

Al's Deli, Celtic Knot, Ten Thousand Villages: Pandemic takes toll on Evanston mainstays

Years after COVID-19's peak, longtime businesses struggle to bounce back

by [Jessica Mordacq](#)
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Celtic Knot Public House had been open at 626 Church St. for 18 years before it shut down earlier this year. Credit: Trent Brown

Though it's been nearly four years since the initial COVID-19 outbreak, businesses everywhere still feel its repercussions, and Evanston isn't immune.

The pandemic's ongoing impacts "have been a real challenge for Downtown Evanston and for business districts across the country," Downtown Evanston Executive Director Andy Vick said in an email.

"The transition to remote and hybrid working has significantly reduced the number of people who are downtown on a daily basis to patronize our local restaurants and retail establishments," Vick said. According to a city report, the retail vacancy rate for downtown was 12.21% in the three months ending Sept. 30, though some new businesses have opened since then.

Consider the pandemic's ripple effects on three longtime local establishments: Celtic Knot Public House, Al's Deli and Ten Thousand Villages:

Irish pub Celtic Knot, 626 Church St., closed in April – at least partly, its owners say, because of ramifications from COVID-19.

French-inspired sandwich shop Al's Deli has been closed at 914 Noyes St. since August, due to the declining health of co-owner Bob Pottinger, who died in September. But the sandwich shop had struggled to pay its rent well before then.

And Ten Thousand Villages, which sells handcrafted fair trade products made by disadvantaged artisans, plans to move from 915 Chicago Ave. to a smaller store in March. The shop's sales have been low in the pandemic's aftermath.

Celtic Knot

Along with inflation, labor shortages and supply chain issues, Celtic Knot's owners, husband and wife Patrick and Liz Breslin, struggled with a drop in customers since the onset of COVID-19. The business received a total of \$243,000 in federal Paycheck Protection Program funds in 2020 and 2021.



A performance at Celtic Knot. The Irish pub closed in April, though its owners hope to reopen at a new location. Credit: Celtic Knot

Patrick Breslin is from a small town in Ireland, where everyone in the community regularly visited the pub. He wanted to create that gathering place for locals and visitors here. But after 18 years in Evanston, such a space wasn't as popular during the pandemic.

There are "changed social habits, no office workers downtown and more students living on campus," he said. "The pandemic was difficult for everyone, and it certainly didn't help our business."

In the months since closing the pub, the Breslins have searched for new potential locations in Evanston, Skokie and Chicago's Rogers Park neighborhood. They said they are currently in talks with a building owner in Evanston, and hope to open a new, smaller location by spring.

Al's Deli

John Pottinger – the sole owner of Al's Deli after the death of his business partner and older brother Bob – said that a large portion of Al's Deli's customers were office workers and Northwestern University staff, many of whom have started working from home more often.



Celtic Knot owners Liz and Patrick Breslin. Credit: Submitted



Al's Deli, 914 Noyes St., is seen in December 2022. The deli has been closed since August 2023. Credit: Nash Vest

“Things are not are not the way they were pre-pandemic,” Pottinger said. “There’s still a layer of people who don’t go out too much for fear of COVID.”

Like the Breslins, the Pottingers also aimed to create a community with Al’s Deli, founded by their father in 1949. And that community of customers has been offering support to the deli.

In summer 2020, a friend of the Pottingers set up a GoFundMe for Al’s Deli. But the more than \$60,000 in donations and \$35,000 from the Paycheck Protection Program didn’t last long. At the end of 2022, the deli was still struggling to pay rent and the GoFundMe was reactivated.

Bob’s death in September caught the deli at a vulnerable moment, John said, as the business’ only other employees went off to college.



John Pottinger, owner of Al's Deli. Credit: [GoFundMe](#)

The sandwich shop hasn't opened since August and currently has \$28,000 in debt, Pottinger said. He is looking for a business partner to help him reopen and has started a new [GoFundMe campaign](#) to help with his finances; as of Dec. 22 it had raised more than \$8,000 toward a \$90,000 goal.

Ten Thousand Villages

Ten Thousand Villages, a Pennsylvania-based nonprofit, has had a shop in Evanston since 1997, and moved from its longtime home on Main Street to a larger space on Chicago Avenue in 2019.



Ten Thousand Villages has been open at 915 Chicago Ave. since 2019. Credit: Michaela Dix/Ten Thousand Villages

“The hope was to have the sales grow in this location, have better visibility being on Chicago Ave., hopefully more foot traffic. None of that came to fruition for us,” said Hannah Wymer, who’s a part of Ten Thousand Villages’ Evanston management team.

“We had a really hard time because of COVID and shopping habits changing in general,” Wymer said. Ten Thousand Villages in Evanston received a total of \$50,000 from the Paycheck Protection Program in 2020 and 2021.



Ten Thousand Villages, run by a nonprofit, stocks handcrafted fair trade products made by disadvantaged artisans. Credit: Michaela Dix/Ten Thousand Villages

The store recently started to see signs of its in-person business returning to normal as customers stopped in for holiday gifts. “People are shopping that way this year,” Wymer said, “but that would be the first that we’ve seen, really, since we moved into this current location.”

With the store's lease ending, it will be moving to a smaller space in Evanston.

Hopeful signs

There are some optimistic signs for the Evanston economy. "While many businesses are still struggling to rebound, we're also seeing a number of new businesses opening in Downtown Evanston," Vick said, "and there are a lot of exciting projects underway or in development."



Sky Zone trampoline Park and Egg Harbor Cafe are among the new businesses in Church Street Plaza. Credit: Ian W. Mitchell

businesses.

In November, UL Solutions relocated two of its corporate divisions to the 20-story Orrington Plaza building at 1603 Orrington Ave. That brings about 150 new workers to downtown – potential customers for the area's restaurants and shops.

A number of new businesses have opened in Church Street Plaza, where the movie theater has reopened and a trampoline park has been added to the entertainment mix.

And the City of Evanston has allocated \$3 million in federal American Rescue Plan Act funds to put some of the recommendations of the recent Evanston Thrives report into action to aid local