

Bivouac, 50 years keeping Ann Arbor dressed for the weather

Hannah Davis, special to the WJN

Bivouac, the clothing and outdoor gear store in Nickels Arcade in downtown Ann Arbor, is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year. Ed Davidson, the owner, founded the store in 1970 while a senior at the University of Iowa as an army surplus store. He moved to Ann Arbor the following



year. The arcade's management company was reluctant to rent space to him — saying he looked like “a bum off the street,” and citing his brief credit history — but Ed appealed to Dora Herbert, one of the arcade's owners, and she was on board, and made sure to come to the opening.

The store itself has moved a few times. Ed started selling army surplus out of his apartment above Campus Bike and Toy on

William Street, sleeping on a mattress in his closet. The store's current location used to be a bank — indeed, the original vault for Farmers and Mechanics Bank is still in the basement, and is used as a stock room. Another architectural highlight is the marble staircase leading to the basement where the safety deposit boxes used to be. It seems every store in Nickels Arcade is like this: each new tenant inhabits the spaces and stories of those who came before.

At the time, all the fashionable college kids in the 70s wore army surplus — a fact Ed found ironic given the strength of the protests against the Vietnam War at the time. In a 1984 interview in the *Ann Arbor News*, he reminisced about these early days. “I had hair down to my shoulders and didn't wear anything but army surplus ... I was a product of the Revolution. I opened the store with surplus and camping equipment. As the mood of campus changed, I changed with it. It was easier for me than for some merchants because I was going through the same changes as my customers. I have 15 times the inventory I had when I first started.” Now the store has expanded to fashionable outdoor brands like Canada Goose and Patagonia, but its core market is still the same: some 60–70% of Bivouac's customers are students.

Ed recalls fondly that a highlight of work-

ing move-in week is when a customer comes up to him, says they used to work at the store, and introduces him to their children who are just starting school. He says, “I enjoy working with customers, we've had wonderful support from the Ann Arbor community. We have customers we've known for almost 50 years.” He was looking forward to the start of football season: there are customers “whose last names I don't know” who come in to town for the games and make a point to come into the store.

Fifty years after its founding, Bivouac is still going strong. Ed is semi-retired now, doing desk work remotely and coming in on weekends to see customers. His son AJ has taken over day-to-day management: AJ implemented an online shop, which has been critical to the store's survival during the pandemic. Ed emphasized that they are still primarily a brick-and-mortar store, though:

“they support us, the community is one of the main reasons I'm still around.”

In a press release, Ed said, “I have learned in the past fifty years to pivot with the times. I have been through recessions, warm winters (we sell a lot of winter coats when it's cold or snowy) ... But the toughest year of all was last year. Luckily, my son had developed an online store presence and we were able to offer curbside pickup and delivery. The best advice I was given when I started was ‘the best fertilizer is a farmer's feet.’ I spent a lot of time at the store. I did my best for the community and my customers. I am very thankful for their support.”

Bivouac will be holding a 50th anniversary celebration on October 9th and invites everyone to come celebrate with them. There will be free raffle prizes all day long, and they will donate 10% of their sales to the Huron River Watershed Council. ■

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