

Oakmont Candle Works

bringing people together

by Laurie Sliben

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As I walk into Oakmont Candle Works (OCW), the obvious sensation takes over: my olfactory receptors are in a dream state, inhaling all those delectable, soft scents. And yet, just as strongly I feel a welcoming aura as I walk under the fairy lights, through the gorgeous displays, and hear Tabatha shout, “Hi, Laur!” in her characteristically warm demeanor. Welcome to Oakmont Candle Works: a beautiful, heartwarming store located in Oakmont, Pennsylvania. Owner, Tabatha Flanick never set out to become a candlemaker but lucky for us, the craft found its way to her!

So how did this destination shop come to be? For starters, Tabatha came from a family of makers and music lovers. During her childhood, she spent much time exploring the nooks and crannies of her family’s store in Saxonburg where they built and stained furniture, sewed clothing, rolled their own beeswax candles, and even grew their own fruits and vegetables. It was truly a family affair. Being in that shop day after day as her grandma would watch her, surrounded by all that creativity, is where Tabatha’s love of making things with one’s hands was born. And as she grew into adulthood, that very work philosophy became second nature, thus planting the seed for what eventually became Oakmont Candle Works.

But owning a candle shop was not the first business idea Tabatha had in mind. As the Flanick family grew to include four wonderful kids, her desire to create never waned. For a period of time, Tabatha wrote a blog called, “A Half Dozen Life,” where she documented her experiences being a mother of four children, and everything that motherhood entails. Through her blog she became connected with a plethora of other creators, thus fueling her fire to create the shop of her dreams. Originally, Tabatha wanted to own a coffee shop: the kind of place where folks could gather in a homey, warm environment and not just buy coffee, but purchase unique goods as well. Then one day, a different opportunity presented itself...

In 2018 Tabatha became aware that assets - wax, burners, jars, etc., - from a candle store were coming up for sale in her hometown, which got her thinking: Perhaps opening a coffee shop was not the way to go; maybe she should learn how to make candles instead! Just as quickly as Tabatha’s mind started swimming with questions - “But wait, I’ve never made candles before? Can I do this??” - she just as quickly started envisioning her shop. She dreamt of a cozy, inviting locale where customers could buy her candles, along with a variety of handcrafted items; where she could offer craft-type classes in a Makers Room; and where a Pour Bar would take center stage, for customers to have parties and make their own custom candles. So after careful consideration, Tabatha decided this purchase was the right one for her, and in January 2019, she was the proud owner of the newly minted Oakmont Candle Works!

The business Tabatha envisioned went beyond just selling candles; it was a sensory one as well. Our sense of smell brings back memories; handmade goods come from the heart; and even music puts us in a certain state of mind. So before any physical store creation took place, Tabatha keenly knew she wanted all of those components incorporated into the ambiance of OCW, and she kept all of that in clear focus as she began prepping her retail space. As soon as the community got wind that a new shop would be opening, there was immediate buzz. The community was excited and couldn’t wait to check it out! Patience, though.

The next six months were a whirlwind of activities as they hammered and sawed their way towards opening day. Tabatha and her husband, Joe, along with their children and extended family, all pitched in as they tore down walls, painted, plastered, and built displays - including the impressive Pour Bar! And as she had never made a candle before, she had to learn that skill as well - which she did by leaning on the ever-helpful previous owners for tips and trouble-shooting.

And lest we forget, there is a great emotional aspect to opening a new business as well. Along with being very nervous about creating this whole new venture, Tabatha had lots of questions: Would the company be a success? As this would be a totally new and different candle shop from the previous owners' business model, would customers like the products? Can she do it all? Can she still raise a family and own a business? She had no idea what to expect.

As July quickly approached, Tabatha adjusted her focus to be on the grand opening, as opposed to feeling butterflies - at least for a bit! Once the storefront was complete and the shelves were fully stocked, Tabatha's vision became a reality. She made it! Opening Day had arrived on July 24, 2019, to the excitement and thrill of the neighborhood. The feedback was incredibly positive, although there were some bumps in the road as she learned the ropes. But it was the energy from that positive beginning that fueled her success.

Even from day one, Tabatha knew that understanding her customers' needs and wants would be paramount to running a successful business. And even though the grand opening took place in July, the thought immediately popped into her head that customers would soon be looking for fall scents. She was right! So she quickly shifted gears and began fall preparations. Tabatha continues her forward thinking and is laser-focused on stocking her shelves in anticipation of each new season, to ensure her shop dazzles with the best of the day.

And then... and then... She was in business less than a year when she had to close her doors due to Covid-19, but in no way did she want to slow down the momentum of that first year in business. She couldn't afford to stop selling candles, so she had to get creative. Tabatha knew for herself, at least, that burning a candle can be very healing and can instill a sense of peace and calm. And when would those feelings of peacefulness and calmness be needed more than during a pandemic? So, Tabatha does what she always does: She figured out a way to help.

OCW provided candles for nurses, hospitals and other frontline workers. Tabatha even provided free porch drop-off two days a week. Knowing many of her customers were unemployed due to the Covid shutdowns, and knowing how costly shipping had become, she offered to deliver - all over Pittsburgh - for free. She says one of the most touching things she will always remember is finding surprises left for her - like a large thank you sign, or flowers, or even balloons - all because people were so grateful to have beautiful smelling candles delivered to their homes, while we were *all* at home, "sheltering in place." Tabatha would never say closing up shop and enduring a pandemic were worth it, but she is forever grateful for these heartwarming moments tucked in amongst the Covid craziness.

Tabatha's ongoing desire to be involved in her community is second nature, whether by creating custom candles for local businesses, organizing fundraisers, or participating in local events like Oakmont's Night Markets and Hometown Christmas. The staff of Brother Andre's Cafe* is one local group in particular who has touched Tabatha's heart. All of these charismatic

individuals have IDD (Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities). They love to hold pour parties in the shop as candle making is a task that can be done safely, on one's own, with little help, and it brings them a sense of freedom and fun. Watching their joyful interactions reminds Tabatha of the importance of sharing those same joys with one another. **See link below to find out more info and when you can snag a cuppa or snack for yourself!*

And even now, every single morning when she comes into the shop, Tabatha still feels peaceful and calm and in her zone. She is in her space - the daughter of makers and artists, and lovers of music - and she wants that same level of comfort to be felt by her customers. Tabatha created her dream in Oakmont Candle Works, combining some of her favorite things: locally handmade, unique goods; connection to people and community; a warm, inviting atmosphere; and of course, her favorite music playing along in the background. What a wonderful way to carry on the gifts from one generation to the next. Next time you're in Oakmont, stop in and say hi. She'll be happy to see you!

Full disclosure: I am honored to call Tabatha my friend, so writing this piece was easy. But I can't forget her husband, Joe! Among Joe's many talents, he owns Flanick Electric, is the Fire Chief for Oakmont VFD, and is an official OCW helper. The two of them are passing on lots of love, and an amazing work ethic to their children. I'm lucky to know them.

Oakmont Candle Works
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*Brother Andre's Cafe
<https://brotherandres.org/>