

# The Mall You Call Home

## First Paychecks, First Flirtations and Plenty of Gyros

By JOEL KELLER

**A** FEW months ago, I was having dinner with my parents and my brother's family at the Cheesecake Factory in the Willowbrook Mall, in Wayne. As we were eating, my brother, Rich, in an attempt to keep my older niece from playing with her macaroni and cheese, threw out a random nugget of conversation. "You know, Samantha," he told her, "three out of the four members of your daddy's family worked at this mall."

When he said this, I almost choked on my Pasta Da Vinci. I hadn't thought of Willowbrook all that much in my adulthood; I'm an online clothes shopper and would rather eat at the local Texas wiener stand than at BenFriApplebeedayigan's. Wandering through a crowded mall makes me cranky. But Rich was right: for short periods of time, my family's financial well-being depended on the Willowbrook Mall.

My brother and my mother worked at Macy's; my brother's job was after school, and mom's was to earn some holiday money. I worked at the mall twice, first in 1987 as a newbie retail worker at Kay-Bee Toys, then three years later as a grizzled veteran after my freshman year of college.

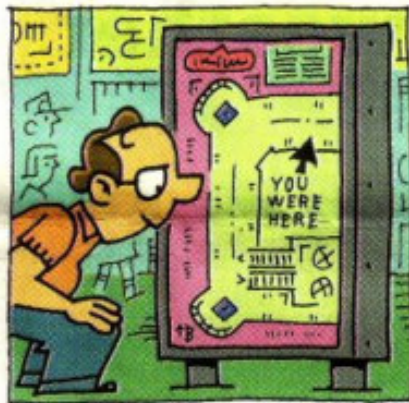
My brother's remark cemented the concept of a "home mall" in my mind. Anyone who grew up in New Jersey during the late 60's through the early 90's, before the Targets and Best Buys invaded the state, had a mall at the center of their social and financial lives. They went shopping with their parents there, had a job there, hung out with their friends there and went on teenage dates there. It was the default location for just about any activity that remotely involved retail transactions, even if

*Joel Keller is a freelance writer who lives in Morristown.*

it was just to buy a gyro at the food court.

For Morristown area residents, their home mall was the Rockaway Townsquare. Many Central Jerseyans called the Woodbridge Center home. Bergen County residents went to whichever of its myriad malls was within a stone's throw of home.

Because I grew up near Wayne, Willowbrook was my home mall. I knew the layout of the place almost as well as I knew the nooks and cran-



Tom Bloom

nies of my high school. The stores have shifted, some have closed while others have opened or expanded. But until I graduated from college a decade ago, if you asked me where the Radio Shack or the bagel place was, I would be able to tell you from memory, complete with detailed directions: "Make sure you make a right after Aéropostale. If you see Herman's, you've gone too far."

Going to any other mall felt excitingly uncomfortable to me. It was an event, akin to going to a foreign country; I didn't know where anything was, and there were surprises around every corner. If I ever went to Garden State Plaza, for instance, I'd always look around with wonder at the enormity of the place, fascinated that it had a real-life carousel and that the Macy's had two separate entrances on the first floor.

I was comfortable at Willowbrook, because I had a history with it. One

of my earliest memories of the place was during one of my family's twice-yearly big shopping jaunts, trips I always looked forward to because they meant that I was going to get new clothes for school. Bored and knowing I'd be able to choose one of Baskin-Robbins's 31 flavors after my mom was done at Ohrbach's, I started jostling a mannequin back and forth while waiting for her to select a bra. After ignoring a few warnings by my father to stop playing around, I managed to tip the dummy to the point of no return. As it fell off its platform, it made an unholy racket that caused the entire ladies' department to turn around and glare at my mortified parents, who obviously couldn't control their bratty son.

Then there was that aforementioned summer after my freshman year, when I helped open the Suncoast Motion Pictures video store that's still there today. The manager was this skinny Midwestern guy named David who had a bushy blond mustache that would make the cop from the Village People jealous. I truly enjoyed every time I worked in the store with him, since I knew we'd be seeing movies like "Grease" and "Top Gun."

David, who was fairly chipper for a 30-something video store manager, used to express his pleasure by uttering the phrase "Yippee Skippy!" Fifteen long years later, it's a phrase that still spills out of my mouth with alarming frequency, even if I say it with a more ironic tone than David did.

Those memories and more flooded into my head as my brother went on to another subject and my niece finally ate her meal. It made me realize that, sterile as it was, my home mall was still a significant part of my life.

There's no shame in having memories of the mall. It's just part of living in New Jersey. After all, there aren't too many places where you can embarrass your parents and pick up a catchphrase, all under the same roof.