

Country Charm, City Style



Michigan bridal salon strives to retain focus on genuine personal service.

Upon assuming the role of operations manager, Will Sanders remodeled the store's exterior sign as part of an overall rebranding effort.

Life throws everyone a few curveballs.

For **Patty Sanders**, happily ensconced in her role as a stay-at-home mother of two and “professional volunteer”, this curveball occurred when her husband, Jeffrey, came home one night in the early 1980s and announced he was ready to quit his job as a retail merchandise/store manager with JC Penney.

Tired of the corporate lifestyle and constant relocation, Jeffrey had other plans: he wanted to open a bridal boutique. JC Penney had experimented with bridal boutiques in several of their large stores and Patty saw promise in the concept.

“Since we both loved the Southwest Michigan area after five years of living here, we just needed to find the right location and building,” said Patty, who wasn’t planning on being part of the staff.

Rather Jeffrey had already recruited two of his assistant managers from JC Penney to help launch his bridal store.

The mother-son team has complementary skills that help Wedding Belles thrive.

However, when they backed out right before the store opening, Patty was put into active duty and has “never looked back.”

Instead, she has parlayed her life experiences and a two-week crash course in bridal retailing into a thriving bridal business. Wedding Belles Bridal Salon in Stevensville, Mich. was “instantly successful.” Things were so good, in fact, that within its first season, the store added pageant to the mix as a means of catering to girls from dozens of local communities who needed to be dressed for preliminary pageants leading to the area’s big Blossomtime Festival Pageant.

Today, Wedding Belles occupies its original space, a leased 100-year-old, two-story building, carrying inventory

for almost any special occasion from youth pageant to winter formal. Bridal remains the heart and soul of the business, which has remained strong despite weathering four recessions, fluctuating industry trends, staffing/technology challenges, and the death of Jeffrey Sanders due to illness in 2010.

Where is it?

Wedding Belles Bridal Salon is located in the village of Stevensville, Mich., close to Lake Michigan in the southwest corner of the state. Bridal, pageant and special occasion shoppers are drawn from 20-plus small communities within an hour’s drive and mid-size and large cities in-state and over the border into Indiana and Illinois. Urban shoppers from cities like Chicago scout locations for destination weddings in rustic or beach venues.

*The store's online virtual tour
is one of its most effective
marketing tools.*

In fact, over time, 27 different bridal stores have opened and closed within a 50-mile radius, yet Wedding Belles has continued to thrive.

**Running The Bridal Store
Becomes A Family Affair**

Three years ago following his father's death, Will Sanders left behind a career in Arizona as an executive recruiter for Fortune 500 companies to temporarily help out his mother with the business.

Will, a graduate in international business at Grand Valley State where he studied on a football scholarship, brought with him skills in human resources, networking and marketing.

Working at Wedding Belles was such a positive experience that he became the general manager in charge of daily operations and now has no plans to leave. In fact, he has secured an ownership stake and a growing passion for the business.

In contrast to Will's skills, Patty serves as the resident fashion expert. Mentored on this subject as a child by her maternal grandmother, Katherine Sweeney Liston, a Renaissance woman who religiously used *Vogue* magazine as her guidepost, Patty's knowledge of fashion was already strong when, as a college student, she studied in Rome for a year.

"While overseas, I traveled all over Europe and the Middle East, visiting over 25 countries and having exposure to all the different cultures and languages, art and music," she says. "While I had sponged all of the wonderful fashion knowledge and information at such a young age, in addition to having such amazing life experiences all before the age of 21, I never had a way to apply it to a career until much later in life."

Opening Wedding Belles, however, changed that. In addition to providing Patty an outlet for her fashion knowledge, Will was able to put his marketing skills to use. His first priority upon joining the business? Establish a Web presence for Wedding Belles, which, as few as three years ago didn't have a Web site or social-media presence.

Today, all of that has changed. In addition to having a fully functioning Web site (www.weddingbellesbridalsalon.com), the store boasts separate (and

popular!) Facebook pages for bridal and pageant. Additionally, Will is bringing back an apprentice from Michigan State this summer who's an expert on social media. The goal? To boost the store's Twitter, Pinterest and blog presence.

Currently, one of the most effective marketing tools on the Wedding Belles Web site is the "virtual tour" of the store that shows Patty in action, working with shoppers in all categories. In fact, shoppers have driven from Chicago to buy a mother's dress

based on taking that tour.

Smaller, but no less important, changes have been implemented as well. The store's royal blue logo of a traditional bride was emblazoned on garment bags and T-shirts, which girls receive after making a dress purchase. Shoppers love the shirt and become walking billboards for the store, the Sanders say. Staff also wear nametags sporting the store logo.

Store hours were altered to adapt to the changing marketplace. Wedding Belles is now open on Sunday and schedules late hours on Wednesday. Appointments are encouraged but Patty won't turn away walk-ins, even



The main floor showroom, which currently features prom/party/pageant, alternates depending upon the season.



The upstairs bridal/alterations room.



Wedding Belles' private bridal dressing/fitting rooms are occasionally used for select pageant customers as well.



Owner/manager **Patty Sanders** describes the uniqueness and fit of a prom dress to new customer.



Accessories and shoes displayed together.



Operations manager/owner **Will Sanders** showcases the store's media screen, an addition he made upon returning home to work at **Wedding Belles** in 2010. Used primarily for showcasing the **Wedding Belles** Web site, it also displays vendor and supplier products, YouTube videos and mood music for shoppers and staff.

Pageant and prom are big, but bridal remains the heart and soul of the business.

near closing time.

For his part, Will has also expanded on networking with other wedding vendors and venues. Additionally, he's active in the county's Cornerstone Chamber of Commerce, which combines about 50 small communities. He even garnered the Chamber's Ambassador of the Year honors in 2012.

The mainstay of the store's pageant business centers around the Blossomtime Festival, a 107-year-old celebration that pays homage to the agricultural history of Southwest Michigan, long regarded as a premier fruit-growing region by consumers, manufacturers and chefs.

Entrants from many area communities host preliminary pageants beginning in the fall, with winners at all age levels moving on to the big pageant in April. Wedding Belles outfits pageant girls head to toe for different competition categories. The store also supplies a white ball gown for the winner to wear at the Coronation Ball and dresses contestants for preliminary pageants in the Miss Michigan competition.

In addition to pageant customers, the world headquarters of Whirlpool, located just a few miles from the store, employs more than 3,000 people in the bridal age demographic and the age bracket for pageant/prom parents. Another customer base comes from international Andrews University operated by the Seventh Day Adventists, whereas the Midwestern store also has a devoted following among the African-American community.

"They've really embraced us," Patty says. "They have very large church-based weddings with 25 attendants including junior bridesmaids and often a 'miniature bride' whose dress mirror's the bride's."

Wedding Belles teams up with other wedding vendors to offer special events to a new niche of wedding shoppers who want to be "privateers", looking for a more personal, intimate wedding-planning experience

"We have been participating with

Customers love the large media screen, which showcases vendor and store videos.

various wedding vendors, such as caterers, reception venues, florists, photographers and music entertainment in shows, open houses and more recently, 'tastings' sponsored by the catering business, but hosted by some of the more premier destination venues in our area," Will says.

These events are invitation-only, VIP, red carpet, and limited to a smaller group than the crowds at traditional bridal shows.

"These usually happen on a Saturday or Sunday afternoon, and many times bring in a very substantial amount of brides, grooms and even family members from both sides of bridal party well in advance of selecting the venue, much less the dress prior to the date of the wedding," he says. "This is a very popular aspect to the planning stages of weddings, and we try to align ourselves with vendors where reciprocal trust and networking partnerships make the most sense."

Refreshing And Updating: Using Limited Space Creatively

Wedding Belles is currently in the middle of a mini remodel, making some cosmetic changes to its store.

The goal is to better utilize the 100-year-old building while retaining the "country charm, city style" flavor the business promises. To help accomplish this, Patty and Will plan to concentrate displays to better show off stock and spotlight more accessories in display cases.

One of the most popular recent additions is a large media screen located behind the first-floor reception counter, which is used to display vendor videos or those produced by Wedding Belles.

"You have to realize that I didn't even have a cell phone until a couple of years ago, let alone a computer, so all of this is new to me," Patty says. "I love having a big screen behind the counter that the girls can use to get on the Web site and to show the girls dresses. Everyone loves it."

Helping out with the redesign is photographer Karen Hopkins, who studied interior design before opting for a different career. The store works with

Hopkins on an almost-daily basis, who provides images for its Web site, social media and other projects. In turn, Wedding Belles refers clients to Hopkins and helps to build her Web site.

Patty and Will say they'd wait for the off-season to redecorate but there really isn't one. Bridal is year-round, a majority of pageant shopping occurs from fall through late spring, and prom shopping typically runs from January through May.

To accommodate these ongoing segments, therefore, the store's first floor is

filled with pageant and prom attire year-round while the second floor is devoted to everything bridal.

Wedding Belles carries bridal gowns ranging from \$300 to \$1,500, with the average gown sale in the \$750 to \$1,200 range. However, when budgets are tight and a bride has just \$200 to spend, the store tries its best to accommodate her. In these cases, Patty often looks to the bridesmaids' racks for dresses that can be ordered in white or ivory.

Regarding other segments, the average pageant gown purchase can be \$400 to \$800. Prom shoppers spend

Continued on page 88

In The Spotlight: Wedding Belles Bridal Salon

Established: 1982

Size: 2,500 square feet

Total Staff: Four full-time, including the owners, assistant manager Juli Flaherty and seamstress Ellen Friday. At least two or three part-time consultants; staffing increases during prom and pageant season.

Compensation: Hourly with incremental raises based on tenure and success; recently reinstated commission based on bridal dress sales and commission based on store profit for the assistant manager.

Alterations: Full-time in-house seamstress; referrals to two off-site seamstresses depending on the workload.

Marketing: Web site, www.weddingbellesbridalsalon.com; social media (separate Facebook sites for bridal and prom/pageant); Twitter, Pinterest and blog undergoing renovations; involvement in community groups, local schools and Chamber of Commerce. The store works with other wedding vendors in red carpet, VIP events such as tastings at unique wedding venues. They no longer advertise in any traditional media, however Wedding Belles is regularly approached by local media for feature coverage.

Recent Good Business Read: Will and Patty Sanders are avid readers of VOWS, Rick Segel's Blog, Jeffrey Gitomer's weekly blog "Sales Caffeine", and Jim Butler's book, "Bridal Profit Explosion".

Local "Must See": Lake Michigan is seven miles away. One of the area's biggest tourist attractions, especially for families in the summer, is the Carousel at Shadowland Ballroom on Silver Beach, a replica of the carousel at the early 20th Century House of David Amusement Park in nearby Benton Harbor said to have inspired Walt Disney's park designs. There's also a Jack Nicklaus signature golf course.

Goodwill Causes: Wedding Belles supports the annual Bids for Barks Ball, which is an annual event that Wedding Belles donates store merchandise credit to through the Humane Society of West Michigan. They also donate dress stock to the United Way of Southwest Michigan and contribute to Catholic Charities and local schools.

Friend them on Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/WBBridal>, <https://www.facebook.com/WeddingBellesPageantandProm>



Continued from page 83

over a wide range, but it isn't unusual for a girl to walk in with \$1,000 to spend on her dress. Informal stock ranges from \$300 to \$500.

Despite its numerous niches, bridal remains Wedding Belles' largest profit center. This, of course, might partially be attributed to the fact that most prom and pageant girls eventually come back for their wedding gowns, especially if their mother bought her dress at Wedding Belles.

And Wedding Belles works hard to deliver the same "privatized" service Patty has made the store's hallmark to each and every customer. In fact, Will and Patty believe in being loyal to their core customer base, families that are now in the third generation of shopping the store.

At the same time, they acknowledge that the number of weddings within the county is now less than half what they were when the store opened, hence the need to take advantage of new marketing niches.

"Service, service, service – that's how she's had to compete against all of these other forces for the last 25 years," Will says. "It's really unique customer service. It's very deep and personal and it goes great lengths to figure out what is going to cater to your particular needs, especially in bridal."

Will says the store still does a manual intake, which is entered into a field of data later. This allows them to converse with customers face to face, asking a lot of questions about the planning of the wedding, where they are from, what their needs are, etc.

Patty notes that she dyes shoes and bags purchased at the store for free, customizes mothers' headpieces and even coaches pageant girls in their walks. The store also offers advice to couples because of the relationships they've built with other vendors and their knowledge of the area.

"We feel we really have to go deep in this area rather than a large facility with 15 consultants or where the bride is shopping for a brand name in a major city," Will says. "To separate ourselves from the pack, we're going to find out a lot about your wedding: the venue, the people involved in it, how the couple met. Sometimes it's

Wedding Belles concentrates on providing "very deep and personal" customer service.

tricky, but the more information you can get the smoother it can be for them."

He continues, "We believe the best

stores are independently owned and operated. That's really what they are able to leverage and enhance, not having a corporate policy, being part of a chain. That's where we can really shine through and get creative, and put the customer first every time."



The Wedding Belles staff (Back row, L to R): Alex Haney, part-time consultant; Juli Flaherty, assistant manager; Ellen Friday alterations specialist; Kim Livengood part-time consultant; Maria Pinkowski part-time consultant. Front row: Patty Sanders, manager/owner; Will Sanders, operations manager/owner. Not pictured: Pam Kublick, seasonal pageant and bridal consultant; Thalia Bertuca, seasonal pageant consultant.

Most Memorable Moment

For Patty Sanders, there is something memorable about almost every day in her store. One of her favorite stories, however, involves the bride who walked into the shop at 10 a.m. on a Saturday saying she needed to get a bridal gown quickly.

How quickly? This bride was getting married at 3 o'clock!

The Wedding Belles staff found her an off-the-rack dress, a veil and shoes. The bride went to grab a bite to eat while her dress was being altered. When she returned, the staff did her hair and makeup, then got her dressed, allowing her to make it to the courthouse on time.

"Being in business over 30 continual years now has afforded us the unique opportunity to forge deep and lasting relationships with countless families, many of which are now shopping with us in a third generation," Patty says. "Being in such an emotional and personal industry, we pride our daily operations on getting to know the story of as many of our customers as possible, many of whom are loyal to us as they grow up for that very reason."

She continues, "You have to know your market, know your capabilities and you have to sustain your growth. If you grow too fast, adding new product areas, you can do real harm to your real core. We've never done explosive, high-risk growth in the past few years, especially that we couldn't sustain. The major key to our success, however, is trying never to bite off more than we can chew while focusing on extremely deep and personal service to our audience, especially in this rapidly evolving world we live in!"

