

# Rebel Nell

By Susan Kehoe, Ph.D. | Photography by Sebastian Sullen



Left: Amy Peterson (seated in front) and Diane Russell (seated on barrel) with the Rebel Nell team: Julia Rhodes, Karen and Patrica, original team members at Rebel Nell, and newer member Eonka Mykira. Middle: Rebel Nell workers create intricate jewelry designs. Right: A completed graffiti pendant. Below: Trays of graffiti ready for transformation into jewelry.

When Amy Peterson was taking her run on the Dequindre Cut, along a set of rail lines formerly owned by Grand Trunk Railroad, she was inspired by a piece of graffiti that had fallen from a building. Peterson examined the many layers and found them symbolic of Detroit — its history, culture and people.

“Never fall in love with the top layer,” she thought, “always go deeper.”

An idea to repurpose the graffiti emerged. She talked with Diana Russell, a Wayne State University graduate in fashion merchandising, and four months later they were partners in a new company named Rebel Nell. They found they could fashion this unique, local material into pendants, earrings, bracelets and other stunning jewelry as unique as the city itself.

“Initially, these scraps of graffiti look a little rough on the surface, just like many people’s first impression of Detroit,” Peterson says. “However, after we take it through our process, we’re able to reveal all the beautiful layers that make up the graffiti, just like the intricate layers that make up our city.”

However, what is most remarkable about this company is that the jewelry is made by women from homeless shelters. Peterson, an attorney with an MBA, was living in the COTS (Coalition on Temporary Shelters) neighborhood of Detroit, where she had heard the stories from women in challenging situations. Believing that these women could change their situations if someone believed in them and taught them about financial empowerment,

she hired them to create the jewelry.

“The jewelry is a vision of the women who transform it into something beautiful,” Peterson says.

The 4731 Arts Incubator in the Grand River Creative Corridor, a neighborhood revitalization project, was the perfect location for the business. It’s the cradle of exploding art production and the art community emerging in Detroit, where artists are relocating from all parts of the country and Europe. Many believe this enclave will be influential in giving the city purpose and bringing it back to life.

Peterson initially hired three employees and, for the past two years, the team has turned Rebel Nell into a company that sells graffiti jewelry in 16 states, as well as many locations in Detroit, including the Detroit Artists Market, the Detroit Institute of Arts and the Henry Ford Museum.

When asked about “success stories,” Peterson said they’ve already had successful graduates. In fact, most of the women from homeless shelters move out within about two months because they earn enough to support their families. Rebel Nell pays well above the minimum wage, but, more importantly, teaches financial literacy and management classes. A dedicated financial adviser guides each woman based on her individual needs. In addition, regular mentoring sessions are available to assist in confidence building and self-realization.



“We’ve seen women flourish and take the next steps in their lives,” Peterson says.

Rebel Nell follows a social enterprise model that emphasizes social and business sustainability. In April, Peterson won the Gingras Global Social Enterprise Sustainability and Standards Achievement Award for her efforts in an innovative approach that emphasizes social and

business sustainability. The Rebel Nell women learn how to recognize both their inner strengths and the emotional barriers to reaching their potential. There are even entrepreneurship classes to explore opportunities and understand the economics of running a business.

Rebel Nell is a company that is changing the way business is created, and women are leading the way. They are doing meaningful work and contributing to the growth of the city. **NS**

## BBAC Exhibitions Through Nov. 13

The Birmingham Bloomfield Art Center (BBAC) has on exhibit the abstract paintings of Nancy Thayer, whose work is displayed in numerous museum collections, including the DIA.

The paintings of Amy Fell, an emerging artist whose discipline is contemporary realism using iconic American imagery with bold color and dramatic lighting in large-scale presentations, are also on exhibit.

The Birmingham Bloomfield Art Center is located at 1516 S. Cranbrook Road in Birmingham.



Amy Fell oil painting of old pay phone.