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Stores report brisk shopping

By Don Ellzey

Customer traffic was up significantly the day after Christmas and returns were average or lighter than for past Christmases, several local store managers said.

Many Hammond Square stores and other stores throughout the area offered steep discounts Saturday to attract customers.

JC Penney had a 75 percent off special on all remaining Christmas decorations. The sale began at 5 a.m., meaning employees had to be at work by about 4 a.m. But customers were waiting at the door at 4 a.m. to get in, said manager Kevin Daigler.

Manager Kathy Johnson of Dillard's said foot traffic in the store has increased significantly since the new shopping center opened, and Saturday was no exception.

Shoppers were waiting at the door Saturday, some with returns, but most were there to shop the specials, she said. Returns and exchanges seemed to be about the same this year as in the past, she said.

Daigler said he has been manager of eight Penney stores in several states in the southeastern United States, but he said Tangipahoa Parish has by far the nicest group of customers overall.

"I say that in total honesty," Daigler said. "The people in this area are just exceptionally nice.

"Most of the time when we get a call from a customer, it's to compliment one of our associates (employees)," the store manager said.

The big thing Saturday at J.C. Penney was gift cards, most of which were for young women from mid-teen years to early or mid-20s, Daigler said.

They were arriving in large numbers to shop the juniors department, he said.

Another draw Saturday was the 60 percent off sale on all winter weight merchandise, Daigler said.

The store has plenty of selections for those wishing to exchange a gift, he said. Also, Daigler said the associates make an effort to get the returned merchandise back on the floor within a hour to be available for other customers.

Penney also tries to make returning or exchanging gifts as hassle free as possible, he said. Hassle-free shopping is a year around policy for the store, he said.

Store merchandise available for post-Christmas shopping and gift exchanges or returns is much better this year, giving customers a wider selection.

As for stress on the associates from the Christmas rush, Daigler said last year his "team" was a group of rookies. It was their first year handling a crush of shoppers.

That experience has paid off with a smoother operation this year, enabling the workers to move the customers through in a far shorter amount of time, he said.

“They are allowed to make the decisions that will satisfy the customers,” Daigler said. “They’re not going to haggle over a few cents or a couple dollars. They want to satisfy the customers and help them get out in the shortest time possible.”