

# Witch's BROUHAHA

*Occult supply store conjures up controversy in Garden City.*

BY LISA MARTINO

**A**t a glance Veronica Kuclo-Raub looks anything but threatening. Her petite, almost frail, frame, long brown hair and lively eyes are features more reminiscent of a child than of a woman ready to stir up some trouble.

Yet decades-old city ordinances say that Kuclo-Raub — who is a practicing Wiccan and owner of Gundella's Witch Ways and Wares — is violating the law by offering psychic readings to her customers. Worse yet, some Garden City residents claim her business is a threat to the city's youth.

When she opened her store on Middlebelt two months ago, Kuclo-Raub says she intended to do psychic card readings in addition to selling books and occult paraphernalia. She complained to the City Council of Garden City after being allowed a retail-only inspection permit due to city ordinances banning fortunetelling for gain, divination and the advertisement of fortunetelling.

City Attorney Owen Cummings said he researched the three ordinances and found them to be unconstitutional and a violation of Kuclo-Raub's right to freedom of speech. The council called for a public hearing to rewrite the ordinances.

While City Manager John Bayless says the public hearing was called because of "the questionable wisdom of having an ordinance that is unconstitutional," nearly 100 people turned out that night to discuss what they call the real issue: the future of their children.

What upsets people the most, says City Clerk Ronald Showalter, is the proximity of the occult supply store to Garden City High School just down the street.

"I think the real fear for a lot of them is that somehow or another their kids may become worshipers of Wicca as opposed to the Christian religions," he says.

Kuclo-Raub says it's more likely that people who visit her store would just become educated about another person's religion.

"They are rather ignorant about what witchcraft really is," she says, adding that Wicca is often confused with Satanism. "We don't worship the devil; what we do worship are the things that support our existence — air, water, fire."

Among those residents who

fear something worse is Russell Tharp. Tharp is associate pastor and youth minister at First Baptist Church in Garden City and one of approximately 40 First Baptist members who attended the public hearing to speak out against Kuclo-Raub and her business.

As a youth minister, Tharp says, he works with 50 to 60 local children and teenagers weekly. He sees them as vulnerable targets for

what he considers to be the fraudulent and dangerous activity encouraged by Kuclo-Raub's business. What disturbs him even more, Tharp says, is that quite a few children in his congregation have expressed interest in the store.

"They have an incredible curiosity toward the things they are told are a no-no," he says.

But even in a time tarot cards and psychic readings are a phone call away and the day's astrological forecast is as easy to get as the nearest newspaper, Tharp says he, the members of his congregation and city officials don't have to support the occult arts in their neck of the woods.

"It opens up a path for the city to progress downward. ... It's just the beginning of deterioration in the community," he says. "If we could have our way, the shop would not exist at all, but that is a violation of her rights."

To Tharp, exposure to a shop like Kuclo-Raub's can lead impressionable people to Satanism, necromancy and other practices based on the occult. "The word 'occult' itself means something done in secret, and we'd like her to keep what she does underground," he adds.

Kuclo-Raub, who makes no secret of her religious practices, "can't understand what the hoopla is all about."

She says she opened the busi-

ness so she can follow in the footsteps of her late mother, Gundella, known throughout the state as "Garden City's official witch" and as a lecturer and storyteller. Gundella, who died four years ago, would travel from Garden City to Detroit and its suburbs to do psychic card readings at private parties for anyone who would ask.

Kuclo-Raub, not embracing her mother's "have cards, will travel" attitude, chose to anchor her services in her hometown.

The 32-year-old's store sells everything from specially prepared candles, incense and books on spell casting to jewelry, chalices and clothing.

The mother of four says there is no reason for anyone in her city to fear her; she is not a member of a coven and does not prac-

tice witchcraft against anyone. She says that all traditional witches are taught that it is immoral to cause another to suffer. She also believes people who are afraid of her misunderstand her religion, and their actions violate her First Amendment rights.

Kuclo-Raub says her two-month-old business

has not suffered. The worst that has happened, she recalls, is when a man came into her store one afternoon reciting a Bible passage. After citing scriptures "in the name of the Lord," he threw salt on the floor and ran out.

If anything, she says, a little bit of controversy has been good for business. "After people started hearing about this, they just started coming in to look, and this book I carry called 'What Witches Do' just flew off the shelves. People want to know what it's all about," she says.

As for the city ordinances in question, Cummings, the city attorney, is working on a comprehensive one that will possibly include a minimum age for getting readings, and would protect citizens from fraud and larceny. The revised ordinance will be sent to the planning commission for rezoning recommendations.

Tharp says he will continue to speak out against the store's existence and attend meetings until the matter is resolved.

"We still live in a country where 'In God We Trust' is printed on the currency," he says.

Lisa Martino is a Metro Times staff writer.



Those who liken witchcraft to devil worship misunderstand her religion, says Veronica Kuclo-Raub.

Metro Times Photo: Bruce Gilpin