

Knapp Jewelers

Small towns that have shops owned for generations by local proprietors are fortunate, because these long-term establishments often become the very essence and character of the community. These shops have been successful over the years because they provide excellent customer service, offer unique merchandise specifically geared to local tastes and pocketbooks, and provide good value. But today these shops, so important to community life, are in grave danger of disappearing altogether, as so many of these local businesses are owned by retirement age folks. One local business that has made a successful transition to a new generation is Knapp Jewelers, on the square in Rushville Illinois, population 3,300, in West Central Illinois.



Five years ago, when he was 31, Mark Ross, who was born and raised in Rushville, took a job at Knapp Jewelers, a 104 year-old full service retail jewelry and gift business owned Cathy and Bill Redshaw. Knapp Jewelers, like so many businesses in small towns, was a thriving concern, but its owners were nearing retirement age. Mr. Ross began working at the J.C. Penny Catalogue desk, which is part of the Knapp storefront and business, and soon found himself making repairs in the jewelry store as well. Within two years, Mrs. Redshaw began talking informally about whether Mr. Ross might want to buy the business one day, not giving a specific time.

Mr. Ross comes from a family of farmers, and being the middle child, he said he wanted to go “on a different path.” He liked the idea of being an independent businessperson and making his own decisions. In the Summer of 2003, when he learned that Mr. and Mrs. Redshaw were seriously considering retirement, he began actively investigating what he would have to do to buy the business in Fall 2003.

At the same time that the Redshaw’s announced that they were ready to retire and sell their business to him, Mr. Ross noticed a newspaper ad from the Western Illinois University Small Business Development Center (SBDC), explaining the variety of free services available to entrepreneurs thinking about starting or expanding a business.

Mr. Ross met with Ted Bartlett one of the counselors at the SBDC, for one-on-one sessions on developing a business plan in order to secure financing for the business purchase. The Western Illinois University SBDC is supported by the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity and the US Small Business Administration. Mr. Ross had never developed a business plan before, so Mr. Bartlett coached him through the various sections, especially preparing the marketing section, financial projections and balance sheets that a bank would need to make a loan. After visiting with Mr. Bartlett several times, Mr. Ross was ready to present his business plan to several area banks. “Mark had a good plan, and is a local fellow” said Mr. Bartlett. “After working at Knapp for five years, and deciding to buy the business, I knew he would make a success of it” added Mr. Bartlett. Ultimately Mr. Ross received financing to purchase the business and the real estate from Schuyler State Bank with a loan guarantee from the US Small Business Administration.

Knapp Jewelers is one of two jewelry stores in Rushville. The store is located in a 2,200 square foot building and Mr. Ross employs two part time people in addition to working full time from Monday to Saturday 8:30am-5:30pm and 8:30am-4pm on Saturday. During the Christmas rush when the store is open seven days a week, another person is added to the staff.

The store stocks a variety of diamond and semi-precious gems set in gold, platinum or silver for bracelets, earrings, rings and necklaces. Knapp Jewelers also sells a variety of lines of china, sterling and stainless flatware, baby gifts, art glass, crystal glassware and gifts and watches for both men and women. The store has a Bridal Registry, offers jewelry repairs and a J.C. Penny catalogue desk where customers can place orders or pick up merchandise orders placed on the J.

C. Penny web site. The store's competitive advantage is that it stocks a wider range of jewelry than its competitors and is the only local dealer for Fenton Art Glass, Noritake china and Citizen watches. Jewelry still represents 85% of the business' sales and predictably Valentines Day and Christmas are the busiest times for jewelry buying. Since purchasing the business in September 2003, Mr. Ross says "sales are up three percent."

Mr. Ross says that "Knapp Jewelers is a vital part of our community, and I will continue to serve the area with the same services and tradition of quality that has come to be our standard." Now that now that he is a local business owner, "I am asked to be on a lot of committees. People ask my opinion on things, because I am in a retail business." Mr. Ross plans to expand his Internet presence www.knappjewelers.com in the coming year, to allow for e-commerce. "Right now the site is just an advertisement for the store" he said, "but it could be much more."

The Western Illinois Small Business Development Center is a member of the Illinois Small Business Development Center network, working in partnership with the Illinois Department of Commerce and Economic Opportunity and the US Small Business Administration.