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**Raymond Holt for City Pulse Jean Jean Vintage owner Emily Duffelmeyer started her shop online in 2010 and opened her own brick-and-mortar location in REO Town in 2018.**

RAYMOND HOLT

Posted Wednesday, January 22, 2025 6:37 am

## By TYLER SCHNEIDER

With “a shoebox full of vintage jewelry and a pocket camera,” Emily Duffelmeyer embarked on a slow but steady path to growth success.

Duffelmeyer, owner of Jean Jean Vintage in REO Town, founded her jewelry shop as an online-only retailer in 2010. By 2018, her success allowed her to open her own Lansing storefront at 1136 S. Washington Ave.

Building a strong foundation and consistent revenue stream before shifting to a full-time physical business was key to her. Also, she encourages new business owners to trust their own instincts.

“Before you start, you need to define what success looks like for you,” Duffelmeyer said. “The culture tells us that you need to be faster and do more and more all the time. That kind of thinking pro

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“You have to tune out all of that noise, have a strong and steadfast idea of your vision – and stick with it,” she added. “Otherwise, you’ll get pulled in 50 different directions and end up doing more of what people tell you should do instead of what works for you.”

Entrepreneur Jero Garza, a newer face in the Lansing business scene, recently started on a similar, incremental path to opening a shop. Garza said he spent about four years preparing and planning before he was ready to launch Daydream Tattoo in Lansing last February.

“It wasn’t something where I was going to fly by the seat of my pants,” Garza, 39, said. “I needed to lock down how I would financially acquire everything that I needed, whether or not I wanted to have a business partner and which location would serve us best.”

At the time, Garza was a 12-year industry veteran who spent much of his tenure traveling around the country on the tattoo convention circuit. While his connections there bolstered his industry-specific expertise, he knew that opening his own shop would require him to develop an entirely different skill set.

“Because I took the time I needed to get it right, it’s been smooth sailing lately,” he said.

As he approaches his first anniversary, Garza has managed to avoid the pitfalls of establishing oneself in an insular and often oversaturated industry. In just a few weeks, he’ll already have surpassed the roughly 20% of businesses that fold within their first year, according to the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics. Nearly 50 percent won’t make it past five years.

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To avoid that fate, Garza and other Greater Lansing business owners will have to wear many hats — but that doesn't mean they'll have to do it all alone. Throughout the capital region, organizations like the Lansing Regional Chamber of Commerce, Lansing Economic Area Partnership, or LEAP, and the Small Business Development Center at Lansing Community College offer dozens of resources to help business owners, new and old, navigate the ins and outs of their respective journeys.

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“Most people who start a business are really good at their craft, but they’re not accountants, lawyers or engineers,” said Harrison Leffel-Jones, LEAP’s vice president of small business and innovation. “Part of our purpose is to bring those experts in to tell them, for example, as they’re scaling to their next phase, that it might make sense not to be an LLC anymore. We’re here to connect you with those who can help guide you as you take your next big step.”

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Darryl Horton, the senior consultant at LCC's small business center, is one of those experts.

Horton specializes in connecting prospective new business owners with the proper loans and vital financial knowhow they'll need to succeed.

"People who come to us are typically already struggling, and finances are usually the core of their issues," Horton said. "Our goal is to put you on solid ground before you launch. If you're likely to struggle financially, we tell our clients they shouldn't push the go button just yet."

A business owner could very well offer the best possible product, Horton explained, but it's the drier aspects of the trade, like not knowing which loans and grants they should apply for, that can sink an otherwise promising ship.

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Similarly, Chamber vice president Steve Japinga said it's easy for first-time owners to get lost in a complex web of municipal and statewide regulations.

"I get a ton of calls regarding zoning, permitting, signing ordinances and other things you don't usually think about as often when you're starting out," Japinga said. "We often run into business owners who are having trouble getting a hold of whoever deals with the regulations they're trying to navigate in their city or township. We help make those connections so they don't have to cold call or track them down themselves."

The Chamber, LEAP and the small business center are among dozens of frequent collaborators in the shared effort to foster a healthy local business landscape. One initiative is Elevate, a LEAP program established in 2022 through a partnership with the PNC Foundation to promote Black-owned small businesses.

### Utilizing local resources

Deanna Brown, owner of the south Lansing-based bakery Everything Is Cheesecake, joined the first Elevate cohort shortly after opening her doors in 2022. She said the program helped equip her with the tools to manage her inventory better, identify her niche and communicate effectively with her customer base.

W' **Sign Up** refuted greatly from the program, Brown noted that her learning curve constantly  
, **Today**



mentor she can turn to when new, unforeseen challenges arise.

“With the help of a good mentor, you can keep yourself from making a lot of mistakes and benefit from their guidance to effectively grow and scale,” she said. “To this day, I’ve been searching high and low for one.”

Similarly, Leffel-Jones noted that business owners within a particular neighborhood or an overlapping customer base can form a collective support group.

“Being an entrepreneur can be a very lonely enterprise, and there are a lot of owners out there who have been floating in the ether and doing it all on their own for years,” Leffel-Jones said. “I like to tell new business owners to get as involved as they can and try to meet like-minded folks who can count on and grow alongside each other.”



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## Experienced entrepreneurs

Lauren Palmer, owner of Curvaceous Lingerie in Old Town, started as an employee at the Wedding Bridal Sign Up in Okemos in 2012. Today, she is a seasoned entrepreneurial vet.



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years in the bridal shop proved that standard, everyday bras would be a primary business driver.

“When I opened, I had like two styles of bras, but it quickly became more and more evident that bras were what people wanted,” she recalled. “Our model slowly morphed to the point where bras make up 75 percent of our business.”

By staying attentive to the needs and wants of her early customer base, Palmer could adjust her inventory accordingly and achieve the sales numbers she needed to expand into her own space and become a success story.

Meanwhile, over in REO Town, Robin Theatre co-founder Dylan Rogers said his key to success has been balancing life and work duties while always being consistent.

“We have a tendency to glorify hustle culture in this country, but the line between burned out and just busy enough is easy to cross,” said Rogers, who opened The Robin in 2015. “I find it helpful to block time off on my calendar to rest and recuperate because it’s a lot easier to find inspiration when you’re not in the middle of a busy work schedule.

“That said, there’s a difference between rest and being flaky with your hours of operation,” Rogers added. “Consistency is important, so try to block off time in advance and communicate your availability.”

Above all else, Rogers said small business owners must remember one important fact: they are not alone.

“I learned a lot from people who have walked similar paths, including Sally Potter at Ten Pound Fiddle, Meegan Holland at The Creole, Rhea (Van Atta) and Ben (Hassenger) at Old Town General Store and numerous artist-mentors over the years,” he said, adding that he’s more than willing to pay it forward if someone reaches out to him.

### **Being a local fixture ...**

As a third-generation owner of Kean’s variety store in Mason, Teresa Wren has had a far less common journey. Some of her earliest memories include watching her father and grandfather returning from trade shows. As she grew up, it became clear that she’d be the heir to the now 96-year-old business.

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“We all did things a little bit differently, but one constant between my father, grandfather and I is that we never let ourselves get too comfortable with what we might think is going to sell,” she said. “Our success comes from the fact that we never let anything just sit around. Your inventory isn’t going to sell itself, so you have to be creative and constantly look for ways to make your space new and fresh. That goes for products, layout, events and everything in between.”

Another factor was an emphasis on the environment and overall vibe surrounding the shopping experience.

“Customers don’t want to just walk into a plain old store – they want it to be an experience,” Wren said. “They want something beautiful, creative and different. One way we do that is to give them spaces to eat, drink, sit and relax before they get back to shopping.”

### **... and becoming a local fixture**

For entrepreneurs looking to start the next century-old business, Leffel-Jones recommends implementing what he calls the “100 benchmark.”

“Who are the first 100 people that will buy your product? To find out, we recommend people in the idea stage to set up a website to introduce their product and directly ask who would be willing to buy it,” he said. “If you get more than 100 people who like your concept, that gives you an early sense of what you’re getting into, even if only a quarter of them end up purchasing it.”

Leffel-Jones also urged potential business owners to stay grounded in their expectations. Some businesses will inevitably flounder, but he said many owners who experience failure will eventually return with a new concept and a greater chance to stand the test of time.

“Maybe it’s not the business idea you start with that ends up making it, but what are the skill sets and things you can learn along the way that might help you with your next venture? Being an owner-operator can be amazing, but it also becomes your life,” Leffel-Jones said. “Many people we work with end up not running a business full time, but if you’re ready to dive back in, you need to decide for yourself if you’re ready for that lifestyle.”

When it comes to the lifestyle, Garza said he is all in. Through creative outreach efforts like fundraisers with the Potter Park Zoo, offering discounts for customers who contribute to their annual Toys for Tots collection bin, and even handing out free shirts to local service workers, he’s found an equilibrium that seems to work.

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“Never stop looking ahead, be prepared for slow times, make sure you’ve got a good chunk of savings that you can reinvest,” he said. “Find the best location with ample parking and ease of access. You want the most direct, straightest line in all those areas. That said, the customer experience will always be number one. Anybody can tattoo someone, but if they have a memorable interaction, it’ll become an experience they’ll look forward to and keep coming back for.”

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