

The Buddha of Retail

Zane Kaplan, 84, owner of Kaplan's, at 1055 Market St. for 45 years

BY ED BOWERS

THE past still exists now at Kaplan's emporium. The modern version of a war-surplus store harks back to an era when businesses served their neighborhoods with consideration and treated their customers, no matter how difficult, with respect and dignity.

This is the third location for Kaplan's. It opened in 1939 on Third Street, where Yerba Buena Gardens is now, had a stint at 11th and Market, then moved to Market between Sixth and Seventh in 1965. Zane Kaplan, 84, is the owner, and he works there six days a week.

Recently, I was shopping for long underwear at Kaplan's. When I took two pair to the counter, Mr. Kaplan took a look at me, said I had the wrong size and found the right size, an inspiring gesture. At most stores today, the sales clerk would have sold me any merchandise I brought to the counter. If the clerk even noticed my mistake, he or she would have written me off as a bad shopper and taken my money like a thief in the night.

But Mr. Kaplan is different; he is old-school business. Kaplan's is a monument to the days when a small business owner had a symbiotic, instead of a parasitic, relationship to his customers.

Read the following interview with Mr. Kaplan and learn. Or weep for the days gone past.

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EB: It's kind of chaotic out there right now. Is that the way it was in 1965?

ZK: This is a port city and you always see people coming and going. People drift in here and it's hard for them to leave because they get help.

EB: Well, they're getting less help now than ever before. They're out on the street.

(At this point a drug-addled or mentally ill or intoxicated man limps to the counter and asks Mr. Kaplan where he can obtain such and such an object. Mr. Kaplan politely directs him to the location of his desire.)

EB: You're very patient. That man? A lot of people would have just blown him off. And that phone call you received a few minutes ago, the caller didn't seem to understand the English language when you told him to call back in 15 minutes until finally he understood. How did you develop that patience?

ZK: I guess being in retail you've got to be patient. You've got to pace yourself, and you see all kinds of situations, things, people, and every day you see something new you've never seen before.

EB: But you go out of your way.

ZK: Well, we have a lot of experience here. Oh, here's the whistler.

EB: The whistler?

(This man, a regular at Kaplan's, knows how to whistle like he's singing. He's a very good whistler but, unfortunately, I can't translate his whistling into

words, though I did get it on tape.)

EB: What advice would you give an entrepreneur who wants to open a business in this neighborhood?

ZK: He's got to be patient. And he's got to live with good and bad in this area. But it's not as bad

have a birthday I always say 15 more years and that's it! In 15 more years I'll be 99 and I say I'm not going to work until I'm a hundred, but I might work until I'm 99, then I'm calling it quits. I'm giving you a warning now.

EB: Then you love your job.

ZK: Well, it's a job. There's a reason why I'm still here.

EB: Do you have any parting advice to pass on to people who want to start a business?

ZK: If you're going to start a business now, you'd better be careful because the conditions are actually against you, but I always say a millionaire is born every day. Every day somebody has a different thought about how to be successful. A creative person can do well if he has something novel and acceptable.

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Zane Kaplan is of a dying breed of wise businessmen from a generation that was not plugged into iPods or cell phones, and if they had friends, they talked to them in person and not on a computer. He knows how hard life can be and he knew it right from the beginning. But he transformed that hardness. He's the Buddha of

Retail, a wise and compassionate man who can teach us all a lesson.

He's 84 years young. May he live forever. ■



PHOTO BY LENNY LIMJOCO

Zane Kaplan: "In retail, you've got to be patient. ... Every day you see something new."

as it looks sometimes. Most of them who are on the streets know their space. Once in awhile they come in and you have to attend to them one way or the other. Give them advice and so forth. But you get used to it.

EB: If you had it to do all over again, would you do it?

ZK: I guess it's part of my life. When I was young and just got out of the service, I played a lot of baseball and I asked my coach if I should go to school, college or work. And he told me it was best to go to school because you're going to work for the rest of your life. That's how smart he was.

EB: So you went to school?

ZK: Yeah. I went to college for 2½ years.

EB: You love your job?

ZK: I don't think so.

EB: (Laughter) But do you think that you'll work your job until the end of your life?

ZK: Well, when I

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