

Local Pub & Music Venue Bunny & Pirates Forced to Close

By Elizabeth Shore

My partner Jeffrey and I originally soft-opened Bunny & Pirates Bazaar in late 2017 as an eclectic coastal store with new, vintage, and repurposed items, beach and fishing gear, snacks, beverages, and packaged craft beer. By the end of April 2018, we launched the pub and live music. Announcing that we have been forced to close the venue has been among the most difficult things we have ever endured.

Back then, Cortez was a sleepy Florida town. To the west of us, a small boatyard and marina stood where what is now the Hunters Point Development. If you remember, that property was vast and open, with the crumbled remnants of the old gas station grown over with weeds. The views of undeveloped land and old Florida on your way toward the island felt like home. To the rear and east of us remains the Buttonwood RV Park, and down the way, the once landmark tourist stop, the Sea Hag, is now an upscale Coffee Bar and Gift Shop. It was a very different neighborhood when Bunny & Pirates entered the scene.

We leased the property in humble condition. There is no central AC, and there are only two small room-size wall units on either end. My brother-in-law helped us install a mini split unit. You can ask any of our customers: It's quite hot in the summer, but they will tell you that is part of our charm.

We evolved the beer garden over time with the grassroots help of friends and family. We rented a backhoe and graded the property to elevation and built the sound wall, all with the expert help of our friend Trigger. We celebrated one of my birthdays by having a garden decorating party. Everyone pitched in, and we transformed our outdoor space with many helping hands.

There is something special about being part of helping one another. We brought people together around common human needs – a place of belonging and friendship. That is the beauty of mom and pops, we showcase the flavor of local areas across our great country.

People loved watching us grow. Mom helped out all the time, and one of my best friends from Manatee High School, Heather, has been with us since the beginning. Our customers became part of our extended friends and family. It's obvious from the reaction of our community over the last couple of weeks since we announced our sudden closing how much our familiar vibe resonated with so many people. We became a destination for friends to meet; there is heart and soul in what we created.

Our brand developed over time because of the love of our friends and customers. I think my father, R.B. "Chips" Shore, more than anyone, taught me what true community was all about. He loved Cortez, and being part of its historical preservation was one of his greatest passions as Clerk of Courts & Comptroller of Manatee County for almost forty years. His passion is what attracted us to Cortez. He wanted to preserve the history of those who came before us so that we remember who we are and where we came from as we move into our future.

There is a great responsibility in how we develop and grow as a community. Wiping out all that keeps us grounded and connected under the guise of "it's just business" pollutes and soils our foundations. It can cause us to forget the fabric of who we are collectively. There exists a delicate balance. Yes, change, growth, and business are essential, but so are the riches of our history, family values, and helping our neighbors. Where are the healthy ethical criteria that used to be considered in business, development, and area growth? Where are the limits? When is enough enough?

We made it through Hurricane Irma, which delayed our opening, the long Red Tide in 2018, our first year in business, the 2020 Covid shutdowns during our second anniversary, the resulting 2021 supply chain crisis, the 2022 great resignation, and the 2023 rising inflation prices. We never thought a member of our own community would seal our fate.

There is a lot of speculation and rumors about what happened with our lease. It's more than just the buzzwords of rising rental rates. We entered into our long-term lease when Cortez was quiet, prior to recent area developments. Of course, we knew times had changed, and our lease would increase.

We also knew we were weathered like everyone else in these times. Along with caring for sick family members, personal health issues, and surgery... life comes at you. We are no different than so many going through it. No matter, we knew the area was changing, and we needed to plan in advance.

I reached out to our landlord, Shawn Kaletta, via text over a year ago, on February 7, 2023, asking for a meeting, hoping for his advice and help in looking forward. Who better than Shawn to talk to about it all? Over the years, he expressed that he liked what we were doing. I gave his family a Bunny Shuttle ride to the festival in Cortez when they visited our place after we had recently won Best Small Business of the Year from the AMI Chamber of Commerce.

I have had dozens of texts with Shawn over the last year scheduling meetings and calls. Shawn told me he loved helping businesses and would be happy to talk. We spent several afternoons sitting waiting for him at the pub only to be stood up. Each time, he said he got busy, that we would meet tomorrow, or that he had to go out of town. We were put off through the end of summer, then the fall and the holidays, and finally January. Our time ran out; we were now month to month on our lease, and then he forced us out.

In hindsight, I take accountability that I should have formally written him, according to the terms of our lease. But we had not done business formally in the past. I liked Shawn, and I trusted him because his staff believed in him, and I've always felt that says a lot about a person. Hence, I took him at his word when he told me in person and more than once via text that he would renew our lease. I naively thought we'd work something out even after we decided to sell the business because our broker was confident they could get Shawn market price, and Bunny & Pirates offered the community something unique and special.

We needed the data to make decisions: What are the plans for the building? What is your idea of market price? Are you willing to let us find a new tenant? Our broker was ready to list late last summer, but with our lease renewal coming up, we could not move forward without information. If Shawn wanted the building back for financial or other purposes, that makes practical sense. But what does not make sense is not communicating with your tenant. Over a year ago, Bunny & Pirates could have found a path forward with adequate timing and communication instead of a matter of weeks to close our business at the height of season. What's it all worth in the end to develop so much if, along the way, you kill the roots of what makes our great area so unique and special? Treating us as if we do not belong here, that there is no place for locals and generational natives?

There are no words for the magic of our music garden, a space that connects and honors both artist and audience. Our customers engage with the musicians and hear their stories, and the musicians have a captive audience interested in their music, which is so much more than background noise to them. Artists have been able to give their gifts and have them received—the magic is the mutual consideration.

Our salty, humble place lets people of all backgrounds let their hair down, grab a music shaker,

and enjoy life without pretense. Its absence will be a terrible loss. We are truly the place where friends meet. People have become lifelong friends from coming together in our pub. We've made lifelong friends ourselves. Jeffrey even married three different couples that we became friends with here. True friendships that are made from the real place of authenticity, heart, care for our community and a true understanding of preservation of all things rare.

I have been scared to talk to all the reporters and news outlets that have been calling. I canceled interviews because it's been hard enough, and I didn't want to be retaliated against. But maybe this serves as a lesson to both those in power and those who are impacted by their decisions. Yes, business is business, but community is community. Progress and change are inevitable, but how we progress and change is a choice.

We need to pay more attention to what is happening right now in our communities. Our history is being erased by an elitist transplanted culture. You can't buy the love and respect that Bunny and Pirates has in our community. I think we sometimes forget what is possible in numbers. We do have a voice when we come together, and this community speaks up for each other. We are grateful for each of you who spoke up for us. That's its own kind of power, and we had better start exercising more of it if we intend to preserve the true character of Old Florida.