

## Former employee to reopen Neumann's Food Store

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THOMAS DOYLE - Victoria Advocate

Sometimes memories live again.



Thomas Doyle/Victoria Advocate

Carlos Balli, who plans to reopen Neumann's Food Store & Meat Market in June, looks up from examining a piece of equipment in the meat department where he started his grocery career in 1975. The store closed in 2001 when proprietor Fred Neumann retired.

Neighbors on the south side of Victoria still fondly remember the old Neumann's Food Store & Meat Market almost five years after it closed in late 2001.

For more than 50 years the store at the southwest corner of Juan Linn and Laurent streets was a neighborhood fixture.

And now, a kid from the neighborhood and a former employee, Carlos Balli, plans to reopen it as a neighborhood store in June. It will have the same name as before.

He started his 27-year career in the grocery business as a teenager behind the meat counter there.

Others have fond memories of the store as well.

As a child, Martina Martinez would go to the store with a list of groceries to buy for her mother. It was a place where neighbors met, and people went to see their friends who worked there, she said.

Theresa Tolbert, a customer for more than 30 years, remembered going to the store as a child and sending her own children there.

Balli recently purchased the store from former proprietor Fred Neumann.

"This side of town needs that little grocery store," Balli said. "It's a landmark here in Victoria."

Balli grew up right around the corner from the store. His brother and father also worked there at one time or another.

"This is almost a lifelong dream, ... being able to get this place," Balli said. And now that he has it, he plans to "bring it into the 21st century."

The 8,000-square-foot store at 1507 E. Juan Linn St. is undergoing extensive renovations including a new floor, new coolers and a new front to give it a cleaner appearance, he said.

The renovations will also add a restaurant dubbed "Poor Folks Eatery," that will serve lunch specials, and such dishes as hamburgers and breakfast taquitos.

The market will retain the full service meat section, including the sausage ground and smoked in the store that gained quite a following in the past, Balli said.

"I'm going to be using the same recipe," said Mike Neumann, meat market manager and son of the previous owner. The younger Neumann made the sausage during the previous life of the store.

Much of the original equipment is still in the store and in good working order.

News of the reopening has created excitement in the neighborhood.

"It's great. I can't wait," Tolbert said.

Another neighbor, James Estrda, said, "I'll be in there as soon as it opens."

The risk of opening his own grocery store is somewhat scary, said Balli, who has also worked for Dick's in Victoria and most recently worked as grocery department manager for the H-E-B in Port Lavaca.

The success or failure of the business will depend upon how well the store achieves "old fashioned personalized customer service," he said.

"If there is something we don't carry, we'll get it for them," he said as an example of how that service works.

That philosophy led him to spend the extra money to hire only experienced people to fill the 15 jobs at the store, he said. He hopes it's a financial risk that pays off by establishing a loyal customer base like that enjoyed by the previous owner.

Fred Neumann first opened the store with his father and brother in 1948 because all three needed jobs. It proved to be a good business that was embraced by the community.

"I loved it," Neumann said. "I loved the people, I loved the job."

But at the age of 76 in 2001, it was time to retire, he said.

The store will be open from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. Monday through Saturday, and from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. on Sunday.

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