

CHERYL HANNAH, KELLY STURGISS and DENA PHARAOH

Gallerists galore

When I arrived in Braidwood just over a year ago it struck me as a town with a huge number of independent, intelligent, creative and hardworking women. I couldn't be sure that this was just my perception or perhaps a magnification of Australian women everywhere, but whatever the case, it has been a surprise benefit of joining the community. One micro-study of this apparent phenomenon exists in a collective of entrepreneurial women behind the understated shop front façade of 84 Wallace Street.

Like me, Cheryl Hannah spent years regularly travelling through Braidwood from her home in Canberra. Artists in the area were a particular drawcard, and she and partner Dr Helen McKenna would visit at least annually to see exhibitions by makers such as ceramicist Suzanne Bellamy. On a visit in late 2004 they saw that the building at 84 Wallace was for sale, dilapidated but full of promise and potential. This was the pull towards setting up in town more permanently, as was the inherent opportunity for Cheryl to realise one of her life-long ambitions, having been an avid art collector for 40 years.

FyreGallery was established as a boutique fine art gallery, with a focus on works on paper and textiles. Cheryl presents two major exhibitions a year and likes to support artists to hold solo exhibitions, some of whom don't necessarily have the resources to get their work out in public. She commissions these shows well in advance and keeps in touch with them as they are making work in what is very much a collaborative process. The remaining time she operates from her office and stockroom at the rear of the gallery. She also trades online in highly collectable Patsy dolls, as another project and passion, and works with a wide range of overseas galleries to share art and artists internationally. Running a private gallery, Cheryl is unconstrained in what she pursues, with true independence to 'set the taste and set the pace'.

The gallery dream had long been postponed, while Cheryl chose qualifications in international relations and strategic studies and went on to pursue a career in the public service. Working hard over two decades she had the opportunity to travel the world, look and collect, think about



Words by Yolande Norris, a Braidwood-based writer and arts producer

art, while gathering the financial backing to get started.

Meanwhile, in 2010, Kelly Sturgiss was busily establishing her own business, with a mission to showcase contemporary art in Braidwood. Kelly's family reaches back a full seven generations in the region, including daughter Pepper. She went away to study art, but returned driven to follow her passion in the town that she called home. An exhibiting artist in her own right Kelly has decided she wants to stay in Braidwood and give back to the community via her wide range of skills and learnings.

Stur Gallery was established, and after an early shift of venue Kelly found herself at 85 Wallace Street, across the road from Cheryl. Though she knew little about business she navigated her way with her own taste and instinct,

managing a full exhibitions program as well as a shop stocking hard-to-find brands she admired and the work of creative locals.

When the building was sold suddenly in 2012 it looked as though Stur might be over just as it had begun to gain momentum. It was the point at which Cheryl, admiring Kelly's work representing contemporary art in a regional area, approached her with an innovative business proposition. Stur Gallery inside FyreGallery.

The 'one location, two gallery' model is not entirely a new invention, and other examples can be found in similar initiatives in London, emerging as a response to the global financial crisis. From Cheryl's perspective the arrangement is about making the best use of the facilities, while still maintaining her model of two shows a year. Kelly

has use of the space for the remainder of the year for a subsidised rate.

It offers each a 'colleague' with whom they can share ideas, offer information and advice while gaining added visibility for each business. It certainly takes effort, good communication and forward planning, but ultimately provides the opportunity to make the space work for all involved.

Like Cheryl, Kelly has many strings to her bow.

Alongside running the Stur Gallery and Store she teaches art workshops and piano, maintains her own art practice as well as offering professional photography and graphic design services. This way she gets to do her thing while also being present for her daughter's childhood. What may be lacking financially is balanced by a high quality of life and creative satisfaction.

In the twice-yearly changeovers to make way for the FyreGallery program (April and November) Kelly finds opportunity to revamp and reinvent Stur, the most recent example being the addition of dressmaker and designer Dena Pharaoh to the creative/cooperative mix. It's a maturing of the model, making one space on the main street work for three individuals and their respective endeavors.

Dena arrived in Braidwood of January this year, and Kelly laughingly admits to literally chasing her down the street

so that they might meet. Her hunch about their compatibility was correct, as they discovered they were the same age, have lived similar lives and share the same tastes.

Stur had always been a big undertaking for Kelly, requiring her to be in the store every day while also raising a child as a single parent and studying for her masters. Dena, stepping back from a professional career in Sydney and keen for a change, came into the mix at the perfect time. She now shares the day-to-day running of Stur while offering her dressmaking services from the premises. The duo help one another with their children, weaving their creative pursuits around a seven-day business week and the eternal 3pm school pick-up.

There is a beautiful stagger to the intersecting of these lives. Kelly with her lifelong connection to the town and community, Cheryl's decade of contribution to it, and Dena coming up on her year-long anniversary in Braidwood. Three women, doing separate things, coming from different places at different times in life, but getting there together.

It's no secret that life can be tough for a business owner in Braidwood, but thanks to the trickle-down of subsidised rent, the diversity and flexibility of the operations it houses and the vision of all involved, 84 Wallace Street can remain vibrant and relevant. It's a story of the strength that can be found in intergenerational support and the sharing of resources. Cheryl has had opportunities to accumulate the capital that enabled her to buy a commercial building, and to establish a business with a level of security behind her. She is the first to recognise that for a raft of reasons many women don't always get that opportunity. Now she is interested in being the person who gives a hand up to those coming behind, in investing in something cooperative and collaborative.

She points out that through clever partnerships "we are not beholden to anyone but ourselves, because we own the means of our own production." Kelly agrees, and is spurred on by the growing realisation that she and her contemporaries "are the future of the town. We're the present and the future and the past. We are the people." In each of these cases, it's women doing it for themselves.

You can read more Yolande Norris work at uselesslines.wordpress.com

ABOVE LEFT: DENA PHARAOH AND KELLY STURGISS, BELOW: CHERYL HANNAH.



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