

—Slug:.....COMM-0841.bratt.69A_closing
—Contributor.....Virginia Ray
—Contributor email.....ginnypray@gmail.com
—For section.....News
—Format.....News - byline and dateline
—Dateline.....Brattleboro
—Article Number:.....42638

Notes from editor (not for publication):

HEADLINE ELEMENTS:

####BEGIN HED####

1 A space for community and shelter suddenly needs a
2 home

####END HED####

####BEGIN SUBHED####

3 Organizers seek a new space for 69A, whose current
4 landlords have other plans for the Elliot Street storefront

####END SUBHED####

5 TEXT BODY:

####BEGIN TEXT####

6 Come Dec. 6, when the lease runs out, the community
7 art space on Elliot Street known as 69A will be closing.

8 “We absolutely love our landlords; they’re amazing
9 people,” says 69A Director Lisa Marie of building co-owner
10 Ashok Kumar.

Artist Katie Bachler and her husband, Scott Berzofsky, took out a one-year lease to “make a community space.”

“Our lease is up and they have plans for this space, and the building’s for sale,” says Lisa Marie. “We understand completely.”

The building at 69–71 Elliot St. went on the market in May and is listed for \$1.15 million through Southern Vermont Realty Group of West Dover. Listers’ records show the building has been owned by Kumar and Amrik Singh, as A&S Realty Trust, since 2008.

A caring place during a time of need

From the original art space, 69A has certainly blossomed to much more.

Amid the final dismantling of the state’s motel program in July for those who were unsheltered and the already acute homelessness epidemic in the region, 69A Elliot St. became a safe space for all, offering free coffee, tea, water, Wi-Fi access, various gear and supplies (including tents, sleeping bags, flashlights, and clothing), restrooms, music, and a social milieu.

Bachler and Berzofsky tapped into their savings to rent the space last winter in the aftermath of the national election and last year’s contentious local debate over “acceptable community conduct.”

Without knowing the exact contours of how the space would actually be used, the former owners of Avenue Grocery did know they wanted to restore a community gathering place in the same spirit of the community convenience store that they briefly ran on Western Avenue in 2017 and 2018.

“We thought something was missing, a place for new ways of being to emerge, to care for each other, [to] provide something else, something emergent,” Bachler told *The Commons* at the time [[“A place to care for one another,”](#) News,

44 July 8]. “Like a space that could be an alternative to the behavior
45 ordinance. Like a space to organize different ways of being, to
46 learn from each other.”

47 She and Berzofsky, starting slow with a loose group of
48 community members organizing events, including book clubs
49 and art shows, “really wanted to take it slow and not over-
50 prescribe what 69A was going to be.”

51 Lisa Marie eventually opened the “10 to 4” program,
52 referencing the hours 69A is open.

53 The initiative offered two meals a day, a free store, and
54 “advocating for people to get what they need.”

55 The number of folks served varies from day to day. On
56 Nov. 17, about 73 folks stopped in for various needs. Last week,
57 the facility served 130 people in one day.

58 The program has occasionally been controversial, with
59 critics concerned that it was attempting to provide social services
60 to a clientele its volunteers were not trained to treat. Others were
61 concerned about altercations that required police help to
62 address, and the space became a concern at several Selectboard
63 meetings this summer.

64 Lisa Marie says 69A is not a shelter. In fact, she says,
65 “we’re not even technically a drop-in [place].”

66 “We’re just a community center,” Lisa Marie says. “We
67 just don’t have a basketball hoop.”

68 69A serves those who need camping gear, meals,
69 clothing, and bathrooms.

70 “And sometimes random tourists use the bathroom,” says
71 the director.

72 About 50% of the people who use the facility are
73 housed, and the other half are homeless. Ages range from infants
74 to about 80.

75 **Lots to do, but where to do it?**

76 Lisa Marie is currently training overnight hosts for the
77 new winter shelter, which will open at the Beloved Community

78 Church in Brattleboro on Dec. 1 [[“Emergency overnight shelter](#)
79 [will open in Brattleboro this winter,”](#) News, Nov. 12]. She is also
80 gathering domestic violence and panel members for an event and
81 getting a Thanksgiving meal together.

82 All income has been from donations, until a fiscal
83 sponsor came on board with some support a month ago.

84 “Everything from the food to the clothes, rent, lights, and
85 internet is all from awesome individuals who love and support
86 us,” says Lisa Marie.

87 Until the group has to move, organizers will endeavor to
88 keep regular hours weekdays from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

89 And organizers are looking for a new home.

90 “We’re looking for a space and have had meetings with
91 potential landlords, so we’ll see,” says Lisa Marie, adding that if a
92 new location isn’t found before Dec. 6, she and others will do
93 what they can to help from their cars and walking around.

94 “Just ‘cause the doors on 69A Elliot St. are closing
95 doesn’t mean that we’re done,” she says.

96 Right now, adds the director, “a lot of people are hurting,
97 scared.”

98 “Winter’s coming and it’s really cold, and people are
99 sleeping on pavements and benches and doing everything to
100 survive,” she says. “And we’re going to do the best we can to
101 provide what they need to make that happen.”

102 One person has already died from the cold this winter,
103 she says.

104 “People dying because they’re homeless is an absolute
105 crime. Whether it’s not being able to pay a bill, or having an
106 addiction, or running from a domestic situation, none of it
107 deserves death in the end,” Lisa Marie says.

108 Selectboard member Isaac Evans-Frantz attends meetings
109 at 69A and does what he can to bring concerns back to the town.

110 “I’m deeply concerned for the well-being of the people
111 who have found community and warmth at 69A Elliot St. over the
112 past several months,” Evans-Frantz says. “There are hundreds of

113 unhoused people living in Brattleboro, including many who do
114 not have adequate, safe shelter.”

115 He adds that “thousands of people in our community
116 have recently come together in support of democracy and turned
117 out for ‘No Kings’ protests. There is lots of energy here to show
118 up for the greater good. It’s been good seeing people showing up
119 for 69A Elliot St. and other community resources.

120 “With the news about 69A, this is a great time to pitch
121 in, whether through financial donations, volunteering time, or
122 reaching out to potential spaces where the resource hub could
123 move to.”

124 Evans-Frantz says the town as a whole can make a start
125 to help “by minimizing harm against unhoused community
126 members.”

127 “I’ve requested that the issues of no-trespass orders and
128 removal of homeless encampments be placed on Selectboard
129 meeting agendas this fall,” he says. “All community members
130 have rights and responsibilities when it comes to our town parks,
131 sidewalks, benches, and other public spaces, and we need to
132 make sure that these rights are respected.

133 “At a time of federal cruelty against people living
134 paycheck to paycheck, and against people in extreme poverty,
135 Brattleboro must do better,” Evans-Frantz says.

####END TEXT####

BIO/COATTAIL:

####BEGIN BIO/COATTAIL####

136 If you have a space to offer, call 69A at 413-418-8227.

137 To make a donation, visit 69A’s GoFundMe [campaign](#).

####END BIO/COATTAIL####

LAST ISSUE IN WHICH THIS FILE CAN BE RUN:

####BEGIN MAXISSUE####

138 0

####END MAXISSUE####

LINKS:

####BEGIN LINKS####

139

####END LINKS####

VIDEO:

####BEGIN VIDEO####

140

####END VIDEO####

LOGLINE (SOCIAL MEDIA):

####BEGIN LOGLINE####

141

####END LOGLINE####