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SWAP MEET'S AIM: TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

**BYLINE:** By ERIN J. AUBRY

**BODY:**

On the surface, Shoppers World looks like many other swap meets in Los Angeles, with about 230 merchants selling everything from compact discs to insurance policies in a cavernous warehouse at La Brea Avenue and Exposition Boulevard.

But Shoppers World aspires to be much more than a swap meet. Since opening about a year ago, it has implemented a minority entrepreneur program, sponsored a debate between candidates for Board of Supervisors in the 2nd District and started a jobs program for students. Saturday, the center is holding a health fair focusing on ethnic minorities, particularly African-Americans.

And Shoppers World managers have strived to bring in merchants of varied ethnic backgrounds in an area where most swap meets are dominated by Koreans.

"When we came up with this concept, we knew it had to be different," said Shoppers World co-owner Michael Katz, who grew up in Los Angeles. "We didn't just want to come in selling T-shirts and tennis shoes."

Since the riots, which saw the destruction of several businesses at the nearby corner of La Brea Avenue and Rodeo Road, Shoppers World has enjoyed a surge of new customers and vendors who were displaced by the disturbances. The initial 40% occupancy rate at Shoppers World now stands at 70%; sales have improved 30% since midyear, said co-owner Allan Davidov. Although Shoppers World welcomed new tenants, Davidov said he and Katz chose carefully.

"We helped about 19 businesses get back on their feet," he said. "We didn't take everyone. We wanted to maintain a focus on unique, one-of-a-kind stores."

The 200,000-square-foot Shoppers World also aims to be more like a mall than a swap meet. Parking is provided in a two-level garage, and the structure is heavily patrolled by security officers. Inside, spacious aisles separate booths and shoppers browse to the beat of piped-in music. The mall is planning to open a food court with five eateries, including a coffeehouse, within a month.

Crenshaw resident Deborah Davis said that although she initially found the merchandise at Shoppers World similar to that of another swap meet she frequents, she's beginning to see changes that go beyond the goods.

"The weekend entrepreneur program, that's really different," Davis said. "They're offering more merchandise and helping the community at the same time. That's pretty unique." The entrepreneur program offers first-time vendors 10% to 50% discounts on initial deposits and rent for at least six months. Business promoter Debi Lewis, who has run the weekend entrepreneur program since July, said the low start-up cost and flexible, month-to-month leasing encourage business owners with little or no experience.

"We provide space for a fraction of mall costs," Lewis said. "People can try things out, see how they go, without giving up their 9-to-5 jobs right away."

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For Lisa Davis, Shoppers World gave her the incentive to launch Lisa's Gourmet Goodies, a sweet-shop weekend business that is her first venture. "Everybody here has been real friendly," she said. "I've gotten a lot of encouragement.

Shoppers World is also trying to reflect the ethnic diversity of the area in its merchants, 40% of whom are Asian, 30% African-American and 10% Latino.

"This is like a small city, with many different races," said promotions and marketing director Eleanor Williams. "But everybody gets along. We have a common purpose: good business." ERIN J. AUBRY

GRAPHIC: Photo, "We have a common purpose: good business," says Eleanor Williams, marketing director for Shoppers World, which strives for a balanced ethnic makeup among vendors. Rafael Rodriguez, one of 230 merchants at the swap meet, sells Mexican leather goods at his booth. ROSEMARY KAUL / Los Angeles Times