

Listening to her instincts

A dramatic mid-life change led Monica Gallivan to open a children's store, writes Hattie Klotz

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Monica Gallivan admits that when she signed the lease for her Wellington Village store Red Chair Kids, she had no real idea what she was doing -- other than pursuing her dream.

Ms. Gallivan had no retail experience, no customer service experience, no merchandising experience, no buying experience, no experience dealing with suppliers and no idea what the future held for her grand project.

However, she did know that Ottawa didn't have the kind of children's store that she had envisioned.

Red Chair Kids, a bright, cheery one-room shop next to the famous Three Tarts bakery on Wellington Street, offers products for babies and children not widely available elsewhere in Ottawa. The store stocks design-conscious nursery furniture -- some of it manufactured in Canada from start to finish -- fabulous linens, quilts made in Quebec, soft toys, decorative items, pictures, blankets, tiny clothes, diaper bags, soft shoes, original artwork and the must-have stroller for the glamour set, the Bugaboo.

For Ms. Gallivan, her change in profession came about after a dramatic mid-life hearing loss. After the birth of her third child in four years, her hearing capacities declined from 50 per cent to less than 10 per cent, and she knew that her former career as an occupational therapist would be impossible if she could not hear her clients.

Then, just two years ago, by coincidence, she was accepted on a trial program at the Ottawa Hospital for a cochlear implant to restore her hearing.

The surgery was successful beyond her dreams. "I recall walking back from the hospital and saying to my husband, 'What's that sound?' and he replied, 'Oh, that's a crow!' I felt like I'd been reborn."

And with that, she launched herself with huge energy and enthusiasm on a new career. "My husband told me that I've been in training for this all my life. I'm a huge shopper and when my third child was on the way, I was obsessed with building a crib and decorating the bedroom even when 8 1/2 months pregnant."

Ms. Gallivan's husband, Mike Roszak, has an MBA and works at BCE Emergis, so



CREDIT: Pat McGrath, The Ottawa Citizen

Monica Gallivan, a former occupational therapist, opened Red Chair Kids on Wellington Street after a severe hearing loss meant she could no longer hear her therapy clients. A cochlear implant has helped her regain her hearing.

he's done all the financial projections for the store, which the couple has self-financed for the first year. The two of them, fuelled by friends dropping round with power tools, encouragement and sustenance, painted and restored the shop.

But it was Ms. Gallivan's responsibility to source and order the products. This was a bigger hurdle than she could ever have imagined. Unable to use the telephone because of her hearing troubles, she had to do it all online. She spent hundreds of hours at her computer, sourcing products she wanted to stock.

She soon learned, however, that suppliers from the U.S.A. and Europe just didn't want to ship to a new small store in Ottawa, a place many had never heard of.

She set about proving to them that the demographics of the Westboro area are just what they should be looking for. Using Google images to show the local coffee shops, art galleries, independent grocery stores and other consumer stores, and digging up information to show that the area is home to a high concentration of highly educated, affluent professionals with some of the highest per capita incomes in the province, she gradually won them over.

The deliveries started to arrive before the shop was ready to open in November 2006, so her house, in the nearby Civic Hospital area, became a depot for several weeks. "We could hardly move for packing cases of furniture and toys," she recalls.

Red Chair Kids has already become a destination store for mothers looking for good design for their children in Ottawa. Ms. Gallivan offers design help including paint chips and fabric samples, and will spend time flicking through magazines with her clients to help them find what they are looking for.

She's planning to work with an interior designer who can go into client's homes.

"I think the celebrity baby phenomenon has made all these products available and new mothers all that much more aware of what's out there," explains Ms. Gallivan.

"Also, the yummy mummy movement, which has seen many successful, educated women give up their jobs to look after their children, means that they as consumers are much more concerned that they like the products that surround their children. We've benefited from that."

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