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Up and down the Deuces: new businesses, new hope

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NNB Student Reporters

ST. PETERSBURG – When Mac Arthur was a teenager, he and his friends liked to gather at Jesse Henderson’s sundries store on 22nd Street S and Ninth Avenue.

It “used to be a soda pop shop,” he said. “It is where we used to bring our girlfriends to hang out and dance.”

Arthur, now 60, said he has lived in the Midtown area for years. “I grew up here. I attended what is now John Hopkins Middle School and Gibbs High School.”

When he turned 18, he said, he left and joined the military “because the biggest issue in Midtown was that there weren’t any opportunities for young black men at the time.”

The soda pop shop is gone now, like virtually all the old businesses. But when Arthur stopped to shop at a small grocery on 22nd Street earlier this month, he noted signs of change up and down the street, which locals still call “the Deuces.”

“There are a lot of businesses opening up around here, and hopefully it will change the area for the better,” said Arthur.
The newest business is Deuces BBQ at 911 22nd St. S. It opened April 15 in one of four buildings that entrepreneurs Elihu and Carolyn Brayboy are restoring.

Time was when barbecue was a fixture on the Deuces. For years, John “Geech” Black served up barbecue with his special, secret sauce from a stand on 22nd Street and Eighth Avenue.

Geech’s closed in the early 1980s, however, and Deuces BBQ owners Patrick “PT” Collins and Kevin Egulf hope to resume the tradition.
“One of the really unique things about Deuces BBQ is that we use pecan chips to smoke all of our meat,” said restaurant manager Tim Richardson. “That isn’t typical, and it makes for a great tasting product.”

Deuces BBQ serves barbecue chicken, baby back ribs, spare ribs and pulled pork. It is open daily from 11 a.m. to 8 p.m.
Two doors north of Deuces BBQ is Chief’s Creole Café, which opened last year in a building that once housed Sidney Harden’s grocery store and the Washington Beer Garden.

The Brayboys, who grew up in Midtown and remember when 22nd Street was the vibrant main street of the black community, own this building, too. They also run the restaurant, which features the nickname of Elihu Brayboy’s take-charge mother – Chief – and some of her Louisiana recipes.
Diners at Chief’s can choose between the tastefully appointed dining room and the courtyard outside.
One of the Brayboys’ first tenants was Carla Bristol, who opened Gallerie 909 at 909 22nd St. S in April 2014. The gallery showcases the work of African-American artists, and the exhibits rotate every few weeks.

Bristol has made her cozy shop more than a gallery. There are impromptu musical sessions, photo shoots, wine tastings and spoken-word performances.
Up the street, at 642 22nd St., is another restaurant. Sylvia’s Queen of Soul Food, which opened in November 2013, is an affiliate of the famous Sylvia’s in Harlem. Like its namesake, it serves home-style soul food. It is open six days a week, with a jazz brunch on Saturday and a gospel Sunday brunch.
Above Sylvia’s is the Manhattan Casino, which in its heyday hosted everything from school proms, civic club meetings and society teas to performances by black entertainers like Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington who were barred from whites-only venues.

The Manhattan closed in 1968 and for many years stood vacant. The city eventually bought and restored it, and the new Manhattan opened in October 2011. It promises “affordable elegance in the heart of St. Petersburg” for meetings, banquets, special occasion parties and wedding receptions.

For years, residents of Midtown complained that the neighborhood lacked a grocery store. That meant people had to shop at higher-
priced convenience stores or find transportation to a full-services
grocery outside the neighborhood.

In 2005, Midtown finally got a Sweetbay Supermarket in a
shopping center that the city spent $7 million to assemble at 22nd
Street S and 18th Avenue. It was named Tangerine Plaza. To the
dismay of residents and city officials, Sweetbay abruptly pulled out
in early 2013.

But Walmart put a Neighborhood Market in the space in 2014,
bringing an estimated 100 jobs. The shopping center is now called
Midtown Plaza.

St. Petersburg College has offered classes at 1048 22nd St. S since
2003. But on Aug. 1 it will cut the ribbon on a new three-story, $15
million Midtown Center at 1300 22nd St. S that will quadruple the
space and serve far more students.

The college has also bought a gym and community center across
the street. It intends to establish a community outreach center there.

Earlier this month, workers were putting the finishing touches on
the building’s exterior and installing desks and furniture in six
regular classrooms, three computer labs, two science labs, a career
center and a bookstore.

The building is named for the late Douglas L. Jamerson Jr., a
Midtown native who served as a state legislator and state
commissioner of education.
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In recent years, artists have discovered Midtown. Now at least 200 of them are working in studios sprinkled around the northern part of the area.

Long-empty warehouses that offered abundant space and cheap rent were the initial attraction. Now a nonprofit organization of artists in the Warehouse Arts District has bought six old buildings at the intersection of 22nd Street S and Fifth Avenue that it intends to turn into studio space with reasonable rent.

The president of the nonprofit is Mark Aeling, a sculptor who moved his MGA Sculpture Studio from St. Louis to Midtown in 2005. His studio provides distinctive sculpture pieces to clients all over the country.

Here, Charlotte Chieco is working on a sculpture of Benjamin Franklin for an educational exhibit in Discovery Park of America in Union City, Tennessee.
The northern flank of Midtown is also home to several craft breweries. They are a five-minute drive from downtown and have become favorite haunts for beer enthusiasts.

3 Daughters Brewing at 222 22nd St. S claims to be the largest craft brewery in St. Petersburg. The brew house is open seven days a week. On tap are 14 beers including Beach Blonde Ale and Bimini Twist IPA.
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