

Gazebo in Northampton - helping people feel great in their bodies and under their clothes

On March 17th, Gazebo, like many small businesses in Northampton, closed down to customers sending employees home without a paycheck and leaving business owners fearful. How were they going to pay their bills with no income?

Owners Amy Dickinson and Donna McNeight purchased Gazebo (a women's intimate apparel retail store) in 2016 from founder and longtime owner Judith Fine. They were still paying off bank loans and slowly implementing their business vision for the future, when the COVID 19 virus struck throwing a monkey wrench into their plans. One of their future plans (after paying off their loans) was to invest in new computer hardware and software to implement an online, web-based, e-commerce system for customers to order products. Now that their store front business was closed to customers, they realized the need to have this feature was critical to their long-term financial success.

Thanks to the Northampton Emergency Small Business Grant Program administered by [Valley Community Development](#), Gazebo applied for and received \$7,000 to purchase software and hardware to set up an e-commerce system and to manage inventory for a new line of business. If it were not for the grant funding, Amy and Donna would not have been able to make this financial investment so soon. According to Amy "These upgrades to our computers and point-of-sale system are key to optimally serving our customers and building a sustainable future. E-commerce capability will help us survive in case we are forced to close again, and it is something that we can expand and improve upon in the coming years. We will initially sell items like pajamas and robes that do not require an expert to fit. Eventually we hope to offer bras online too".



Like a tailored suit, finding the perfect bra requires a personal visit with a professional who knows how to properly fit the customer. All of Gazebo's employees are highly trained and skilled bra fitting experts. Gazebo is also an accredited post-mastectomy boutique serving breast cancer survivors. They accept most health insurance and provide specialized fittings for breast prosthesis and post-mastectomy bras.

Gazebo was allowed to re-open for retail sales on June 8th. However, because using the fitting rooms was not allowed, that made bra fittings IMPOSSIBLE. Since, 95% of

Gazebo's sales are up, the June re-opening did little to increase sales. On June 22nd, Gazebo was able to allow access to the dressing rooms by appointment, after being unable to do bra fittings for 3 months! Donna says that they took advantage of the forced closure to apply for EIDL, PPP, and local funding, and make sure that employees had the resources they needed to get unemployment benefits. In addition to making arrangements for extensions on vendor, utility, and rental obligations, Donna and Amy used the time to paint the dressing rooms, clean the basement, plan and dream.

Since COVID 19 protocols required extensive cleaning/sanitation of dressing rooms and clothing, Gazebo initiated personal appointments for all customers using an online scheduling system. According to Amy "this has worked out terrific, both our staff and customers value the one-on-one attention. We plan to continue this option post-COVID 19."

Going forward, Gazebo has just applied for a Community Revitalization Fund grant to hire the professional services of a marketing expert to operationalize the new e-commerce system that Gazebo installed this summer. Amy said, "we are looking forward to this new line of business, increasing sales through online purchases and providing our customers with an easy way to reorder their favorite products without coming to the store".

With the generosity of their customers and the community, Amy and Donna are optimistic and hopeful that Gazebo will survive and grow despite the COVID 19 pandemic. They are overjoyed they have resumed in person customer fittings and sales and are very much look forward to implementing their new online retail store. Gazebo carries bras, swimsuits, sleepwear, maternity, foundations & shapewear, underwear, accessories, and pleasure objects. To find out more about Gazebo, go to <https://www.the-gazebo.com>