New in Town

TWO NEW SHOPPING DESTINATIONS IN TOWN

story by Kate Chadwick

The Green House brings handmade pots and adorable house plants to Church Street

A creative life is an amplified life. It's a bigger life, a happier life, an expanded life, and a hell of a lot more interesting life," writes Elizabeth Gilbert in her 2015 book *Big Magic: Creative Living Beyond Fear*.

The maker scene is strong in West Chester, and in this edition of New in Town, we chat with the owners of two new businesses adding to the borough's creative landscape. Their contributions of handmade clothing and custom-made planters aim to amplify both the person and the place.

Solome
117 W. Gay Street, Suite 206

Solome Katongole always loved to shop and dress up, and while working in retail during her formative years, she found herself drawn to garment construction. "I had always wanted to learn how to create and how to make clothes," she recalls.

The Ugandan-born fashion designer grew up in Columbia, Maryland, earning a Bachelor of Science from the University of Maryland Eastern Shore and later a postgraduate degree in Fashion Design from The Fashion Institute of Design and Merchandising Los Angeles.

Her passion for fashion, infused with her Ugandan culture, influences many of her designs. "My goal is to design and create clothes that are sophisticated, elegant, comfortable, and at the same time make a statement," she says. She started out designing and creating women's custom bridal and evening wear, along with contemporary African-inspired clothing. Later, she added children's clothing, home goods, and menswear.

When it was time to take her business to the next level, she started with an online store. "You can widen your market by being able to reach beyond local customers," she explains. "No overhead costs, the start-up costs are lower. There are more tools to attract and engage new customers." But online stores still face challenges. "Maintaining a professional e-commerce space is not cheap. Building online customer trust is hard if you don't have a big following and a known track record. Customers' attention span is very limited." Offering perks such as free shipping might bring in sales, but they are costly.

In the early years of her business, Solome designed and crafted 100% of her offerings. As she's grown, she has scaled back to 80% of design and construction, with the remaining 20% of her designs produced elsewhere.

In addition to ready-to-wear clothing, she offers jewelry. "I work with artisans from Kenya and Mozambique, and every piece is handmade," she says. "I am collaborating with other creators, so in addition to my products you will see other items from other talented creators carried in my studio/shop."

Solome Katongole is a Ugandan-born fashion designer whose designs focus as much on elegance as comfort. She initially started her business in the e-commerce sphere, but has recently open a brick and mortar operation on Gay Street.

Solome loves being able to connect with customers in her store on Gay Street. "It's more engaging because you can physically communicate to the customers," she told us. "Product appeal



can be improved because the customer can physically see, touch, and try things on." She notes that the visual displays widen the shopper's imagination, and the personalized shopping experience makes the customers prefer shopping in the store. Although as a staff of one, her outside obligations sometimes make it challenging to maintain store hours. The community, however, makes all the difference. "West Chester is a close-knit community, and very supportive," she says. "I look forward to creating a great loyal customer base and also to collaborating with other businesses."

Beyond designing, Solome enjoys spending time with her family and traveling, which further inspires her work. "Besides creating memories, traveling enhances my creativity," she says. "I was born in Uganda, and the cultural flair is part of my brand. In some pieces it's louder and in others a bit silent. That way, there's something for everyone."

The Green House
107 N. Church Street

It's safe to say that houseplants are really having a moment, and Peter Giuffre and Kellie Ink have managed to take two things they were already doing and meld them into a third, very cool thing. The result is The Green House, where the pair sell houseplants and accouterments, along with organic home, body, and clothing products, and home décor.

Pete, who works full-time at local tech start-up LifeBrand, started a pottery business in the summer of 2021 called Pot+Plant. "I thought it would be fun to make my own concrete planter, so one weekend I looked up online how to do it and it just grew from there." Within a year, Pete had an e-commerce site, sold wholesale to nurseries and gift shops in the Chester County and Philadelphia regions, and was selling his wares at local markets.

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Meanwhile, Kellie has another full-time, remote job as Operations Manager at an organic skincare company, The Golden Secrets. "She's very passionate about holistic health and only uses organic, non-toxic products on herself and in her home—which has rubbed off onto me as well, as we've been in a relationship for over three years now," Pete said. "In starting the store, we wanted to combine our two passions, which are plants and non-toxic living—hence, The Green House." [*Editor's note: we're big fans of a good play on words.*] The brick-and-mortar location came about in May of this year, with the grand opening this past July.



Kellie Ink & Peter Giuffre
in their shop on Church Street

That may seem like a lot of juggling—and it is—but they make it work. "Kellie runs the store during the weekdays. LifeBrand is about half a block from The Green House, so I work the store on the weekends, can pop over on weekdays after work, and then make the pots at night after that." That's right—he makes those pots.

"A lot of the pieces you see on our shelves I make by hand," Pete told us. "Usually, I spend four to five hours a night, six days a week, trying to keep up with inventory. The only difference in degrees of difficulty comes from how many colors I want to do in a pot. If I'm pouring something with four different colors, I'm doing four times the amount of work for a piece and have to pour really carefully to get the crisp lines I want my pots to have."

Handmade propagation stations top the list of their best-selling items. Pete crafts most of them from cement, but there are wooden pieces as well. "A lot of people who come in have a houseplant collection, which usually means they like to propagate cuttings of their favorite plants to grow new plants or fill in their existing plants up top," he explains. "They like the fact that they don't have to use a plain glass jar and instead can have a stylish piece of home decor that can also function as a vessel to root their propagations." They also partner with local artists for woodworking and ceramic pieces.

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Peter Giuffre

Their favorite thing about working in retail is developing relationships with the people who come into the store. "We've loved getting to meet so many different people over the past few months and learn about them and their house plant collections," says Pete. "We have a fairly small store, so it's natural for us to have conversations with people as they look around. We love when customers come back, and we know them by their names and can ask them how this or that is going and continue that rapport."

The Green House's local roots run deep: Pete grew up in West Chester and went to Rustin High School, while Kellie's from Elverson. "I've personally wanted to have a home base to sell my products for a while, so when I saw this commercial space open up half a block away from the LifeBrand office, I knew it was perfect timing," says Pete. "West Chester's a great small town, and I am so happy to now be a part of the small business community in downtown West Chester after growing up here."