

Know your city

Curious about downtown history and architecture? Cynthia Howk, a local history expert and staff member at the Landmark Society of Western New York, leads lunch-time walks through downtown neighborhoods in the summer.

Architecture for Lunch tours are free—and just 25 minutes long. They start at 12:10 p.m. Howk has watched the city change over the years and can tell you historic tidbits about a street or a building that most locals have never heard.



The first walk is a new one—High Falls/Brown's Race, on June 10. Meet at the Pont des Rennes Bridge at Platt Street.

Howk will talk about Rochester's oldest industrial district, where it got its Flour City name. This tour comes with a dramatic view of the 96-foot High Falls, and Howk will share stories of the companies that once occupied the 19th-century brick buildings in the district.

St. Paul Street was once the center of a very busy garment district in Rochester. On June 17, Howk will lead a tour that starts in front of the H.H. Warner Building at 80 St. Paul.

On June 24, Howk's tour will explore another new area: The East End at Chestnut Street and Eastman Theatre. Meet in front of Christ Church, next to Rochester Contemporary Art Center on East Avenue.

Digital rebel's pursuit takes flight

Heartfelt words find wings with Michelle Roberts' Messenger Birds

BY KERRY FELTNER

There are many ways to relay a message in today's world.

A local entrepreneur has created a personal way to communicate that stands in stark contrast to more typical digital options available.

Michelle Roberts, 31, has created Messenger Birds for customers who want to slow down and send rolled-up paper messages, held by little ceramic birds, either through the mail or by hand. Growth has been steady.

The idea for the business came out of Roberts' love of crafts as well as a slight rebellion against the digital age, she says.

"It's the hand touch. It's the handwritten feel that's lost in today's technology world," Roberts says. "There's something really special about that."

Roberts makes the birds using raku, an art dating to the 16th century. She forms each bird out of clay, glazes it and then fires it in the kiln. The piece is removed from the kiln while still hot, allowing open air to cool it.

"All of the markings are brought on by the process of the toxins and the oxygen hitting the bird in a place at the same time, so every single bird would be different," she says.

In five years, Roberts has sold roughly 1,300 birds on Etsy and in boutique stores as far away as Australia.

Roberts attended Mohawk Valley Community College where she earned her associate's degree in graphic design. She went to SUNY College at Oswego from 2004 to 2006, graduating with a bachelor of fine arts degree in graphic communications. After college, Roberts worked in product design for retailer Pavilion Gift Co., designing a 21-piece giftware set sold in Hallmark stores across the country.

She left Pavilion in 2007 to work for Utica-based Mele & Co.—one of the oldest jewelry box companies in the country. She worked as art director and designer, refreshing the company's product lines.

Outside of her working life, the idea for Messenger Birds was born. She left the firm in 2011 and worked in a variety of other positions for advertising and branding companies around Utica and Rochester. She grew tired of the work environments she experienced and started rethinking her career.

"I decided to shift and try to find a job in branding, and when I did it's like the sky opened up," she says.

In January 2013, Roberts struck out on her own, starting Novus-Be Known Inc., a branding company.

"It's really putting yourself out there," Roberts says. "It got to the point where I just wanted to basically do whatever it took to make it happen. I knew I had talent but I didn't know how to be a business owner. I just did it and worked really hard."

From an office on Monroe Avenue in Pittsford, in three years she has helped 50 companies across the country not only find



Photo by Kimberly McKinzie

their brand but reach their full potential, including Healthy Baby Network and Edge-Global Technology Solutions in Rochester.

"With starting my own business and with branding itself, I can actually meet people one on one," Roberts says. "I could get to know them, I could get to know their company, and I could really help them move through their business and make sure that the value is being shown."

Most of Roberts' clients also have bought Messenger Birds.

"I love birds and I love the form of the bird," Roberts says. "And what started to happen was when I started making and selling them, people would come back to me with their stories. And it became not just a bird but all of these stories that would go along with it."

"The stories are really what make it special," she adds.

In April, Roberts got her big break.

A friend brought the product to the attention of top executives at Hallmark Cards Inc., and they purchased a test order of 80 birds. Today the birds are sold in 10 stores across the country, including retailers in Hawaii and California. The only New York location is in Yonkers.

"My grandmother was always raving about Hallmark; she even told me she wanted to have her own card or her own product in Hallmark, and it's so cool that I've been able to," Roberts says. "It's really a dream come true for me."

In July, Roberts will find out if Hallmark will continue to sell the product.

"Even if they choose not to continue with a bigger order, it's those stories. (If a bird) brings contentment to someone who's in disarray or if it's bringing excitement to a new bride—just for that reason I'll probably never stop making them," Roberts says.

A dream is to partner with a women's shelter to staff the business of Messenger Birds, helping women as well as helping customers continue to communicate thoughtfully.

For now, Roberts is enjoying the moment.

"I knew I could do it and I just did it," Roberts says. "You have to be passionate about what you do. No matter what, you have to love it and you have to be passionate—because if you don't, it's never going to work."

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