

## THE MOVABLE BUFFET

## Fame: What's it worth to 'em?

'Pawn Stars' don't let their celebrity status affect business.

RICHARD ABOWITZ

Past the Strip, north up Las Vegas Boulevard amid a stretch of blocks populated by adult stores, tattoo parlors and the like sits the Gold & Silver Pawn Shop. The store stands out on a recent weekend afternoon, because in front there is a rope line of tourists waiting to get inside. These are the fans of "Pawn Stars," a reality show on the History Channel centered on the store that has become a surprising hit and began filming its third season this month.

"The show impacted our lives immediately. It is crazy," Rick Harrison says. He owns and runs the shop with his father and son. "I can't watch the show. I get weirded out."

His son Corey, sitting at a desk in a backroom beneath a framed gold record for Bruce Springsteen, notes: "We were at Bellagio last night for a red carpet." And his father finishes the thought, "And today we are here, because we have to run the shop." They estimate they walk about three red carpets a month now on the Strip. "It is business thing. We have to get our name out there," Rick says.

But years spent living in celebrity-obsessed Vegas have also taught the Harrisons to protect their privacy outside the store, including keeping their wives and minor children off the cable show and red carpets. "We had a talk early on and decided we did not want to end up like the Hogans," Corey Harrison says, referring to a show built around former pro wrestler Hulk Hogan.

One thing that has changed, somewhat distressingly, is that fans constantly interrupt the business of the pawn shop to offer a compliment or ask for a picture. This happens repeatedly as Rick tries to negotiate with a man from Utah over a \$4,000 Winchester rifle. Whether it's stamps or the obscurities of Americana or the history of European firearms, Rick Harrison sounds more like a museum curator discussing his wares than a pawnbroker. He moved to Las Vegas from San Diego with his parents. The Harrisons represent the dreams of so many families who moved here over the years. "My dad rolled into this town in 1981 when I was 16 years old," Rick recalls. "He had 5 grand in his pocket and \$600 a month in Navy retirement." To buy an existing pawn license, even back then, Rick Harrison recalls, cost hundreds of thousands of dollars.

Gold & Silver Pawn, which got its license in 1988, was not an overnight success. Corey Harrison remembers growing up with dinner of English muffins and refried beans some nights. These days, the family owns the entire block the shop is on.

Gold & Silver Pawn got its reputation by dealing in eccentric and odd objects. Rick explains, "If you go to most pawn shops in Las Vegas, they will tell you exactly what they will pay for, say, an iPod. But if you show up with an 1833 ormolu clock, it won't pop up in their computer. They are going to tell you to go to Gold & Silver Pawn, because we buy weird things."

And the television show has made that reputation national. Tourists routinely fly into Vegas with an obscure object to bring to the shop. So just before the man with the Winchester rifle was a couple from New York, fans of the show, with a family heirloom: a collection of field passes for American League baseball games circa 1939-43.

On display in the store are works by Picasso, Dali and Pop artist Steve Kaufman. "I probably have 15 to 20 Dalis in the store," Rick says. "The secret to buying Dali, never buy one made after 1970" when the artist's agents flooded the market.

The shop's Vegas collection has hats that include vintage showgirl headdresses and the Stetson worn by legendary gambler and casino owner Benny Binion.

Still, the bread and butter of Gold & Silver remains that of any local pawnshop: "Our typical customer is a local guy who needs the money to get by for the week," Corey says.

Pawn shops in Vegas, of which there are about 50, are usually stable businesses, according to the Harrisons. Yet the collapse of the economy has caused variation. As construction projects shut down all over town, Gold & Silver Pawn kept buying tools from laid-off workers. According to Corey, "Hitachi Nail Guns were as good as gold in this city for years. I had 300 on pawn, and then when they stopped building houses in Vegas I wound up with 300 Hitachi Nail Guns that I can't give away."

Still, the Harrisons see Vegas as the place for those with a dream who are willing to work. "For 40 years you could get a job here and within a year set yourself up very nicely," Corey says. And if your particular Vegas dream doesn't work out, you can always raise some quick cash at Gold & Silver Pawn Shop.

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**CASH IN HAND:** Rick Harrison, left, and son Corey star in the reality show "Pawn Stars," set in Las Vegas.