Interview with Jeanell - Monkey’s Uncle – Doylestown

It will have been five years this June since Jeanell and her husband opened Monkey’s Uncle on State Street in the heart of Doylestown. As with many small businesses, the store’s origins are rooted in a personal quest to fulfill an unmet need. Jeanell and her family wanted apparel that matched their own unique personalities. Doylestown itself has its own unique personality with its mix of arts, boutiques and history. It comes as no surprise that combining the two would result in a benefit for both.

Nearly every small business story from the past decade seems to start with an unmet need finally being realized thanks to the wonder of the Internet. In Jeanell’s case, even the Internet was coming up short in her quest to find apparel that both featured the nostalgic designs she desired and would hold up for more than a few washings. In a twist as nostalgic as the merchandise she sells, a brick-and-mortar shop in the heart of a small town proved the solution to this market oversight. While Jeanell utilizes social media to promote her business, over 80% of their business is generated in store.

Monkey’s Uncle is in every way an extension of Jeanell’s and (I assume) her husband’s personality. Entering the store is akin to entering their home. The store’s layout is divided into intimate rooms arranged to feature groupings of merchandise (boys’, girls’, adult sports, adult nostalgia). The “displays” themselves are in loving disarray. This gives the appearance of browsing through a treasured personal T-shirt collection. It connects the shopper with a shared past, without completely disconnecting from the shopping experience. Ask Jeanell about a specific design or size need and she can recall exactly where it is located and how many are in stock. In the middle of our conversation, a twenty-something woman inquired about the availability of a “Doop” Union shirt that she saw outside the store. Without missing a beat, Jeanell confirmed they had exactly one L remaining and directed the customer to the exact shelf where it was located. It was buried two deep under a similar Union shirt design. Monkey’s Uncle’s collaborative shopping environment is not easily replicated.

In many ways, Monkey’s Uncle shares the same heart with its owners. You cannot have one without the other. Jeanell and/or her husband are almost always in the store, exemplified by the fact that store hours mirror their family life. Photos of their family appear throughout their social media feeds and it’s not uncommon to see the store temporarily closed while they run to pick up their son from school.

Much as the store shares its owner’s identity, Jeanell is exceptionally involved in promoting the small business community of Doylestown itself. She serves as a board member for the Doylestown Alliance, a network of local small businesses in the local area. Most of Monkey’s Uncle’s marketing and promotions comes via their Facebook, Twitter and Instagram presence. Given the value, and volatility, of these channels, it is even more impressive to see how often Jeanell makes posts tangentially related to her
business. It’s no less unusual to see a photo of the Doylestown Food Truck festival, the Memorial Day parade or other community events than it is to see a shot of the latest t-shirt design.

With her personality invested in the shop and her credibility tied closely to the community, the emphasis on quality in the store’s inventory is critical. Jeanell sources her apparel from a select set of distributors that only work with boutique shops. She mandates that all vendors provide full licensing and enforces a strict 20-mile exclusivity radius on her merchandise. Mitchell & Ness and 47 Brand are among her more notable brands, but she also works with local artists such as Philly Phaithful and Paul Carpenter provided they have done their legal due diligence. Jeanell sticks closely to her desire to stock retro and nostalgia designs sometimes at the expense of ignoring the latest memes or pop culture trends. She also avoids adult themes (drinking games) and mass-produced designs (current player “shirseys”) that either clash with her family-friendly vibe or could be found at the local Modell’s.

Jeanell knows she has near exclusivity on the inventory she sells, but the niche nature can make for supply issues. Each Christmas, Jeanell sketches out which teams, sports and concepts to stock for the coming year based on customer inquiries and sales over the previous year. Orders must be placed six months out due to difficulties securing fabric that meets her standards. Secondary orders are placed around big weekends like Father’s Day, but the decisions she makes to start the year in many ways govern what the store will carry.

It is not uncommon to see a design you love in the store, but not in the size you want. Unfortunately, Jeanell has limited resources to reorder in these scenarios. On the plus side, it makes shopping more rewarding and encourages customers to lay claim as new inventory is posted to Facebook. On the negative, there’s a higher risk of shoppers leaving empty handed despite having their curiosity peaked.

With these inventory concerns and the expected small margins when running a small business, it might be tempting to look to alternative means for creating new or replacing sold-out inventory. While Jeanell will happily research a t-shirt design a customer saw on the street or consider an independent artist’s offerings, she is adamant about Monkey’s Uncle’s commitment to quality. If ownership, licensing or approval are in question, it’s not worth the risk to her business, her reputation or her family.

There is an emotional investment in finding an item that helps you recall a fond memory or favorite hobby. Low quality goods can cheapen fond memories if they fail to meet expectations. Jeanell counters these concerns with a tangible environment for exploring the quality of each shirt first-hand. Her efforts in the community, presence in-store and honesty on social media build trust in her products and make her a trusted resource for hard-to-find designs. Jeanell has made it her business to make sure her merchandise lives up to your memories.