

profile on sandra and jon wynn

By Rob Neff

Success didn't come easily for Sandra and Jon Wynn. With sheer perseverance they guided Gear Up for Outdoors from its precarious beginnings into one of the region's most successful outdoor equipment retailers, serving a clientele that has reached international dimensions.

Sandra and Jon were both raised in southern Ontario. Jon ventured north to pursue a degree in Forestry from Lakehead University. After graduation he took a job selling forestry equipment that required extensive travel through northern Ontario and into the United States. Sandra graduated from Sheridan College with a Diploma in Marketing/Accounting. She was working in a large retail sporting goods store when she met Jon. In March 1987, along with a third partner, they decided to open their own outdoor supply business in Thunder Bay. Their partner pulled out of the business early on, leaving the Wynns and their embryonic enterprise in a desperate financial bind. Thunder Bay Ventures stepped in with critical financing and slowly the Wynns built one of Thunder Bay's most heart warming small business success stories. For the past twenty years, Jon has been president of the Thunder Bay Ventures Board.

"Gear Up was fortunate to have Thunder Bay Ventures when we were in dire straits," says Jon. "I appreciate the fact that I and the Ventures Board can now help others who may need financial aid as we once did."

Initially Gear Up relied largely on the forest industry, supplying tree planters and others with tents, sleeping bags, work boots and packs. Sandra recalls those days with a mixture of pride and relief. "We had nothing when we started out! The first few years were rough. We opened at 8:30 to catch the crews before they went out.



We closed at 6, and we'd get home by 10 or 11. We lived below the poverty line, putting everything back into the business. It was just the two of us in a little 900 square foot building while our present location (894 Alloy Place) was being built."

Thanks to wisely selective purchasing and attentive customer service, Gear Up for Outdoors grew steadily. As the city's demography evolved, so too did Gear Up's client needs.

"After a while the forestry industry just wasn't our forte," says Jon. "Over the years we acquired quality outdoor names brands, such as TNF, Canada Goose, Eureka, Mustang, Salomon, Merrell and Baffin. Our business evolved into an outdoor recreation, rather than a work-oriented place."

Fifteen years ago, Gear Up for Outdoors positioned itself on the vanguard of the futuristic field of internet sales technology. "We started with a small website showing a few tents. Some backpacks and sleeping bags," Jon recalls. "In those days it was all scanned images or line drawings. Today on line sales account for 30 per cent of our business. We now receive orders from all over the world. Our customers are looking for quality made-in-Canada products."

Between internet and in store operations, Gear Up for Outdoors employs 21 people, tapping into the young talent available at Lakehead University and Confederation College and local high schools. Sandra and Jon take a personal interest in their employees, whom they refer to as "our kids". They're proud that so many use Gear Up as a stepping stone, learning the fundamentals of good business and moving on to success elsewhere.

"Customer service is critical in our industry," says Sandra. "If it wasn't for our fantastic Floor Manager

Nick Whitbread and our knowledgeable staff we would not be where we are today. We depend on their ideas and suggestions as to which products, brands and styles to carry based on their customers' needs. They are our front line people.

How would the Wynns advise a young person going into business today? "You need a well thought through business plan and financing," Sandra advises. "Understand that most things will not go as planned, think on the run and learn to adapt."

"You've got to have perseverance," Jon adds. "You need to have great products and suppliers and learn how to work with them."

"We didn't go into business to get rich," says Sandra. "We wanted to make a decent living, which we do. But at the end of the day the bills are paid; the staff is paid. You may have a little extra in your pocket. That says a lot for a small business."

**Gear Up
for outdoors LTD**

