

Best footwear forward

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OCTOBER 22, 2015 06:00 AM



John Whittaker at Rock Bay Footwear's new location downtown on Blanshard Street.
Photograph By DARREN STONE, Times Colonist

Some are drawn to an industry, others are born into it.

But John Whittaker, the owner of Rock Bay Footwear, found his way into the custom footwear business through his chequebook.

It's a far cry from his background in business consulting and selling industrial food products, but manufacturing footwear seemed like the right move given he was already invested in it.

Whittaker, who is about to celebrate three years with Rock Bay Footwear and now has a new location in the city, had initially just planned on assisting a new footwear business to get off the ground.

He had helped to buy equipment for a boot-manufacturing business. When it failed, instead of kissing his investment goodbye, Whittaker opted to try and do it himself.

“While that business didn’t work, I had a registered security in the equipment for shoe making, so the decision was to either sell for pennies on the dollar or actually make a go of the business,” Whittaker said.

That lifted the curtain on Rock Bay Footwear, a custom footwear manufacturer in the Rock Bay neighbourhood on Hillside Avenue. Six weeks ago the company moved to new digs at 1024 Blanshard St., to the home of what until this summer had been Gaudio Shoe Repair.

“There is some continuity in that,” said Whittaker. “What appealed about the location is that continuity and we are getting so much more foot traffic here than in Rock Bay.”

On top of being busier, the company is now carrying a line of ready-made Biotime orthopedic shoes and has increased the amount of custom orthopedic shoes they make.

“We could definitely use a few hundred more square feet here,” Whittaker said, noting the retail space is 400 square feet, with the bulk of the 1,000 square feet of space being used for manufacturing and material storage.

The company prides itself on custom-made shoes. If you can think it up, the shoemakers can build it to suit.

They have done some wild and off-the-wall styles, like exaggerated curly-toed men’s shoes and vibrantly coloured women’s boots, as well as everyday footwear tailored to a client’s needs.

“Often people will bring in a picture or email a link and ask if we can do this,” Whittaker said, noting from there they will discuss styles and various shoe attributes the shoe must have and then they are given a quote. “If the client decides to go forward, we take a foam impression of each foot, because each are different, and we create the shoe last — the physical mold around which the footwear is constructed — and before we attach the outsole they come in for fitting.”

The custom work can run between \$550 to \$750.

But the backbone of the business is the custom orthotic footwear, and customizing the ready-made orthotic shoes, which makes up 80 per cent of revenue. “The value-added is in the orthotics,” said Whittaker, who has a specialist in that field who is also working with a pair of shoemakers apprenticing in the discipline. “It made a difference in the business.”

Whittaker said while custom shoes tend to be a “want” item, orthotics are “need” items in a city that is highly walkable and has a healthy aging population.

The biggest issue he faces is expansion as trained shoemakers, and those who specialize in orthotics in particular, are not easy to find. “It is a lost art, finding artisans is difficult,” he said.

Rock Bay Footwear is celebrating its grand opening this weekend at its new space. From noon till 5 p.m. on Sunday — St. Crispin’s Day, celebrating the patron saint of shoemakers — they will offer a shoemaking demonstration and have a footwear design contest among other features.