

# A cash mob effort for West Concord's 5 & 10

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Polly Stadt and her daughter Emma have hit upon a very modern approach to reinvigorate a longstanding and iconic business in their West Concord neighborhood.

They are holding a cash mob Saturday at the West Concord 5 & 10.

By local standards, Stadt is a relative newcomer to the variety store. She discovered it only 10 years ago, when she first moved to town and her son wanted to go fishing.

"We needed bait," Stadt said. "So I went into the store for the first time and asked if they had worms. And they did."

The 5 & 10's more seasoned denizens would not be surprised by her story. The old-fashioned shop has stood on Commonwealth Avenue in downtown West Concord — often seen as more artsy and down-to-earth, and less upscale than Concord Center — since 1934, and has been owned by the same family since 1951. People who shop there are accustomed to the idea that you can walk in and find anything, from bobby pins to stationery, from electrical cords to blenders, from penny candy to, well, fishing bait.

And in years past, the shelves were always stuffed to the gills, so to speak. So when Stadt noticed in recent months that inventory looked a little thinner than usual, she asked manager Chris Curtis, who has run the business for his parents for the past two decades, what the problem was.

According to Curtis, his main supplier, Arrow Wholesale Inc. in Worcester, which had provided quirky inventory to small, dime-store-type businesses all over the country for generations, went out of business. That loss, coupled with the decrease in business facing small neighborhood shops everywhere, as more consumers flock to malls, superstores or online, was draining the lifeblood out of the West Concord 5 & 10.

Stadt said she and her 13-year-old daughter, Emma Hill, agreed that this was awful news. Browsing the shelves for inexpensive, amusing, or useful items was a tradition not only among adults in the community but among children Emma's age as well. They decided something had to be done, and then Stadt remembered a tactic to save a local business that a friend in Texas had told her about: a cash mob.

In a cash mob, according to the website [www.cashmob.com](http://www.cashmob.com) (<http://www.cashmob.com/>), committed supporters "come together to shop in a locally owned establishment to support their favorite local business and support the area economy." Each "mobber" spends an agreed-upon amount, usually \$20.

Stadt and her daughter said they decided a cash mob was just what the West Concord 5 & 10 needed, providing an influx of money and, more importantly, bringing attention to its plight. They talked to Curtis, chose a date —

the first Saturday in March — and started putting out the word: Emma on Facebook, and her mother by e-mail and word of mouth.

“This means everything to us,” Curtis said. “When Arrow Wholesale went out of business, we lost half of our inventory source and had no money to pay anyone else. Since then, we’ve been living by the skin of our teeth. We’re trying to re-source everything, and trying to pay up front, which is hard to do in this economy. We’re trying everything we can.”

Cash mobs are reportedly growing in popularity as a way to nourish the “buy local” movement, which aims to help small, independent shops. Since November, the Newton-Needham Chamber of Commerce has organized three cash mob events, each targeting a village in Newton rather than a specific store.

“The idea is that people want to show their appreciation for local retailers, and local retailers enjoy this,” said Greg Reibman, president of the Newton-Needham Chamber of Commerce. “It’s fun for everyone. You get a crowd together and it’s a great community event. Some people visited stores they’d never been to before, and some would get together afterwards and talk about what they bought or found.”

Reibman said more cash mobs are planned for this spring, with events in line for Needham as well as Newton.

Dennis Ceru, an adjunct professor of entrepreneurship at Babson College and a consultant to small- and medium-sized businesses nationally, said he believes this concept may not be as new as it seems.

“What we’re seeing is the convergence of social media with business as a way of mobilizing a community,” Ceru said. “I used to live in Los Angeles, where there was a very strong ethnic population. I found that Asian and Hispanic communities have done this for many years, through buying locally and shopping at ethnic stores owned by their neighbors.

“Now, we are starting to see in mainstream America a desire to have more of that small-town feel. You could say a cash mob is a variation on the old church bake sale.”

But ultimately, said Ceru, the value of such an initiative may be more symbolic than practical.

A cash mob “is a show of support,” Ceru said. “The question it raises is one of sustainability. This creates an immediate short-term cash infusion, but the bigger question is what happens on Day 2, on Day 20, on Day 200.

“If a campaign like this raises awareness of the business among people who do not regularly shop there, then that’s useful. But in the end, is it a flash-in-the-pan cash infusion, or does it translate to sustainability for the business?”

Symbolic or not, Rebecca Harrison Parker said, she would not think of being anywhere except the West Concord 5 & 10 on Saturday with \$20 in hand.

“I have great memories of going to the West Concord 5 & 10 as a kid,” said Parker, who grew up near Concord in the 1970s. “My three siblings and I always asked our mom to take us there. We shopped for toys and candy. Bazooka bubble gum with the comics inside and woven finger-traps were favorites.

“In high school, I worked there during the holidays stocking shelves,” she said. “It hasn’t really changed a lot that I’ve noticed, and now I bring my four daughters there.”

As Stadt sees it, showing support for Curtis and his family is about something greater than just keeping the shelves of a favorite business stocked.

"I love West Concord and I love supporting our community," she said. "The more shops and businesses we have here, the better. In doing this, we are showing kids that we put a priority on giving back to our community. If you're going to live in a small, close-knit community like West Concord, you have an obligation to give back to it."

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