

Video stores to pawnshops

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Sales associate Juan Hernandez shows off a guitar at a La Familia Pawn Shop in Orlando. Photos by Isaac Babcock — *The Observer*

By Sarah Wilson
Guest Reporter

Royal blue and fluorescent yellow paint still edge the building at the corner of the strip mall. People mill in and out; some bringing along items to return, while others come looking for something new to take home.

Inside, merchandise is stacked, sorted and sectioned throughout the orderly aisles and televisions still border the expansive room flickering scenes of yesterday's hit movies.

A middle-aged woman aimlessly peruses the store's DVD collection in the far back corner.

At her side is a shop employee just waiting to make a suggestion, to her left — a display case of diamond rings, locket necklaces and brand-name watches; to her right — an aisle lined with buzz saws and power drills.

Blockbuster may have gone through some major business restructuring recently, but handsaws have not become the new rental item.

Winter Park-based La Familia Pawn Shops have made this, and other former Blockbuster retail locations throughout Florida and Puerto Rico, its new home.

"They're providing a great opportunity for us to take over; they're in great spots. We need about 6,000 to 8,000 square feet, so they meet our needs. So they're available and they meet our needs — this is good!" said La Familia owner and CEO John Thedford, clapping his hands.

This first Central Florida location, located on Curry Ford Road in Orlando, is one of as many as 20 stores he hopes to open by year end. He estimates that one-third of them will end up in former Blockbuster video rental stores.

According to a Blockbuster press release, 342 locations nationwide closed up shop from Jan. 3 to April 4.

About a year ago, in this same building, you would have found candies and popcorn lining the counter, but now there are guitars, a ukulele and even an accordion on display behind the registers.

What happens, however, when a family comes out in search of the newest movie releases to find new and used bicycles, lawnmowers and stereo equipment out front?

After the initial shock, Thedford says it's nothing but business as usual.

He said that he has yet to receive any negative feedback about his shop's presence. In fact, he says that by being in locations that maybe would not traditionally be filled by pawnshops, it gives more people the opportunity to experience and accept the practice.

La Familia manager Jackie Garcia, who has worked in the pawn business for the past nine years under Thedford's previous company Value Pawn and Jewelry, said La Familia offers customers a more family-friendly retail environment than they would typically expect from a pawnshop.

With her petite frame and well-manicured style, she says it's hard for some people to believe she works in the pawn business.

"My hairstylist couldn't believe I worked in a pawn shop ... but I just say, 'Imagine that it's your favorite store where you always want to go and buy your favorite stuff, but imagine the same thing just with better prices,'" she said with a laugh.

Those better prices are what keep pawnshops in business in the bad economy.

"Our business is not counter cyclical," Thedford said. "If our customers have jobs they pay on their loans; if they don't pay on their loans, our business fails. So in a down economy we feel it too, and in an up economy we feel it the same way."

Thedford said the stigma that pawnshops are only a place where criminals come to sell their goods is overly exaggerated. To sell any item to any pawnshop, or to receive a pawn loan, all patrons must present ID and get fingerprinted. The serial numbers to all items also must be noted.

"It's our corporate policy if somebody had something stolen and it was in one of our stores, we just give it back. Because you know why? It never happens," he said. "Your stolen stuff goes on eBay or Craigslist. Thieves know that if you come in here, you get fingerprinted, so they don't come in here."

La Familia, Thedford said, prides itself on its high level of customer service. The store is kept clean and organized, and team member employees wear dress shirts, ties and name tags and greet every customer at the door.

"Where are groceries cheaper," he asked, "Publix or Winn-Dixie?"

Winn-Dixie.

"But who gets the most business?"

Publix.

"Exactly. Because they're clean and have good people. So our strategy is great people — that means excellence in every role — and clean stores. It works!" he said.

First-time customer Patti McCormick would not be your stereotypical pawn shopper. With her grayed-blond hair pulled back, khaki Bermuda shorts and Kentucky-drawl, she is exactly who La Familia is trying to extend pawn business to.

After checking out the DVDs, she meanders around the rest of the store as her husband makes a deal with the clerk at the register.

"It's nice to come in and have someone come ask if they can help you ... I'm not afraid to come in here, where some of the pawn places I wouldn't want to come in at all," she said.

Learn more

La Familia Pawn in Orlando is located at 4205 Curry Ford Road. For more information on the shop and its services visit www.lafamiliapawn.com or call the store at 407-440-8800.



The Winter Park-based chain has turned vacated Blockbuster Video stores into thriving businesses and growing jobs.