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Feature Writing
7 April 2020

Uptown's Hidden Gem(ma)

By Brittany Cline

The sun shines brightly through the windows and into the Gemma Shop. There is an airy, lively feeling when entering this little boutique. A couple candles line the edge of the front counter and pristine white, wooden tables, assisting the brassy, vintage light fixtures in illuminating the open space. A fresh floral scent floats throughout. The boho-style rugs lay underneath the tables, plants in white and brown wicker baskets on either side. Fabrics, patterns, and styles are endless. All these details provide a new, exciting flair to the beloved phrase, “shopping local”. Located on College Avenue of historic uptown Westerville and launched in May of 2016, the shop adds an extra sparkle to the rustic village of small businesses.

“Gemma is Italian for gem,” owner Lauren Williams explains. “I want my customers to feel special.”

Following the Gemma Shop's online presence, Williams would set up “pop-up” shops in various empty retail locations around Columbus. The women coming through loved the brand and what it stood for, thus she decided to open the brick and mortar, which she recalls was “the next big thing”. Her mom was the one who spotted the available space and they both loved the idea of opening the shop in Uptown since she grew up here and still lives here. She runs the shop on the daily, and typically has three to four employees working alongside her on any given day.

9:40 a.m.: A typical day at the Gemma Shop begins when Williams unlocks the glass door. She is sure to see the antique, light brown, hard wood floors are clean and shiny, as well as the white walls with gold-accented furniture. The lavender logo hangs, centered on the wall behind the cash register and is surrounded by scattered, circular, golden polka dots.

10:00 a.m.: Williams and her employees for the day fix mannequins, reorganizing outfits according to what is new in the shop at the time. The team makes sure the tops and dresses that are hanging are straight on the hanger and appear nice for the women walking through, as well as folding clothing neatly on displays and accessories are facing outward.

Though every day brings something different and new, the common theme of most days involve helping women feel good about themselves and ensure they find the clothing that makes them feel the most beautiful. The target customer demographic lies typically within the 20-30 something, young mom, but the clothing sold is trendy, great quality, and well-priced enough to target women of all ages.

When Lauren Kitchen, a sophomore at Otterbein, first entered the shop, Williams greeted her and asked what she was shopping for.

“I’m actually looking for a dress for a graduation party, but I’m not sure what to get,” Kitchen said.

Williams smiled and assured her they had several different summer dresses to choose from for a graduation party. Kitchen followed her to the dress section. Pastel pinks, yellows and blues, flowy sleeves, strapless, bows and ribbons, floral patterns, and even a few jumpsuits hang from wooden hangers on a gold rod below a cursive sign that read “sparkle”.

“The clothing is so cute and classy and worth the price! I had a great experience with the owner. She was so sweet and helped me find exactly what I needed for the grad party I was going to”, Kitchen said of her experience.

5:30 p.m.: The customer rush begins to slow and Williams works to attract customers online through social media accounts like Instagram and Facebook as well as spreads the word in Uptown from positive reviews that build her business. Because the shop is located on a side street and she can't rely on natural foot traffic, she has to do what she can to entice customers to come in, even if it means standing outside as a reminder that they are there.

5:45 p.m.: Williams checks her inventory, using skills she learned for ten years as a buyer for corporate retail and she focuses heavily on making sure it is managed the best and most accurate way. When taking in inventory and deciding what to sell from different clothing vendors, she is conscious of the women she is selling to and what they would be most excited to see in the shop and online.

When the stay-at-home order was issued in the spring, she struggled, as many small businesses in Uptown did. At times of worldwide economic struggle, Williams mitigates the impact by continuing to connect with the customer any way she can and manages her finances as well as possible to continue to pay bills and juggle the shop and online sales. Everyone has to start thinking outside the box when it comes to running a small business to ensure profits continue to happen.

“It's a great time to get creative,” says Williams.

Uptown is greatly impacted by the addition of The Gemma Shop and Westerville in general because uptown did not have a boutique like this before them.

“I think it provides a unique assortment and experience. The customer loves having a shop like Gemma in the mix of businesses in Uptown,” Williams replied when asked about the impact of her shop.

6:50 p.m.: Williams and her employees prepare to close the shop for the day by adjusting the stacks of clothing and tidying around the shop for any last-minute accessories or objects that are out of place. Williams grabs her bags, turns off the lights and walks to the front door with her keys in hand. She thinks of how she had dreamed of owning a boutique, since she was a young child playing store in her bedroom. It took an abundance of hard work and dedication to get where she is now. As she steps outside and locks the door with a smile on her face, she is grateful she took the leap of faith to open the brick and mortar.

“There are a lot of highs and lows, but I love every step”.

Sources:

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