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Tuesday, May 18, 2004

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ARCHIVE

Religious sect set to expand business; Twelve Tribes buying another downtown building in Plymouth

By DENNIS TATZ
The Patriot Ledger

PLYMOUTH - A controversial religious sect hopes to expand its presence in town and is negotiating to buy another downtown building and open a cafe.

Twelve Tribes, a group described by critics as a cult, has a tentative agreement to buy the building that's been home to Stevens the Florist for 28 years.

Kevin Gadsby, a Twelve Tribes spokesman, said the group wants to open a storefront cafe and serve salads, sandwiches and soup as an expansion of its Common Sense Wholesome Food Market next door on Main Street.

"We want to create a warm and healthy atmosphere for the people of Plymouth," said Gadsby. He said an adjacent building Twelve Tribes owns at 7 North St. will become a bakery.

Twelve Tribes, which says it has about 3,000 members worldwide, came to Plymouth about four years ago. The group has two homes on Warren Avenue for its 30 local members. They all work at Twelve Tribes businesses.

The conservative sect, which has been described as a Christian-Judeo hybrid, has courted controversy since it was founded in the early 1970s by Elbert Eugene Spriggs.

Spriggs advocates corporal punishment for children, including hitting them with wooden sticks. Children younger than 15 make up about half the group's membership. They are schooled at home and are not allowed to play with toys, eat candy or watch television.

Adults must give up all their assets to the group before they are allowed to join. Former members, some of whom went through cult deprogramming, have accused Spriggs of getting rich off the labor and assets of his followers.

Spriggs, 67, made a rare public appearance at a meeting in Plymouth three years ago, trying to refute allegations made by some of the group's new neighbors. But the fiery discussion seemed only to fuel mutual suspicion.

Gadsby said things have improved for the group in Plymouth.

"There was a lot of confusion and misconception when we came here," he said. "Initially, there was lot of suspicion. If you ask our neighbors, I am



Twelve Tribes has a tentative agreement to buy the building that's been home to Stevens the Florist in Plymouth for 28 years. (GREG DERR/The Patriot Ledger)

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confident to say they are our friends."

The renovations at the florist shop are expected to eventually include an outside cobblestone courtyard for customers at the rear of the building.

Gadsby said some sort of tribute to the Pilgrims will be displayed in the stores.

"We really admire the Pilgrims and want to uphold the foundation they established," he said.

Greg Tolonen, who owned the florist shop with his wife, said the deal with Twelve Tribes hasn't been finalized.

He had high praise for Twelve Tribes members.

"If I had some concerns about them, I wouldn't sell it (the building) to them," he said. "They have been great neighbors. They pick up trash in the neighborhood and the parking lot, and sweep the sidewalks. They are really a nice group of people. I hope they have success."

Gadsby said there are no plans to buy any more property in Plymouth.

Twelve Tribes has run a similar cafe and food market operation on Dorchester Avenue in Dorchester Lower Mills since 1994.

For Stevens the Florist, it will be the end of an era - again. For only the second time in more than 100 years, the business won't be owned by a Stevens. The Tolonens are selling the business to two Plymouth women who will be moving it to a location next to Mayflower Food and Spirits on South Street.

"It's bittersweet," said Greg Tolonen. "We will miss our customers and friends who come into the shop."

Tolonen, 53, and his wife, Diane Stevens Tolonen, 51, bought the business from her father 30 years ago. The Stevens family started the florist shop in 1898.

The couple sold it in the mid 1980s and traveled for a while with their children on a sailboat before moving to Englewood, Fla., for about two years.

When the Tolonens decided to return to the South Shore 13 years ago, they bought back Stevens the Florist from the Plymouth Five Cents Savings Bank.

The new owners are Nancy Carafoli, co-owner of Mayflower Food and Spirits with her husband, Skip Carafoli, and her sister-in-law, Lynda Oehme.

The two women had been selling flowers at Mayflower before deciding to buy Stevens.

Both are graduates of New England School of Floral Design in Norton. They have been learning the florist business from the Tolonens while preparing to take over on June 1.

Dennis Tatz may be reached at dtatz@ledger.com.

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Transmitted Friday, May 07, 2004