

DREAM AND IT WILL COME TRUE!

By Kay Tarr

It was a bitterly cold and windy evening, Wednesday, January 23, shortly before five o'clock, I stopped in the parking lot of the old Dillons store on East Iron, hoping to sign the petition supporting the effort to get another grocery store in that location. Since it was prior to the 5:30 p.m. time the drive was to begin, I planned to sign the petition and leave. Greg Stephens and Jon Blanchard, two of the organizers, asked if I would stay at the petition table while Greg left to make more copies of the petition. I agreed to do that.

As soon as Greg left, shortly after five o'clock, citizens began arriving in droves—from every direction and from all over town. Cars filled the parking lot. People from the neighborhood came on foot, and in wheelchairs—with their families and alone. They waited patiently while those ahead of them signed, wanting to show their support for a grocery store in that location.

Many told me stories of how the closing had impacted their lives in very negative ways, and how much they needed to have a grocery store there. One man told me he helped build the store many years ago. The expressions on their faces and the emotion in their voices when they talked of losing their beloved grocery store will stay with me for a long time. Some of them told me they cried when the store closed. Others talked about what a hardship it has been for them since the closing. Obviously, people had depended on this landmark over its long history, some simply for its convenience, as I did. Others, though, **needed** that store, as many in the neighborhood and in North Salina are elderly, physically challenged and/or financially in no position to travel south to the new Dillons.

The citizens of Salina were fortunate to have the Iron Street store as long as they

did; but, circumstances change. Corporations do what they must do. Dillons closed two stores when they built their lovely new store. The impact of the Southgate closure was nothing compared with the Iron Street situation. Most of us gave up hope that there would ever be another grocery there. Many felt it would go the way of many of the empty buildings in cities and towns all over—a forlorn, forgotten structure whose time had come and gone.

However, when a dedicated group of activists, who had been working diligently to help North Salina become a vibrant, economically sound part of the community, heard about the Iron Street closing, they sprang into action. Investigation began, to determine if and how a new grocery store could be opened to replace the old one.

Full circle from that effort, the Petition Drive came to fruition. If enough interest were shown from all over Salina to support such an entity, would the impossible become possible? This raw, blustery night showed the results. Young adults, families, the elderly and the infirm—whether poor, middle class or rich—eagerly supported this endeavor.

The most touching of all, were the people from the neighborhood. When they signed the petitions, I got the feeling that for the first time since the store closed, many had some hope—hope they might get another grocery store. More than that, I saw hope that their voices might finally be heard—voices that hadn't been listened to for a long, long time, if ever. I saw pride—pride that they could actually make a difference by signing their name. Many of them had tears in their eyes, and most appeared to go away uplifted that they had been able to have a part in a grass-roots outpouring of support that even

the organizers of the Drive hadn't anticipated.

I was amazed at the turnout—a constant flow of people from five o'clock until dark, coming from all over town, believing they were being empowered by signing their name to the petition. There was the synergy created when individuals are united with a common cause in which they deeply believe. After losing one more vestige of their independence—going to the grocery store on their own—some of the elderly and infirm heretofore had felt invisible and unimportant. Some of these supporters, who had been demoralized and had already lost so much in life, began to have expectations that their signature might actually make a difference. Every signature was just as important as the last.

It was my privilege to witness the groundswell that came from meeting adversity with hope and action. I think those who came truly believed that something could actually be done to change a neighborhood disaster into a triumph. By banding together for a common purpose, they hoped to achieve a goal that many had felt was completely out of reach before this Drive started.

On this first day of the Drive, 308 signatures were collected, an astonishing feat, from a small article in the Salina Journal and word-of-mouth by the people in the neighborhood. That night set the tone to transform the rest of the Drive. The air was crackling with electricity on this special night, and there was a sea change afoot. If I took away anything from my "accidental happenstance" of being a tiny part of that evening, it was this: When (not if) this new store becomes a reality, with a large, built-in group of shoppers, it will be "Salina's Store of Dreams....If you open it, they **WILL** come!"

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