

# Storefront

## The Stuff of making a community

by Kerri Fivecoat-Campbell

Imagine a world where retailers know their suppliers as well as their products. A world where retailers know their customers by name and sell them only items that they — the retailers — truly adored rather than just the highest-priced items.

That's the world that Casey Simmons and her sister, Sloane Simmons, have created at their store called **Stuff**, located at 4120 Pennsylvania in Westport.

"Everything we do is about partnership," said Casey. "It's ironic that our store is called **Stuff** because it really isn't about the stuff, it's about the people."

**Stuff** carries a wide variety of home accessories, stationary, jewelry and gift items, all handmade by 250 artists and crafters from all over the world. About 65 are artists from the Kansas City metropolitan area.

The Simmons sisters say that they first establish a relationship with an artist and then decide if they will accept that artist's creations in their store.

"Most of our artists are mom and pop operations that are trying to accomplish what we are, by living by a different work ethic," Casey said.

The sisters are native to Kansas City, having grown up in the Plaza area, and both still live in the urban core. They co-owned a PR consulting firm before heading into the retail business. In 1996, they realized that Kansas City had many talented artists and although some were represented in the market well, there was still

room for more venues.

"We got into the business quite by accident by hosting an intimate art party where everything sold out," Casey said.

They later became involved in custom framing and eventually the conference room of their PR firm was filled with art. They rented a small space on West 47th Street for a gallery. "We had the delusion that we could continue in the art business part-time," said Casey. "We finally had to decide what we wanted to be when we grew up."

Their mission was to provide quality, fine art at reasonable prices. "We wanted to make it more user friendly," said Sloane. The two women also wanted to provide a store that had a commitment to the artists' talents as well as the community as a whole.

On a note they give to new customers, Casey and Sloane write about their mission: "We are dedicated to the idea that our lives can be filled with creativity. We believe environments help define our personality. Your home, your car, your dress, even your choice of coffee speaks about your unique character. We like diversity. We like to be challenged. That's what **Stuff** is about. We help you find the stuff that makes your home and your life extraordinary."



**Stuff** is about a commitment to artists and the community says Casey and Sloane Simmons. (photo by Frank Siraguso)

Casey says that many of their sales are memorable, but she points to one in particular that Casey says represents their philosophy.

"We had a 20-year-old woman come in who fell in love with a piece of fine art. She wanted it so badly but it was out of her price range. We allowed her to pay on it every week and each week she would come in to visit her piece. When she finally was able to take it home, she cried...and so did we. To pass that creativity and love for it on to someone else is an experience she will always remember."

Sloane adds that their store has evolved from doing custom framing to selling the finished pieces, although much of what they have to offer is not on canvas.

**Stuff** has just about everything, including handmade custom children's furniture, pillows, oil paintings, candles, soap, jewelry with hand-blown and vintage glass, beads, cards, journals, stationary and personalized dishes. Many of the items are one of a kind and contain inspirational messages regarding life.

Jane Hosey-Stern is an artist who creates, among other items in the store, a wisdom cane. Wisdom canes have a little message on them such as "Experience is a good teacher," and "Life isn't bad for a first draft."

Hosey-Stern also sells a tool box for life, which has a different tool matched to life's various phases and challenges.

Katie Marlo creates custom jewelry, including a medical bracelet highlighted with colorful beads and glass.

After an artist is accepted at **Stuff** their involvement with their art doesn't end. The Simmons host eight, catered art parties per year for featured artists so they can meet customers. They also host a holiday part the first weekend of November. A percentage of that day's sales is donated to the Susan Henke Miller Breast Cancer Research Fund.

Their next special event will be "Diva Day," which will include refreshments, free hand massages and "complete indulgence for women." The event will be held July 14 from 1-5 p.m. and is open to the public.

For more information on **Stuff**, call 816-561-4888.