

By Jan Wilson



Margaret LeMay provides fine art solutions for blank walls and office spaces.

Integrated Art Group LLC

In a cozy, inconspicuous office on Evansville's cobblestone Main Street, Margaret LeMay (42), president and owner of Integrated Art Group LLC (IAG) contemplates her recent career change from a corporate art director to small business owner. "This decision was years in the making," she said, "and the time was right."

Right, because LeMay had done her homework. She knew it wouldn't be easy, but she also knew that she wanted to work closer to home, in an industry she loved. She created a business plan and met with UW's Small Business Development Center and SCORE. "They really helped me take the final leap," she said.

Right, because the financing was there. As art director at Erdman for 13 years, LeMay had been saving for this day. She was also able to secure a line of credit, and had the financial backing of some family members who provided low-interest loans.

Right, because her family just needed the change. "We have three kids. We live here. It's nice to be a bit more flexible with family issues," she said. Her husband, a former welder at Marquip, is involved with the business on a part-time basis, but spends most of his time caring for a daughter with special needs. LeMay knows there is no possibility of a dual income household at this point in time. "This has to

work," she said with determination.

IAG is a business-to-business resource for fine art. Its mission: to supply a professionally organized selection of art that is diverse, affordable and appropriate for the corporate or healthcare environment. The staff will travel to wherever they're needed to work with clients. On this day, they're preparing for a trip to Urbana, Ill.

The office walls are adorned with a myriad of artwork, from colorful landscapes to brightly textured abstracts, to quilted tapestries and several sculptures.

Each piece is original art, and most are on consignment, which allows LeMay the ability to stock an inventory of 675 mostly-unframed pieces. All pieces are also digitized, and will soon be available for viewing on the company's Web site.

"Art adds an element of humanity and interest that helps pass the day," said LeMay. However, she clearly understands the risk she's taken in a difficult economy: "It's also a luxury item, and the first thing to get cut."

LeMay had the luxury of not starting entirely from scratch. She was able to retain some of her Erdman clients, and hopes to ride-out the current economy by servicing, retaining and growing with them. At the same time, she works to acquire new business by aligning with the architects and designers developing future projects.

Though some of those projects have already been delayed, LeMay remains optimistic. "Buildings are still going up, they just need the infill," she said.

IAG works with companies to establish an overall artistic plan and budget, then helps locate, choose and acquire the art, which comes in a variety of mediums – from woodcuts to etchings, paintings, and even mobiles and commissioned stained glass. Most collections are purchased, and each piece is specifically placed depending on the client's overall mission, lighting, and ambiance.

"We really try to push people beyond their comfort zone, to provide an art collection, rather than just a design element," she said. And whether a client is looking for one signature piece of artwork for a lobby, or fifty pieces for an entire building, costs vary accordingly.

The artwork LeMay collects comes from local, regional, national and international artists, many renowned. She has relationships with art dealers in Maryland, California and Chicago, as well as local artists, fine art presses, and she visits a throng of art shows where she can personally meet the artists. This is not only her job, it is her passion.

But it didn't start out that way. Born and raised in Kenosha, LeMay attended college in Warsaw, Poland for two years before returning and enrolling at UW-Parkside. Her field of study? Mechanical engineering. When she came to UW-Madison to study printmaking, the artist in her was awakened. She worked at TandemPress in Madison for two years prior to joining Erdman.

Owning a business is "scary, and a hard decision, but definitely worth it," she said. "It provides a sense of security in that I am responsible for all that happens. There is no finger-pointing."

After leaving Erdman, she had one month to complete three \$100,000 projects which, she said, was both exciting and grueling. She "hobbled" along on a home computer until the business opened, and her efforts paid off. The income allowed her to hire two art consultants and secure the new lease. Other significant start-up expenses included computers and phones, software, autoCAD programs, office supplies and insurance. "It was tricky to find a company that insures artwork," she said.

LeMay said she has been able to offer some staff benefits, and she's currently trying to work out a health package. "I'll offer a bonus package this year, and hope to have a commission package next year," she said. "But we would have to grow significantly to add more staff."

INTEGRATED ART GROUP LLC

BUSINESS LOCATION:
13 West Main St., Evansville
PHONE: (608) 882-1400, call for appointment
WEB: www.integratedartllc.com
EMPLOYEES: 2 FT / 3 PT
ANTICIPATED FIRST-YEAR REVENUE: \$600,000
SECOND YEAR GOAL: \$850,000 - \$1 million
MAJOR CLIENTS: Dean Health Systems, Erdman