

**Downtown**

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part of the much-hyped restaurant row.

Wiley is a believer in the many revitalization efforts planned for downtown in the near future. She envisions a downtown that will be everything to everyone.

Wiley says she doesn't go to the mall anymore; everything she wants can be found in her building or elsewhere downtown, she said.

"What I have on," she said looking down at her purple business suit, "I bought downstairs."

Her vision is shared by her growing list of tenants, many of whom could have opened up shop in a variety of other places around the city, Wiley said.

She also had definite plans about the type of landlord she wanted to be before she leased the building. She did not want her power to be absolute; she wanted her tenants to have a voice.

She works to make the building's tenants association vocal, active participants in the building. Together, Wiley believes, they will enjoy and benefit from the fruits that a rejuvenated downtown could bring.

Because of the negative perceptions many people have about the downtown, Wiley does concede that making such a substantial investment in the area could be viewed as a risk.

But she's a risk taker. "I'll risk it and then pray about it," she said with a bright smile.

**Youthful Endeavors**

A colorful, laminated place card is folded on the keyboard of Tabitha Bell's computer. The card reads: "Wonder woman works here."

Bell says she is feeling more and more like the mythical character. She has had to rely on her "powers" and her faith as she prepares for the February opening of La Cafe Kids, a Trade Street entertainment facility.

The cafe is a dream come true, Bell said. In addition to being a hang-out where young people can come and play games and sports, classes in acting and photography will be offered.

"It's more of a community center," Bell said.

She said young people have been left out of all the plans for a new downtown. Many of the clubs and restaurants set to open are geared toward an adult crowd.

It was different when she was growing up, she said. Downtown was home to street scenes and other outdoor festivals that were kid-friendly.

Bell says young people have an important role to play in the revitalization of downtown.

"Children can revitalize the downtown area," Bell said. "Where there are children, there are parents."

The cafe is a work in progress now. Boxes of toys and books are lined against freshly painted walls.

"It has been very trying," Bell said with a grin as she surveyed the building.

Bell is partially bankrolling her project through Project Blue Print, a United Way program. Bell will be the first to tell you that money for this venture is not abundant.

She considered delaying her dream yet again due to finances, but then she thought about the kids and the void.

"Money is short; participation will be limited at first, but we are moving on because the kids can't wait," she said.

She has also relied on the many connections she's made through the years as she has worked to become one of the best known local actresses in the Triad.

Bell scouted out many downtown locations before she found her building. Other parts of the city were never an option, Bell said. She always wanted a location downtown.

Trade Street's new distinction as the city's arts district will only help her cafe, Bell believes.

"If there is a method of healing other than doctors or medicine, it's the arts," Bell said unequivocally. "(The arts) touch the depths of your soul."

The February opening of the cafe is only the beginning, Bell said. She flipped leisurely through her five-year plan and talked excitedly about expanding to include classes in other artistic disciplines. According to Bell's estimations, she will have nearly 800 students by 2005.

Her expected influx will mean that she will have to relocate to a larger location in the distant future. It's an option that she is already exploring. Bell doesn't have specific plans about where she would like to move, but she is definite that she will remain downtown, in the thick of things.

"Downtown used to be the spot," Bell recalled. "We used to come here and have fun. We didn't have any cursing or fussing; it was

somewhere to just hang out....We can have that again."

**Hidden Treasures**

Sharon Hunter found herself in a bind a few years. The textile plant where she worked was closing and Hunter had to find a new way to make ends meet.

Hunter's bind led to the creation of Sharon's Treasure Chest, the furniture store she opened in September of 1998 on Trade Street. Hunter says she is adjusting to being her own boss and the tedious chores and long hours that come along with it.

As its name suggests, Sharon's Hidden Treasures is stocked with unique pieces from different cultural groups. There are ceramic pigs and alligators. A wool-like "dream catcher," a Native American item, hangs near the cash register. Replicas of the sphinx and other African landmarks are also sold at the store. More traditional furniture - plush couches, dining room tables, end tables, brilliant lamps - can also be found in the store.

Her merchandise is both new and used. She has just one requirement to bring something into her store to sell: "It has to look good," Hunter said with a smile.

Hunter says her experience downtown so far has been so-so.

She relishes being a business but sees many ways that downtown can improve. Her desire to make her business, and all of Trade Street, a better place led her to join the Downtown Arts District Association, commonly known as DADA, where she served as vice president last year.

"Sometimes it's a ghost town here," Hunter said of Trade Street. "It's partly because people think Trade Street is a bad area. But it's not as bad as they think it is here."

Often, Hunter says, she feels as if her shop is hidden, overlooked by many city residents. For various reasons, Hunter said, African Americans have especially turned a blind eye to her store.

"I don't think they patronize us like they should," she said hesitantly.

Hunter's daughter, Kizzi, who often works side-by-side with her mother in the store, said that blacks will spend thousands at other furniture stores and then come to their shop and want exorbitant discounts and deals. They say some blacks have had bad experiences with black businesses and stop shopping at them altogether.

But Hunter does not try to battle the big guys. She says her unique pieces are her niche.

She applauds each time a new business opens up on the street. Hunter believes that more businesses in the area will mean more profits for everyone.

There is room for more diverse businesses on Trade, Hunter said. She is optimistic that they will come soon and build the street's appeal.

"We need more stores and we really need a restaurant here," she said.

Hunter concedes that business owners could do more to help downtown become more appealing. Hunter said she often keeps her store open past 5 p.m. so that she can appeal to the after-work crowd.

A big complaint about businesses on the street is that they open late and close early.

Hunter is positive about her future downtown. She talks about trying her daughter so that she can one day run the shop while she pursues other interests.

Her regular customers also keep Hunter going. On this particular day, two of her regulars, a black married couple, stop in to browse. Hunter immediately went into saleswoman mode; even a newspaper interview had to wait.

And when the going gets really tough, Hunter will always have her dream catcher; that's until she sells it.

"It catches all the bad dreams and spirits," Hunter said as she straightened the piece.

**The Veteran**

James Robert Miller III has nearly three decades on most of the business owners on Trade Street today. He opened Miller's Printing Co. in April of 1973, making him one of a handful of blacks who broke their way on to the then nearly lily-white street.

"I've seen a lot of change," he said. "A lot of businesses have come and gone, both black and white (businesses)."

In fact, Miller believes that he and the shoe shop owner down the street are the only ones left from an era when downtown still had its retail and commercial teeth and city residents rushed there for many of their needs.

Miller remembers when that all started to change. First, he said, Trade Street was "remodeled," making a portion of the street one-

way. Then the white business owners started to leave downtown, he continued, taking many of their white customers with them.

At one point, Miller was the only merchant in the building that's now owned by Wiley. When F.I.R.S.T moved in, he relocated a hop, skip and jump down the street.

Miller, though, says he never thought about leaving. Downtown is what he knows.

Money is a factor that also played into his not leaving downtown.

"It would be hard to find a place of this size without it being expensive," he said. "I'm comfortable here because the rent is reasonable."

Miller admits that 24-hour copying shops have put a dent into his business.

"That's not printing," Miller said strongly. "That's copying. There's a difference."

Miller followed in his father's footsteps into the profession. He was trained in Chicago for five years by professionals from the Printing Industry of Illinois.

Plaques and certificates of achievement dating back to the 1960s line the walls of his shop along with pictures of his family.

Miller uses the plate system of printing, where copy and photographs are transferred to soft aluminum plates before the printing process begins. It's not an easy process, he said, but it is what he knows.

"I don't want to know any other way. That's the way I was trained."

Plate printing also produces better prints, Miller said. The better quality means higher prices, Miller added, but that can be expected.

"It's like when you go to the shoe store, you have some shoes for \$7 and some for \$107. You get what you pay for," he said.

Miller doesn't believe that he'll benefit all that much from a boom downtown. He says when Trade Street hosts the frequent Gallery Hop events, people don't come downtown in search of a printer.

"They didn't come in here," he said with a grin.

He has a loyal customer base. He prints obituaries for many funeral homes as well as calendars and letterhead for businesses.

Miller works alone, often working into the wee hours of the morning to finish time-sensitive jobs.

Though he has worked in the printing profession for more than 40 years, Miller says he doesn't think about retiring. He doesn't even know what it means.

"My doctor asked me whether I thought of retiring. I said, 'What's that?'"

When asked whether or not he would advise an up-and-coming business owner to bring his or her business downtown, Miller is hesitant.

"I don't give advice," he said.

But then Miller gives the question a bit more thought and expands on it more.

"You have to let people know that you have something to offer them and you have to work hard to be a success. That makes the biggest difference in whether you are a success or failure."



Downtown business owners gathered for photograph after a recent meeting.

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