

Building Up Local Pharmacy



By Clark Corbin
ccorbin@postregister.com

EDITOR'S NOTE: This is the latest installment in the Post Register's ongoing Small Business Success Stories series. To submit a recommendation for a homegrown business to profile, send an email with a brief description of the company to news @postregister.com.

The days of employees bumping elbows inside Mike's Pharmacy are almost over.

Owner Mike Merrill is investing more than \$500,000 to expand his 26-year-old Holmes Avenue business.

Merrill hired Rigby-based B&B Builders to construct a new building behind his longtime location at 180 S. Holmes Ave.

The expansion will more than double the size of Merrill's existing 800-square-foot shop, giving him 2,000 square feet on the new building's main floor and an upstairs area for office space and future expansion.

Merrill hopes to occupy the new building by mid-November. Crews will demolish his longtime storefront when the new building is ready, freeing up space to double the size of his parking lot.

Although national chain pharmacies swallowed up many independent shops and put the mom 'n' pop drug stores under, Merrill isn't folding his cards and walking away.

He's doubling down.

"I'm passionate about this -- expansion is the only way to go," Merrill said. "It will allow us to provide better customer service and better access for our customers."

Ryan Johnson, construction supervisor with B&B Builders, said he is happy to see Mike's doing well enough to expand.

B&B and Merrill have worked together before, and Johnson appreciates the chance to forge local relationships that benefit both businesses.

"We do out-state work as well -- which is nice to have -- but we like to keep things local," Johnson said. "The down economy has affected everybody, but usually the economy here still seems to be fairly strong compared to other parts of the country where building has slowed down."

Merrill said he has been able to stand strong in the face of competition -- and a down economy -- by doing things differently than a national conglomerate.

When customers walk into Mike's, they'll find the owner behind the counter, greeting customers by their first names, asking about their grandchildren and filling their prescription.

"Chain stores have their place, but what we do is offer service," Merrill said. "When you get service and get the same product at the same price, where are you going to go (shop)?"

Donna West, who has been doing business with Merrill for more than 22 years, said the shop's commitment to service is the reason Mike's has become her exclusive pharmacy.

"He's very, very accommodating, and your prescription is always ready for you," West said. "If you need any medical advice or help with your prescription, it doesn't matter how busy he is, he takes the time and talks to you about it."

Merrill, a Preston native, graduated from Idaho State University's pharmacy program in 1978. He worked in a corporate pharmacy for about six years before he decided to take another path. Merrill longed to open his own business and settled on a Medicine Shoppe franchise during the down years in the mid-1980s after he found it difficult to obtain financing.

After 20 years as Medicine Shoppe, Merrill changed gears and changed the business to Mike's in 2005.

The new shop will feature an expanded lab, giving Merrill more room to develop specialized medicines -- a practice known as compounding -- that aren't otherwise available commercially.

Examples of compounding include mixing custom doses, adding a flavor such as cherry to make medicine more palatable or analyzing a patient's blood work to create a specialized female hormone treatment.

Merrill said the expansion will allow him to keep Mike's in the family for a long time. His two sons, Chad and Justin, are preparing to embark on pharmacy careers, and the expansion will allow Merrill to leave them with a well-established foundation.

But don't count on Merrill fading into the sunset when his sons complete pharmacy school.

"I don't want to quit when I retire, I just want to work less," Merrill said. "I love the people, and I love to be able to provide a product that helps people feel better."

Clark Corbin can be reached at 542-6761.

Did you know?

Information about Mike's Pharmacy is available by calling 525-8700 or visiting www.mikesrx.net.