Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Hey, Let's Go to JCPenney!

Julissa Padilla · Saturday, July 15th, 2023

Saturday has arrived again. It is time to go run some errands. Don't forget your sweater just in case it gets cold. We can go to McDonalds afterwards and grab something to eat like a happy meal hamburger, no pickles. Before we go home, let's go to JCPenney and see what they have on sale.

I can still hear my mom saying that. When I was a kid, she didn't have a car so we would go walking everywhere to complete our errands. She loved to shop and that was one of the activities I enjoyed with her. Growing up in San Fernando, it felt as if we were living in a small town with local family shops and we knew our next door neighbors.

As we approached the JCPenney on San Fernando Road, I was amazed to see how big the store actually was. It had this huge neon sign on the outside. Walking towards the entrance there was a huge outside area near the front door with tall pillars and a green marble floor. Tan carpet in various areas of the store. There weren't many shoes in the shoes department. I would sometimes wander in the jewelry section to explore. It was amazing to see there was a second floor at this store. These long green stairs that allowed you to see the other departments with a view. Women and men's departments were near upstairs near the dressing rooms and the exit door.



JCPenney, with its original J.C. Penney Co. sign.

I remember how much of a treat it was to walk down the stairs because I knew that was the section for me. The kids section! They had toys, clothes, everything! I remember buying a Pokemon shirt there.

One of my fondest memories there was around Christmas time and my mom was getting last minute presents. I remember her using coupons where, if you bought $30 worth of merchandise, they would discount half of that. This enticed us to shop there more often. We went over to the next door Jack in the Box. We ate dinner then we headed home. We then all watched the TV special *How the Grinch Stole Christmas.*

When I started middle school, they announced the devastating news: the store was closing. I didn't think about how much it would affect me until after the closure. It looked so abandoned and unloved compared to before. It wasn't until I became an adult where I finally appreciated the architecture and the store itself. I learned how it served the San Fernando community.

According to the *Los Angeles Daily News*, JCPenney first opened in San Fernando in 1920. It then moved to a bigger location on the corner of Brand and San Fernando Road in February 1953. Over the years, the store became a staple considering San Fernando's increasing Latino community. This store became the place for everyone in the community to purchase their goods without needing to go to another city which in turn helped contribute huge tax returns back to the community. This brought more foot traffic to the neighboring stores.

The store served as a major place for locals to work and serve the community. This was a convenient place for locals to purchase back to school clothes or any kind of clothing needs without needing to venture outside of the city. Then they announced the closing which brought people from all walks of life to protest the closure including celebrities like George Lopez and human rights advocate Dolores Huerta. The store was already being considered a historical landmark because there weren't many JCPenney that had this unique architecture, let alone still standing.



JCPenney, with one of its original Penney's signs

According to the JCPenney company, they had a variety of reasons for its closing including the rise of e-commerce, fall in sales and lack of major store companies nearby like Target or other fast fashion stores. Despite these reasons, locals were not satisfied.

The night after the store closed, the company tried to remove their lettering from the store. Locals discovered this and immediately reported it. They had it reinstalled but this was just blatant inconsideration for the historic landmark. This was a slap in the face and just proved to the

community that the company didn’t care about the hole they left. The store not only was an important symbol of the Valley but it was one of my earliest memories of the city where I grew up.

For the longest time, the store lay dormant. It wasn’t until recently where it appeared people were trying to reutilize the space. It’s currently a pop-up where they sell vintage items such as clothing and toys. They surprisingly kept the moniker Penny’s on the door.

This store served as a vital part of the community for almost 90 years. Local business owners said they felt the decrease in foot traffic to their stores once it closed.

With the closure of JcPenney, a piece of my childhood closed with it. I will always remember when my mom would tell us “Hey, let’s go to JCPenney!”

I asked her what she remembered of the store and she just enjoyed the old fashion feel of it. I wish I appreciated it at the time but at least I can reminisce.

One final note, since the sign can’t be removed, a department store museum should be using the space! Not only will local residents learn about the JCPenneys, but other stores in the Valley or even Los Angeles can be a part of the museum! It can talk about all the stores that helped develop the San Fernando Valley and uncover other hidden history. There are so many possibilities; let us explore them and bring another sense of pride for the city of San Fernando.

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