

# Strength in numbers

## Co-op nurtures entrepreneurs

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After 15 years in the graphic design business, Petra Geiger started looking for a creative outlet.

"I found myself spending 12-hour days in front of the computer," Geiger said. "I started looking for ways to be creative, so I started making handbags. I knew how to sew – my mom taught me as a kid – and I started sewing again in the evenings."

Once friends saw the handbags, Geiger, who lived in San Francisco at the time, was encouraged to sell her wares at summer festivals.

"They did really well, and I met a ton of other people who were doing the same thing who were really good at what they were doing," Geiger said.

But selling her handmade handbags at festivals, fairs and boutiques wasn't a steady outlet, and Geiger began searching for something more.

"I thought, what's really needed is something in between selling at market and then selling wholesale, where people can kind of develop their products and grow and incubate in a safe environment, but sell directly to their customers," Geiger said. "I think I walked into an antique mall one day and thought, this is the right idea."

And so Beehive Co-op, based on a business model of sourcing product from local and regional designers, was born.

"I think that people are tired of going to the mall and seeing the same thing over and over again," Geiger said. "It's become a huge part of our culture and I think finally people are rebelling against that, so they

want a connection to what they buy. There's nothing like picking up something handmade or designed by somebody locally that you can hear the story about it and make the connection with what you're buying. I think people are definitely looking for that, it's a trend that I think is here to stay."

It was 2004, and Geiger was living in Atlanta with her husband and elementary school-aged children. She found her new store, which rented space to local designers, was a success.

"Ultimately it became a real community hub for designers and that was really gratifying," Geiger said.

In October 2007, she decided to franchise the concept and sold the original Beehive Co-op to Viviana Campbell.

"Beehive is a co-op of local designers and I think what it does for the community is provide local artisans an opportunity to have a true store where they can market themselves, sell their items, meet their customers and build a small company," Campbell said.

This year, Geiger moved to Croton-on-Hudson and planned to open a second Beehive Co-op Sept. 22 at 337 E. Main St. in Mount Kisco.

"I'm looking for everything that's product-based: apparel, jewelry, ceramics, kids items, soap, candles, anything that's handmade or made in really small runs," Geiger said.

Designers can rent space in the store and merchandise and market their own products.

It's a six-month rental agreement. Designers can opt to work at the store a few hours a week for a lesser price point.



Petra Geiger, owner of Beehive Co-op in Mount Kisco.

Designers can choose from 15 large boutique spaces or smaller tables and four-way stands.

Geiger said she thinks in Westchester, much like Atlanta, the designers are "all spread out in a wide geographical area and kind of working on their own."

Leslie Latto, also a Croton-on-Hudson resident, designs gemstone jewelry and is scheduled to start selling her creations at

Beehive.

A full time legal secretary in Manhattan, Latto works on building her jewelry company, LML D'zynz, in her free time.

"This is really my first real break," Latto said. "I'm hoping that this will really give me an opportunity to expand my customer base and show my jewelry to a plethora of people."

Latto sells her jewelry at fairs and small shops, but "it's very difficult to get out there and find your niche."

"The craft fairs, holiday fairs and boutiques are designed for a limited customer base, and it's very competitive," Latto said.

Geiger said the price points at the store are "pretty good, because you don't have that double mark-up" as there is in retail. Although it's been hard work, Geiger believes in being very hands-on with her new store.

"You have to really be prepared for a lot of hard work and a lot of rolling up your sleeves and doing it yourself," Geiger said of owning her own business. "Businesses that succeed are the ones where the owners do a lot of the stuff themselves and they're not afraid to work long hours and put in the time. You can't start a business and hire a million people to do everything for you."

As for the future of Beehive Co-op, "I do want it to be a bigger concept," Geiger said. "I think that's what makes it exciting for me. As a bigger concept we can meet with larger retail and really open doors for small, fledging designers. Potentially if we've got a Beehive in major cities across the United States we can give someone who's got a great product and who's really working hard to get it out there an outlet."