

Handmade books, boxes grow into treasured items

By Jim Winnerman

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Joanne Kluba thinks your life should be an open book, and she wants to be the publisher. She makes one-of-a-kind books and keepsake containers for family mementos that immediately elevate them into treasured family heirlooms.

Would you like an individually designed box to hold the birth announcements and wedding invitations and programs for each of your children? Or perhaps a book for a collection of poems you penned? Might a memorial book containing photos and mementos of a deceased parent have a place in your home? Whatever your idea, Kluba promises to deliver the perfect book or box as a work of art.

Ginger Gambaro of Labadie owns and treasures 12 of Kluba's handmade art books and boxes and has purchased many others for gifts. "It is a long drive for me to get to her studio, but I love her work," she says.

For Gambaro's daughter's wedding, Kluba was commissioned to make a guest register. The book was made using silks in shades of the wedding flowers, and included a silk poppy to adorn the cover. Polaroid photos were taken of each person at the reception. Once guests signed their photos they were inserted into album pocket pages Kluba had designed to look like frames.

Kluba's expertise is also valued by corporate clients. Marie Casey, president of Casey Communications in Clayton, employs Kluba in her public relations agency. Recently she had Kluba design a custom book to hold a client's company history researched and written by Casey.

"The company president was a Lewis and Clark aficionado, so Joanne used leather to design the book to look like the original journals the explorers carried," she recalls. "An arrowhead attached at the end of a leather strap held the book closed."



Casey says the final product was a beautiful way to express the personality of the recipient, and the perfect way to package and celebrate the 20-year anniversary of his firm.

"As an artist I have always recorded my personal experiences in handmade journals, and collected mementos in handmade boxes," says Kluba, 56, of Affton. "I often thought people would appreciate having a one-of-a-kind container to keep or give as a gift."

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Kluba graduated from Webster University with a degree in fine arts followed by a master's degree in business. For 20 years she worked in the corporate world as a graphic artist designing art for people she never met.

Although she had been studying book binding under the guidance of a local book conservator, and producing books and boxes for herself for about 15 years, it was not until eight years ago that she decided to open her own business.

“I thought it made the most sense for me to do what I loved, and combine it with my graphic and fine arts skill. “Now I am really enjoying making something for people who appreciate what I do on a personal level. It is very meaningful for them, and just as satisfying for me.”

Paper Birds is the name Kluba chose for her business. “I feel like part of what I do is to create hand-bound, blank books that inspire the imagination to take flight,” she says.

Her studio in south St. Louis occupies a storefront with large picture windows. The space is filled with shelves of colorful papers and various tables with an array of projects in different stages of completion. An assortment of unusual tools, different types of hand-operated presses and samples of completed projects on display pique the curiosity of passers-by. As a result, people frequently stop in and inquire about what she does.

Careful attention to detail goes into every aspect of the creative process. The color of the paper is selected or hand-painted by Kluba to match what the client desires. Hand-crafted embosses are often added to the book cover. The edge of each page may be cut with different decorative scissors, or the natural deckle edge of the paper may be used. Pages are often held together with ribbon, or the binding is artfully sewn together with thread.

Kluba's talent also frequently appears as a custom watercolor to help support the “theme” of a book. She uses her excellent calligraphy to supplement traditional type.

Technical knowledge of bookbinding allows her to construct a book that will open easily, so every page lies flat once it is turned. “How a book works and feels is important,” she emphasizes. “A book should ‘touch’ you in an emotional way so that you realize every part was carefully thought about.”

Kluba also uses her studio space to teach classes on bookmaking, and for giving weekend workshops.

Custom-designed art books and boxes can be as much as several hundred dollars or as little as \$20.

“A handmade book makes a personal and lovely gift,” she says. “Even in an age of electronics, everyone still enjoys holding a special book in their hands.”



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