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## Spotlight on Ben Russell and Vikki Trammell / Art-supply shop blossoms into a community under the stewardship of its owners

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In 1980, Ben Russell had close to what he thought was the perfect art-supply store.

It was stocked with thousands of supplies for serious artists and art students. Those who were up and coming got the attention they deserved. Those still struggling received the same respect.

But Russell wanted to take his store, Art Supply, a step further. He wanted to add studios. He wanted to add apartments. Artists tend to work in isolation; he wanted to help them build a community.

His landlord considered the extra costs and said absolutely not. But Russell didn't give up, even though he and his wife and business partner, Vikki Trammell, couldn't imagine setting up shop in another location.

Then, in late 1996, the landlord died, and the building at the corner of Richmond and Montrose was sold and scheduled for demolition.

Art Supply, an institution, had to move. Trammell and Russell started searching for a building big enough for all their hopes and plans, but affordable, too.

In the inner city, that seemed impossible. With the boom in downtown and renewed interest in Main Street, everything they saw was out of reach financially. For a short time, they even wondered whether they wanted to stay in the art-supply business.

But they came to their senses - or lost them completely.

In August of '97, Trammell, Russell and real-estate agent Trudy Herolz stumbled across a dilapidated two-story building at 2711 Main. All three saw the possibilities. There was the classic Main Street address, almost equidistant to the Museum District and burgeoning downtown. There were cavernous spaces for an elegant store stocked with all the art supplies known to mankind as well as a couple dozen studios and apartments.

To bring the deal within reach, Trammell and Russell formed a 50-50 partnership with Herolz, then searched for a bank that would help them with the mortgage and remodeling costs.

The building needed electrical work, new plumbing, new air conditioning, and walls for the studios and apartments.

And those were just some of the jobs to be done.

Seven banks turned them down.

"As silly as it sounds, there was no project like this anywhere in Texas," Trammell says. "Every time, the banks would tell us, 'Artists don't have money, and they don't pay their bills.'"

"If that's true, how have we made it in business 40-odd years?" Russell asks. "We've seen customers drive up in Rolls-Royces and wear \$500 blue jeans. We have clients who have lots of money, and we have clients who have no money. But they're not all starving. And many do have other jobs."

Sterling Bank was bank No. 8. The CEO of Sterling's Bayou Bend office, Charles Neff, loved the proposal and decided to share the risks.

Art Supply opened in its new location in June '98, just two days after moving out of the old place. There was no air conditioning and they had only temporary lights, but the show went on anyway.

By the end of the year, Trammell and Russell had finished several of their 28 studios, and artists snapped them up. Today all the studios are finished and rented at roughly \$1 a square foot, and five of seven apartments are occupied, too. The one that still needs lots of work, directly behind the shop, eventually will be home to Trammell and Russell.

Russell guffaws. "One of the officers from the bank called the other day wanting to know if we were going to try this concept all over the United States. I guess I should put on a white suit and franchise, like Colonel Sanders."

The idea might sell, but Trammell and Russell aren't interested. What grabs them are the art supplies, volunteer projects, and customers and tenants who have become family.

Local artist Lucas Johnson shows up many mornings with a box of donuts - and fruit for Trammell, who's watching her weight.

He perches at the round glass table at the back of the store, where Russell is making coffee and talking about civil-rights projects or yellow-dog Dem politics and Trammell is listening and doling out art-supply tips.

Some mornings, artist Phyllis Flax - customer, tenant and longtime friend - swings by with bagels. She loves to paint, and she finds the company mighty nice, too.

Flax met Trammell and Russell about 14 years ago, when she was taking painting lessons. Her teachers recommended she get her materials at Art Supply.

She quickly became a member of the family.

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Artists who need peace, quiet and privacy simply close their studio doors, Flax says. She leaves hers open.

"I'm glad when people come and tell me what they think of what I'm doing, tell me what's going on or just say hi. And I love the fact that when I'm painting and run out of a color, I can just run downstairs and get it. We're friends for life."

A newer friend is artist Michelle Jackson, who used to paint at home. But with three young children, her work was often parked in the middle of things. One morning, her youngest child scribbled all over a commissioned drawing of a judge.

When Jackson relayed the sad tale to her spouse, they agreed it was time to move her work out of the house. When she asked Trammell and Russell for ideas, they showed her the lovely studios they had just completed.

She moved in. And when the judge came by to look at his portrait, Russell happened to be there to steady the nervous artist and offer framing ideas.

"I just can't say enough good things," Jackson says.

Nor can Patrick Palmer, an artist and teacher at the Glassell School of Art. He says Trammell and Russell know more about art supplies than anyone he's ever met. They help him in other ways, too.

For almost 10 years, Palmer has been teaching an art class for men and women with HIV. "From Day 1," Palmer says, "they've underwritten little events and donated art supplies. They're the most supportive couple. They're the real art supporters of this city."

Russell, 70, came to Houston from Ohio in his 20s. He was helping a friend move, and he never left.

Trammell, 47, moved here in the 1970s from Dallas. She found a job, a niche, and, as the years passed, a whole new life at Russell's Montrose store.

They share common visions. Both work hard at giving back to the community that supports them. Both are fairly popping with ideas. They started annual bus tours of the art groups in and around Midtown. They host an open house every fall (Nov. 4 this year) and spring.

Their building, Trammell and Russell say, is a work in progress, and they're still searching for bucks to make improvements. They want to fence the parking lot. They want to spruce up the front of the New Orleans-style building. They want to fix the balconies and create gardens.

It's coming, it's all coming, they say calmly. Right now they're just happy to be a part of the community.

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