

“We take this home, it puts food on our table, it’s our life” The Owners That Built Southern Crossing

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Welcome to Southern Crossing, a small, local Opelika business that sells gifts, home décor, and smiles to everyone who enters their doors. Although Southern Crossing seems to be only a giftshop in a railroad town, inside you will notice it is filled with loving people, a family that truly cares about their customers and a community that will always stand by their side.

Southern Crossing owners, Valerie and Mike Smith have been the sole owners of the downtown Opelika stapple shop, Southern Crossing, for the last five years. Their journey as owners of the store has been a rollercoaster, but it did not begin there.

Valerie, known as the heart of the business, is from Dothan, Alabama but lived just north of the city in Headland for most of her life. Valerie grew up in the small town and stayed there until it was time for college, but she already knew where she wanted to be. Auburn University. “I’ve been an Auburn fan my entire life and I just always loved Auburn”, but before she would arrive on Auburn’s campus, Valerie would spend her freshman year at Samford University in Birmingham, Alabama.

When Valerie left for college to attend Samford University, she also left behind her mother battling breast cancer.

Valerie and Mike’s story began when they graduated college, “Mike and I were dating in college, and we always said we wanted to live in Auburn, but my mother was sick so when I graduated, I went home to take care of her”. After a year at Samford University and three more years at Auburn University, Valerie quickly went from college graduate to her mother’s caretaker.

Although Valerie had hoped to return to Auburn within a year or two of moving back to Headland to care for her mother, her plans were put on pause to focus on what was more important. “My mother passed away within a year and we decided to stay in Headland for 13 years”. Valerie describes her mother as kind, loving and

the type of mother a young woman needs, but “when you lose your mom at 23, you grow up really quick”.

While in Headland, Valerie and Mike stayed busy with their first shop. “I owned a store in Headland for 5 years”, Valerie said while recalling her time in her hometown, “but when our daughter was headed to middle school I thought ‘I wanna do something’” and that’s when the move to Auburn became a reality.

In 2015, The Smith’s gathered all their belongings, packed them up, moved to Auburn and began a whole new adventure. It wasn’t long until the family was well adjusted to their new city and Valerie heard about a small boutique in Opelika called Southern Crossing.

Valerie became friends with one of Southern Crossing’s owners at the time, Debbie Holt, and that’s when the wheels started turning in Valerie’s head. “One day when we were having coffee that one of the two owners of the business was selling her share and that I should buy in.”

Although Valerie was not new to retail, she was surprised to hear that someone wanted her back in the retail game, “when she told me I thought ‘no way’ because I swore, I would never go back into retail, but I did”.

After a surprising meeting, Valerie called her husband to get the a-okay to become part-owner of Southern Crossing with Holt. “We saw the potential for growth” Valerie said, “and the store already had a great reputation, and Opelika people are very loyal to their downtown businesses”, with that in mind, Valerie began her journey as small business owners in Opelika.

Not even a year later, Valerie and Mike sat down again to discuss full ownership of the shop. Valerie had a dream for the shop that only she could make come true, “I saw the potential to bring in a younger crowd while maintaining the older demographic we already attracted” she said, “I had an eye for both age groups.”

The shop was Valerie’s project, but she needed a team to help her and who better than her own family? “This is a family business, me, my husband, and our daughter” said Valerie, “but it didn’t start out that way. Mike was a schoolteacher and P.E. coach in Phoenix City, but once I saw the growth here, I had to bring Mike in. He’s the business, the money, the payroll, and the taxes while I’m the buyer.”

Mike and Valerie bought the shop in 2016 and their success has only grown from there, “the very first year I was a half owner, we ended the tax season \$310,000 in sale. We ended 2020 at over \$800,000” She then went on to add that “last year, the year of Covid, we made \$200,000 more than in 2019 and we are continuing the success.”

However, this family business is not for everyone in the family. Valerie says her daughter, Maddy, will not be taking over for her when her time with the store comes to an end. “This is a family business, but I know my daughter will not be the one taking over when I’m done here”, Valerie laughed, “She wants to be an engineer; she does not want anything to do with this.”

Although we may not know who the next Southern Crossing owner will be, we do know that the shop is in great hands with Valerie. “We have excellent employees and customers” Valerie said when describing her reason for success, “Every single sale matters. It doesn’t matter if you’re spending \$5 or \$500, the impression we make decides if you ever want to come back and that is what we care about.”

Good impressions are everything, but according to the awards the shop has won, the Smiths are doing more right in their shop than just first impressions. “The shop has won Opelika’s Best Giftshop, Small Business of the Year and Quarter, as well as a finalist for Alabama’s Retailer of the Year”, only a few of the many awards won since the Smith’s gained ownership.

The Opelika community is also a huge part of Southern Crossing’s success. Valerie says, “winning Small Business of the Year for Opelika was the best because it means our people love us”, and that they do.

Southern Crossing is not only a well-known store for gifts, décor, and clothing, but also a place with a lot of heart that the Smith’s value over everything, “we take this home, it puts food on our table, it’s our life”.

Come see Southern Crossing and their amazing selection of gifts and goodies at 813 S Railroad Ave, Opelika, AL.