The essential qualities of a small city’s downtown invariably include the personalities who frequent it or work there. Other parts of town have their own characters, too, but downtown Lafayette has a large and colorful population. There are many characters downtown besides the ones we’ve photographed here. Like Jimmy Cotini, the “How-about-some-garlic-bread-baby?” man who owns Jimmy’s Restaurant. Or Frank and John Gardner, the two bachelor brothers who live on Stewart Street next to the police station and regularly feed a zoo’s worth of stray cats on their front porch. Downtown characters are a kaleidoscopic group of inimitable individuals. They dance to their own tune. Without them, the color of downtown would be gray.

By Katrinna Huggs

Velma Roy and her husband Gerald live in the middle of the Evangeline Thruway. But in the midst of cars rushing by them on either side, the Roys have created a refuge. It’s an outreach ministry and business that does God’s work in Salvation Army style.

“We started out four years ago with two boxes of clothes and food,” says Velma. Since then the RV’s Way and Means ministry has blossomed into an open flea market. Their inventory includes everything you need and don’t need—from bird cages to barbecue pits to brassieres. And it all comes from donors.

For those who can afford to buy, the flea market items are for sale at bargain prices. For those who have no money, every Thursday clothes and shoes are given away. If a poor soul has no place to sleep, the Roys have a bed or two to give away. And if a poor soul has no wedding gown, well the Roys can fix her up right in one of those, too.
Barber Shop on Jefferson Street looks like something straight out of an Andy Griffith rerun. It epitomizes an era gone by when barber shops had real character. Or maybe this kind of character only becomes a business when it’s lasted 67 years.

"Yes, Fernand "Lolo" Broussard, who started the shop and turned 90 last month, still works there. The sign on the mirror behind his barber chair reads "Work Tuesday Friday."

Elmo Amelot, who owns the shop now, figures that between himself and Lolo, they’ve got more than 100 years of experience in the shop. Elmo’s sign on the mirror where he cuts hair reads: "Oil Every Wednesday."

Then there’s Alden Webb, whose barber chair is situated between the other two barbers. His sign reads “Every Day.”

During the Depression haircuts at the City Barber Shop were 20 cents. Today they’re still a good deal at $7. And don’t pass up a City Barber Shop massage for another $7. Just walk in. No appointments. Ever. And none of that Mastercard and Visa business. Payment is almost always in cash. Things aren’t complicated at City Barber Shop. Here the barbers always wear bow ties, and their service is always the finest.

If you pass in front of the downtown Greyhound bus station at any time of the day or night, you’re sure to spot the brick line of Yellow Cabs. They arrive at a constant rate from all points of downtown. They swarm the station on the lookout for someone who just got off the bus or they just land a few minutes until another call dispatches them.

Most taxi drivers downtown are men. But not No. 7. "I’m the only woman in Lafayette with this company," she says. Otherwise known as Joyce Oallien when she’s not behind the wheel, No. 7 works the 3 a.m. to 3 p.m. shift. The Greyhound bus station is a good hangout, she says, because there’s more business on this side of town. When there’s no business, or slow business, she pulls out a Harlequin romance.

"I think most women aren’t taxi drivers because they’re more scared of getting ribbed or hurt or raped," says No. 7, who in 2½ years on the job has never had an incident. She knows why, too. "I think the majority of my clients don’t trust me because they say I have a mean face. Also, I was trained by seven brothers."

If it’s Borden’s, it’s got to be good." And it’s also got to be Ella Meaux. She’s the Borden Ice Cream Store lady. If you don’t recognize her, then you haven’t eaten ice cream in downtown Lafayette in 30 years. That’s as long as Ella has been behind the Borden counter.

She’s been serving up hot fudge sundae and malts and burgundy since way back in ’71 when a scoop was a nickel, a few cookies at Keller’s Bakery around the corner were about the same price and a movie at Jefferson Theatre down the street wasn’t much more.

"Lots of people have left to go off to school and have come back years later and are just amazed to see that nothing has changed here, and especially seeing me here after all these years."

Her favorite treat? "A chocolate frappé."

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Travis isn't his real name, but Travis is what he goes by. He's the artist you see from time to time when you're stuck at a red light at Johnson and Jefferson streets. The hurricane fence on the corner lot across from Borden for Cream Stores is Travis' canvas. His medium is the newspaper clippings and headlines he creatively works into various collages along the fence line.

"Travis reads about five papers a day," says artist George Rodriguez, who has photographed Travis and his work. "He cuts out parts of them and pastes them on fences and telephone poles. Once he decorated a whole dumpster with about 2,000 newspaper clippings. He's very artistic and very erudite. And it all relates to him and to what's happening in the world today. Travis can't remember exactly when he started creating his outdoor collages, but it's probably been close to a decade. "I did it because of guilt and a sense of anger, because I couldn't get people to listen," he says. "It's not happy, like normal art work."

Walk down Jefferson Street most anytime during store hours and you're bound to bump into Rasta. An ex-model, ex-musician, ex- street gang member, he's the hippest sales- man downtown. His work place in New Luck Fashion, a man's shop between Hong Kong Wigs and T.J.'s Cafe on Jefferson Street.

Unlike most salespeople, Rasta spends most of his time outside, hustling passersby to come in and shop for a deal. A cross tattooed between Rasta's eyes is an everlasting reminder of his boyhood initiation rite into a street gang. But an older, more peace-loving Rasta is more into a street prof- it. Once he gets a potential customer off the street and inside the shop, it's generally a done deal. Rasta's favorite line is: "You walk in lookin' like E.T. You walk out lookin' like Billy D."

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is real name is Thomas Holliday, but everyone downtown just knows him as Tom. Just about everyone knows him, too. Tom walks a lot because he's got a lot of time on his hands. He became disabled six years ago after he injured his back working at a restaurant. Now he lives off a disability check—that and collecting aluminum cans. Local businesses like A&O save their cans for Tom. So do friends, like the man on Stewart Street who lives with multitudes of cats and gives Tom all his empty cat food cans.

But the most fascinating way Tom supplements his living is by collecting things that other people treat as junk. Recently he found a trash can printer and sold it for $30 to one of his customers who works with computers. “People amaze me, the things they throw out,” says Tom. “Six years ago, before I was injured, I even found a gallon jug of pennies.”

One day it may be a little ceramic pot that Tom finds and sells to a downtown client. Another day, a cored wooden jewelry box. He’s even peddled a box of Soft & Dry stick deodorant he came across in someone else’s trash pile. While most of us while away the day inside conventional office walls, Tom is out there. And what we overlook or treat as trash, he sees and sees.