

Lamorinda Music takes off despite opening in hard times

By David Morrill
Contra Costa Times

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LAFAYETTE — The economy couldn't get much worse. John and Colleen McCormick were well aware of that reality when they opened Lamorinda Music last July. But they weren't flustered.

Realistic expectations and a firm grasp of their musical customer base gave them confidence a music store would succeed.

Less than six months later, the five instruction booths in the back are regularly filled, Taylor Swift sheet music flies off the shelf and an average of 160 kids use their facility every week.

"For the first few months it was painful to keep transferring money from our own personal account to help fund the business, but then in December it just started to click," Colleen said. "Suddenly we were making money."

Music has been in the duos blood since they first met in the 80s while in the Cal-Berkeley marching band. Their youngest child Scotty, 14, plays the trombone, and Emily, 17, is in the choir.

While driving home from their cabin last year, the idea came to their minds to have a music store.

"We just thought what do we know and like, and music was the clear answer," John said. "Colleen just said it was what she wanted to do, and it made a lot sense."

After quickly putting together a business plan, identifying a location, and traveling to other music stores to see what worked and what didn't, the lease at 81 Lafayette Circle was signed April 1.

Funded by a home-equity loan, the McCormicks hope to be profitable in three to four years.

"I knew the economy was really bad, but my personal feeling was that the situation would get better in the next couple of years," said John. "And we were expecting the first years of a new business to be tough anyway, so it didn't bother us too much."

John, 43, helps out on the weekends, but still works full time for Pleasanton-based EMC Software Group. He hopes one day to be able to solely put his efforts into Lamorinda Music. Between the two, Colleen, a former science instructor for Lafayette Arts and Science Foundation, puts the most time into the store working the day-to-day duties.

"The chance to come to work every day and do something you truly love is such a blessing," she said.

The store itself is broken down into three primary components — retail, rentals and lessons.

In the back, private instructors rent out rooms for \$3 for each 30 minutes. French doors were built between the store and the instruction area to allow teachers to work off hours. The instructors have

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been prescreened by the McCormick's who seek advice from musical leaders in the community.

"This is an unbelievable setup they've put together," said Jon Brummel, who teaches trombone there. "I truly believe that it's going to become a mecca of music not only in this area but the entire East Bay."

Not only was the teaching section set up with students in mind, but parents as well. A waiting area with couches, a checkerboard and popcorn machine is carefully laid out.

"A lot of times when students go for lessons at homes, the parents wait in the car," Colleen said. "We wanted this to be a happy place for mothers and fathers as well."

Lamorinda Music has its share of music-themed knickknacks and sheet music, but its rental program currently drives the business.

Modeled after a store they saw in Seattle, the McCormick's allow people the opportunity to rent practically any instrument in the store.

"This is important, because a parent doesn't want to have to spend \$1,500 for an alto saxophone to have them change their mind and want to play something else later," John said.

All the rentals are "rent-to-own" where the monthly rental payment goes 100 percent toward the eventual purchase of the instrument. If a customer doesn't want to purchase it, they can return it any time. For example, a trumpet that costs \$824 to purchase can be rented for \$25 a month. A used trumpet would go for \$20.

Currently there are about 240 instruments out on

rental.

"We are a brand-new store, so right now all our instruments are brand-new too," John said.

While state budget cuts have forced many school districts to cut back on their music programs, the McCormick's are hopeful that performing arts will remain strong in their area.

"We love to be a part of this community, and provide a fun place people can come to," Colleen said. "We want to do whatever we can to keep music around here."

Contact David Morrill at 925-977-8534.

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