

LEFT OF CENTER

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BY JOSHUA MALONI

The Plant Shack puts spring in our step, while giving back to many worthy causes

Stop me if you're heard this one before: We're in a pandemic. Added bonus: It's January. Cold, dreary, eventless January.

Blah humbug. It's about this time when one starts to hear "think spring" spring forth from the mouths of others. What does that even mean?

I can't will warmer weather into existence – but I can actually see, touch and smell something green, vibrant and cheery now that The Plant Shack has opened a new location on Center Street in Lewiston.

"Everything in here is based on how you can spice up your space and your living area," owner Rachel Stepien explained. "I've always grown up with plants. My dad had a lot of cacti and trees growing up. And I am the one that hates winter, and I love green, so having plants in my home during the winter just makes me feel a lot better – and it does to others, as well. So, I want to bring that space to Lewiston, and share that uniqueness with everyone around here."

At The Plant Shack, green is good: A portion of the funds spent on products goes to support the environment, animals – particularly turtles – people, too (I know; some of you prefer the turtles). And when Stepien isn't doing her part to make the world a better place, she's bolstering the business community by inviting WNY merchants to hold pop-up sales at her stores.

"My mission is 'the shack that gives back.' We want to help out the community – both local, national, international. A lot of our products are based on that," said Stepien, a West Seneca resident who grew up in Youngstown and attended Lewiston-Porter. "So, for instance, we have string of turtles, which is a plant, and it's called string of turtles, which is the common name. Every time we sell one in the shop, we donate to the



The Plant Shack owner Rachel Stepien is shown inside her third store, located at 335 Center St., Lewiston.

Sea Turtle Conservancy."

The Plant Shack is not a florist. Rather, "We range everything from very easy-to-care-for plants to a little bit more harder-to-care-for plants, and then we have a little bit of rare plants every so often. They are hard to come across, but I do want to try and have a little bit more in here at a lower price point than what you can get online. Plants are insane right now; it's crazy. And then, obviously, we have pottery to pair. We do have some local ceramicists that will make pottery for us, and then also we have decor pottery, as well, from retailers and wholesalers.

"The product that we have mostly comes from small businesses around the nation. We have a kids area right here that has kind of go-outdoorsy type of things. Plant a pollinator garden; look at the butterflies that come with that. We have do-it-yourself terrarium kits. ... We have all sorts of fun things around there."

And "We like giving back," Stepien said. "We plant a tree every month. For every 10 plants that we sell, we plant a

tree through One Tree Planted, the nonprofit. A couple months ago when we started, a lot of people were like, 'Well, let's bring it home. Let's plant trees around here.' I found Re-Tree of Western New York. So now, every other month I do donate to them, as well."

She said, "I really want someone to walk in and not only think it's a beautiful place to come in – they want to hang out – but also know that they're shopping and also helping the local community, and the international and national communities, as well."

Stepien has a degree in entomology through the Air Force, and dreams to work full time with animals. For now, she's busy with a Plant Shack inside Knox State Park, another on Main Street in East Aurora, and the Lewiston store.

"The ultimate goal, going past where we are now, is to become a botanical café," Stepien said. "It would be coffee by day and then craft cocktails – all botanically themed – at night. And it's almost like think of the Botanical Gardens, walking in and having a coffee – it would be amazing. And then even more so going past that and having the botanical café to continue to give back. So, it'd be even a bigger and larger outlet."

"From the beginning, I wanted to work with animals, but knew I wouldn't be able to support myself on that job. So, I found something else I can do in the time being, and then found ways to still help the animals while doing this."

Kerry Champlin of Buffalo shops at Stepien's store on Main Street in East Aurora.

"I first came across The Plant Shack when they first opened up on the Knox Farm – my friends and I packed up the pups for a midday plant/walk adventure," she said. "Five plants

and two planters later, I was hooked – not to mention they are dog-friendly! They are a staple in the plant world here in WNY. Hardly a month goes by where I don't order at least a thing or two for myself or friends from The Plant Shack. They have a great selection of pretty much everything! Rachel and her team were rock stars during the pandemic and stayed innovative when it came to finding a way to stay open and maintain a growing clientele despite economic conditions. I can gladly say I waited outside for curbside pickups every time they were offered.

"Rachel and her team bring true meaning to the saying 'plants make people happy.'"

The third Plant Shack opened at the end of November. Stepien said response has been wonderful and, post-pandemic, Lewiston is likely to "see probably double the boom in population when it comes to festivals and small businesses and things like that, especially with the new plazas going up."

"I'm really excited about Brewed & Bottled. Chris and Jess (Budde) are two of my closest friends. And honestly, so many people that come in the store ask me when the beer store is going to reopen."

"That anticipation is building up so much that the summer – if all goes well, and COVID is in downfall – I think people are going to storm this area. They're going to be excited to look at the new Sgt. Peppers and Brewed & Bottled and Gallo and everything."

She said, "I think it's just gonna be really exciting. ... The summer in Lewiston with all the festivals, these streets are so crowded. I'm really excited to see what it does bring. This year just made everyone appreciate (small businesses). I think the restaurants are gonna have wait lists during the summer, and small businesses are gonna have lines out the door to let people in; so, I'm really excited."

Stepien is hosting her own version of Small Business Saturday through the end of May, inviting a local merchant to share her space in Lewiston. The impetus is "Since the year sucked, like all these craft fairs were canceled, events were canceled. ... It's just one way that we can use our space and share it with others."

She said, "Even if they don't sell anything, it's just a way to get their name out. You know, follow on Facebook, follow on Instagram. 'Here's my card,' like, 'Hey, so and so knows someone who wants this.' I think it's just a really good way to help spread the love."

Amanda Larkowski, the retail director at the Roycroft Campus in East Aurora, said, "The Plant Shack is not only a place where summer is endless, but it's also a place where everyone feels they belong. Plant lovers of all kinds are welcomed with open arms and are always greeted with genuine care, passion and kindness. Rachel and her team are wonderful not only in what they are doing for their business, but in what they're providing to local nonprofits, our planet, and to other businesses, as well."

"As Rachel's first-ever customer when she opened her doors at Knox Farm, I love nothing more than supporting her and cheering her on as she achieves her dreams!"

The Plant Shack is located at 335 Center St. For more, visit www.theplantshackwny.com.

HOMETOWN PRIDE!



River Region in Bills playoff spirit

The River Region was in the Bills playoff spirit last Saturday with an impromptu parade organized by fans that began on Lockport Street in Youngstown and continued through neighborhoods into the Village of Lewiston. Pictured is a group of Bills fanatics gathered at the start of the parade at the Rite Aid Plaza in Youngstown.

The small but festive parade included a Youngstown fire truck plus numerous vehicles, and concluded with a pregame gathering at Lower Niagara Moose Lodge 584 in Lewiston. (Submitted photo).



Mount St. Mary's cheering on Bills

Members of the Mount St. Mary's Hospital team gathered together Friday to cheer on another beloved Western New York team: the Buffalo Bills.

The Bills beat the Baltimore Ravens on Saturday. One week prior, Buffalo won its first playoff game in 25 years, defeating the Indianapolis Colts.

Buffalo now goes on to Kansas City, to face the defending Super Bowl champion Chiefs, at 6:40 p.m. Sunday, Jan. 24. TV coverage is courtesy of CBS (WIVB-TV Channel 4).

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