

# GOLD & GEMS

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**GOING OUT OF BUSINESS**  
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Looking for signs of the economic downturn...

## ... within a few miles of home; among business associates, friends, relatives, and people I meet along the way. Scene 1. Take 1. 3/09



*Nicole: Graduate Student (in social work) and part time waitress*

Before beginning this search I imagined that I'd find foreclosure signs, knock on the door, interview and photograph the families inside. Or, that I'd talk to a friend or family member who'd give me the name of someone to talk to and photograph. It didn't go as imagined.

For the better part of a month I asked everyone I spoke with (not a lot people as I work alone as a freelance designer/photographer with a shrinking client list), "How's the economic downturn treating you?" and "Do you know anyone being affected by the downturn?" Everyone's response was eerily similar. In essence: I'm not feeling it, and thankfully, I don't know anyone who is.

Then we'd talk a bit longer about it and gradually the retired high school teacher and principle let me know that he didn't fish with his brother this year because he didn't receive the dividends from the riskier half of his teacher's pension; which had been reduced by 45-60% depending on when you look at the numbers.

Or, the graduate student (social work) and waitress who said, "I'm not really feeling it, but the restaurant is real slow the last two months." She'd worked there a year. Then went on to tell me that her boyfriend, a full time welder was laid off a while back and decided to go back to business school. These students share an apartment with 4 others; a couple of which are seeking degrees in education. I asked if she could give her boyfriend my card and have him call me. She e-mailed that he's not comfortable talking with me.

Self employed friends and business associates tell me things are okay, yet proceed to describe waiting 90 to 150 days for payment on invoices with 30 day terms. I'm feeling this myself. As a designer I received a cold call from a freelance writer I'd never heard from before; he said, "for ten years the phone rang nicely; then about a month ago it got real quiet."

### Surprise!

### They all begin with, "Everything's fine."



*This restaurant property has been empty for over a year.*



# The city of Mequon surrounds the village of Thiensville within Ozaukee county in the State of Wisconsin.

I've lived in Mequon since 1985 and didn't even really notice how many retail storefronts and restaurants have recently closed; until I began working on this assignment. I've watched businesses come and go over the last couple decades; but most shops reopened under a new owner and name within months.



*Frost, Ann and I used to love walking the mile to Freddy's custard stand. It closed a few years ago but was quickly reopened as a Cousin's Sub shop. Cousin's moved to smaller quarters 6 months ago. This property now stands empty even though it sits on the corner of Hwy 167 and I-43, a major interstate exit.*



*The beauty shop and print shop, which occupied this building for 20 years, both recently closed their doors. Given its condition this property will probably become vacant land; much like the former hardware store a few blocks south.*

Even though Mequon is in a different county it's considered one of the northern most suburbs of Milwaukee. Mequon is bordered by the Great Lake Michigan on the east. The Milwaukee River snakes through both it and Thiensville. In the last 25 years Mequon has gone from a rural, agricultural area to experiencing enormous residential McMansion growth; and is considered an upscale community. In 2006 it ranked 12th in per capita income out of 35 of Milwaukee's suburbs. For now residential building is at a standstill. You won't see many pedestrians in Mequon except on the sabbath. People tend to drive where they need to go.



***I interviewed Seth Tyler, sculptor, blacksmith, metal worker. He had this to say,***

"I found that given the clientele that I have (people with gobs of money) they're not as loose with it. In some ways I feel that they feel it more than we do; just by ratio of what they started out

with their ratio of loss is amazingly large. And they're just not ready to hand it out as freely as they were before. And that's my livelihood and affects me too.

But I feel more like an observer of it. We're still all down here.

Being self employed and a versatile guy I'm able to scrape up work just by having friends that need little jobs done. My new job, instead of doing high class ironwork and sculpture, I'm refinishing gates on site with grinders; hand painting railings; just anything. It's all related to what I do anyway.

For me business in general's got this sine wave action to it. I've always done these odd labor jobs between high end design work. The economy being screwed is not the entire reason for me refinishing these railings. It doesn't feel foreign to me. It's not something that I'm unused to feeling; having to scrape up some work; and breath some dust for a while.

It makes me more aware of local businesses. Makes me feel more loyal to and support small local businesses more than ever. I'm not inclined to go to big name corporate companies for anything. I'm all about Ma and Pa on the corner. That's probably the biggest thing I feel about how this has affected me. Leslie said to me, 'I'll cut your hair.' But I need to support Ann, I want to keep that stuff alive. I feel a tremendous amount



of loyalty to small businesses. They're the ones that feel it, not the Walmarts. They're actually serving the community.

I'm not worried about it. I feel like I can always find work with my skills."

All of the properties seen on these pages have been vacated within the last few months. Along with retail and restaurant closures we see "For Lease" signs on virtually every office building; with new signs going up seeming daily.

Mequon doesn't really have a "downtown." It's commercial, retail and food service properties have built up in malls around the intersection of Highway 167 (Mequon Road) and Port Washington Road (which lies just west and runs parallel to I-43).







*A large amount retail square footage has become available in one of Mequon's premiere Malls.*



*We still have one nice frame shop in Mequon and one in Thiensville. But three months ago, after 8 years in business Bokaré closed their doors.*

*I used to love picking up the occasional kitchen goody at the Gourmet Outfitters, a locally owned shop. Bed, Bath and Beyond drove them out about six months ago.*





*Ethan Allen Furniture left Mequon a month ago.*



*And yet more premium mall space available for somebody's next venture.*



*Each of these business closures represents a loss of local jobs; and I assume a loss of tax revenue for the city or village, county and state.*



**Thiensville has more of a combination of main street store fronts, converted residential properties and minimalls.**

*And here too — the vacancy signs seem to increase on a weekly basis.*







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