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Tuesday December

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Venture Mall reinvents itself as Santa Fe Plaza

12/18/2005

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Laura Armos, an employee at Dulceria Mi Fiesta at the newly remodeled Santa Fe Plaza in Duluth, sweeps the store.

DULUTH

Amid the clamorous talk of high-rises near Gwinnett Place Mall, a once dying shopping center has been quietly reborn. Venture Outlet Mall, whose retail star faded over the years into dull paint and empty stores, is recast in bright Adobe colors of the Southwest. Mexican fiesta music blends with the sounds of saws and nail guns as the finishing touches are placed on what is now called Santa Fe Plaza.

Amy Forero, Santa Fe Plaza's leasing manager, has filled the 17-acre retail center with an international mix of tenants.

Although the look and sound is Latino, the mall houses a variety of tenants and merchandise from different nationalities. There is a Mexican candy store with yellow and orange pinatas and spiced lollipops and a Latin music store called Discolandia. Narges Ibrahim, owner of Egyptian Corner, offers Middle Eastern gifts and antiques. Tierra Santa, translated "the holy land," sells religious figurines of Christian icons such as the Virgin Mary. A new food court will offer Mexican and Colombian cuisine, a bakery, ice cream and seafood.

"We have many cultures represented here," said Forero, who has spent the past three months building the diverse tenant mix. Doug Reid is one retailer who knew the old Venture Mall and stuck around for the transformation. His sports trading card business is benefiting from the changes.

Big crowds are returning to the retail center, especially on the weekends. To capture the growing international customers of

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Santa Fe Plaza, Reid has added more soccer cards to his inventory.

Former Brazilian soccer great Pele is a big seller, as are Hispanic baseball stars such as Boston's Manny Ramirez and the Yankees' Alex Rodriguez.

"The renovations have basically turned this into an entirely new mall," said Reid, owner of Venture Sports Show.

"We had lost some tenants over the years. There were lots of empty spaces. New malls in other parts of Gwinnett were posing a lot of challenges. Everything was kind of dull and dreary. Now it's vibrant again and exciting. Things have picked up considerably."

A rekindled retail center like Santa Fe Plaza enhances the effort to upgrade the Pleasant Hill corridor, said Dave Rosselle, who heads the Gwinnett Place Community Improvement District. *

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