

Ellicott City set to measure its comeback during holiday season



Garrett Glover, a retail and restaurant industry specialist and high impact consultant, visits All Time Toys on Main Street. After last year's flood, he assisted this and other businesses
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Jason Barnes was knocked off his feet by the July 2016 flash flood that nearly destroyed historic Main Street in Ellicott City.

The owner of All Time Toys was washed down the street by swiftly moving waters. He not only managed to rescue himself, but locked arms with bystanders to pluck a woman from the raging torrent, an act captured on a smartphone video seen around the world.

The business he had purchased just two months before the flood, however, suffered indescribable damage, along with most of the shops in town.

Now, after months of one-on-one business coaching, Barnes has gotten back onto his feet.

He knows he's been given a second chance, and is excited to join his neighbors in showing off their revitalized stores next weekend on **Small Business Saturday**, which falls immediately after Thanksgiving and is set this year for Nov. 25. The national event was started in 2010 as a way to galvanize support for the niche shops that cater to their communities through an emphasize on personalized service.

For Ellicott City, it's also a milestone that represents the town's reemergence after the flood.

Like other Main Street entrepreneurs, Barnes gives credit for the business district's turnaround to Garrett Glover, a retail and restaurant specialist with the Maryland Small Business Development Center in College Park.

"Garrett has rejuvenated our businesses and given us a new life," said Barnes, who now divides his work and life into pre-flood and post-flood chapters.

"He showed me the doorway and gave me the nudge I needed to walk through it," he said. "Now we can re-introduce ourselves as more successful businesspeople, and I have huge faith that Main Street is making a comeback."

Tammy Beideman, owner of a clothing boutique called Sweet Elizabeth Jane, joins Barnes in describing Glover as a soft-spoken and trusted adviser, a straight-shooter and a "retail whisperer" who instinctively knows what business owners need to do to succeed.

His personalized brand of mentorship has transformed the town's business district, she says, and store owners hope customers will turn out to celebrate the reinvention of Main Street with them the day after **Black Friday**.

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; and so devastating, that feeling numb was preferable" to facing reality, Beideman said

Sweet Elizabeth Jane managed to reopen for last year's Small Business Saturday with Glover's help and the dedication of community volunteers, she said, though many shops did not.

"Garrett's advice has been brilliant and he has been helping me through a very overwhelming time," Beideman said.

"We may look like we're back to normal" to people on the outside looking in, she said, "but there's a lot going on behind the scenes and sometimes I feel like I'm running on a hamster wheel.

"Garrett is the glue that's holding things together, and we still need him," Beideman said.

Glover said Howard County residents have been extremely supportive of Main Street businesses, especially right after the catastrophe, but their patronage is still needed.

"Sympathy purchases aren't happening anymore, but business owners need support more than ever as they enter the last stage" of the plan he developed for Main Street, he said, which is built on three "R's" – relief, recovery and revitalization.

Glover is gratified to know business owners place a premium on his assistance, but recalls that his first speech to the shop owners on Main Street wasn't uniformly well-received.

"I told them there was nothing on Main Street but a collection of knick-knack shops," said the resident of Southern Maryland, "and I called the business district a thin and shallow industry mix. I wasn't very popular.

"Merchants needed more sophisticated business models; some of them didn't even have cash registers," he said.

Glover says he wasn't shocked to find this in a historic district, describing business operations in some cases as "a throwback to another time."

Some merchants didn't appreciate being told their way of doing business had become outmoded, he said.

"One woman said I had greatly insulted Ellicott City, but that [viewpoint] was a rarity. Everyone else agreed and jumped in and said, 'Let's do it,' " he recalled.

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Ellicott City Partnership, corroborated Glover's recollections, saying: "Garrett came to buy,' and that shook up the town."

While no one would call the flood a blessing, it did present an opportunity to modernize for business owners who had no choice but to start over anyway, she said.

“Now we’re the ‘New Old Ellicott City,’ ” Sweeney Smith said. “We kept the charm, but we realize people want to shop in a cool, slick place.”

Glover said he wasn’t about to let anyone return to their old ways.

“I wanted business owners to use this opportunity to develop more sophisticated, contemporary and mature business models,” he said.

Barnes’ new setup at All Time Toys, for example, provides the customers with a “visceral, entertaining experience,” Glover said, allowing the store owner’s love of pop culture toys and collectibles to shine through with the introduction of more vibrant merchandising. The approach has been so successful that Barnes is scouting for a second location, possibly on Main Street in Westminster.

“All of the merchants I’ve worked with now have a brand ID that makes them unique and they are focused on providing an enhanced customer experience,” Glover said.

There are other success stories up and down the historic thoroughfare, so many, in fact, that business owners are calling for an extension of Glover’s contract, which is set to expire on Dec. 31.

Glover said he hasn’t finished what he set out to do.

“What I’m doing is working, and I would like another six to 12 months to tighten up the marketing strategies in old Ellicott City,” he said.

Barnes said Glover’s work could serve as a template.

“Main Street is the perfect petri dish to develop something like this,” he said. “If Garrett is allowed to finish what he started, it could prove to be revolutionary for other places.”

The Small Business Development Center is working to extend Glover's contract beyond Dec. 31, a move that would require funding by a federal or state agency or other stakeholder.

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or Garrett," said Renee Sprow, SBDC state director. "We know Ellicott City wants this,

Sweeney Smith said she is hatching a plan to set up a website to solicit personal donations to help bring about an extension of Glover's services.

"Main Street businesses have expanded and gotten better," she said. "Our July was better this year than our December was last year, but there's still work to do."

Despite all the positive change Glover has overseen in old Ellicott City, growing pains continue to push new issues to the surface, Sweeney Smith said.

"We need Garrett to come back in 2018," she said. "He can help us continue to grow."

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