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Pittsford shop is still a bead-stringing success

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Beads 'N Things, a specialty retailer in Pittsford, has evolved during its 40 years in business, and the changes are helping the store do well in a tough economy. From the original shop, which sold beads made of wood and clay in the 1960s and 1970s, the store became a bead and craft shop during the 1980s and now focuses on high-end beads and supplies.

"I thought we would feel a pinch" because of the economy, said Sheila Grabowski, the mom in the mother-daughter team that now operates Beads 'N Things. "But things have been wonderful." Beading classes are booked through mid-October as customers begin making gift-giving plans for the holiday season. "People would rather put their own creativity and personal touch into making beaded jewelry rather than buying something already made," said Ann Grabowski, a Rochester resident.

Sheila, 63, of Rush is the third person to own and operate the 1,100-square-foot store at 50 State St. in Northfield Commons. She took over on Nov. 1, 1984, after spotting a business-for-sale ad. At the time, the Bead 'N Things was a bead and craft business. A former real estate agent, Sheila was an avid knitter and always wanted to own a shop. She knew about crafts, but nothing about beads.

A shift in customer needs later led to the return of the beads. Customers were coming in seeking restoration work on antique lamps and wanting embroidery bead stitching on bridal and pageant gowns. "It dawned on me it would be a good idea to go back into it," Grabowski said.

By 1995, the business returned to being a full-service bead shop that also offers custom jewelry, repairs, beadwork classes and instructional books. The Grabowskis declined to disclose the store's revenues.

Ann, 33, a former human resources manager for Xerox Corp., joined her mother in April to manage the business, the shop's Web site and the nearly 3,000-member rewards program, the Beads 'N Things Bead Club. Ann had worked in the shop while growing up.

Custom beaded jewelry is big. Ann recently made earrings for a Florida bride-to-be and necklaces and earrings for her seven bridesmaids. Jewelry repair is also a large part of the business.

The business has grown because of the Web site Ann started in December 2001, which then provided only basic information about the shop. A redesigned site was unveiled in June, featuring more photos of the shop and beading items. It has generated phone calls and e-mails from California, Pennsylvania and Ohio. While the products are not sold on the Web site, "we can accommodate people's (long-distance) requests," Ann said.

The Grabowskis said the majority of their customers are women, though there are a few men who do custom jewelry and fine beadwork. Most, but not all, of Beads 'N Things' customers live in the Rochester area.

"It's amazing the talent of our customers," Sheila said.

Molly Colegrove of Canandaigua has been a customer of Beads 'N Things for 40 years. Colegrove was 7 when she first visited the shop with her mother. "Beads were big in the Sixties," she said. "They had the hippie beads and the macrame planters."

Colegrove, who teaches fiber arts workshops around the country, said the Grabowskis have not only kept pace with trends, but also stayed ahead of them, offering items not commonly found, such as seed beads, tiny beads used in weaving and embroidery. Colegrove said Sheila Grabowski taught her how to bead crochet.

"The store is a friendly place to go and shop," Colegrove said. "It's much more personal than shopping over the Internet.

"I like their enthusiasm. If they don't have something, they will try and find it for me."

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