Phoenix Market: Rising from the ashes

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Phoenix Market carries the usual assortment of grab-and-go items — chips, canned and frozen meals, sodas and sandwich meats — that can be found at most convenience stores. But customers can also find things like incense, T-shirts, winter gear (in winter) and handbags.

“We bring the stuff in because customers request it,” said manager Tarig Mohamed. Situated on the corner of Third Street and Maria Avenue, the store caters to a wide group of customers, many of whom are regulars from the surrounding neighborhood. Some of those regulars don’t have the means to travel to Target or other places for non-food necessities, said Mohamed, who has worked at the store since 1997.

Aside from Phoenix Market, the closest convenience store to the neighborhood is the Super America by the Downtowner car wash on Seventh Street.

The Phoenix Market has been catering to the neighborhood’s needs since it opened in September of 1994, but store owner Ali Artol, a Sudanese entrepreneur, has been a mainstay in the area even longer.

Artol ran a similar corner market for several years until 1993, when a leak in a gas main resulted in a massive explosion that destroyed the block. Artol’s grocery store, a bookstore and four apartment buildings were reduced to rubble in the inferno that took 70 firefighters to contain.

Two people died and seven people, including Artol, were injured. According to Mohamed, Artol was badly burned. It took a year and 45 surgeries for him to recover.

After the accident, Artol opened a new grocery store because he wanted to continue serving his neighbors. A woman in the neighborhood suggested that Artol call his new store the Phoenix Market, a reference to the nearly immortal bird in Greek mythology that obtains new life by rising from its own ashes.

The personal connection Artol and Mohamed have with their customers is evident. Several customers made a point of seeking Mohamed out to needle him or give a quick update of their personal lives during a midafternoon mini-rush. And Mohamed often stops what he’s doing to joke with customers.

Even though Phoenix Market is only three blocks from Metropolitan State University (337 steps to be exact), the store has flown under most students’ radar.

That changed in 2009, when the store started serving hot foods. Mohamed said that a number of students come there for lunch. The most popular item is the gyro, but the market also offers Philly cheese steak, fries, fried chicken and seafood such as catfish, tilapia and shrimp.

Besides Artol and Mohamed, two employees work at the Phoenix, which adds to the cozy, familiar atmosphere and sense of community at the store.

“It’s like my second home,” Mohamed said. “Most of the customers are like my friends now.”

Layout editor Ed Day contributed to this report.

Captions: The hot food options offered at Phoenix Market’s grill

The store stocks specific items to meet customer demand, including things to keep the kids happy.