food truck just up Penn Avenue, agrees.

“I’ve been here for 23 years. In the past we’ve seen many new businesses open and close, here and there,” he says looking up and down The Strip. “One thing is the same – people have always had an interest in Asian cuisine.”

His food stand sells several Asian specialties that attract people of all backgrounds. Lo-Mein fried noodles, BBQ chicken kabobs, fried rice and fat egg rolls are some of the many items they pack up for hungry customers and all portions no more than a couple bucks each.

“Although we see a lot of Chinese, Indian and other Asian people shopping and coming here to eat, we bring everyone together of all kinds of backgrounds,” he said.

Kathleen Narciso, one of the cooks, says the Moon Light Express gets specialty items from either Lotus or WFH foods nearby, things like homemade chili paste or imported soy sauce. Being conveniently located in the middle of The Strip, right next to the Vietnamese grocery store Kim Do, Kathleen and Robert often get business from shopping customers.

“After customers do their weekend grocery shopping, they come here for our Filipino, Chinese, and Thai selections,” Kathleen said.

These Asian businesses operate in The Strip for the same reasons any other business would: it is a perfect location and they’re making money! Like a network, families of Asian backgrounds – or even those who are just interested in Asian cuisine or groceries – come to The Strip to shop for items that are inexpensive and can’t be found in supermarkets like Giant Eagle.

“Where’re you going to go for Trung Nguyen Coffee, packaged noodles, Trưởng ớt chili paste or sữa đặc condensed milk?” Tam Nguyen, owner of the Vietnamese grocery store Kim Do laughs.
Stan’s Market: Good, Fresh and Cheap

With its worn green-and-white awning, handcrafted wooden tables and open-air setup, Stan’s Market has the feel of a produce stand located alongside a beach-bound highway.

Stan’s Market, located at 1809 Penn Ave. in Pittsburgh’s historic Strip District, has been selling fresh fruits and vegetables since 1997. Steve Stanek, owner of Stan’s Market, has had his hands in the produce business since high school. Steve worked as a produce manager at Foodland before deciding to start his own business.

Stan’s employs eight people including Mike Stanek, who jokingly refers to himself as the “latch-on brother” and has worked at Stan’s since the market opened.

What is the difference between Stan’s Market and competing food shops and stands in the Strip?

Tim Workman, a Stan’s Market employee for more than eight years, credits the store’s focus on inexpensive, quality produce for its success.

“[Stan’s Market] is the only full produce shop in the Strip, there is nobody quite like us,” Workman says.

Stan’s Market obtains its produce from a variety of distributors. Some of the products are bought

On a cool, autumn Saturday at Stan’s, customers can find a variety of seasonal produce to choose from.
wholesale from various vendors. Other fruits and veggies are shipped directly from vendors in California and New Jersey. Depending upon the season in Pittsburgh, Stan’s Market also sells produce provided by local farmers. The food is delivered by truck or picked up at the produce terminal area.

But as in any other business, there are pitfalls and changes. After nearly 100 years in the Strip, J.E. Corcoran Corporation, one of the largest wholesale fruit and vegetable vendors in Pittsburgh and one of Stan’s key suppliers, has decided to move out of the city.

The ability to buy produce at a significantly lower price than that of a grocery store is appealing to customers, like long-time customer Diana Hallen of Greenfield, for example. Diana, who has been buying her produce from Stan’s Market ever since it opened, considers their prices unbeatable.

In order to offer low prices to customers, Stan’s finds suppliers that offer lower wholesale prices. Since suppliers are currently nearby, transportation costs are low. But thinking outside the box also allows Stan’s to economize.

“Say there are 100 oranges in a box. The USDA allows 5% decay,” Steve explains, meaning that a supplier can expect full price if five of the oranges are bruised or otherwise unsellable. “If there is 10% decay by the time we get them they have to sell it to us for an even lower price. Instead of paying $25 you only spend $10.” Tossing out ten oranges isn’t a bad deal when they get 90 for such a discounted price.

On a cool, autumn Saturday at Stan’s, customers can find a variety of seasonal produce to choose from. Pumpkins of all shapes and sizes, squash and decorative gourds are in stock for the season’s festivities. A very diverse group of customers browses through potential jack-o’-lanterns.

At the rear of the store, near the cash register, there is a laminated map covered with thumbtacks that mark the hometowns of Stan’s customers.

“We get such a diverse crowd of people … we have over 100 countries represented,” Steve says. Over 45 states in the U.S. are represented alone. Six of the seven continents, Antarctica being the exception, have at least one thumbtack to represent them. Kenya, Sri Lanka, Italy and Australia are just a small sample of the nations whose culinary emissaries have visited Stan’s.

Stan’s Market is open seven days a week, but nothing compares to a weekend morning in the Strip District.

The crowds are buzzing, the food is sizzling and Stan’s Market is packed like an uncarved pumpkin. When asked about a Saturday at Stan’s, employee Dave Dubris laughs and says “It’s ‘goin’ be real busy brother.”
As people head down Smallman Street towards the Strip, they see a massive red-brick building topped by an eternally pouring neon Heinz ketchup bottle. Black banners hanging from the side announce that this is the Heinz History Center.

The warehouse opens up to a great hall with classic red and white fire trucks and ambulances. Kids and adults alike take pleasure in climbing aboard the restored red-and-white 1940’s Pittsburgh trolley.

History buff Paul E. Scheider has worked the admissions desk for three years. He gives visitors a ticket and a red sticker with the History Center’s emblem.

“It’s the biggest history museum in Pennsylvania,” he explains. The Great Hall introduces the massive space that holds 3,000 different artifacts related to the history of Western Pennsylvania.

The structure originally housed the Chautauqua Ice Company and when refrigeration made that enterprise unnecessary, it served as a storehouse for lumber. From XXXX to 1996 the building stood vacant, until the Historical Society of Pittsburgh moved in from Oakland.

The spacious seven-floor building boasts five floors of exhibits, such as “Pittsburgh: A Tradition of Innovation” and The Western Pennsylvania Sports Museum.

Pittsburgh sports fans can find the history of their favorite professional Pittsburgh teams, and high school sports from the region.

The Heinz History Center also documents extraordinary innovations made in Pittsburgh and Western PA, such as Jonas Salk’s invention of the polio vaccine. Visitors can also browse a number of artifacts from 200 years of regional glass making and Pittsburgh’s reign as America’s Glass City.

Additional exhibits are dedicated to historic events with special importance to Pittsburgh’s history, like the French and Indian War, when Western Pennsylvania served as center stage for what some call the first world war.

The History Center also caters to children and younger visitors with exhibits teaching them the history of Pittsburgh.

“We have different school groups in daily with different tour guides from the center;” Paul says. “And we have special events such as National History day.”

The warehouse attracts history lovers from all over Pittsburgh, and tourists visiting Pittsburgh. Tourists and local Pittsburgh researchers and students are attracted to the Thomas & Katherine Detre Library & Archives at the Heinz History Center. The library and archives house thousands of books, photographs and collections relating to the Pittsburgh area.

“Researchers from out of town and even outside of the country come here,” says Michael Strauss, chief archivist at the History Center. Our Westinghouse archive draws a lot of local and out-of-town researchers.”
Archivists catalog all the material to make it easier for researchers to find the extensive information.

“As an archive we have company records, materials, and documents that relate to the history of Western Pennsylvania,” Strauss explains.

The Library and Archives contain 700,000 photographs, prints and negatives, and has 3,500 archival collections of individual families, organizations, business and industries. The archives contain catalogs pertaining to George Westinghouse and the first factory he built to build air brakes in the Strip District.

“The area has a great history,” Strauss says. “A lot of the collections we have on industry and commercial business ties into the Strip District.”
The meat and cheese bubble and sizzle on the huge flat-top grill. The French fries gurgle in the deep fryer as they cook to a perfect golden brown. A symphony of culinary preparation drowns the chatter of the usual weekend crowd, scents overtake the senses. The customers try with all their might to fit their mouths around the monstrosity that is the historic Primanti Brothers sandwich. Not one person seems to mind the messy meal as they smile and chow down.

The Primanti sandwich evolved into a Pittsburgh staple after Joe Primanti opened his sandwich cart back in 1933 to help feed the truck drivers. Soon enough it was time to move into a more permanent location. Joe bought a small restaurant on 18th and Smallman Street and decided to stay open from 3 a.m. to 3 p.m. for his truck-driving clientele. Joe’s brothers Dick and Stanley and his nephew John DePriter, who became the cook, soon joined him. An institution was born when DePriter, who had just been given some potatoes by a trucker, fried some up for the customers and served them on their sandwiches.

After Joe provided a jumping-off point for the Primanti’s legend, he moved to California for health reasons. That didn’t stop John, Dick and Stanley as they continued to craft their unique culinary creation for 30 years. In 1974, after the deaths of John and Stanley, Dick decided to sell the business to Jim Patrinos. This is when Primanti Bros. began to evolve into the munch-out Mecca it is today.

1974 was also the year that Tony Haggerty started at Primanti’s. The owners may have changed, but Tony says the quality of their sandwiches has always been the same.

“Nobody else makes this,” she says. “We have the fresh coleslaw, the fresh potatoes. It’s a truck driver sandwich, but everyone loves it.”

Tony has seen Primanti’s grow into an influential business. Since its humble beginnings in 1933, Primanti Bros. has expanded to 21 locations, including three in Florida. They make a quality
product, and no one can dispute that but to Pittsburghers like Haggerty, the sandwich is so much more than coleslaw, fries, meat and cheese between two slices of hearty Italian bread.

“The people are what made it stick. It’s a part of the culture now,” she says. “I think what made it popular is people’s mouths. They eat the sandwich and tell their friends about it.”

The need for truck drivers to have a full meal that they could eat with one hand while on the go gave birth to the Primanti Bros. sandwich. What better way is there to do this other than pile their sides right on their sandwich?

A shop that was once filled with the blue-collar workers from the Strip has a different image today, though. As time went on, the people who patronized the shop became more diverse. Tony watched as the trucker clientele gave way to a trendier late-night crowd.

“We’re busy all the time that’s why we’re open 24 hours-a-day now,” she says. “Before it was more truck drivers and people working around here, but that’s changed. We get bar crowds and stuff now.”

When the bars let out, the inebriated masses want something quick, convenient and delicious. The usual post-midnight snacks in Pittsburgh, like pizza or gyros, may be enough to curb alcohol-induced hunger, but according to midnight manager Andrew Perich, a Primanti’s sandwich is an unbeatable choice.

The truckers of the earlier days of Primanti’s still linger, but it’s the bar crowd that brings in most of the late night business these days, according to Andrew.

“Once 2:30 hits we fill up really fast. Actually, for an eight hour night shift, we make most of our business between 2:30 and 3:30. I mean like 90 percent,” Andrew says.

Though the clientele devouring Primanti’s high-rise of a sandwich may be changing with the new hip image of the Strip District, people still seem to flock to 18th and Smallman Street. The historic sandwich gives people a huge, feel-good meal that will keep them satisfied for hours. It doesn’t matter if it’s hungry loading dock workers, truckers looking for a rich and convenient meal, or famished bar-hoppers hoping to sober up before hitting the sack, most people in Pittsburgh have a soft spot for the hearty sandwich that has been ingrained in the culture for over 75 years.
enough the red-and-white striped awnings of Wholey’s lies an experience for all of the senses. Bright red crab legs fill the cases and the glassy eyes of fish stacked in the displays seem to follow you around the room. Children hurry through the entrance to the back of the store, dragging a parent along by the hand behind them, where live bass and lobster swim around in tanks.

Three men stand along a counter, joking and greeting customers as they glide long knives through each fish. The men hardly look down as they move from one fish to the next in rapid succession; this is clearly second nature. The lunchtime sounds and smells from the dining room waft downstairs.

This unique atmosphere and quality of products characterize Wholey’s. It is a Pittsburgh legacy and a landmark in the Strip District with a style and history that fit right in with the neighborhood.

“You feel that family energy when you come down here, that sense of community, that sense of history,” says Natasha Brody, who does marketing and events for Wholey’s.

Robert L. Wholey began his business selling fruit from his wagon in the South Side. In 1912, he opened Wholey’s Butter & Egg Store in McKees Rocks. His son, Robert C. “Bob” Wholey, then took over the family business after returning home from the army after World War II. A few years later, Bob opened a store selling poultry and other goods in Pittsburgh’s Diamond Market, now Market Square. After a decade, the area was transformed into a city park and the business needed a new home. In 1959, Bob moved the company to the Strip District where it stands today on the corner of 17th Street and Penn Avenue. It is now operated by third generation Wholey brothers.

That entrepreneurship is what Dan’s father, Bob Wholey, relied on to develop Robert Wholey Co. into the seafood destination that it is today.

“He came to the Strip District still as primarily a poultry stand. A Pittsburgh Post-Gazette reporter asked him if he could sell a bushel of crabs that he had brought back from Maryland,” Dan says, proudly pointing to a small black-and-white photograph from the early days of the store hanging on the wall. “That kind of gave him an idea.”

According to Dan, the Strip was much different
then and when he was a kid growing up in the business.

“There were very few shops. No one was selling Steelers jerseys, none of that stuff,” Dan said. “There were no entertainers on the street playing the guitar. There were no nightclubs back then.”

When Wholey’s moved into the Strip District, merchants in the area were mostly wholesalers. Wholey’s was the first market targeted at retail customers.

Today, Wholey’s sells over 500 types of fish and seafood to a growing clientele of residents, visitors and tourists to the area. Wholey’s is able to offer such a variety in landlocked Pittsburgh, by bringing in seafood from several ports both nationally and internationally, including the New England region, Alaska and the Caribbean, shipped into the store whole where it is then filleted on-site. To keep all of these products cool, Wholey’s makes 40,000 pounds of ice each day!

Wholey’s isn’t just selling seafood. The store boasts a well-stocked deli, produce section and a selection of grocery staples for customers, making Wholey’s a one-stop shop, especially for the growing number of customers who live in the neighborhood.

What is perhaps most striking is the variety of products the market offers.

“We like to think of ourselves as a mainstay in the community, one of the anchors of the Strip, providing the community with good value and quality,” Sam Wholey says.

As a Pittsburgh institution, Wholey’s is generous to local causes. A life-size bronze piggy bank, named Rachael, stands near the store’s exit. As customers leave they can drop change into the bank, which Wholey’s then matches before donating it to the Children’s Institute.

According to both Dan and Sam, their father is responsible for instilling in them a strong work ethic and teaching them to always treat customers well. A Duquesne University graduate and member of the Duquesne Century Club, Robert Wholey recognized the importance of making the customer feel welcome and satisfied.

“We have a stone outside the door that says: ‘Rule number one the customer is always right. Rule number two if the customer is ever wrong, re-read rule number one,’” Dan says of Wholey’s business philosophy.

This sense of customer appreciation extended to Wholey’s 100th anniversary celebration held at the end of September. A Celebrate-the-Strip parade marched down Penn Avenue before Mayor Luke Ravenstahl dedicated 17th Street as the new Wholey Way.

“It was exciting. It was fun,” Dan said. “It was absolutely a blast.”

More importantly, the anniversary festivities were a way for Wholeys to express their gratitude to the city and their customers.

“It was a great way to thank our customers,” Natasha said. “Without them, who could make it 100 years? It was a way of thanking Pittsburgh for being able to provide them with our services.”
A person walking the length of the Produce Terminal Building on Smallman Street in 1955 would pass 71 retail produce distributors. Walk it today and you’ll find one, Superior Produce.

The quaint, open-air shop stands at the terminal building’s east end past numerous locked bays. Looking at the abandoned shops feels like observing the Titanic at the bottom of the ocean. Premier Produce, a wholesale produce company, and a flower shop are Superior Produce’s only neighbors past the Pittsburgh Public Market in the five-block long building.

The trucks still come in throughout the day, bringing fruits and vegetables from Guatemala, Hawaii, China and Ecuador but the industry pales in comparison to what it once was.

Cindy Kokowski, who has owned Superior Produce since her husband, Brad, opened it in 1996, says she enjoys her work as she and her son’s friend, 28-year-old, Tim Farrell pick through bright-red tomatoes for a gentleman who wants to purchase some with lower grade – meaning they are not as firm and are therefore cheaper.

“I love working here. I’ve been doing it for a while,” Cindy says as she runs back-and-forth from her small office off to the side to the pile of tomato boxes. “This is what the Strip has been forever. Of course that’s going to change and we know that none of us who are left in the building will be able to stay.”

With the Buncher Company’s proposal to tear down about 528 feet of the 1,478-foot-long building to make room for its planned Riverfront Landing, it is only a matter of time until the three shops past the Public Market are forced to move. Cindy is unsure of where Superior Produce’s future lies.
PlACES

“I wish I knew where we are going to be a year from now, but I can’t really say. Of course it’s scary, but we know it’s inevitable.”

Cindy Kokowski

The Produce Terminal has been owned by the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA) since Conrail sold the building in 1981. The URA recently granted Buncher $50 million in tax increment financing, a public financing method used for subsidizing redevelopment, in order to move Buncher’s Riverfront Landing plan forward.

“I wish I knew where we are going to be a year from now, but I can’t really say,” Cindy says. “Of course it’s scary, but we know it’s inevitable.”

Buncher did not reply to numerous requests for interviews.

Councilman Patrick Dowd and Neighbors in the Strip Executive Director Becky Rodgers said that because Superior Produce is a tenant of the URA, it will need to relocate if the URA does not extend its lease.

“The produce is an important part of the Strip’s identity,” Rodgers said. “The produce business took a blow when J.E. Corcoran moved and if they [Superior Produce] need to move, I hope they can relocate within the Strip District.”

After almost 100 years in the Strip District, the J.E. Corcoran Co. announced in March 2011 that it intended to move to the Crafton area, leaving the terminal building missing one of its mainstay produce sellers.

In its proposal application to the state, the URA described the building as a “Pittsburgh icon,” but said that its “broken nature” threatens development along the river.

“Removing a block of the produce terminal allows the riverfront connection, and allows the new development of the riverfront parcel the visual and physical connection to the rest of the city that will allow the new development the greatest chance of success,” the URA wrote in its application.

While its time in the building is ticking away, Superior Produce is still flooded with customers every Saturday. Many are astonished by the quality of the produce compared to what is offered at chain supermarkets.

For example, banana peppers the size of a child’s forearm and bunches of a dozen bananas stand out in the display in the middle of the shop.

“We get stuff in every day,” Cindy says. “All of this is fresher than anything you’ll find in a supermarket.”

Superior Produce also maintains a wholesale component as it sells products to local restaurants. This portion of its business was also adversely affected recently due to the 2012 NHL Lockout.

Tim, who is draped in a Penguins hoodie, hat and tassel cap, says the lockout caused him to “go crazy.”

“I love the sport and it’s pretty noticeable that we don’t get as many orders when there isn’t anything going on as far as the Penguins go,” Tim says.

Cindy explains how local sports teams contribute to the success or struggle of her business.

“When the Pirates were really going for it this year, it was the best … the best. Sports runs everything in this town.”

Still, Superior Produce has its regular customers. A large group of people arrive at about 11 a.m. on Saturday. A small child goes over to the peppers and looks up at Tim with wide eyes.

“Everything looks good doesn’t it?” Tim says as he turns around and grabs something off of a high wooden table. “I’ve got something for you.”

Tim hands the little boy a “Super” sticker and the kid smiles and runs back to his mother.

“This is more like it,” Cindy remarks and runs over to the register to check out a few customers.

About 15 minutes pass and the shop empties once again. The space is quiet and Cindy discusses the building’s history.

“This all used to be one, long opened-up space,” she says. “You could walk from one end to the other and it was busy and vibrant. It’s nothing like it used to be and once the plan goes through, that’ll really be it.”
The door of an old Polish Roman Catholic Church at 21st and Smallman streets is propped open every Tuesday morning. Mass is beginning at the historic St. Stanislaus Kostka. It is still dark outside and the Strip District is just beginning to stir; vehicles and machinery from the morning commute can be heard from distant streets and intersections.

“Let us pray.” The words of a morning sermon resonate softly, echoing inside a chamber 150 feet high, and 105 feet deep. Father Albert’s words soar, reaching the magnificent murals that cover the vast ceiling.

History runs deep in the church, extending far beyond the founding of the Strip. A mural depicts Polish King Jan Sobieski and his winged cavalry driving a frightened Turkish army out of Vienna in 1683. The authors of the gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John – symbolized respectively by a man with wings, a winged lion, an ox and a rising eagle cover a section of the ceiling vaults. Outside, as the sun is rising, brilliant stained glass windows, created in Munich, Germany, begin to filter in natural light, animating vibrant scenes imbued with bold colors.

There is enough room for hundreds of people. But this morning, the familiar responses of a Roman Catholic mass are quite thin, only about a dozen voices replying, “Amen.” Everyone knows each other’s names and schedules.

“Let me take you to Mary, she’ll be great to talk to,” says Francis Caiazza, a retired judge and Duquesne University class of 1958 graduate.

“Psst, Mary,” Caiazza whispers. “This gentleman would like to talk to you about the parish here.”

“Flo knows more than I do,” she says. “She’s been here since she was this high.” Mary Szulborski, in her 80s, whispers back, motioning her hands palm down and parallel to the floor about two feet from the kneeling platform next to her.

“My relatives and I have been coming here all
“Cardinal Karol Wotija – later to become Pope John Paul II – visited and attended mass here on Sept. 29, 1969.”

my life,” says Florence Viola, a cheerful woman. “There are two of us left now.” She was one of 14 children.

“Florence is Polish, but she married an Italian,” Francis laughs.

There is a great sense of history and community here. Most of the 12 members attending this morning mass are descendants of the 200 Polish families that joined together in 1873 to form the Saint Stanislaus Beneficial Society.

Cardinal Karol Wotija – later to become Pope John Paul II – visited and attended mass here on Sept. 29, 1969. When he entered the church, he said it reminded him of Poland. In 1972, the church was listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Some of the members recall the disastrous Saint Patrick’s Day flood in 1936, when the church’s pews floated about. That same year the Pittsburgh Banana Company explosion shook up the church and neighborhood; soon after, a protective layer of cement was placed over all the stained glass windows on the upper level. This hid some outstanding artwork up until 10 years ago when it was finally uncovered.

There were over 7,000 families living in the Strip by the 20th century: The Poles went to St. Stanislaus, the Slavs to St. Elizabeth – now the Altar Bar – and the Irish went to St. Patrick’s, located between Penn Avenue and Liberty avenue.

Since then, the descendants of these families have moved elsewhere. Most of them resettled in the suburbs of Pittsburgh.

“We have about 1,200 members, but most of them live in North Hills, South Hills, Lawrenceville, East End...” says, Rev. Harry E. Nichols, the current pastor at both St. Stanislaus and St. Patrick’s. “Only about 25 to 30 of these members actually live here in the Strip,” he says.

In 1993, as part of the diocese’s revitalization and reorganization plan, all the three churches merged together, making St. Stanislaus – the largest of these – the main church. Mass is held every day at St. Stanislaus. It serves as the main center for the combined populations of these parishes.

Now, St. Stanislaus Kostka is the center of an active community. The parish organizes CCD classes, marriages, burials and also preserves certain ethnic customs. Every June, there are Italian masses, while Sundays retain Polish traditions.

“We still have Polish hymns on Sundays,” says Mary Szulborski.

More than $800,000 in renovations have taken place over the last five years, according to Nichols. The walls have been newly plastered and painted, and a new floor was just installed. The lighting and all of the wiring has been replaced. A new sound system and a beautiful Phoenix Organ were recently installed, while the pews were refinished.

The 8,337 square foot brick edifice stands beautifully among the bustle of the Strip District. Its twin towers house seven powerful bells, each weighing more than a ton.

The church shows absolutely no signs of slowing down. “We have around 30 to 35 weddings a year,”
The weather is brisk. Raindrops trickle down from the gutters into a small alleyway lined with misshapen bricks, into the café. A tall, well-dressed man with salt-and-pepper hair sits calmly at a small table, no more than a foot away from two ladies enjoying a glass of red wine. A small leather-bound book rests on the table with a pair of keys on top.

“Hey, how are you?” Larry Lagatutta asks, in his blended Italian-Pittsburgh accent, as he looks up from his phone.

Lagatutta is the proprietor of Enrico Biscotti, a small bakery and café on Penn Avenue. The bakery was founded in 1993. Born and raised in Pittsburgh, Lagatutta first grew interested in cooking by watching his mother and grandmother in the kitchen.

“I cooked with them,” Lagatutta says. “There was always something going on in the kitchen in my house and I always wanted to be in the mix.”

While Lagatutta is indeed a master of the art of bread making and despite his childhood interest in cooking, baking isn’t how he expected to make a living.

“I was an account executive for 15 years,” Lagatutta says, like it is nothing worth remembering.

A chance encounter with a bread maker led him to change the course of his life.

“I met a baker from Tuscany, who was in Pittsburgh at the time, and offered to help him as a night baker. I can remember staying up for hours through the night making bread and waking up watching the sunrise over Pittsburgh. I always enjoyed it.”

As one could imagine, all that practice helped. Today, five bakers working in rotation at Enrico Biscotti knead, shape and mold a whopping 1,200 pounds of dough every day. They work in the back of the bakery, behind the mounds of breads and mouth-watering pastries. Customers love to watch them.

Biscotti literally translated means “twice baked cookie” and it’s delicious. So it should come as no surprise that biscotti is the top-seller at the bakery. Macaroons are a close second.

What’s the tastiest treat at Enrico Biscotti? Lagatutta has to think about it for a moment, but
finally puts his hand to his chin and narrows down his favorites.

“There are so many,” he says. “Fig pecan biscotti are great. The buckeyes are delicious and so are the chocolate radicals.”

Not to be confused with a resident of Ohio, a “buckeye” is a tasty peanut butter confection dipped in chocolate, while a “chocolate radical” is a flourless chocolate cookie.

Now, what makes the biscotti so special at this particular bakery?

“Well, it’s my grandmother’s recipe,” Lagututta says. “She had a craftsman’s mentality. We only use the freshest ingredients. I make them exactly how she made them and there is no difference between then and now.”

When asked to summarize Italian cooking in one sentence, Lagututta proudly replies: “Simple, fresh and authentic. And did I mention simple?”

For those interested in creating their own crusty creations, the biggest misconception about bread making is the notion that it’s complicated.

“Bread has four ingredients. Flour, salt, yeast and water. If you know your way around a kitchen, you’ll be fine.”

Lagututta loves his job. You can see it in his eyes. A wide smile crosses his face every time the opportunity to discuss food presents itself. He passionately stresses the importance of human nature and why being a successful baker is so enjoyable.

“I love getting up and making bread early in the morning,” Lagututta says. “I love seeing the customers happy and the fact that knowing what we make will end up in people’s homes and affecting their numerous celebrations. That’s my favorite part about what I do.”
Freshly baked bread in varieties not found in the average supermarket sit on a rack along the wall. A case is filled with over 10 flavors of biscotti begging to be taken home and dipped in a hot cup of coffee. A sign on the door proclaims, “It smells like grandma’s house in here.” Every customer walking through the door is immediately welcomed by Jimmy Sunseri, an old-school Italian with a large, unlit cigar jutting out of his mouth.

“I bet I get more kisses than anyone else in the city,” Jimmy says. “When my friends, my customers, come in they don’t shake my hand. They give me a hug or a kiss – that’s women and men. You know how emotional Italians can be.”

Sunseri’s in the Strip District just feels like home. Certainly there is no shortage of Italian food markets in the area, but the characters and products that Sunseri’s offers customers create a whole different atmosphere.

“Being in here all day, all day long it’s interacting with customers,” Jimmy says. “I may have three generations of one family come in and I know all of them.”

Jimmy, known as “Old Man Sunseri” to other Strip District merchants, seems to be the official mascot of the store, with his image displayed on t-shirts and grocery bags. A true character, he was raised in the business and knows what is needed to operate in the Strip District.

“This is our roots. You just don’t come to the Strip to open a business,” Jimmy says. “If you’re a true Strip merchant, you’re bred for that like a fine racehorse.”

Jimmy and his brother Nino are third-generation entrepreneurs. Their grandfather started a similar business in 1902. Jimmy began working in his father’s store at 13 and learned everything he knows about running a business. In 1985, Jimmy and Nino branched out and opened their own store.

“My father didn’t believe that his sons should have idle time, so he taught us a good work ethic,” Jimmy says, grinning. “When I think about it now, he got three years of free labor from me, because I didn’t get paid until I was 16.”

Originally, Jimmy had no intention of taking on the family business After graduating from Duquesne University in 1970, the English major and French minor had aspirations of becoming an attorney. But somehow the food business pulled him back to his roots. He didn’t need books to learn the business; he had access to the wisdom of generations.

“Technically I don’t know anything about this business,” Jimmy says. “The knowledge that the third generation has, you can’t buy that and you certainly can’t acquire that.” Jimmy pauses to ask a customer, “Can I help you, sir?”

Clearly Jimmy must be doing something right.
According to a framed picture on the wall, he is currently employee of the month. Jimmy receives this honor every month.

“Well, voting takes place at 6 a.m. and guess who is here at 6 a.m.?” Jimmy explains. “Me. Guess who else is here? Me.”

One of the missions of Sunseri’s is to provide customers with homemade, signature products they can’t get anywhere else.

Sunseri’s bakes all its breads fresh daily and uses no preservatives. By far, Sunseri’s most popular product is the two-pound pepperoni roll stuffed with homemade pepperoni, mozzarella and provolone cheeses. On a typical Saturday, Sunseri’s will sell between 400 and 450 pepperoni rolls.

“When the Steelers played Green Bay for the Super Bowl, we sold over 900 the Saturday before,” Jimmy recalls.

Sunseri’s also has other signature products, like their Legendary Dipping Peppers, the second most-popular item. For the concoction, Jimmy mixes hot banana peppers, cubanelle peppers, Portobello mushrooms, jalapeno peppers and prosciutto and bakes it for two and a half hours.

Asked about the store’s trademark “mystery cheese,” Jimmy is tight-lipped. “I could tell you,” he says with a mischievous grin.

“I’m assuming you can keep a secret. Well, so can I.”

Sunseri’s also offers a full-scale deli with homemade sopressata and pepperoni, as well as a hot sandwich counter for the lunch crowd.

“Where else are you going to get a six-inch sandwich like that and a drink for six bucks,” Jimmy says, pulling a cigar cutter out of his apron pocket and snipping off the end of a cigar. “It’s not going to happen.”

But customers aren’t just coming in for the unique, quality products; they are also coming for the tradition of the Strip District.

“Even though some of the old stores aren’t still here, the notoriety of being an old neighborhood brings people here,” says Erin Nolan, who works at Sunseri’s. “That old world essence is here. There may not be anything you want down here in particular, but you’re still going to come down.”

Perhaps this quality is what allows Jimmy and Nino’s customer base to expand, while keeping the atmosphere of the store the same.

“When you come into Jimmy and Nino’s, you’re not walking into a sterile environment,” Jimmy jokes, as customers come in to talk about their father or brother. “Everyone here knows everyone. There is so much love, camaraderie and friendship in this business.

“I could never do anything else,” Jimmy says. “This is what I do. This is what I breathe.”
Regional Tastes Meld at the Pittsburgh Public Market

BY: PHILIP BOTTI

The Pittsburgh Public Market’s vendors constitute a close-knit community of independent businesses from Western Pennsylvania. They bring their products to the Strip District, and hope the new friends they make there will seek them out at their home locales or online.

“We are like one big family,” Kellianne Frketic says at her Organic Bakery stand that sells artisanal food made with organic ingredients.

Kellianne, who is a Duquesne University graduate, has been with the Public Market for six months. “I’m doing well,” she says. “Businesses in the strip are small, and the market gives a good opportunity for us to get new clientele.”

Chatter fills the air while musicians play in a corner in the back of the building. Merchants bring family members, and chase down offspring who decide to explore the market a little more.

“It’s like our home away from home, our extended family,” says Sara Raszewski, a vendor for Soup Nancy’s, while pouring homemade soup into to-go containers. Soup Nancy’s has been in business here since April 2011. The excited crowd that hovers around the stand soon moves away with their soup bowls to make conversation at another stand.

Each vendor in the market brings something different, and customers enjoy the relaxed atmosphere while they browse the stands searching for something that catches their eyes or taste buds. With more than 30 different vendors every weekend there is a wide variety of products and cuisine for customers to enjoy.
The Neighbors in the Strip group started planning the Pittsburgh Public Market in 2003. It wanted to create the first public market in Pittsburgh since 1965, when the last such market in the city was demolished to make way for development on the North Side. When the current public market opened, it enabled local merchants to bring their products to people in the city, which helps them compete with larger Pittsburgh-based businesses.

“I think it fits in well,” Sara Raszewski says. “It shows the spirit of small independent businesses, selling their products.”

The market is only open Friday through Sunday. There are tons of merchants who have year-round stands in the market, but there are also seasonal produce merchants who bring local food to consumers. Kellianne Frketic and her eeash Organic Bakery, for instance, offer organic baked goods.

But Raszewskis says it is also the sense of family that brings people back again and again. “People come for the good atmosphere.”
Diners, Drive-ins and Dives: Deluca’s, Pamela’s and Kelly O’s

C heckerboard floors, red-and-silver stools, chrome counters and the smell of fresh coffee kept warm all afternoon—these are just some of the perks customers expect from a great American diner. In the Strip District, three restaurants, Deluca’s, Pamela’s and Kelly O’s, each bring something special to the laminate-topped table.

Tom Donaldson is a street vender who has a table full of handmade jewelry for sale set up in front of 2111 Penn Ave. He spends his days directing indecisive visitors looking for a top-notch breakfast.

“I ask them what they’re looking for,” Donaldson says. “If they want top-quality diner food, I send them to Deluca’s. If they want a step up...different things, like crepes...then I suggest Pamela’s.”

Deluca’s: A Pittsburgh Classic

Before entering Deluca’s, any passersby can tell that this diner is a landmark. On weekend mornings, Pittsburghers and visitors line up outside, braving the cold and snow in the winter, to experience the famous Deluca’s breakfast that has been a classic since the restaurant’s opening in 1958.

The red building, which is crowned by a giant chicken statue, sets expectations for a unique diner experience, and the bright sign advertising “the Best Breakfast In Town” lets potential patrons know the menu is a bit better than your average diner fare. Inside, it feels like a small-town diner with unassuming red and white checkerboard floors, simple green wooden booths, and red stools along an old-fashioned wooden counter. Even on a first visit, it is easy to tell that Deluca’s is a Pittsburgh institution.

Manager Robert Andrew says that Deluca’s attracts a crowd because of fresh ingredients, the friendly staff, and, of course, the publicity it has received. Adam Richman, the host of The Travel Channel show “Man Versus Food,” took on the “mixed grill,” a combination of onion, peppers, eggs, home fries, cheese, vegetables and meat, as well as a banana split hotcake sundae in 2008—a gastronomical event immortalized by a photo on the wall.

These dishes and many others are popular with Deluca’s customers, according to Andrew. Some of the most popular items on the menu are the huge breakfast burritos, which barely fit on the plate and are stuffed full with eggs, meat, cheese and home fries. Other popular choices include seafood omelets, which are filled with...
“garlic sautéed Langoustine lobster, lump crabmeat and shrimp with avocado, tomato, Swiss and Hollandaise.”

No matter what is ordered, Deluca’s is a Pittsburgh classic for a reason. It is hard to pin down just one thing that makes it so special, whether it is the classic, down-home atmosphere or the quirky, unique spins on breakfast foods. A local diner and a world-famous eatery, Deluca’s is a quintessential stop in the Strip.

Pamela’s: A Challenger To Throne

Even though Deluca’s has been serving the Pittsburgh community for over fifty years, another diner in the Strip District has been giving “the Best Breakfast in Town” serious competition with what they claim is “the Best Breakfast in Pittsburgh.”

Pamela’s claim is quite bold, but the diner may have the chops to back it up. In the end, a diner is just a diner no matter where it may be located or who owns it, right?

Pamela’s manages to project the cozy, welcoming atmosphere associated with classic breakfast joints. The sea-foam-green pillar, pastel-pink front door, and huge art-deco lamps on the storefront point to the fact that Pamela’s Diner first settled in the Strip District in the 1980’s. A stencil of a steaming pile of hotcakes on the window beckon those trekking the Strip to come in, sit down and enjoy Pamela’s unique take on breakfast.

“Man Versus Food” may have filmed a segment in Deluca’s, but President Barack Obama decided to start his day with Pamela’s famous breakfast (at the Millvale location) when he visited Pittsburgh for the G-20 Summit in 2009; a few months earlier, Michelle Obama summoned co-owner Gail Klingensmith and Pamela Cohen to the White House to make breakfast.

Manager Priscilla Zychowski explains what brings people to Pamela’s over anywhere else: “There are all kinds who come in, but a lot of our customers work in the Strip or are down here to shop.” “It’s got to be the atmosphere. We have great food and a family atmosphere. We’ve also been in business for 35 years.”
Pamela’s trademark meal is crepe-style hotcakes. Somewhere in between a traditional hotcake and a French crepe, Pamela’s take on this dish is a delightfully delicate breakfast treat. There are enough varieties to leave anyone full, satisfied and ready to tackle the day. However, those who want to fill up on Pamela’s famous hotcakes better be ready to wait.

“Our busiest time is definitely on Saturday,” Zychowski said. “After 9 in the morning and until 2 in the afternoon we’re pretty much full. During the week though we get busy between 9 and 11 in the morning and then between 12 and 1 for lunch”

Kelly O’s: New Kid on the Block

Deluca’s and Pamela’s have almost religious followings in Pittsburgh, each holding its own in the battle for best Pittsburgh breakfast. A new contender, however, has entered the fray: Kelly O’s.

The Strip location has only been open since July 2012, though the décor and atmosphere feel as if it has been there since the 1950s. Shiny black and silver bar stools line a metal counter and simple black chairs cluster around the tables, wait for customers to come in and enjoy a hearty breakfast.

Kelly O’s is the kid sister of a diner in the North Hills that has been in business for close to 60 years. Memorabilia from that diner hangs on the walls, including menus featuring long-ago specials for just 10 cents. Though more than 10 cents a plate now, the breakfast fare at Kelly O’s is more or less traditional, with a few items that are especially unique.

Another veteran of the television world, Kelly O’s has been featured on “Diners, Drive-ins and Dives” hosted by Guy Fieri. While there, Fieri sampled owner Kelly O’Connor’s Huluski, the fried or grilled mush with either butter and syrup or crumbled bacon, turkey pot pie soup and the polenta with Bolognese sauce.

Another top choice for regulars and newcomers alike at Kelly O’s is the Mancinis French toast, made with bread baked fresh in the Strip at Mancini’s bakery. There is even a dish named after O’ Conner’s daughter, “Seana’s Favorite,” featuring classic...
breakfast favorites like eggs, bacon and pancakes or French toast. Her specialty omelets, which are not all on the menu, are also a huge success. For example, the crab and asparagus omelet is filled with three ounces of fresh crabmeat and topped with Hollandaise sauce, and the wedding soup omelet comes stuffed with all the makings of the diner’s Italian wedding soup.

The new diner has already attracted a big following.

“The Strip District is rockin’,” O’ Conner says. “It is a variety, a very integrated variety, of people... The diner does draw a different clientele than other businesses. It draws a more down-to-earth crowd, especially the regulars. They walk in like they own the joint, and that's what we want.”

O’ Conner loves meeting new people, too, whether it is at the diner or anywhere in the world, and she brings that openness and friendliness to her restaurant. The pleasantness of the smiling staff and the classic retro atmosphere make up part of Kelly O’s success, but the most important part of the equation is the food. Proud of her booming business and her “grandma-style” cooking, Kelly O loves to offer home-style, traditional dishes that keep customers coming back for more.

“That's what you should have in a diner. People look for that – it’s home cookin’,” she says. “A way to people's hearts is food – comfort food – and I sell people comfort food.”

And the Winner Is...

So which diner is the best? It is truly impossible to determine, but there is no wrong decision here. Deluca’s offers a more traditional menu, gigantic portions, and some unique items. It is the wily veteran who believes in the adage, “If it ain't broke, don't fix it.” Pamela’s has grown into Deluca’s true competitor and aims to switch up the regular diner formula with their famous take on the crepe style pancake. Though these two giants slightly overshadow the newest breakfast joint, Kelly O’s is doing robust business. Kelly O’s menu sits somewhere in between traditional breakfast food and unique creations and offers a shorter wait, friendly personable staff, and a bit of comfort food inspiration.
The Leaf and Bean Company: ‘Key West Meets Garage Sale’

BY: MAGGIE PAVLICK

On a warm day, the smell of roasting coffee and cigar smoke float out of the open front of the Leaf & Bean Company’s small but vibrant building on 22nd Street in the Strip. A huge, colorful mural of neighboring shops in the Strip covers the outer walls, and shaggy, island-inspired umbrellas cover the tables.

Bits and pieces of Bob Dylan’s “Don’t Think Twice, It’s All Right” trickle out from speakers inside, and a white board lists the day’s unchanging menu: “Coffee and Cigars.”

And that’s only the outside. Inside, customers are greeted by a suit of armor with a “Will Work for Cigar” sign, a skeleton riding a motorcycle suspended from the ceiling, an antique wooden bathtub-turned-fountain, and one of the last of a nearly-extinct breed of phone booths. They can choose a seat from the cushioned booths, high bar chairs or old-time barber chairs and admire the walls and ceiling, every inch of which are covered with delightfully random paraphernalia, while enjoying a coffee, a cigar, and the company of fellow members of a cigar-loving community. It encompasses, as the employees describe it, the idea of “Key West meets Garage Sale.”

On Saturdays, singer-songwriters perform folksy, laid-back tunes.

Owner of another staple in the Strip, Deluca’s Restaurant, and long-time friend and patron of the shop, Drew Mikrut, considers the shop his second hangout and notes that the other regulars range from people with millions of dollars to people who just stop in after work for a cigar. Truly, Leaf & Bean breaks down the stereotypes of the “typical cigar smoker” and creates a fun and friendly place to hang out, whether the customers have ever smoked a cigar before or not.

New manager Jake Mulliken knows this all too well. Originally from California, Mulliken is a local filmmaker who was drawn to the shop about a year ago by the music and atmosphere,
even though he didn’t really smoke cigars at the
time.

“The people who hang out here are cool
people,” says Mullikan. For the past year, he has
been hanging out in the café and working when
needed, and finally he became manager.

“A typical cigar smoker is a middle-aged white
guy, but that’s not the case here,” says former
manager Darren Shue.

Dan Monks, a first-time customer visiting from
Kansas City, was thrilled with the café. Monks
has to travel all over for work, and in each city,
he seeks out a cigar shop, always interested in
local color and cigar culture. Even though he was
born and raised in Pittsburgh, he has not seen
any cigar shop like the Leaf & Bean before.

“I couldn’t believe when I came in here and
saw 10 brands I never saw,” he says.

Owner Jim Robinson’s personality and love
of small, boutique cigar manufacturers seemed
to fit perfectly among the off-beat shops and
shoppers in the Strip District, making The Leaf &
Bean Company a perfectly content resident there
since 2003. Even though customers can spend
hours just looking around at the decorations,
the humidor in the back is “the heart of it all,”
according to Shue.

Behind the humidor’s wooden door is a room
filled with 300 to 400 cigars from all over the
world. Small boutique brands and special blends
attract customers from all over the country and
even the world. In fact, Robinson even travels
to where the cigars are made to request special
blends just for Leaf & Bean.

The small, boutique cigar brands are part of
what make Leaf & Bean so unique, as is its coffee
which is hand roasted in an antique roaster one
pound at a time. Perhaps the most unique aspects
about Leaf & Bean, though, are the attitudes and
philosophy behind it, and those are an extension
of Robinson himself.

“I’m not from anywhere, really,” claims
Robinson as he smokes one of his cigars while
rearranging others in the humidor.

He has been on the cigar scene for 20 years now,
and though he is a man of few words, Robinson’s
attire speaks for itself. From his feathered straw
hat to his tie-dyed shirt, he fits in perfectly with
the café he has christened his “clubhouse.”

And the reason for opening such a unique cigar
shop in the Strip District? It’s simple, he says:
“Because I didn’t want to work.”

And coming to a place like Leaf & Bean wouldn’t
feel like going to work, but rather like going to
someone’s eclectic living room, surrounded by
friends, entertaining décor, coffee, cigars, and
good music. The Leaf & Bean fits into the Strip
District, with its friendly, small staff and original
products, but the colorful, laid-back business
stands out as one of a kind, too.

![Leaf & Bean’s eclectic décor](Photo by Aaron Warnick)
Mullen Advertising Leads Wave of Hip Businesses in the Strip

BY: EMILY LAMIELLE

Amid restaurants, produce markets and artisan shops, you’ll find Mullen Advertising, an innovative marketing organization that promotes clients such as First Commonwealth Bank, Random House and the Pittsburgh Zoo and PPG Aquarium.

Eric Ash, a Duquesne University alumnus and director of public relations and social influence at Mullen, explained that the firm has changed with the times. “It started out more like a boutique, a creative shop. Over the years, [it] grew with digital online space, PR and social media.”

Today, Mullen is fueled by the cultural diversity and art of the Strip, paired with its own contemporary creativity and high-tech expertise.

“Mullen invites the creativity of the Strip into its offices, specifically the cultural atmosphere of various ethnicities, food venues and wares that are sold on Smallman and Penn Avenue,” Ash says.

In a progressive company where new media and technology dominate, the atmosphere of the Strip is soothing to Mullen’s employees. Ash says, “If all of the conference rooms are full, sometimes the creative team members will go to a coffee bar or restaurant where they can enjoy a sense of escapism, out of the realm of the office work space.”

Not only does Mullen utilize the creativity of the Strip, it also recreates its own originality in the confines of the office space. A unique fusion between old and new permeates Mullen’s interior.

In the entryway of the brick building, a beach cruiser bicycle rests alone in the corner. A colorful array of “ideas” notes and drawings on sheets of paper cover a wall in the lobby space. In a lounge area, a vintage Coke machine lies between a white board and a brick wall.

What’s more, a locker and shower area also hides on the second floor of the office. Why? For the employees to utilize after an afternoon run, of course!

Ash says, “Our president and executive creative director is a strong advocate for balancing work and hobbies. We have a shower room and lockers, so it’s common to go running at lunch or before work and then have a chance to clean up and get ready to go.”

Not only does Mullen benefit from its comfortable location on 24th Street, it has also reached out to its community, such as Neighbors in the Strip. Mullen has established relationships with several small businesses in the Strip, representing their mission and brand.

Ash says, “When the Pittsburgh Public Market opened, we helped with the logo treatment and branding aspects. It was an opportunity that befell from our location in the Strip.”

Ash says that Mullen Advertising has watched the Strip grow into the dynamic area it is today.

“I’ve seen the evolution of the area for the past thirteen years, working in the building in the same space, seeing shifts in the Strip from commercial to retail to residential to expansion. It’s been exciting,” Ash explains. “Visually, looking out the window, I can see what’s here and remember what used to be here. I look at how things have come and gone; how the Strip is a hip, cool spot that people love.”
SOUNDS OF THE STRIP
Photos by Off The Bluff Staff
On a Thursday afternoon towards the end of the lunch hour, Lidia's Pittsburgh in the Strip District is bustling. An older woman scans shelves stocked with cookbooks and jars of pasta sauce created by celebrated Italian chef Lidia Bastianich.

Businesspeople and families are lingering, sipping wine and filling up on decadent pasta dishes. The hostess helping the woman decide which cookbook to purchase looks around and says, “You should see how busy we are on a Saturday night.”

Weekday or weekend, Lidia's Pittsburgh is crowded with diners looking for authentic Italian food and also for a classy dining experience amid Lidia's warm and tasteful décor.

Lidia’s Pittsburgh opened its doors in the Strip District in 2001. Christina Valasek credits the location for Lidia’s popularity in Pittsburgh.

“They decided to put the restaurant in the Strip District because of the viewership of Lidia’s PBS show in Pittsburgh, as well as the large Italian immigrant population here – and the Strip District has very high foot traffic,” Valasek says. “Our restaurant’s demographic includes a lot of Lidia’s loyal supporters and regular customers, as well as a lot of guests to the city from the nearby Convention Center.”

The homey restaurant located at 14th and Smallman is in a large old warehouse filled with beautiful fixtures and Italian accents. Two extravagant chandeliers made of colorful blown-glass resembling hot air balloons illuminate the dining room. Rows of tinted bottles of olive oil line the back wall, catching shafts of light from the chandeliers.

Lidia’s brings a touch of upscale class to the industrial strip, but also remains connected to the working-class roots of the neighborhood, which was built by wholesalers who trafficked in fresh produce and other organic foods, long before “organic” became a synonym for “trendy.”

“We work with Neighbors in the Strip as well as the Pittsburgh Cultural Trust and other strategic partnerships within the city,” Valasek says.

Lidia Bastianich, in that sense, is a natural for a city built by immigrants.
Lidia was born in Pula, Istria, on the Adriatic coast, about 90 miles northeast of Venice. This area belonged to Italy at the time of Lidia’s birth in 1947, but was later ceded to Yugoslavia. Since the dismantling of that artificial nation, the region is split between Croatia and Slovenia. Lidia came to the U.S. at the age of 12 and was put in charge of household meals while her mother went to work in a bakery.

At the age of 24, Lidia opened her first restaurant in Forest Hills, Queens and in 1981, she opened Felidia in mid-town Manhattan. Lidia Matticchio Bastianich had arrived. And soon she would take her distinctive cuisine to other cities, as well as to television as the star of *Lidia’s Italian Table* on public television (it’s also syndicated abroad).

So Lidia knows what it is to work hard, to adapt to and embrace the opportunities of a new land while staying true to one’s roots.

It is no surprise that Lidia’s has drawn so much attention in Pittsburgh, but without the famous name behind it, the food would still to stand on its own. The menu consists of traditional Italian pastas, seafood and chicken dishes, all infused with Italian herbs, and the desserts look as though they’ve come out of a pastry shop in Rome. All served, of course, with a delectable selection of wines. Whether at lunch or dinnertime, almost every table has at least a glass if not a bottle of wine from the extensive list. A true oneophile’s haven, the list, all in Italian, includes Lidia’s own wines, which she produces at her family-owned vineyard.

At Lidia’s, food and wine is something to celebrate all the time. Events are frequently held in conjunction with Lidia’s latest book venture. In November, the restaurant held a “Lidia’s Favorite Recipes Dinner,” where patrons enjoyed Lidia’s favorite dishes and received a copy of her new book, Valasek says. Along with events such as these, every Monday evening Lidia’s hosts a “Tuscan Grill Menu” which differs from the normal seasonal menu and encourages customers to come in and try new dishes.

The ultimate gift for Lidia’s loyal followers is to meet the chef in person. According to Valasek, Lidia visits two to three times a year as do as her business partners, her son Joseph and daughter Tayna. Her matronly persona on television belies her inner ambition and drive.

“It’s crazy to me, when [Lidia’s] in town she gets up at 5 a.m., goes to the radio station, goes on the local news and cooks all day, then comes into the restaurant and meets with people and just keeps going,” Valasek says. “She is a driving force, it is something to respect.”

Just as Lidia’s business ventures grew from her family, her Pittsburgh restaurant location has the feel of a family run place, too. The staff works in sync with one another to deliver fine service to the customers. “Our staff all has a mutual respect for one another and a lot of people are friends outside the restaurant which creates a family atmosphere among the staff,” Valasek says.

Valasek credits some of the success to the restaurant not only to the serving staff, but to the chef.

“What we offer is a different take on Italian cuisine and having a celebrity chef run the restaurant makes everyone work a little harder,” Valasek says.

And when Lidia is not in town, diners are in the superb hands of award-winning chef Jeremy Voytish, who has quite a following of his own.

The experience at Lidia’s is nothing short of impressive, which Valasek believes is partially due to the “love for food and cuisine from the entire staff.” As Lidia would say at the end of her PBS cooking show, “Tutti a tavola a mangiare!” – “Everybody to the table to eat!”
Restaurateur Luke Wholey: The Oyster is His World

BY: WES CROSBY

A short walk down from Wholey’s Market on Penn Avenue, a small intimately-lit restaurant bears the same last name. Luke Wholey, owner of Luke Wholey’s Wild Alaskan Grille, is building on the reputation his great-grandfather Robert Wholey established in the Strip District a century ago.

The Alaskan Grille, which opened in August 2012 on the opposite side of Penn Avenue from Wholey’s, started as a small sidewalk joint manned by Luke. After returning home from Montana and Alaska, where he caught 500,000 pounds of salmon as a member of the commercial boat the Sea Fury from 2006 to 2007, Luke found a grill in uncle Jim Wholey’s basement. He asked if he could take the grill, previously owned by a man known as Cajun Ritchie in the 1980s and 1990s, and spent three years selling grilled salmon on Penn Avenue.

“I saw the grill and figured I could make something out of it,” Luke says. “It was just lying there, and I thought it could go to some use.”

He then met business partner Jason Hondros who convinced him to open his own restaurant, carrying on the name that has become synonymous with seafood in the Strip District. But, he decided to focus on grilled seafood, as opposed to the fried product Wholey’s is known for, to produce food “people could eat a couple times a week and not feel bogged down.”

Fresh fish is a running theme throughout the restaurant. Large, blue swordfish hang from the walls, while the aromas of grilled oysters, crab and tuna fill every crevice. Two smiling, stuffed lobster dolls adorned with chef hats and aprons next to a picture of Luke as a boy sporting a red Wholey’s cap, greet customers as they enter through large retractable glass doors that provide most of the restaurant’s light during the day.

That theme continues outside of the restaurant. On a Friday after the lunch rush, Jason shucks oysters on the Penn Avenue sidewalk, passes them off to Luke and shouts to passers-by.

“Hey, how are you doing?” He asks. “You guys up for some grilled oysters?”

Most people politely decline, while a few adventurous souls decide to give the mollusks a try. Luke places the oysters on one of the two outside grills while he advises Jason to keep a protective zone around the grill and the youngsters passing by.

“Hey, Jay, when we’re grilling these things make sure people keep away because of the butter. You know?” Luke says. “The last thing we need is some little kid to come through here and get popped in the face.”

Two minutes later, the butter on one of the oysters explodes up into Luke’s face.

“See?” he says and laughs.

Luke takes two of the scorching oysters and slurps them into the back of his throat.

“I love these things,” he says as he notices two attractive young women pass by. “Hey ladies, how are you doing on this great day? You up to try some
of these oysters?"

The women laugh and carry on without ever answering his question.

He heads back in the restaurant and takes a seat, but he is never able to sit completely still. His head pops up quickly and his eyes brighten as he takes out his iPhone with a spider-webbed screen.

“You fish?” he asks. “Here, check out these fish I caught over on the rivers.”

He proudly flips through nearly two dozen photographs of large fish, including a 40-pound catfish he caught in Pittsburgh.

“It’s good fishing out there,” he says. “You wouldn’t think it, but there’s some really crazy stuff if you want to spend some time looking for it.”

While he continues flipping through the pictures, Chef Matthew Lang comes out from the kitchen, and Luke jumps up to greet him.

“This is a guy you want to talk to right here,” Luke says. “We found this kid at the [Rose] Tea Café, and Jason saw him scaling a wall while he was holding a bar tub. Right then we were like, ‘This kid is crazy.’ And we knew we had to hire him right there.”

Matt stops and takes the time to describe working for Luke. He says Luke is a “goofy guy with a very off-the-wall sense of humor,” while also giving him credit for being “one of the most creative people” he has ever worked for.

“We got a new line of sea scallops one day and we went out that night and just out of nowhere he said, ‘We are going to shuck them on the table and grill them’ and we’re like ‘Obviously,’” Matt says. “How could we not have thought of that? But he did.”

The restaurant gives off a laid-back vibe, but the tone changes around noon Saturday. The tables are filled with well-to-do customers, while a projection of Pitt’s football team trying to keep up with the Louisville Cardinals is displayed on a screen hanging against a tan-bricked wall. Jason and Matt man the two outside grills, furiously shucking and grilling oysters and scallops. Two waitresses shuffle back-and-forth from the kitchen to the dining area, asking customers if they are enjoying their meals every 10 minutes or so. Four chefs scramble to meet the orders, while Luke bounces from station to station, supervising and aiding every member of his crew.

He rushes to help a customer and dashes past a quote from the Van Morrison song “Into the Mystic” painted against a wall in a dark corner behind the kitchen. The line from the Northern Irish rock singer-songwriter exemplifies the Wholey’s tradition Luke is attempting to carry on.

“Hark, now hear the sailors cry, smell the sea, and feel the sky,” the quote reads. “Let your soul and spirit fly, into the mystic.”
As you along Penn Avenue on a busy Saturday morning, the sidewalks of the Strip District are not only bustling with shoppers, but unique vendors too.

Outside of Jimmy and Nino Sunseri’s, a stand is set up on the sidewalk. All of the store’s specialty homemade breads are stacked high on baking racks. Pizza bread, slices of Italian bread topped with tomato sauce, pepperoni and cheese, and more are quickly wrapped in wax paper before being handed to the next customer. As the racks and baskets empty, stacks of warm bread are brought straight from the ovens inside to fill them again.

“Hot pepperoni rolls! Two-pound pepperoni rolls!” can be heard all the way down the next block, beckoning inquisitive people to take a look. Erin McGrath is often the one doing the yelling.

Working as a guide for carriage tours in Savannah, Ga., Erin returned home to Pittsburgh for the winter season in 2011. Although she planned to return to Savannah in the spring, Erin found a position at Sunseri’s and is still there a year later.

Erin is primarily an account manager at Jimmy and Nino’s where she handles sales. However, when a spot opened up helping out with the stand on Saturday’s, Erin’s personality made her a good fit. Nino’s son had been selling bread outside for years, and after he left, she filled in.

“They couldn’t believe how loud I was,” Erin joked. “He hung up his loudspeaker and I took over.”

Being a vendor on the sidewalks of the Strip District does require a certain style, as visitors have come to expect a fun experience when they come to the neighborhood.

“You have to be friendly and bubbly. You have to be excited about what you’re doing to be able to get others excited,” Erin said. “You should always be wearing black and gold. I think that should be a rule.”

According to Erin, the returning customers that stop by every week are the best part of the bread stand. Bread is only sold outside at Sunseri’s on Saturdays and near holidays, with specialty breads for sale that aren’t available during the week. The stand itself is also unlike many others in the Strip because the items being sold are made on-site.

“The Strip District is just good for people’s souls; no one gets that happy shopping at Giant Eagle,” Erin said. “It is just very wholesome and satisfying to be able to interact with all these different people.”

Across the street in front of Roland’s Seafood Grill, Sister Sandra Sharon hands out lollipops to children passing by. Christmas ornaments swirled with red, white and green paint draw the attention of holiday shoppers. Wreaths decorated with poinsettias and Steelers’ footballs are on display.

The booth is a fundraiser for the Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth, with proceeds benefitting the senior sisters and their ministries. Sister Sandra and Michael Cavanaugh, who volunteers at the facility, have been selling the Christmas decorations in the Strip District since 1998.
“Our senior sisters have worked hard all those years, so this is our way to give back to them,” Sister Sandra said.

The booth started out when an older sister asked Sister Sandra to take over her efforts in the Strip District, selling tickets for the congregation’s October fundraiser. The booth grew from there when they began selling wreaths and ornaments as well.

“People love the Strip. They come from out of town and this is the first place that you take them,” Sister Sandra said. “You have people dining outside and all the vendors set up on the sidewalks.”

The ornaments for sale are hand painted by retired sisters, some even in their 80s or 90s, using acrylic paints. The wreaths and centerpieces are made by Sister Sandra and Michael.

The pair come down from the congregation’s Mt. Nazareth campus in Bellevue to the Strip District each Saturday, setting up the booth from 8:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. The decorations seem to be a hit with shoppers during the holiday season, as people stop to admire the ornaments or candy Santa sleighs.

“We have made so many friends down here,” Sister Sandra added with a smile.

“People love the Strip. They come from out of town and this is the first place that you take them,”
Dresses blow in the wind outside Lucy’s Hand-Made Clothing Shop, beckoning customers to step into the unique store. Scarves, hats, sweaters, jewelry and even wooden flutes are just a sampling of what waits inside. It’s hard to believe that for more than 10 years, this outdoor display of merchandise was all that existed of Lucy’s.

“In the beginning, it’s always hard,” owner Lucy Moran, says.

Open seven days a week on 2021 Penn Avenue in the Strip District, Moran opened her store with the help of her friends and her two daughters. It was a big step forward for Moran and her customers, whom she refers to as her “sidewalkers.” The new space allows her to showcase a greater variety of hand-made goods from Peru and her native Ecuador.

“You cannot find some of this stuff in the malls,” Moran says. “People come back for quality.”

Quality is exactly what Moran hopes to offer with her store. Originally from the Sierra region of eastern Ecuador, Moran grew up learning the traditions of Latin American manufacturing culture, such as weaving and hand-embroidery. Her shop now brings this artisanship to the Strip with hand-made goods from her home country as well as Peru, India, Nepal, Mexico, Guatemala, Pakistan and Bolivia. Customers search through the reasonably-priced offerings as if they are on a treasure hunt.

“The main reason people decide to get something here is because they want to see what other countries can offer. They’re tired of seeing the ‘Made in China’ label,” Moran says.

Moran tries to accommodate all of her customers and takes their satisfaction seriously. She always remembers three rules for success in business, which are posted at the front of her store: “1. Take care of the customer 2. Take care of the customer 3. Take care of the customer.”

“We want to make them happy,” she says.

Moran emphasizes these rules to everyone on her team, which consists of three members. She believes
the only way her store can be a success is with these three women. Hesitant to call them employees, she instead refers to them as her “very good friends.” Her team reflects the diversity of goods in her store, as one is from Guatemala, one from Iran and one from Mexico.

“We work as a family,” Moran says. “We share everything.”

Marta, a member of Moran’s team for two years, says she never expected to see the type of clothing Moran sells in Pittsburgh. A professor in her home country of Mexico, Marta says she enjoys seeing what customers discover at Lucy’s.

“They have fun in the store. It’s like a tour. They can find different styles and they feel like they’re transported to another place,” Marta said.

Soon, customers will be able to shop in a new place when Moran opens a store in Southside. This store is scheduled to open on East Carson Street in mid-November, and will carry all of the goods currently found at Lucy’s, such as hand-made sweaters, hand-embroidered dresses, hand-crocheted children’s clothes, scarves, pashminas and animal hats. The big difference will be the store’s hours, which will reflect the later schedule of the neighborhood. While Moran opens her shop in the Strip as early as 6 a.m. on some days to keep up with customers’ earlier tendencies, the store on Southside will be open from 11 a.m. to 9 p.m. to accommodate a typically later crowd.

For Moran, her second store is not only for reaching more customers, but it is also a symbol of personal triumph. Hard work has allowed Moran to live in Pittsburgh for 15 years while supporting her family at home in Ecuador. While she has not been able to visit her family since 2004, she was able to see her uncle when he stopped by Lucy’s for the first time.

“He was congratulating me day and night,” Moran says.

Moran urges her daughters to follow in her footsteps and become “professionals” who treat customers and employees honestly and fairly. Their success would make Moran extremely proud and grateful. She hopes they will follow her model of building from the ground up.

“My goal is for my daughters to see how people can start from nothing and become an entrepreneur,” she says.

An entrepreneur is exactly what Moran has become by bringing a little piece of Latin America to the Strip. She will continue to decorate her store with unique hand-made treasures until every space is filled. Her success and strategy are distilled in a simple maxim her mother taught her: “The only thing that is impossible is coming back from the dead. The rest you can fix,” Moran says.
Stamoolis Brothers: After 103 Years, It’s Still All About Family

BY MAGGIE PAVLICK

Traditional Greek music and the smell of spices from metal bins greet you and give you the feeling that you have stepped into a simpler time – a time when the man at the counter knew your name and your order by heart. It is a place where the old, wooden floorboards and glass display counter have seen three generations of the same families shop there weekly, and it makes you feel as though you are a part of that tradition, even on your first visit.

In a busy world where grocery stores are chains and food is prepackaged, Stamoolis stands out as a reminder of old-time business values, rich Greek heritage and most importantly, family.

“Now you need a contract,” owner Gus Stamoolis recounts. “Back then, you needed a handshake. Your word was the contract.”

Gus Stamoolis is the son of one of the original owners. He strives to retain the store’s original character and the legacy that his father and four uncles brought from Chios, Greece.

In 1909, the five Stamoolis brothers started the Stamoolis Brothers Company, which imported Greek specialty foods. They came to Pittsburgh from New York City in 1929, first opening on the Boulevard of the Allies, then on 16th street in the Strip, and finally in their current location on Penn Avenue, in 1936.

Gus, who has been working at the store since 1965, grew up in the family business. When he was younger, the store’s business was mostly wholesale. They had no set hours and often, the store would be empty by noon. Then, the store had a crank register, and the refrigerated section was cooled with ammonia.

They now have a point-of-sale register with a scanner and modern refrigeration. The ammonia pipes still hang on the wall next to the old wooden grape crusher that Gus’s uncles used to make wine.

Both the Stamoolis Brothers Company and the Stamoolis family have grown and adapted to Pittsburgh, but the transitions from Greece to America were not always easy.

Growing up, Gus and his family spoke only Greek at home, so when he was in kindergarten, he would sit alone and not talk to anyone. Finally, the teacher called the principal, who called Gus’s mother. She answered the phone in her native tongue, and they then understood the issue. Gus quickly picked up English from his classmates and teachers, but at home, it was always Greek.

It wasn’t only Gus’ siblings and parents who were influential in his upbringing. The Stamoolis family averaged 18-20 people around the dinner table on a regular basis and twice as many during the holidays. Gus fondly remembers fighting over their favorite meal: snails.

“My uncle would have to dish them out 10 at a time so no one would fight,” Gus recalls.

The store sold fresh snails before it was illegal
A more dire surprise later shook the business to its core. When Gus and his brother were teenagers, there was a devastating fire that completely gutted one of the store’s buildings.

“My dad and uncle, they weren’t totally prepared for something like this,” Gus said. “It was my brother and me, even though we were young, who said we need to move on.”

Gus and his brother filled out the paperwork and worked with the insurance companies, and sure enough, the store survived and was stronger than ever.

Today, the store flourishes, with shelves stacked with imported canned goods, such as peppers stuffed with rice and pre-made Greek dinners. Behind a glass counter are over 60 types of feta cheese spreads, made fresh every day from Gus’s late brother’s recipes, as well as more types of Feta cheese than most people have ever heard of. Varieties of Kalamata olives soak in plastic buckets in a center display, ready for customers to scoop into smaller containers and take home to enjoy, and Greek olive oil in all shapes and sizes line a neighboring shelf.

As the store expanded, though, some things were left behind. When he first got his driver’s license, he would make home deliveries to his parents’ friends from church, who always offered him milk and cookies. Now, there are no more deliveries, and the store has changed from a strictly wholesale business to a popular destination for shoppers in the Strip, reflecting the overall change in the nature of the Strip in recent decades.

“The scope of the business has changed beyond what I think my father would have seen,” Gus said.

Gus’s daughters, Connie and Catina, now work in the store alongside their father. Gus and Connie recount how all three of Gus’ children would hide in the metal spice bins when they were younger.

“We have a picture of it, the three of them sitting inside the bins,” Gus said.

“And kids still love them,” Connie adds. “Kids who come in the store will try to crawl into them, too.”

Connie and her siblings would work in the store over the holidays and grew up in the store, the way the generation before did. Though big family dinners are impossible, with much of the family dispersed all over the country, they try to still keep the old traditions alive.

“We do the best we can,” Gus said, “but it’s nothing like it was.”

But the store, at least, is everything it was – and more. The daughters helped to bring the business into the 21st century by creating an online store with over 1,000 items available 24/7. The physical store, however, with its small, family atmosphere, remains the heart of Staoomolis Brothers.

“A lot of people, this is why they come... We try to keep that atmosphere coupled with the modern,” Gus said. “[The Strip] was an ‘area.’ Now it’s a ‘destination’.”

Though many customers come to the store just to experience the warmth and personality of years gone by, the Stamoolis family still sees generations of the same families come in regularly for oil, olives, or feta. It’s as busy as ever, and even after working in the store his whole life, Gus wouldn’t have it any other way.

“A lot of my peers, my colleagues, are retired now. They ask me, ‘Why don’t you retire?’ and I say, ‘I am,’” Gus said. “And I am, because what I’m doing, I enjoy doing. Coming in everyday, talking to people... this is what I love.”
Kim Đô Serves Thriving Vietnamese Community

BY: ANASTASIA FARMERIE AND VICTOR ESSEL

After you grab a quick jumbo egg roll, a side of fried noodles and a hot BBQ-chicken kabob at the Moonlight Express food vendor, you’ll find you are right next-door to a special Vietnamese grocery store on 1808 Penn Avenue. A bright yellow sign with red text reads: “Kim Đô Oriental Grocery. Wholesale Retail: Vietnamese Foods, Chinese Foods, South East Asian Foods, American Foods, African Foods.”

At Kim Đô, there is more than just food – you can find Vietnamese magazines, music, and, of course, traditional ingredients to cook traditional meals. It is a resource for all Vietnamese community members. Built by the hands and minds of immigrants, shops like Kim Đô represent a community’s pursuit of something universal, or as it has been called: the American Dream.

Two Vietnamese immigrants came to the strip to open Kim Đô, which offers Trung Nguyen Coffee, Vietnamese homemade chili sauce, dried noodles for every kind of Southeast Asian soup, fresh fruits and every kind of tea imaginable.

Tam and Phuong Nguyen own Kim Đô. They grew up and married in Saigon, which is now Ho Chi Minh City, the biggest city in southern Vietnam. But Phuong wanted to start his own independent business in the United States, so his wife, Tam, came along to support his dream. Finding work with Westinghouse, she and her husband were able to settle in Pittsburgh. When Phuong decided this was the place to start his business, he asked Tam to join him.

“I was working at Westinghouse and my husband made me do it,” Tam says, conceding that operating the neat Vietnamese grocery store full-time in the Strip District was a great idea.

Twenty-seven years ago, they opened a...
Vietnamese grocery store in Oakland, but felt they needed more space and even more exposure to a diverse community. So, 13 years later, they landed in the midst of varied businesses on Penn Avenue’s Strip.

“More and more Vietnamese families began to relocate to the Pittsburgh area,” says Hanh Nguyen, Vietnamese Professor at the University of Pittsburgh and member of the Vietnamese Catholic Community and the Vietnamese Association of Pittsburgh (VAP).

“There were about 2000 Vietnamese people that lived in Pittsburgh. This number has certainly increased since 1979,” she says. “The community is very close and most of the people know each other.” Before Phuong and Tam, Mrs. Hanh Nguyen came to the United States in 1975, and settled in Pittsburgh in 1979 when her husband was offered a job as an anesthesiologist.

“Moving to Pittsburgh was great as more and more Vietnamese people have relocated to the area. This has helped create a vibrant community that I enjoy being a part of,” she says.

A poster taped on the front door of Kim Đô tells of a Christmas Celebration for the Vietnamese Catholic Community of Pittsburgh.

Every month, the Vietnamese Catholic community holds a Vietnamese mass, followed by a community gathering and a traditional meal.

“We also have the Christmas mass where traditional music is sung by the choir that I direct. After mass, everyone gathers for a feast and celebration,” says Mrs. Hanh Nguyen.

“We also do something similar for New Year’s Day. In the VAP, we host many smaller gatherings. Our most popular event is the Lunar New Year Celebration. In February, we gather for a day of traditional food, dragon dancing, Vietnamese games for the children, and giving good luck money in the red envelopes. We gather together to celebrate, talk, and look forward to seeing old friends,” she says.

Tam and Phuong Nguyen help raise money for these events. Right now, they are in the process of raising money to bring in a famous Vietnamese singer from California for a performance at the Tết Lunar New Year Festival. Community members will prepare food. “We give back to Vietnam,” Tam says.

A small old TV broadcasts a football game behind Phuong, as he rings a customer up. Shelves of Vietnamese CD cases and music line the wall above, along with posters of Vietnamese movie stars and soap operas. Tam speaks to a customer in a language that most Americans cannot understand.

“We get people from Thailand, Vietnam, Africa, Columbia, Mexico, people who come over and study,” Phuong says.

Tam and Phuong achieved what they initially set out to do, and they are satisfied with their shop. Although it has become a hub for the Vietnamese people, it also serves as a place for diversity – everyone is welcome to enjoy the unique products there.

The Vietnamese couple is confident that Kim Đô, will still be here years from now. Their children have already graduated from college and became professionals and moved on to other cities. One might ask, who will take over once they retire? This doesn’t matter – according to Tam and Phuong – as long as someone in the community keeps it going, they’ll be happy. This way, the immigrants’ passion and care will be preserved and consistent, presenting the products in a way that has kept the business thriving.

“This is a place for Vietnamese people and others to go. This is so we have a voice,” Tam says.
People

Penn Pottery: Heart Like a Wheel

BY: ALEX MELL

After Gary Pletsch prepares the clay purchased from his hometown Standard Ceramics in Carnegie, he sits at the shaping wheel and effortlessly moves his fingers through the soft, wet clay to transform it into a large bowl. The piece will need finishing: Creative thoughts about the designs he wants on the bowl, the actual carving of the piece, two separate firings, and glazing. If all goes as planned and there aren’t any cracks or dripping glaze, the bowl will be ready for retail in four to five weeks.

“There is no immediate gratification,” Pletsch says of the process of turning the clay into a piece of pottery.

The Strip District is bursting with small specialty shops and boutiques that don’t generate a great deal of publicity but have managed to survive for decades. Penn Avenue Pottery, located at 1905 Penn Avenue, is one of those shops. It has been in business for 33 years.

In 1979, Bill Foglia opened the store when his father chose to retire from his Italian grocery store and give the space to his son. Foglia transformed the grocery store into a ceramics studio and operated on his own for almost 10 years.

Foglia decided he wanted to teach and found a job in the Fox Chapel School District, where he taught fourth grade for 14 years and elementary art for eight years. During that time, Foglia rented the front of the shop to a woman named Lilly, and she named the store “Artisan Show Place.”

In 1989, a few of the potters who sold pieces at Artisan Show Place decided they wanted to come together and help the store. In September of 1990, the shop went back to its original name of Penn Avenue Pottery with a new group of potters that turned the store into the small art gallery it is now. Artists Valda Cox and Pletsch continue to work at and help run Penn Avenue Pottery today.

“We are our own private art show,” Pletsch says. “We are a 365 day-a-year art festival.”

Customers who venture into the store are greeted by the overwhelming variety of pottery that artists have crafted: A mixture of mugs, plates, wall pieces, and other odds and ends in shades of reds, browns and blues. Guests can look to the back of the shop and see the potters working at their craft.

Penn Avenue Pottery is run by a group of five individuals who form the co-op. Along with Foglia, Pletsch and Cox, Mike Gwaltney and Tracey
Donoughe labor at their craft. These potters have over 100 years of combined experience. The main thing that keeps them going: The clay.

“When people get their hands in clay, there is something that draws them to it,” Foglia says. “Whether it’s the texture or the feel of the clay on your hands, people enjoy doing pottery.”

The shop’s location in one of the busiest, family-run shopping areas in the entire region has aided its success. People come to the Strip for a kind of authenticity that cannot be found at the mall.

“Subway and Starbucks came here and didn’t last: Chains don’t seem to last,” Pletsch says. “It just shows how loyal the customers are to the businesses in the Strip.”

The fervor of Penn Pottery customers is evidenced by the fact that the shop doesn’t spend a dime on advertising. People learn about Penn Avenue Pottery by visiting the store and they see the artists’ work on display at other venues, such as potlucks or charities. Current customers tout the shop to new customers.

“Since we are a small business, we don’t need the hi-tech devices,” Pletsch says. “We advertise through word of mouth.”

Foglia, with his salt-and-pepper-hair and clay-dust covered hands, focuses intently on covering the bottoms of his pieces with a wax that protects them from glazing when placed in the kiln.

“One of the things about pottery that’s different from other crafts is the different steps involved,” Foglia says.

Before the potter can begin shaping the clay, it must first be wedged so that there aren’t any bumps or air pockets in the clay. Wedging clay is similar to the process of kneading dough. After wedging, the clay is wetted and shaped on the wheel into whatever shape the potter decides. After the piece is formed, it must dry a bit before the potter carves any patterns for finishing. The piece is then fired two separate times before the glazing is applied.

As Pletsch wedges a fresh block of clay, wets it and puts in on the table to be shaped, his love for the art is obvious. With focus and ease, he turns a block of clay into a beautifully crafted bowl in less than five minutes. The finished product won’t be available for another few weeks, but the process has begun.

“Each day of the week, a different potter works and we rotate on Saturday and Sunday,” he says. Like most shops in The Strip, the busiest business day for Penn Avenue Pottery is Saturday.

Pletsch sits in his chair with his black-rimmed glasses and dirty work pants and focuses on the newest design that has come to him as he carves a mug he recently sculpted. He is known for his heavily carved pieces with different symbols and patterns ranging from doodles (a habit from his days as a student when he should have been taking notes), to the rope lava flows of Hawaii.

“I look at buildings a lot for design ideas,” Pletsch says. “Manhole covers and tree grates also have beautiful patterns.”
haking the hand of Raymond Mikesell is like gripping the hand of a professional football player. It is large, strong – and perfect for digging into dough and kneading it to perfection to make the breads and pastries. His shop, Café Raymond, is the place where those hands work from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. on a regular basis doing what he loves most: Baking.

Mikesell discovered he had a love for food and cooking at an early age, learning from his father, a former chef.

“I got thrills for cooking for my family,” Mikesell said. “I wanted to see people happy when they ate.”

In 1984, Mikesell started working in product development at Breadworks, an artisan bakery on the North Side. He worked there for 13 years. With some Breadworks co-workers, he traveled to France in 1990 to study the European style of bread.

“We studied the French way of baking bread,” Mikesell said. “One of the owners set up the trip so that we could study the culture, wine, cuisine and the general experience of the European lifestyle.”

After returning from France, Mikesell and his wife, Marie, decided to move to Baltimore, Maryland, where he became the president of the Stone Mill Bakery. While there, he also served as president of two other bakeries and a commissary kitchen, where foods are processed from raw to semi-cooked to ready-to-eat.

“We moved to Baltimore because my wife has family there,” Mikesell said. “Stone Mill is an upscale bakery and where I got my start to experiment with other foods rather than bread.”

While he was in Baltimore, Mikesell’s bread was served at the White House during both the Clinton and Bush administrations. The Smithsonian Museum of Natural History, which hosts over four million visitors each year, and the American History Museum in Washington D.C. were also regular customers. He supplied the Smithsonian for about three years.

“I felt pride having my bread served to that many people each year,” Mikesell said. “It was also a chance to expand my knowledge because they would ask for many different types of bread and I would have to go on the Internet and teach myself how to make them.”

Working in the food industry and developing relationships with people is an important part of the business, according to Mikesell.

Kelly Ripken, wife of former Baltimore Orioles Hall of Fame shortstop, Cal Ripken Jr., would often dine at the bakery. She was a fan of Mikesell’s rugula, a sweet pastry, and he eventually started catering at
the Ripken home.

While working with the Ripkens, he developed a friendship with Cal and was invited to his Hall of Fame induction ceremony in 2007. That year, Cal and former San Diego Padres right fielder Tony Gwynn, were the only two players voted into the Hall of Fame, and Mikesell had the once-in-a-lifetime experience of riding on the bus with the players and their families to the ceremony.

“It was a great experience,” Mikesell said. “After the ceremony, I got to go to the Oriole party with past and present players and got the chance to meet them.”

Mikesell said that the Ripkens are “down-to-earth people” – and big fans of his tiramisu.

The experiences Mikesell had in Baltimore helped him realize that he wanted to have a business of his own.

“I worked with a couple of good chefs and I paid attention,” Mikesell said. “It was a lot of trial and error while learning to cook other foods besides bread.”

Mikesell, Marie and his three children, Sarah, Ray and Emily, moved back to Pittsburgh because he wanted his children to experience Pittsburgh, the beloved city where he grew up.

He took a chance by opening his own business in the Strip District almost five years ago, but he didn’t want to end up working for someone else when he had gained such great knowledge through all of his experiences.

“It is hard to survive when you first open and I went through all of my savings to start the business,” Mikesell said. “It takes a good three years to turn the corner and for the business to become a success.”

Café Raymond is a favorite catering choice of many upscale clients, including investment firms, from Downtown Pittsburgh. Mikesell offers everything from sandwiches to braised short ribs to his customers, and he is happy with the location of his shop.

“I love the Strip,” Mikesell said. “You can walk out the door and go in any direction and find what you need.”

Mikesell also loves the Strip because it is such a diversified area, from visitors from Toronto to college parents dropping their kids off for school. He also believes that people like change and he feels his shop offers just that.

Serving anything from blueberry ricotta pancakes to lox omeletos, Café Raymond has just what customers crave.

“In today’s world, people want diversity and I try to give them that,” Mikesell said. “People don’t want to travel from place to place to get what they need; they want it in one spot.”
The Strip was not always what it is today – not in form, not in function, not even in name.

According to Lauren Uhl, curator of the Heinz History Center and author of *Pittsburgh's Strip District: Around the World in a Neighborhood*, it wasn’t until a 1915 pamphlet entitled *The Strip’ A Socio-Religious Survey of a Typical problem section of Pittsburgh PA*, that the area was referred to by the name we know today.

For most of its history, the Strip lay beyond the bounds of Pittsburgh, which was founded in 1758. The neighborhood’s western border, from 11th to 25th streets, was open and undeveloped, and the eastern end home to a village of Delaware Indians, according to documents from the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh’s Pennsylvania Room. The Delawares settled at what was later known as Shannonpin’s Town, located around present day Penn Avenue and 30th Street.

In 1769, the Penn family, to whom a vast area of land – including Pennsylvania (thus the name) – had been given by the English crown, started a land office in the Manor of Pittsburgh and sold 300-acre tracts of land. Thomas Smallman purchased a 319-acre plot, called “The Officer.” His land covered a third of the present-day Strip and ran along the Allegheny River from 28th to 34th Street, according to documents from the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh’s Pennsylvania room.

Four years later, in 1773, James O’Hara bought the land from Smallman and renamed it...
“Springfield.” Ten years later, O’Hara married Mary Carson and they had two children, Elizabeth and Mary, according to Uhl’s book “Pittsburgh’s Strip District.”

In 1814, development at the southwest end of the Strip began, just above the borough of Pittsburgh. O’Hara, George Bayard and James Adams had an area that ran from 11th to 15th Streets surveyed and plotted, which became known as “Northern Liberties.” The area was also commonly referred to as “Bayardstown.” In 1837, it joined the city as Pittsburgh’s Fifth Ward, and was described as having a “very industrious population” with stores, hotels, taverns and extensive manufacturing establishments, according to Uhl’s book.

But by whatever name it went by, the area now known as The Strip was, “an undesirable, heavily populated, residential-industrial district notable mainly for its marauding gangs and election day brawls,” according to an article in a 1940 journal called “The Federator.”

After O’Hara’s death in 1819, his land was divided into two shares and left to his daughters. Elizabeth received Springfield Farm and Mary was given Manor Farm, located between 25th and 28th Streets.

The Strip has had many identities, and Uhl believes all of them contribute to the Strip’s story.

“I think it reflects the different epochs of the Strip’s history, the different eras. As it kinds of goes from one mans’ property, kind of rural, to the urban fabric, and industrial fabricate,” Uhl said. “[The] ebb and flow of the Strip’s history is found in its names.”

Bayardstown boys, known as ‘Bayardstown rats,’ had a bad name. Any strange boy that came along was certain to be brow-beaten and abused. Stone fights with the Allegheny boys and Hill boys were common. Battles with Allegheny boys took place in skiffs on the river or, in the winter time, on ice. When the canal was frozen over, as was often the case, a Bayardstown mob would gather on skates and invade Allegheny. The invaders frequently met their equals and the battle would end on the canal viaduct; neither party venturing to enter the other’s territory for fear of being ambushed.

Brawling was a hobby especially enjoyed by colorfully named gangs of boys, according to a 1926 Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine article cited on the Web site of the Carnegie Library system:

The hill side above the site of the Pennsylvania Railroad was a regular battle ground in struggles with the Hill boys, who generally had the advantage until the McCully Glass House boys would be through with their day’s work. By deploying to the right and left of the central fight the Glass House boys would outflank the Hill boys drive them to flight. On one occasion they fled to a schoolhouse, which was promptly bombarded with stones, all the windows broken and much damage done to furniture and books.”
If you are getting off of Liberty Avenue at 17th street, perhaps to visit Wholey's fish market, you might have noticed an old church with a garden grotto surrounded by stone walls and filled with 3 trees in the center. Turn right and you will find yourself at St. Patrick's Church, on 1711 Liberty Avenue. It is the direct descendant of the oldest church in Pittsburgh.

“The building at St. Patrick's is the third generation. It was the first Catholic church in western Pennsylvania,” said Cynthia Helffrich, Director of Communications at Neighbors in the Strip.

The parish was originally established by Rev. William F.X. O’Brien in 1808 to accommodate about 20 Catholic families living in the area. In 1854, St. Patrick's experienced its first fire and destruction. A machine shop went up in flames next door; the fire spread to the church and destroyed the structure that was originally on 11th street.

A second fire occurred in 1935, but Father James R. Cox had the church rebuilt on March 17, 1936. During the reconstruction, a piece of the Blarney Stone from Blarney Castle in Ireland was placed in the tower sheltering the baptistery.

The old church is quite small, but classically pretty. And the parish is still active. “The church still holds Mass twice a week. Lots of people like to have weddings there because of its beauty,” Helffrich said.

Father Cox was easily St. Patrick’s most famous pastor, and one of the most notable in the whole
history of Pittsburgh. In 1925, he established a local radio station to broadcast daily mass – a practice that lasted for 33 years. During the Depression, St. Patrick’s became a relief center for the poor, distributing over two million free meals, 500,000 baskets of food, clothing and fuel under Fr. Cox’s direction.

When shantytowns began to appear, Fr. Cox made sure the unemployed were taken care of by providing them with sanitary facilities. “The poor in this area weren’t as disease-ridden as in some other particular areas,” Ms. Helffrich said.

“He was a very interesting man. He led a group of unemployed people to Washington to beg for relief,” she said.

Interestingly, Fr. Cox also ran for president with a party called the “Jobless Party” during these times.

The current pastor is Rev. Harry E. Nichols. He directs Mass at St. Patrick’s and St. Stanislaus Kostka church – the two churches having merged in 1993 as the Catholic population declined with the rest of the city’s population. By then, as in many other neighborhoods, the population in the Strip no longer justified two autonomous parishes.

St. Patrick’s church contains catacombs underneath and a set of “Holy Stairs” in the main room. People go on their knees in devotion when using these stairs. As an act of holy devotion, the religious ascend the stairs on their knees to symbolize their faithfulness. The Holy Stairs signify the twenty-eight steps between Christ and Pilate when Pilate said, “Behold the Man” and condemned Him to death.
Old Photos Expose Long-gone Shantytown

BY: MAGGIE PAVLICK

Dust and smoke-filled air hangs wearily over wooden shacks and soup kitchens. A man shaves his sunken face with old straight razor, watching his reflection in a piece of broken glass while another sweeps the dirt floor and tries to make the thin, fragile wooden structure feel like home. Weathered men huddle around a wooden table and drink lukewarm coffee from dented tin mugs. There are shanties made of burlap, tar paper, and old boards. There is no sewage, no running water, and no electricity – and there was almost no evidence preserved to mark its existence.

This “shantytown” is the past that Pittsburgh's Strip District nearly forgot until some snapshots of it were developed over seven decades later.

In the early 1930s, the Great Depression was in full swing. About 300 of Pittsburgh's impoverished congregated in the Strip District largely because of Father James Renshaw Cox of St. Patrick’s Church, who worked to open soup kitchens and shelters for the homeless of Pittsburgh. Cox was even named Honorary Mayor of the Shantytown in 1931.

A photographer for the Pittsburgh Sun-Telegraph named Ed Salamony noticed this group of people and created some of the only photographic evidence of the Shantytown that exists today, though the photos were never published. In fact, Salamony never even developed the photos, according to Bruce Klein, Founder of the Photo Antiquities Museum of Photographic History. Salamony donated the negatives that he shot with his 4x5 Graflex camera to the museum decades after he took them, and they were developed for the first time five or six years ago.

The Shantytown's existence was important but brief. With no sanitation, garbage and human waste lined the streets. Rats and cholera were rampant, and the poor living conditions did nothing to slow their spread.

In 1931, Cox gathered 25,000 unemployed people, including all the members of the Shantytown, and organized the “March of the Jobless” to draw attention to vast and extreme poverty in the U.S. As soon as Cox and “Cox's Army” left Pittsburgh, the city officials took it upon themselves to destroy the Shantytown and prevent the unsanitary conditions from igniting an epidemic, according to Klein. It was burned to the ground, erasing the work of the unemployed masses and their kindhearted leader.

Luckily, over 80 years later, Salamony's images of the steadfast citizens of Shantytown are preserved behind glass on the wooden shelves of the Photo Antiquities Museum on Pittsburgh's North Side. Their spirit still resonates through these powerful images, and as Pittsburghers look back on their hopeful faces now they can feel a sense of pride in the tenacity and hope expressed by the city's forgotten neighborhood.
The Heinz History Center that anchors the east end of Smallman Street in the Strip is housed in what used to be an ice distribution company.

In the late 1800’s, The Chautauqua Lake Ice Company on Smallman Street helped people keep their food cold and fresh. “Prior to the days of refrigeration, many local residents relied on ice deliveries to keep their food cold,” said Brady Smith, the communications manager at the Senator John Heinz History Center. “The Chautauqua Lake Ice Company’s Smallman Street warehouse stockpiled ice harvested from New York lakes and shipped south to Pittsburgh on railcars.”

Ice would seem a pretty safe and stable medium, but disaster visited the Chautauqua Ice Company building.

“The building has a chilling legacy,” Smith said. According to an 1898 report by The New York Times, an explosion caused by ammonia and whisky left 11 dead, 19 seriously injured, 27 missing and caused a total of $1,500,000 in property losses for the company and surrounding businesses.

However, “by 1898, the seven-story brick structure was back in service supplying blocks of ice to home ice boxes throughout the city,” said Smith. The company’s useful days were numbered by then.

“With the invention of the electric refrigerator, the demand for ice quickly evaporated, forcing the closure of the ice warehouse in 1952,” Smith said.
Although the railroad industry was booming in the 1800s, crashes and work accidents associated with train travel were often fatal.

Using an ineffective and slow hand-brake system, brakemen sat atop the train’s cars and, as the brake whistle sounded, manually turned a hand wheel to apply the brakes to that individual car. The men would then leap on to the next freight car in the line and do the same.

The deadly system continued until 1868 when George Westinghouse developed the revolutionary air-brake, which allowed the train’s engineer to apply the brakes to all cars simultaneously using compressed air.

The air-brake system made it possible for the construction of longer and faster trains, and also eliminated the dangerous job of the brakemen and made travel safer for passengers.

Westinghouse was born into industry in Central Bridge, New York in 1846. His father, George Westinghouse Sr., owned a company that manufactured farm equipment.

By his early twenties, Westinghouse had already developed two products to improve railroad travel, the car replacer and railroad switch. The steel needed for these technologies is what originally brought Westinghouse to Pittsburgh.

At the time, Pittsburgh produced about 45% of the nation’s total iron and cast more steel than any other city.

While traveling the country selling his products, Westinghouse developed the concept for his air-brake. After patenting the design at the age of 23, Westinghouse formed the Westinghouse Air-Brake Company at 25th Street and Liberty Avenue in the Strip District.

Westinghouse was not merely known for his innovative mind, but also his paternal attitude toward his employees. According to Ed Reis, Westinghouse historian at the Heinz History Center, this quality is what separated Westinghouse from other Pittsburgh industrialists.

“He had a very good rapport with his workers which wasn’t very common at the time,” Reis said. “There was never a strike, he paid better than the other industrialists and he treated his workers with respect.”

The fact that Westinghouse had only 361 patents credited to him, far fewer than his competitor, Thomas Edison, was due in part to the respect he had for his employees.

“If you were working for Westinghouse and a product you were working on was selected for a patent, then your name was on the patent not Westinghouse,” Reis said. “He believed workers deserved the recognition.”

Westinghouse instituted Saturday half-holidays at his plants, giving employees a five and a half day work week, which was uncommon at the time. He also introduced paid vacations and pension and disability programs. Westinghouse
believed that employee satisfaction was what truly made a company successful.

By 1890, Westinghouse Air-Brake Company had relocated to Wilmerding, Pa., an industrial town with insured housing for his employees’ families and a safe factory for workers. In the first year, 6,000 workers at the Wilmerding plant were producing over 1,000 sets of brakes a day. Westinghouse died in 1914 but his legacy of innovation continues.

The original factory itself still stands in the Strip District as a reminder of one the city’s industrial giants, today housing the offices of the Pittsburgh Opera. A statue was erected in 1930 in honor of Westinghouse in Schenley Park through voluntary

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Churches Helped Immigrants Take Leap of Faith in America

BY: ALEX MELL

The Saint Patrick’s and Saint Stanislaus-Kotska parishes were two places where immigrants in the Strip District could worship and pray – with their families and in their own language – for the strength to make it through another week in the steel mills.

According the parish website, in the early 1900’s, over 7,000 families resided in the Strip District. By 2000, there were only 160 families living in the area. This caused a decline in parish membership and resulted in the 1993 joining of St. Patrick’s, St. Stanislaus-Kotska, the first Polish parish founded in 1875. The diocese closed and sold St. Elizabeth of Hungary, the first ethnic Slovak church in the area.

“St. Stanislaus survived because of the strong base of parishioners in Lawrenceville and other parts of the city,” said Father Harry Nichols, a Priest at St. Stanislaus-Kotska. “St. Patrick’s died because there was no longer a need for an Irish parish since most of the Irish migrated from the Strip District.”

St. Stanislaus-Kotska was founded because a group of Polish immigrants decided they were tired of congregating on different sides of the city. The first church was building was purchased in 1875 and within the first two years, the congregation outgrew the building, which caused them to build a new church on 21st and Smallman Street.

“We currently have about 1,150 parishioners with only about 25 living in the boundaries of the Strip,” Father Nichols said. “People come from all over the Pittsburgh suburbs to celebrate Mass.”

The church saw damages in 1936 from both the St. Patrick’s Day Flood and an explosion at the Pittsburgh Banana Company, which led to the church’s domes being removed. The two churches merged to the St. Stanislaus-Kotska location because the size of the parish is considerably larger than the St. Patrick’s location in the Strip District.

The original St. Patrick’s Church was located on 11th Street before it was destroyed by a fire in 1854. The parish then bought land on 14th Street and a new church was built in 1858.

Yet another church had to be constructed in 1865 because of the growth of the railroad and the population of the city. The site of the new location was 17th Street and Liberty Avenue. The parish suffered another fire in 1935 that lead to the construction of a smaller church which stands today on the same site.

Masses are still celebrated at St. Patrick’s even though it merged with St. Stanislaus-Kostka.

“St. Patrick’s is kept open because of the historical value it holds and it’s also an excellent place of prayer,” said Father Nichols. “Mass is still celebrated on Monday’s, even though weekend masses are celebrated at St. Stanislaus-Kostka.”
At the far end of Smallman Street, hiding beside the 31st Street Bridge and set against smokestacks and electric lines, the old Springfield Elementary School stands as a strong reminder of times past, but also a perfect example of the continuously evolving face of the Strip District.

Constructed in 1871 as a school for children living in the flats along the Allegheny River, the building has never stopped being an important part the Strip District. When its life as a school ended in 1934, the school district used it as a warehouse.

In 1946, the Crucible Steel Company decided it would be a perfect place to house its administrative headquarters. In 2000, the school took on yet another role as the Pittsburgh Decorative Center, which was a creative arts center for interior design. When the Decorative Center faded away, the old elementary school caught the attention of Bonn McSorley and her husband.

The owners of a small retail store on 21st Street, which is now home to Pamela's Diner, the couple fell in love with the architecture and old world charm of the schoolhouse. They decided to bring it back to the community by renovating it into loft space.

“We wanted to provide the opportunity for all types to be involved in the city, and that is so very important,” McSorley said. “We don’t want to get rid of industry; we want to attract business to give back to the community.”

Now known as the 31st Street Lofts, the old school holds 14 loftstyle apartments. Renovating such an old building to meet the modern demands of living was no easy task, but for McSorley and her husband, it was a labor of love.

“When we remodeled we had to go along the historic preservation route,” she said. “We couldn't remove the smoke stack, change the stairwells, or the front porch. It was tough but ended up being worth it. It has so much personality and really is a landmark”

Once again, the Springfield Elementary School has become a focal point of the Strip District community. Now the building is symbolic of the Strip's hip new identity. Even though it may serve a much different purpose than it did more than 100 years ago, the school remains a vivid reminder of the beautiful clash between past and present that makes the Strip truly unique.
“See you in the Strip!”
JOURNALISM

MULTIMEDIA ARTS