Female entrepreneurs open The Gray Barn Boutique in Fitchburg

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FITCHBURG — The chic boutique that recently opened in the city is more than just the culmination of months of hard work, it’s the realization of a dream years in the making for two local women.

Nestled between Black Hydra Tattoo and Pammy’s Place in a bustling retail plaza on Airport Road, The Gray Barn Boutique is the passion project of co-owners Alyssa Buono and Kateri Forte, who launched their shop with a soft opening on Aug. 27 that drew crowds of supporters including family, friends and shoppers alike.

Autumn-hued separates for women including skirts, blouses, T-shirts, crop tops, jeans and booties adorn clothing racks and the walls. Carefully curated inventory such as wristlets, jewelry, home and bath products, children’s activities, gift and snacks are neatly displayed around the clean and modern space, filled with natural light.

Visitors of all ages milled around at the soft opening last weekend, checking out the merchandise. A tray of cookies was laid out for people to enjoy along with mimosas. Two dressing rooms enable customers to try on clothing and one section of the store is dubbed the Bad Word Corner and displays adult-centric items with a tongue in cheek sign stating, “proceed at your own risk.”

“They have had this vision for years and to see it realized is pretty incredible, we are just so proud,” said Forte’s father, Jim Arsenault, who stopped by the opening with his wife. He said he felt emotional coming into the shop and had a “wow” moment when he saw how it had all come together.

“So many people here have been with them since day one and their LuLaRoe days. All the work they did to get to this moment, it just shows what you can do,” he said proudly.

Sterling resident Cathie Martin, whose late sister was friends with Forte, picked out a lightweight blouse in a pretty pattern to wear on an upcoming cruise.

“I’ve been following these girls for years,” the college professor said, praising the fact that Buono and Forte often model the clothing themselves and have “real people” modeling for them.
The 65-year-old said that as a “new senior” she appreciates that variety of styles featured in their shop and online offerings, “things for all ages,” and that “the diversity of the clothing is amazing.”

Buono is a Leominster High School graduate who attended UMass Boston and now lives in Fitchburg with her husband, Mike, and their two kids, Mikey, 6, and Madalie, 1.

Forte grew up in Worcester and attended Burncoat High School and Quinsigamond Community College before working in retail management and banking. She calls Templeton home these days and has a 6-year-old son Connor with her husband Dan. They have a dozen pets between their two households — five dogs, six cats and one bird.

“Clearly we are pet lovers with 12 animals between us,” Buono joked.

The duo became fast friends five years ago and decided to launch The Gray Barn Boutique online in April 2020 — just as the COVID-19 pandemic was shutting the world down — offering clothing for real women of all shapes and sizes.

“We both had a passion for entrepreneurship and fashion and our personalities and strengths complement each other so we decided to combine forces,” Forte said.

Their business savvy has paid off, and since then they have acquired quite the loyal following through online sales and posting relatable real-life photos of their kids and families that highlight the work-life balance struggle that moms are often so familiar with.

Martin touched on how down to earth the two female entrepreneurs are, noting that their “live sales are hysterical” with kids and dogs often wandering into the frame.

In addition to active Facebook and Instagram groups and posts, once they were able to, Buono and Forte began hosting groups at their homes, which gave them a chance to meet their customers and tap into what they are looking for.

“We have a wonderful local client base here in the North Central Mass. area and every time we offer in-person shopping events we, and everyone who attends, have such a great time trying on clothes and chatting,” Buono said. “We love the confidence and glow we see on our ladies’ faces when they try something on and see how good they look in the mirror.”

As the business grew so did their need and desire to expand, which inspired them to open the boutique.

“We had outgrown our space and decided it was a perfect time to move to the next step of a brick and mortar,” Forte said.
Customers really seem to respond to their mission of handpicking pieces tailored specifically for women that flatter and at the same time give a boost of confidence.

“We work very hard to be an inclusive community who welcomes all shapes and sizes into our store,” they said.

A grand opening will be held at the boutique on Sept. 16 and 17, at which customers can expect new merch and goodie bags, and the tech savvy duo even has their own Gray Barn Boutique app to shop through. The women said they are grateful for the support from their village and that “everyone is so excited” for this new chapter.

“I can’t tell you how many customers have offered to help us get the store ready,” Buono said. “We are truly thrilled with the reaction.”

For more information visit http://thegraybarnboutique.com and follow The Gray Barn Boutique on Facebook and Instagram.