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Gail Gaboda '88

Illinois Wesleyan University, iwumag@iwu.edu

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With new shop, alumna takes downtown to another level

By Gail Gaboda '88

When Melanie Ginavan '92 decided to open her own store in downtown Bloomington, she was taking a leap of faith.

As a graphic designer with no previous business experience, Ginavan spent a year and a half perfecting her plan for her “dream” store: a shop specializing in high-end, modern home accessories and gifts.

When Ginavan opened Artezen on Main Street in 2003, what shoppers saw was unlike anything else in downtown Bloomington. In fact, it looked more like the kind of store one might better imagine residing in a upscale, urban neighborhood.



Ginavan (above) combines urban chic with Zen simplicity in her boutique, which won a national award for its design. (Photo by Marc Featherly)

Part gift shop, part modern design gallery and part tranquil oasis, Artezen’s chic, artistic vibe is a reflection of its owner, a former art major who spent her first eight years out of college working for a design firm in the heart of downtown Bloomington. As a student, she admits, she hadn’t spent much time in the area. As a downtown employee, she became more exposed to its sights and rhythms; she remembers walking to work in the mornings and seeing the morning light hit the courthouse dome. “I fell in love with downtown,” she says.

Ginavan also watched businesses like Coffee Hound — catering to a younger, more upscale clientele — open up in the neighborhood. Gradually, she began to think about the possibilities of opening her own shop.

“I’ve had this idea of wanting to do retail, something kind of funky, and I wanted to be downtown,” she says. “There’s a real community down here.” In particular, Ginavan loved downtown’s sense of history and liked the idea of being part of the area’s retail resurgence. “I just saw great architecture and great buildings that weren’t being used,” she says. “I wanted to be part of the growth and the innovation that’s happening down here.”

Artezen “is a boutique for people who like things off the beaten path,” says Ginavan, who describes her aesthetic as “mid-century modern,” a design concept of clean lines and simple shapes. What makes a piece stand out for her is something that is easier to hold, better to use, and “beautiful in its simplicity.”

The store itself is a mix of Zen-calm and modern wares in a funky, urban space. In renovating the 100-year-old building that houses Artezen, the dropped ceiling was torn down to reveal the

original, pressed-tin ceiling and a skylight at the rear elevated area. To enhance Artezen's natural lighting, the façade was removed and replaced with a 14-foot window wall. The building's old flooring was replaced with yellow birchwood in the main showroom and ceramic tiles in back.

Artezen's visual appeal was recognized by *Gifts and Decorative Accessories*, a national trade magazine, which gave the shop its Gold Award for Visual Merchandising in 2004.

In announcing the award, the magazine stated, "There is nothing 'small town' about the execution of store design and visual merchandising. ... Seldom do the design for a new store and the owners' visual merchandising concepts blend as well as they do at Artezen."

However, developing an appealing locale was only half of Ginavan's battle — she also had to attract customers. With a small advertising budget, she looked to non-traditional ways to draw customers, including serving as a local sponsor for public radio. Artezen also gains foot traffic via downtown events, such as the summer Farmers' Market. But word of mouth remains the store's most effective promotion method, and that word has spread as far away as Champaign. In fact, customers from that area frequently urge Ginavan to consider opening a store there as well.

The idea of expansion appeals to Ginavan, whose future dreams include opening a furniture boutique. However, she is cautious about moving too quickly. Before opening a second location, she believes, "you have to do the first one really well." But with sales in Artezen's first year of operation exceeding Ginavan's goal by 55 percent, she has reason to be confident.

Whatever her next move, Ginavan will carefully research all her options, just as she did prior to opening Artezen. And her essential credo will remain the same: "Nothing is out of the question Don't be afraid to take a deep breath and jump in."

Looking back on her bold decision to bet her future on downtown Bloomington, Ginavan says: "I don't doubt for a minute I made the right choice."