

# Brewster Flower Garden: A Profile in Community Revitalization

BY WILLIAM WEGNER



The Brewster Flower Garden sits juxtaposed between a row of quaint retail shops and the decaying façade of an abandoned post office on Brewster’s Main Street. The stark contrast exemplifies the emergence of Brewster’s revitalization, meaning the slow but steady replacement of failed businesses and peeling storefronts with colorful shops and a promising future.

Mark Buzzetto, florist for the past 28 years and owner of the Brewster Flower Garden for 18 years, shares his block with a pet grooming salon, a travel agency, a hair and beauty salon, an art gallery, and a privately owned mail station. All of the business owners on this strip of Main Street lease their workplaces from Richard Ruchala, who owns the property and maintains its rural village charm.

Mark worked in a flower

shop in Mt. Kisco for ten years before buying the Brewster Flower Garden from its previous owners. He looked at other florist shops in Westchester County but none of them had the right feel. “I liked the idea of a downtown area,” he says. “All of the other ones didn’t have a nice downtown feel.” Luckily, the owners of the Brewster Flower Garden were ready to sell.

For seven or eight years Mark’s florist business was located farther down Main Street, across from the old movie theater. “When I found out this [current location] was opening, I jumped on it right away,” he says. He now services Putnam and Westchester Counties, and even western Connecticut. He also supplies the flowers for Riverkeeper’s annual Shad Festival in Garrison. “I do as much as I can for donations or for the fire

houses [and] schools. I give them all great deals. And I get it back, because when they need something for funerals or a friend or birthdays for somebody in the organization, they come to me. It all works out.”

Although business is good at the moment, it wasn’t always. Since starting up in 1986, Mark has witnessed Brewster’s economic swings as sprawl and big chain stores drove local merchants out of business. Many of the cornerstones of downtown communities have vanished in Brewster. The pharmacy, movie theater, post office, hardware store, shoe store, optician, pizza and ice cream parlors, five and dime, even the bank have either gone out of business or relocated. “I had tough times for a while there,” Mark says, “but I kept going. I have two young kids, a family, and I wanted to make it work and I stuck it out, during the recession, during the tough times.”

What have been the effects of the merchants’ flight from Brewster? “Not as much walk-in traffic,” Mark says, “because there’s not much in town for people to walk into. There was a lot of walk-in trade.” But no longer. “Especially the post office – that really killed the town. I don’t know how I’m so busy. I don’t know how I stay in business.”

Mark has been able to stay busy and fend off the competition from malls and shopping centers that have driven out other Village businesses by taking a strong service-oriented approach. “With the shopping centers you don’t get the service that we give, and the knowledge and the experience,” he says. [“We do wed-

dings and funerals. You can’t go to A&P and get funeral work done.”]

Did he ever reach a point at which he considered taking his business elsewhere? “I did look around, to be honest with you. I told Richard [Ruchala] too, not because I was getting to the point where I didn’t think [the economy] was really going to come back, because I’ve heard it for years, the same thing. But now, with Team Brewster and Brewster 10509, I really do think things are going to turn around. I see them really pushing, trying to get grants and get things going here.”

*Team Brewster and Brewster 10509*, to which Mark made reference, are active groups of local citizens and decision-makers who have been working hard to revitalize downtown Brewster. Mark is actually an original member of the Coalition for a Better Brewster and belongs to the Chamber of Commerce. [“I try to get involved as much as I can,” he says.]

When the New York City Department of Environmental Protection ponied up \$13 million to complete Brewster’s sewer construction and infrastructure repairs, Main Street’s future began to look brighter. “From the bottom of my heart, I really do think things are going to change,” Mark says. “The sewers going in, hopefully new sidewalks, just making it look a lot nicer. I think maybe we’ll get some new businesses to come back. We’re trying, and I think everything is going to turn around.”

In the meantime, Mark encourages everybody to shop in the Village of Brewster. ■