

**Economic Fuel Competitor Opens Shop in Old Town
by Courtney Hunt-Munther, The Eureka Reporter
7/9/2007**

If someone had told Eureka resident Sandy Jensen 10 years ago that she would one day open a home furnishings and decor shop, she probably would have laughed. Today, however, that is exactly the situation in which Jensen finds herself.

Jensen opened Gaia Imports on June 30 — a day before her anticipated opening date. The business moved in after a store called Jabberwocky vacated a storefront on Third Street in Old Town Eureka in early June.

The name “Gaia,” meaning “Goddess of the Earth,” seemed a fitting title for Jensen’s store, which contains unique treasures from around the world.

From intricate belly-dancing scarves and Kuchi tribal jewelry to sleek teak tables and one-of-a-kind hand-painted chests, Jensen carries assorted products imported from countries like Indonesia and India.

One of her priorities is ensuring that the merchandise she carries is all fair trade.

“You see all of the bad effects that unfair labor causes: child labor, unfair wages, working extremely long hours. I could never support anything like that,” Jensen said.

The main supplier she uses in Los Angeles knows the Indonesian villagers who make much of the furniture personally and ensures the labor is fair by visiting often, she said.

Collecting exotic furniture has been a passion of hers for years, but was more of a hobby until she made a life-changing decision last year.

With layoffs taking place at St. Joseph Hospital in Eureka in 2006, Jensen, who worked for 24 years as a lab technician, took the opportunity to do something different with her life and voluntarily resigned. She said she had a great job and loved her co-workers, but found she needed something that would give her more satisfaction.

She found inspiration to open an imports store and even more support for her idea through classes at College of the Redwoods. There, Jensen

met Chris Gaines, an adviser and instructor for the Economic Fuel Student Business Challenge, which pits students against one another in a race for more than \$100,000 in seed capital for new businesses.

"I had a little window of opportunity to do this," Jensen said. "If I would have missed it, I would have kicked myself for years."

Entering Economic Fuel, Jensen wound up just outside the pool of finalists for the prize money, but was still thrilled to have completed her business plan and be on her way to opening her store.

"It was intense," she said of the competition, "but it made you get (the plan) done."

Through her plan, Jensen secured loans from local banks and finally made her dream of running a small business in Humboldt County a reality. Humbled by the experience, she credits the competition advisers and the North Coast Small Business Development Center with her success.

"I just couldn't have done it without any of those people," Jensen said. "I didn't know how much I didn't know."

Gaia Imports is in its infancy — still missing exterior signs and some ceiling lighting — but Jensen is already looking into future projects. Eventually, she wants to expand the store to include more imported goods and a Moroccan and Turkish teahouse.

Gaia Imports is open seven days a week: from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday through Saturday and from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. on Sunday. The store is located at 426 Third St. in Eureka and can be reached by phone at 707-834-9488.