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Shoppers pack local stores on Black Friday

COVINGTON — Economists and retail experts predicted a bleak Black Friday, but what do they know?

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 Above, Marlon Griffith of Covington, a member of the 48th Brigade of the Georgia National Guard, was among the bargain hunters shopping early in Conyers for Black Friday, the busiest day of shopping. Griffith arrived at the Conyers Target at 3 a.m. He had been home from duty in Afghanistan for just three days. He is home for two weeks and then he heads back to his post.

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COVINGTON — Economists and retail experts predicted a bleak Black Friday, but what do they know?

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Shoppers and store managers in Conyers and Covington said crowds were larger and sales were up from last year.

Hard-core shoppers Renee Blackwell, Aimee Lawson and Kim Oliver, all of Covington, appeared to be taking the slogan "Shop 'til you drop" seriously. By 8:30 a.m. Friday, they were into their 10th hour of shopping and still had more to do.

The women got started at 10:30 p.m. Thursday at Tanger Outlet Centers in Locust Grove, where stores stayed open all night. They finished there at about 1:30 a.m. and made their way to Wal-Mart in Conyers, where they took turns holding a place in line and shopping.

After three hours at Wal-Mart, they made their way to Target and Kohl's and planned to go to Belk before heading home.

Oliver and Lawson had been up 24 hours straight, while Blackwell admitted to taking a short nap Thursday afternoon.

"I have an adrenaline rush," Oliver said, noting that she cooked Thanksgiving dinner Thursday, too.

The ladies had more work to do after the shopping was over: Sorting out all the gifts. Several shoppers said the Wal-Mart Super centers in Covington and Conyers were slammed and ran out of big ticket items early.

Kim Parris of Stockbridge started shopping at 4:45 a.m. and hit both Wal-Marts, but she left disappointed, as the items she was looking for had already sold out.

"The sales were good, but if they're advertising sales they should have plenty of items," she said.

Vickie Gasaway and her daughter Amy of Covington walked out of Wal-Mart without attempting to get the products on their wish list because they didn't think the wait and the chaos were worth it.

"There was probably 100 people at every checkout line," Vickie Gasaway said. Store managers at the two Wal-Marts were unavailable for comment.

Old Navy in Conyers opened at 3 a.m., but manager Jennifer Morris said people were already in line when she came to work at 1 a.m. About 100 people were waiting when the doors opened, and as of 8:30 a.m., the line to check out still spanned the entire length of the store. Shoppers were after \$5 fleece, \$15 denim and outerwear on sale for half price, Morris said.

About 300 people were in line when the doors opened at Kmart in Covington at 6 a.m., according to store manager Don Buckner, who said foot traffic has definitely increased over last year. Most folks were after electronics and toys, he said.

Economists and retail experts are predicting shoppers nationwide will exercise restraint this year, with many in financial straits or worried about job security.

A new holiday spending poll by Georgia Credit Union Affiliates of its members across the state indicates that 52 percent of Georgians are planning to spend less than they did last year, while 45 percent plan to spend the same and only 3 percent plan to spend more.

Of those polled, 59 percent plan to spend less than \$500 on gifts, 31 percent plan to spend between \$500 and \$1,000 and 10 percent plan to spend more than \$1,000.

According to the poll, 76 percent of Georgians plan to pay for all or most of their purchases with cash, and only 12 percent are planning to use credit cards.

"Clearly, Georgians are concerned about their financial well-being, so they are looking to spend money more vigilantly now than in previous years," said Mike Mercer, president and CEO of Georgia Credit Union. "It's one thing to spend money, but it's another to spend money wisely. While Georgians will still spend money to enjoy the holiday season, they're not going to take on more debt to do it. Instead, they are looking at their finances with an eye toward the future."

Black Friday, so-called because it is often the day when a surge of shoppers helps stores break into profitability for the full year, has traditionally marked the kickoff of the holiday shopping season. But its importance has faded in recent years as merchants have started hawking the deep sales and expanded hours usually reserved for that day well in advance.

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