

A Pack Rat by design

An unexpected layoff prompted Heather Badham to capitalize on her pack-rat tendencies to create a costume-clothing business, Iris Winston writes.

Iris Winston The Ottawa Citizen *October 9, 2004*

Heather Badham, an admitted pack rat all her life, did not expect the tendency to be the starting point of a multi-faceted costume-clothing business.

But when the former employee of a Compac call centre was laid off in 2000 during the high-tech downturn, she used her long-time interests in sewing, art and community theatre as the starting points of a new career.

"Sewing is something I've always done," says the proprietor of The Pack Rat Costumier. "Even in my teens, I preferred to make things unique to me rather than just following fashion. My grandmother was a seamstress for Sears Canada and showed me a lot of things when I was young. My mother has been in the antique business for years and taught me to appreciate the history of fashion, old textiles and notions and jewelry, and I was a keen amateur in theatre. Basically, this business brings my interests together."



CREDIT: Rod MacIvor, The Ottawa Citizen

Heather Badman hams it up with some of the colourful costumes available for rent or purchase at her store on Wellington Street.

Working out of her home at first ("The sewing machine was in the kitchen, textiles were in the bedroom and I was helping people out with theatre props and costumes"), she built the business gradually. She was accepted for the government's self-employment assistance program and was introduced to the Ottawa Community Loan Fund through it.

"I wouldn't have been able to develop my business without them," says the 47-year-old entrepreneur. "Through SEAP, you have help and monetary support for a year and even when you are not on the program, they are available to give advice. **And the OCLF is very supportive. It's a great program for people like me.**"

Ms. Badham received a \$5,000 startup loan from OCLF when, she says, traditional funding sources "laughed at someone who didn't own her own home, had a rickety old car and was divorced. But when I took my business plan to OCLF, they helped."

The remainder of the \$15,000 she needed to set up The Pack Rat came from her savings and her family. "My sisters and my mother have been very supportive."

While she is still working to pay off the initial loans -- "based on sales, I expect that to take three to five years," she says -- business at the store, now in its third year of operation, doubled in the second year and continues to grow. With monthly expenses exceeding \$2,500, the company regularly makes an operating profit.

In addition to costumes for rent or sale, the 800-square-foot store is packed with vintage clothing, bridal wear and accessories, jewelry, artwork, china and collectibles. "I also do a lot of custom sewing," says Ms. Badham. "Anything from hems, zippers and repairs to construction from scratch or from patterns. I'm open to the challenge of any kind of sewing -- anything from fixing granny's quilt or a doll torn up by the family dog to being commissioned to make medieval costumes for a wedding."

On that occasion, she adds, the wedding party rented the custom clothing for the day of the ceremony, but the store retained ownership and the costumes became part of The Pack Rat's rental inventory. As well as being less expensive for the bridal party than purchasing the garments, it was a good business decision from her perspective, says Ms. Badham. "And, on the

couple's first anniversary, I was able to decorate my windows with the costumes to wish the couple a happy anniversary."

During the peak rental seasons -- Halloween and spring and fall productions of community theatre and dance -- the store's emphasis is on costumes for rent and sale. "Then, because the costume end of the business is so seasonal, I store most of my rentals downstairs during the off-season to make room for all the vintage clothing, interesting jewelry and collectible pieces."

She never has trouble building stock, she says. As well as making costumes, she accepts pieces on consignment and has received several donations. The bridal wear side of the business is also growing fast as "people are not always going for traditional white dresses any more. Developing stock is no problem. In fact, sometimes the amount can be overwhelming."

Because the sales area is limited, fast turnover is important, says Ms. Badham. "Cost dictates price and sometimes there is a book price for an item. Generally, I price with the location and the clients in mind. If something does not sell quickly, you can put the price down -- or up --and then it moves. But sometimes, I will get an item that is too high-end that I know is never going to sell here."

In such a case, she says, she asks a friend to sell the piece through EBay. "But I don't want to be in that business. I'm more tactile. I enjoy custom sewing and I want to deal with people directly."

The Pack Rat Costumier

Location: 1112 Wellington Street Telephone: 724-2937

What's best about the business: The outlet for creativity.

What's worst: The paperwork and the need to hone mathematical skills.

Biggest challenges: Keeping stock fresh and interesting and pricing attractive so that stock turns over quickly.

Entrepreneurial Spirit - Successful Small Business. Profiles of Heather Badham and The Pack Rat Costumier. Ran with fact box "The Pack Rat Costumier", which has been appended to the story.