

Lee's Vintage Garden blooming in Fairfield

By Rita Papazian

It is inspiring to see how a garden variety of work experience can produce the seed for opening one's own shop some day. That is exactly what has happened with Kathy Lee, a young mother of three sons, who while raising her young family, has kept in mind that part of her life's plan would be to include her very own gift and floral shop.

Thanks in part to Albert and Ken Kleban, the father and son team responsible for the surge of new retail space in the downtown "Brick Walk" area, Lee has found the perfect setting for her dream to become a reality at the 1189 Post Rd site. The Klebans have helped in turning Lee's dream into a reality by accommodating her interior design for the shop in the 1640-square-foot space just off the

brick esplanade between the two rows of "lifestyle" retail shops.

"The Klebans have been wonderful," Lee said. "They couldn't have been more supportive of letting me fulfill my dreams. They just asked me what I wanted. She praised the Klebans for their respect for the independent business owners and their manner of accommodating shop owners in these challenging economic times.

Lee noted that her shop like the others opening in the Brick Walk represent a new wave of "mom and pop" shops in town.

The Klebans couldn't be more pleased with what they saw. Ken Kleban even took time out from his business day to buy his wife a Mother's Day present at Vintage Garden.

"It's very serendipitous," said the elder Kleban. "You look in one direction and you see something beautiful, chocolate. You look in another direction and there's handsome pottery. It's a fabulous store."

In the midst of arranging 20 floral arrangements for a fashion show at the Brooklawn Country Club, recently Lee took time out to discuss the joy in seeing her dream become a reality.

How unique is this shop?

Quite unique, considering that when Lee joined the Fairfield Chamber of Commerce recently she said there wasn't a gift shop category for membership. It is evident that in opening the shop, Lee is carving out her own garden path on the retail landscape. And she is doing it with panache, and well she should.

Consider the portfolio of work she brings to her new role as proprietor.

This Staples High School graduate, who earned her Bachelor of Science degree in business Administration from the University of Southern California, is a former retail manager for the gift shop at the flagship Ritz-Carlton hotel in downtown Boston. Also, she is former floral manager for the HayDay/Balducci's in Westport. During her teen years she worked for Joanna Hush and her husband, owners of the Greens Farms Bookstore and Seasonings, a gourmet shop. Add to her resume her stint at the Vie de France bakery in the Carriage Hill retail complex in Westport.

With each retail experience, Lee is expanding her knowledge and skills in the floral, food and giftware industries. When it came time to take the step and open her shop, Lee turned to her childhood friend who has followed a similar path through the Westport Public Schools and who became the floral manager for Hay Day's Greenwich shop. Donna Jones is now Lee's shop manager. Hired after Lee had done the purchasing for the shop's merchandise, Jones praised her selection. "I was just amazed. One thing was nicer than the next."

Looking around the shop at the variety of merchandise, Lee said, "I think I have a nice mix that you won't find anywhere else...I love doing the buying. I love finding different things. You know at Christmastime how you buy one for a friend and one for yourself?" That is truly the feeling as one meanders throughout the shop filled with displays of unique and attractive gifts for Mother's and Father's Day, birthdays, baby and wedding showers, teacher and hostess gifts, graduation

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Contributed photo

Vintage Garden's owner Kathy Lee and her family held a ribbon cutting ceremony with Fairfield First Selectman Ken Flatto to celebrate their grand opening. Lee's children, from left, are Sean Lee, Hayden Lee and Max Lee. Also pictured are husband Bruce Lee and niece Rose Wallace.

John Shields teaches the sweet science, on his own terms

By Kirk Lang
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Underneath the quiet environment of Border's Books - where many lounge with laptops and flavored coffees in hand — there is a no frills boxing gym where people come to learn hand-to-hand combat.

It's a humble space but it's more than adequate for the one-on-one training that Fairfield Boxing & Strength Training provides. John Shields, a former University of Delaware defensive end whose pro boxing career was cut short by a shoulder injury he suffered in his first fight, finally has his own space to train people after nearly three years of working out of gyms and fitness centers belonging to others.

Shields said he enjoys his newfound "freedom" because he won't have to disagree with other trainers' boxing philosophies, in the same gym, that he felt were incorrect as far as teaching boxing.

Shields' workouts aren't about just making somebody build up a good sweat. They're about teaching somebody the correct way to throw punches and defend against punches. Shields has seen a lot of trainers focus too much on offense and too little on defense, and who also have their clients doing too many flashy things before giving them a solid foundation in the basics, such as head movement and how to stop a jab.

"This is the kind of gym that if you want to work hard you'll lose fat, you'll gain muscle, you'll learn how to defend yourself. This is a real boxing gym," said Shields. "This is meant for people who are serious and committed about training. This is not a show-off gym. It's a gym for real work and when you leave you'll be proud of yourself and you'll say 'I did that. I made it through that workout.' And you'll be better for it."

Shields absorbed most of his boxing knowledge in various gyms throughout Philadelphia and one place where he spent a lot of time was South Philly



Phil Noel / Staff photographer

John Shields, left, of Fairfield Boxing and Strength Training, trains client John Soto in the ring.

Boxing on Passyunk Avenue, where he trained alongside former heavyweight champion Tim Witherspoon and former world bantamweight champion Jeff Chandler. Shields' trainer was "Slim" Robinson, who worked with seven world champions, four of whom he worked with from day one, when they didn't even know how to wrap their hands. Shields began training in boxing in the summer of 1992, before his second season of foot-

ball at the University of Delaware.

He returned to the gym in March 1993 and would show enough promise in sparring sessions with Witherspoon and others that a decision was made to turn him pro a year later. Making his debut in Las Vegas against Maurice Gray, he tore his labrum in the first round of his first fight. When Shields went back to his corner, Robinson questioned why Shields wasn't keeping his left hand up.

Shields said he couldn't. Robinson said, "If you can't hold it up, I'm not letting you back out." To this day, even after reconstructive surgery, Shields doesn't have full range of motion in his left arm. He can't extend it out, or as high, as his right. He fought about a half dozen exhibition bouts after the injury, and did fairly well, but found himself getting hit with right hands more frequently than

See Shields on A18

Connecticut Top 25 pays special attention to Fairfield County

Twenty-five companies were chosen as the best places to work in Connecticut for 2009. In a ceremony hosted by the Hartford Business Journal, the rankings were revealed at the best places to work annual, statewide event.

The winners and 25 top-ranked were determined by the independent survey company, Best Companies Group, which works with local partners to identify and recognize those companies which have been successful

in creating and maintaining workplace excellence.

"We are thrilled to honor the top companies in the state," said Gail Lebert, publisher of Hartford Business Journal, whose company produced best places to work. "In this turbulent economic time, it is inspiring to see businesses committed to distinction, and not only surviving but thriving."

The top five winners in the small/medium company category include Haggett Longobardi - A Division

of J.H. Cohn, Edward Jones, Envision Pharma, Inc. of Southport, Pullman & Comley, LLC of Bridgeport and Ovation Benefits Group.

The top five winners in the large company category include Pepperidge Farm, Inc. of Norwalk, Comcast, Shipman & Goodwin LLP, Robinson & Cole, LLP and EMCOR Services New England Mechanical

For a full list of the 25 honorees or for more information, visit www.hartfordbusiness.com.