



Elderly Instruments

LILLIAN WERBIN
CONTINUE'S LEGACY
BUSINESS SELLING
GUITARS AND OTHER
INSTRUMENTS AROUND
THE WORLD

Photos and Story by Phil Eich,
Storyville Social, as part of the
Michigan Main Street Story
Series

“Elderly Instruments started with my dad, Stan Werbin, and Sharon McInturff. They were fresh out of grad school living in Ann Arbor and had already been collecting and trading vintage acoustic fretted instruments. Although they started by selling out of an attic, they were pretty good at it, and ended up with enough inventory to open a store. Ann Arbor was fairly saturated with music stores at the time, so they opened the original location in East Lansing. It was just the two of them at first but grew to 10 people in the first couple of years. They quickly outgrew their small space, so they moved over here to Old Town in the early 80s, and a new era began.

Elderly was at its largest in the 90s: we had over 100 employees and ownership changed hands solely to my father. We were bursting at the seams, so we expanded into the buildings next door.

When I graduated from Western Michigan University in public relations, I didn't want to end up working for a company I didn't believe in, so I asked my dad if I could come work for him at Elderly while I figured out what I wanted to do. I think it came as a surprise to him. Growing up around the business created an organic love for it, and so I started commuting from Kalamazoo to work part-time in the warehouse.

I loved it. There was so much to learn. Aside from the construction of fretted and acoustic instruments, there's a history behind these instruments that is so parallel to American history. I found a new interest in the world around me and in the politics and the socio-cultural changes that music creates; because Elderly had been around since 1972, it had been involved in that as well.

From there, I asked to go full-time and work in other departments so I could really understand how they all interacted with one another. Then I went into management; I really wanted to update the backend of the business so my dad could enjoy his last years steering the ship. He still works here six days a week, sometimes seven.

Now as a co-owner, it's really important for me to preserve what people feel when they come to Elderly. This should be a people's music store. This is a family business, and it's a community business. Because we're focused on supporting the music community, we try to assist musicians at every stage: from picking out a starter instrument, giving the knowledge to keep it in good condition, having a repair shop to fix it, and having an appraisal team for when they sell it back to us.



We try to meet the needs of both the instrument and the person over their lifetimes, and that's a pretty unique perspective.

We're in a totally different era than when Elderly started. The world is different, but I don't intend to change the foundation of what Elderly is. I don't think you always need to change everything—sometimes you just need to savor what is. It's important to me to preserve the legacy. My dad and Sharon had a vision of creating a music store that supports musicians and gives them the best experience that they could ask for, and I don't know why I would change that.

My dad was 25 when he started Elderly, and I was 24 when I started working here. It's my hope that I can give the music community the same 50 years! I'm honored to be in a position to help continue his legacy and the legacy of American roots music."

—Lillian Werbin, co-owner and president of Elderly Instruments in Lansing



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