

Closed Tea Room Owner 'Not Giving Up'

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by Heidi Kyser

Unlike most owners of businesses that haven't succeeded, Allan and Lurline Wagner are not reluctant to talk about what happened. In fact, they're eager to draw attention to the plight of their small business and counsel others considering going down the same path.

The couple opened [Cuppa Tea Company](#) in Richmond, Va., on April 11, 2007. It closed two years later, on May 16, 2009.

Lurline and Allan believe they were the victims of unfortunate timing, a bad economy and an uncooperative landlord. They spent five years researching and planning the business, including two trips to [World Tea Expo](#), where they befriended tea experts Bruce and Shelley Richardson, and Jane Pettigrew. The Richardsons, who live in Perryville, Ky. a few hundred miles away from Richmond, advised the Wagners on their business, and Pettigrew visited in June 2008 to conduct a tea event.

It was around that time that Cuppa Tea's business peaked, Allan Wagner said. In May 2008, the first month when year-over-year comparisons were available, business was up 77 percent, according to Wagner. The following month, a restaurant entrepreneur with 28 years' experience visited the tea room. "He asked how long we'd been in business," Wagner recalled. "When we told him, he said, 'You must be doing something right.'"

Although business slowed down during July and August, the Wagners weren't worried, because they'd learned these were typically slow months for tea rooms. But after the housing bubble burst and the Wall Street crash in September, things went from slow to disastrous, Wagner said.

"By the third week of October, I was so alarmed by the numbers that I called our accountant for some counsel and he advised me to get a rent reduction," he said. Wagner followed through immediately, but his requests got him nowhere. The landlord wouldn't budge.

"Business bounced back a little in November, December was decent, and the first couple of weeks of January were OK," he said. "Then (President) Obama was inaugurated." Wagner said he felt things got worse with each of the new President's dire warnings about the economy, which discouraged people from spending any discretionary income. By May, business was so low, and rent so high, Cuppa Tea couldn't remain open.

The company continues to sell tea through its Web site and offer tea event services. Wagner said he couldn't imagine reopening the tea room: "Small businesses are so reluctant to hire people or re-hire the people they had, because they don't know what's going on in Washington. We have to think about our age, our health, before we could do this again." (Allan and Lurline Wagner are 55 and 54, respectively.)

"I was smart not to leave my career," Lurline Wagner added. Her husband left behind a good job in the construction industry to open the tea room and has been unable to find work since it closed.

Philippine by birth, Lurline Wagner moved as a child with her family to Alberta, Canada, and then to Richmond as an adult to get away from the cold. She finished her college education and went to work in microbiology, most recently at the Virginia Commonwealth University Hospital in Richmond, where she continues to work today.

She is more optimistic than her husband. "It was my passion, and my American dream, so I'm not going to let it die just like that," Wagner said. She conducts the company's tea events and is hopeful for a new start.

Allan Wagner, meanwhile, is hoping for some outside investment, or the opportunity to advise others who may benefit from his experience. The Wagners can be contacted through Cuppa Tea's [Web site](#).

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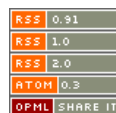
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