

Zeytin Ercan

Mr. Greco

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Wearing Your Heart on Your Sleeve

Bare mannequins line the windows of a small store on Castro Street, the heart of Mountain View, California. The windows are plastered with signs reading “CLOSING SALE” and “50% OFF ALL ITEMS”. The store is packed, with the check out line nearly spilling out the front door. Flashes of color swirl by as customers rush through, clutching dresses that seem to fly through the air behind them. At the front of the winding line, customer after customer give their heartfelt, and often teary-eyed, condolences to the two women behind the cash register, both of whom wear matching bittersweet smiles. The women are Tamara and Julie Michel, sisters and now-former owners of Boutique 4, a unique clothing and novelty store in downtown Mountain View. After 17 years, this is their final day in business.

The loss of the Boutique follows an upsetting pattern seen in small Mountain View businesses, as the store joins three other vacant buildings surrounding it on both sides, leaving a gaping slot of empty business on the street. Boutique 4’s closure in particular is one that has truly hurt the Mountain View community, as it was one of the town's only stores of its nature. Thanks to the creativity and ingenuity of the sisters, Tamara and Julie Michel created a community around their clothing store, representing a unique aesthetic and perspective on fashion and entrepreneurship that is rare in Silicon Valley.

The Boutique 4 experience really started before you even walked through the door. Eight mannequins lined the windows at the entrance, sporting the newest looks and accessories. The

displays, carefully designed and replaced by Julie every few weeks or so, welcomed customers to the whimsical aesthetic that touched everything in the store. Bright patterns, loud colors, unique designs – think Ms. Frizzle from the Magic School Bus meets Jessica Day from New Girl. Longtime customer, Elina Koretsky, says that the window displays were what first drew her to the Boutique. “I think I saw Boutique 4 before I heard about it,” she says. “I am a huge fan of dresses and they always had the best window display dresses!” Koretsky, who works for a non-profit in the Bay Area, says part of the reason she loved Boutique 4 so much was because it had what so many other retail stores didn’t, especially in Mountain View, where most small businesses are restaurants or novelty stores. “The atmosphere was always warm and friendly,” she says, “I loved the hand-drawn art on the walls and the wide variety of unique clothing options. The vibe was the opposite of Target- it was warm, welcoming and full of character!”

Former employee Lauren Levenston says that the ambiance of the store was part of what made it so unique. “The store had a very welcoming and relaxed atmosphere... There were colorful decorations everywhere: on the walls, hanging from the ceiling, and at the front desk.” As one of only a couple employees at the Boutique, Levenston had basic retail responsibilities, (tidying, opening and closing, reorganizing the racks, etc.) but above all else, she says, the most important part of her job was helping the customers, whether that was through setting them up in a fitting room, answering their questions, or just taking the time to have a nice conversation. “When she was training me,” Levenston remembers, “Tamara had an emphasis on making the store a positive experience for the customers, so we made sure there was a very welcoming and friendly environment in the store.” The sisters worked to ensure that that positive environment extended to the employees just as much as the patrons, as Levenston recalls: “Tamara and Julie would always stick around for a few minutes to have a genuine conversation with me, which I

know is something that most teenage employees do not experience, and just by talking to them, you could tell that they were truly kind people who really wanted to make a positive impact on their community.”

Tamara and Julie have been partners in crime since the very beginning. The sisters grew up together in a small Ohio town by Lake Erie with a population of around 35,000. They attribute much of their interest in fashion and entrepreneurship to the early influence of their grandparents and great grandparents, all of whom lived within blocks of the sisters. “One grandparent on our mother's side taught us how to sew, and so we learned how to do that from a young age and made all our own clothes,” Julie says. “Then the grandparents on our father's side had their own bakery. And so we grew up working in the bakery.”

Tamara initially got her start working in STEM, getting a degree in Computer Science from Ohio State University, while Julie attended an art school nearby. Tamara began working at TI (Texas Instruments) in Dallas shortly after college, but was later transferred out to Silicon Valley. The sisters, who, according to Julie, have never been apart for more than a couple months, eventually reunited when Julie chose to move out to the Bay Area with her sister. “She forced me!” Julie jokes, to which Tamara sheepishly agrees.

The creation of the store initially came about as the sisters’ to make a unique shopping experience for women who, like them, had backgrounds working in more professional environments. “It was an idea that we had to try to make a different kind of shopping experience for customers to help make it easier to find what looks good on them.” Tamara explains, “So the concept is the four color groupings that people fall into, and when you wear certain colors that enhance your natural coloring, or even when you change your hair, there's certain colors that enhance you and certain colors that don't. So there's four of those, there are four body shapes. So

we wanted to create a boutique that was organized in a way that customers could come in and easily find what would enhance them and make them look more beautiful.” Unfortunately, early on into the store’s operation, the sisters quickly realized that physically organizing the store perfectly into 4 categories was near impossible, so they instead focused on continuing the concept through helping customers find their perfect matches one on one. Another obstacle the sisters faced early on was finding and catering to their audience. Google employees, a large portion of the Mountain View consumer population, typically have very casual dress codes at work, which left the sisters unsure of how to accommodate that huge demographic whilst also staying true to their aesthetic. As the store grew, however, the sisters learned to not focus in on one target demographic. “The reality is when you're sitting there at a store, you're just catering to whoever happens to walk in and you can't control that completely. So you have to keep adjusting to who is coming into your store” (T. Michel).

For the next decade and a half, the Boutique solidified itself as one of the most genuine businesses in Mountain View, as it gained an incredibly loyal and supportive fanbase in the community. According to Levenston, “There were so many regulars that would say how much they loved the individuality of Boutique 4, or that it was the only store they liked to shop at!” Unfortunately, a day would soon come that would prove to change everything.

March 17, 2020, exactly two years before my interview with Tamara and Julie, Santa Clara County issued a shelter-in-place order due to the uncontrolled spread of COVID-19, leaving several small businesses, such as Boutique 4, unaided and unsure of their future. Castro Street saw the effects of the virus on business early on, as *The Mountain View Voice* reports that on February 28, the day it was announced that a patient with COVID-19 had been admitted to El Camino hospital, 80% of all reservations at Rumble Fish, a popular Japanese restaurant in

downtown Mountain View, had been canceled (Bradshaw). The initial impact of COVID-19 on small businesses was truly devastating, with many beloved establishments being forced to permanently close down soon after the first shelter in place as a result. One such business was Clarke's Charcoal Broiler, one of the city's oldest family owned restaurants, which, after 75 years in business, closed in early April of 2020 due to strains caused by the initial lockdown. Steve Blach says his family's decision to close the much loved eatery was unavoidable: "It could be another 18 months until we get back to where we were prior to the virus," he said. "What do you do? You lay off people. You cut hours. You raise prices. And then you're going to be out of business anyway. It's a no-win situation" (qtd. in Zavoral). Ethan Baron of *The Mercury News* explains why beloved Silicon Valley institutions, such as Clarke's, were forced to closed so early into the pandemic: "In this city with an economy heavily dependent on the technology industry's army of daytime workers, thousands of whom are typically bused in by their employers, the shift to remote work is wreaking financial havoc across a broad swath of Mountain View businesses even as the city's biggest employer contributes new revenue and pandemic assistance."

In the following months, many restaurants were able to find solutions to the challenges posed by a lockdown, with many investing in take-out options and food-delivery platforms like DoorDash or GrubHub. As a store that relied almost solely on foot-traffic, there were no easy immediate solutions for Boutique 4. "A lot of people were able to still work from home and still have jobs and still continue to get income," explains Tamara, "but for us, it was a completely different scenario because we had to be open to do that and we couldn't be." To make matters worse, the lockdown started just before what would normally be the store's most lucrative season, as customers would typically be preparing for events they had during Spring Break or over the summer, such as weddings, vacations or Prom. Now with no customers and no events

for customers to shop for, the Michel sisters were terrified for the future of the Boutique. As COVID restrictions became looser, it seemed the store was able to regain some of its footing, but the initial hit would prove to weigh on Boutique 4's earnings as time went on. Two years later, this would result in the sisters making the incredibly difficult decision to permanently close Boutique 4, after nearly seventeen years of operation in Mountain View.

The community was devastated. "I was heartbroken when I learned it was closing." Koretsky says, "It was like a good friend told me that they were moving away forever!" Longtime patrons were calling to see if there was anything they could do to help, encouraging their friends and family to buy gift cards, recommending the boutique to their colleagues, anything to support their favorite store. "In Mountain View it's just been an unbelievable outpouring of support and sympathy and devastation," says Julie, "regardless of COVID." Tamara adds, "Yeah, it's just how everybody has been, and so with COVID, it was even more so. It's been very heartwarming, and it made us feel like we meant something to the community."

Although the end of this chapter of the sisters' lives and careers was forced to come to an abrupt end, the future for Tamara and Julie looks extremely bright. The day I interviewed the sisters, Julie had officially finished packing up her house to, as she puts it, "fortunately- or unfortunately", move back to Ohio for the first time in nearly 30 years. She plans to stick to her creative roots and continue bringing art to her community. "I'm going to do something creative, artistically centered, related, probably another small business. Maybe a small scale art store." Tamara, on the other hand, will be staying in the Bay Area to pursue another of her passions: saving the environment. She plans on getting a design certification in permaculture, explaining it as "a concept related to how you grow things, but not just grow things, how it relates to the entire environment. So it's kind of like trying to save the Earth one garden or farm at a time."

As they continue to find new ways to contribute to their community, even now, as they're separated for the first time in decades, the sisters' strong bond leaves hope for future projects as a business duo. "You know, everybody warned us when we first started thinking about doing this together and talking about it," says Tamara, "everybody kept saying, 'Don't do it. It's going to rip you apart. You know, I've seen many families torn apart because of this.'" But as Julie explains, "I think, because we are family, you have to get along, you know? We don't have a choice!"

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