

VIBRANT TRANSFORMATION

# VERTIN'S





# NEW LIFE

*Vision and perseverance has turned Calumet's historic department store building into a growing art community*

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY CRAIG WOERPEL

When Ed Gray looked out of the window of his room at the Michigan House in downtown Calumet over two years ago he saw something that would change his life.

Lined up along the windows of the fourth floor of the old Vertin Department Store building across the street were someone's paintings. The building itself had been closed since 1985.

"It just seemed to me that it was a great building," Gray said. "It was just full of junk, it was piled with lumber and trash. Then I read the sign that said space for rent, so I called the owner. He came down in about ten minutes and showed me the building as we actually climbed over stuff."

"We went up on the second floor and I fell in love with that space so

I rented half of the second floor as my own personal studio."

The problem was, Gray didn't live in Calumet, or the Upper Peninsula,

for that matter. He had just finished a workshop in Eagle Harbor and was waiting four days before he had a gallery opening in Hancock. Gray had a studio in downstate Fennville near Holland where he sold his copper and clay pottery and artwork.

But he had a connection to the area. For about 20 years, he had been teaching workshops in the Keweenaw Peninsula on the history of copper and Anishnabe people. Participants would learn to make copper bowls and learn how to grind stones for color pig-



Opposite page, two women check out the artwork at the Vertin Gallery through the window of the Vertin building. Above, Ed Gray takes a break in his second floor studio at the Vertin building. Left, a pottery piece by Ed Gray.



Pottery by Ed Gray lines display shelving near the entrance to the Vertin Gallery. Over 60 artist have items at the gallery. The gallery covers the first floor of the Vertin building.

ments. And, his great-grandparents lived in Calumet.

“I made the decision in those four days that it was time for me to come home,” Gray said.

Gray’s family came to the area in 1840. His great-grandfather worked in the native copper pits.

“My great-grandfather, who was Ojibway, married my great-grandmother in Minneapolis and immediately moved to Calumet. Just down one block from the train station, he built her a one room log cabin,” Gray said.

When the Cliff mine opened in 1845, his great-grandfather went to work there. Then, in 1883, his great-grandfather was killed while falling a tree during the winter. His great-grandmother, who was Norwegian, remarried and by the 1920s the family moved away.

Gray honors his Native American heritage in his artwork, signing each piece with his native name, Jikiwe. His studio he calls Miskwabik, meaning “copper.”

“My artwork has always had copper involved in it some way. I did that in honor of my great-grandfather. So, for

me, even though I never lived here, it was like coming home. That summer it was like, ‘ok, I’m ready. I’m going to make the move,’” recalled Gray.

At 65-years-old, Gray started a new venture. In September of 2004, he moved to Calumet and opened a new studio.

“I wanted to get out of the rat race of everything. I just wanted to do my art. Everything was falling into place that summer so perfectly,” he said.

But his new project in Calumet has been anything but relaxing. Gray supervises an art gallery that includes over 60

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different artists on the first floor, manages the artists studios on the second, and third floors, helps run a small literary publishing company called the Vertin Press and somehow finds time to do his own artwork. He finds the time by going to work at 3 o’clock in the morning so he is not distracted from creating his art.

“It’s very difficult as an artist to be focused on something and then jerked back and forth. If I’m focused on something and then I come down to answer someone’s question and then go back up I think ‘where was I?’ When you get to my age that seems to happen more and more,” Gray said.

All of the hard work is paying off. One of the reasons for the success is the building.

“This venture here is probably the most successful venture that I have ever been involved with, ever. It’s different here because we have this incredible 121 year old building with all this glass. We have a great package. So, I look at the building as a package that is making it all work,” said Gray.

The building is hard to miss. It is made of large red sandstone blocks and



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Abbey Green pulls a sheet of stained glass from a bin glass. Her art glass business was one of the first artist businesses at the Vertin building.

stands four stories high. The windows are what you notice. The first floor windows run the entire height of the floor. The second and fourth floor windows are rounded at the top.

"I remember one night a guy from Chicago came in here. He said he pulled up to that stop sign out there, it was evening and the lights were on all the way up the building, and he said, 'this can't be Calumet.' He pulled up, the doors were open and he came in and said, 'what are you doing here? This looks like it should be in Chicago or New York.' It's a shocker to see it here. We get that a lot," Gray said.

The building was built on the corner of Oak and Sixth Streets in 1885 when Calumet was known as Red Jacket. It had only two stories at the time and was called the Vertin Bros. Store.

The area was booming then. Mines in the area produced nearly half of the U.S. copper supply. In 1900, the area had a population of some 60,000 people. That's when the third and fourth floors were added to the Vertin building

as was an atrium that runs through the four floors.

Vertin's Department Store was promoted as "five floors, five stores" with a grocery in the basement. The store offered furniture, appliances, bedding, millinery, wallpaper and clothing.

The department store closed 100 years after it began, 1985. By 2000, Calumet's population was 879. But the residents remember the department store and with the gallery now open, people have been coming in to see the building.

"They come here because it was the Vertin store and they want to reminisce," said Abbey Green. She was one

of the first artists to rent space in the Vertin building. "They want to talk about where they bought a dress for a special event or that they used to bring items home on approval and come back to pay for them later."

"A lady came in to tell me she operated the elevator for 22 years. She escorted guests in this building for 22 years, you know, she's in tears."

Green makes glass artwork mostly on commission for homes, businesses and churches. Her and Gray were the first to rent space in the building.

"When we first came into the building, we were the two anchors, if you want

Jack Oyler checks the framing on a piece of inlaid wood artwork at his workspace on the second floor of the Vertin building. Oyler's artwork displayed on the fourth floor of the building gave Ed Gray the idea of starting the Vertin Gallery.





Ed Gray pulls a pottery piece from the kiln in his studio on the second floor of the Vertin building. It will later be fired at another location.

## USING PIT AND SMOKE FIRING TECHNIQUES

*Artist Ed Gray explains his traditional pit and smoke firing techniques.*

Pit firing has roots going back thousands of years in most indigenous cultures. The ritual of the preparation of the pots is one of care and respect...a way to honor our ancestors.

Preparing for a pit firing requires attention to a particular and time-honed process. I place the bisque pots in a pit about 30 inches deep and completely cover with wood, straw and cedar chips. The material in the pit is lit around the outside edges, which slowly burns and increases in temperature to approximately 1800° over a period of about six to eight hours.

When there is nothing left but charred embers, I put the cover on the pit for the cool down period. A primitive pit firing takes about three days.

A way to get a different look, smoke firing gently caresses pots to create colors of soft whites and dark hues. Using various combustibles, such as



paper, straw, hay, leaves, etc., many exciting patterns are created on the surface of the pots.

To prepare for a smoke firing I create a container above ground from layers of red bricks placed in a circle or square and as high as needed for the pots to be fired. The bricks are loosely spaced with about 1/16 inch between the horizontal bricks to allow for air intake. I wrap the pots with newspaper and place them in a single layer on top of a small bed of straw. Then the straw is ignited and when flaming, I put on a lid and allow it to smoke until cool.

For more information, log onto [www.edgraystudio.com](http://www.edgraystudio.com).

to call it that. We had big spaces but we were the only two people in here. He knew people I didn't know and I knew people. We sort of networked with a lot of different people," Green said.

Because the rooms were wide open, artists' spaces were divided up using

## WHAT WE WERE THINKING BACK WHEN I FIRST PUT MY STUDIO HERE CHANGED COMPLETELY

tables and markings on the floor.

"The space is awesome. I call it New York City living. I mean, I have this urban kind of feel of being up and looking out over the town. Snow days are really incredible because the snow swirls around the buildings," said Green.

About that time, Jack Oyler rented space, although he was no stranger to the Vertin building. It's was Oyler's paintings in the fourth floor windows that originally grabbed Gray's attention. Oyler's neighbor, Tim Lyons, owned the Vertin building and allowed Oyler to use it.

"The building was full of junk. There were pigeons flying around. It made the perfect spot for an artist's studio," Oyler joked. "I had all this work from previous years and I just put them in the window and it looked real nice."

He finds working in the Vertin building now exciting. Last June, Oyler was the featured artist at the Vertin Gallery with a show called "A Superior Life." Since then, he has been working hard to keep up with demand.

"Up until now, I didn't have any trouble keeping up with demand. Since last June, my things have gotten popular. That's kind of different for me," said the 56-year-old artist.

Oyler joked that the biggest difference between working in the building before the gallery opened and working there now is that now there is heat.

"It took a little getting use to having other people around. It's kind of like be-

ing back in art school. We've got people coming in all the time looking at your stuff. It's great," he added.

The plan was to have artists rent space on the floors and have people come up to them to buy artwork. That way customers could talk with the artists before buying the artwork. But eventually 100 to 150 people a day were climbing the stairs to talk with the artists.

"We could not work!" Gray exclaimed. "Some of the people were interested in art, a lot of the people were interested in the building because it had been closed for so many years."

To take some of the pressure off of the artists so they could work, Gray went to Lyons to see what he thought about opening a gallery on the first floor.

"We had to change our thinking about how we were doing things. What we were thinking back when I first put my studio here changed completely," Gray said.

There are 67 artists currently displaying in the 6,000 square foot gallery. Gray said sales this past year were very good.

"I think the growth of the gallery is wide open. We try to make the gallery and the artists fresh. Other than the building, the artists are our biggest assets. If you don't have the artists then you don't have anything to sell," said Gray.

Gray said they are looking to put together a well rounded display of art. The gallery is juried and artwork changes all the time.

"If you come in here today and find something you like, you're probably not going to come in here next year and find the same thing. We've got to keep the gallery fresh and moving," Gray said.

Gray feels the Vertin Gallery, by its location, can become a major part of Calumet's downtown. Around it are other businesses that he hopes to work with to generate traffic, such as the Michigan House Cafe and Brewpub across the



## VERTIN PRESS

One of the other businesses in the Vertin building that Ed Gray is involved with is the Vertin Press. Among the material it publishes is a quarterly booklet of literary poetry, stories and artwork called the "Cliff Soundings."

Gray and his friend T. Kilgore Splake came up with the idea for the press during coffee at the Evergreen Cafe in Calumet.

"It is the rare art gallery located in a big city metro let alone an out of the way backwater that can boost having it own press and publishing operation," wrote Splake on their web site.

Submissions come from writers all over the country. Splake describes their publication as "an effort to produce something that is thought-provoking and unique, that has a sense of peace about it and an aesthetic beauty with a cutting edge."

Each booklet is about 40-pages and sells for \$7.50 each plus postage.

For more information, go to [www.vertinpress.com](http://www.vertinpress.com).



Steve Toorman hangs an oil painted titled "The Canoeist" at the Vertin Gallery. Toorman and Meredith Krell were featured artists at the gallery in September and October. The show called "Campalot."

street, the place Gray was staying when he first glanced out and saw the Vertin building. The Michigan House Cafe and Brewpub and the Vertin Gallery have joined together to promote their businesses.

"From the very early days, when Calumet first started, this corner was basically the hub. The railroad station was a block away and people would come here from the railroad station. We would like this to be the hub again," he said.

Gray believes Calumet is facing an "incredible" future, mostly because of the past. But he believes it needs to be a "living" future.

"Calumet can not be a surviving town filled with beautiful buildings with a museum look. You've got to have the bars, you've got to have the churches, you've got to have the retail, you've got to have the art, you got to have the theater. It can't just become a bunch of old buildings that have been a restored and just sitting there," he said

Gray is impressed with the quality of art in the area. He said art in the Upper Peninsula is no different than art in other places like California.

"Some people might think it is, but art is about doing, about an incredible desire



This acrylic painting is titled "Louise" by Jan Manniko. Manniko was the featured artist at the Vertin Gallery in November.

within an individual to take that creative spirit and turn it into something," he said.

Green agrees. In turn, that creative spirit is passed on to the viewer.

"I know there are people who come and will never purchase anything but will look at it and are stimulated and I always say that's what art is," she said.

Green is making plans to move out on her own. She is moving to a building

near by so she can be on the first floor. Her move is based on founding principles of the gallery, to act as an incubator for the artist community, to help artists grow and succeed.

"How it has prepared me is I think more of the cooperation or trying to continue the cooperation of a lot of different artists in this community and trying to work together," Green said.

Other ways the gallery helps artists is

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through an artist-in-residence program. Artists wanting to visit the Keweenaw Peninsula to pursue their art can rent space on a weekly basis and take advantage of the gallery's resources.

Artists in the gallery are also able to put on individual shows. In September and October the husband and wife team of Meredith Krell and Steve Toorman displayed a show called "Campalot." The show was about camping in the U.P.

In November, Jan Manniko held a show. She is known for her caricatures of people.

For a listing of shows, log on to [www.vertingallery.com](http://www.vertingallery.com).

In its short time, the Vertin Gallery has gained a lot of attention. It has provided a forum for artists of all different medias to come together and provided life into a building that long ago served the mining families of the area.

"When I first came here there wasn't a thought in my head of whether it may or may not work. That never enter my head. It's gotta work. It's going to work. We're going to do whatever we have to do to make it work," Gray said. ↩

**Vertin Gallery**

220 6th Street, Calumet, MI 49913  
906-337-2200 • [www.vertingallery.com](http://www.vertingallery.com)