



"I moved here from Greece with my husband, 40 years ago now. I wasn't working at the beginning. I raised my family, my kids. We had a family business where I kind of helped, but I never really worked full-time. When my kids grew up, I had a lot of free time on my hands so I started working in a store downtown part-time.

It was called Mainstream Boutique, and it was just a few doors down. I loved doing that. It was so much fun. Then the owner decided to get out of the business, and at the same time I was deciding that opening my own boutique was something I wanted to do. I knew I loved this, and I knew Florence needed that.

Then one day, this space became available. I thought it was meant to be. So I went home and told my husband, and he said, 'If you want to do it, this is the time.' I had to do it.

It was a scary decision, for sure. But then I thought, 'You know what? I'll figure it out. There is a lot of strength in me.' I moved to the United States when I was very young. I couldn't speak English at all, but I learned. I didn't know the language. I didn't know the culture. It was an entirely different world, moving here. I had to raise my kids without any help from family being close by. I knew if I could do all of that, I could run a business.

I had a picture in my mind of what I wanted to do. I wanted it to be different. I wanted it to be beautiful. I wanted a place where people come in and feel welcome and feel happy. I wanted everybody to walk out with a smile on their face.

Money can be a problem when you do something like this, and I didn't want to get in debt. So I said, this what I'm going to do the first year: I'm going to work it all by myself. I want to know what I'm doing. Every part of it. I wanted to know how to do everything before I started asking people for help.

So I did. And it went really well at the beginning. But then I started going home exhausted. Inventory would show up at the store, I'd need to steam it, price it, put it up. People are in the store, they need help. I'd go home so tired and my husband said, 'You need someone to help you.' But I made a promise that I'd do it myself for the first year, and I did.

After my one-year anniversary, I put an ad in the paper and on Facebook that I was looking for help.

Guess who showed up? Jill.

And Jill knew exactly what I had in my mind. I didn't have to tell her one thing. She knew what we needed. She knew how to do it. Jill is amazing and one of the reasons the store is still here.

I love the people that come in here every day, teenagers to 95-year-old women. No matter who walks in here, we want everybody to have a good experience. I don't want anybody to say, 'I cannot afford this, why am I here?'" We have something for everybody, and everybody will find something. We have so much inventory, and sometimes it's overwhelming for people to look through it. But we are here to help them find what they are looking for or help them decide what might look good on them.

Florence has been very, very good to me. I can tell you that. It makes me teary all the time—from the day I landed in Florence until now, Florence has been good to me. I was welcomed into the community from day one. And when I opened my business—I cannot say enough.

Being a woman and doing this is hard. People go to school, they get degrees, they have experiences, they have a lot of background—I had none of that. And I just opened the store because my heart told me to do it. And I did it. I followed my instinct, and I still do up to this day. I let my instinct drive me.

Sometimes, if I have a bad feeling about something, I listen to that. But I never had a bad feeling doing this. Never. From the day I thought, 'I'm going to open it,' I knew exactly this is what I was going to do.

I believed in it."

—Agathoula Gioldasis, Agathoula's