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The PULSE of Whatcom County

Space Advocate finds new opportunities through WBA membership



Mary Louise Van Dyke

Tristen Dolores' interior design journey began as a child while helping her parents with home renovations, to studying abroad, working for major Washington state organizations and launching Space Advocate LLC in Whatcom County. Photo courtesy of Tristen Dolores.

Space Advocate Studio specializes in commercial interior design and planning expertise for small to midsize businesses, nonprofit and public-sector clients in Whatcom County.

Services focus on interior renewal and branding projects, tenant improvements and facility and space-planning studies.

"It's always been a dream in my mind to end up in this position and share my expertise locally," said Tristen Dolores, the company's founder and lead designer.

Her background includes positions in the capital planning department at Western Washington University and as director of occupancy and interiors for Kaiser Permanente Washington.

Dolores recently moved the business out of her garage to new quarters at 40 Bellwether Way in Bellingham. The transition marks the company's growth as Whatcom County's small businesses keep expanding. The Bellwether location is home to both the design studio and The Interiors Dept., a free-access, commercial-only tenant improvement resource hub for designers,

builders and business owners, according to the Space Advocate website.

She grew up in Custer, an only girl with three older brothers.

"Every house I've ever lived in has always been a remodel starting from the first one," she said. "As my parents were building and renovating, I was the one handing my dad the drill. I wasn't the strongest of the kids, but I was the one who was paying attention and anticipating the needs."

By the time she graduated from Ferndale High School, she knew exactly what finishes and methods were needed to redesign or renovate house interiors. From there she attended school abroad in London, graduating in 2009 with a degree in interior design from the American Intercontinental University and a degree in interior architecture from London South Bank University. The economy's collapse at that time led her to return home to Whatcom County, where she worked in interior design sales before accepting an interior design position in 2014 with A-1 Builders & Adaptations Design Studio.

That job propelled her into doing comprehensive architectural and permit drawing to serve design-build projects. That experience and the knowledge gained eventually led to positions with Western and Kaiser. She completed a graduate degree in interior design at Ball State University in 2023.

Dolores credits working for the public sector as the foundation for the professional she is today, having developed a deep interest in public environments and commercial design.

After leaving Western, she worked as a consultant on projects around Washington state and for Kaiser.

"After driving the I-5 corridor every day to serve these large institutions, I realized there had to be a better way to serve the industry. As a solo parent of three boys, I'm raising my family here in Whatcom County," she said. "So, I crafted this business enterprise to find a home for my skillsets and knowledge amongst my community."

She launched Space Advocate Studio in 2024 and began building a customer base

and design team. Very quickly, Dolores realized there was a gap in Whatcom County that allowed smaller commercial projects to get lost in the shuffle while competing against companies with larger projects.

Dolores described her role as being a bridge to help small businesses connect with resources, including subcontractors and other professionals who have the expertise to meet their needs, such as budget and timeline. Consultations begin with a space needs conversation and the determination of functional space requirements and project goals.

“My goal is to be the county’s commercial interiors connector,” she said. “Having such expansive industry experience and a regional knowledge base, I can make the connections our local small businesses need from within our community and bring innovation to our local interiors.”

Space Advocate’s projects include working with future tenants to plan a commercial floor for the second phase of the Millworks project on the Bellingham waterfront.

Dolores joined Whatcom Business Alliance in 2024. “I’ve learned we live in a strong in-person, participation-based business community in Whatcom County, and you have to find the right community to establish your presence,” she said. “The only community in Whatcom County that has been both comprehensive and inclusive of all the business industry as a whole was WBA.”

Participating in and attending WBA offerings has opened up new client opportunities. Marr’s Heating & Air Conditioning became a client through connecting at a WBA event.

Dolores hopes Space Advocate will become better known in the Whatcom County business community through WBA — and, possibly, achieve a future WBA Business of the Year award.

She plans to keep focused on Whatcom County. “I don’t want to aspire to become a big company,” she said, “but I want Space Advocate Studio and The Interiors Dept. to be a big benefit to my community.” ■



Tristen Dolores is making plans to create a welcoming environment for clients, visitors and staff at the company’s new headquarters at 40 Bellwether Way on Bellingham’s waterfront. Image courtesy of Tristen Dolores.



Tristen Dolores’ projects at Western Washington University included a revamping of the campus’s Multicultural Center with bright orange color accents. Photo courtesy of Tristen Dolores.