An artsy expansion - Leah Lytle (MBA ‘02)

JACKSONVILLE -- When Leah Lytle sold her struggling shop in Gainesville to relocate her family and start a business at St. Johns Town Center, she knew it was a big risk. What she didn't know is how well it would pay off.

The purveyor of home décor, jewelry and gifts has done so well since opening in March 2005 that Lytle opened a second location in Lake City in spring 2007 and locations in Orange City, Orlando, Palm Coast and Middleburg in the summer and fall. The seventh Artsy Abode is scheduled to open in Ocala in mid-2008.

"It's so unbelievable it's beyond words," Lytle, 35, said. "I knew that if I could get in the right market I could make it work."

It took a few years, faith in herself, some patience and the last available spot in St. Johns Town Center Phase I before it happened, however.

After earning a bachelor's degree in public relations and a master's in mass communications with a minor in health care administration from the University of Florida in the 1990s, the Illinois native worked in public relations in the health care industry for several years before returning to UF for her master's in business administration. It was in her entrepreneurship class where Lytle discovered that "I was not meant to have a boss."

So, shortly after earning her third degree, Lytle, her husband, Rob, and another partner opened Paddiwhack in High Springs in 2001. Her original intent for that first shop was to sell products by Sticks Furniture Inc. They quickly branched off to other types of merchandise based on customer demand.
Even after relocating to Gainesville, the shop struggled. Then, in late 2003, a friend who was also a real estate agent suggested Lytle look into moving into the town center in Jacksonville.

The first phase of the much heralded project by Simon Property Group Inc. (NYSE: SPG) and Ben Carter Properties Inc. that opened in March 2005 was 98 percent full when Lytle started her research.

But after selling their interests in Paddiwhack to their partner and finding another partner, Neil Rosin, for the new business, the Lytles snatched up the last available space at the town center. Artsy Abode is one of the few independently and locally owned and operated boutiques that opened on opening day at Phase I of the town center.

Lytle said it was good timing, and good karma.

"When you try to be a good person and do your best, good things happen," Lytle said. "I believe in karma."

Sales at Artsy Abode's town center store rose 40 percent from 2006 to 2007. Company executives declined to provide revenue figures.

Lytle credits her success at the town center in part, at least, to the unusual array of home décor, art, jewelry and gifts, much of which is available at few, if any, other local retailers.

The products, carefully chosen for their rarity to avoid saturation in the market, are made by American craftsmen and such brand-name companies as Vera Bradley Retail Stores Inc., Pandora Jewelry LLC, Sticks Furniture and Fresh Produce Sportswear.

Katie Wengert, vice president of sales and marketing at the Des Moines, Iowa-based Sticks Furniture, said Lytle's astute business sense and willingness to take risks have helped. Artsy Abode is among the top 20 of the 150 retailers around the nation that sell Sticks Furniture in terms of volume sold.

About 19 retailers, including all the Artsy Abode locations, sell Sticks Furniture in Florida. Sticks Furniture prices range from $50 to $7,000 with the average around $500 to $1,000.

Originally from Copenhagen, Denmark, and only in the United States since 2003, Pandora Jewelry specializes in high-end charm bracelets...
and matching accessories that range from basic bracelets that start at $27 and beads that start at $20 to gold bracelets that cost about $1,000 and gemstone beads that can cost up to $450.

'She gets it'

Pandora sales representative Chuck Rouse said Lytle's knowledge of the product is evident in Artsy Abode's ability to outsell the few other local retailers that offer Pandora jewelry.

Lytle's stores may even be one of the top retailers in the state, Rouse said. About 150 retailers sell Pandora jewelry in Florida.

"She gets it," Rouse said. "Some stores get it a little bit, but she gets it totally."

The mother of 2- and 4-year-old boys, Lytle said there are no plans for further expansion after the Ocala store opens this year.

The main focus this year will be to keep the merchandise and the atmosphere at Artsy Abode interesting, unique and fun.

Even with six shops open and a seventh on the way, Lytle doesn't consider Artsy Abode a chain. Nor will she ever.

Lytle still embroiders Vera Bradley handbags upon request and works the cash register.

"When I'm ringing up customers at the cash register, I tell them, 'Thank you,' " Lytle said. "I'm that appreciative."