

LAWRENCE BUSINESS MAGAZINE

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**LONGEVITY &
ADAPTABILITY**

Buckets of flowers at Englewood Flowers

A Blossoming Business

by Emily Mulligan, photos by Steven Hertzog

Nothing, not even a pandemic, could keep these flower and plant shops from flourishing.

As the saying goes: Bloom where you're planted. Two florists and a plant nursery have done just that for decades now.

Englewood Florist, Owens Flower Shop and Clinton Parkway Nursery are some of Douglas County's long-established businesses. And their success stems from each business' priority to be expert at what they do and to use that expertise to serve the customer well.

Englewood Florist opened on Massachusetts Street in downtown Lawrence in 1993. Owens Flower Shop was established in 1946 and has thrived through four different owners for more than 75 years. Clinton Parkway Nursery was built "out in the country" at the corner of Clinton Parkway and Wakarusa Drive in 1981.

All three businesses have found success in balancing two distinct attributes that Lawrence possesses: a demanding and progressive local community, and transitory university communities.

Establishing Roots in the Business

In many ways, the field of flowers and plants has not changed for decades. Special occasions like weddings, funerals and Valentine's Day still demand flower arrangements as part of the tradition. Those flower arrangements must still be designed and created by a person and delivered in a vehicle. That part of the operation really hasn't changed much. However, technology like online ordering and social media have had gigantic impacts on the flower business—and for so many hometown florists in the U.S., those have spelled the end to their longtime businesses. So read on for how Englewood and Owens have maintained their footholds through invisible competitors and even a pandemic.

In the early 1990s, Cary Engle was living in Lawrence and commuting to his job at JC Penney in Topeka. A friend near his home in Missouri was running a floral shop and needed help with deliveries for Valentine's Day, so Engle went and helped him for the holiday. Working in that store planted a seed, so to speak. Back in Lawrence, Engle scouted the market for local flower shops and saw that he had a chance to succeed here. He and his wife, Susan, scoured every storefront on Mass Street, and just before they were going to sign a contract farther west, they spotted a "for rent" sign in the window at 939 Mass.

"We opened there and did well. Mass. Street Deli was next door at the time, so there was already foot traffic for that," Engle says.



Left: Cary and Susan Engle of Englewood Flowers with staff
Right: Emily Basinger creating a wreath at Englewood

Three years later, Engle bought out a florist at the corner of 11th and Mass, and moved Englewood Florist there, where it remained for 20 years until 2015, when the building was sold. Rent increased, and the building needed extensive renovations that took almost two years. So Engle set out to find a new location. He landed at 923 N. Second St. in North Lawrence, just south of I-70.

"It took me four years to build the business back up, but this location allowed me to do some things differently than before. I was able to set this building up the way I worked, with a workstation in the center, so things would be more streamlined to work and interact with customers at the same time," he says.

Owens Flower Shop also has made a location change, but that was so many decades ago, it predates most Lawrencians' memories. Jim and Laura Owens opened the shop in 1946 at 931 Mass. St., which had been Ward's Flower Shop. Owens Flower Shop remained on Mass. Street until 1963, when the Owenses moved it to its current location at 846 Indiana St. Though it has been in the same spot, multiple owners have operated it there since. Don and Carol Randall purchased the business from the Owenses, and Sharon and Bill Reynolds subsequently purchased from the Randalls.

Owens' owner Kristin Spacek has been at the helm since early 2012 as its fourth owner. She came to Lawrence 19 years ago and landed a job at Owens after scanning the phone book for businesses where she thought she could work. Spacek started working in the back room, answering phones and processing orders. At one point, she left for a year but then came back, and she attended Johnson County Community College for interior design while she worked at Owens. Then, in 2010, working as a designer in the shop, Spacek had an unexpected opportunity arise. "My previous employers were ready to retire, and they asked in-house first if anyone was interested in taking over the business. I never saw myself as a business owner, so I was like, 'Huh. Could I?' I was scared out of my mind at first," she says.

Spacek has now owned the business for more than 10 years, and she oversaw an expansion into the space next door in 2016, after Jensen Liquor closed.

Both Engle and Spacek say their floral businesses are as good as ever. As it works out, weddings, funerals and special occasions of all sorts occur year-round—and even in a pandemic—so business is constant and reliable.

Spacek says that ironically, despite a drastic decline in the



Top to Bottom: Corner of Owen's Flower Shop
 Owner Kristin Spacek creating a sunflower bouquet
 Hannah creating a bouquet for a wedding

their families during that time," she adds.

Engle says working with flowers entails being involved in the full gamut of people's lives.

"We see both extremes of emotions, the best times and catastrophic times. Some days, as much as anything, we are counselors, and we let people talk it out," he says.

Taking It Online

Of course, every industry has undergone transformations because of and alongside of the internet. But potentially none more so than the floral industry. Spacek and Engle have worked proactively to thwart third-party services and keep most of their business both local and directly between their shops and the customers.

Englewood and Owens built up their stores' websites with their own in-house floral designs for every occasion, so customers can still have the convenience of online ordering, but the business stays 100% local and is not funneled through a third party that takes a big cut. National services like Teleflora and 1-800-FLOWERS process orders all over the country and send the orders to local participating florists, but the services keep 25 to 30% of the costs, so the floral arrangement is worth much less than the cus-



number of events, her business held steady during the shutdowns and roller coaster of 2020 and 2021.

"People couldn't visit their families, and they would just order flowers instead. It was amazing to help people reach

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Left (top to bottom) Clinton Parkway Nursery & Garden Store Owner Ann Peuser carrying box of plants for a customer Jack & Daryl Bell with their daughter Berkley choosing a Peach tree Customer looking for the plants they want to purchase Right: Fernanda Raney selecting plants for her families home garden

tomers pay through those services, Engle says. And obviously, it's much less profitable to the florists themselves.

"We try to educate people why to buy local. The 'order gatherer' services charge fees that don't go to the florist. Use a local florist, and keep the dollars local. We are hiring local people, paying taxes and spending our money here," he says.

Spacek also has ramped up Owens' social media presence by posting the shop's designs and engaging on social media platforms, particularly Instagram, Facebook and Pinterest. She says she knows her posts have had an impact because she receives orders through the direct-message function on those platforms in addition to traditional online channels.

Engle says that especially with the move to North Lawrence, he has put a great deal of effort into staying connected with Lawrence and with his customer base. He thinks his floral designs have built and maintained his following.

"People that know flowers know quality," he says. "We built a good reputation behind our name, and I think we do really good customer service."

Spacek says the familiarity of the Owens name always helps, but new people come to Lawrence every year, so she can't rest firmly on the shop's history.

"We have to keep doing new things and not get stuck in tunnel vision. We have to listen to what people are saying they want and take that into consideration," she says.

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Finding the Lay of the Land

“People have rediscovered their yards,” says Clinton Parkway Nursery owner, Ann Peuser.

The pandemic turned into a boon for garden centers nationwide. Already a destination for outdoor gardeners of all sorts and landscapers, professional and amateur, Clinton Parkway Nursery has powered through supply-chain challenges and had two really good years in 2020 and 2021, she explains. So far, 2022 shows no signs of slowing down.

Peuser bought Clinton Parkway Nursery in 1986 from Hank and Bev North, who had opened it in 1981. Prior to her time in Lawrence, Peuser worked at a nursery in Ottawa and then teamed with investors to launch and manage a garden center in Pratt. She moved back to Lawrence to be closer to home and found out about the Norths’ impending retirement. She bought the business and then bought the land.

“It’s unreal to see how the town has grown. When I came to work here, you could see one house from here. Now, you can’t even count how many houses we can see,” Peuser says.

By the time she bought the nursery, Peuser had worked in garden centers for many years, but she had to prove her experience and knowledge here in order to grow the business.

“It didn’t take me long to develop a reputation. The way you develop a reputation is that you know what you’re talking about, and you’re honest,” she says.

Through more than four decades of technological advances, and with electronics now integrated into people’s entire existence, Peuser says that ironically, not a lot has changed about managing and operating her nursery.

“It’s still about what plants to buy and how much help to have,” she says.

Now, technology allows her to track inventory through her point-of-sale system and to learn year-over-year how much of each type of inventory to carry.

“The more information you have, the smarter you can buy. We carry close to 1,000 different plants, including annuals and bedding plants,” she says.

The pandemic has brought more new customers than ever and has encouraged existing customers to do more with plants than before. But Peuser cautions that the impacts of the past two years are not all about increased sales and revenues.

“Our industry is going to be affected by the pandemic longer than anyone else,” she says.

She explains that trees take about 10 years to grow, and shrubs take about five years. As the supply chains contracted in 2020 and 2021, many nurseries started pulling trees and shrubs that were not yet fully mature in order to have inventory available. That means that in a few years, there will be gaps and potential shortages in tree and shrub stock nationwide. It’s something to watch in the mid- to late 2020s.

So how has Clinton Parkway Nursery weathered the decades to become a longtime Douglas County business?

“The best advertising is word of mouth, but that’s also very scary advertising, because you have to perform,” Peuser says. “My philosophy is that you take care of customers and know what you’re talking about.” ▲

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