

# Jumping Off the Corporate Ladder to Fulfill a Dream

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As a young girl growing up in Valley Stream, New York, Lori Thomson dreamed of someday opening her own business. "I always wanted to build something for myself," she says. "Although at the time I wasn't quite sure what that would be."

Thomson went on to earn a degree in Fashion Merchandising and Design. Then, she worked as a visual display artist and merchandiser for big-name retailers including Macy's, Bloomingdale's and Brooks Brothers.

After her daughter was born in 2010, she continued to work part-time and began to sell her handmade quilts and other items at a few independent shops in the Philadelphia region. "Seeing my items in those shops, many of which were owned by women like me, sparked my interest in opening my own boutique," she recalls. "It's what I like to refer to as good envy."

## Pandemic Postponement

Unfortunately, the pandemic put a temporary crimp in her plans. But it also gave her much-needed downtime to seriously consider next steps. "2020 was socially impactful for a lot of people, including me," she says. "I decided to create a store that offered people a positive experience, a space where they'd feel seen and appreciated."

A local office of [SCORE](https://www.nextavenue.org/become-score-small-business-mentor/) (https://www.nextavenue.org/become-score-small-business-mentor/), the group of retired businesspeople who counsel and mentor aspiring new small-business owners, gave her advice on opening a business. After crunching the numbers, she realized she had enough cash on hand to keep the business afloat for a year. "The easy thing would have been for me to get another job," admits Thompson, now 47 years old. "But I believed I was ready. I felt like it was now or never."

Fortunately, her retailing experience helped to ease the transition. "Retailing is hard work and you have to be ready for it," she says. "Of course, it's about customer service first and foremost. But it's doing the little things well: knowing how to display items, fold shirts and stand on your feet all day."

It took time for Thomson to find a suitable and affordable space in the suburban Philadelphia market. But one day while driving home, she spotted a "For Lease" sign in the space she now rents. "It was pure chance that I found that site," she recalls.

Finally, in April 2023, Thomson opened her boutique for business. The store, located in Mt. Airy, a section of northwestern Philadelphia, features a carefully curated selection of home décor, apothecary, accessories and gifts, mainly created by local women artists of color.

## Honoring Her Mother

The shop's name, Vera Doyle, pays homage to Thomson's mother, who is now 86. Doyle was born in Mobile, Alabama, in the 1930s, when many African American families faced state-sanctioned racial segregation, financial hardship and other obstacles.

"Growing up, my mother never could have imagined that someday she would have a store bearing her name," Thompson says. "Yet, despite the many obstacles she faced throughout her life, she always carried herself with individuality, grace and [style](https://www.nextavenue.org/my-mom-my-first-superstar/) (https://www.nextavenue.org/my-mom-my-first-superstar/). It's important to me that people get to know her name and her story."

Thomson recently celebrated the first anniversary of her store. Reflecting on her experience, Thompson admits that entrepreneurship can be a bumpy ride. "It's always on my mind," she says. "I'm open five days a week, but I think about it 24-7."



## Passion Fuels Her Hard Work

"At the beginning, every day was a real thrill," she notes. "But as the months go by, the excitement has died down. There are days I wake up and if it's raining, it means that it will be a slow day at the shop. On those days, I remind myself to think about the 'why' behind my business. Fortunately, I'm passionate about what I'm doing, and that passion helps carry me through."

Over the past year, two other gift shops opened in her neighborhood. "It's easy to get in competition mode with the other gift shops," she says. "All of us feature local artists, so we carry some of the same products. I'm trying to keep blinders on and stay true to why I started the shop."

As Thomson learns about her customer's tastes and preferences, she continually tweaks the mix of products in her store. For example, she discovered that vintage housewares didn't sell as well as anticipated, but fragrances were a big hit.

## Building a Bond with Customers

She's hosted several in-store events, including [jewelry making](https://www.nextavenue.org/jewelry-making-amy-cousin/) (<https://www.nextavenue.org/jewelry-making-amy-cousin/>), cowboy hat decorating and a vision board, manifestation and healing workshop, among others. "I'd like to do more events," she says. "They are a nice way to build community, and interest in the store."

For now, Thomson works alone, but she plans to have an intern this summer who can assist with social media and other related tasks. "Staying up with social media is important, but it's really hard as a one-person business," she admits. Expanding her customer base is another ongoing priority. She's developed a nice core of devoted customers, but is considering investing in paid advertising as a way to broaden her reach.

She checks in with her SCORE mentor each month to discuss her business challenges and questions. She also works with a bookkeeper who assists with record keeping and the numbers part of the business.

## 'Philly Favorite' Awards

Thomson says that she's been surprised and delighted by the accolades the store has received from the media. Vera Doyle recently won second place in two categories in The Philadelphia Inquirer's "2024 Philly Favorites List" (Favorite Boutique and Favorite Place to Buy a Gift). The store has also been featured on a local news TV program and in several local print publications.

But what thrills Thomson most of all is seeing how her store makes a difference in the community. "I love that we get to spotlight creative women artists and share their stories," Thomson says. "And when customers tell me how much the town needed this type of store, that's what really keeps me going."