

Seeing the light, K&H snares window-treatment market

Walking into K&H Custom Window Treatments on Trexlertown Road in Lower Macungie Township, it would be easy to mistake the business as a quaint gift shop or a homey design studio.

To be sure, the business had a strong focus on home décor in its early days, but now the firm, which spans three buildings and has a dozen employees, is more of a business-to-business enterprise than one would suspect at first glance.

Today, the shop's clients are 80 percent corporate and institutional and about 20 percent designing and making custom window treatments for homes in the Greater Lehigh Valley. Plus, the firm is considered a leader in the modern natural-light modifying technology.

But for Sandy Kuhns, president and design director of K&H Custom Window Treatments, commercial or residential – it's all the same big, beautiful business.

Curtains, drapes and window treatments are simply in her blood.

"I was always surrounded by the drapery business," Kuhns said.

As a young girl, Kuhns' father, Donald Heller, worked for Automatic Devices in Allentown, which made riggings and tracks for theater and hospital curtains.

The company did not do its own repairs, so as a side business, her parents would service some of the Automatic Devices clients.

Father would do the mechanical repairs, while mother would mend and replace curtains.

Then 30 years ago in spring 1986, Kuhns joined her family in the drapery world.

She and her mother, the late Norma Heller, started K & H Custom Window Treatments, at first out of their home, and then moving to its existing Trexlertown Road location in 1989. They continued with repair and supply of curtains and drapes for commercial clients, but steadily grew the home-design aspect of the business.

That market segment fell off dramatically after the housing crash several years ago, and so the business adapted and changed with the times.

It also grew.

Kuhns now has a full staff of designers, installers and sewers, yet she remains.

Her primary focus these days is on commer-

cial and institutional clients, she said.

Not only are those customers the largest segment of her business, but commercial window treatments are becoming a technical and ever-evolving industry, and her expertise is a valuable commodity.

Henry DelVecchio, project manager and interior designer for Spillman Farmer Architects of Bethlehem, said as architects and designers seek to create working spaces that are more energy efficient, the use of natural light has become integral. He said experts such as Kuhns are important.

"She's really one of my go-to people," DelVecchio said. "When I need an idea, she's the one I ask for help."

Today's window treatments aren't just there to look pretty or block out light, he said. They are part of the energy footprint for commercial structures.

"Without a doubt, we're doing more with light harvesting and light control," DelVecchio said.

He said designers such as himself are looking to blackout shades and light filters to keep out heat and glare, and they design window treatments to bounce light as far into a room as possible to reduce the need for artificial lighting.

"She has vast knowledge and experience on what is out there and how to use it," he said.

Kuhns hasn't forgotten about the "pretty" end of her business.

There is still a demand for custom window treatments, especially among owners of higher-end homes in the region, and that's also a skill that translates well into some segments of her commercial business.

Senior housing, assisted living and skilled nursing facilities are being constructed at a break-neck pace in the region, and K&H often is called on by those buildings' operators to create not only sensible, functional window treatments, but attractive ones, too.

"They want to those places to look very nice and homey, and they're willing to spend money to make that happen," she said.

While the retail segment of her business is by far the smallest, Kuhns said her small showroom is nonetheless an integral part of operations.

Lamps, art work and candles on display in the homey showroom are all for sale, and sell



Sandy Kuhns in her showroom amid window treatments and other décor. - (PHOTO / STACY WESCOE)

them she does, but those items are as much for inspiration as for sale.

"It helps people see what it would be like in a home setting," she said. The retail area helps sell ideas.

K&H's work doesn't just help clients; it benefits the community, as well. When ordering material for large corporate clients, there are leftovers, often high-quality, attractive fabrics.

Kuhns donates those leftovers to community groups, and the "scraps" are repurposed for such things as quilts for babies or aprons for the elderly.