

SHOP TALK

Open Market

BY BETH CHACEY DEBOOM

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[1/3] The handsome façade of M.C. Ginsberg Objects of Art.

Mark Ginsberg owns and operates a destination jewelry store in Iowa City, Iowa, a three-story shop that won a national award for its first-floor retail space redesign in 2004. Ginsberg wanted to do away with the barrier of display cases between staff and customers, so he tucked jewelry into cherrywood cabinetry, encouraging customers to dig like archaeologists for their treasures.

Why? He wanted customers to feel "the heart flutter" that accompanies first discoveries: "the first date, the first kiss, the first time we traveled alone," he says.

The shop's second floor has, from the start, been a dedicated gallery space, with room for art students to show their work. In the past six months, the second floor has added new uses, as a metals shop and University of Iowa classroom, producing both original jewelry pieces and business-savvy art students.

In 2010 Ginsberg's contributions brought him national attention - a spot on the Americans for the Arts BCA Ten list, an honor given to businesses that demonstrate especially innovative and dedicated support for arts programming. (BCA stands for Business Committee for the Arts.) By far the smallest enterprise on the list, Ginsberg's shop was recognized alongside companies like BlueCross BlueShield of South Carolina and ConocoPhillips.



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Let's go back to 1985, the year you took over the family business.

What was that like?

I came back from Chicago, bought the jewelry store, and decided I had made a huge mistake buying a retail type of store. So the goal was to change the personality and the psychology of the space.

How would you sum up the space you've created?

This shop is fluid. We look at this space as changeable, organic, flexible. We're not bound by some dogmatic perception of ourselves. If anything, our mission statement reads, "Chaos rules."

Last fall you turned the second floor into a classroom for MFA students. What do you think the students took away from that experience?

We gave students full access to \$500,000 worth of equipment, something they don't have available through the university. I also taught students real-world business skills to prepare them for life after graduation. I did this because I care about students having skills that are employable - or at least being aware of the value of their education.

You contribute an average of 20 percent of your profits to area arts organizations, so you need to make money to donate money. How do you do that?

We're not a team of homogeneous thinkers. I've got somebody who is really well-organized, someone who focuses on budgets and operating expenses; technicians and contractors who assemble the ideas; dreamers and creative thinkers who are bound by no rules. This works on a business level because we offer clients diverse products. A woman recently came in thinking she would buy her husband a watch and instead ended up with a gift that we custom-made, something that she was thrilled to have created. In that way, we create a more personal connection and a following.

Beth Chacey DeBoom is a writer in Cedar Rapids, Iowa.

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