



Downtown Oshkosh Retailers

MEET THE WOMEN WHO ENERGIZE OSHKOSH'S DOWNTOWN BUSINESS DISTRICT AS THEY SATISFY CUSTOMERS' TASTE FOR TREATS AND PASSION FOR FASHION



Deb Allison-Aasby
Fine Country Gourmet, Inc.

What inspired you to open your business? Fine Country Gourmet, Inc., is actually the third business I started, however, the reasons behind starting each one are the same.

I wanted to put myself in a position where family came first.

If I want to have my children, parents, siblings, and spouse be part of my work day I can. If I want to schedule around family activities I can.

Recently, I needed to step away from the business for about a month to be with my dad until he passed away. It made all the

challenges of owning a business worth it.

What have you been doing to make it in this economy? Developing additional legs of the business. In addition, I spend a fair amount of time during the year going to retail shows that are not in our immediate area.

You would be amazed how many people will come to you if they enjoy your products and customer service.

What do you like about Oshkosh? I come from a very small town on Lake Superior and the friendliness of the people in Oshkosh reminds me of home.

Also, Oshkosh has amazing and beautiful natural resources. It is a great location to do business.

What have been your greatest challenges so far? Being spread too thin at times.

It is a continuous balancing act to make sure you are fully engaged in your family, community and business.

All three areas are so important and need attention. I wish there were many more hours in the day.



Sandy Prunty and Debra Toman
AtomicKatz Vintage

What inspired you to open your business? A love of antiques and unique

fashions. Opportunity presented itself in a manner that could not be denied.

What is the best thing about owning your business? The thrill of the hunt ... finding treasures in estates, auctions or buying from people who come into the store.

Learning their story about the article of clothing and/or furniture and then sharing that story with the next generation who falls in love with that article.

This is a joyful sharing of personal history that accompanies each and every sale.

What have you been doing to make it in this economy? Advertise, advertise, advertise. Finding new methods of formal and informal marketing. Asking my cus-

tomers what works for them and seeing if I can apply that to my business.

Why do you enjoy your career? Actually this is my second career. I retired as a registered nurse two years ago to become more involved in AtomicKatz, but working with the customers to find that special item that IS IT cannot be duplicated.

I tell people that we have the good, the bad and the ugly and cannot tell you which is which as it is open to personal taste. When someone finds the "good one" it is a great feeling to have helped them and to share the story of the article.

Right now, we have just purchased and cleaned a 1920s wedding dress that is in fabulous shape. It is a beautiful steel blue

gray with light coral velvet trim.

If you could change one thing about your profession, what would it be? We could charge East and West Coast prices for our items. The thing about vintage is that everything is one-of-a-kind and it is very difficult to find that period piece. When our coast customers come in they keep saying, "I can't believe how cheap this is."

What has been your most memorable experience as a business owner? Refer to greatest achievements, and breaking the barrier that vintage is "thrifty."

Vintage stands alone, as each piece is chosen to represent the best of that decade and is lovingly cleaned, restored and put out for sale.

Standing, left to right: Deb Allison-Aasby, Sandy Prunty, Karen Brey, Cath Hursh, Chanda Anderson, Michelle Pieterick.

Seated, left to right: Pam Elmer, Kathy Sakschek, Debra Toman, Karen Frisch, Kia Wright, Karen Kassube-Moxon.

Photo Location: Oshkosh Convention Center. Photo by Kristi Kemp, Beau d'Art Photography, Kimberly.





Karen Brey and Kia Wright Soiree

What inspired you to open your business? I've always been drawn to historic downtowns, whether they were filled with abandoned, run-down buildings or thriving.

I (Kia) lived in lower Michigan for 6 years prior to owning Soiree near an area that had become a central drug line between Chicago and Detroit. However, this community was beginning a large overhaul.

Many buildings were being salvaged, renovated and turned into new businesses. This was my first choice for opening Soiree but realized I couldn't do it alone.

I moved back to Wisconsin and convinced my mother it would be a great venture.

What do you like about Oshkosh? Growing up in Pickett, a lot of time was spent in surrounding cities so Oshkosh and Ripon became second homes to my family. You could say I have an attachment to these places.

There is a rising interest in the architecture of our downtown and a lot of people are making sure it stays that way. We really have a unique story in downtown Oshkosh with the underground tunnels from The Grand to the historic Athenen Hotel and the many fires that swept through our town.

More recently it really seems the younger generation in Oshkosh has embraced the historical value of downtown and is determined to make it once again the central shopping district.

What have been your greatest challenges? Overcoming the negativity that comes with being in an area that has struggled to get back to where it once was. It's difficult to get people to remember that downtown is where it all began, before big box stores or outlet malls.

Fortunately there are still businesses that have been able to overcome this hurdle and have remained downtown for 20 to 40 years.

I'm not sure if we'll be able to make that kind of impact but I'm definitely proud to say that we are here now.



**Cath Hursh
Guided Lily**

What inspired you to open your business? It was a lifelong "impossible dream." When the chance came, I jumped at it.

What have you been doing to make it in this economy? Advertising in multiple channels, having lots of sales and doing more advertising.

Why do you enjoy your career? I genuinely like clothes, jewelry, etc., especially finding unusual items you don't see anywhere else.

What have been your greatest challenges so far? Winding down my real estate business so I can spend enough time on The Guided Lily and carefully building a new brand for my dress shop without losing 2,000-plus prior customers.

A third challenge is government paperwork and fourth is the economy.

What have been your greatest achievements so far? I seem to have an eye for what looks good on people, especially combinations they wouldn't normally try. I love it when a customer says, "Wow, this really looks great on me!"

In addition, my style shows have been extremely well received.



**Chanda Anderson
Caramel Crisp & Cafe**

What is the best thing about owning your business? Many people may not realize that owning your own business is a 24/7 commitment.

Usually I spend the few hours I get away from the store thinking about what needs to be done, or coming up with new ideas to try and get sales up a little bit more.

All that effort makes it that much more satisfying when customers say they'll be back soon with friends, or that they like the store, or that I made their day.

Any time the store gets a compliment like that, you can take pride in knowing that you did that, you made that person happy, and that you made it successful. That is a feeling unlike any other. It makes all that time and energy 100 percent worth it!

What do you like about Oshkosh? Having lived in Oshkosh my whole life, it becomes like an adopted child.

You nurture it, you worry about it, you enjoy watching it grow.

Oshkosh has had some tough times but it is starting to grow again. I am excited I get to be part of the growth of downtown.

What have been your greatest challenges so far? Every day, the greatest challenge for me is the unknown, and dealing with things outside my area of control. Because we opened a business in the begin-

ning of the recession we don't really have a grasp on what a normal day is. There is no pattern, no routine, no schedule.

One great Monday does not mean that they will all be great. Just because you sold 300 caramel apples yesterday does not mean that next year on that day you will sell 300 caramel apples.



**Michelle Pieterick
dainty daisies**

What inspired you to open your business? My customers. I have been selling in the area for more than six years.

I found my customers wanting a place to find my clothing and accessories other than just at shows. Before opening the retail location I was just selling at craft shows and the local farmer's markets (while working out of my home).

I still take my goods on the road. I sell at the Appleton farm market in summer and I do a couple shows in a year.

What have you been doing to make it in this economy? I have been creating lower-price items, but fortunately I have not seen much of a difference in my sales.

My customers come to me looking for unique quality handmade items and we are known for our affordable prices.

What do you like about Oshkosh? I grew up in a small town near Madison and the thing I love the most about Oshkosh is that it feels like a small town with the convenience of a bigger city.

Why do you enjoy your career? I love what I do. I hand-make about half the things available in my shop.

I love making a skirt, headband or purse that someone falls in love with and just has to have.

Knowing it was made by me and made someone happy is the best feeling.

What advice would have for women interested in business ownership? Do what you love and be unique. My customers tell me all the time that my passion shows in my work and I get excited when talking about what I do.



**Pam Elmer
Christensen's Lingerie & Swimwear**

What inspired you to open your business? The business has been established since 1932. I was thrilled that this is a store started by women, run by women, for women.

What have you been doing to make

it in this economy? Still offering the great service we are known for.

When we fit a woman for a bra, we are pretty much with them every step of the way. We explain how the fit is right, or not, for their body type. It's very frustrating trying to figure that out for yourself, and if left up to their own devices, most women will give up because of having to get dressed and then undressed to try more on.

We bring everything in her size right to her dressing room and we are much more efficient at it.

We ensure a proper fit, saving them time and money. They get an excellent quality bra that will last longer. Care instructions are provided and the fit is perfect.

Why do you enjoy your career? I'm a helpful person and get great satisfaction especially while doing mastectomy fittings.

Most women who come to me have awesome attitudes about their cancer, and that is encouraging. To see the look on their face realizing they are whole again, that's what I'm in for.

What have been your greatest achievements so far? Having my facility become Medicare accredited. In an effort to crack down on fraudulent claims, Medicare has enacted stricter guidelines for submitting insurance claims through them.

Before any applications to become accredited were filed, I had to have at least 500 mastectomy fitting hours logged, a certification class that must be refreshed every five years, and a proven legitimate business.

The paperwork and dollar amount needed to become accredited were excruciating. Many boutiques offering these same services throughout the nation were forced out due to the economic timing.

Women seeking these services are advised to be sure the facility they use is accredited or face possible denials of their insurance reimbursements through Medicare.



**Kathy Sakschek
Action Dancewear**

What inspired you to open your business? Fifteen years ago, I didn't want daycare or someone else raising our children. My primary business objective was having my children with me.

What have you been doing to make it in this economy? The economy

doesn't scare me. What scares me are the people who are scared by the economy.

We're doing the same stuff we always do: employing talented people, hand-selecting premium products and aiming to astound our customers.

Why do you enjoy your career? I'm all about making miracles happen for people.

What have been your greatest challenges so far? 1. When Saks Fifth Avenue made us change our name. 2. Deciding whether or not to buy Saks Fifth Avenue.

What have been your greatest achievements so far? My girls, my husband putting up with me and my "Thank You" inbox folder.

If you could change one thing about your profession, what would it be? I wish I were as gifted as my customers.

What has been your most memorable experience as a business owner? Working with a Hollywood designer to outfit the Kids Choice Awards. In our store you'll find pictures of Bruce Willis and Robin Williams, who attended the event, gawking at the costumes.

What advice would have for women interested in business ownership? Owning a business is not an end, it's a means to an end.

Be sure that you know, and are passionate about, what the end is. Then, just do it. Stop talking about it, and just do it.

Don't seek answers to every question, just do it. (But don't choose a name that starts with "Saks").



**Karen Frisch
Tennies Jewelry**

What is the best thing about owning your business? Building relationships with our customers.

Knowing our customers' children, parents and grandparents and being able to share all the special moments in their lives.

Why do you enjoy your career? Our business revolves around happy occasions: engagements, weddings, anniversaries, birthdays. These are special life moments.

I enjoy sharing in these special times and feel privileged to be part of them.

What has been your most memorable experience as a business owner? One of the happiest is when a new dad comes in straight from the hospital, so excited that you can see the love and joy all

over his face. It is such a great feeling to be a part of.



**Karen Kassube-Moxon
Karniby's**

What is the best thing about owning your business? Listening to what our customers are in need of and responding to it as best we can.

It's also stressful, exhilarating and challenging knowing every decision you have affects your business daily.

What have you been doing to make it in this economy? We have ordered less merchandise and kept the price points more in line with people's change in spending. We also strive to continue our friendly customer service and meet our customers' needs.

Why do you enjoy your career? It has given me so many opportunities, from travel to meeting other women from around the country who have succeeded in their own businesses. I've also met wonderful customers who become friends and employees who are like family.

What have been your greatest achievements so far? Proving a local banker wrong and being in business for 15 years. The banker said the business type was too much of a risk, and wouldn't last more than three years.

In ladies clothing, it's like opening a new store twice a year. We've been through some tough times. Thank you to our customers who have supported us since Karniby's opened for business.

If you could change one thing about your profession, what would it be?

Male sales reps. I think it's pretty funny when they try to tell me how women's clothes fit. For example, they talk about body styles, length and having it run true to size.

Male sales reps have a harder time accepting no for an answer.

What has been your most memorable experience as a business owner? Watching Karniby's being built at its current location in City Center. From designing the layout to choosing lighting, carpet, paint and then merchandising the store, it was watching my dream come to life.

What advice do you have for women interested in business ownership? If you believe in it, you can do it. Never take no for an answer.

You can always find a way to make it work!