

If The Shoe Fits

By Tamar Rhode

Being a female shoe fitter is rare. Being a woman of color shoe fitter, rarer. And being the sole owner of a shoe business without a business partner—unheard of. Jo Ann Epps is all of these. Her husband is a crisis provider and his schedule does not allow him to be a business partner or even an assistant in her store, Jo's Comfort Zone, located on Market Street opposite Starbucks.



Jo Ann Epps, Owner of Jo's Comfort Zone

Her mother was born in Spain, her father in Mexico—a pairing frowned upon in the 1960's, resulting in their move to Vancouver, where Jo Ann was born. Jo Ann's father was then a singer-songwriter, teaching music while her mother earned a degree and eventually became a psychiatrist. Jo Ann is the youngest and only daughter among seven children.

While she was a Target executive in the Tidewater area she suffered severe pain in her back. A visit to the doctor changed her life. He listed her medical options or, said she could just change the shoes she wears. He introduced her to a pair of Danskos and Jo Ann says the pain was gone within two weeks.

She says that a little research revealed that everywhere in the world, but the US, shoes were worn according to a person's profession rather than appearance. She studied the art of shoe fitting and took a part time job helping to open a Comfort Shoe store. She then became the store manager for The Walking Company, a west coast store, and helped them establish stores here in the east.

Jo Ann then accepted a position with Birkenstock in Bethesda where the business thrived. This, she says happily, was FUN! "I felt I could change the life of someone walking in the door." Eventually she trained others in shoe fitting, bringing her background and experience to practical application.

Spotlight on Business

Like so many others, Jo Ann says she had always wanted to have her own business but feared financial failure. Three years ago when she declared to her husband that she wanted to open her own shoe store, he balked. Everything is on line, he said! Shoe stores are disappearing!

But that was not the case for Jo Ann. She was in a virtual tug of war between Birkenstock and Comfort One. Her husband had been offered a job in New Zealand. Look, he said, either launch your dream job and open a store of your own or we'll be moving to New Zealand.

With Birkenstock holding her hand and providing step by step guidance, she opened the Kentlands store. Birkenstock was supportive, encouraging—she was the first and only woman of color to begin such an entrepreneurship.

Naot, an Israeli company, donated the first 100 pairs of shoes to be sold and sent two people to help her out in the store. Then Dansko wanted in on the action, as well as Clark, another well-known comfort brand—Wallabees anyone?

I learned a lot in my conversation with Jo Ann who is not only a professional shoe fitter but well versed in the history of the shoes she fits. Birkenstock, launched in 1774 by John Birkenstock, were originally orthopedic. Clark's started in 1825.

So how has she beaten the odds in this internet shopping world? Jo Ann says that her doors remain open in large part due to her former Bethesda clients who carpool to Kentlands in vans. She is frequently assisted in the store by her son. Go in, say hello. Walk in Comfort. ■

Meet Cathy Shao from the Tea Spa

By Tamar Rhode

Located in northeast China, the province of Liaoning rests approximately where Boston lies on a map of the US. Its capital, Shenyang, lies about 150 miles west of the North Korean border. Named for the Lao River flowing through the region, the second syllable means peace. In more informal Chinese characters the name looks like this: 辽宁.

Why the geography lesson? Liaoning is the birthplace of Cathy Shao, owner of Tea Spa Wellness Center on Market Street. Cathy was born in 1989 and left China at age 13, traveling with her mother. Her mother had met her step-father when both worked in the middle-east. Ironically, because middle-eastern women are not permitted to work in many countries, Cathy's mother worked in a Chinese restaurant. During this time, Cathy was in China in the charge of her aunt and attending boarding school. Siblings? No, due to the one-child policy implemented in 1979 and just recently (October 2015) revised to allow two children. While there were numerous exceptions to the complex policy, Cathy's parents were not exempt.

When Cathy said that many North Koreans would escape that country and enter her home town, I asked why? Why leave North Korea for China? She explains without much humor that 'they were leaving a worse communist country for a better communist country'.

In 2001 Cathy's mother returned to China from the mid-East. Her step-father went to the US and after 9/11 came to China to marry her. After the ceremony he returned to Baltimore County but could not return to his government job which precluded him from marrying foreigners. Back in China, Cathy's mother began the immigration process which would take nearly two years due to her having worked and lived in the mid-East.

Finally, Cathy and her mother landed at BWI. Cathy recalls the excitement she felt. She attended Dumbarton Middle School for only a month before it was graduation time. Just getting her bearings, immersed in a foreign language, attending a new school, Cathy only learned they were graduating when, heading down the hallway on the way to the school auditorium she asked a classmate what was going on. Imagine!

With only a month of English in middle school, she started at Parkville High School in Baltimore County. Cathy says that there her English improved, though she circle of friends consisted mostly of other Chinese students to whom she spoke Chinese.

As with most area high schools, Cathy was required to take a foreign language.



Cathy Shao, owner of Tea Spa Wellness Center

She chose Spanish, requiring that she translate the material from the English spoken in class, to Chinese, and then to Spanish. She says she blanked at the oral exam. Spanish was not her second language but her third. Who wouldn't choke?

Cathy wound up enrolling at the University of Maryland, College Park but stayed only two years because she was unable to decide on a major. (I recall a conversation with a fellow student at College Park when I said that it was like being in an ice cream shop with too many flavors from which to choose. My friend replied, yeah, and I'm not even sure it's ice cream that I want. What if I want frozen yogurt?)

She then tried nursing classes at Frederick Community college but didn't care for that. It was a summer class in massage that sparked Cathy's current career. At the clinic many clients would ask for her particularly.

Cathy got engaged to a Chinese student she'd met at the University of Maryland who, following Chinese tradition, gave her parents money when he asked permission to marry her. This money was used to open her first business—a spa in Wheaton also called Tea Spa and still operational. That was three years ago. The Kentlands store opened in 2013 while Cathy was expecting her daughter, Emily.

Cathy's husband, a Ph.D. in software engineering, handles the finances of Tea Spa. Cathy manages both stores including scheduling staff for both and travels between the two frequently. Both spas offer message, facials, waxing, and saunas. The Kentlands shop also offers manicures and pedicures.

Cathy says she enjoys the business and that she learns a lot from her hard-working staff. She says she is inspired. ■