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Creativity, connections equals 35 years for Chico firms

Creativity and customer attention keeps Bird in Hand, Made in Chico thriving

By Laura Urseny, Chico Enterprise-Record

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Chico >> When a business hits Year 35, it's done something right, but sometimes pinning down what that is can be difficult.

In the case of two Chico businesses that were celebrated earlier this month, it's a combination of creativity, listening to customers, and being alert all the time.

Bird in Hand and Made in Chico, both downtown retailers, were celebrated by the Chico Chamber of Commerce in its annual Summer Bash.

The two popular retailers started out in different directions than their current stores portray. Bird in Hand started as a print business, while Made in Chico channeled from a pillow and soft decorations manufacturer.

Bird in Hand

Owners Bob and Barbara Malowney said an old poster told the story for Bird in Hand.

"The poster said, 'Posters, T-shirts and kites,'" said Malowney, explaining there was enough demand to flesh out the Orange Street location into printing in the back and retail in the front. It wasn't long before it moved into a storefront at 320 Broadway.

Walking from section to section reminds shoppers of the day of the department store, only more entertaining. There's toys and yo-yos — of course — to gifts, clothing, jewelry, books, baby items and cards.

Blessed with a knack for quick wit, the Malowneys came up with the motto "Shop for fun," stressing the act of being entertained while shopping, as well as shopping for fun merchandise.

Asked about longevity, the couple have a few tips, including nurturing contacts, keeping on top of change but valuing the classics, and being conscious of the value of face-to-face retail.

Some of Bird in Hand's strongest niches doesn't even have to do with the store; it's about outreach and community. The business is behind the annual Kite Day held every March in Community Park, as well as yo-yo contests that built into national competitions. Admission or viewing is free or low cost, and it was more about bringing back classic entertainment that wasn't a computer, but made people — primarily youth — interact with others. Admitting to marketing, Bird in Hand was among the few places that sold kites and yo-yos.

This year is special in other ways as well, and knowing the Malowneys there's a button for that.

Handed out at the dinner and elsewhere are buttons with the numbers 25, 36, 45 and 50. Twenty-five is the number of years in Chico for National Yo-Yo Museum and Contest. Thirty-six is years in downtown Chico.

Forty-five is the years in business for the couple. And 50 years is how long they've been married.

What made the chamber recognition especially poignant for the Malowneys was sharing the spotlight with Made in Chico.

Barbara Malowney said they were very close to the late Jacki Headley, founder of Woof & Poof pillows and decorations, and eventually the spinoff to Made in Chico. The friendship branched from playing league softball, to doing business. Headley would contract with the printing business — now defunct Media Screenprint — for piecemeal items on her products or for printing jobs.

Made in Chico

For Graham Hutton, the chamber celebration was really in honor of his late wife. Headley started Woof and Poof in 1975 as a manufacturer of soft decorations and pillows. With demand for creative and uncommon merchandise, Headley opened Made in Chico in 1982, then expanded it as a place to find items with the Chico mark. Those businesses too have changed locations several times, landing to a wooden-floored shopfront at 127 W. Third St.

Today, the shelves are filled with food, art and crafts, clothing, metal art, photography and gifts, with roughly 300 artists — from age 7 to 90 years old — and 40 food vendors represented.

Store manager Aimee Anderson notes that it's important to Made in Chico to represent local creativity. While it's the perfect place to shop for gifts, Made in Chico is like perusing a local art gallery.

"You're going to see things here that you're not going to see in the mall," said Hutton, an artist in his own right when it comes to wood and furniture. He tried his hand at a graphic design for a T-shirt displayed at the store that says Chico Camp.

Customers are encouraged to come in regularly because the mix of items change. Not only are established items relocated to make way for new ones, but the merchandise itself is shifted around.

That better highlights the artists, who don't want to be stuck in a corner.

"When you shop here you support local people. It's critical," Hutton said.

Like Bird in Hand, Made in Chico is about touching lives.

Anderson recalls a 7-year-old artist who burst into tears at his first sale, astonished by the idea someone would pay for his work.

"This was Jacki's vision," said Hutton, who had been married to Headley for more than 30 years before her death in 2012.

In addition, both families have been generous with their time to the public. Malowney has served on the Bidwell Park and Playground Commission, and is now the chair of the Chico Area Recreation and Park District, and is a member of the Downtown Chico Business Association. Barbara Malowney was a member of Soroptmists.

Headley served on the city's Architectural Review Board, as well as Chico Heritage and Janet Turner Print Museum.

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