

The downtown's advocates

September 11, 2019



Crescent City came alive last week for the three-year anniversary celebration of the Downtown Divas' First Friday event.

The event's theme was: Disco!

Tunes from bands like ABBA and the Miracles reverberated from large speakers throughout Friday evening as participants, many dressed in bell-bottom pants and go-go boots, strolled ... or danced ... from booth to booth.

The Downtown Divas is a Crescent City nonprofit committed to seeing the downtown flourish. Composed of five women who own local businesses, the Divas know the struggles that small businesses face and the support needed to thrive.

Four ago, Billie Kaye Gavin-Tygart, owner of the 6 Degrees of Celebration shop, founded Downtown Divas. She had grown up in Crescent City and recalled a once-vibrant downtown scene. But when she returned home after 9/11, it felt like a ghost town to her.

“When I moved home, there was nothing downtown. Like, when I grew up, this was a happening place,” she said. “Like downtown, there were businesses, there was shopping, there were just things all the time.”

Now, as a downtown business owner, she wanted Crescent City to feel alive again. So in 2015, she created a small get-together for women only called Wine and Whine Wednesday, and invited other local business owners to attend.

They met once a month - and the same women kept returning. All shared a similar goal for the downtown.

“We just chatted and talked and daydreamed about what downtown could be and what we were missing, and life and all of those things, and then we decided to have another (meeting) the next month,” Gavin-Tygart said.

But she didn’t want just to talk about downtown. She wanted to do something about it. So Gavin-Tygart began working on making the group a nonprofit organization.

“We got approved (as a nonprofit) in four months, so we were off and running,” she said. “It was scary, because it meant we were on to something and that we had work to do”

The first thing they did was ask the City Council for the Wednesday downtown farmer’s market, which was in danger of having no host. Then they came up with the idea of First Friday celebrations, inviting vendors and local businesses to participate in a block party of sorts on the first Friday of each month.

“We all have very, very different personalities and backgrounds, but we’re all so committed to downtown and this mission,” Gavin-Tygart said.

Tourists and residents alike can stroll through the streets of downtown Crescent City, stop into the businesses that have stayed open later, and visit booths of handmade clothing, homemade desserts, and locally brewed beer. Local artists, authors and teachers host booths to promote their work.

“That’s the whole idea about community spirit, isn’t it? Everybody should pitch in and try to make things easier for everyone else. Particularly if it’s for the betterment of the entire community,” said Doug Plack.

“It’s nice to see more and more businesses involved in (First Fridays). This is the way it should be. I like to see it expanded.”

Companies without a storefront appreciate the opportunity to participate in both the First Friday events and the Wednesday downtown farmers market. “We’ve done really good here,” said Joe Pearcey, an owner of the Sticks and Scones treats booth.

First Fridays also serve as a fundraiser for the Divas, an all-volunteer group. The funds go towards projects to enhance the downtown. Last Friday, the money was earmarked for public restrooms to be installed downtown by the end of the year.

Ideally, Gavin-Tygart said, she’d like to see more restaurants downtown. If there were more food options, more visitors would come and then proceed to shop in the local shops

Her passion for downtown Crescent City is unabated after four years. “We want to see downtown survive because in many towns, they’re not. So that was our number-one (goal),” Gavin-Tygart said. “I just think it’s really important that we look outside of the box and think about things that can happen to make Crescent City successful.”