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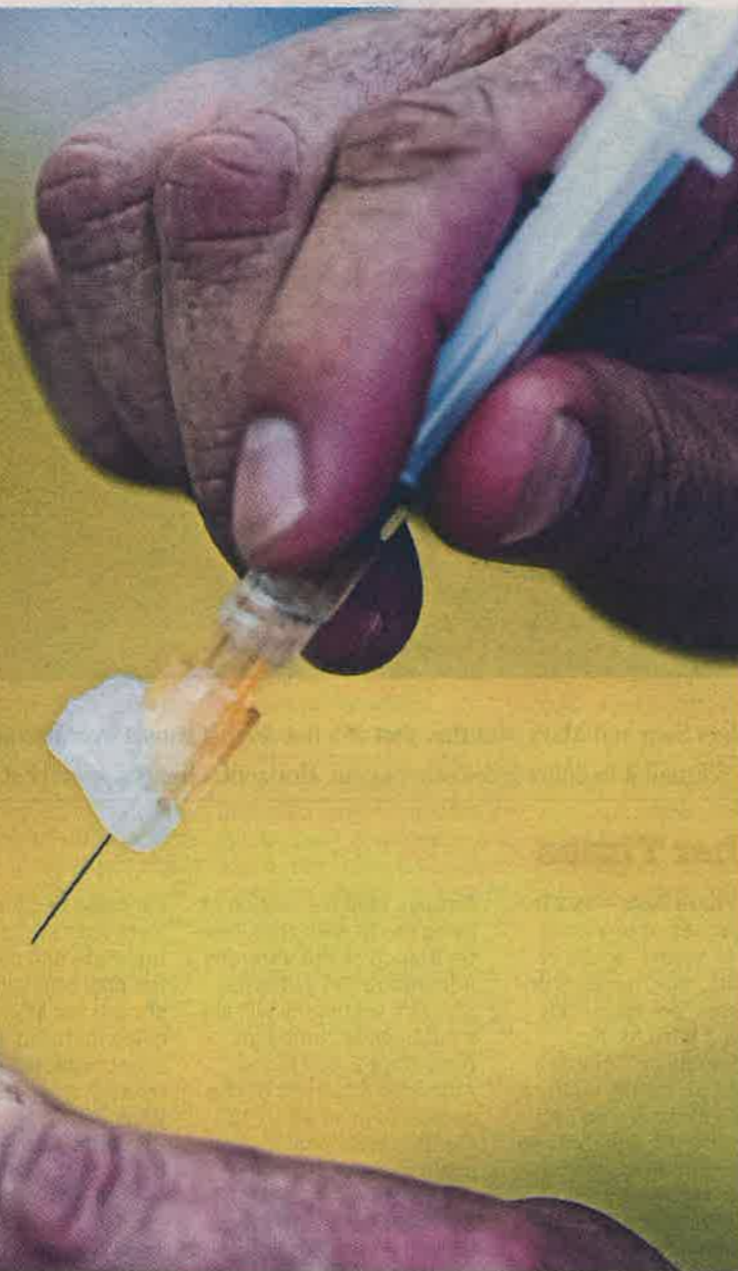
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New book relives the groovy past of The Balcony



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NEW BOOK

'My View from The Balcony' delves into Delco's history of bell bottoms, black lights, and Woodstock posters

By Peg DeGrassa

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Editor of Town Talk, News & Press of Delaware County

UPPER DARBY » People who listen to a hit song and believe that all the hippies met on South Street in the 1960s and '70s must not have been from Delaware County and its surrounding area. The Balcony in Upper Darby is where many local hippies, and shoppers wanting to be hip, went for their leather goods, posters, incense, record albums and "cool" clothing.

Fifty-two years after he co-founded The Balcony on Terminal Square in Upper Darby, Mike Smith published "My View from The Balcony," the true story about his unique experiences at the head shop/clothing store from its opening in 1969 until its closing in 1988. The memoir reflects the history of the peace, love, and happiness decades, although some days were far from happy.

Self-published through BookBaby, "My View from The Balcony" is a 249-page walk down pop culture lane, full of photos and anecdotes about a time when French undershirts, headbands, low-cut bell bottoms and long hair were all the rage. The book highlights Smith's two decades as owner of The Balcony, colored with his personal experiences of fun adventures, marriages, illnesses, friendships, drugs, death, having children, divorce, arguments and more.

Smith decided to write the memoir after his brother Buzzy, also a co-owner of The Balcony, died in 2019.



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Mike Smith, the former co-owner of The Balcony in Upper Darby, talks about his new memoir "My View from The Balcony."

Smith, who currently lives in Wilmington, Del., with his partner Rick Bohrer, is a Realtor at Coldwell Banker in Media. The new author says that when he wears his Balcony T-shirt to the gym or out shopping, people will inevitably approach to tell him how much they loved The Balcony and how it was "the" place to shop back in the day. Smith, 71, said they almost always ask him the same questions, "Which brother are you?" and "Why did you close?"

"After my brother died in April, 2019, I knew it was time to answer this question," Smith said. "It was now time to tell the truth of not only how it happened, but also to share what went on in my life while it was happening."

Smith was only a senior at Lansdowne Aldan High School in 1969 when the seeds for The Balcony were planted. He was living at home with his parents Clarence and Anna Smith. His brother Buzzy Smith and his pal, Jimmy Goodyear, both Class of 1965 alumni



SUBMITTED PHOTO

The co-owners of The Balcony in Upper Darby are Lansdowne natives, left to right, Jimmy Goodyear, the late Buzzy Smith, and Mike Smith.



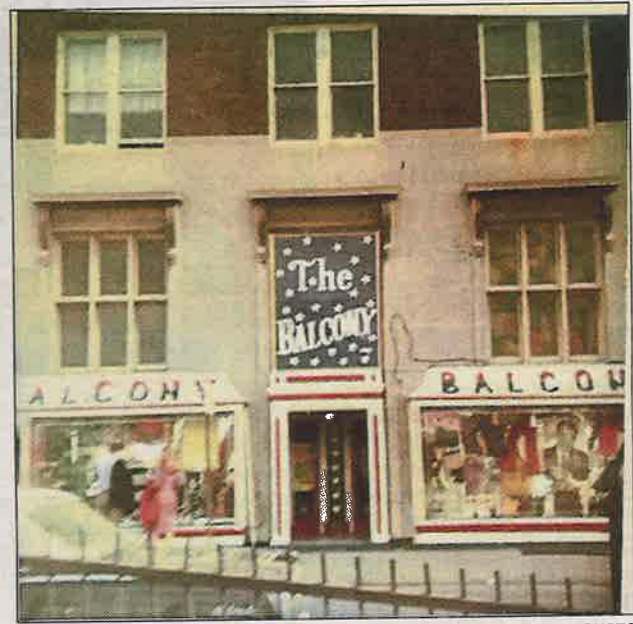
SUBMITTED PHOTO

A case of head shop inventory and posters located in a corner of The Balcony.

of Lansdowne Aldan High School, were classmates of Johnny Nangle, who owned Habilidad on Terminal Square in Upper Darby. Nangle asked Buzzy and Jimmy if they were interested in sub-renting out

the upstairs loft at his store to open a small store selling hippie accessories. The three guys chipped in \$500 each to get the head shop venture started.

The young entrepreneurs started out selling trendy



SUBMITTED PHOTO

People came from all over Delaware County and Philadelphia to The Balcony on Terminal Square in Upper Darby to buy hip clothing and accessories.



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Some of the hip clothes that were on display at The Balcony in Upper Darby back in the 1970s.

posters, hip jewelry, leather goods and other small items, eventually making a connection to a wholesaler who hooked them up with flare-style jeans. They were an instant hit.

"We made our first inventory buy up at the Naked Grape in Greenwich Village," Smith remembers.

"We bought floppy hats and small leather goods in bulk. It was a crazy time back then! Jeans and incense were our most popular products, with strawberry scented incense being our number one seller. We would go home smelling like incense, because we

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burned it at all times.”

Already married to their wives, and working at Castle Tool in Clifton Heights, Buzzy and Jimmy asked Mike if he would work at the store until they got off from work and then they'd come in and take over.

Mike agreed and changed his course of study, enrolling in business training at Lansdowne Aldan, to defer getting drafted and to have afternoons off to work. He would study from 8 to 11 a.m., and then rush off to work each day at the store.

A year after renting the loft, and naming it fittingly “The Balcony,” the store next to the shop became vacant and the three co-owners jumped on the opportunity to move to a larger space. Not long afterward, Nangle moved out and opened Distant Drummer on Samson Street, giving The Balcony owners a chance to take over the full store there as well. Eventually, the store on the other side of The Balcony, which was Gulliver's Travels, closed and The Balcony expanded into all three stores, with a shared basement area.

One store operated as the clothing store, selling items of the times like jeans, rock T-shirts, army jackets and water buffalo sandals; the center store was the head shop with body oils in scents like Sandalwood, Jasmine and Patchouli, pipes, roach clips and papers, black lights, and incense; and the third store sold brass items from India, jewelry such as pill rings and slave bracelets, sunglasses, and record albums. Smith said the countercultural comic books, like Fritz the Cat and Mr. Natural, by artist and Philadelphia native Robert Crumb, as well as underground newspapers like Village Voice, High Times, and Distant Drummer, were also brisk sellers in the store.

“We put a water bed up for sale for \$29.99 in the loft,”



SUBMITTED PHOTO

In 1969, The Balcony was originally started in a loft of Habillment on Terminal Square in Upper Darby. In the years that followed, The Balcony took over the full store, plus expanded into the stores on its left and right. Eventually, the store moved locations altogether, relocating to Market Street.

Smith laughs at the memory. “We were young and fearless — we never even thought about the structure of the loft and if it could bear the weight of the water bed. It was a different time back then - we just did it.”

By the time the three owners took over the third store, there had been trouble in paradise. Goodyear had not shown up for days, leading up to the brothers buying him out in 1974.

Smith talks about the store's products and how they evolved over the two decades in business. Although vinyl albums were a small part of the inventory in early years, they became huge, in addition to tapes, as the years progressed. In the early years, artists like Chicago, Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix, Santana, Joni Mitchell and Black Sabbath were flying off the shelves. In later years, bands like the Sex Pistols, Fleetwood Mac and Blondie were the rage, and then came Debbie Gibson, Tiffany, Tina Turner, Prince and Madonna.

“I could order these records day and night, and they would sell,” recalls Smith.

Posters, which were sold throughout the years, were always popular. In the earlier years, customers wanted posters of Woodstock, Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix, Crosby,

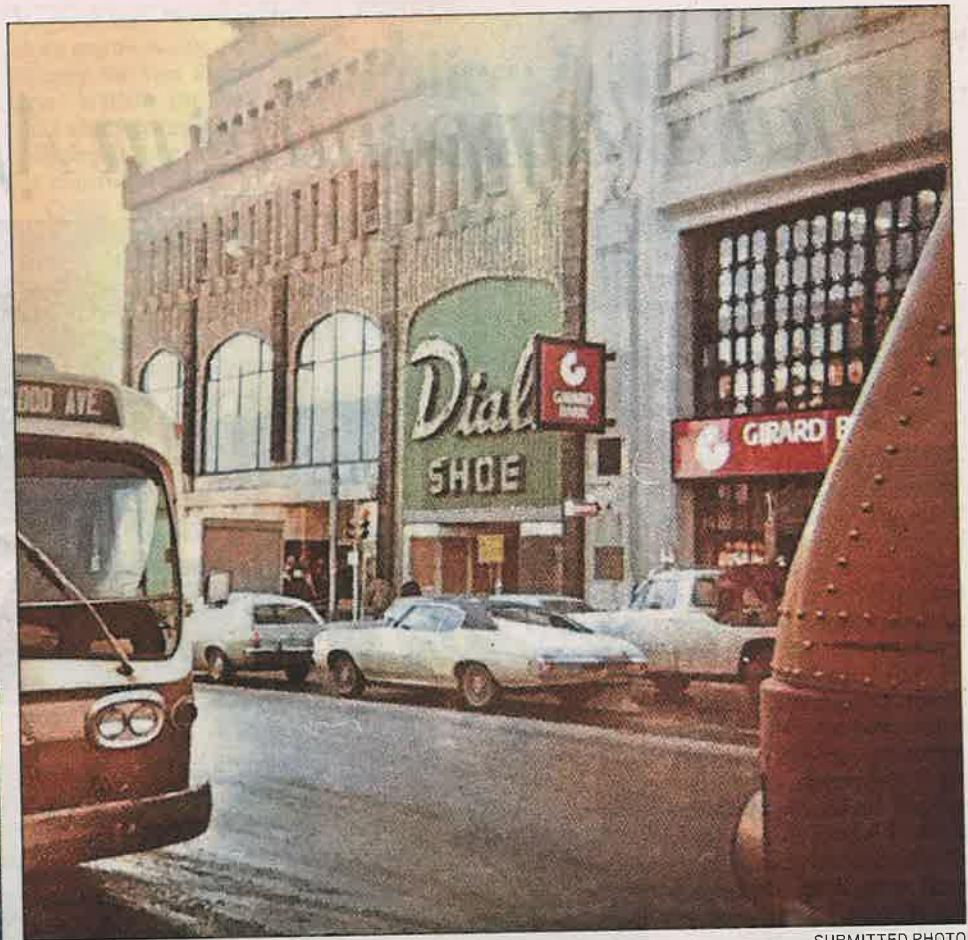


SUBMITTED PHOTO

Former Balcony co-owners Mike Smith and Jimmy Goodyear reconnected in 2021 and pose in shirts to commemorate The Balcony and its local cultural influence on the hippie generation.

Stills and Nash, Led Zeppelin and The Beatles. In later years, the demand was for posters of celebrities, and stars like Suzanne Somers, Farrah Fawcett, Wonder Woman Lynda Carter and Loni Anderson.

“I remember once, when we were in the store on Terminal Square, the police made us take down a poster in our window that depicted Richard Nixon with a caption that read, ‘Would you buy a used car from this guy?’ and so we removed it,” Smith laughed.



SUBMITTED PHOTO

The Balcony moved its location from Terminal Square onto Market Street, directly across from the 69th Street Terminal, in 1974, when the Dial Shoe Store became vacant.

Denim jeans also evolved through the years, going from very large bell bottoms, to flare, to boot cut and then straight leg, overalls and colors, along with low rise, super low rise and then high rise. Patches to sew or iron on the jeans were also popular. Early sought after name brands were Jordache, Calvin Klein and Gloria Vanderbilt. In the shop's later years, people wanted Lee, Levi and Wrangler.

In addition to taking buyer trips to New York trade shows to keep up with ever-changing trends, Smith said they'd hire young people to keep them hip on emerging styles. Plus, they had made good contacts along the way. Marty Feldman supplied rock T-shirts and Renee and Kenny Dilks designed trendy, hip clothing.

“I think half of our store at one point was filled with in-

ventory designed by Renee,” Smith said.

In 1974, the McClatchy family approached the Smith brothers about a possible relocation from Terminal Square to the former Dial Shoe Store on Market Street, opposite the 69th Street Terminal. The building was empty, visible to more foot and commuter traffic and large in size, enabling their successful business to grow even more. Smith said that John McClatchy even helped the Smiths to secure light-up display cases and racks from the Arnold Constable store on 69th Street, which had recently went out of business. They made the move.

At the time, the 69th Street shopping mecca was second in size only to Center City Philadelphia. Later in the same year that The Balcony moved location, the Springfield and Granite Run malls

in Delaware County opened. The Smiths saw their business sales drop 60 percent as a result.

According to history archives, Morris Willner, a former mortgage banker who specialized in the renovation of older malls, paid \$9 million to the heirs of McClatchy for his 69th Street properties, a four-block area along 69th Street bounded by Market and Walnut Streets. Smith said their rent soon tripled.

The Smiths tried to keep up with the times and with growing overhead expenses, evolving from the Hippie Era to the Disco Era, but it wasn't easy. Times were changing, and the owners struggled to keep up with all the changes and still have the same thriving store. Personal issues between the brothers added more stress, leading to the dissolution of The Balcony,

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signaling the end of an era for many shoppers.

"It was no longer a place of peace, love and incense," Smith stated. "It had turned much more corporate and was strictly a job about making money and the bottom line in its final years."

Smith said the years of owning The Balcony have many unpleasant memories that still haunt him, like the time the shop owner next door at Gulliver's Travels was accidentally shot. He remembers when he and co-worker Eddie Baker heard a pop and when they went out front of the store, they saw their neighbor John Murdock stumble out and die.

Smith also recalls the day that The Balcony was raided by the FBI for making and selling counterfeit T-shirts. The owners luckily got off with a \$1,000 fine. The day that they

were busted for selling drug paraphernalia had a much more expensive consequence.

Two employees and the owners were all charged after an undercover officer came into the store in 1983 and purchased a pipe, a knife, and a pill box. They hired a lawyer and the case dragged on for over two years.

"My mother worked for years for the Lansdowne police and she told us all the police thought that we were selling drugs at The Balcony," Smith shook his head. "So, none of us were too surprised when we were arrested for selling paraphernalia two weeks after the Pennsylvania law passed making it illegal. We felt they were gunning for us for years."

Smith removed anything that could be considered drug paraphernalia from the store and replaced it with Nintendo and Atari games, as well bootleg Cabbage Patch dolls. They also bought an iron press to make their own T-shirts. At first the brothers made shirts



PEG DEGRASSA - MEDIANEWS GROUP

Mike Smith, a Realtor at Coldwell Banker in Media, proudly displays his new book, "My View from The Balcony." As a former co-owner of The Balcony boutique in Upper Darby, Smith wrote a memoir about his experiences there.

emblazoned with Gucci, Polo, Jordache and other popular designers of the day until they were told to stop selling them following the FBI raid. Later, they made shirts with popular cars like Cadillacs and Mercedes on the front of them.

"On Aug. 15, we are going

to post the drug paraphernalia case's details on our website so anyone interested can read it," Smith said. They were all acquitted. Despite the pitfalls, store ownership had many, many good memories, Smith said.

"We almost always stayed after-hours when the store was closed and really enjoyed ourselves," Smith shared.

He met his ex-wife Claudia at the store, whom he's close friends with to this day. They have two daughters, Renee Smith of New York and Nikki Dougherty of Douglasville. Smith lists forming lasting friendships with former employees Eddie Baker and Eddie Gorman, as well as his former sister-in-law Ginny Smith Fox, who was the store's accountant, as one of the top assets in The Balcony chapter of his life.

While reminiscing, Smith talks about the numerous concerts he got to attend at nearby Tower Theater, eating breakfast and lunch at the counter operated by "Helen and Al" in-

side the Girard Bank on Market Street "when life was simpler and seemingly friendlier."

Smith also fondly remembers in 1976, when musician Bob Marley came to Upper Darby to perform at the Tower Theatre. On request, the owners closed the store down so the famous performer could shop.

"He came over with a couple of band members and spent about \$400 or \$500 on clothes," recalled Smith, who added that members of The Hooters also came in regularly to shop.

While in the late stages of writing his book, Smith visited Goodyear, who is currently a beekeeper residing in Malvern. He hadn't been in touch with his former co-owner for decades.

"We were really happy to reconnect, after all these years. I discovered that Jimmy makes the best honey that I've ever had," exclaimed Smith. "It felt really good to catch up with him and see him again."

Smith says that every once

in a blue moon, he drives through 69th Street and glances over at the spot where so much of his past took place.

"I get depressed just seeing it, looking at the big 69th Street Bridge and all the changes there," Smith said. "It's just not the same and I really miss how it was. Some days, I even miss working in retail. Despite all the ups and downs, they were some really good years."

"My View from The Balcony," by Mike Smith, is available in both electronic and softback editions at Amazon.com and www.barnesandnoble.com and at BookBaby.com. It is \$18.99 in paperback. The book is one of Barnes and Noble's Picks of the Month for August. The book, along with other items, photos, and information, can be found at myviewfromthebalcony.com. The website went live Aug. 13. The Balcony's former customers can share memories and photos with Smith at myviewfromthebalcony@gmail.com.

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