

Who made Evanston Made

Lisa Degliantoni is a force for the arts in the city

by [Gay Riseborough](#)

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“She was hard to miss when she landed in town,” says photographer David Sutton about Lisa Degliantoni, the power behind Evanston Made. Since she arrived here from El Paso, Texas, in 2002, she has thrown herself into launching one arts organization after another. An extrovert with tremendous energy, she is the self-proclaimed “loudest, bossiest, pushiest” person in the room.



Lisa Degliantoni (Jamie Kelter Davis Photography)

These outsized traits have served her – and the city and its artists – well.

Although she has been at the heart of numerous arts projects in Evanston, Degliantoni’s marquee initiative was **Evanston Made**, the local arts-promoting organization. She launched it in 2012 and since then it has grown from a handful to more than 450 members. This past holiday season Evanston Made took over the vacant Urban Outfitters store at Church and Maple Streets as a showplace for artists and artisans to set up

displays and installations for perusal and purchase.

Other Evanston arts organizations were invited to participate in special events. The market lasted seven weeks, and was, by all accounts, busy and successful.

Born into a “huge French-Italian family” near San Francisco, Degliantoni majored in English and creative writing at Cal State San Diego. After college she moved to New York with outsize aspirations, nothing less than to effect global change, “maybe to even be like Oprah.” Her career in journalism wasn’t quite Oprahesque but was nevertheless highly successful, culminating in the position of Managing Editor at Sussex Publishers, which put out *Spy*, *Mother Earth News* and *Psychology Today* magazines.

New York was also where she met her husband, Dave Ford. He was pursuing an “informal graduate education,” she says, learning the art business by being at the very center of it.

From New York, she was recruited to El Paso, Texas, to launch Robert O’Rourke’s Stanton Street Weekly alt-newspaper. Afflicted by a persistent “brain drain,” El Paso needed a publication to help area youth feel connected to a vibrant culture of music and art, she said. A free weekly newspaper, modeled on *The Village Voice*, “would do just that.”

The paper lasted only 15 issues, however, and O’Rourke went on to become Congressman “Beto” from Texas and Democratic candidate for President in 2020. (“I consider Beto to be one of my oldest and closest friends, and he’ll make an incredible governor of Texas,” she said.)

Even though Degliantoni calls herself a “hop around Sally, a professional relocater,” marriage to Ford and the birth of their two sons required settling in one place – to raise a family and make art. Ford has always needed a big studio space for his art. (He is the creator and owner of **Swing Set/Drum Kit**, a sculpture that integrates music and movement,

which was originally commissioned by the city of El Paso and is now an Evanston favorite at outdoor venues. It was even shown recently at Lincoln Center in New York.)

A New York friend, originally from Wilmette, suggested Evanston as an “arty” and reasonably priced community, at least compared to New York or San Francisco. Ford welcomed the idea. He was originally from Grand Rapids, Mich., and liked the Midwest, the change of seasons and the proximity to his family.

On arriving in Evanston in 2002, Degliantoni took a job at Illinois Institute of Technology as a project manager, which required a long and discouraging commute to the school’s campus on the south side of Chicago. After 18 months at IIT she left and vowed to work only in Evanston.

Since then, she has been busy as ever, working as Operations Manager at the business-to-business service firm Acquirent, serving as Editor-at-Large of Evanston Magazine and Engagement Director at Hackstudio, and as Director running One River (Art) School when the chain opened a branch on Davis Street.

Degliantoni also created a blog called “Evanston Newbie” devoted to “falling in love with all things Evanston.” Former city Cultural Arts Coordinator Jeff Cory, at the time the Director of the Evanston Arts Council, saw the blog and sent it to then-Mayor Elizabeth Tisdahl. The mayor invited Degliantoni to join the Arts Council.

Crowded opening at Gallery 1100 in Jan. 2020
(Photo by Amy Riseborough)

The invitation came only six



months after the family had moved to Evanston. Three years into her six-year term, Degliantoni was elected Co-chair with Shorefront Legacy Center founder Dino Robinson. She said Wally Bobkiewicz, then-City Manager, told the Arts Council, “No one will ever visit a city to see the car lots. They visit for culture!” She took him at his word, bringing back the artists’ open studio tours to create more visibility for the arts and raise awareness for Evanston artists.

Bobkiewicz “wanted to do good by artists,” Degliantoni said, and told her his goal was a freestanding arts organization in partnership with the city. He was “always enthusiastic about what I was doing – bringing energy, awareness and visibility to the arts community.” She did not forget his suggestion of a freestanding arts organization: it eventually became the germ for Evanston Made.

Another formative event in the city’s artscape was the release in January 2013 of the EvanstARTS report. EvanstARTs was a citizen-engagement initiative with representatives from the city, the Arts Council and the Evanston Community Foundation, which sought input from community residents to help form a “roadmap to the arts in Evanston.” The report promised to “help direct public and private efforts to bolster the arts” in the city.

Several important recommendations surfaced through the EvanstARTs process: to develop a central plan, name an “arts czar or czarina” to coordinate and spearhead cultural development, develop public-private partnerships, coordinate physical and virtual infrastructure; develop and launch a “brand” for Evanston’s arts, nurture young artists, cultivate

patrons of the arts and improve communication among arts groups and between arts groups and the community.

A Cultural Arts Coordinator was hired and served for three years, but as the city budget came under pressure, she and a number of other city employees were let go.

By this time, Degliantoni was off the Council and had launched yet another initiative, the “Lisa D. Show,” a podcast devoted to interviewing artists and creative types and collaborating with organizations to promote Evanston events and initiatives.

Invitations to join arts organization boards followed and were accepted: Art Encounter and Young Evanston Artists (YEA).

Meanwhile, hoping to carry out some of the worthy goals of EvanstARTs and find a new place to live that would combine all the family’s interests – living quarters for all, a studio for Ford and a gallery where art could be shown and events could be held as a way to connect with the community – she and Ford made the plunge and acquired a home at 1100 Florence.

The 1100 block of Florence was already an artists’ neighborhood. After the first World War, Eastern European immigrants moved in, took jobs in the nearby Mark Manufacturing factory (now Evanston Plaza at Dodge Street

Crowded opening at Gallery 1100 in Jan. 2020.
(Photo by Amy Riseborough)

and Dempster Avenue) and built shops and small houses, many housing two or more families. Following World War II, the next generation moved to suburbs farther out and the inexpensive, empty spaces became artists' homes and storefront studios.

The building Degliantoni and Ford bought had been a Polish butcher's shop with a few rooms in back and a full basement. (The butcher lived in the house next door.) When he closed, 1100 was for a few years a custom cabinet shop and then briefly an electrician's outlet store. It had been empty several years when they bought it in 2016. The corner, commercial location would promote engagement with the neighbors, Degliantoni thought, and, then, as she envisioned it, with the general public.

It took 18 months to complete the necessary buildout, during which time the family lived in the building. Ford did all the work himself. Degliantoni said the city was "helpful," requiring windows of determined size in the now-bedrooms on the south side, where there had been none. Chickens can be seen scratching in the back yard through what are now the big kitchen windows. A tiny rental house sits on the back of the property.

The family's two sons weren't as enthused: they thought the purchase was bizarre.

Gallery 1100 opened in 2017 with an exhibit by graphic artist Ben Blount, who now has a studio in the very same block. Degliantoni felt she should put "some skin in the game," by offering art for sale there. The living room gallery gave her freedom to program as she pleased – with no rent to worry about covering through art sales.

The space is a for-profit outlet and not just for Evanston Made, she says. It is a professional-looking, white-walled gallery that shows mostly professional artwork. Degliantoni usually takes a 30% commission on sales, compared to the more common 50% in Chicago, although work is not always for sale at 1100. And the commission is not always 30% – sometimes it is negotiable. Lisa laughs, "I'm the broke Peggy Guggenheim

of Arts in Evanston.”

Even though an artist himself, Ford does not use 1100 as a “vanity” gallery, for his own work. (That is considered bad taste and unprofessional in the art world.) He is a silent but strong presence in the gallery, however, “pushing” for art to inform and stimulate – neighbors and public.

Ford is a supporter of outside artists, a proponent of crossflow. Because he works part-time in installation at the Art Institute of Chicago, the Museum of Contemporary Art and the Block Museum at Northwestern University, the installations at 1100, consequently, are always professional – the hanging, the presentation – no matter what is shown.

“Nasty Women” volunteers, 2018. Degliantoni and Dave Ford in back row on right. (Photo by Joerg Metzner)

For three years, the gallery hosted “Nasty Women” fundraisers of Evanston art only to benefit Planned Parenthood. (That phrase, uttered by the former U.S. President during his campaign, made worldwide news and

launched a feminist movement by the same name.) Gallery 1100 raised almost \$25,000 through their efforts, which Degliantoni is very proud about. Other fundraiser events followed.

Using a membership model, Degliantoni began Evanston Made as a community-building initiative. For years it grew by word of mouth and the “ripple effect.” Annual membership costs \$75 per artist, \$45 per senior artist. Degliantoni is founder and Executive Director of Evanston Made, with a volunteer Board to which she reports. The organization provides publicity, venues and artist events. Degliantoni has a salary and a three-year contract. She plans to find and train a new director soon, to cycle leadership – “The organization should be sustainable,” she says.

On the subject of the Evanston Art Center, Degliantoni was “sick” about the city’s “abandonment” of the Harley Clarke mansion, which the Art Center could not afford to keep up, even though the rent was only one dollar a year. Ultimately, the Art Center organization was forced to find a new location.

She is impressed with new facility at 1717 Central St. “The exhibits and the space are good, their classes great – but expensive,” she said. She believes the Art Center “needs to do a better job showcasing the work of Evanston artists if Evanston is going to be in its name.” The only cooperative event between the two organizations so far has been Evanston Made’s annual exhibit there.

Degliantoni’s vision for the future is a thriving art center in every ward in Evanston. She sees that manufacturing and churches are “dying” here – church buildings are for sale, like St. John’s at 1136 Wesley, which she would dearly love to buy for Evanston Made. (Perhaps there is a generous donor lurking nearby.)

She thinks Artists Book House is “fantastic, the project and the team... it will be a marvelous destination for anyone interested in book arts.” She wishes the City of Evanston would lease space in every city-owned

building to an arts organization for \$1 a year, as they are doing with the Harley Clarke. “After all, we literally make Evanston a more interesting place to live and visit,” as city statistics prove.

Degliantoni admits she is impatient, hyperactive – “aggressive for the Midwest, where everyone is ‘humble.’” She is definitely a doer, as she defines it, and a happy free agent at Evanston Made. “There are two kinds of people; doers and consumers. We don’t make much anymore, just consume and collect – we don’t engage, don’t share. I am a community-builder by nature! Artists need lots of eyes and the community needs to know their artist neighbors. I want to do this for artists, for humanity, for connection.”

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