

Sheer Hamam

Mr. Greco

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### The Sweet Shop: A Hidden Gem

**Dedications:** I dedicate this documentary to the entire Sweet Shop crew and to the people that help keep the community spirit alive by showing their support for this shop. Additionally, I'd like to dedicate this project to my parents, who always inspire me to complete anything I do with full devotion and to always push myself to my best ability.

**Acknowledgments:** I would like to acknowledge Freestyle Academy for giving me the opportunity to dive into this amazing project and for supporting me throughout the process. I would also like to extend my gratitude to my interviewees, Sandra Colunga, and Satjiv Chahil. I appreciate your time and all the memories you shared about your experiences with the Sweet Shop.

**Preface:** We began this project in the early weeks of February, with a wide range of options about what we could document. At first, I was overwhelmed, but as we read Mary Beth Meehan and Fred Turner's *Seeing Silicon Valley* in English class, a specific story stood out to me. It was about a woman named Mary who moved from Africa and lives with her son in Silicon Valley and although she was living in a better home and was with her son she said she constantly felt lonely compared to when she was living in her village back in Africa. She claimed that although living conditions may have

been worse in Africa she was constantly surrounded by her community and therefore never felt alone. Whereas in America she felt as if everyone was alone with themselves and the sense of community she had back at home was not found in the States.

This story stuck with me because it made me realize that in the world of modern consumerism, people order and review their food with barely an exchange of words, if even, and continue to go on with their lives. That inspired me to make my documentary on the issue of convenience over community. And when I think of community, the first thing that comes into my mind is the Sweet Shop.

**Introduction:** The smell of freshly baked cookies and the sound of children laughing flows through the air at the intersection of Loucks and Los Altos Avenue, bringing a smile to everyone's faces. At the entrance of the Sweet Shop, bright candy welcomes everyone who walks in. Indeed, when life gets dull, a candy shop can always make it sweeter.

But that's not all the Sweet Shop brings. Unlike other mainstream businesses, the Sweet Shop takes the time to develop its connection with the community. Amidst the pandemic and its lasting effects, many small businesses faced the sad reality of getting shut down. Yet, throughout the immense challenges of the pandemic, the Sweet Shop remained an outlier thanks to its community. The neighborhood refused to let the Sweet Shop close, showing the effects of their connection with the people of Los Altos Avenue.

It is often said, “People succeed because of other people.” Indeed, Sweet Shop’s pandemic survival story exemplifies this belief. The year 2020 brought many challenges to small businesses such as supply chain interruptions, declining demand for products and services, shortages in supplies and inputs, and government-mandated closures. Lydia Depillis, a journalist writing for *The New York Times*, explains, “Using tax data from California shows that through the fall of 2020, smaller businesses closed at a significantly higher rate than large ones, increasing the degree of market dominance by larger firms in the state.” That along with the fact that we’ve lost about 65,000 small retailers, despite the population and economy having grown considerably. This shows us that as stated by Stacy Mitchell, author of the article *Fighting Monopoly Power* the Sweet Shop remaining open is not by chance.

So how does a small candy store placed in the middle of a neighborhood foster such a welcoming environment that it allows them to endure so many challenges? And why is that resilience significant to the Los Altos community? The Sweet Shop has been referred to as a “hidden gem” and is essentially everything that is rare in today’s current consumerism.

### **Chapter 1: The Sweet Beginning (History)**

Don’t drive too fast or you’ll miss it! The Sweet Shop is nestled between two houses in a residential neighborhood on Los Altos Avenue. Bikes scattered around the entrance of the store create a maze for people to walk through as they enter through

the doors. Outside strollers and bikes often occupy the sidewalks as people take their afternoon strolls through the neighborhood. Laughter and screams of excitement echo as kids run in and out of the store with their froyos and milkshakes in hand.

There has always been a business in this spot since the 1940s, and always some kind of food shop. In the late 1980s, it was FoodLand, a staple for anyone who wanted to grab a quick after-school snack such as a 25-cent candy bar. One of FoodLand's frequent customers was a girl named Stacy Sullivan, a student of Terman Middle School and Gunn High School. After school, she'd hop on the bike path and ride a couple of miles to grab some candy or a drink before heading home. Foodland eventually shut down around 2000 and stood vacant and abandoned for years.

One day, Sullivan, who still lives in the neighborhood, was walking by the abandoned building and thought, "Such a shame that it was let go." So she decided to purchase the property and bring something back to the neighborhood. In her words, "give it an uplift", recalls Sandra Collunga, the Sweet Shop's manager.,

Although Colunga humbly refers to herself as "chief bottle washer and cook," she has been part of the Sweet Shop since it was built. Eight months before the Shop opened its doors, Sullivan had hired Colunga as a consultant to help with the actual designs of the building, such as helping choose the lights and researching candy. "It was sort of like a mini start-up," Colunga reflects.

Satjiv Chahil, a day one regular of the Sweet Shop, recalls the conversion of FoodLand into the Sweet Shop: "It was wonderful when Stacy Sullivan bought it and

restored it to perfection. And not only restored it, she reinvented it and made it kid-friendly.” The Sweet Shop is within walking distance from five schools, and over the years it has continuously donated 5% of its earnings back to the schools to support the community. A note on the tip jar at the front counter reminds you that 5% of tips will go straight to local schools. Knowing her business is such a community center, Sandra has to take certain steps to ensure that the attitude and energy of the store remain joyful and welcoming. “I think one of the biggest things especially when hiring people is I tend to look for someone that would talk to a customer you know if you're maybe a little too shy or quiet then you're not going to have that connection with the customer so that's maybe where the employees play a role”, says Colunga. Traces of that attitude are everywhere in the shop. The employees who ring you up are often Mountain View or Los Altos High students and are on a first-name basis with some customers. Often times people walk into the Sweet Shop looking for a sweet gift they can get for a friend, and the employees are always ready to offer their opinions on which products they should buy. Kristin Welsh, a writer from Bentley University argues, “Take time to consider company missions and issues that are important to you — and that will be meaningful to your gift recipients.” According to this view, small businesses such as The Sweet Shop add something special to each purchase you make in a way that other corporate businesses can't by providing additional help and interest in making sure you get the gift best fit for your needs.

## **Chapter 2: The Regulars**

Sandra Colunga was monitoring the shop as usual when she noticed a familiar face sitting outside enjoying his froyo and watching the kids play. Colunga recalls, “He would come almost every day and so one day I walked up to him and said: Hi! I see you every day and I introduced myself, he introduced himself, and we became friends. And then he began to sit inside and get a coffee and lunch and that would end in him sitting there for 3 hours getting to know the employees”. That was how Sandra formed her lasting friendship with Harry Logan thirteen years ago. Logan inspired her because she felt that everybody should be like him. In Colunga’s view, “We’re unique in that way: we want you to stay and we want you to hang out”. Colunga’s point is that if a customer is sitting at the Sweet Shop and hanging out she wants them to stay as long as they want without feeling rushed to move out and make room for new customers. Colunga strives to add to both the culture of the neighborhood as well as forming special connections with each customer who walks in. Collat School of Business states that, “Not only are local businesses important for creating a culture for the community, but they also build connections and relationships with the people” (“Small Businesses Impact on Communities”). By remembering a birthday or a dog’s name, Colunga takes the extra steps to form a relationship with a customer and seeks to do that with anyone who walks in.

As a result of Colunga’s actions, Satjiv Chachil, senior vice president of global marketing at HP, Apple, Beats, and other well-known tech companies is now also a Sweet Shop regular. Chachil recalls his first thoughts walking through the Sweet Shop

doors: “It can be captured in one word: Wow. And then the two words: how cool. And then, oh, this is so wonderful.” Chachil, who lives across the street from the shop, describes it as an extension of his own home. First, it became an extension to his kitchen as he made frequent visits for froyo and his personal favorite Apple Smoothie. Then it became an extension to his living room as he would spend hours conversing with his friends that he made through the shop, such as Harry, or with friends that he brought from all corners of the world. Chachil jokes, “all my guests who visit me, I see that they get a bed and breakfast, and the breakfast is always at the Sweet Shop”. Satjiv is very proud of the Sweet Shop and refers to it as a “meeting place.” He goes on to explain, “It's a wonderful place. Not just for the local community, but whenever my friends from Germany, Japan, India, and anywhere send me a note, they ask me, how is it (the Sweet Shop)? They remember it very fondly. In airports, they have spots simply called “meeting places.” So when you go to find somebody, you go to the meeting place. The Sweet Shop is the meeting place for the global” (Chachil).

The shop's first two regulars were Satjiv and Harry, who first met one another before the Sweet Shop, back when it was a cafe called Tea&Spice. They had met over a cappuccino and would see each other occasionally and converse over a cup of coffee. However, when Tea & Spice shut down Harry and Satjiv stopped seeing each other and it wasn't until the Sweet Shop opened that the two reconnected and have been great pals ever since. Harry just celebrated his 91st birthday at the Sweet Shop and was surrounded by his friends.

Once the Covid Pandemic hit the Sweet Shop was forced to close its doors along with all other businesses until guidelines permitted them to open again. “Small business owners are also particularly adept at finding new ways of doing old things” (“The Importance of Small Businesses”). Colunga was quick to open a takeout window that was open for 4 hours a day and delivered the neighborhood their favorite candy in a safe way. Chahil recalls when the Sweet Shop had to close for 4 months: “The worst part of the COVID pandemic and all of us having to be isolated was that we missed each other so we couldn't wait for it to open.” Yet, the restriction keeping people apart from seeing each other and enjoying their regular froyo during the pandemic only made it that much more exciting for when the Sweet Shop opened again. It reminded the entire neighborhood exactly why the shop was so special. According to Chahil, “The pandemic actually sort of magnified the importance of the Sweet Shop to the community”.

### **Chapter 3:**

When it comes to the topic of convenience and the ability to order a drink online and be in and out of a store in less than 5 minutes, most of us will readily agree that it's efficient and helpful. Where this agreement usually ends, however, is on the question of whether it's worth giving up the community experience. Whereas some are convinced that not every business needs to build relationships with their customers, others maintain that small businesses that work to build the connection and construct a community are not to go unrecognized. Essentially, there is a reason why a Seven-Eleven is not taking the Sweet Shop's spot in the neighborhood the shop



demonstrated it was strong enough to endure the pandemic. Kristen Welsh administers the results from The Bentley-Gallup Force for Good Survey: “We found that 82% of Americans believe small businesses positively impact people’s lives” (Shopping Small Means Big Impact). This suggests that the efforts of the neighborhood working hard to keep the Sweet Shop a place in their community and lives were so it could continue to leave a positive impact.

The Sweet Shop brings individuals together in a way that no other place can. The difference between ordering at the register and not over a phone is that people are able to make face-to-face conversation and spark even the smallest connection, which can lead to making someone's day better. “Yes, today's social networks exist on the Internet. But the real social network is what happens in person”, says Chahil. The sweet shop builds and maintains their affiliation with the neighborhood by celebrating St Patrick's Day, Christmas, Valentine’s, and birthdays with the community.

Colunga goes the extra mile by decorating the shop with fresh flowers and decorations for each event to provide a welcoming atmosphere for new and returning customers. UAB believes, “From providing a hometown feel for localities to working hard to know their neighbors, these small companies do a lot to help others who live nearby in many different ways” (“Benefits of Supporting Small Businesses”). Moreover, some of the earnings from the store go to support the local schools and act as a meeting spot with not just the people of all age groups of the community—and their dogs. “You meet not just the people, their family. You meet all the pets of the family. So there are not many places like that,” asserts Chahil.

**Conclusion:**

Although their ice cream flavors may change every few months, one thing that has remained consistent since the day the Sweet Shop opened has been their drive and commitment to the community. Their engagement is what sets them apart from other local businesses. In the years to come, Colunga's hopes for the Sweet Shop are that they continue to welcome more customers and hopefully become someone else's new "hidden gem". The neighborhood shows its appreciation for the store by supporting it through challenging times. In turn, the Sweet Shop continues to maintain a welcoming atmosphere and fosters a unique experience that keeps its legacy alive.

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