

## Manhattan Beach News

### Painting business leaving town after three decades

by Carley Dryden

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Things in Manhattan Beach were a lot different 28 years ago when Rick Mirabito secured a lease on a duo of wooden buildings on a dirt lot next to Vons with just a handshake. The town was blue collar and full of small beach bungalows and beach bums.

"When I moved into the shop (on Valley Drive) there were at least four people living out of their vehicles along 10th Place," he said. "We would accommodate them and allow them to use the outhouse. At times I would employ them to help out around the shop. It's come a long way. We cleaned it up a lot."

Over the years, Mirabito put in a new roof, fence, siding, walls and a couple of sheds, got the grass to grow again, brought in gravel, kept the weeds down, repainted often and illuminated the buildings. He also created more parking spaces along 10th Place for the neighborhood.

But soon, those improvements will be a memory, as Vons prepares to expand its parking lot and demolish the old buildings. Mirabito recently moved his Advanced Painting and Rick's Rain Gutters business to 147th Street in Hawthorne.

In the past, the Valley Drive lot had been used to sell Christmas trees, as a paper recycling business and as a garden. As a kid growing up near downtown, Mirabito would sneak through the broken wooden fence and play in the empty lot.

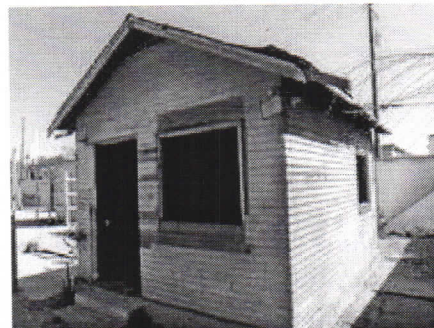
Little did he know it would one day be his office.

After graduating from Mira Costa High School in 1978 and attending El Camino College, a real estate agent friend gave him a painting job and he soon found himself painting full time.

"I painted my way around town," he said of the first years. "I remember I finally had a job big enough to buy a five-gallon bucket of paint. That's a big turning point for painters. I went from a quart to a gallon to multiple five-gallon buckets."

Neighbors soon grew concerned that Mirabito's van was parked in a residential area, so he needed to find a permanent home for his painting and carpentry business. So with a handshake and a smile, Mirabito made a deal with his longtime landlord Pete Ristani, and the lot next to Vons was his.

Although Mirabito's business in the wooden "barn" that resides prominently on Valley Drive has been known as "the paint shop," he doesn't actually sell any paint. He and his employees do exterior and interior painting of single family and multiunit homes, along with carpentry and gutter work.



The historical society is fighting to save a 90-year-old real estate shack on Rick Mirabito's old lot, where he ran his Advanced Painting and Rick's Rain Gutter business. He is leaving town and moving his business to Hawthorne after nearly 30 years.

Since he opened, business has never slowed for Mirabito.

"If you take care of your customers and do quality work, they'll call you back," he said.

Now, Mirabito said, it's time to move on.

Vons, which has owned the property for five years, will be demolishing Mirabito's former business, expanding its parking lot for employees and improving the area with landscaping and new sidewalks.

"I'm happy to see this progress take place," Mirabito said. "It's a great lot to do what they're doing with it."

When neighbors gathered last year to discuss Vons' parking lot plans, especially how they would impact 10th Place residents, Mirabito's business was also mentioned - as an area of blight in an otherwise blossoming downtown.

"I wouldn't call it blight," Mirabito said. "I think I turned it into a leather purse, but not a silk one."

Mirabito said he was never a nuisance in the neighborhood and tried to improve the buildings as best he could.

"Most people accepted it for what it was, an old place not developed to current Manhattan Beach aesthetics," he said. "It's one of the last larger places downtown that needs improvement to bring it up to the nice level that exemplifies Manhattan Beach."

There is one building on the lot that Mirabito and the Manhattan Beach Historical Society are now fighting to save from the demolition - a 90-year-old shack that housed one of the town's first real estate offices. In recent years, Mirabito had used the 12-by-14-foot wooden frame building for storage.

"There were a lot of real estate offices in Manhattan Beach in the early days, the 1920s," said Steve Meisenholder, president of the historical society. "They were these little wooden shacks basically ... sometime before they built Vons, I assume they hooked a chain to (this one) and moved it south to its current location."

Meisenholder is going to talk to the city about relocating the shack to Polliwog Park next to the historic Beach Cottage museum. He still has to solidify how much it will cost to restore and move the building and ensure the task is feasible.

"We want to preserve it because it is an original real estate office," he said. "The other buildings being torn down are not of historical value. We're trying to save only the structure of historical value."

But for Mirabito, all of the buildings will always hold sentimental value even once they're gone.

"I've had a really good run there," he said, adding that he would miss being in the center of his hometown. "Do I have any regrets? I wish I'd bought it long ago, but I'm ready to move on. When one door closes, another one opens up."

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