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Kristene Quan/ MEDILL

Rachel Hershinow, owner of Stella, and Vivian Mitchel, a Stella employee, discuss the Evanston boutique.

A treasure trove found in Evanston's Stella

by KRISTENE A. QUAN

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Walk along Central Street in North Evanston and you'll come across a series of mom and pop shops where the nearby Starbucks and Subway are anomalies.

The shopping district west of Green Bay Road holds a number of gems, and if you look closely enough you'll find Stella.

For the past 16 years, the boutique at 2116 Central St. has offered locals and out-of-town visitors alike an assortment of treasures.

Owner Rachel Hershinow, a 43-year-old mother of two, describes it as very much "a chick shop."

The boutique, which offers clothing, gifts, home accessories and jewelry, tallies just under \$500,000 in annual sales.

"My numbers had been fairly consistent since I opened in 2002. I was seeing increases of 10 to 20 percent per year in sales," Hershinow said. Until the recession hit. But then in 2009 and 2010, Stella had its best years since Hershinow took ownership.

A typical Stella customer can be anywhere from 30 years old to 70 years old. "It's funky mommy," Hershinow said.

"My first impression," said Fran Warren, a first-time customer to Stella with a passion for handbags, "was that I saw the great handbags with the block colors in the window and I absolutely fell in love with that."

Warren, who shops at small stores because she finds "more unique" clothes than in big box stores, enjoys the ambience at Stella.

"It seems like a relaxed, friendly atmosphere. It seems very nice," she said. "I feel very comfortable in here, and I like that atmosphere."

Stella, named after its original owner, first opened its doors on Central Street in 1996. The boutique sold only home accessories, gifts and jewelry before the current owner added clothing to its offerings.

Hershinow, a former social services worker and corporate event planner, said she stumbled upon the opportunity of acquiring the shop in 2002.

"It was really 'right place, right time.' I wasn't looking for it, but it was really this opportunity that I couldn't pass up," she explained. "The owner was looking to sell, and I decided I was going to go for it."

The eclectic merchandise that enthralls customers like Warren are all handpicked and bought by Hershinow in the U.S. However, the products may originate anywhere in the world, such as Africa, Israel or South America.

"For me, I've always been more drawn to 'Is it cool?,' 'Is it beautiful?,' 'Is it well-made?,' she explained. "I do like to have a mix of things that are local and from other countries, and things of that nature, but I'm just looking more for the aesthetic."

To differentiate Stella from other boutiques and the big stores, Hershinow tries to offer customers products at reasonable prices, which she noted as being "a big saving point" through the current economy.

"One thing that I've been conscious of, and has been my saving grace, is price point. I can't stand going into boutiques where things are so expensive for a little t-shirt or something," she declared.

A simple t-shirt at Stella was priced at \$26 without tax.

"Prices are reasonable and affordable," said Helen Chan, an occasional Stella customer. "I would say compared to other boutique shops their prices are better."

However, Chan said that when she shops at Stella it is more about style than quality.

"I'm looking very much at the style. They have good style, but quality-wise compared with store brands and brand names, I'm not so sure," she said.

Hershinow kept the original store name despite new ownership because the boutique already had a loyal customer base – an important plus for any business.

"It was a great name, I wasn't going to mess with it," Hershinow noted. "There was a built-in presence and so I turned it into my Stella, and I kept the name."

When the economy plummeted in 2008, Hershinow saw customers close their wallets and turn in the opposite direction as they cut back on extraneous spending. "It was literally like a light switch," she described.

Heading into that holiday season, when sales should be strongest, Stella's sales fell dramatically and were down for the fourth quarter. However, Stella's strong performance in previous quarters enabled it to end the year with a decline of less than 1 percent.

But Hershinow was not taking anything for granted. She would invest in her business after remembering one of her old bosses told her: "You've got to spend money in order to make money."

"After initial panic, and freaking out like everyone else, I thought, 'I'm going to fight like hell because this is my baby and I love it.' I committed to working with a PR firm to get my name out," she said.

Hershinow hired a public relations firm on a six month contract for approximately \$6,000, where she received some television and print media coverage. During this time she also helped to bring a campaign to the Central Street Business Association called "Shop Small Stores."

"The movement had been there prior to, but people were much more conscious of keeping their money locally, and in their local economy," she said.

According to the association's website, for every \$100 spent in locally owned independent stores, \$68 is returned to the community through taxes, payroll and other expenditures.

"That campaign in conjunction with the PR I was doing really brought attention not only to my store but the shopping district in general," Hershinow stated.

Her tenacity paid off. The business rebounded.

Celebrating her 10 year anniversary in business this February, and the renewal of her lease, Hershnow renovated Stella to give it a long-awaited face-lift.

Although the original boutique did not sell clothing, Hershnow found space for the new merchandise in the crowded and congested store: on top of existing products.

Thus, changes to the shop were the first improvements to the space physically. "It allowed me to empty the store and have a clean canvas, and start over and then design it with my merchandise in mind," she commented. "It was time to renew and refresh."

Future growth for the Central Street boutique is not quite clear. "I'm not going to make it a \$1 million store because I don't have the space to blow through that much merchandise," she explained. "But we could get close, and that is my goal."

Stella does not currently offer customers the ability to shop online, which is an option the owner is considering. "Not yet, one day. I'm not sure how to incorporate that because I'm kind of a touch and feel kind of store," Hershnow commented.

"I've felt that once people find me, they'll come back."



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A shirt dress at Stella retails for \$39.

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