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Gallery owners selling to Fringe: It's time to move on

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A reception at Connersmith Gallery. Proprietors Jamie Smith and Leigh Conner will sell their Trinidad gallery to the Capital Fringe theater group later this year.

Connersmith Gallery owners Jamie Smith and Leigh Conner were contemplating leasing their second floor space — not selling their entire Florida Avenue NE building — when they heard that theater company Capital Fringe was looking for space.

Smith actually saw my article about the closure of Fringe's current headquarters on New York Avenue NW in the *Washington Business Journal*, she said, which prompted her to reach out to Fringe director Julianne Brienza, who was touring spaces this spring.

Smith and her business partner and wife, Leigh Conner, bought their gallery property, a former auto body shop, for \$1.4 million in 2007, according to city land records. They renovated it into a 9,300-square-foot gallery, adding a 2,500-square-foot outdoor courtyard. Before moving to Trinidad, the gallery was in Dupont Circle for eight years.

"It's kind of a natural time for us to make a change," Smith said. "We've done 56 solo exhibitions in the space and 10 group shows here. And we also exhibit at a lot of international art fairs."

The next phase of their business could bring them back to Dupont Circle or Logan Circle — but it will definitely be in a smaller space, due to the increasingly international nature of the business.

"There is a lot of demand for high-quality work. We're very privileged to represent the artists that we do, but they can only make work so quickly," Smith said. "We didn't want to get to the point where we didn't have enough material to present at our gallery and the international shows."

Trinidad's burgeoning art scene has also changed over the past few years. Three other galleries on Florida Avenue have closed as property has been redeveloped. Though Smith said those closures didn't affect Connersmith's bottom line, there was a loss of camaraderie among art business owners in the neighborhood.

"We missed our colleagues. It was nice when we all had exhibition openings on the same night," she said.

Several developers had approached Smith and Conner about selling their property over the years, but nothing ever panned out.

Now, Smith said, they've found the right fit.

"Personally, we're very happy it's going to remain an arts use space," she said.

Smith declined to discuss the details of the sale; the Washington Post reported that Fringe estimates the project will cost \$9.2 million, including purchase of the property, renovation of the site and an operating reserve.

Before the end, Connersmith will put on its annual academy exhibition, showing work by recent art college graduates throughout the D.C. region.

"That'll be a really fun note to go out on," Smith said. The sale is expected to close Oct. 1.