

Oakridge Outfitters prepares to open new page on a local story



By Brock Weir

As a young girl, Aurora's Deb Clark was bitten by the fashion bug.

Her mother could not afford to let her go out and buy the things she wanted to make a splash, however. Instead, she was sent to sewing class to learn how to create the looks she wanted.

"I learned pretty early that you can love fashion and look great on many budgets and that is the way it has been for me," says Ms. Clark. "I have always just loved the textiles and the colours, the looks and the shapes, and they have always been a passion for me."

But now, this passion has led her to a new career as the new owner of Aurora's Oakridge Outfitters.

A mainstay at the Aurora Shopping Centre at Yonge Street and Murray Drive, Ms. Clark takes the helm of the popular boutique from Cheryl Walker, who decided to sell the business earlier this year.

Since its foundation, Oakridge Outfitters has earned a loyal clientele from Aurora and beyond, Ms. Clark among them.

Having moved to Aurora with her family in 1997, Oakridge Outfitters was one of Ms. Clark's first stops. She still recalls her first visit and many subsequent purchases, often looking forward to dropping the kids off at school in the morning to pop over to the store to see what was in stock.

"I just felt like many women in Aurora felt: this is a go-to spot, a place where you can always find something," she says.

In those days, fashion was simply a passion for Ms. Clark, who forged a career in marketing and corporate philanthropy. Things rapidly changed, however, when Ms. Clark took time off over the winter for "a health respite."

"To keep myself busy, I asked if I could volunteer at the second-hand Clothes Closet store at Trinity [Anglican Church]," she explains. "I was just reminded all over again how much I loved being with clothes, customers, and helping women put things together, helping them see what we could do with \$10. How many different looks can we get? I just loved it. It was one day there that one of my fellow volunteers said, 'You love working at stores. Why don't you buy Oakridge Outfitters?'"

"That day, I spoke with Cheryl, I spoke with the bank, I spoke to our lawyer, and within days Cheryl and I were writing on paper. [I had a feeling] of absolute certainty. I can't remember how many times I said to my husband, 'this went really quickly, but boy does it feel right!' There was real joy and excitement."

Deb says, in the process, she and Cheryl found a meeting of the minds and agreed that Cheryl would stay on in a consultant role for the first year ?because I have a lot of respect for the great work she did to build this business.?

?She has got a great wealth of knowledge and connectivity in this business,? Ms. Clark explains. ?That is exciting to me. Within weeks we were off on our first buying day and we hadn't even finished the ink. We have a favourite line that we say: Where are we going when we're wearing this? It is always looking for our customer. Who is wearing this? Where are they wearing it? When we think about what we're going to put into this store, we're really giving, piece by piece, thought on why it is in the store in the first place.?

Ms. Clark refers to the transition ? and the store will officially re-open the first week of September ? as turning ?a new chapter,? a sentiment long-time employees share.

?We are all excited for the next chapter and turning a page,? says Donna Grayson, who has been at the store for 15 years. ?There was a big uproar when we said we were closing, so I think our customers are excited for the new changes.?

Adds Kim Ferry, who has been there for over a decade: ?It will be something new and exciting for us. A lot of the ladies come to us and we have long-lasting relationships.?

So, what keeps the ladies coming back year after year as customers? Ms. Clark says the appeal of Oakridge Outfitters is it meets the needs of all women of all budgets, shapes and sizes ? ?a magic recipe.?

?Knowing that as a customer made that very appealing to me,? she says, noting that in the future she hopes her new chapter will include some different looks, brands exclusive to Aurora, and getting the store more involved in philanthropy within the community. ?The local business is staying local. I will be happy if I can continue to build the Oakridge customers' loyalty because I will know then I have met their needs.

?I think the women who come here are fashionable, they want to look great, but they are smart, savvy and want value. Those are the things that appeal to me because back in the day, my mother told me, ?You can look fashionable, but it is going to be on a budget, dearie! I feel a certain affinity with the women who walk in the door.?