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BUSINESS

DEL RAY MERCHANTS/A SHOW OF HANDS The place for art – hands down

If we were taking a poll to determine the best new retail shop in Del Ray that offers original artwork by local artists, my vote would be for a store called A Show of Hands, located at 2204 Mount Vernon Ave.

By Tina Games-Evans
Alexandria Times Special Writer

The retail art store, which held its grand opening Dec. 3, features a wonderful selection of handmade and handcrafted items from a variety of artists in several different mediums.

Currently, more than 50 artists are represented there, including Patrick O'Brien, Alice Kale, Susan Slattery, Bryan Leister and Becky Heavner. Some artists carried at "Show" are well-known nationally, while others are big local names.

Through an array of products from oil paintings and watercolors to jewelry, pottery, candles and even soaps, the store's operators said they try to represent the diversity of artists in Alexandria by providing them a venue to showcase their work.

In the beginning

Owners Maria Wasowski and Pat Miller said they began A Show of Hands after dreaming of having a place where local and emerging artists and craftsmen could share their work with the public and have someone assist with the sales.

Wasowski in an interview recalled her thinking from that period before opening the store. "I knew I could never pull it off by myself. I was thinking what a shame it was that I couldn't have a partner like Pat Miller, the founder and organizer of Art on the Avenue [the annual show in Del Ray]."

Two days later, an e-mail from Pat appeared on my computer. The timing couldn't have been better, so we got together and started looking for a space to rent and thinking about a business name."

Around the beginning of June, Wasowski and Miller learned that a space was coming open in the ForumOne building, and they eventually signed a lease. They had to take down some office walls to transform it into a retail space.

While all this was going on, they said they had been brainstorming with friends and family members to come up with a store name that would hint at craft and art products made by hand, but a name that would also be somewhat "funky, unique."

They first settled on "Form & Funktion," but found themselves repeating it twice and having to explain it to each person who heard it.

Then, said Wasowski, "my husband started brainstorming around the words 'made by hand' and 'show your hand' and finally, 'a show of hands.' Pat and I loved it. So we immediately contacted



Courtesy Photo/ Mark Blackden
A ribbon-cutting was held recently officially opening Del Ray's A Show of Hands shop. On hand were Vice Mayor Del Pepper, Mayor William Euille, Maria Wasowski, Pat Miller, and City Councilman Paul Smedberg.

Becky Heavner, a nationally known illustrator who lives in Del Ray and who has designed the look for Art on the Avenue every year. She came up with our wonderful logo and several versions for our sign and stationery."

About the owners

Wasowski said her involvement with art "began with my grandfather, who was a painter. When he came to visit we would go to the National Gallery and talk about the paintings. From childhood on, I've always had an art project of some kind going, and eventually I ended up with a degree in commercial art from George Washington University."

She took a job as production manager for a graphic design firm, where she spent long hours trying to realize the graphic designers' vision in print. She said she has also dabbled in clay, photography, silk-screening, calligraphy and more recently has been making jewelry.

"I've been selling my jewelry at craft shows for several years, and I find that it's very frustrating to have my income depend on shows that only last a couple of days, where high or low sales are determined by weather and other competing events around town. So I had started selling my jewelry through a couple shops in Del Ray, but I knew I needed more outlets."

Miller came at the arts from the business side. Already well known in Del Ray as a supporter of the art community and organizer of the annual autumn show, when she teamed up on A Show of Hands she added business and marketing expertise to the venture.

Miller said that when she and others started the Art on the Avenue show ten years ago "this fulfilled one of my dreams — to promote local artists and give them an avenue to sell their art and to promote the wonderful community of Del Ray and its businesses."

But beyond that annual event, she said, "I've always wanted to do a store that sold original art. And it has now become a reality."

Response from the artists and the community

Both women said they want artists to feel like they have an investment in the store, by allowing their work to be showcased and sold.

Miller: "I had a visit with a neighbor recently who has collected handkerchiefs throughout her life. Her thought was to make them into children's clothing. Now, with the store open, she said she'd love to try it and see if it works."

Having a place "for people to do this is what the store is all about for me," Miller said.

The owners said they have had a positive response from the arts community. Among the artists and crafts specialists coming to discuss arrangement, they said, have been potters, painters, knitters, glass blowers, soap makers, a puppet maker and a maker of garden ornaments from salvaged gravy boats and butter dishes.

Besides the diverse range of offerings, the store takes pieces on consignment, so that its inventory is constantly changing.

But beyond providing a place to sell the products, the owners have additional plans for how A Show of Hands can connect the creators with the broader community.

Wasowski said that "so many of the artists have wonderful stories, about how they became interested in their particular medium and about how they work. We want to give customers an opportunity to hear their stories first-hand, so we plan to have some evening or Sunday afternoon get-togethers at the shop with featured artists."

If You're Going...

A Show of Hands
 2204 Mount Vernon Ave.
 Hours: 11 a.m.-6 p.m. Tue-Wed,
 Fri-Sat;
 11-9 Thursday; 12-5 Sunday
 Closed Mondays
 (703) 683-2905

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