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Sharing home and heart

Fenstermacher transforms house into biannual boutique

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Though still enjoying her summer vacation, Jackie Fenstermacher has a busy fall ahead of her.

Twice a year, Fenstermacher, 57, transforms the two floors of her home on Main Street in Telford into a Victorian boutique, offering from everything from candy to lace pillows to pottery to handmade soaps to jewelry.

“My philosophy is ‘something for everyone at a price they can afford,’” she said.

The two fall and spring shows each last four weeks, and thousands visit the boutique every year, often coming back multiple times in the course of a showing.

Fenstermacher first started the business in 1987, by selling her own handcrafts of appliqués.

“I wanted to be home with my children,” she said. “I made pillows, nativity scenes, wall hangings.”

Over time, the boutique expanded from four rooms being shown in four days, to 13 rooms being shown over four weeks.

“We started positive from the beginning,” Fenstermacher said, who has had no formal business training.

“I just knew early on we needed to have a really good product at reasonable prices,” she said. “We needed to give a wide variety.”

The format for the boutique is like a consignment store - artisans send their items to Fenstermacher, which she arranges and displays in her home, and she receives a percentage of the sales. The artisans are often on hand during the showings.

Fenstermacher also charges customers a \$1 entry fee, which had been donated to charity for the past 20 years.

“After the \$1, you can come in the rest of the time for free,” she said. “Some come back two or three times in a week. What makes me feel good is when people ask when the next show is going to be.”

Setting up for the shows takes three to four weeks, from removing all of Fenstermacher’s personal belongings, to organizing all the crafts, to the arranging and displaying of the items, from floor to ceiling

“Decorating takes two weeks, because I always need to get it just right,” Fenstermacher said with a laugh. The rooms are often color-coordinated or themed.

"I think that's why people come back every year, because we take the time to set up everything so meticulously," she continued. "It's also a visual experience. The customer has to say, 'wow,' when they walk in, or else you can lose them."

Setting up could be quite overwhelming for one person, but the Victorian boutique is largely a family oriented business. The house has been in the Fenstermacher family since it was built in 1863, and today is actually three connected living units, containing two of Fenstermacher's daughters and their families. All the families help out with set-up, and running of the business. Her husband, John, helps in the pay area.

"He's been so supportive, because we still live here while the show is going on," she said. "And, when it is, from when I get up until I go to bed, I'm working the show."

Her favorite part of the business is meeting customers. The mailing list for the boutique is over 35,000 names, reaching all over the Northeast.

"Our customers, our clientele, everyone has been so supportive," Fenstermacher said. "Despite this current economy, we've been blessed with regular customers. They are the nicest people, just so positive. They make me feel it is all worth it."

The boutique also allows her to show off her innate creativity.

"I love to decorate," Fenstermacher said. "I have a good eye for seeing things and how to market them. I don't know how I know this, I just do. I can envision how to incorporate an item."

Fenstermacher acknowledges that it can be hard to give up one's home for two months out of the year, not to mention the time it takes to set up.

However, "I do have six months out of the year I can just enjoy," she said. "It can be intense, but I also have a lot of freedom. I am very blessed."

Fenstermacher said she'll start setting up for the fall show in the beginning of September. The fall show will largely contain Christmas items, including seven themed trees, including a snowmen tree, a gingerbread tree, and a special peace-themed tree, "because of all the uncertainty and unrest in the world right now," she said.

Until that time, Fenstermacher said she has been taking full advantage of the off-season, being with her five grandchildren who live in the house, reading and gardening.

"Just spending time with family and friends," she said.

The four-week fall show runs Oct. 31 to Nov. 25, with a \$1 entry fee. The show hours are Monday through Friday from 10 a.m. to 8 p.m., Saturday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m., and Sunday, 12 p.m. to 5 p.m.

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