

Bradshaws owners offer a lighthearted alternative

Tori Sutton
STAFF REPORTER

Jeremy and Carrie Wreford know starting a business can be a risky move.

But when they came up with the idea to open a small store filled with eccentric and eclectic merchandise, the retailers didn't hesitate.

A few months ago, their new store, Small-Mart General Mercantile, opened its doors at 121 Ontario St.

"We wanted to offer something that was unique to Stratford and that was lighthearted and fun," said Jeremy, in a recent interview.

The couple is no stranger to Stratford's retail scene. In 2006, they took over Bradshaws from Jeremy's parents, Bill and Sharon. Since then, they've been adding their own touches to the 115-year-old business, while retaining those that regular customers have come to know and love.

"We wanted it to be sort of the younger brother to Bradshaws," he said of the new store.

"It's a very personal thing for us because it was a way for us to have fun and to be able to explore things that weren't necessarily appropriate to Bradshaws."

Over the last few years, the Wrefords had noticed an increase in lighthearted, humorous merchandise. They began carrying some items at Bradshaws and realized there was a high demand.

"It was getting to a point where stuff was demanding more space," Carrie said. "It was becoming very clear that people

were loving it and people were buying it."

They ran with the concept and arranged to take over a space just two doors down from Bradshaws. The fact the store had no frontage onto the main street and could only be entered from a long hallway added

to the store's character, Jeremy said.

"It was sort of a hidden gem, it was something exciting you could discover," he said.

Jeremy did the renovations himself, using recycled fixtures from other local stores. Both worked to select items and lines to fill the shelves. They admit the mix of merchandise so eclectic it's difficult to describe.

Though you won't find fake vomit or whoopee cushions, there's plenty of novelty items. Been looking for a box of Popeye cigarettes? They've got them at Small-Mart, except they've been rebranded as Popeye candy sticks to ensure kids don't pick up a nasty habit.

It was also important to them to carry a selection of items from Canadian designers, though they're quick to point out their entire store isn't filled with products from the Great White North.

"We've chosen to represent a very selective group of Canadian artists and

artisans," Carrie said.

There's the Red Canoe Heritage Brands, a line of clothing and accessories inspired by the Royal Canadian Armed Forces, mortar and pestles by Tahir Mahmood, Biko Jewelry and metal sculptures by Mark Clark.

So what's in a name? Small-Mart obviously rhymes with the name of a major retailer that's caused quite a stir in Stratford over the last few years.

Politics aside, the Wrefords say the name isn't meant to take a jab at the big box retailer, though it certainly is tongue-in-cheek. They wanted Small-Mart to be a throwback to the mom and pop shops of the past.

"It's not a sneer at the big guy but a cheer for the little guy," Jeremy said. "Businesses are becoming an endangered species for a variety of reasons, whether it is Internet sales, or big box or chain stores moving in."

Stratford has an array of interesting stores with unique merchandise, and it's been satisfying to add Small-Mart as their own contribution to the city's retail fabric, Carrie said.

"We've travelled around to a lot of much bigger cities like New

York City and Chicago and I've got to be honest, there's some fabulous businesses here in this very small city," she said, adding stores such as Family and Co. have really inspired her.

Others, it seems, have also taken a liking to Small-Mart. Several prominent citizens and well-known actors have been spotted doing their shopping there. There's also been plenty of positive feedback.

They're hoping the momentum will carry into the Christmas season, which is always an exciting time of the year to be in retail.

"This is something completely different. It's not street level, it requires a lot of word of mouth," Carrie said.

"We just want people to take a chance and walk down that funny little hallway.

"Be adventurous, explore it, go down there and check it out."

For more information about Small-Mart and the products it carries, visit www.small-mart.ca.



Carrie and Jeremy Wreford, who own and operate Bradshaws in Stratford, recently opened a new, eclectic store, Small-Mart General Mercantile.

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