

MEET YOUR (BEAD) MAKER

A jeweler turns her passion for beading into a viable business

AMONG THE SOFT HUM OF blow dryers from the Beach Salon, rhythmic twisting of the dancers from the Missouri Contemporary Ballet studio and lingering scent of espresso from the Dande Café sits The Bead Gallery, a pretty little storefront with a pink-and-white-striped sign bearing the gallery's name.

Four years ago, Jessica Otterbacher opened The Bead Gallery at Orr Street Art Warehouse with \$100 in capital and four tables. Initially, she used the space as her studio, where she strung jewelry and helped others make their own. "I've always had a love for jewelry and pretty things," she says. "So this just kind of happened."

Otterbacher describes the journey that led her to owning The Bead Gallery as fateful.

She says she wasn't too concerned with a career until she blew out her knee as a walk-on to the University of Toledo's soccer team. "Stuff just didn't happen the way it was supposed to," Otterbacher says. "But God has never led me in the wrong direction."

While injured, she discovered a talent besides scoring goals and bicycle kicks. She found jewelry making.

Before she finally opened The Bead Gallery, Otterbacher worked for Kay Jewelers and Jared The Galleria of Jewelry, held a handful of jewelry repair side jobs and opened a studio.

Three years ago, Julie Kinworthy was introduced to The Bead Gallery by her mother and has been hooked ever since.



Jessica Otterbacher, owner and operator of The Bead Gallery, continues to grow her business. She initially opened her shop with only four tables and \$100. *Photographs by KELLY COLEMAN*

"I've gone in and chatted with Jessica about the piece that I'm working on, and she'll give me tips and tricks and ideas right then and there," Kinworthy says.

The gallery has not always been brightened with a vintage, feminine decor and touches such as distressed wood dressers, handmade earrings hanging from white wooden frames and rows of eclectic glass cups filled with an assortment of beads and sterling silver.

"If you look at the pictures of the store from two years ago, I just didn't have the budget," she says. "(The store) is growing, and it's very healthy."

Since opening the gallery, Otterbacher has increased the number of tables and dressers to nine, and display shelves now hang from the walls.

Customer and hobbyist Anne Johnson says the store is distinct compared to craft stores like Michaels and Hobby Lobby because Otterbacher is an artist and gives customers advice about their creations.

"I think you are missing something when you don't go to a local business with a local artist supporting a local

economy," Johnson says. "It's that one-on-one relationship you develop with a business. There's an intangible that makes you want to come back. They encourage you even if you don't have the skill. It's inspiring and contagious, and you just want to be a part of it."

Otterbacher says she has more empathy for her customers after suffering a miscarriage a year and a half ago.

"Sometimes, when people want to make jewelry, they are trying to get away from some stuff," Otterbacher says. "And I can relate to that."

These days, she works more than 70 hours per week. Otterbacher says she just focuses on her kids, career and the gallery.

"Jessica is really an inspiration," Kinworthy says. "Here she is, a small business owner, mother to younger children, busy wife to a busy husband, so much like all of us. Yet, she still is able to do what she loves — her passion — and to encourage others to advance their own love of the art of beading."

✦ ALAINA LANCASTER



Metal earrings and necklaces strung with various stones, pearls and beads saturate the surfaces of tables and dressers at The Bead Gallery. Otterbacher also repairs and improves customers' damaged jewelry.