

She's nails *Las Vegas Weekly*

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by John Katsilometes



As with any remodeling project, this one begins with a handful of nails.

And Paula Sadler knows nails. They are her livelihood.

As owner of A Harmony Nail Spa in the Commercial Center—rather, the District at the Commercial Center, the project's new name—she spends much of her time painting tiny artworks on weather-battered fingernails. But today her work is far more expansive. Sadler's artistry extends outside, to the makeover of a lifetime. She is bent on remaking the 26-acre parcel that, for 52 years, has been home to the more than 200 legendarily diverse businesses that make up the Commercial Center, the city's stoically square retail and nightlife haven near East Sahara and Maryland Parkway.

"We were painting a curb in the parking lot in this really hot red, and it was just like painting nails," Sadler says during an interview earlier this month at her cozy salon, which is filled with handmade furniture and decorated in the spirit of a hobbit habitat, with a eucalyptus tree and meditation cove among the amenities. "I can't help but manicure areas."

An acutely focused 31-year-old educated in beauty care and fashion design, whose on-the-job business training consisted of a short stint as an assistant manager of a Kentucky Fried Chicken restaurant, Sadler has organized and is president of the eight-month-old District at Commercial Center Business Association. That title was determined by a group of 10 business owners during a meeting in March, and Sadler does not foresee any discernible confusion with the name of another pedestrian mall in the Las Vegas Valley, the District at Green Valley Ranch.

"There are a lot of 'district' names out there already. We'll have our own identity," says Sadler, who has already arranged for bus-stop signage and pamphlets bearing that name and has launched the group's official website, www.thedistrictatcc.com. "We are creating a new image."

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Fifteen businesses have joined the District at Commercial Center Business Association, which longtime business owners say is the first formal effort to organize a dues-paying business organization in the history of the Commercial Center. Members pay an annual membership fee of \$600. The crew meets monthly at one of the Commercial Center haunts, the Las Palmas Mexican Restaurant, to socialize and haughtily talk of their vision of what the center might

become. At this point, Sadler's objectives are admittedly modest; hers is the grassroots, polar-opposite counter to the multibillion-dollar renovation projects in process on the Strip. As is the case with most small projects, when the association has a dime, it spends 10 cents. It's mostly been cleaning up trash, repainting curbs and walls and furnishing security on weekend nights.

"All of the things a small business needs to attract customers, we are doing," Sadler says. "It's a lot of work, yes."

But to fully appreciate the task facing the District at Commercial Center Business Association, it helps to first understand the wildly diverse makeup of the Commercial Center itself. This is no ordinary strip mall. And if you spend even a single afternoon touring the complex, it becomes evident that this sometimes cosmic but headstrong woman with an eye for beauty and a brain for business might well be the ideal individual to herd the cats, and all other species of wily small-business owners, who make up the Commercial Center community. A total of 15 countries are represented in the vast array of businesses that take up nine buildings ringing the parking lot and stationed in the core of the outdoor mall. About all they have in common is their zip code, and as you trek through any of the larger complexes, such as New Orleans Square, where the bare-bones, 500-square-foot Commercial Center Business Association office recently opened, you feel overwhelmed by the sheer volume of tucked-away ethnic businesses. The Korean culture alone is represented by more than a dozen retailers, most notably the Jin Mee Korean BBQ & Karaoke restaurant and nightclub, which is being remodeled inside and out in marble and granite.

Within walking distance near the entrance on East Sahara Avenue (one of only four entrances into Commercial Center) is a veritable cultural hodgepodge of dissimilar businesses, many of which have been in operation at the Commercial Center for decades and are inherently familiar to most longtime Las Vegans. A sampling: The Cue Club pool hall (with 39 tables, the city's largest pool hall, and also its oldest, having opened in 1964); Lotus of Siam (which Gourmet magazine writer Jonathan Gold has called the best Thai restaurant in North America); Serge's Showgirl Wigs (the city's foremost scalp-enhancement emporium, with more than 2,000 wigs in stock); the Spotlight Lounge (a gay-friendly alternative club that seems to benefit from the pedestrian traffic entering from East Sahara); John Fish Jewelers (the longtime family-owned jewelry shop that has been operating at the center since 1976); Tiffany Cleaners (another family operation, which dates to 1970); Kool Kollektables (home to thousands of vintage comic books and related memorabilia); and, anchoring a stretch of adult businesses around the center's northeast corner, the vaunted Green Door adult social club (which is targeted to sexually adventurous practitioners and even the casual spectator).

Evidence of how those cultures blend at the Commercial Center was apparent earlier this month when the Cue Club, which had closed its kitchen to comply with the statewide anti-smoking ordinance, leased that space to an Ethiopian family, which has since opened a small café connected to the pool hall.

The name of the place is Aynée's Café. The fare, of course, is Ethiopian; the pool sharks rarely are.

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But all of that rich heritage can be lost in the magnitude of the Commercial Center.

It is an outdoor mall, certainly, but not the type where window shoppers enjoy leisurely afternoon strolls. Instead, it is a thousand-parking-space beast, more resembling a small airport than a shopping mall. The center is further dogged by its largely deserved reputation as a somewhat seedy, unkempt, unsafe expanse populated by homeless people and ne'er-do-wells who use the big lot as party spot or place to crash. A group dubbed by some business owners as simply the "Car Club," which had no other apparent function but to show off street rods and blast bass-driven dance music, used the lot as a regular weekend meeting ground (that scene did nothing to help business at Lotus of Siam, to name one restaurant). As recently as this spring, a dozen or so abandoned vehicles sat comatose in the parking area before tow trucks were summoned; John Fish Jewelers co-manager Steve Fish had taken a somewhat nostalgic view of an old Mercedes Benz until it was finally hauled away.

"It was out there for weeks. Nice car, actually," Fish says. "Then one day, it was gone."

That was not the only vehicular issue in the lot. RV owners had mistakenly (or, maybe, intentionally) felt that the ample surface could be used as an overnight rest stop. Some vacationers just plugged into the nearest outlet and enjoyed the unique view of the Strip to the west. It was not uncommon to observe the sad sight of a homeless person approaching a power-pirating Winnebago, offering to Windex the whitewalls for spare change. There was crime—in October 2002, two men visiting from New Mexico were shot and killed in an early-morning incident; one business

manager remembers, years ago, a man being set aflame on a median near Lotus of Siam and the Cue Club. Business owners long accepted prostitution and drug deals as part of the unique Commercial Center landscape.

Thus, providing security was the association's first objective. Though the parking lot itself is owned by Clark County (and has been since 1962, in a weird deal in which the county paid \$1 for the parcel and has been responsible for the surface area of the lot ever since), the center is considered a private operation and, as such, the county requires that it provide its own security presence. Sadler has used association funds to hire a security company to patrol the area on weekend nights.

"We have our own staff handle security over here," Green Door manager Jeff Lutz says, "but I know that looking across the parking lot there is a big difference. The patrol has really helped."

Sadler also organized an Easter Sunday effort to sweep up and collect all of the garbage that had collected on the property, tall mounds of trash that actually blocked entrances of some businesses until it was carted off. Then she repainted all of the public areas in the parking lot, including all of the light poles, curbs and graffiti-blighted walls. Now she is busy pricing artificial turf, which she plans to install on each of the dozens of medians throughout the center.

"I am learning a lot about the price of fake grass," Sadler says. "But it will make a huge difference. It will look a lot more welcoming than just this big, drab area we have had."

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Drab would be a good way to describe the county's view of the Commercial Center. Former County Commissioner Myrna Williams once suggested razing the place, but over time—owing to the history of the center—determined it was worth salvaging. In 2003, the Clark County Redevelopment Agency released a report that included the Commercial Center in one of the three commercial areas targeted for redevelopment to be initiated by the county. All of the areas were listed in the commission's blight study, a term that sent shudders through Commercial Center. Blight is nothing to strive for.

"The thought was, we need to do something to redevelop that area," says Chris Giunchigliani, Myrna Williams' successor on the County Commission. Giunchigliani lives about five blocks from Commercial Center. She has her dry cleaning done at Tiffany Cleaners. She purchased her wedding ring from John Fish Jewelers. She is also the commissioner whose district—District E—encompasses the Commercial Center. "The Redevelopment Agency reviewed three small parcels, to see how it would work."

Two high-rise projects were planned. "Neither got off the ground," Giunchigliani says. "Every project we have had never got going."

Over time, high-rises might well throw shadows across the big lot. But until then, Giunchigliani says she welcomes the burgeoning association.

"In the last three years, we have begun to have some consolidation there. There were originally 56 different property owners over there. Now, I think, there are 22 or 23, and a quarter of them are brand new, so what is going on there is very healthy," she says. "It gives us a sounding board, an opportunity to help them improve the property."

What if the county's redevelopment plan does get off the ground?

"We could relocate businesses temporarily and re-create the space for those types of amenities, the small businesses that complement redevelopment," she said. "We're trying to do things to help businesses. Anything that can help promote improvement, we support."

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Well, not everyone is supportive. Kool Kollektables owner Karl Vetter has no plans to join the association. Requiring members to pay dues is the chief reason. In 2000, just after he moved in to the center, Vetter organized a volunteer group to clean up the center. "I don't have a clue what [Sadler] is doing," he says. "We spent years trying to clean up

this neighborhood, and I got a group to do things for free and was pretty successful." Some Commercial Center proprietors are waiting to see just how far Sadler can carry her plans.

"She seems to be making strides," Serge's Showgirl Wigs manager John Gigalotti says. "She's definitely working hard, but we're taking a wait-and-see approach with this." Cue Club manager Julie Nogiec says she is leaving the decision to formally join the organization to her father, club owner Henry Nogiec. "I support her, but in the end I'm not making that decision," she says.

Beyond the spruce-up work she has already initiated, Sadler has a stack of plans that range from likely to far-fetched. She hopes to install a Welcome to Fabulous Las Vegas-style sign, which would be flanked by large plants (or small trees) and a pair of directory signs, at the entrance on East Sahara Avenue. She speaks enthusiastically of an international art garden displayed on the center's medians, which would pay tribute to all 15 countries represented at the Commercial Center and showcase the works of UNLV art students or members of the arts-district community.

But these ideas are concepts that exist only as colorful, Sharpie-sketched renderings. Sadler has not yet reached out to UNLV (but says she plans to). Such requests for student-crafted artwork are commonplace at the university, which is careful to review each overture and is not always swift to partner in such private projects. Enlisting support from the local arts community, too, is going to take some work. Interim Contemporary Arts Collective president Wes Myles, who has been a key figure on the local arts scene for more than 20 years, has not heard a word about the plans for upgrades at the Commercial Center. The CAC is easily the city's largest arts organization, with between 700 and 1,000 Las Vegas artists as members.

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But even with many of her plans far from realization, Sadler deserves an even chance to make something of the new District. She can certainly claim it as part of her own past. Her business is just across the parking lot from where her education in the beauty field began, Rollers Beauty School, a now-defunct business whose sign is visible from the A Harmony Spa entrance. Sadler started at Rollers (which went under, without warning, about six months ago) and spent five years finishing her schooling. At one point she borrowed \$800 from a friend to wrap up her coursework and take her beauty-license test. She moved from salon to salon before taking a chance with A Harmony. She opened the salon in August 2004, and today is among the more well-known figures in the Commercial Center community. So far, she has made the most of her surroundings.

At Tiffany Cleaners, where Judy Del Rossi has had a front-row seat for all of the openings and closings at Commercial Center for more than 30 years, mentions of Sadler spark a smile.

"For someone to take the time and have the initiative to improve this area, it can only help," says Del Rossi, whose father, Ed Germano, founded the business. "Just cleaning up the trash and painting, the little things, do mean something here."

Del Rossi recalls her husband, Dan, calling to her from the back of the business one afternoon about a year ago.

"He says, 'Judy, what's going on out there? Someone is painting our wall,'" Del Rossi says. "We went out there and it was Paula, painting over the graffiti on the wall that faces out toward Sahara. I mean, most of us don't even have the time to run our own businesses, and here she is, painting over the graffiti at our business."

Then Del Rossi adds a sentiment shared by nearly everyone who wants to see the Commercial Center survive as something other than blight: "More power to her."

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