

# Shopping locally driving force for bustling Web site

■ Nonprofit lists Oakland merchants to help build sustainable community

By Francine Brevetti

STAFF WRITER

Away with the big box markets and chain retailers. Forget the swanky department stores in someone else's city.

"Shop locally" is the slogan of commerce supporting the environmental movement. And lest you think buying your sister pink Angora socks down the street instead of from your favorite catalog store is a wonky liberal statement, advocates of shopping locally remind you that you will be keeping profits circulating in your hometown.

The Web site Oakland Unwrapped, [www.oaklandunwrapped.com](http://www.oaklandunwrapped.com), connects you to the goods and services of Oakland's local craftsmen and retailers.

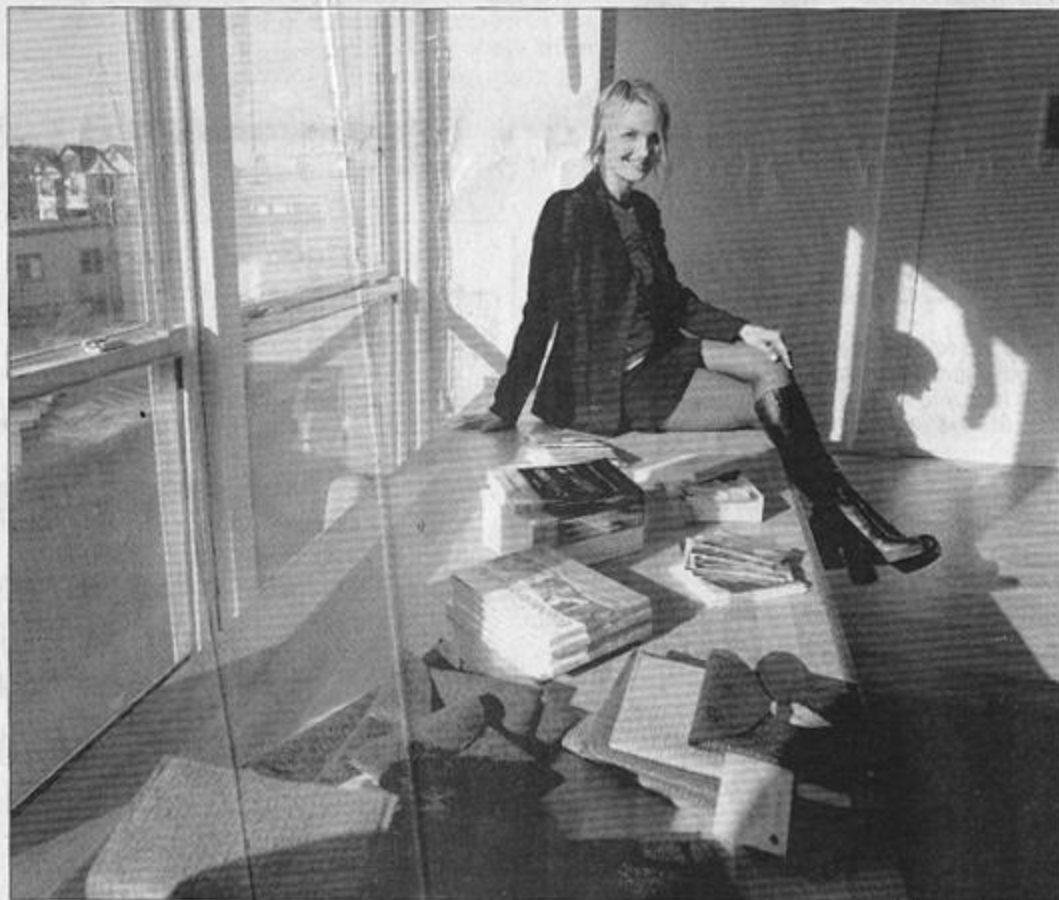
Erin Kilmer Neel, with a degree in urban planning, realized when she married three years ago that the only place to sign up for a gift registry was with a non-Oakland department store. She wanted to change that.

Since she launched her site in May, she has welcomed 15 entrepreneurs, mostly artists, designers and craftsmen as well as two publishers and two brick-and-mortar outlets to the site, and she reports several more will soon link their products to Oakland Unwrapped.

She conceived her business as a nonprofit and, working single-handedly, Neel is busy writing grants to get each next piece of technology in place. For instance, a recent grant from Pacific Gas and Electric will allow her to emphasize ecologically friendly merchants who participate in Oakland Unwrapped.

She also is partnering with Oakland's Cerebral Palsy Center, which has an entrepreneurial division for its clients. In the future, the center's entrepreneurs will be able to display their products on her site.

Two bricks-and-mortar boutiques, INDUS-



ALISON YIN — Staff photos

**ERIN NEEL**, seen here in her studio Thursday, launched Oakland Unwrapped in May of this year as a way to promote local artists and businesses by providing an online market place. Originally from Pittsburgh, Neel has embraced Oakland as her new home and is committed to boosting the city's economy by encouraging residents to shop locally.

TRielle on Grand Avenue and Entrez on Telegraph Avenue also have presences on Oakland Unwrapped. Publishers are GrassRoutes, a series of city guidebooks, and EcoMetro Green Savings Book, a catalog of coupons to environmentally friendly local businesses.

Neel charges the entrepreneurs on her site 5 to

7 percent of their sales or a monthly fee of \$25. Even with these modest charges, she hopes to be in the black by May, the first anniversary of her launch.

Serena Bartlett, the publisher of GrassRoutes guidebooks, was starting out three years ago just when Neel was setting her own gears in motion.



**REUSABLE FABRIC POUCHES** by local designer Fwrap are among the merchandise that can be found on online retailer Oakland Unwrapped.

"We had the same message — shopping locally and keeping the money here. I was one of her first merchants," Bartlett said.

Neel announced her epiphany to Oakland commerce with a bash called the Indie Awards last May when local entrepreneurs were honored. She chose the name Oakland Unwrapped "because it's a gift site, but it also unwraps the treasures of Oakland," she said.

Although most of her merchants have found her rather than the other way around, Neel is a go-getter, with rich contacts in Oakland business. She co-chairs the Oakland Merchants Leadership Forum, serves on the board of the American Independent Business Alliance and belongs to the international Business Alliance for Local Living Economies, [www.livingeconomies.org](http://www.livingeconomies.org), which promotes local business to sustain healthy communities.

Sales are heating up for the holidays. But she says she probably won't be able to display several new merchants who are waiting to get on her site until January.

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