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Clothing Store Now More Gay-Friendly

A store that offers new, used and handmade items for mothers and children has just changed hands and become a more gay-friendly place to shop. Laurel Ackerman took over Bella Stella at 2635 N.E. Broadway last month and started carrying "Queer Mama" T-shirts.

"When we went down to Pride and saw how many families there are in Portland, that was really great," said Ackerman, who is straight. "We wanted to make a store that lots of people could shop in and feel comfortable."

Ackerman is committed to providing clothing and accessories to special-needs children. Her 2-year-old daughter, Ella, has Langerhans' cell histiocytosis, a cancer-like condition that is treated with chemotherapy. "I'm really tuned in to marginalized children," said Ackerman.

Bella Stella sells baby carriers that can carry children up to 5 years old as well as products for tiny babies who may have been born premature. Ackerman offers her customers personalized attention and is always willing to special-order items. A community board in the store provides parents with information about a number of local resources.

The store also just started hosting play groups—one for stay-at-home dads and their children and another for bilingual parents and kids. "I'm open to starting a gay and lesbian parent group if people contact me," said Ackerman. "That would be awesome."

Ackerman, who is an ordained Universal Life Church minister, said she is also hoping to perform marriage ceremonies at Bella Stella. "I'm thinking about getting a makeshift altar that I can

business watch

pull out," she said. "It would be a free service, and we could order the commitment or marriage certificates." Universal Life recognizes marriages between people of all genders.

"It hasn't happened yet, but if anyone came in today and said they wanted to get married, I'd do it right then. It's always available," said Ackerman.

A New Place to Find Old Things in St. Johns

The gay-owned Gray Gardens antique shop made its debut on the St. Johns scene July 4. The building at 7400 N. Lombard St. has been closed since the 1950s and, according to proprietor Robert Lawrence, the place was built in 1919 as an auto repair shop for Model T Fords.



Robert Lawrence sits among an eclectic array of antique décor at Gray Gardens.

Lawrence, 40, has been an avid collector of antiques and vintage clothing for 20 years. He has been selling items online and in antique malls for some time and decided it was time to open a permanent location.

The name Gray Gardens comes from the 1975 film of the same name about two eccentric, high-society ladies. "They were happy doing their own thing," Lawrence explained. "People often think they have to decorate their house a certain way, and that's not true. People should choose things that fit their personality rather than going into Pottery Barn and picking out something that's on the floor."

Gray Gardens carries a wide variety of items, including knickknacks, linens, paintings, furniture and some clothing. "It's eclectic—basically anything I think is interesting that I think other people will like," said Lawrence. "I try to keep my prices low so there's something for everyone."

Lawrence, who moved to Portland from his native New York, has lived here for almost a decade. "I wanted a change of pace," he said, "and I knew that moving out here would give me more opportunities to work for myself."

He recently sold his house in St. Johns to purchase the retail space. The building has a small, private cottage attached to it that Lawrence calls home. He hopes to create a small boutique garden shop in the back of the space, but for now he is focused mainly on antique décor.

"The response has been really positive," said Lawrence. ☐



Laurel Ackerman's store, Bella Stella, carries clothing and accessories for children.