

LOCAL NEWS

# Owner of Finestra Gallery recalls what brought business to its 20th anniversary

Downtown Willoughby shop has evolved since opening in 2002



Lisa Longo, owner of Finestra Gallery in Downtown Willoughby, always had a passion for art and for owning her own business. Now, Longo is celebrating a 20-year milestone of her gallery being open. (Marah Morrison — The News-Herald)

By **MARAH MORRISON** | mmorrison@news-herald.com | The News-Herald  
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A small gallery in Beachwood was not only a shop Lisa Longo loved venturing to, but a business that inspired her to open her own.

Now, Longo is celebrating a milestone of [Finestra Gallery](#) in Downtown Willoughby being open for 20 years.

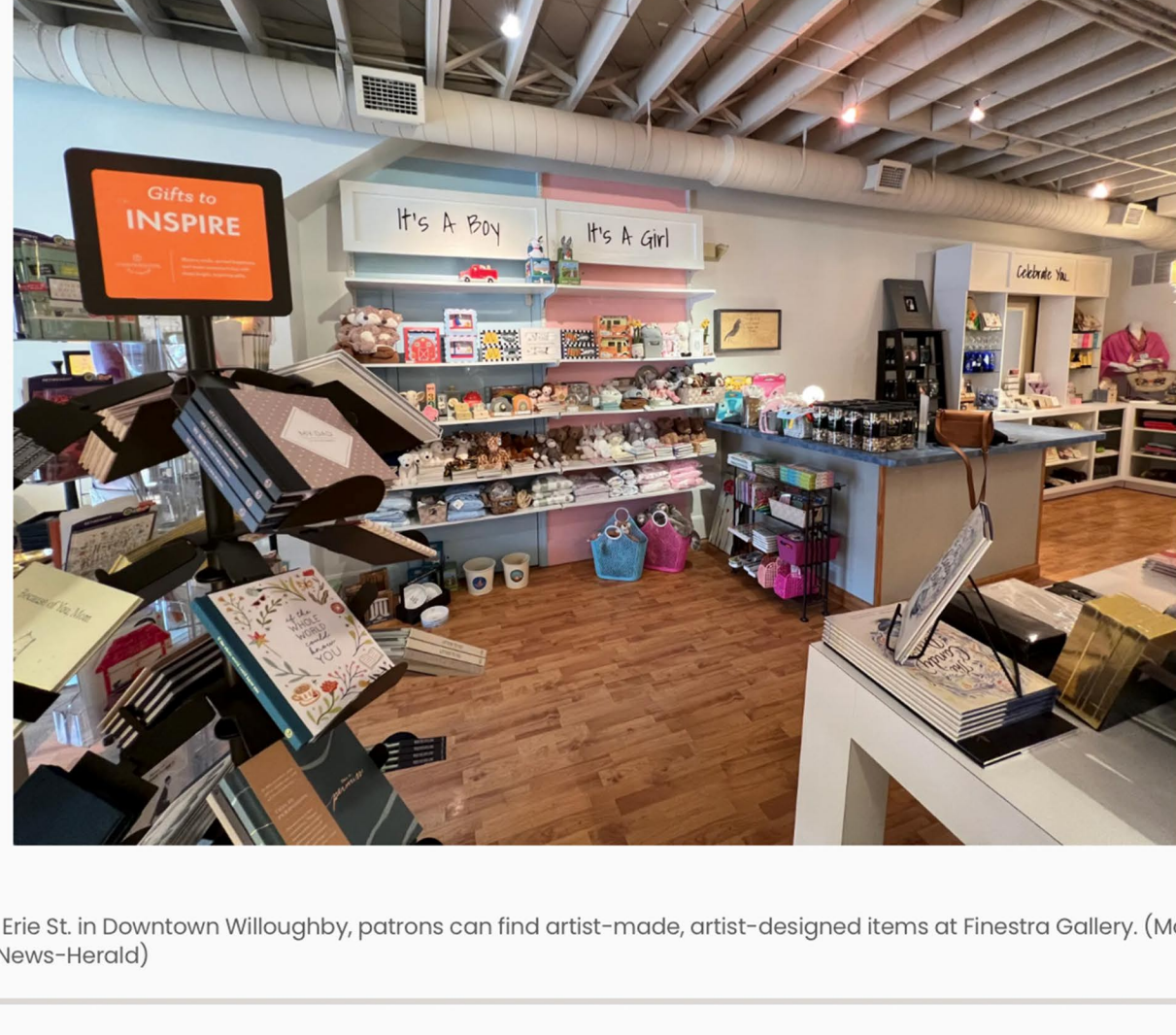
The first two years of the 20 it's been open, Finestra was in Painesville prior to relocating to 4076 Erie St. Moving to Willoughby's historic downtown was a game changer, she said.



Located at 4076 Erie St. in Downtown Willoughby, patrons can find artist-made, artist-designed items at Finestra Gallery. (Submitted)

"Willoughby is amazing, and getting better and better," Longo said. "Back 20 years ago, the whole shop small, women-owned business wasn't really a tagline yet. It's been fun to watch Downtown Willoughby through the years. I think there's a good backing trying to keep everything historic with the lights and the charming little events they have down here.

"It's growing and I don't think we've ever had as much retail down here. We've always had great restaurants, but getting the little shops down here is a fun mixture."



3 of 5  
Located at 4076 Erie St. in Downtown Willoughby, patrons can find artist-made, artist-designed items at Finestra Gallery. (Marah Morrison -- The News-Herald)

When Longo opened Finestra Gallery in 2002, her products were limited because at the time, she said she didn't really know what was going to sell and what was popular. However, she knew she was mainly and almost exclusively looking for artist-made, artist-designed products, as well as unique items people could not find in big box stores.

When Longo moved her business to Willoughby, she started hosting gallery openings that featured local artists, painters and photographers.

"That was a really fun five years or so that we did that. It was well attended and lots of fun," she said. "I was still going to New York for the gift fairs twice a year looking for product. It was always changing and then I found a line called Trollbeads — charm bracelets. That was a game changer for me for the next 10 years and that was almost exclusively what my store as all about."

The Trollbeads jewelry line put Longo on the map, she said, and at one point, Finestra Gallery was number two in the nation.

"It was an amazing run and I knew how lucky I was to have gotten that line in here, but I also knew that it was going to peak and eventually wasn't going to be around forever," she said. "It came to an end and I had to re-envision what I wanted my store to be. By that time, things had changed. There were lots of small shops opening up. It's a work in progress."

While still staying true to selling artist-made, artist-designed and unique items in her gallery, Longo has gotten into selling more giftable items. She still carries items in her gallery from local artists who have been with her since day one such as Deborah Woolfork Jewelry and wine glasses by Robert "Skip" Streecher, president of [Streets of Manhattan](#) out of Cleveland.

"I've always loved art and owning my own business was always something I saw myself doing," Longo said. "I was never sure what I wanted to be. I raised my kids and then I was 40, and I thought this is something I think that would be fun and make a living off of."



Lisa Longo opened Finestra Gallery, now in Downtown Willoughby, 20 years ago. (Marah Morrison — The News-Herald)

While her customer base is mostly women, men and couples come in to shop at Finestra. The front window display of the gallery has been a strong focus to bring customers in, Longo said.

"Every day, I have a customer who says, 'How long have you been here? Are you new?' Then I say I've been here almost 20 years, so there is an opportunity for new customers," she said. "You have to have that turnover of your customers."

Since opening, Longo has expanded children's items, which has done especially well post pandemic, she said. The jewelry has and still is the gallery's number one seller.

"Margaret Solow from Los Angeles has been our top seller for the last couple of years, and we have a massive following for her," Longo said. "We've got this new line of coasters that are funny and the towels have been great sellers for years.

Through the business years, Longo has tried not to panic when she has a bad year and she also tries to not rest on her laurels when she has a good year.

"You never know," she said. "When (the coronavirus) happened, that was, for me, unique. I had my worst year right before. I was struggling with what I wanted the store to be and getting customers in the door. I had Amazon. Etsy and all these things. It was challenging and then (the coronavirus) hit, and I was really close to closing for good."

After going through a couple of months of being closed due to the pandemic, customers "came out of the woodwork" when Finestra reopened.



Located at 4076 Erie St. in Downtown Willoughby, patrons can find artist-made, artist-designed items at Finestra Gallery. (Marah Morrison — The News-Herald)

"I think people really realized how important local, neighborhood shops were," Longo said. "That's always been something I've tried to do — go to small groceries and hardware stores. It was getting harder to do that. Now, I feel like small business is really coming back."

Longo still finds enjoyment in patrons visiting her store.

"We have a little traffic pattern that I hope people will walk around. There's so much to see and look at," she said. "I'm very proud of my store and I love when people say, 'I love your shop' or 'I bought something for someone and they really love it.' I don't think there was ever a day, prior to (the coronavirus), where I didn't know that this could be a success. I never felt that and I always love coming to work. A lot of customers have become friends."

For the last five years, Longo's tagline has been "give, live and celebrate." She also says that one of the best things that has ever happened to her store was the front window displays Edward Sajovic, of Edward J. Sajovic Design has created.

"He's talented. We do a seasonal window and he did the 20th anniversary window," she said. "Finestra means window in Italian, so it was a way to say that a lot of our product is artist-made."

Although online selling is something Longo is not interested in doing, it may be a part of her future business plans.

"What I want for my store is people to come in, see, touch and feel, but competition is intense," she said.

Finestra is open from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m., Tuesdays through Fridays, and from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. on Saturdays.