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Shop reveals circle of artists

By Meg Dedolph
Oregon Daily Emerald

Imagine walking into your favorite store to buy a sweater. You pick one out and take it up to the counter to pay.

Instead of the usual question — "Will that be cash, check or charge?" — the clerk says, "Did you know Susan over there made this? That's her son on the floor chewing on his foot — he'll be two in a week or so."

Kit Kirk, co-manager of Circle of Hands, believes every store should be like that, and workers should tell customers more about the people behind the goods in the store.

"I like being able to walk into a store and have someone tell me, 'John Q. So-and-So made this,'" Kirk said. "We can offer customer service above and beyond anyone else. We can tell them just about anything about an artist."

Circle of Hands is a collective store in the Eugene Mall that represents more than 75 local artists, selling goods from clothing and jewelry to pottery, watercolors and wall hangings.

The collective, which includes 17 of the artists, runs the store and makes all store decisions by consensus.

"There's usually very few things we do not reach consensus on," Kirk said. "These aren't 16 people standing in a room. We have a similar vision. We want to educate the public into letting them know that there are real people who make these things."

Kirk said Circle of Hands wants to supply artists with a "vehicle for sale." The artists who are not part of the collective either sell their goods through Circle of Hands on consignment only and do not volunteer time in the store or work in the store in exchange for a lower consignment rate.

Artists who want to sell their goods through Circle of Hands go through a jury process where samples of their work are judged by members of the collective based on quality, craftsmanship, originality and whether the product will fit in with the other goods being sold.

If the artist's work is accepted, it is sold on consignment for three months and profits are split 60-40 between the crafter and the



Photo by Anthony Forney
 Five-year-old Camas Hyland of Eugene plays with a lifesize Batik doll at Circle of Hands. The doll was crafted by Maria Faulders.

store. If the artist chooses to work in the store in exchange for a higher profit, the store receives only 35 percent of the sales and the artist receives 65 percent.

Members of the collective pay \$25 each month and 17 percent on any sales more than \$100; each member spends about four-and-one-half hours working in the store each week. Each collective member also serves on committees ranging from finance to display and promotion.

Each month, an artist's work is selected and featured in a gallery-like setting in the back of the store.

Circle of Hands began when the founders, six of whom still sell through the store, realized that crafters selling only at the Saturday Market missed opportunities for sales the other six days of the week.

"I thought of those beautiful things not for sale January, February and March," said Judi Guthrie, one of the founders. "But our families still eat those months. There was thousands and thousands of dollars of merchandise sitting in car trunks, garages and garbage bags."

The store's name came from the circles the members made while first deciding how to run the store, and at the beginning and end of each day, Guthrie said.

The shop originally opened in September 1991, on Pearl Street,

and moved to its Eugene Mall location a year later.

"We moved to the downtown mall because as local artists, we want to see the local mall work. We're all firm believers in the core of the city," said Steve Oppenheimer, one of the founding members of the collective.

Joy Tsunka, of Morning Star Studios, said the amount of walk-by traffic on the mall is an improvement over the store's old location.

"A lot of customers who come by during lunch break might not buy then, but see something that catches their eye and come back later," she said.

Despite times when Oppenheimer and other collective members looked at the store's accounts and wondered where the money would come from to keep the store open, Oppenheimer said he always knew the store would make it.

"We had all guaranteed ourselves at least a year together," Oppenheimer said. "After the year ended, it just continued. The most amazing thing is that we've been together for 20 months, we started friends, we're still friends and still a family."

Being a member of Circle of Hands is not without frustration, Oppenheimer said. "We always knew the circle would continue, but each member within the Circle has been frustrated enough to throw up their hands and say, 'I quit.'"

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