

CAMBRIDGE DAY

Tuesday, 1 November 2005 | Free | Cambridgeday.com

November 1, 2005



Mara Kustra stands in her Boutique Fabulous, the store from which she launched and helps lead the young Inman Square Business Association.

Lawrence E. Miller/lemcreative.com

Making business fabulous

Strength in numbers, and associations

By MARC LEVY

If being in a business association sounds dull, consider Inman Square.

A surge in crime has made getting an Inman beat cop the No. 1 priority for Cambridge's youngest business group, started in April 2004. There were seven armed robberies in August and September, police said last week, including three at the Cambridge Portuguese Credit Union. The Inman Square Business Association has also organized late-night shopping events and summertime open-air showings

of "King Kong" and "The Princess Bride." And its founder and leader is a stylish, if not outright glamorous, young woman named Mara Kustra operating out of a shop called Boutique Fabulous.

"No one knew who anyone else was," recalled Kustra, 30, of when she moved her boutique to Inman from a space near Dali. "I started doing little things like getting businesses together for Shop Inman by Moonlight — a good night to get a babysitter and come out and have a good time."

Eventually she went door to door to recruit people for a business association, winding up with about 50 members, to help preserve what she found most special about the square: "It is all independent businesses, no chains. All the people involved in the association care so much, it really wasn't too hard to get people to sign up," she said. "And when I stop by and ask for a donation, everyone says yes. You don't have to go up through the chain to get permission."

While she speaks, there is a constant flow of people prowling her

See BOOM, page 8

Boom in associations may be boon in business

From page 1

tables and scanning her walls, and there is a lot to look at — everything from handmade soaps to metal bird sculpture and classic French café prints. About three dozen local artisans are represented, Kustra said.

The boutique grew from a casual suggestion made to Kustra: that she wore such "crazy, vintage clothes" that she should put her fashion sense to work selling to others. Within three months stocking a booth at the Cambridge Antique Market she was doing well enough to take the plunge into her first small shop. She moved to Inman two years ago, quadrupling her space.

There are sales in rapid succession: clothing for about \$60, another a print for about \$145. Like much else in Inman, Boutique Fabulous is busy. Kustra is looking to open a second shop in Boston next fall, which is one reason she wouldn't want Inman to block small, local chains from the square.

Her fellow business association leader, Thomas V. Lynn Jr., is vice president of East Cambridge Savings Bank, which already has seven locations.

But they're set on keeping out the big chains. After burning out on a Wall Street job, Kustra moved to Inman and "fell in love with it right away. It's the one square that didn't have any chains, and that's another reason I've become so passionate about the business association," she said. "I wanted to keep it from turning into Harvard Square. I want all the businesses and landlords to work together to keep the chains out."

Some of the same thinking is going on a couple of miles away in Porter Square's Drinkwater's, a men's clothier with a décor as



Alex Mavradis/alexmavradis-photography-smugmug.com

Gary Drinkwater stands amid ware at his eponymous men's shop in Porter Square, from which he plans a business association.

classic and soothing as Kustra's is funky and engaging. Here Gary Drinkwater, amid buttery leather chairs and French antique furniture, is planning to have Porter take Inman's place as the city's youngest business association. He hopes to have "something viable" by spring.

And, although he plans to install a paid executive director, unlike Inman's all-volunteer group, and speaks in the language of mission statements and cross-marketing, unlike Kustra, Drinkwater also names blocking or limiting chain stores as a top priority for his imagined group. He also nearly shudders when contemplating what has become of Harvard Square.

"I strongly believe there is a renaissance going on in Porter Square ... I have a vision that this place is going to get better and connect to Arlington."

Gary Drinkwater, men's clothier

"I strongly believe there is a renaissance going on in Porter Square, and it will be a very strong area that will support small business," he said. "Harvard Square was a village ... there were unique shops to browse in, to shop in. But an unethical, gluttonous pattern developed there where landlords have just said to the shop owners, 'We don't need you.' Unfortunately, the character got lost."

"Harvard Square has moved up to Porter Square. If you walk up Mass. Ave., you find the face of it has changed. I have a vision that this place is going to get better and connect to Arlington," Drinkwater said.

After working at Louis Boston, Newbury Street's Cole Haan and Stonestreeks in Harvard Square, Porter Square could have seemed like a gamble for Drinkwater, but he says it was more like coming home. "I knew that I wanted to be in Porter Square," he said, and the intuition has paid off. There are 4,000 customers in his data-

base, he said, about half from Cambridge and many customers who followed from his previous shops.

"I haven't done much with the business association because I've been so inundated," he said.

Area business groups have traditionally been short-lived, divided and mainly motivated by crises, including the 1980s extension of the red line. Simon Shapiro, owner of the square's Tag's Hardware, said about a decade passed between the end of the T-inspired Merchants on the Line (another leader from that time, Karen Swaim Babin, didn't even recall that group, but did remember the Business Association of North Cambridge being formed for the same reason) and the creation of the Porter Square Neighbors Association, which was intended to include businesses and residents from Cambridge and Somerville. Now it attracts mostly Cambridge residents, with business owners attending as needed.

"I don't really see a Porter Square Business Association coming together or even what it's needed for," said Shapiro, who doesn't wear suits and hasn't met Drinkwater. "If I have a problem, I bring it to the Porter Square Neighbors Association, so you're not trying to reinvent the wheel."

Kelly Thompson Clark, president and chief executive of the Chamber of Commerce, has a different view.

"I'm very excited about what they're trying to do in Porter and Inman," she said, noting that Inman's association has been "very proactive and very effective already. It takes a lot of work, and I have a lot of respect for the amount of work it takes to get [a business association] started and try to garner support and maintain it while you're trying to run a business."