

Local sisters succeeding with Western shoe line

By Kathryn Godsoff
Correspondent

When a pair of Central Oregon sisters launched their unique line of womens shoes a year ago, some very good things happened very fast. Y Knot Branded shoes are well established in several retail outlets in the United States. Customers are giving positive feedback about the lovely and functional shoes that sport a definite Western style. And things that usually take time and angst to bring to fruition fell into place seamlessly as the sisters embarked on a learn-as-you go adventure.

Wendy Weems of Sisters and Kelly Beall of Tumalo grew up on a family ranch in Jefferson, Oregon. Their clothing and lives are decidedly Western. Along with loving conchos and tooled leather, the women have a life philosophy of honor, grit, and loyalty. They wear boots and jeans and ride horses, but also like to dress up.

According to both Beall and Weems, the effect of a lovely, flowing Western skirt or dress comes to a rather abrupt end when cowboy boots, even really fancy ones, are on the feet. For many years both women longed to have some stylish, comfortable shoes with a Western flair to wear when changing out of their barn clothes.

Beall entertained herself by making designs of the sort of shoes she'd like while continuing to work in the Western

apparel and accessories industry, moving away from Oregon in 2002. Her return in 2010 was prompted by surviving yet another hurricane in Texas, after which she realized she longed for Oregon. Weems lived in South Carolina for many years, working with horses and doing real estate until she realized she, too, missed her home state and settled in Sisters in 2009.

They soon realized that if they didn't get the ball rolling with their designs, someone else would capture the untapped market of stylish, heeled Western women's shoes. Weems called her sister one day and said, "You'd better get over here to my house and meet with your new business partner."

Weems is reserved and quiet, satisfied in her role as CEO in which she makes most of her contacts by phone or email. She communicates with the stores and the factory that produces the shoes.

Beall is an outgoing woman who gets itchy feet after about three days at home, she says. She is the sales and marketing half of the team, traveling to many trade shows and expos to show their line. She also designs all the shoes.

"We grew up in an artsy family," she said. "It's no stretch for me to draw shoes."

Their mother and aunt were both respected artists, and Weems works in watercolors, while Beall's strength is in design.

One of the contacts Beall

formed during her years in the Western-wear industry made it possible for them to work with an artisan shoe factory in China that hand-makes the shoes out of quality leather. Unbeknownst to Beall and Weems, it usually takes several years for a factory of that caliber to take on a new client. They were in production in a matter of months.

Both women give a great deal of credit for their success to a mentoring program for new business called SCORE. Their mentor, Bruce Michalski, walked them through the process of setting up a new business and continues to work with them. Weems also works with Economic Development for Central Oregon (EDCO) and the business program at Central Oregon Community College.

The current styles have high heels, with an accompanying high platform, making them "a four-inch heel with a



PHOTO BY KATHRYN GODSIFF

Kelly Beall and Wendy Weems with a sample of their Y Knot Branded shoes.

two-inch feel," said Weems. A lower-heeled style is in the works. They have the approval of another friend, a physical therapist with an interest in orthopedics. Both women can vouch that some of the shoes do very well on the dance floor.

Early in December, Y Knot Branded was represented by retailers at three shopping venues during the National Finals Rodeo in Las Vegas.

Beall said, "The best thing was to be standing there and see someone walk by in a pair of our shoes." She added that she'd always go up to the wearer and thank them for their purchase.

The shoes are sold through retail and online stores. Locally, they can be tried on at Desperado in the Old Mill and at High Desert Ranch and Home in northeast Bend.

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