

Goodbye Mr. Movie

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Photo by Ann Ringwood

During the last hour of Video Revolution on Thoreau Street in Concord, owner Ralph Grossi (who is also battling leukemia) greeted people from a recliner. Coming over to say hello is former employee Alex Barbosa, of Concord.

By Kerri Roche
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It's a hot, sticky Wednesday. The kind of weather air conditioners and Bedford Farms' ice cream are made for.

More than 50 people stand on the hot pavement of a parking lot, forming a single-file line in the blistering sun.

The line stretches from the doors of Video Revolution to Thoreau Street.

The store's floor-to-ceiling windows are decorated with colorful hearts, containing messages of hope and love.

"You rock. Thanks for the movies," wrote self-proclaimed "Godzilla" fans.

Another heart reads, "Our dear town needs you. You cannot be replaced."

The squiggly lines of small child's handwriting spell out, "Dear Ralph: Get well soon."

A large van pulls up. Two men drag a well-worn blue recliner out and maneuver through the glass double doors.

From the front of the line, cheering can be heard.

A man is brought to the front of the store in a wheelchair. He is situated on the recliner, directly in front of the register.

Stretching out, Ralph Grossi observes the crowd of people making their way through the doors.

Some head directly for the comedy section, others go to horror. Many head for Ralph and offer warm welcomes and kind words.

Since Feb. 1, 1991, Ralph has co-owned Video Revolution with his wife, Ellie.

At the time, “I was actually in between jobs,” he said, when he filled out the application for a manager.

“I do love movies. I do enjoy dealing with the public,” Ralph said he soon realized. “Before I knew it, I ended up loving the job and buying the business.”

He has since become a familiar face in Concord’s network of merchant-owned businesses.

However, this week, the store is closed, and not because of looming competition from Netflix and Blockbuster.

“It was certainly more difficult to keep it operating,” said Ralph about the national competition. But, “if you still enjoyed the business, you could keep operating.”

Instead of recommending the latest rental, Ralph strove to individualize his recommendations as much as possible.

Ralph’s personal favorite, he said, is “The Big Chill.”

Former customer Brian Rosborough agreed with Ralph’s business philosophy.

“He could size up a customer and match them with an inspiration,” said Rosborough.

Also, he recalled several times when Ralph stopped by his residence to assist him with a broken video player.

“He fixed my machine multiple times,” said Rosborough, adding that he probably was not the only one who received technical support from Ralph.

“Concord should have more Ralphs,” he said.

Although she co-owned the store, Ellie is quick to give Ralph all the credit.

“He’s ‘Mr. Movie,’” she said. “I would put my own self out of business the first day because I don’t watch TV.”

However, beginning in September 2005, Ralph underwent six weeks of chemotherapy and radiation after being diagnosed with colon and rectal cancer.

After undergoing surgery to potentially cure the cancer, Ralph was diagnosed a year-and-a-half later with MDS, a pre-cursor to leukemia.

On July 11, the diagnosis changed, and Ralph learned he had developed acute leukemia. Most recently, he was told the rectal cancer was back and has metastasized in his lungs.

This Monday, July 30, Ralph turned 58 and began receiving hospice care in his home.

As the latest developments began taking a major toll on his health, Ralph decided to close the business.

However, he would not leave Concord without a four-day, going-out-of-business sale.

When he first began working in town, Ralph said, “I had preconceived ideas of what Concord would be.”

Driving originally from Fitchburg into work each day, Ralph expected this affluent community to be different.

“I found out so quickly, that the people [in Concord], basically in my line of work, are no different from others. They’re looking to be entertained for three hours. I really switched my attitude pretty quickly about it.”

On the first day of the sale, Ralph opened the doors of his business for four hours, but could only stay for about an hour.

The exhaustion of that day kept him away from the business until the final day of the sale.

In the meantime, family and co-workers helped.

Throughout his time as owner of Video Revolution, Ralph relied on the maturity and responsibility of his high school-aged employees.

“Of all the experience I had, working with the kids, just watching them, was probably my biggest enjoyment,” said Ralph.

His wife agreed.

“He was their second father,” said Ellie of the 100 or so teenagers employed over the years. However, Ralph got the best deal, she said, and never had to change a diaper or pay for college tuition.

Ralph said, “[People] should appreciate and give credit to the young kids in this area. I hope the people utilize them and give them a chance and let them shine.”

As for the future of the 97 Thoreau St. location, “We hope that Concord finds something nice for that location,” said Ralph.

He was able to make it back to Concord, from his hometown of Leominster, for the final hour of business on Saturday.

During that time, the last of his customers and friends made their way to the store.

They sat and talked. They shared some laughter and get-well wishes. People helped removed the hearts from the front windows.

“My wife Ellie and I really want to thank the town,” said Ralph in a phone interview.

And then, as of Monday morning, the store was empty.

A large dumpster stands out front, and nothing remains inside the windows.

Video Revolution, and Ralph, had left Concord.

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