

Retail Profile: By Design Scrapbook Boutique, Houston, TX



"Seriously, it's the cutest, sassiest, girliest scrapbook store ever!" That's how one visitor described By Design Scrapbook Boutique in Houston, Texas. Others have described it as stunning, wonderful, amazingly tasteful, stylish, and yummy. Not bad for a store that just had their "soft" opening in late June.

Walk in to the By Design Scrapbook Boutique, and you realize immediately this is not your typical local scrapbooking store - it definitely has a boutique feel. The retail space is graced with high ceilings, spacious rooms, beautiful ceramic tile and marble floors, domed archways, and detailed architectural molding. Owner Tracy Keith uses her store to offer a stylized scrapbooking experience.

After 20 years as a stay-at-home-mom to four children, Keith found herself at a crossroads, facing her 40th birthday. She told her husband she wanted a "challenge" - she wanted to

open a scrapbook store. "He's been very supportive and that's what I wanted to do," Keith says simply.

The Boutique Look

Keith had a definite vision for how she wanted her store to look. "I wanted something different than other stores," Keith explains. "I like things big and fancy and glitzy. I treat my store like a scrapbook page - I wanted to have fun doing it, and for it to be fun, like a scrapbook page. When people come in, whether they buy anything or not, I want them to leave inspired by something they see."

Keith started with the perfect architectural foundation (left by the previous occupants, an interior design firm) and built from there. She (and a crew of helpful friends and family) painted the walls bright hot and pale pinks, adding black polka-dotted curtains and wrought iron accents. She combined sleek track lighting with sparkling crystal chandeliers. She "framed" her slatboard wall displays with elaborate decorative molding built by her father. The molding makes the displays very distinctive, giving the eye a definite focal point. In fact, that's one of Keith's prime criteria for choosing accents: she likes "anything that attracts the eye". "All I can say is that if you drive by the store make sure and put your sunglasses on so the pink glow doesn't blind you," Keith recently wrote on her blog.

Part of the appeal of Keith's store is that she's not afraid of uncluttered open space. There is plenty of room to move around and soak up the inspiring atmosphere. Products are artfully displayed on a variety of surfaces, from bookcases and ornate wooden tables to more traditional spinner racks and scrapbook paper shelving units. Product is draped over urns, spilling out of baskets, and leaned against candelabras. It's what you might expect to find if your glamorous inner diva and your more practical "just-get-it-done" self could meet in the middle, for once, and agree on something. And this "something" works.

The whole look of the store invokes a sense of trendy "Sex & the City" sass, which Keith reports has been received well, despite her decidedly non-New-York-City locale. "People come in and are amazed," she says. Customers have remarked on Keith's eye for finishing details, everything from

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her employees' matching black and white aprons edged with rickrack, to the matching black and white tissue paper peeking out of the branded shopping bags.

The Online Presence

Almost as soon as she decided to open a store, she started a blog [<http://tracykeith.typepad.com>]. "I started it more as a personal journal," explains Keith. She used her blog to describe the process of opening a store - negotiating the space contract, remodeling, choosing a design team, getting the store website up and running, and more. Once Keith started sharing those behind-the-scenes experiences, "it really just snowballed from there. Now it's really neat to go back to [blog posts from] January and see where I've been." Keith likes blogging about life in her store: "...with the store just opening, there's so much to write about. I can write about whatever is going on in the store. I take pictures with customers and write about what we talked about in the store." She believes it's a great way to communicate with customers. "Customers get to know you through your blog," she says, and she gets to know them through their comments.

All throughout the process of getting the store ready to open, Keith has posted photos on her blog. She recently posted numerous photos from her trip to CHA in Chicago, sharing new goodies with customers anxiously waiting at home. These photos have proven priceless in terms of free publicity. Links to her blog, and specific photos of her finished store, have been posted all over the blogosphere, most significantly mentioned on Heidi Swapp's [<http://heidiswapp.typepad.com/>] and Donna Downey's [<http://donnadowney.typepad.com/>] blogs, as well as on Scrap in Style TV [<http://www.scrapinstyletv.com/>], and tagged on del.icio.us.

That viral momentum carried people right to her store during her soft opening. "One of the MAJOR surprises of the day," says Keith, "was when we asked a customer 'so, how did you hear about our store?' and she replied, 'on the Heidi Swapp website!' [Store manager] Pixie and I nearly fell on the floor! We thought there had to be some mistake!" But it definitely wasn't a mistake - Swapp not only linked to Keith's blog and included photos, she also sealed the endorsement by writing, "I am in love."

Beyond the blog, Keith has been using ConstantContact.com to send out email newsletters - she has sent three in this first month of being open. Once she settles in a bit more, she expects to send out newsletters about once a month. Between the blog and the newsletter, that's been the extent of her active promotion of the store. "I still have not advertised in my area," she admits, almost guiltily. "I was going to just casually open my doors and work out the kinks. Then we got slammed that first week. I get more people coming from San Antonio which is four hours away, more than people who are a mile down the road."

The Global Impact

As a matter of fact, most of her blog visitors are from outside the Houston area - way outside the Houston area. Keith has received comments and emails from people in Holland, France, New Zealand, Canada, the UK, Denmark, Germany, and Italy. These visitors probably won't make it to her retail storefront any time soon, so several of them have asked if Keith would open an online store. 27 passionate "yes, please do!"s filled the comments section of that blog post. Keith and her husband are discussing it. "He's pushing more than I am. I don't like doing things halfway. I'm not willing to do it if it's not the way I want. We're probably going to do it, but I'm not sure in what capacity yet," she explains.

Trade Show Lessons

Keith recently returned from CHA-Summer in Chicago, her first trade show experience. She reports it was "a little overwhelming at first." She went with several loyal friends, and by the

second day, they hit the show floor "a bit more organized." Her tip for new storeowners: "Go to the companies you know you want to order from, and order from them first. Then go search out the new companies." Keith also mentioned she plans to leave for her next trade show a day earlier, so she can attend classes.

The Digital Aspect

Keith shares that she would like to offer digital scrapbooking "in some form", though she isn't quite sure what yet. "For ladies that work and don't have a lot of time, [digital scrapbooking] is a good thing. I know it scares a lot of storeowners, but it's something I'd rather embrace. For now, we'll just tiptoe around it and see where it goes," she says.

"Everything's an Option..."

That open-minded attitude applies to her whole business. Her husband is already talking about franchising, but Keith is pleased with where things are - for the moment. "We're having fun with it right now and we'll just see where it goes. Everything's an option."

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