

The Women of Woodburn

Steph Barnard

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Something interesting is happening in East Walnut Hills. It's not just that this once-rundown neighborhood, often forgotten when debating the merits of OTR versus Hyde Park versus Clifton, is finally experiencing its own urban revival, complete with the two-way reconstruction of Taft Road and McMillan Street and a successful street food festival in October.

It's that the growing business district of Woodburn Avenue - salons, art galleries, boutiques and fitness studios - is almost entirely powered by women. Since last fall alone, at least five Woodburn storefronts have bloomed with a new woman-owned enterprise, with more in the offing - and even before then, women had been ruling the East Walnut Hills business scene for years.

"I believe in energies. When I would drive down Woodburn, I felt like this place was on the verge," said Annie Bolling, who opened PAC Gallery on Woodburn in 2009 and a yoga/Pilates studio, Clear, next door in 2011. "The potential was there. I could see the storefronts filled and people walking up and down the street."

Officially incorporated in 1866, East Walnut Hills became a destination neighborhood post-Civil War for wealthy urbanites who had easier uptown access thanks to newly built streetcar lines. However, as in many urban neighborhoods in the late 20th century, decay and crime slowly crept in as suburbs boomed and longtime small businesses closed up shop. These days, however, a combination of factors - including, yes, the recession - has inspired creative, entrepreneurial Cincinnati women to step up to the plate and make this neighborhood their own.

Bolling opened PAC, for example, to address her desire to bring contemporary art to the Cincy masses; Clear followed as an extension of her side job doing private fitness training. Catherine Meguire wanted to feel more connected to her half-French side while living stateside, so she opened Le Bon Vivant, a local source for all things French, in 2011. An opportunity created by the closing of MoCa coffee shop opened the door for Sandy Vierling to debut Cafe DeSales in early 2012. High online sales traffic from Cincinnati to a North Carolina boutique inspired Arien Agurs to launch a new Oomph location here.

EWH's mix of affordable rentals and stately old homes attracts a diverse group of residents, from young singles and couples to seniors and everyone in between. As the younger generation continues to buck old trends - staying in the city instead of fleeing to the 'burbs and holding off on new home and car purchases - creating and maintaining opportunities for neighborhoods like EWH to thrive will become even more vital as we continue to recover from the recession.

"I'm a city mouse," Meguire says. "I love the idea of seeing these marvelous old neighborhoods being brought back to life."

That life is most evident once every six weeks, when Woodburn lights up on a Friday evening for the Walk on Woodburn. Organized and promoted by Manifest Gallery and Shawna Guip of Hi-Bred, the WoW combines art, food and shopping for a more laid-back alternative to downtown's Final Friday scene.

"The collaborative mentality is in right now, and it has proven to be successful," Bolling says. "We are including our community, not excluding them. There's stuff for everybody here - high end and low end."

Women own almost a third of U.S. small businesses, and most of those have 10 or fewer employees, according to research by American Express OPEN. With such a high concentration of these small businesses on Woodburn - and with many offering similar products, such as clothing, salon services or art - you'd think things could get catty quickly. But the women of Woodburn easily defy that tired stereotype; rather than competing, the businesses complement each other, making the street a true shopping destination.

"I think women are survivors, and that sort of attitude lends well to starting your own business," Bolling says. "We all understand that united we stand, divided we fall. When you put your sweat equity into it, there's no room to butt heads. What's good for one store is good for all the stores."

"Women have courage," Meguire added. "We do what we feel we need to do."

Women-owned shops in East Walnut Hills

One More Stitch - 1609 Madison Road
Cafe DeSales - 2835 Woodburn Ave.
Salon DeSales - 2839 Woodburn Ave.
Oomph Boutique - 2803 Woodburn Ave.
Le Bon Vivant - 2801 Woodburn Ave.
Kitchen 452 - 2714 Woodburn Ave.
StrebelArt - 2723 Woodburn Ave.
The Secret Vintage Store - 2725 Woodburn Ave.
Parlour - 2600 Woodburn Ave.
PAC Gallery - 2540 Woodburn Ave.
Clear - 2542 Woodburn Ave.
Sole - 2544 Woodburn Ave.
Hi-Bred - 2548 Woodburn Ave.
Palette Studios - 2501 Woodburn Ave.