

Niwot's Little Box Store

By Pattie Logan

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Tim Rollman remembers looking out the front window of Niwot Rental and Feed and seeing a cornfield. He was just eight years old and already helping out at the store owned by his parents, Steve and Kay. By ten, he was writing up invoices, driving U-Hauls and hay trucks. He didn't yet know how much the town would change or how his responsibilities would grow. But here he is, 43, with a salt and pepper beard, starting to take over the iconic store on Second Avenue, having learned what makes it so special.

"Everybody knows me, Dad or David. They know a friendly face," says Tim. And they know what kind of service they'll get. "Most people's feed is in their trunk before they ever make it back out to their car," says Tim.

In a world of impersonal chain stores, Niwot Feed is like a big helping of retail comfort food. Push open the front door and an old-time buzzer announces your arrival. Enormous yellow bags of peanuts are stacked to the right with a community bulletin board above them, announcing horses for sale, lost dogs and various services. Take a few steps inside and you're immersed in bird feeders, plush dog toys, salt blocks and stacks and stacks of pet food, treats and supplies for all sorts of animals including rabbits, dogs, cats and birds. Above the counter are blackboards listing dozens of types of feed for horses, cattle, chickens, pigs and goats. You can even get earthworm chow if that's what you're after. Special requests and odd questions are welcome. Steve recently talked to a caller who wanted to know the hours of operation for the new restaurant in town. "I said, 'Well, I'm going to the post office and I'll find out.' So I walked by there and got the hours for them. If I can tell them about Niwot, I will."

Interacting with the customers is the best part about having the store, says Steve, who is 70 now. "I used to know everybody. Now I can't remember anybody," he says half joking, "At least I remember their faces." Customers certainly know him and some treat the store like their own. "If we're busy they reach in the counter and grab an invoice and fill it out by looking at the prices on the board. Some of them will even answer the phone for us."

Purchase invoices are all hand written. There isn't a computer in sight, which makes the sign behind the counter quite amusing. It reads, "Our policy is to always blame the computer." There actually is a computer, tucked away in the back. Tim uses it for ordering sometimes, but he says his parents don't touch it. "Teaching him and her how to use it, we'd rather shoot ourselves. The nice thing is that if the power is out, I can still sell you a bag of cat food."

They do get occasional outages, but there haven't been any disasters that were too disruptive over the years other than a flood about 26 years ago. "We had lawn mowers floating by. There was 18 inches of water in the lot," says Tim.

The lot is where they keep 50-pound bags of feed, hay and rental equipment like Bobcats, trailers, aerators and various tools. The rentals were the focus of the business when they opened in 1981. Today there are fewer do-it-yourselfers. "Nobody can work on cars anymore. Our engine hoists used to go out a couple times a week. Now they go out twice a year," says Steve.

The feed business is their emphasis now. But they've got plenty of competition from big box retailers. That's inspiring changes in the look of the store. They paved part of the parking lot, created better lighting, dusted off old shelves, carved out nooks to better organize. "Change or die. If things get harder, it just means we have to work a little harder, so we'll try and do that," says Tim. "We want to have a little nicer customer experience, but not take away what makes this place what it is."

Steve is a big part of making the store what it is. He's pleased that his son wants to take over, but he's not quite ready to let go. "A lot of customers tell us never to go away. Some day we have to. We're both going to get old," he says. "But I'll probably be around here forever. A little bit anyway."

It's a fine line trying to stay updated, but quaint, laid back, but efficient, to cherish the past yet embrace the future. Tim has had 35 years to think about it. He's looking forward to building on his family's legacy. "They developed something. This place is part of the community."