

With one dime at a time RPC gift shop breaks even

By Teresa A. Parsons
Associate editor

The LILAC Friends Gift Shop is one of those rare stores where you can still buy penny candy.

More unusual still is the fact that most customers visit the shop expressly to buy bubble gum or caramels or mints — quite often a dime's worth or less at a time. Nevertheless, the shop — located in the lobby of the Rochester Psychiatric Center on Elmwood Avenue — last month celebrated three years of break-even operation, taking in nickels and dimes that have totaled more than \$5,400 in sales during the past several months.

The figures are good news to patients, for whom the shop represents a tiny island of normalcy in an otherwise disordered world.

"Here, they act like customers, not patients," said shop manager Mary Horihan. "They do have problems — sometimes they're impatient — but generally they are very polite. We're very much appreciated."

So important has the gift shop become to its patrons that when a lack of volunteers forced a cutback in hours several years ago, more than 100 RPC patients signed a petition asking that the shop's previous schedule be reinstated.

As a result, the shop hired Mary Horihan, its first formal employee, to serve as paid, part-time manager.

Horihan began volunteering as a clerk two years ago after reading a *Courier-Journal* article announcing the shop's opening. "I had had experience with patients with mental illness, and I was in-

terested in that kind of work," she explained. "It also seemed like a good opportunity to learn about buying and merchandising."

Trial and error were Horihan's primary teachers, since the gift shop is the first and only such operation in any New York state-run psychiatric hospital, according to RPC officials.

As the LILAC Friends Gift Shop's name attests, it is a cooperative venture among several agencies. The hospital supplied a renovated space in its lobby. The Friends of RPC, a hospital auxiliary group, lent the shop its corporate identity and provided business expertise and financial backing. Catholic Family Center, through its LILAC program (Life in Institutions, Loving and Caring), has supplied day-to-day management and volunteers to staff the shop.

LILAC volunteers, who visit RPC residents on a regular basis, were the first to suggest opening a shop where they could purchase gifts for patients. Although intended primarily to provide a service to RPC volunteers, staff and particularly to patients whose chances to shop for personal items and gifts might otherwise be limited, the shop has demonstrated therapeutic benefits as well, according to Dr. Martin Von Holden, RPC's executive director. "It's turned out to be very much of a rehabilitation program, which it was not originally intended to be," he said.

"It's a learning experience for patients to be able to make choices, to realize that they have a certain amount of money to spend ... and it's up to them how they spend it," explained Lucy Dechaine, who as head of Catholic Family Center's min-



Judy Sanchez

Volunteer Mary Joan Kruppenbacher helps Mike Thomas, laundry manager at the Rochester Psychiatric Center, with a purchase at the LILAC Friends Gift Shop.

istry to the disabled, oversees the shop's day-to-day operation.

Since patients' spending money is limited to an average of \$10-\$15 per week, the shop's inventory remains low-cost, including health-and-beauty items such as shampoo and makeup, novelties ranging from mugs and stuffed animals to inexpensive jewelry and brightly colored pencils, greeting cards priced from 29 to 69 cents, bandanas, winter hats and gloves, and inexpensive radios. The highest-priced item in the shop is a \$12 watch.

At first, Friends of RPC board member Dan Saperstone recalled, "we stocked (the shop) like a CVS." But organizers quickly discovered that many such items were too

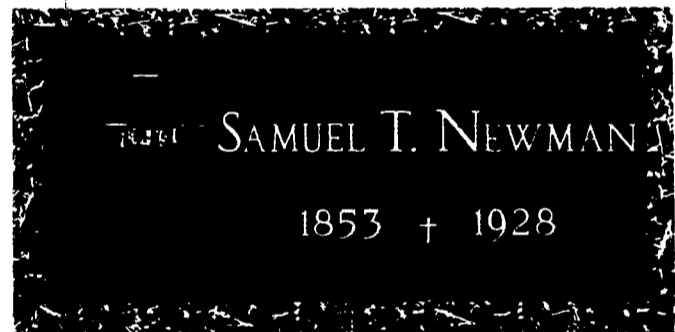
expensive for patients, so they reduced prices by offering such alternatives as travel-size samples.

Despite two years of experience, deciding what patients will buy remains a challenge for Horihan, who chooses stock for the store and staffs it most afternoons. One week, she may sell out of watches. The next week, when a new shipment of watches arrives, they may not draw a single inquiry.

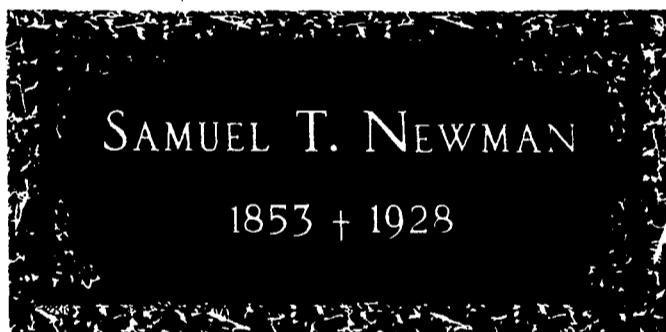
"There's absolutely no rhyme or reason for anything," she said. "I read somewhere that you should buy a few things that you like, a few that you feel impartial to, and lots of things you don't like, because

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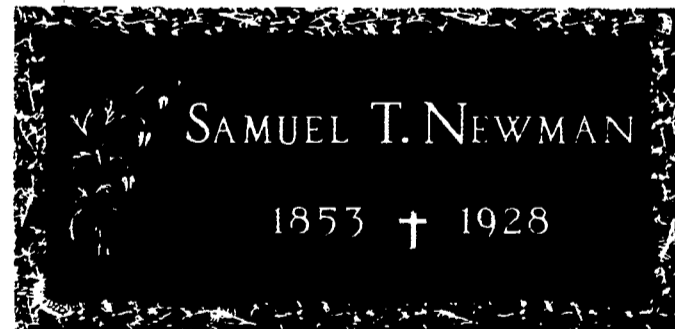
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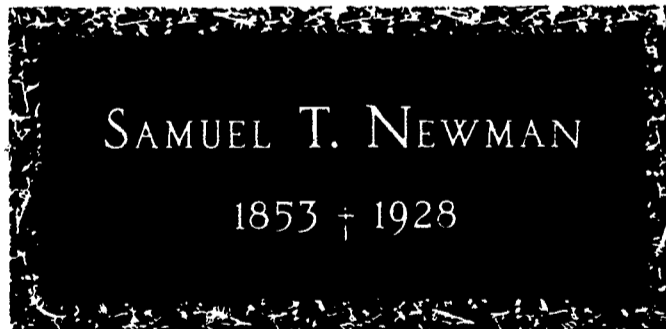
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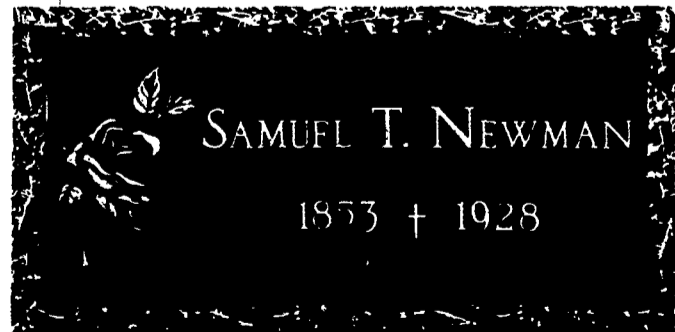
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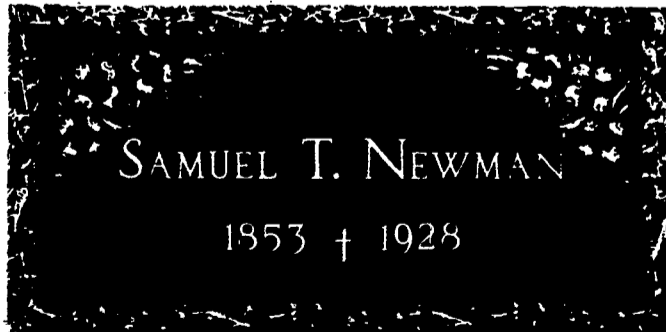
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