

In the Eye of the Beholder

Main Gallery 404, Inc. and Specs Around Town offer their unique brand of beauty to shoppers.

Eyewear at Specs Around Town is unique and fashionable.

by **Liz Reich**
photograph courtesy of
Specs Around Town



Downtown Bloomington has maintained its formula for success by preserving its turn of the century buildings while at the same time infusing them with new life in the form of specialty shops and galleries. You'll be hard pressed to find many national chains on these streets, the same ones which Abe Lincoln strolled before deciding to run for president. Two stores, Main Gallery 404, Inc. and Specs Around Town, add to the unique flavor of the downtown.

Main Gallery 404, Inc.

Main Gallery 404, Inc. is such a good fit in its downtown Bloomington locale that it feels like it's been there forever. Nestled among other distinctive shops, the store's location, which is also the gallery's namesake, was exactly what owners/artists Martha Burk and Joann Goetzinger were seeking when they came up with the idea to showcase the abundance of local artists—an idea that hatched one year ago this spring.

But it was no easy feat to transform the former newsstand into the inviting space needed for a gallery setting. The space required professional cleaning with chemical sponges as well as special

paint. The owners were surprised to find the original maple floors remarkably well preserved after tearing up seven layers of linoleum and concrete.

Main Gallery 404, Inc. currently showcases sculpture, glasswork, jewelry, book illustrations, paintings, wood carvings, and many other forms of art representing 39 local artists, a concept both owners agreed on from the start. After being accepted, artists pay a monthly fee to have their work displayed in the space, and if sold, the gallery does not take any profit, an unusual practice but one indicative of the owners' commitment to artists.

"Bloomington-Normal has the highest number of artists per capita anywhere in downstate Illinois and yet there aren't that many places in town where they can show their art. We want to focus on Bloomington-Normal artists and help promote them," Burk said.

The gallery also partners with local establishments to showcase art and expand its exposure, as well as provides art for hotels, restaurants, and churches. Goetzinger explained that while a lot of people in the area buy art, they don't necessarily realize the abundance of artists in their own backyard. The trend nationwide has been moving towards supporting local art rather than hitting up

the major cities to find pieces. That's a trend the gallery's owners want to capitalize on in order to support the arts, and for good reason.

"The arts in general add a lot to people's lives," Burk said. "It can be inspiring, just the sheer pleasure of having something attractive to look at. Children learn better when they are exposed to art, music, theater, and all these things. Communities need art a lot more than they know they do."

Located at 404 N. Main Street, Main Gallery 404, Inc., is open noon to 5 p.m. Wednesday through Friday; Saturdays 7:30 a.m. to 4 p.m. May through October and 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. November through April. For more information call 309-828-9500.

Specs Around Town

Specs Around Town owner Julie Kubsch sells a different type of art—the kind you wear on your face, or as her store motto boasts, "our reputation rests on your nose."

It's obvious this optical boutique is not the typical carbon-copy optician's office showroom. The open space resembles a trendy living room kept classic by its tin ceiling and antique wooden hutch, a distinctive setting for showcasing all styles of

eyeglasses. Novelties like an oversize ear of corn painted with eyeballs and a giant pair of spectacles add whimsy to an already laid back atmosphere.

Kubsch began her business as a mobile optician, using her participation in the McLean County Chamber of Commerce and collaborations with local fashion shows to promote it. In 2001, the business planted its roots at its 317 N. Center Street location but Kubsch still offers mobile service free of charge to accommodate customers' hectic schedules.

Kubsch's background of working in the profession since 1980 in various doctor's offices brought her attention to the lack of originality in available frames.

"I would repeatedly hear: 'Is this all you have?'; 'Do you have anything more exciting?'" In the sea of frames, everything looked the same, so I knew from the patients I was working with that there was a demand—people craved what they couldn't find," Kubsch said.

Specs Around Town does not order the ordinary frames in bulk, it features frames that normally would be impossible to find in Central Illinois locations. Kubsch and her staff hand select styles annually at a trade show in New York City. The lines, such as the European Face a Face, IC! Berlin, and Lindberg, vary in price but are all lightweight and feature the cutting-edge styles that one would expect from the couture capitals of the world.

"I think an interesting thing that a lot of people don't think of is that eyewear has seasons just like fashion," Kubsch said.

Making a fashion statement is important to many of her customers. Kubsch explained that some customers have even undergone surgery to correct their vision but return to Specs to get non-prescription glasses because they enjoy the distinctive and recognizable quality the glasses give to their face.

In addition to eyewear, Specs offers sunglasses, jewelry, and accessories, and even a line of goggles to protect dog's eyes called "Doggles." Kubsch's dog, Lennie, who patiently follows her around the store, is known to be a fan.

Specs Around Town is open 9:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday through Friday; 6:30 p.m. Thursday; and 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Saturday. Visit www.specsaroundtown.com for more information. Call 309-82-SPECS for appointments.

While Main Gallery 404 and Specs Around Town specialize in different kinds of products, they share an emphasis on quality, affordability, and distinctiveness.

Be sure to stop in both businesses on First Fridays, a time when participating stores expand their hours and offer various forms of hospitality to shoppers on the first Friday of every month. The Farmers' Market from May to October is also a great time to step inside and explore these great shops. ■

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