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## METROPOLITAN

### Jokes Aside, David Letterman Leaves Behind a Costlier Neighborhood

BY COREY KILGANNON

When the “Late Show” first started taping at the Ed Sullivan Theater in Midtown Manhattan in September 1993, the area was “very fringy,” said Rupert Jee, an owner of the Hello Deli on West 53rd Street, around the corner from the theater entrance and next to the stage door and the corporate offices.

The fringe did not last. As part of his “Meet the Neighbors” segments, David Letterman immediately began incorporating Mr. Jee and other local merchants as regular guests on the show, turning some into celebrities and making their shops into tourist destinations.



There were the Longacre Copy Center, Academy Clothes, the Bagel Café and K & L’s Rock America gift shop, where a pair of Bangladeshi salesmen, Mujibur Rahman and Sirajul Islam, became Letterman regulars and were sent across the country as roving correspondents.

The show brought a new buzz and vitality to the neighborhood, improving the business environment, and making storefront space more desirable. This, combined with the redevelopment of Times Square to the south, and a general increase in commercial rents citywide, began driving up rents as much as tenfold over the show’s 22-year run at the theater, some real estate officials estimate.

Today, most of the theater’s old neighbor businesses have given way to wealthier chains.

For many shop owners, Mr. Jee said, “the show was a double-edged sword.”

“The neighborhood literally went through a renaissance when Dave came in, but rents quickly doubled and tripled,” said Mr. Jee, who said his deli was the last of the small businesses near the theater remaining from the show’s early days.

And the rents continue to go up, according to Faith Hope Consolo, a real estate broker who was a retail consultant for the Times Square redevelopment (“So if they want to hate anybody, they can hate me.”).

She said that the area around the Ed Sullivan Theater had become saturated with tourists, and that most mom-and-pop stores had long since been driven out of business or elsewhere, as rents increased from as low as \$50 per square foot 20 years ago to \$500 to \$800 per square foot today.

“You couldn’t give the space away then. Now everybody’s fighting to get into that corridor,” Ms. Consolo said, adding that retailers such as F. A. O. Schwarz have been negotiating to move into the area.

Rising rents forced out K & L's Rock America in 2003, Mr. Rahman said.

"Before Dave came to the neighborhood, nothing was here," Mr. Rahman said by phone on Thursday. "He helped all the little businesses, but then the rents went up. It forced people out, but that was beyond Dave's control."

Mr. Rahman, 60, said that he had "returned to a normal life," finding work as a translator, and that he had completed law school. And yes, he still gets recognized.

The buzz at Mr. Jee's deli was extreme this week, with the approach of Mr. Letterman's last episode on Wednesday. Moving between the cash register and the deep fryer during the lunchtime rush on Wednesday, along with his partner, May Chin, Mr. Jee signed autographs and posed for selfies while seamlessly ringing up his customers.

He served up sandwich specials like the Letterman (turkey, ham and American cheese) and the Shaffer (chicken cutlet, American cheese and sweet peppers), named after the host's sidekick and bandleader, Paul Shaffer.

Mr. Jee said he had been able to survive largely because the fame from the show brought in hordes of customers, and because CBS — which owns the building that houses the Sullivan theater, his deli and several other storefronts — had "been fair and good to me over the years."

"I was blessed being in this space, with the exposure from the show, and my landlord, CBS, being good to me," he said. "So I had the best of both worlds."

Mr. Jee became a regular on the show — "Someone told me I've been on more than 200 times," he said — and his deadpan demeanor was a perfect foil for Mr. Letterman's freewheeling teasing.

"I wasn't acting. I was just nervous," said Mr. Jee, who was urged in a series of popular segments to install a frozen drink machine. He did, and the drinks became a big hit.

After a CBS gift shop near the theater closed several years ago, Mr. Jee said, he arranged with the show's licensee to sell "Late Show" merchandise, in a corner of his deli that he calls the David Letterman gift shop. It includes evidence of his own fame: his own branded merchandise, including coffee mugs and T-shirts.

"Dave gave me the kind of advertising I could never have afforded," he said.

His rent had increased substantially over the years, Mr. Jee said, but he chose not to reveal what he pays.

Outside Mr. Jee's on Wednesday, Mr. Shaffer recalled the neighborhood two decades ago.

"It was dark and dead, and it did come to life after we came," he said. "It was fun to be around here all these years and interact with the neighbors."

Regarding Mr. Jee, Mr. Shaffer said he had not tried the sandwich the deli named after him. In fact, he said he had asked Mr. Jee to change the ingredients. "But he said, 'It's selling too well.'"

Mr. Jee said he feared a summer slowdown, but hoped for a rebound, and maybe even another star turn, when Stephen Colbert moves into the theater and takes over the "Late Show" in September. "I might be retiring from show business, but not from the deli business," Mr. Jee said. "I got a ways to go before that."