

COMMUNITY BUILDER » GHAZALEH ETEZAL

Social enterprise, with a twist

With The StoreFront, a young graphic-design student turns a class project into reality

BY NADJA SAYEJ

There is one storefront unlike any other in Bloorcourt Village. Peek inside the StoreFront Community window at 957 Bloor St. W. and you'll find a papier-mâché mask, black-and-white photos and a coffee cup stuffed with fake flowers.

To the pedestrian casually strolling by, the building's function is a mystery.

"It looks like an art studio," says Pina Rao-Wittersheim, a broker who drives by it daily. "I've always wondered what goes on here."

Unlike most businesses, the StoreFront is a social enterprise – a community-driven business model that would rather see its neighbourhood shine than rake in the big bucks. The window reflects that: The mask and flowers are from the recent Night of Dread parade; the photos are winter shots of Dufferin Park in the 1920s. "It's a blog," says Himy Syed, a self-proclaimed "Torontopreneur" who uses the space, "showing what's going on in the neighbourhood right now."

The StoreFront's director, Ghazaleh Etezal, 22, explains. "It's not a non-profit and it's not an organization," she says. "It's an open rental space and network hub dedicated to building community in whatever form. I want to get people together."

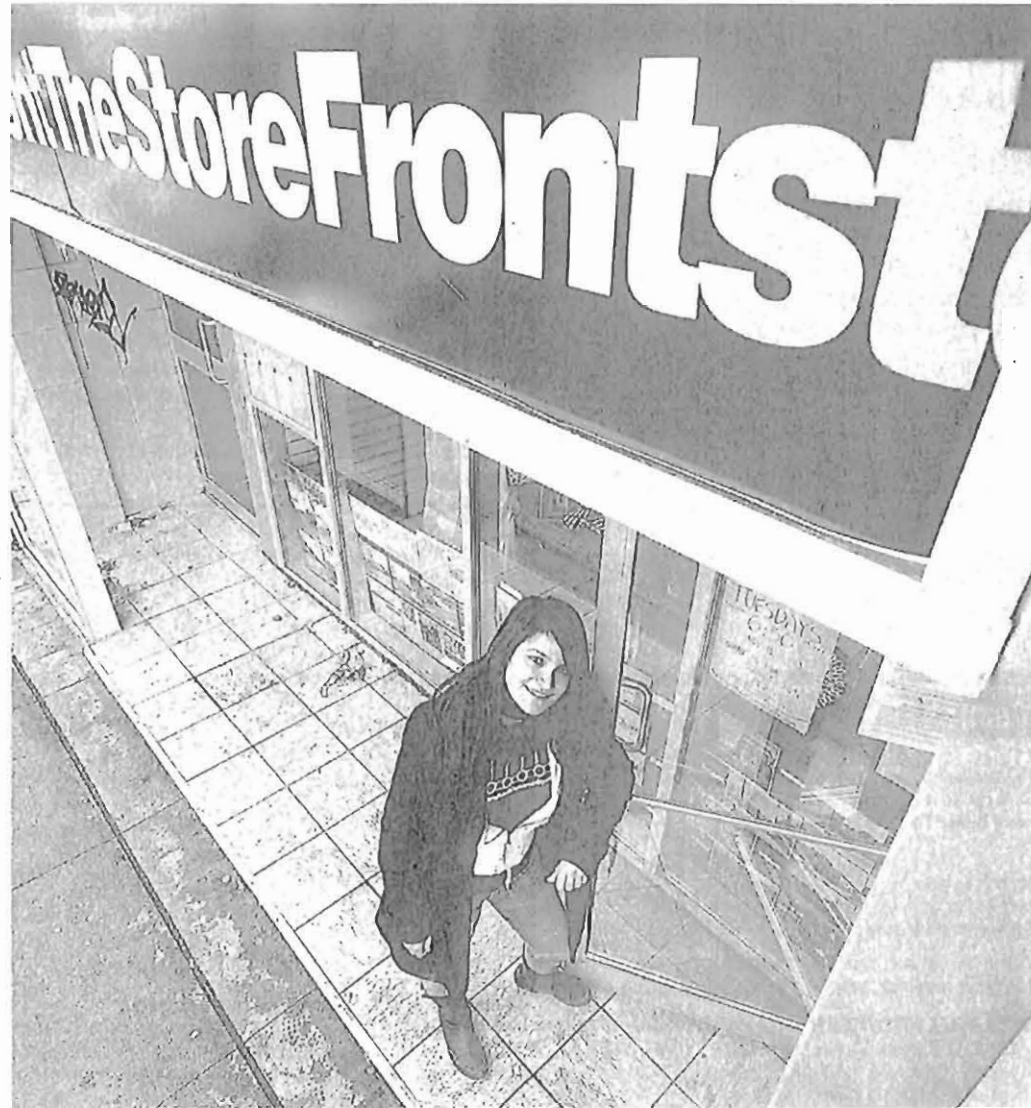
The StoreFront has been a hit at hosting creative events. The garrulous Ms. Etezal led a graffiti walk through colourful alleyways on Sept. 20; just this Monday hosted an Alchemy Art Jam, during which garbage, broken telephones and iPods were tweaked into art.

Paying the rent is another thing. Most of the events here are free to attend and free to host. But that's changing. Come Jan. 1, the rent at the StoreFront skyrockets from \$800 a month to roughly \$3,000.

Since it opened on May 16 as a class project for the Ontario College of Art & Design – where Ms. Etezal was a student at the time – Robert Markovits, the owner of the building, has been generously granting the StoreFront a substantial discount on its rent. But while Mr. Markovits adores Ms. Etezal's idea, he "can't afford to do it forever." (The exact rent price for Jan. 1 has yet to be written in stone. The financial crisis may make the new rent price \$28 per square foot rather than the usual \$30, he said.)

So Ms. Etezal and the neighbourhood are merging forces to keep the StoreFront afloat.

To David Anderson, a local resident and the founder of Clay and Paper Theatre, the StoreFront is a long-overdue way to inject life into Bloorcourt Village, a slightly underwhelming strip between Christie Street and Lansdowne Avenue. A handful of businesses recently opened – Disgrace-



'I want to get people together,' says Ms. Etezal, 22. TIBOR KOLLEY/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

land, Comedy Bar and Saving Gigi café – bringing to the neighbourhood a whiff of the hipster life, but mostly it remains, in Mr. Anderson's words, "underdeveloped and dilapidated, but ripe for improvement. We're trying to find solutions that can [help] local businesses grow."

Dougal Bichan, the programming co-ordinator of the BIG on Bloor Festival, also has high hopes that the StoreFront will revitalize Bloorcourt, which never fully recovered from the opening of the nearby Dufferin Mall in 1956. "[The StoreFront is] for us to bring attention to people and businesses to show good things happen here."

Bruce Hinds, a design professor, brought up the idea for the StoreFront at his interdisciplinary-design class in 2007, as a way for students to trigger change. "Its mandate was to become a storefront 'consultancy,'" Prof. Hinds said.

Ms. Etezal took it on as an independent study project in January. Unlike most design students who are usually glued to their laptops, Ms. Etezal took a little field trip. She wandered into the Christie Ossington Neighbourhood Centre, where the drop-in manager, Tim Hackborn, gave her a tour and introduced her to the future landlord, Mr. Markovits.

That's when she became Bloorcourt's networking queen, stopping into shops al-

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Joe Perketa, Bloorcourt Village Business Improvement Area

most daily, chatting with locals – so much so that now she can't lock the front door of the StoreFront at the end of the night without bumping into at least three neighbours.

At first, Ms. Etezal was more interested in using the location as a venue for meetings. The BIG on Bloor Festival committee, for example, gathered there to plan the first annual street festival held in June. One-on-one chats with local residents garnered requests for youth arts workshops, community gardens and ways to preserve local history.

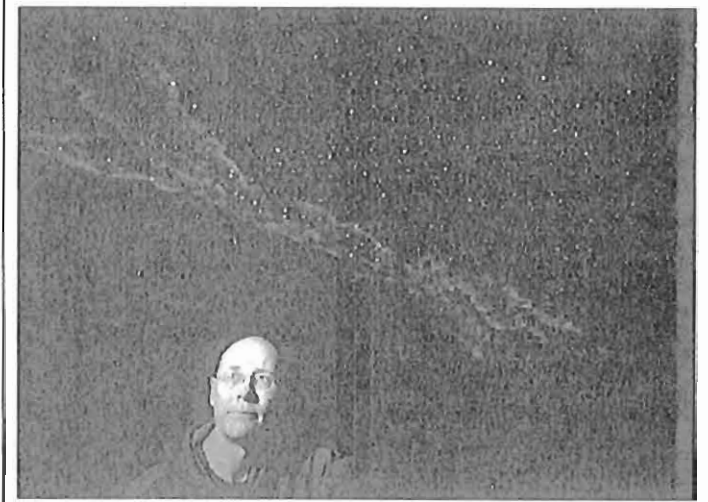
Now that Ms. Etezal has graduated from OCAD, she wants to make the StoreFront a model that will function on its own, a "machine," as she puts it, that could be set up anywhere.

Indeed, other neighbourhoods want in. Clement Wai, a landowner in the Moss Park area, is set on getting a StoreFront started in one of his buildings at Queen Street and Sherbourne Avenue. And Councillor Adam Vaughan has expressed interest about planting a StoreFront in Kensington Market.

Joe Perketa, the vice-chair of the Bloorcourt Village Business Improvement Area, would like to see the StoreFront blossom into an actual business. "I would like to see everything renovated, a little more polished," he said.

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BLOOR CINEMA » LOOK UP, LOOK WAY, WAY UP



Philip Kuntz wants you to see stars. FRED LUM/THE GLOBE AND MAIL

Come for the movie, stay for the astronomy lecture

BY ANTHONY FUREY

While the Bloor Cinema has been doing a lot recently to revamp its image as the cultural hub of the Annex, the most inventive of its attempts is its foray into the planetarium business.

For the past year and a half, patrons of the Bloor have munched popcorn unaware that they were seated underneath an accurate replica of the night sky. Starscape artist Philip Kuntz spent months in 2007 painting about 7,000 luminescent stars on the underside of the theatre's balcony. Finally, under the aegis of Spacetime Star Theatre, Mr. Kuntz is releasing his creation to the city with weekly stargazing sessions every Saturday at midnight.

Last Saturday's inaugural session hosted a healthy mix of students, science geeks and stoners looking up to follow Mr. Kuntz's laser pointer as it traced the outlines of such familiar constellations as Perseus and Cassiopeia.

However, when it comes to the role of the planetarium in society, Mr. Kuntz has his sights set firmly on the ground. He sees the closing, 13 years ago, of the Royal Ontario Museum's McLaughlin Planetarium as a narrow-minded political move that severed students' connection to one of the most elementary forms of science education. As his efforts to lobby for its reopening proved unsuccessful, he decided to create Spacetime Star Theatre. "Every day visitors to the ROM ask where the planetarium is and how they can get into it," Mr. Kuntz said. "The people want it and are willing to pay for it."

He argues that the planetarium, which is currently used as a storage facility and had a short life as a children's museum, was built to stand for 200 years.

"I'm really concerned that the land Sam McLaughlin [the planetarium's namesake] gave to the citizens is going to be turned into condos. Is nothing respected here?"

A self-described "civic artist," the offbeat 57-year-old is a cultural odd-job man, making his keep as a musician, performer

and producer. While his stargazing sessions are committed to presenting the peer-reviewed facts of the sky, he peppers his lectures with mythology, astrology and unidentified flying objects.

Mr. Kuntz sits on the board of GeoSpace Planetarium, an organization that recognizes Toronto as the only major city in the world without a functioning planetarium. The group has devised an ambitious solution. The goal is to build a greenhouse facility on the waterfront that houses a star theatre alongside commercial retail space. If anything can make it happen, this board – including CBC Quirks & Quarks host Bob McDonald and former Ontario cabinet minister Marilyn Churley – can, but Mr. Kuntz sees its \$150-million proposal as a long-term project. Until then, his collaboration with Bloor Cinema will have to suffice.

"It was flight or fight," he says. "I have to have access to things like this, or I don't feel the city is worth living in."

Mr. Kuntz, who gets hired to paint starscapes in people's homes, delved into his own pocket to create the one at the Bloor Cinema.

Aside from the midnight showings, Spacetime Star Theatre offers daytime astronomy sessions to high-school students. Mr. Kuntz, though not a teacher, created the lectures to be harmonious with the provincial curriculum.

So far, several hundred students from Montessori programs and the Toronto District School Board have attended. He is trying to secure public funding to widen the program's accessibility.

It is his belief that the planetarium experience can have a therapeutic effect on restless youth. He refers to the "Mus-koka effect," whereby someone who rarely looks up at the sky experiences a positive emotional response. "The big-sky experience brings them out of their heads, forces them to look out. The planetarium is as necessary as the library."

» Spacetime Star Theatre continues every Saturday at Bloor Cinema at midnight, offering alternating astronomy and astrology lectures. » Special to The Globe and Mail