

At Halloween or anytime, they still have the spirit

By DAVID KAPLAN Copyright 2010 Houston Chronicle

Oct. 23, 2010, 12:41AM

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Johnny Hanson: Chronicle



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Milton Frost, 95, and son, Mickey, 70, of Southern Importers are "fired up" about business. They also sell fabric, makeup and dance accessories.

"I'm either going to be a pirate or a sexy cop," shopper Cliann Herring said at Southern Importers.

Inside Southern Importers this time of year, tiny skeletons poke their heads out of coffins and employees startle customers by pulling a string that raises a mummy's arm.

Owner Milton Frost, who is 95, likes the fire-blowing cauldron on display because it gives him an excuse to tell one of his favorite jokes. (Cannibal No. 1: "I don't like your mother-in-law." Cannibal No.2: "Then just eat your vegetables.")

Halloween is the busiest time of year at Southern Importers, although business isn't what it used to be, said co-owner Mickey Frost, Milton Frost's 70-year-old son.

Once, the line of shoppers stretched from the door to the street. But the store faces stiff competition from other costume shops as well as every discount, grocery and drug store in town. And the economy has slowed.

Yet the wholesale/retail shop at 4825 San Jacinto remains a viable concern that hasn't lost its spirit.

Like Milton Frost, it ages gracefully.

"We both come to work fired up and motivated every day," his son noted.

Southern Importers also sells fabric, trim, theatrical makeup, dance accessories and more.

It's a quirky place. A few days ago it shipped out 150 artificial reindeer antlers, Mickey Frost noted.

"You know what came in the store today?" he asked his father: "About a ton of glitter."

He meant literally a ton.

For almost 100 years, Southern Importers, near the Museum District, has catered to the local culture.

Employees made and sold hula skirts for carhops at Prince's Hamburgers in the 1930s and '40s and supplied burlesque performer Sally Rand with feathers for her fans. Barnum & Bailey clowns used to shop there when in town. When the Houston Rockets won back-to-back NBA championships in 1994 and 1995, the team bought confetti from Southern Importers.

People claiming to be actual witches have come in during Halloween season, salesclerk Helen Meredith said.

In the 1970s, business was more than three times what it is now, Mickey Frost said. Supplying department stores with props and materials for display windows, Southern Importers thrived. The store had sales reps in Florida, Ohio, New York and California. Clients included Foley's, Neiman Marcus, Marshall Field's, Macy's and J.C. Penney Co.

"We sent out 50,000 catalogs," the elder Frost recalled.

Much of that business died. Department store budgets shrunk, he said: "You don't see as many elaborate and beautiful windows anymore."

Southern Importers had 38 employees in those days, compared with 10 now. And business today is half of what it was a decade ago, Mickey Frost said. He declined to share revenue numbers.

It is not unusual for a business to face the realization that its glory days are gone.

"The only thing for sure in business is that it's going to change," said Irwin Miller, a counselor at SCORE, a group of retired executives advising small businesses.

"When your market changes, you can look for new markets or change your outlook. You can make money at almost any level," he said, and it is crucial to maintain your passion.

Milton Frost's passion dates to 1938, when he joined Southern Importers. At this time, it was owned by the family of his wife's sister.

"They sold imported fabrics," he said, and made "diamond cloth" out of glitter. "They had it in one room," he said. "They wanted to stay in that one little hole. I got a suitcase and hit the road, and I was selling up a storm."

Milton Frost took over the operation in 1958. His son joined him in 1976.

Before that, Mickey Frost, an engineer, was a program manager at General Dynamics, working on plans for a manned mission to Mars. But he felt drawn to a family opportunity, he said.

Mickey Frost has used his engineering background to design customized bubble machines and other items for the store.

Customer Colleen Giusti has been shopping at Southern Importers for decades. She learned about it as a child from her dancing teacher.

"The staff is extremely helpful," said Giusti, who was buying gypsy outfits.

When Meredith came seeking work there 37 years ago, she said, it felt strange filling out her job application surrounded by mannequin heads. Now, the store feels like family, she said. She worries on the days when Milton Frost doesn't come in because he isn't feeling well.

Come Nov. 1, Meredith and the rest of the staff will take down all the Halloween items and set up for Christmas. Milton Frost said he still loves seeing the store change with the seasons.

He broke his hip last year and uses a walker now, but he still has vigor and a charming smile.

"He's still a heck of a salesman," his son said.

david.kaplan@chron.com