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# Pharmacy

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in Camden, Minniti thought, "It's time."

Bell Pharmacy, he reasoned, is sort of a halfway point between Lourdes and Cooper University Hospital, the city's two biggest healthcare institutions, and in between them, there's a lot going on along Haddon Avenue. There are empty storefronts and crumbling buildings, but also businesses that never faltered, like Donkey's Place, and signs of new life, like the Parkside Community Garden and a soon-to-be-completed arts center.

"We are a prominent landmark for Parkside and we want to make this the gateway it deserves to be," Minniti said.

Open since 1932, Bell Pharmacy still bears a lot of its original fixtures: signage bearing the logo of Rexall Drugs, a now-defunct chain; cabinets and display cases from decades long past; an old scale that once measured weight and offered "fortunes," telling customers to "Weigh Your Fate."

But the decor isn't Bell Pharmacy's only retro feature. Believed to be the oldest family-owned and -operated independent pharmacy in the city, Bell is a reflection of its owners' commitment to Camden and to its people.

"We see ourselves as stewards of something that belongs to Parkside, and to Camden," said Minniti. "We want to make certain that tradition continues."

The philosophy won't change, Minniti said, though they will move more toward a health services-oriented practice and away from a product-oriented business. They'll offer onsite services so customers don't have to travel outside the city to have blood drawn, for example; they will offer medications used to treat opioid addiction, naloxone, and hard-to-access preventative drugs like Truvada, which can help reduce the risk of HIV infection.

It's an approach Minniti compares to the difference between listening to an album on vinyl versus streaming it online.

"When you grow up only listening to digital music, then you hear a record, you can hear what's lost," he said. "We're analog in a digital world."

Along with restoring its windows to make the pharmacy feel more connected to the people who pass it each day, Minniti said, Bell will add lighting fixtures so the well-traveled intersection of two busy city thoroughfares is more welcoming.

Bell Pharmacy co-owner Marian Morton shows a pharmacist's cabinet that is one of the older fixtures in the store.
PHAEDRA TRETHAN/COURIER POST

"When everyone has the lights on, it feels more like a community," he said.

Bridget Phifer, executive director of Parkside Business and Community in Partnership (PBCIP), said called the planned renovations "phenomenal."

"We are so glad there are existing businesses in Parkside that have been here for decades that understand the value of having a presence here," she said.

It's about more than aesthetics, she added. Pointing to investments made by other established businesses, including Donkey's Place and Corinne's Place, a pair of well-known eateries, Phifer said that she hopes other businesses will follow their lead, and Bell Pharmacy's.

Minniti lived in Camden as a young child; he worked with his grandfather and great-uncle in their own pharmacy in the city and when Bell's former owner, Max Schwartz, retired in 1997, Minniti and his sister leaped at the opportunity to buy the business from him.

A former Cinnaminson committeeman, Minniti said he's a little more familiar with navigating municipal processes and bureaucracy. He estimates the improvements to the pharmacy will cost around $60,000, helped along by $20,000 from the state Economic Development Authority.

"The attitude in Camden has definitely changed," he said. "It's become a much more business-friendly city," a reversal he credits to the last 10 years of city leadership and one unelected individual whose impact on Camden is unmistakable: Democratic powerbroker and Cooper University chairman George E. Norcross III.

"You cannot argue with his dedication," said Minniti, acknowledging Norcross' at time polarizing presence. "He was the first believer in Camden, and he showed other people that it was OK for them to believe, too."

Minniti never stopped believing in Camden, a city he said "gets a bad rap," but has always been kind and welcoming to his family. He's hoping to give something back by strengthening a connection Bell Pharmacy has kept with its customers all along.

"There was a following here, in a community where no one else wanted to be," he said. "The chains never wanted to come here, but we stayed, and we know that means something to the people here."

Phifer noted that while the Parkside corridor of Haddon Avenue has a 50% vacancy rate, most of the merchants there own their respective buildings or spaces, something that fuels a greater interest in their place in the community.

"I think within the next three to five years, you'll begin to see a very different Haddon Avenue," she said.

"Little by little, piece by piece, it's coming together."

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