

Shop in Downtown Lynn? Just do it.

By Beth Bresnahan / The Daily Item | Posted: Wednesday, August 12, 2015 3:00 am

Every year from the time I was in kindergarten through high school, my grandmother and I had a standing date for the last week in August. Grammy Anne and I would walk downtown from our apartment in Marian Gardens, and later from her place in the Harbor Loft building, to pick up my back-to-school clothes.

There was rarely a need to take the bus to the Northshore Shopping Center, or venture to Boston's Downtown Crossing, because Downtown Lynn had it all. In my younger years we'd visit Besse Rolfe and T.W. Rogers for dresses that she loved and I reluctantly wore. As I got a little older and a lot more defiant, I was allowed pick out my own styles. I liked the stores on Union Street — Empire, Lerner, Hoffman's and Randy's, but my favorites were on Munroe Street and we always headed straight there.

If you grew up in Lynn in the '70s, '80s and into the '90s, you likely know that if you didn't go to Pennyworth's on Munroe Street sometime in June to put your sneakers on layaway (my grade school go-tos were Nike Cortez), you'd likely be walking into school in September with your head hung low in a pair of Kangaroos, plastic Saico sneakers from the Wig Shop on Union, or far worse — a scuffed-up pair from last school year. This also rang true for their CB jackets and Levis, along with denim overalls and carpenter pants from Jerry's next door (I was a tomboy who clearly was never getting voted "best dressed" at school).

Inevitably a few items in my layaway haul each year had to be sent back to the racks because my taste exceeded Grammy's limited budget. But she always made sure that I had enough to get by, and also tucked away enough cash in her big black vinyl purse so we could lunch at Klemm's Restaurant. And of course, our day would end sweetly with a piece of Connelly's fudge.

So here it is, mid-August, but about 25 years later. Sadly Grammy Anne and I do not have a date in the coming weeks that is circled on the calendar. All of our favorite haunts have either closed or moved out of the downtown, and she is living in a nursing home a few miles away.



Shopping in Downtown Lynn

The author says she didn't expect to find a pair of her classic Nike Cortez in downtown Lynn, but she did at EbLens on the corner of State and Market.

I'm also now 40 years old, have grown to love designer dresses and heels, and would be ashamed to disclose to Grammy what I paid for them, let alone have the gall to ask her to foot the bill.

I'm guessing that if my grandmother went window shopping on Munroe Street today, she wouldn't recognize much of anything she saw — well, except for me. I'm writing this while sitting in my office at The Item, which ironically is now located in the exact spot where Pennyworth's was. While I've since grown up, not much else about me has changed dramatically since our last shopping date. I take that back; my taste in clothing has. But, really, it has just evolved over time.

The same could be said for Downtown Lynn.

The stores and restaurants that Grammy Anne and I frequented may be gone, but a whole new crop of small downtown businesses have opened in recent years. Most are not marquee names or the usual chains found at the malls, but I encourage you to give them a try. You may find yourself more than pleasantly surprised.

I was when I took a walk last Friday, venturing into several places I'd never realized were here. I didn't expect to find so many unique clothing boutiques, discount stores, beauty salons and barber shops, tattoo parlors, bodegas, and a variety of amazing dining options.

I also didn't expect to find a pair of my classic Nike Cortez — bright white leather with a black swoosh — but I did at EbLens on the corner of State and Market.

There will be no heading back to school for me in a few weeks, but I can't wait to show the new sneakers off to Grammy Anne.

I guess there are some things that just never change.