

Artistic, economic boost to brighten downtown

Calico Rabbit, Dancing Dogs bring unique arts, crafts and business to boost downtown Plainwell

BY SHARON STURDEVANT
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PLAINWELL—Calico rabbits and dancing dogs may seem like unlikely business partners. But the fanciful animals factor into the names of two new businesses growing a niche market within the community. "Bringing arts businesses downtown is definitely a good economic tool," Plainwell Downtown Economic Development Coordinator Emillie Schada

said. "It brings new benefits and opportunities for the residents and it brings people here to find things that can't be found anywhere else."

Those unique shopping opportunities in Plainwell now include The Calico Rabbit craft mall, where individual vendors are selling varied arts, crafts and other products, and the Dancing Dogs Quilt Shop and Art Glass Studio, being developed by a fused-glass artist. "This mall definitely brings people into our community," said Zeida Schippers, who opened The Calico Rabbit at 102 N. Main St. in February. "We even get some older men who come in just to see what has happened in this space that used to house a hardware store."

Carol Trospier bought her studio space at 119 N. Main St. during a real estate auction in January, and it brings people here to find things that can't be found anywhere else.

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The ventures of both Trospier and Schippers join several other unique businesses—like Another Man's Treasure and workshop, BBMoon.com and Brandy's Boutique — that already fill downtown storefronts and help keep downtown occupancy high. Schada said. But the artistic-

based ventures also impact the overall atmosphere downtown. "We've got more creative people with creative ideas bringing a new vitality," Schada said. "And having a critical mass of arts and cultural activities has been proven to bring a higher quality of life to an area."

Having a craft mall provides a chance for some area residents, like Ruth Szymczak, to sell their wares and other area residents, like Michelle Smith, to shop. "I'm really glad to have a place like this in Plainwell," Smith said after exploring the rows of small booths filled with candles, jewelry, wood-crafts, organic pet treats and other items during her first trip into the Calico Rabbit.

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Plainwell resident Sandy Cowels explores The Calico Rabbit Craft Mall. Dozens of crafters and artists rent booth space to sell their wares inside the store that opened February in downtown Plainwell. SHARON STURDEVANT/SPECIAL TO HOMETOWN GAZETTE

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"I might eventually explore renting space to sell unique handbags I make but I know I will definitely be a repeat customer," she said. Szymczak pooled resources with other members of "Janie's Ladies" to fill one booth with cloth wallets, crocheted dishcloths and scrubies, kids bath towels, and photographs incorporated into greeting cards. "We all quilt but we also do other crafts," Szymczak said, "so we decided to give this a shot." The group made

enough during its first month to pay the booth rent and still turn a small profit. Szymczak said. "But I am really impressed with the diversity that's here," she said. "You can check out all the categories today then come tomorrow and see something you missed."

That description pleases Schippers who worked with her husband, Richard, to create 135 booths within the 3,500-square-foot mall space tucked in a side part of what used to be Lull's Ace Hardware. The store is open six days a week. "I really strive to have a variety of items available," Schippers said. "I try



Ruth Szymczak, of Plainwell, prepares items to sell in a booth at the Calico Rabbit Craft Mall. She and other "Janie's Ladies" are among dozens of crafters and artists who rent the booth space to sell their wares inside the store that Zeida Schippers operates in downtown Plainwell. SHARON STURDEVANT/SPECIAL TO HOMETOWN GAZETTE

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Each juried vendor rents booth space for either six or 12 months and then stocks the display at their convenience with wares they've created and priced. Schippers oversees the day-to-day operational details like staffing the store, paying the utility bills, advertising the venture and making sure each vendor is paid for any sales. Across the street, Trospier already has a

little scary starting a new business in this economy but I'm so excited that I get a chance to practice the ideas that I teach."

Right now, Trospier is working to clean up and renovate the storefront — named after a Mexican terra cotta sculpture depicting a pany, your soul to heaven — so it can eventually hold quilting fabrics, books and other notions. "I hope to open that part of the operation sometime next spring," Trospier said.

"I have done a lot of fused glass work, taken some training and sold a few trunings," Trospier said. "But still have my day job with the state working on cultural and economic development projects. It is a