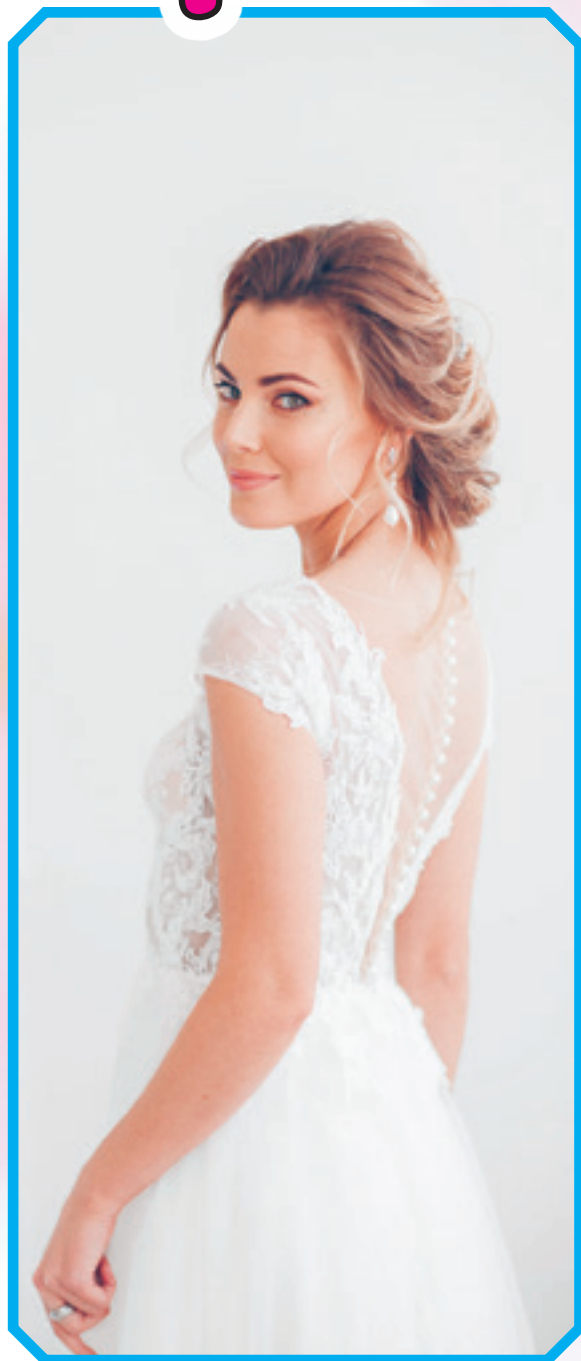


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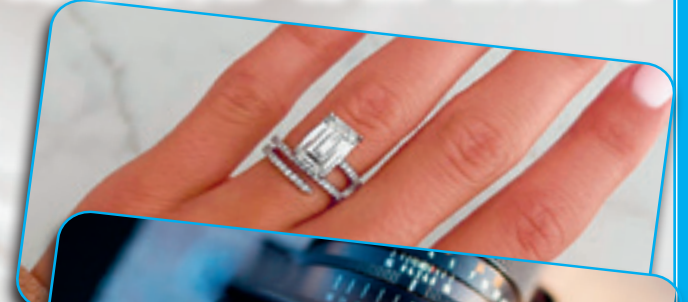
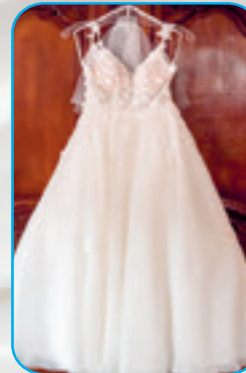


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Eagles wedding expo showcases local vendors

BY JONI HUBRED

“The beautiful thing about Owatonna is we have everything here you need for a wedding.”

Owatonna Eagles banquet manager Jen Hexum says “everything” means photography, floral, formal wear, shoes, honeymoon attire, wedding party gifts, entertainment services, rentals, printed invitations, venues, and more. She’s part of a group bringing together area vendors for a March 16 Wedding & Formal Wear Expo at the Eagles club, 141 Rose St.

The civic group is all about people helping people, Hexum said, and this event, in partnership with The Dress Shop owner Karie Pankowski, fits with that mission.

“It really is a community effort, and that’s what I think is really exciting,” she said. “It’s a collaboration with fellow vendors.”

The expo includes a runway show with models walking an elevated platform. Fashions will include wedding gowns, tuxedos, mother-of-the-bride and flower girl dresses. Hexum said anyone looking for formal



Owatonna Eagles banquet manager Jen Hexum shows off a room at the building on Rose Street, which was fully decorated for the Owatonna Area Chamber of Commerce and Tourism annual dinner. She’s working with a group of local businesses to hold a March 16 Wedding & Formal Wear Expo.

wear—even a dress or tux for prom—is welcome.

Guests can also enter a raffle drawing and will have plenty of time to meet participating merchants and service providers. Hexum expects to see around 30 vendors

but said they’re “still trying to conceptualize the layout.”

The expo will also give people exposure to an event location they may never have considered.

“I think the Eagles is a sleeper venue in town,”

“The beautiful thing about Owatonna is we have everything here you need for a wedding.”

Jen Hexum
Eagles Banquet Manager

said Hexum, who has worked as banquet manager for about a year.

People may think that the club is exclusive, but anyone can rent the facility. Hexum said she and Chef Gar can be flexible when working with couples to plan their perfect wedding, and “he’s exceptional at creating menus on a budget.”

“We can do something very elaborate here or something very economical,” she added.

Hexum said the committee will accept vendor applications through Feb. 21; an application is posted at eagles1791.com, under the Events tab. A mission statement for the event makes clear that the expo is a collaboration:

“Your participation is an investment in the growth and vitality of our local business ecosystem, contributing to a thriving network that benefits us all. Together, let’s create an unforgettable experience for attendees while mutually advancing our businesses and enhancing the fabric of our community.”

There’s no admission charge for the Wedding & Formal Wear Expo, which will run from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m.

STAFF PHOTO BY JONI HUBRED

MATCH MADE IN HEAVEN

Formal wear store doesn't miss a beat

BY KAY FATE

Timing, as they say, is everything.

Take, for example, Karie Pankowski, who dreamed of opening a formal wear store.

"I'd been working in finance for 29 years, and I was just ... burned out," she said.

So she asked herself an honest question: Do I really want to sit here for the next 10-15 years, doing this?

She thought about her father, who died a couple of years ago. He had dreamed

of running a resort, but had devoted his career to providing for his family instead of pursuing the dream.

"I wanted to say I at least tried it," Pankowski said of her own pursuit.

So she contacted a residential realtor she knew in Owatonna, and told him she was looking to rent a commercial space to open her business.

"He told me, 'as a matter of fact, the owner of the bridal shop here in town just contacted me last week, because she wants to sell

her business.' So within a week of each other, we both reached out to the same realtor," Pankowski said.

"I wanted to buy; she wanted to sell."

"She" was Marcia Halvorson, who owned Dream Day Bridals on Cedar Street for 10 years.

Pankowski sold her home in Rochester and all her belongings, and the two struck a deal. The store changed hands in late June.

"I bought everything," Pankowski said, including the clothing inventory, fixtures, the computer

system and Halvorson's customer base.

"It was basically just a name change," she said.

What's Inside

The Dress Shop, located at 315 N. Cedar, offers wedding gowns – both by special order and off-the-rack at up to a 50% discount – as well as special order, off-the-rack and consignment special occasion dresses.

That can run the gamut from bridesmaid and mothers' dresses to prom and cocktail dresses.

There are two large studio rooms – "big enough to host a Thanksgiving dinner," Pankowski said – with plenty of seating and three-way mirrors, where a bride-to-be can try on and model her gown choices.

The tuxedo studio, where the groom's party can look through books to make their own choices, features two smaller fitting rooms.

Pankowski also sells shoes, jewelry and other accessories in the deceptively large space that covers 5,000 square feet between two adjoining buildings.

She is hoping to be a sort of one-stop-shop soon, building her rental inventory of table decorations and linens, as well as reception décor.

She plans to offer a more specialized service within the year: day-of co-



STAFF PHOTO BY KAY FATE

Karie Pankowski, owner of The Dress Shop on North Cedar in Owatonna, holds a bridal bouquet that is designed to display jewelry. Brides can use heirloom pieces or just plenty of new bling for a bouquet that will last forever.

A WEDDING VENUE

What: The Dress Shop

Where: 315 N. Cedar Ave., Owatonna

How: 507-413-6160, or thedressshopmn@gmail.com

ordination for the couple. Pankowski would be the contact person on their wedding day, making sure vendors have arrived and set up properly, corralling people and keeping the schedule on track.

In every aspect, she considers the bride.

"You shouldn't have to worry about anything except feeling pretty, being loved and having a great, memorable time," she said.

Not like the others

Anyone who's watched a reality show on TV that features wedding planning knows the drama involved.

That is not Pankowski's reality.

For starters, she doesn't require an appointment to shop – nearly unheard-of

in the bridal industry.

Of course, appointments are accepted – recommended, if it involves a group of friends and family, but if a bride-to-be is just browsing, none is necessary.

"Some people just got engaged, and they just want to see what I have," she said. "I tell them to try any and everything on, because what you see on the hanger isn't what you'll see when you have it on – and it may not match the vision in your head."

"This is a good place to do that, so you can figure out what you do and don't like," Pankowski said. "I encourage them to take pictures (in the dresses), because I just want to help them find the perfect dress."

See **WEAR STORE** on 8 ►

"You shouldn't have to worry about anything except feeling pretty, being loved and having a great, memorable time."

Karie Pankowski
The Dress Shop Owner



STAFF PHOTO BY KAY FATE

It's a sea of white down the wedding-gown aisle at The Dress Shop. Owner Karie Pankowski sells dresses off-the-rack at discounts of up to 50%, as well as gowns that are special-order. The store features two large studio rooms for brides-to-be to try on and model gowns for friends and family. Appointments to browse are not necessary.

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What's trendy for weddings

BY RENEE BERG

From custom cocktails to food trucks and digital guestbooks, couples marrying this season are faced with myriad choices when it comes to planning their wedding day.

“For other brides planning their wedding, I’d encourage them to take their time with planning and try not to get too stressed,” said Rochester’s Aynsley Allert. “Everyone will want to give you advice, but don’t feel pressure to bend to everyone’s whims and desires.”

“Lastly,” she added, “take time to enjoy being engaged.”

Allert is marrying fiancé Robert Johnson on Sept. 28, 2024, at Bearwood Event Barn in Byron. She declares it the perfect space for their hopefully perfect wedding.

One unique aspect of Bearwood weddings is they can be indoors or outdoors, and the happy couple renting the space only needs to provide an hour’s notice of where they’d prefer to be. Allert said she and Johnson are planning an indoor wedding but will move outside if it’s “perfect.”

“It is absolutely gorgeous and is exactly what we were looking for,” she said.

Outdoor weddings are becoming more popular, experts say, with barns, farms and even backyards as favored locations for today’s nuptials.



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Aynsley Allert and Robert Johnson are planning to be married in September at Bearwood Event Barn in Byron.

Why get married outside? Allert said for a few key reasons.

“Outdoor weddings offer several benefits that indoor weddings don’t,” she said. “Outdoor wedding spaces tend to be more flexible in setting up and finding the perfect spot for the couple. Indoor weddings are often limited by the amount of space available and the configurations. Out-

See TRENDY on 11 ►



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STAFF PHOTO BY KAY FATE

Karie Pankowski holds one of the new arrivals at The Dress Shop – a glittery, silver prom dress in a size 20. The store also offers consignment prom dresses, as well as new special-order and new off-the-rack gowns for all occasions.

Formal wear store doesn't miss a beat

◀ WEAR STORE from 4

Not long ago, a bride found a dress she really liked but had scheduled appointments at two other stores. Both charged a \$50 cancellation fee.

"I always tell them, 'don't make any commitments today; just don't... I'm always going to be here; you can come back,'" Pankowski said.

That bride ended up buying her dress somewhere else, "and I was so happy she found what was perfect for her," Pankowski said, "and it was fun for me, because I don't always get to see these dresses on someone."

The Dress Shop is the only store like it within a 45-mile range, but the

prices don't reflect that.

The most expensive wedding gown Pankowski carries – and it must be special ordered – is about \$1,500.

Mothers' dresses range from \$160 to \$245; her most expensive special occasion dress is about \$400.

"That's why I like the (gown) vendors I have," she said. "I don't feel right charging someone that much money. I want to keep it reasonable."

She offers sizes up to 5X; a recent shipment of prom dresses ranged from size 6 to size 20.

Other options

Pankowski got her start in formal wear back in 2011, when she and a friend opened a consignment shop in Rochester.

"Economically, it just makes sense," she said, of offering consignment options at The Dress Shop, in addition to her new pre-ordered and new off-the-rack gowns.

"A person wore it once for three hours," she said of prom dresses, specifically. "I'll have it dry-cleaned and sell it for half" of the

original price.

The Rochester store closed in 2016, as Pankowski's daughter entered junior high and life got busier.

That daughter's prom dress is for now in Owatonna – though as a high school senior in 2020, she didn't have the chance to wear it, thanks to COVID.

"So I hung on to it, knowing I wanted to do this shop, so I could sell it," Pankowski said.

In reality, her dream started even earlier, though "it took me a while to figure it out. I kind of knew at a young age, maybe 10 or 11, that I wanted to be a party planner," she said. "I loved everything about weddings; I loved everything about birthday parties.

"I loved setting up and decorating and helping out."

Then came the epiphany after years in finance and accounting, thinking about her father, and remembering something an aunt once told her:

"She said, 'do what you love to do, not what you have to do,'" Pankowski said. "That always stuck with me."

Happily ever after

The Dress Shop is open Mondays, Wednesdays and Thursdays from 3 p.m. to 7 p.m., Saturdays from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m.

Tuesdays and Fridays are reserved for appointments, which are required for tuxedo rental selection.

Pankowski still works part-time doing bookkeeping for a local manufacturer, until the shop takes off.

As she builds her business, she also continues to learn; a friend is teaching her the intricacies of alterations. Currently, she refers customers to outside seamstresses.

Halvorson has stayed on for now, Pankowski said, sharing valuable experience.

"The fact that she grew such a good customer base over the years says something," she said.

Her clients, she said, can expect honest feedback and guidance while shopping, "but in the end, they'll choose what they feel good in. If they feel confident, then they feel pretty."

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A 4-legged wedding

Help available for including Man's best friend

BY KAREN M. JORGENSEN
MAILTO:EDITORDCI@KMTL.COM

So, you really want your best friend at your wedding. But it's not quite as simple as it sounds, because your best friend might try to run off with some food from the buffet table, or jump around during the ceremony, or if the wedding is outside, chase a squirrel that comes too close.

Yes, your best friend is your dog, and you really want him or her to be part of the big day.

It turns out that more and more couples want their dogs to be part of the wedding, and there are people who can help.

Lara Leinen is one of those people. She is the owner of Doggy Social, a business that specializes in providing pet attendant services for weddings. The company is located in the Twin Cities, but offers services throughout Minnesota, including southeast Minnesota and Rochester.

Leinen said she started the pet attendant business in 2018. This was after she could find no one to help her find a way for her pet,

in this a case a cat, to be in her wedding. Shortly after her wedding, she said, she adopted a dog, and it was then she knew that there was potential in her idea.

And she quickly found out that many couples want their pets to be part of the wedding. Her business, she said, takes pets to about 100 weddings a year throughout Minnesota. Some couples simply want the dog to be part of the official photograph sessions. In other cases, they want the dog to be at the ceremony and perhaps walk down the aisle with a bridesmaid.

What kind of couple wants their pets at the wedding?

"These are people who love their dogs," Leinen said. "They are level-headed beautiful people."

Doggy Social's business model is based on "pet attendants" who attend the wedding with the dog. Leinen said that a pet attendant will pick the dog up from home before the wedding and stay with the animal until they are returned home after the event.

Some dogs love it, and others may have anxiety,

she said, and the pet attendant can make it work for all. Some dogs will do better if they come before the ceremony and are only part of the picture taking. Other couples do want the dog to take a more active role in the ceremony or at least be present when the dog is comfortable in that environment. If the idea is to have a bridesmaid, for example, walk the pup down the aisle, the pet attendant is always nearby to step in if needed.

One rule, she said, is that generally the dog is taken home before the reception starts.

She added that it is not always necessary that the pet attendant meet the dog before the ceremony, but during the planning process, there is plenty of communication with the couple about their dog, so the day goes smoothly.

She says she is very particular about who she has as a pet attendant as they must be someone who can relate to the animal. She has five or six attendants to handle her Minnesota clients and said she has also expanded her business to several other states.

Shannon Granholm, newspaper editor, dog lover, and weekend pet attendant and pet attendant manager for Doggy Social, says they provide



COURTESY RUSSELL-HEATER PHOTOGRAPHY

Man's best friend has become a staple at many weddings.

a much-needed service. And, she said, involving the dog goes beyond simply having him or her at the wedding.

"A pet attendant is such a necessary service for the wedding industry," she said. "I didn't have my dog Frosty in my wedding because the service didn't exist at the time, and we didn't want to pawn her off on a relative or friend all day. It's been so fun getting to meet dogs of all breeds and sizes. It's also been so cool to see how every couple incorporates their dog into their big day, whether it is having a cocktail inspired after their pup, customized cufflinks or napkins or dog treat goodie bags for their guests."



Divanyx is 'the' place for area weddings

BY RENEE BERG

For Christian Bohlen and Abby Dedina of Blooming Prairie, their wedding venue was a no-brainer. They'd been to a wedding at Divanyx Event Center & Photography and loved it.

The facility in Dodge Center allows couples to have their wedding indoors or out, and Dedina anticipates taking advantage of both for her July 27 wedding extravaganza.

"We had a friend get married there and she was like, maybe you'll get married here one day," said the bride-to-be. "We were like, let's do it!"

Divanyx was formerly Coop's Event Barn. Divanyx got its start in 2011, with just photography and graphic design, said co-owner Aaron Hasley. In 2021, he and wife Raquel Hasley bought Coop's and "turned it into what it is today," Aaron said.

Barns have become trendy locations for weddings. When the Hasleys first started with photographing weddings in 2011, they were primarily church affairs. But since



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Abby Dedina and Christian Bohlen of Blooming Prairie will be getting married later this summer at Divanyx Event Center near Dodge Center.

about 2016, the couple has noticed a change to outdoor spaces for area weddings.

"We saw that switch, and that's what got us excited," Aaron said. "That's the biggest thing for us, switching from indoor spaces like churches to

"Our biggest motto and belief is that the wedding is the couple's day."

Aaron Hasley

Divanyx Event Co-Owner

outdoor spaces."

When the pandemic hit, outdoor weddings took off even more. Some couples opt for having their ceremony outside at Divanyx, then eat inside. "On a good day, that's what people do," Aaron said. "They have

the main bar outside and their dance outside. We can handle inside or outside."

Their barn holds up to 199 but outside couples can host up to 299 guests there.

Dedina said she and Christian are pretty "laid back" when it comes to all things, including wedding planning. As such, she said they appreciated everything Divanyx had to offer.

The couple will rely on Divanyx for decorations and photos, as well as tables and chairs. Dedina's uncle will gift them DJ talents and videography. And for food, they'll serve Famous Dave's. Dessert is what will set them apart, Dedina said, as they're serving Dip n Dots.

It won't be done in time for this couple's wedding, but down the road couples will be able to be married at Divanyx year-round. Aaron said their "biggest dream" is a winterized facility on site.

"We are looking at starting the building next fall, and opening in 2026," he said.

"Our biggest motto and belief is that the wedding is the couple's day," Aaron said.

What's trendy for weddings

◀ **TRENDY** from 7 door weddings also offer a certain type of whimsical aesthetics that you can't find indoors."

As for what's trending with wedding cakes, well, nothing is. More and more couples are choosing to create a dessert bar, said Angela Larson of Angela Larson Baking of West Concord.

Allert confirms, saying "wedding cake alternatives" are hot right now.

Dessert tables, cookies and other non-cake options are popular for her, Larson said. "It's running the gambit but dessert tables seem to be the thing I'm seeing more of," she said.

"Another thing coming back is replication cakes," Larson said. "Brides want mom and dad's cake redone. It's interesting seeing what people are getting requests for."

When it comes to flowers, it's a race. Book early, said Mindy Hedberg, owner of Huckleberry Floral Design & Gift in Dodge Center. "We only have so much time and space so it's important to get your florist booked as soon as possible, and have a realistic budget set."

She's seeing lots of classic white and green for weddings now, though come summer and fall, she'll also see peach and burnt orange. There's also a lot of blue, and pastels are big.

Larger weddings are becoming the norm, said Katie Trelstad-Andrist, co-owner of Bearwood Event Barn near Oxbow Park in Byron. At Bearwood, long tables with family-style food service is one popular wedding trend for these large weddings that are becoming all the rage.

Couples are also repurposing more. Instead of buying new, they're going with second-hand items for decor, centerpieces and even the head table backdrop.

"I think sustainability is becoming more popular just in general," Trelstad-Andrist said of Bearwood, which focuses on weddings. "People are becoming more mindful."

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