



When seven properties that make up the downtown core of a tiny Shenandoah Valley town were put up for auction, the fear was that a village's heart – alive since 1761 – was about to be cut out. Turns out something quite different came to pass.

BY SUE EISENFELD

THIS WAS SUPPOSED to be a story about loss.

When I heard that a large swath of historic Strasburg, located in Virginia's Shenandoah Valley – including an 1825 manor, the former Museum of American Presidents, and what's billed as the largest antique emporium in Virginia – would be sold at auction to the highest bidder, I thought folks would talk wistfully about time passing and the ruthlessness of change.

I assumed that lifetime residents who remembered “when” would mourn days gone by. It seemed a given that the town would be nervous about what outsider

would come in, and how the sale would disrupt the place that 6,200 souls had come to call home since its founding in 1761.

Above all, it seemed the descendants of the town's benefactor and owner of the three acres of property for sale, Leo M. Bernstein, a Washington, D.C. banker and investor who fell in love with the area, began buying real estate there in the 1960s, and built the town into “the Antique Capital of Virginia,” would be devastated to lose their grip on the empire he built.

But that is not the story that wanted to be told.

When I drove into town for the auction, passing

Downtown Strasburg, from left: The Great Strasburg Emporium, largest building at the auction and the only one that didn't sell as it did not meet the reserve price of about \$865,000; the Museum of American Presidents sold for \$160,000; the brick building and log buildings, which house the Heirloom Emporium, sold as one for \$200,000.

by the typical edge-of-town chain hotels and gas stations, rows of new vinyl-sided townhomes and a huge empty lot once planned for commercial development but abandoned due to the recession, I couldn't help but think that Strasburg could suffer the same viral infection of characterless big box retailers that most of America is succumbing to; that some corporate entity could swoop up the entire block of properties with no concern for the town's charm or history; that it could tear down the gingerbread front porch of the historic Cayton House, with its wide-plank wood floors and stone walls, or oust the Heirloom Emporium, the largest Civil War costuming business

in Virginia, and build a completely new Strasburg with the same homogeneous, vanilla template we see everywhere else.

Perhaps I have become too jaded, living in Northern Virginia, where many of the oldest businesses have been shuttered to make way for the big guns that can pay higher rents. The people in Strasburg didn't seem afraid of what might come. “Life goes on here,” one 90-year-old resident said.

AT THE JULY AUCTION, held in a back room of the historic Hotel Strasburg, which Bernstein once owned and refurbished back to its

Victorian Age elegance, six individuals from Virginia and Maryland bought six individual properties.

A female duo bought an empty retail building and plans to relocate their Strasburg home & garden shop there.

The former president's museum was snapped up by a man who plans to use the building to "forward Strasburg's antiques tradition."

The Cayton House buyer intends to begin working on his property by fixing it up so it looks nicer from the road.

A local developer who owns some of the abandoned land on U.S. 11 bought Leo M. Bernstein's 14-room former residence for either commercial or residential uses, and he professes a love of antiques, old houses, and quaint Strasburg itself, where he spent his summers as a child visiting his mother's family.

What will happen to The Great Strasburg Antique Emporium is unknown, as the place did not sell at auction. How someone will use the retail

"He believed in ordinary people. He wanted to make them extra-ordinary." Ami Aronson

lot that's the site of the old home & garden shop is anyone's guess. And the fate of the co-joined brick and log building – which once served as a brothel and then a hospital but that now showcases antiques, like Victorian tussie-mussies (hand-held vases), and a showroom of 19th-century garments sold for Civil War reenactments, balls, and weddings, such as corsets, work dresses, gowns, blue and grey battle garb (folks here "cross-dress"), cavalry boots, and men's all-cotton drawers – is still to be seen.

Together, the seven parcels once owned by Bernstein – a history buff, a real estate "deal junkie," and an unabashed believer in the supernatural, who once created the Jeane Dixon Museum and Library in Strasburg to celebrate the clairvoyant who famously predicted the JFK assassination – will not become one large faceless conglomerate. But what it will become exactly, only a psychic could say.

WHICH MAKES THIS really a story about legacy.

When Bernstein began investing in Strasburg, there wasn't much around. Lifetime-resident Suzanne Matthews remembers only bars. "Keep on walking," her Daddy used to tell her when she was a kid, of the undesirable area that Bernstein came to own.

"He built [Strasburg] up from the ground," she says. "He changed the atmosphere here."

"We never dreamed anyone would do anything like this for us," one 88-year-old resident of Strasburg

says of Bernstein's revitalization.

"Bernstein put this town on the map," remarks Anna Belle Winkfield, 90. "He loved this town. We saw him as our benefactor."

Grandson of an immigrant from Lithuania, with a particular affinity for the Shenandoah Valley and all aspects of Americana, Bernstein believed that "a banker is more than just a man who handles money," according to his obituary two years ago. "Next to a psychiatrist, he fills an emotional need people have – an emotional financial need."

Townspersons and relatives recalled how he loved helping people start new businesses and build communities. "He believed in ordinary people," his granddaughter Ami Aronson says. "He wanted to make them extra-ordinary."

In that sense, Bernstein came to Strasburg with a vision, and he'll be leaving Strasburg with a vision too: all the money from the auction benefits the philanthropic Bernstein Family Foundation, which he founded in 1952. Its mission is to invest in people and ideas, in the areas of American democracy, arts and culture and Jewish causes.

"We feel this is the best way to preserve his legacy," says Aronson, the managing director of the foundation.

ON THE DAY OF THE AUCTION, though not all of the buyers knew exactly what they would do with their new properties, they were thrilled with their bargains. Auctioneer Jason Dolph of the Chartwell Group talks about the sale as "rejuvenation"; as an opportunity for "new hands" and a "new vision."

"Something will happen here," he says. "And something is good" – as several of the properties are run-down and vacant.

And so, in the end, what's really for sale here is the opportunity to be the next Leo M. Bernstein, to find new ways to do good – for the town, for the people, and for what endures after you're gone.

The Jewish tradition, which is Bernstein's heritage, subscribes to eight degrees of giving, ranging from the first – giving charitably but reluctantly, a gift of the hand but not the heart – to the eighth: anticipating people's needs and assisting the reduced fellow man, either by a considerable gift, or a loan, or by teaching him a trade, or by putting him in the way of business so that he may earn an honest livelihood.

"This is the highest step and the summit of charity's golden ladder," the philosopher Maimonides once said.

In Strasburg, then, where Bernstein no doubt would be thrilled to have helped six buyers get the deal of their lives, paving the way for some new venture, the question is: Who will be the next to reach that mountaintop?" ❧