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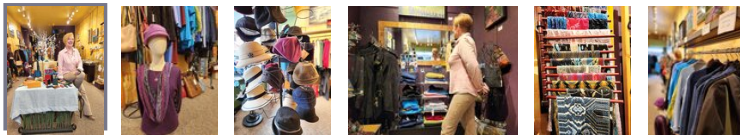
From art to apparel: How MaJe Gallery has survived 25 years

Celebration planned Nov. 16 for venerable Main Street store



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Manya Vee: “We sell a lot of tops and jackets, because layering is key in the Northwest.” (Photo by Brian Soergel/Edmonds Beacon)



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By Brian Soergel
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When MaJe Gallery opened its doors in downtown Edmonds in November 2000, owners Manya Schilperoort (she is known by her business name, Manya Vee) and husband Jeff Stilwell couldn’t have imagined the challenges ahead.

Less than a year later came 9/11 – and with it, a swift downturn in the arts market. “That beautiful pre-9/11 market for the arts just tanked,” Vee said. “But we kept it going.”

Back then, MaJe Gallery was primarily an art space, featuring paintings, sculpture, and one-of-a-kind wearable art, particularly jewelry designed by Vee herself. “We were still pretty new, still finding our footing,” she said.

But just as business began to grow, the 2008 recession hit. “It really hit hard. We had so many zero-sales days in a row, it was scary. I thought I might have to close and go work in an office.”

Then came her sidewalk epiphany. “I stood outside and watched people walking by. The only shopping bags I saw were from clothing stores. So I thought, maybe that’s where the demand is.”

That decision would redefine MaJe Gallery. Vee began carrying clothing – but not just any clothing. “I didn’t want to do mass-produced stuff. I wanted small designers, small companies – made in America if I could, or fair trade if not.”

That pivot not only kept the business alive through the recession – it gave MaJe Gallery a unique identity. “That saved me,” Vee said. “It really did.”

The slow fashion difference

Today, 25 years later, clothing remains the store’s top seller. Vee describes her aesthetic as “slow fashion,” a deliberate contrast to the “fast fashion” of cheaply made, disposable clothes. “Fast fashion is the stuff you wear twice and throw away,” Vee said. “Slow fashion is well-made, classic, built to last.”

She gestures toward her own outfit – a black top and pants from the Los Angeles-based brand Testimony. “I’ve had these pants for 10 years. They still look great.”

Testimony, along with Olivia by Habitat Clothes, forms the backbone of her clothing lines. “Both are comfortable, very well-made, and not ostentatious,” Vee said. “You’re not going to see three other people on the street wearing the same thing.”

Most pieces are made in small batches, and Vee typically carries just one of each size. “People have learned to come back often if they want their size,” she said. “Because with small companies, sometimes I can’t get the same item again.”

While her prices are higher than big-box competitors – Testimony pants start around \$145 and jackets hover near \$200 – Vee said her customers understand the value. “They’re investing in quality. You don’t need a dozen cheap pieces that wear out fast. You buy something beautiful that lasts for years.”

Enduring through the years

MaJe Gallery has weathered multiple economic storms. The pandemic brought another string of “zero days,” Vee said, but government aid made a big difference. “Unlike the recession, we actually had some help. It made it much easier to survive.”

Recently, the store has had one of its best years in a decade. “About a year and a half ago, I took a good, hard look at what I was doing,” Vee said. “I realized I had too many different product lines. I decided to narrow my focus and expand what was already working. That’s been the winning formula.”

Besides clothing, MaJe Gallery continues to showcase art – paintings and sculptures mingle with the apparel. There’s jewelry from more than 40 designers, including Vee herself.

“We sell a lot of tops and jackets, because layering is key in the Northwest. And we’re known as the hat place, too.”

Her jewelry designs are crafted in a home studio. “On my days off, I’m doing admin work or making jewelry,” she said. “It’s just me. I take the photos, run the website, and do all the buying. I get no sleep.”

A legacy of art in Edmonds

Vee is a central figure in Edmonds’ arts scene. She and her husband co-founded both the Edmonds Art Walk in 2002 and the Edmonds Mural Society in 2007. “The Art Walk was about giving artists a free place to show their work – and bringing more people downtown,” she said. “It was a win-win for everyone.”

The Mural Society grew out of her desire to lift spirits during the recession. “Everyone was depressed, so we thought, let’s do murals.” Since then, Edmonds’ murals have become a beloved part of the city’s identity – prime placements for selfies and group shots.

Vee credits Edmonds’ collaborative spirit among business owners as another key to her store’s longevity. “We really try not to overlap brands. If another shop is already carrying something, I’ll check before ordering it myself. We support each other.”

MaJe Gallery (<https://majegallery.com/>) is open from noon to 4 p.m., Tuesday through Thursday, and from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m., Friday and Saturday. Vee will celebrate 25 years in Edmonds on Nov. 16 from noon to 3 p.m. at the store at 409 Main St. The public is invited.

“I love what I do,” Vee said. “It’s not a lucrative business, but it’s rewarding.”

She said never expected to make it this far. “It’s been a rollercoaster – 9/11, the recession, the pandemic. But we survived every one of them. Twenty-five years on Main Street. That’s something to celebrate.”

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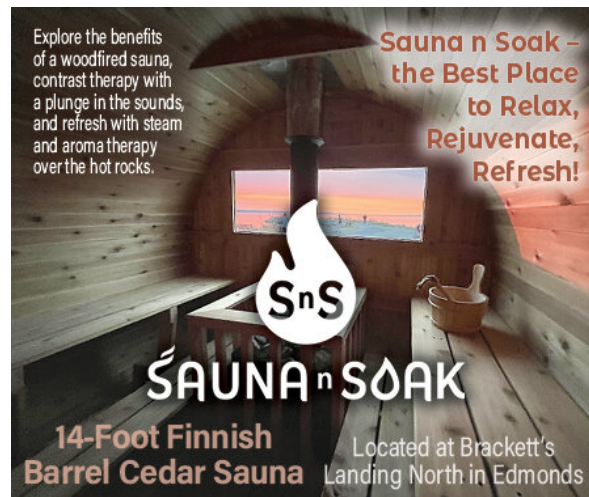


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