

Flower hobby blossoms into business

By **Eli Sherman** - November 10, 2017 6:28 am



LOCALLY GROWN: Semia Dunne, owner of Flowers by Semia in Providence, constructs a centerpiece arrangement from 100 percent locally grown flowers. / PBN PHOTO/MICHAEL SALERNO

Semia C. Dunne, owner of longtime floral business Flowers by Semia Inc., described how she got into the flower industry as “backwardly,” thinking of it as a hobby rather than a career.

Nonetheless, while pursuing college degrees in pre-med and landscape architecture, she took a part-time job at a flower shop and her flower career began.

“I got bit by a bug,” Dunne said. “I loved the flower scene.”

By 2000, at the age of 22, Dunne opened Flowers by Semia, a retail flower shop that continues today. And after 17 years of working on the retail side of the flower industry, Dunne is expanding and launching a new

wholesale side of the business called "The Floral Reserve."

The separate operation, which will continue under the umbrella of Flowers by Semia, will open in December. Dunne leased out new space at the same building as the retail shop at 1 Sims Ave. to make room for the new venture.

The idea is to offer a space where artists and growers can connect and do business in one central location.

"The current model for local florists is to order off growers' websites and then they drive everything to [people] all around the state," she explained. "It got me thinking that it would make life a heck of a lot easier to bring their product to one location and let the florist come ... pick up their pre-selected [arrangements] and shop where they couldn't on a farm."

Dunne said she's seen a major increase in the demand for local flowers in the last five years, as buyers put greater value on cultivating a direct relationship with local farmers. Dunne will still offer unique flowers from far-flung places, such as the Netherlands, but will have a strong concentration of local flower growers from Rhode Island and Massachusetts.

"I haven't seen a wholesale model yet where the local product is on the floor, in your face, really super available in a market. And I find it to be the most popular stuff right now," she said.

Dunne is optimistic the new venture will help bolster business. Rhode Island is a popular place for destination weddings, fancy parties and corporate gatherings, which Dunne sees as growing opportunities.

"Our industry is growing and it's hot, so we want to be able to service it," she said.

Dunne declined to disclose sales figures but said revenue grew 46 percent last year. She attributes much of that success to her recently completing the Goldman Sachs 10,000 Small Businesses program, a boot camp-like, professional-development program sponsored by Goldman Sachs and offered through the Community College of Rhode Island.

"Flowers by Semia is running so much smoother and efficiently, allowing us to delve into a new venture," she said.

Her goal is to offer others the tools necessary "to do their best work" and to create a community for the industry at large, she said.

OWNER: Semia C. Dunne

TYPE OF BUSINESS: Retail floral-design studio,
wholesale flowers hub

LOCATION: 1 Sims Ave., Units 102, 105, Providence

EMPLOYEES: Six

YEAR ESTABLISHED: 2000

ANNUAL SALES: WND