

Published January 22nd, 2020

Jennifer Perlmutter, Business Person of the Year, connecting through art

By Pippa Fisher



Jennifer Perlmutter, this year's Business Person of the Year Photo Christa McCabe and the bank vault in place.

This year's Business Person of the Year, Jennifer Perlmutter, is proof that art and business are not mutually exclusive. Nonetheless this year's recipient of the award says she was truly surprised to learn she had received the honor.

"As an artist, 'business person' is only a title that I have really embraced for the last six years," says Perlmutter. "It's always been my livelihood but to truly embrace business within a small community and do it with success, I have had to learn how to engage civic organizations, fellow business owners and local residents on a scale that is new to me."

Although Perlmutter has run a small gallery on the western end of Lafayette since 2014, it wasn't till February of last year that she opened the "pop-up" gallery in the old Wells Fargo building. The highly visible gallery was born of an idea floated at a city council meeting as property owners and retailers brainstormed ways to fill the then-growing number of vacant storefronts.

Property owner Steve Cortese recognized the potential for this building. Perlmutter says she "dared to dream" and on Feb. 14 the new gallery named JP@TheBank opened to a huge crowd, anxious to see what she had done with the large airy space, leaving the teller counter

As Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Jay Lifson says, since then each exhibit has highlighted a variety of media, large and small sculptures and illustrations. "But what makes the gallery unique is the way other art forms are celebrated. Music, performing art, poetry, and art in motion have all been woven into the fabric that has become a center for our community to meet, learn and appreciate art," says Lifson.

Lafayette City Manager Niroop Srivatsa agrees. "Jennifer has raised awareness of the arts in downtown Lafayette. The corner of Mt. Diablo Boulevard and Moraga Road has never seen so much buzz and excitement!" she says.

Perlmutter, the youngest of three, is a California girl, born in Mountain View and raised in Napa. She attended Emerson College in Boston and started her working life in radio. On graduation in 1989 she moved to New York with her then-boyfriend Sean Perlmutter. Her work in radio transitioned to work on film and TV production. In 1990 a move to L.A. saw her continue work in the film industry, on set with stars such as George Clooney and Salma Hayek. She even had a line in a Little Caesar's national "pizza-pizza" commercial.

Her landlord (an interior designer) noticed Perlmutter's interest in art and introduced her to a high-end furniture painter in need of assistance. One year later, she opened her own furniture design and painting studio focused on exploring high-end finishing techniques. She began creating her own collection of art and hung it throughout the studio. Designers and clients bought directly, galleries followed, and soon she was presented with an opportunity to create special paint effects and finishes in South Korea for two luxury real estate destinations.

Jennifer and Sean married in 1996, their son Jaco was born in 2002 and, in 2008, they moved to the Bay Area, settling in Lafayette for the great schools. Perlmutter took a studio in Berkeley but, tired of the commute by 2013, she left the studio, as she says, not knowing where she would paint next.

A few weeks later, she took a chance and called the number on the window of the little brick storefront on Mt. Diablo Boulevard across from Diablo Foods - the building that would house the Jennifer Perlmutter Gallery.

Perlmutter creates art while curating and showing the work of others. She was invited to give a TEDx talk in 2011 on her approach to art and business: one brick at a time, from wherever you are, responding to what is and trusting the process.

Perlmutter says that her mission is sharing compelling fine art that touches and inspires. She has always loved communications and for her, in both her art and her business, it is all about making connections. She believes we all have a quest for purpose in life and says that for her, the answers come when we listen for the questions. This is a philosophy echoed on signs around her gallery: "What is art?" "Why does it matter?"

There is no doubt in Perlmutter's mind about the quality of people who surround her. "It's like a vortex," she says of the gallery. "It draws all these great people in." She is referring to her staff Martin Segobia, Yvonne Banis, and Hilary Shipway who will be emceeding the dinner in her honor at the end of the month.

"JP@TheBank is a very interactive space," explains Perlmutter. "Kids drag their parents in for the treasure hunts that Martin comes up with." It's just another way she connects people with art.

Lifson sums it up; "She helped make our community a better place to work, live, learn, shop and play. That is why she was named the Lafayette Chamber's 2020 Marquis Business Person of the Year."

Perlmutter is very grateful. "In any field, it's nice to be acknowledged. I don't take the recognition for granted and feel a sense of responsibility and also celebration."

And the community will get a chance to celebrate with Perlmutter at a dinner in her honor at 6 p.m. Jan. 31 at the Lafayette Park Hotel and Spa.

Tickets can be purchased on the Chamber website: <https://cca.lafayettechamber.org/EvtListing.aspx?dbid2=CALAF&evtid=26988&class=B>

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