

NOT JUST A BUSINESS

As business continues to grow in Liberty Township, womens formal wear shop Bella Divine extends a new branch into the area, bringing its customer-first based approach to the community.

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Sunbeams shine through the glass window panes that construct the front of the building, reflecting off the glitter and gems that decorate the gowns on display inside. On the floor, a woman maintains a brisk pace as she whirls around the store, picking out a variety of dresses in all sorts of styles and colors for a customer she is currently helping. A certain magical energy hangs in the air, elevated by the rows of ballgowns placed around the floor and the sparkles that seem to cover every tangible surface.

Located at 7530 Bales St Suite A-130, Liberty Township, OH, Bella Divine is a women's formal wear store that specializes in attire for homecoming, prom, quinceañeras, and weddings. The business is owned by couple Robert and Kim Lee, as well as their partners who reside in Georgia. The recently opened location at Liberty

Center is their third storefront, with two other locations in Dayton and Beavercreek, Ohio.

"I am a native Cininnatian, and so we wanted to dip our toes into the market here," Robert told Spark. "We have really been blessed with the amount of business that we have got and the loyal customer base we have in the entire Greater Dayton area."

According to Robert, the decision to open a new storefront in Liberty Center was driven by the quantity of business that the other locations have been receiving. When the shopping center reached out and offered them the opportunity to move in, the choice was a no-brainer.

Bella Divine is one of many businesses that have successfully expanded into the Liberty Township market. In recent months, notable chains have also moved in including Shake Shack and Buff City Soap. Liberty Center General

Manager John Taylor said that over the past year, the shopping complex has seen a wide variety of incoming business.

"We have had several significant [new businesses] open in Liberty Center this past year," Taylor told Spark. "In The Game, Dry Goods, Windsor, and BoxLunch were a few significant ones that we had been expecting. We also had some surprises come in like Cowboy Sally's and Running on Blooms. It was a busy year in '23 for new stores, but we were always excited to see them come in."

Taylor said that Liberty Center and the surrounding area have become a desirable location for business for several reasons, including its location in the township.

"For one, our location right off of I-75 [has made Liberty Center desirable for businesses]. Liberty Township and West Chester have a lot of new people, a lot of new families starting, and so that growth is another reason," Taylor said. "Also, Liberty Center has become more of a community center in the past four to five years and I think that is a big part of why these properties have been so successful. [The businesses] are part of a community, and so we have really focused on that aspect of it as to why retailers would want to be here."



Pictured to the left: Bella Divine has a wide selection of formalwear for multiple occasions.

According to both Robert and Taylor, the process for a business to open a location in Liberty Center is much like the process of renting an apartment. Both the business and Liberty Center go through an exchange of checks and interviews to ensure that the business is a good fit for the shopping center.

“Giving us a call and expressing interest is the first step for a business if they want to open a location here. Normally once that happens we have a discussion about what the business wants to do and how that fits with what we already have [within Liberty Center],” Taylor said. “Then it is a question of where the business wants to go and what spaces we have available.”

Bella Divine is located on Bales St, which according to Taylor, is one of the most visited areas in the mall and widely desired by many business owners looking to move in.

For the owners of Bella Divine, the most profitable part of owning a business is not the money, but rather the satisfaction and confidence they are able to provide their customers with.

“We really, really, really strive for high-quality customer service and personal, individual connection with our customers. Everything that we have ever done in life and everything that we have done with our business is all based on long-term,” Robert said. “Neither one of us is the type of person interested in setting up shop trying to make a ton of profit quickly and then moving out. We try to provide value and service with every product that we sell with the intention and the knowledge that we want to be here for the next generation. We have been blessed, mostly because of my wife and her customer service and dedication to the business.”

The work that goes into managing a

Pictured to the right: New Liberty Center businesses, (top to bottom) Bella Divine, Buff City Soap, and Shake Shack.

store like Bella Divine heavily depends on the season of the year. Robert said that during homecoming and prom season, the stores are more busy during the day.

“Probably about 65% of our business is all homecoming and prom. When we get into March and April during prom season, there will be 200 girls and their parents in here all day Saturday and Sunday. It gets busy here in the evenings after school as well during the week,” Robert said.

During the off-seasons when the store sees fewer customers, Robert and Kim are still hard at work busying themselves with plenty of behind-the-scenes activities.

“It slows down a bit during the off-season, which is when we start to attend shows and meet with designers. We take a look at inventory and decide what we want to be ordering for the upcoming season, which has become a bit more complicated since COVID-19,” Robert said. “Since the vast majority of women’s formalwear

comes from outside the US, we now have to plan and purchase anywhere from six to nine months in advance whereas it used to be we could order something and it would arrive in a matter of weeks.”

Despite the challenges that come with owning and operating their own business, Robert and Kim remain passionate about what they do.

“We have existed [as a company] for about 15 years. I was a pilot for American Airlines for about 24 and a half years and took an early retirement about four years ago,” Robert said. “But my wife from day one has been working to build the company with our partners. We really have been blessed and a big part of that is due to my wife’s amazing customer service skills.”

Kim said that the Bella Divine has helped her in many ways, including in her mental and physical well-being. But her favorite part of being a business owner is the satisfaction she can give to her customers.

“Bella Divine is all about finding the perfect dress for the perfect girl and putting a smile on her face,” Kim told Spark.

In the future, Bella Divine hopes to find a “final landing spot” as well as give back to the community that has supported them.

“We want one store to serve the Greater Cincinnati area and one to serve the Beavercreek area. I would like to settle on two locations that we would consider long-term assets for the location and for the customer base and finish up there,” Robert said. “We also try to be good community citizens, something that we want to do here is give back to the people who are helping us thrive. By that I mean we are looking into doing some stuff with schools here, like the two Lakota high schools, and giving scholarships back as a way of thanking them for all their students coming in and participating in our business.”

Robert and Kim hope to continue providing high-quality service at their new location in Liberty Center and are excited to see what the future holds for them and Bella Divine.

“Our total advertising budget for 15 years has been zero dollars and zero cents. People enjoy the service we provide and how we do it and we want them coming back. We would rather make a minimal profit and have our customers come back satisfied each time versus try and make a quick profit once and alienate someone from our store,” Robert said. “At the end of the day, we really love what we do. And, we are going to continue doing it for as long as we can.” •

