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Photos by Stefan Hard
Top, the sign outside Paul Perley Cellos shop in Berlin. Above, Melissa Perley takes a cello off a rack.

(Continued from Page 1)

From Vermont to the world

Like many small businesses, Paul Perley Cellos has several components. One is the sale of new and used cellos, violins, violas and bows. Cellos for sale are advertised on the Web site in price range sections with a photo and description of each instrument. If potential customers express interest, the instrument can be shipped to them for a trial period. “They’re sent all over the world,” said Melissa Perley. “We’re just shipping (a cello) to Australia in a Kevlar – bullet proof – case. So customers don’t have to come here to get an instrument.” If the instrument sells for \$3,500 or more, there is no shipping charge. If customers decide to buy, they send a check and return the empty case. If they don’t buy, they ship the instrument back to Perley.

Restoration and repair of instruments is the focus of what a customer sees when entering the Perley workshop. The space also doubles as sales showroom with dozens of cellos on display as well as a sizeable collection of violins and violas. But cellos are the Perley specialty. According to Perley, although there are many restorers of violins only a couple of businesses specialize in affordable older cellos.

He and Melissa will go far afield whenever they hear about the potential for buying old instruments. “If we have any clue at all that someone’s got something old for sale, we’ll just go,” said Melissa Perley. “For example, recently we went down to Rhode Island. A friend of ours who makes cellos had some old ones there and we brought back eight in our Volvo. Some of them need to be restored, but the odds are once they’re put back together they’ll be good players, something people are looking for.”

Local business on the Web

The Perleys and their business are part of the changing landscape of the Vermont economy.

According to Tom Murray, newly appointed commissioner for the Department of Information and Innovation in the Agency of Administration, Gov. James Douglas wants 90 percent of the state to have broadband access by the end of 2007 and 100 percent to be wired by 2010. Murray said he also wants small Vermont businesses to get broadband access.

Most residential and small business customers access high-speed Internet through their phone company (DSL) or their cable television hookup. A newer but rapidly growing means of access is through wireless Internet service providers, according to Murray. “When you get to areas of a little more attractive than hanging cable, because of costs.” He said wireless gear can go on

existing cell phone towers or be attached to buildings.

Murray cited a study by the Gartner Group (www.gartner.com) which predicts that by 2009 70 percent of all voice connections will be wireless. “This includes cell phones and other devices,” Murray said, adding that the field is evolving rapidly. “You’re going to see the cell phone, your laptop – all converging into a device that for better or worse we’ll take everywhere. The good side is we’re no longer tethered to our office. We can go to our kid’s soccer game and check e-mails as we head home.” He added, “The downside is you’ve always got your office with you. People will need to realize that these devices have ‘off’ buttons!”

According to Murray, medium to large-size businesses in the state have no problem getting broadband. “Phone companies will run a T-1 or dedicated facility to just about anywhere. But those can be pricey, anywhere from \$500 to \$1,000 per month. But (those companies) under-

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stand that’s the cost of doing business.”

However, Murray sees much of the future of Vermont’s economic development tied to the telecommuter and the small business with five or fewer employees. “In this knowledge-based, global economy, it’s a huge opportunity for the state.

“If you ever get on a plane in Burlington – one of those early flights to (Washington) D.C. on a Monday morning – half those people live in Vermont, work in D.C. but they may go down only every other week or every two weeks. People working for defense contractors, some government folks – probably more in the private sector.”

Murray also jokes about where he lives as the typical Vermont road. “We have five houses on my dead-end road and in all of them one of the spouses has some sort of work-at-home business. One sells bamboo fly rods on line. Another sells \$5,000 to \$10,000 kitchen stoves. My neighbor who’s an engineer had business rental space in Waterbury because he couldn’t get broadband, then he investigated a satellite solution and now he’s able to work out of his loft. My wife is two days a week in the office and three days a week at home – she’s able to stay connected via her computer.

“And take the graduates of some of the higher end Ivy League schools. Traditionally they would go to New York or Boston out of college – go and work 10 years in the big city. Now, these people say, ‘I want to live in Stowe, Vermont, and I’m just going to go there and these companies are going to come hire me with the caveat that I’m going to live

here and you’ll just have to deal with that. I’ll connect. I’ll commute.”

Statistics on current use of the Internet by Vermont businesses are available at www.publicservice.vermont.gov, along with a telecommunications survey completed in the summer of 2004.

According to the site, 55 percent of businesses had Web sites and 97 percent had some sort of access to the Web. Of those with access, 57 percent did business over the Web although 65 percent said they don’t sell online. “This is not so unusual,” said Murray. “For a lot of businesses the Internet is just their way to get information out there.”

The public service site said 38.5 percent of Vermonters use the Internet to work from their homes.

Murray talked about the great value of a Web site to small start-up businesses, people who still need to keep another job. He gave the example of small entrepreneurs in the food business, more than 100 of whom are listed on www.ver-

montspecialtyfoods.org.

“The Internet is critical for them. They don’t have time to market, answer phones. They put their product online and take e-mail orders and check their e-mail when they get home and send a box out the next day.”

Murray also touts the Government Marketing Assistance Center, which is in the state Economic Development Department, for use by small businesses (www.thinkvermont.com).

“They have a bid-board and business registry, kind of a Monster.com for companies that want to bid on government jobs.” By registering on this site and filling out the application papers, small businesses can automatically receive e-mails when state or federal jobs requiring a percentage of small business subcontractors come up for bid.

Murray himself uses the system to be alerted to new grants that impact information technology. “Every morning I get an e-mail that tells me the Department of Labor or the Department of the Interior has released a grant for this type of project.”

Murray feels the growth of broadband and the new technologies associated with it are “a huge opportunity for Vermont. We have a great quality of life. If you can stay connected and have opportunities to earn good-paying jobs it makes Vermont

that much more attractive.”

The right pedigree

Back in his Berlin shop, Paul Perley looks for a forged label when he takes the top off an old cello to repair it. According to Perley, many labels misrepresent an instrument as Italian-made.

“This is because if (a cello) was made in Italy in the 1800s or 1700s or 1600s and can be verified and is in decent condition, it will command a fortune,” he said. “The price of an instrument is not based on its sound. Beyond the very lower-priced instruments, it’s the pedigree.”

The right pedigree in this business can command a price of \$200,000 or more.

The catch is, Italian provenance on an old cello doesn’t mean it will necessarily produce a better sound. “The myth people like to create – especially people who sell them – is that’s what you have to have if you’re going to be a great soloist,” he said. “And very big money is made on those things.”

What Perley and other luthiers have found is that other old instruments can have that beautiful old sound, primarily because the wood has aged. He said these instruments are very affordable if you can find them.

Part of the Perley business is searching out old instruments, primarily cellos but also violins and violas, and restoring them to excellent playing condition. Perley cellos range in price from about \$2,500 to \$50,000, although playable instruments for students or beginners can start as low as \$1,000.

The restoration and repair of stringed instruments is an ancient craft passed down from master to apprentice, in a system like the mentor-pupil relationship of musicianship. Perley studied with Hans Nebel, who had trained in the famous Wurlitzer workshop in New York and is considered one of the world’s expert restorers.

Perley said luthiers who make instruments have a different business, and “to tell the truth, it’s hard to earn a living making instruments. People want the older ones and you can only charge so much for a new one. But we do carry new cellos. And some are great players.”

He has bought cellos made by Thurmond Knight of Glover and Barbara Theobald of Chelsea, Mass. When he orders new

cellos, Perley selects the wood and orders a particular model.

Renting is another aspect of the business. Melissa Perley said beginners and students are the usual rental customers. “It’s a good way to get into the cello and they only have to commit to a year,” she said. They encourage students to buy because the rental payments might be better invested in purchase. “If they don’t want to continue (with the cello) we would turn around and buy that same instrument back in good condition.”

Bring in the bass

Three years ago, Paul Perley Cellos expanded to include sale, repair and restoration of double basses. Rob Morse, a Central Vermont jazz bass player who also comes from a woodworking background, joined the company as an apprentice. Since then, bass players have been bringing their instruments for repair and have begun buying new and used ones. The son of an area musician, Burr Morse, Rob started playing different instruments at a young age but early on fell in love with the big bass and its long strings.

“Now I’m able to fine tune my own

instrument meticulously and have it set up exactly as I want it to play and sound,” said Morse. “Beyond that I meet people all the time out there in the world, from musicians around Vermont to people in New York or Canada or wherever and I feel I’ve been able to bring people into the shop that wouldn’t have known to come here.”

On a recent afternoon, Perley and Morse had three old cellos open for work. Morse was planing the edge of an instrument that had the top removed; a family heirloom cello was propped on a stand; on his workbench Perley examined the inside of a cello marked “Italian from 1880,” but which he had determined was actually German in origin.

The family heirloom, which Perley referred to as “The Tammy,” was not a valuable instrument but had been in a North Carolina family for several generations. It had sentimental if not great musical value, he said. “It had been left in a barn and some vandals had gotten in and carved ‘Tammy’ – the name of, we assume, their girlfriend – in the top.”

The top had already been scraped down to remove the initials. The instrument next needed to be revarnished and put back together. “We’ll do a few more things to it that (the owner) requested and then she’ll drive up here from North Carolina in the springtime and pick it up.”

As for the “Italian” cello, Perley said, “It came from a woman in Michigan who bought it at auction for her son who has a career ahead of him as a cellist. She couldn’t afford to spend many thousands on a really important instrument, so she got a very nice cello, but which had some seriously damaged parts. She sent it to us through the Web site.

“We’re going to put the top on this afternoon and Rob will set the neck tomorrow. We’ll finish the touch-up varnish and it will be shipped back to her. She’ll have a cello worth far more than she’s got into it. Hopefully it will be a great player. It was way too far gone for us to be able to tell when we got it. That’s a little bit luck of the draw.”

A Perley customer is often someone who plays cello in a local orchestra who wants a low-price instrument but with a good sound. Another might be a young cellist hoping for a big musical career. “There are some people in very high-powered conservatories that have come to us for old cellos,” said Perley. “The one thing they make us promise is that we won’t tell anyone what they paid for it. They want people to think it’s a more expensive instrument.”

A recent Perley customer is young Canadian cellist Genevieve Guimond, a student of Yuli Tarovsky, artistic director of I Musici, the Montreal-based chamber orchestra. Guimond was recently one of 11 finalists qualified to compete in the triennial Johansen International in Washington, D.C.

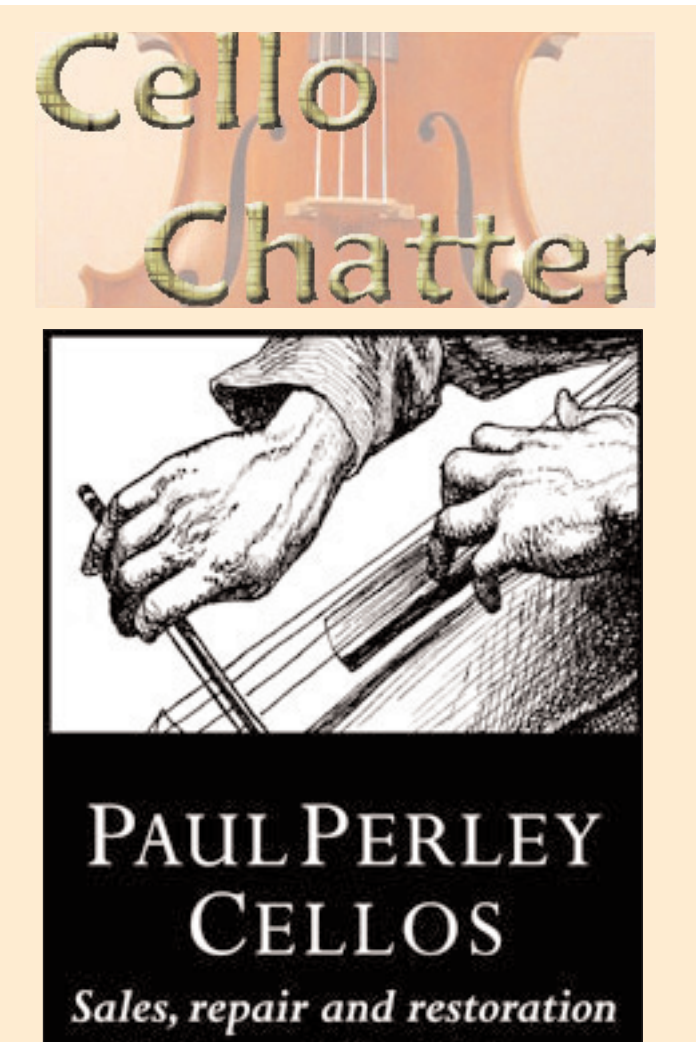
“She has a cello from us and she’s looking at another one,” said Perley. “But she won (the entry to the Johansen) with a bow that wasn’t what she should be using at that level.” Apparently Guimond had tried out other bows, including one priced at \$30,000. But none was quite what she wanted.

“She and her mom came here and we let her play everything we had. We had one in mind we thought she might like and in fact she fell completely in love with it, paid us, and took it back to her teacher, Tarovsky. After hearing her play, he said, ‘This is your bow.’”

“And it wasn’t near \$30,000,” Melissa Perley added.

When Melissa and Paul Perley aren’t working in their business, they both play cello. Melissa Perley manages the Montpelier Chamber Orchestra and her husband is a member. He also teaches cello one day a week and directs the youngest group in the Green Mountain Youth Symphony.

According to Melissa, this business in this location allows them to have the lifestyle they want. “It’s really a special way to live, surrounded by instruments and music.”



Images from the Paul Perley Cello Web site.

Local Web designer focuses on presentation

Willie Docto of Waterbury designed www.paulperleycellos.com. A native of the Philippines who has lived in Oklahoma and New York City, Docto moved to Vermont in 1996. He and his partner own a bed-and-breakfast for which he designed his first Web site, www.moosemeadowlodge.com. That led to doing some work for other Vermont inns. He also designed the Web site of the Vermont Brewers Association, www.vermontbrewers.com.

Docto is an association management consultant, working with different trade and professional associations to provide services such as event planning and general management. Web sites are a side business for him, but one he loves to do.

He doesn’t focus on e-commerce sites but is interested in creating marketing and communication tools for small businesses and nonprofits. “I really try to focus on presenting,” he says.

“They know what they do, but they may not know how to present themselves, the image they want.” As a result he talks to clients about who their audience is. “For example, is the Web site for the general public or some particular group.”

Docto met Paul and Melissa Perley through the Montpelier Chamber Orchestra, where he is principal violin for the second section of the orchestra. He was looking for a violin when he worked on the Perley site, so “I put myself in the buyer’s position. What would I want to find out if I were buying a cello.”

The Perleys already had their logo, artwork and photos and Docto chose black as a background because it “seems to bring out the color of the wood. Also the navigation links show up more.” Altogether Docto spent 20 hours over about five months developing the site, including some quick updates.

— Spencer Smith