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Clay County Native Keeps Downtown Business Thriving With Her Own Twist

SKED Helps Fund Rogers of Manchester Opening

MANCHESTER, KY - The Rogers name has been on the door at 106 Main Street, Manchester for as long as most of its residents can remember. Generations have bought their jewelry from the same family in the same location for nearly 70 years. It's a part of the downtown landscape. That tradition continues thanks to Clay County native, Rhonda Bowling, who is now opening her own new business, Rogers of Manchester, in the same location.

Bowling purchased the historic jewelry store in January 2017 when the second generation of Rogers, Fred Rogers, retired. She has worked to make it her own by restoring many of the original fixtures, keeping the bones of the store in place while adding her own flair to create a unique and inviting shopping experience.

The Rogers name will remain on the store, as a tribute to the solid and honest dealings that helped established the name well in the community for so many years at the Main Street location, Bowling said.

The new store, Rogers of Manchester, will still feature fine jewelry and dependable repair services including watch batteries. In addition, it now showcases a unique blend of Kentucky art, pottery and other gift items. Much of the merchandise is skillfully handcrafted by artisans from across the region. Bowling doesn't consider it as much of a new business as a revitalization of one of Manchester's retail landmarks. I guess you could say it's personal for Bowling. Here's why:

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Clay County natives Howard Rogers and Ben White partnered to open Rogers & White Jewelers there in 1949, when both returned from serving in World War II, where Rogers had been a prisoner of war in a German prison camp. The two best friends had seen much of the world, too much they might have said, and came home to build their American dreams in their hometown.

Rogers and White had grown up together in Clay County. They came home to rebuild their lives and combined their G.I. Bills to buy what was then a sporting goods store on Main Street. For 25 years, they ran the successful business together, with the help of their watch repairman, Robert Sams, also a WWII veteran who had lost a leg in battle. Here is where Rhonda Bowling comes in . . . Sams was her beloved grandfather. Bowling says it's her memories of visiting her grandfather there as a child that makes the store a special place.

"I loved going into Rogers and White's with my grandfather when I was a child," Bowling said with a smile. "So, the place feels like home to me. He would park his car over by Manchester Lumber and would hold my hand to help me walk across the swinging bridge, and we would come in to the store from there."

After Ben White retired, Howard Rogers' son, Fred, came on to assist Howard in the early 1990s, after Fred had completed a career in finance. When Howard retired soon afterward, Fred and his wife, Judy, took over the family business and ran it successfully until their retirement at the end of 2016.

Bowling says a visit to the store two years ago is what started the wheels in her mind turning and ultimately led to the business purchase.

"I went in to the store a couple of years ago and asked Fred if I could have my grandfather's monocle that he had always used when repairing watches. It had been hanging there on the pegboard for over 30 years since he died in the '80s," Bowling remembers. "When Fred gave me the monocle, it really meant a lot to me."

Bowling believes that it meant something to Fred Rogers too.

"When Fred was ready to retire, he knew how much I cared about the place, and he thought I might be interested in taking over the business. Now the monocle I had taken home a

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couple of years ago has made its way back to the store to hang by my grandfather's photograph and even part of our new logo," Bowling said. "A lot of people see the photo and still remember him."

This month, Bowling debuts her revitalization of the downtown retail space. She plans to keep the tradition alive and build on the success of the city's Main Street Market Experience.

"There has been a new interest in downtown in recent years, and I am excited to be part of all the things going on in the town square" she said.

She knew she could take the historic retail spot, create her own small business and keep the shop's rich history alive in one of the fastest growing areas of the city. Hers joins a number of businesses in the downtown area that have merged almost as a complementary unit. There's, Restoration Massage to great hamburgers at Pat's. There are also high-end interior accessories at Rebecca Leigh's, boutique-style clothing at Southern Charm, handcrafted jewelry at the Makery, and fresh floral arrangements from Razzle Dazzle.

With the addition of Woodford Reserve chocolates, greeting cards and pottery at Rogers of Manchester, along with the fine jewelry, this roundup of merchandise in Town Square has what Bowling hopes is the beginning of a destination town emerging similar to the artsy feel of downtown Midway, KY.

Although Fred Rogers has retired, he has offered to assist in the transition by such things as training in jewelry repair or even occasionally watching the store when Bowling has to be out of town.

"I think she'll do well here," Rogers said. "All of the women-owned businesses on this street are doing great."

Bowling's dreams were given a jumpstart when she turned to Southeast Kentucky Economic Development Corporation (SKED) to help in funding her new business. The 30-year-old nonprofit economic development organization offers a number of loan programs to help entrepreneurs and small business owners fund inventory, equipment purchase and more. Bowling was approved for a micro loan and has received technical assistance from SKED during her startup.

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“The resources and support I have received from SKED have been exactly what was needed to help get my business off to an amazing start,” Bowling said. “SKED’s team has been very hands-on throughout the process to give advice and encouragement and even ideas. That kind of direct assistance provides a boost to make sure everything is in place for success.”

For more information about Rogers of Manchester, visit her Facebook page.

For more information about SKED, visit: www.southeastkentucky.com.

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Formed 30 years ago by Fifth District Congressman Hal Rogers to create jobs in Southeast Kentucky, the economic development organization, based in Somerset, serves a 45-county region in Kentucky. Staff works with business owners, small and large, throughout its service area to identify financing solutions to fund their location, expansion and working capital needs.