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Alfa Lite to close its doors

By Kathy Gurchiek
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The shop will darken forever at Salt Lake City's Alfa Lite Saturday when 83-year-old Barbara Gardner closes the door of her business at 380 E. 1700 South for the last time.

It's been a good 38 years -- 45 when you count Design & Decor, from which Alfa Lite evolved -- but Gardner is ready to move on.

It's time to get rid of the bolts of fabric, the lampshade bases, the skeletal metal forms and scores of tassels and trims that Gardner used to design lampshades over the years. Alfa Lite's Web site has been discontinued, merchandise is marked down. The property is sold and will become a yoga center. It's time for Gardner to shine her light in a new direction.

"This is a part of my life that I can fold up and put in a box and mark it 'been there, done that.' I have lots more to do."

She acknowledged experiencing some turmoil when, at her children's urging, she first considered closing the business a year ago. It is a business she wanted to end with her.

"I was a little concerned that I was a failure because I wasn't able to keep it going," she said of the enterprise she has likened to a garden that is nurtured and cultivated. "I'm not retiring because I expect to rest," she said, adding she plans to accept private appointments until Sept. 6.

Maybe now the former music teacher who gave private lessons can devote more time to her music, photography, books and writing. Those interests went by the sidelines when she went into business with her sister Virginia in 1958. It helped keep Gardner going after her husband Wilford died two years earlier from a fall in the shower. *heart failure*

"I needed something for my energy to go into. Marriage takes energy and when it's gone, it leaves a great big hole even though you've got six children to take care of," said Gardner, whose children ranged from eight months to 14 years old at the time of her husband's death. She also was recovering from a light case of polio when her husband died. "I needed an intellectual challenge as much as anything."

Her parents were supportive, Gardner said.

"My parents really stood behind me -- not financially but in support, in encouragement and appreciation," she said, recalling how her retired father took her children to school and various activities. Over the years most of her children and some of her 26 grandchildren have spent time working at Alfa Lite.

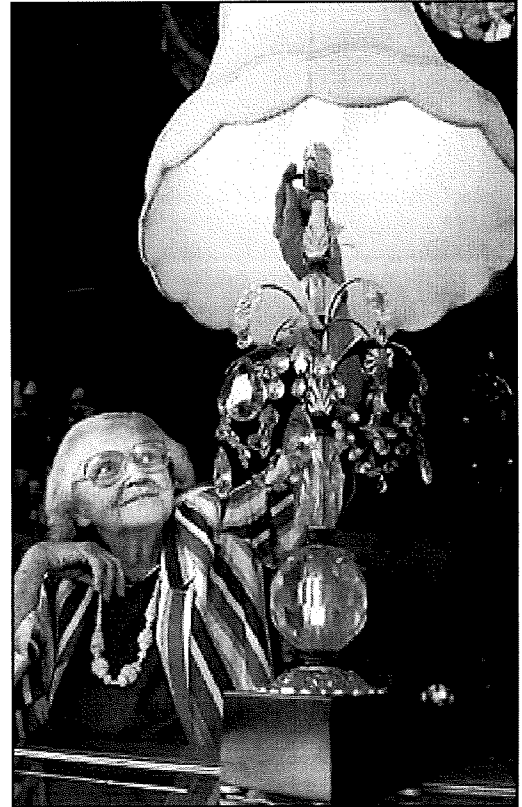
Gardner, 38 at the time, and her sister, an established designer from Los Angeles whose husband was transferred to Utah, opened Design & Decor at 2305 Highland Drive in October 1958.

"We had a lot of emphasis on lighting. It's such a big part of decorating," Gardner said. Her sister thought it made business sense to create their own laminated lampshades instead of ordering them from California.

Much to Gardner's irritation, her sister insisted that Gardner could take on this new skill. And much to her own surprise, Gardner learned how, even designing her own patterns. Now as she prepares to close her business, she is passing along the skill to a competitor's daughter, part of a deal she struck to sell him some of the 5,000-plus patterns she created over the years.

Gardner continued Design & Decor after her sister and brother-in-law moved to Texas, and relocated the business to 1016 E. 900 South. One of Gardner's biggest jobs was redecorating the corporate offices of KSL-TV and radio when it was on Social Hall Avenue. That business evolved into Alfa Lite, a separate business at the same location with Mac Hansen, who was her partner for about a year until his construction business grew too demanding.

Alfa Lite specialized in decorative wall, floor and table lamps. It created customized lamps and shades, restored antique shades, and offered services such as lampshade repair and cleaning, changing sockets, rewiring lamps and ceramic repair on candlesticks, art work, plates and mugs.



Barbara Gardner, who went into business for herself over 40 years ago after her husband died, is closing Alfa Lite at 1700 South and 400 East. She has specialized in lampshade design. (Paul Fraughton/The Salt Lake Tribune)

In 1975, Alfa Lite relocated to its current position and demanded all of Gardner's time.

"We're noted for quality and for ingenuity and integrity and caring about customers' things," Gardner said proudly.

She has loved her involvement in a business that has brought her satisfaction and fulfilled some of her ambitions. She hopes her late husband would be proud of her and does not think he would be surprised at what she has accomplished.

"I'm just not a sit-at-home, 'pity myself' girl," Gardner said.

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