

Farwell's facelift

Story by Larry Widen - Photography by Nathan Harrmann

After two decades of neglect, north Farwell Avenue is undergoing a renaissance at the hands of a passionate city alderman, civic-minded businessmen and creative real estate developers

Anyone who's been on Farwell Avenue in the last year is bound to notice some major changes taking place. New restaurants, retail spaces and residential opportunities are breathing life into the once-decaying thoroughfare. Although Farwell Avenue and the surrounding neighborhood has always been a mecca for students, artists and musicians, it was slowly dying from 25 years of neglect. But in the last several years, prompted by efforts from a local politician, a host of individuals and companies have brought Farwell back from the dead.

"I crave the atmosphere here," says Deneine Powell, owner of Seven Stones spa. "Farwell just throbs with life, and I wouldn't want my business located anywhere else."

Powell's enthusiasm for the new Farwell Avenue is echoed by others who've chosen to invest in the area. Eric Wagner, owner of Twisted Fork restaurant at Farwell and North avenues, says there is a mixture of cultures and diversity that doesn't exist anywhere else in the city. "Out on the street you'll see college students, urban professionals, empty-nesters who've returned to the city, and every kind of ethnicity and race," Wagner says. "The avenue is vibrant and colorful, and I love it."

Tom Miller has been operating Beauty at Farwell and Brady since 1993. When Miller first opened the salon, it was above what is now Starbucks. "I was just a young man, trying to get started," Miller says. "The location was great and the price was right."

Looking back, Miller says he was lucky to have been in the right place at the right time. "Just after we opened, things began happening all around us," he says. In 1998 he relocated Beauty to a larger space at 1633 N. Farwell. "I think the kinds of businesses that are here now complement my customers perfectly," he says. "After their

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haircut, they can stop at Starbucks, have lunch or shop. We've come a long way since 1993."

And so has Farwell. The avenue originates in the 1400 block of Milwaukee's lower East Side and runs 17 blocks to the north. In 1854 it was named for Leonard James Farwell, a local hardware merchant who, at age 32, was the youngest man elected governor of Wisconsin. As a member of Abraham Lincoln's inner circle, Farwell witnessed the president's assassination in 1865.

The resurrection of Farwell Avenue was sparked in 1996 when Michael D'Amato became alderman of the city's Third District. Following the election, one of D'Amato's first priorities was to eliminate a dilapidated flophouse located near the intersection of Farwell and Brady Street. At the time, the building had more than 70 occupants and no on-site supervision. Drug deals, fires and fights had escalated into far more than just neighborhood nuisances. When D'Amato took office, the rooming house was receiving more police and fire calls than any other building in the city. "Clearly this was a problem I wanted to rectify for the people in my district," he says.

D'Amato worked with Robert DeToro, a developer who saw potential in the Queen Anne-style row houses, which were built by former Milwaukee Mayor George W. Peck in 1883. While demolition would have been the easy solution, DeToro shared the alderman's vision to restore Peck's houses to their former grandeur. Their collaboration resulted in the opening of Peck Row — six luxury townhouses — in 2001. D'Amato says he was proud of the success of that project, but his passion for the neighborhood didn't end there.

The alderman avidly supported an energetic development group's desire to turn a parking lot at 1920 N. Farwell Ave. into condominiums and retail space. Tim Gokhman, a principal with New Land Enterprises, says his firm was eager to bring their vision to Farwell Avenue. Work began on the \$6 million Abbotsford Condominiums, a five-story structure with public parking, tenant parking and retail space at street level. Businesses such as Powell's Seven Stones began moving in by 2001, with condo purchasers following shortly afterward.

Gokhman's firm also purchased the Ivanhoe Building, a retail/residential structure that once housed the popular Oriental Pharmacy. They worked with Wagner and his partner, Mike Pranke, to develop the space that would eventually house the Twisted Fork. New Land then purchased the Oriental Theatre building, an East Side landmark that houses three movie theaters, a bowling alley and several retail stores. "We plan to resell the bowling alley and arcade to an independent operator, but our firm will develop the street-level retail spaces," Gokhman says. "As for the theater, nothing's changed. Landmark, who operates the Oriental, is going to be there for a long time."

Currently New Land is involved in a new \$30 million project, The Sterling, on the corner of Farwell and Royall Place. The former parking lot will soon be a 12-story tower with 112 condominiums above and retail space at street level.

"Clearly, Farwell Avenue is in the growth phase," says D'Amato. "Right now we're working with UW-Milwaukee on a project that will really bring something new to the neighborhood."

D'Amato says the Kenilworth Building, a hulking 500,000-square-foot structure that sprawls from Farwell to Prospect avenues, will be transformed into student housing with 350 beds. Additional plans call for 40,000 square feet of retail space, a bike and walking path through the center of the building and another 120,000 square feet designated for the Peck School of the Arts.

Jim Plaisted, executive director of the East Side Business Improvement District, cites the new Columbia St. Mary's hospital building as another major part of the overall regeneration of the area. Part of the hospital will be located on the northeast corner of Farwell and North avenues. "Milwaukee's East Side has been losing population for years," says Plaisted. "For a number of reasons, people didn't want to raise a family here. But we're seeing that begin to change. People are coming back."

Wagner says he sees nowhere for the area to go but up.

"I live here, and own two restaurants here (the other is Qdoba on Prospect and Ivanhoe)," he says. "As wonderful as all this development is, I think we're just getting started. The future of Farwell Avenue promises to be very exciting for all of us." ❧