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Artists Bring Life to Local Shopping Centers

By Sophie Braccini



Art behind empty storefronts at Rheem Shopping Center in Moraga Photo Wenda Pyman

In two Lamorinda shopping centers, the Rheem Center in Moraga and Theater Square in Orinda, artists are creating new life and attracting the community to areas that had been a bit desolated. It just took an artistic vision and some sound business sense.

Somber windows adorned with colorful artistic creations enliven the Moraga Rheem shopping center. Artists are hanging a show in the windows of empty storefronts adjoining the Moraga Art Gallery at 570 Center Street. "It's a great partnership for the artists and the Center as it helps promote the gallery while filling the ugly, empty spaces," says Wenda Pyman of the Moraga Art Gallery. "It already has made a difference ... as we were working (setting up the show in August), passersby frequently stopped to look

at the art and applaud our efforts," she adds, "the works cheer up the area and lifts the spirits of the viewers."

Artist Nancy Slack noted the difference as well. "Some people told me that they had never noticed the gallery before," she said, "it encourages shoppers to walk from one end of the shopping center to the other and can only be beneficial to the small businesses located between the anchors."

The displays will change every eight to ten weeks and continue until the spaces are leased. Kimco Realty Corporation, the owner of the Center, does not charge the gallery for displaying the art in empty stores.

Theater Square in Orinda has a reputation as being a challenging place for the businesses located in the

back portion of the center. But that didn't stop Allison McCrady from taking over a previous art gallery to displaying her work and the creations of some 20 artists. "It all happened organically," explains McCrady, "I have been an Orinda artist for ten years. At the beginning of 2008 the city asked me for a painting representing the city for a poster. The firm managing Theater Square invited me to display the original in their space, and I agreed. Other artists proposed to join in and I supervised the extension of the project."

In fact the scheme grew so well that McCrady now has two spaces in the Square, one of them being a framing studio she owns with a partner. "When I started to represent artists and opened the store 1 1/2 years ago, the recession just started, I really questioned my decision, knowing that art is not considered a first necessity item." But McCrady is as much a businesswoman as she is an artist. Before turning to art 10 years ago, she was an investment banker and she believes that the business savvy she developed then is what makes her succeed now.

"To succeed in any community you have to understand it well and adapt to its demands," she says, "when I started in the middle of a recession, I decided to cut my prices

and let my customers know it. My main goal is to allow people to enjoy art everyday, whether it's by coming to the gallery, or buying something that will make people feel good and fit their budget." She believes that this adaptability is one of the elements that have made her successful where others have failed.

"This location has been very good for me," adds McCrady, "the place is beautiful, people enjoy seeing the art, and the company that manages the Square has been very supportive; they want the community to visit the Square and the community is coming."

The Lamorinda Art Association Open Studio on October 17 and 18 is another way that artists in the three cities will enliven the community. The event will kick off at the Moraga Gallery, and McCrady's boutique will be part of the tour. For more information go to: www.laaopenstudios2009.blogspot.com.

Lamorinda Weekly business articles are intended to inform the community about local business activities, not to endorse a particular company, product or service.

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business briefs

La Boulange to Settle in Lafayette Early 2010
A final contract has been signed with Bay Bread, the group that owns San Francisco French Bakeries and eateries called "La Boulange." Signing with a new tenant is all about retail strategy for Craig Semmelmeier, the retail real estate broker who found tenants for the Mercantile building along Mount Diablo Boulevard. Semmelmeier felt the property needed that kind of café business to complement and enhance the business dynamic of the building. La Boulange anticipates an opening at the beginning of 2010.

New Marketing Director at Aegis, 950 Country Club Drive, Moraga
Aegis of Moraga made a recent addition to its management team. Virginia Sargent is the new Marketing Director, taking over for Candice Moses, a familiar face in the Lamorinda community. "I can't say I'm replacing Candice, but I'm thrilled to be following in her footsteps," said Sargent, who has entrepreneurial experience, as well as a corporate sales and marketing background. Sargent plans to continue the Aegis of Moraga tradition of supporting community activities, such as the annual Moraga Pear Festival, and hosting community meetings and events. Reach her at 925-377-7900.

Chow Bella Offering Cooking Classes in Lafayette
Elaine Smit's business is booming, from catering to birthday parties to cooking classes. She will be expanding her range having secured a new location, Founders Grove in Lafayette, where she will manage cooking classes, birthday parties and special events this fall. "Located behind Lafayette Christian Church, Founders Grove is a beautiful building, recently remodeled by the church, now made available to the public for various events, such as weddings, receptions, meetings, etc. The kitchen is new, with great appliances, stove and three ovens. I couldn't have asked for a better location," says Smit. For more information and registration go to www.chowbella.net.

News from the Three Chambers of Commerce Lafayette

- Lafayette Art & Wine Festival on Saturday, September 19 and Sunday, September 20 in Downtown Lafayette
- Business Issues/Government Affairs Committee Open Meeting on Friday September 25 at 8:00 a.m. in the Lafayette Chamber Conference Room.

Moraga

- Chamber meeting on Friday, September 25, 7:30 a.m. at the Hacienda de las Flores

Orinda

- Orinda Restaurant Tour on Tuesday, September 29, from 5:00 to 8:30 p.m. The fun will start at Theater Square with appetizers from 5:00 p.m. to 6:00 p.m. The Restaurant Tour itself is from 6:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m. and will include favorite local restaurants, with dessert from 8:00 p.m. to 8:30 p.m. The event benefits the Orinda Schools. Tickets should be purchased in advance for \$30.00 per person; tickets at the door will cost \$35.00. Purchase your ticket online at www.orindachamber.org/OrindaRestaurantTour2009.htm.

If you have a business brief to share, please contact **Sophie Braccini** at sophie@lamorindaweekly.com

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