



Special team reviews its leather sourcing policy

Footwear experts are working in a special unit at Toronto's Sunnybrook Health Sciences Centre to make customised shoes for patients. One of the team's biggest problems is finding the right leather at the right price.

A group of talented, knowledgeable, creative and enthusiastic custom shoemakers in Toronto are working to make from scratch footwear for customers with particular demands and needs. Their base is not on Bloor Street, the city's downtown designer haven, but buried deep in the labyrinth of corridors at one of its biggest hospitals, Sunnybrook.

Beyond a shopping mall-style atrium entrance, with competing coffee shops and gift outlets and on, past centres for an array of medical specialisms, U-Wing is the home of the Sunnybrook Centre for Independent Living, to which people with crippling foot ailments come, sometimes as the result of accidents, sometimes not, to have their needs assessed and addressed, their confidence restored, their lives rebuilt. The part shoes can play in this is of great importance.

In the recent experience of pedorthic team leader, Jay Paul, a fine example comes from his work with an elderly woman who originally came to Canada from Italy. Her foot pain had become so severe that she spent her whole life sitting down. He made her a pair of specialist shoes. She looked at

them and declared them ugly. When she came back for a follow-up appointment, her tone had changed completely. The shoes made it possible for her to stand up and this, she told Mr Paul with great enthusiasm, meant that for the first time in ages, she was able to work in her own kitchen and make food for her family. Nothing gave her more pleasure and pride than this. "The shoes are still ugly, though," she told him on leaving.

Sarah Rotering in her days as one of Toronto's few independent custom handmade shoe producers.

CREDIT: SARAH ROTERING





Jay Paul's colleague, Sarah Roterling, has this to say: "Jay is driven to be a shoemaker. He comes from the west coast and worked in a shoe repair shop out there and I think this has led to him becoming obsessed by the idea of the perfect handmade shoe. We're working in a slightly different environment, but I can tell you that some of the orthopaedic footwear he has done is fantastic."

Handmade and home-grown

She knows what she is talking about because Sarah Roterling is a shoemaker herself. She ran her own luxury custom handmade shoe business, not on Bloor, but in a busy workshop in the bustling bohemian area around King and Spadina, Toronto's old garment district. She attracted some regular clients but, after three years, she realised she knew more about making shoes than running a business and decided not to continue. One frustration was that she found a surprising lack of awareness among some of her wealthy clients of how handmade luxury items, including shoes, are made and how long it can take. Her own interest in how the magical process happens has lasted a lifetime.

"I knew I wanted to be a shoemaker from a very young age," she explains. "When I was nine or ten, I wanted high-heel shoes so badly that I made my own using spools of thread from my mother's sewing box and cardboard. I thought they were great, and so did lots of other girls in my neighbourhood. I had a thriving business there, for about half an hour."

When she did start to make a living from her passion, it was in the footwear section of the wardrobe department at Toronto's Princess of Wales Theatre where she worked on the production of the musical version of *The Lion King*. The show's run in Canada's biggest city was successful, lasting around four years. During this time Sarah Roterling had plenty of opportunity to make and alter dance shoes for the cast. When the show closed in 2004, she took herself and her savings to Europe to learn more about her chosen specialism on an intensive course at the London College of Fashion, now the home of Cordwainers College and part of the University of the Arts. On returning to Canada, she spent a season working on shoes for stage productions in the country's most famous location for theatre, Stratford, Ontario, and then went into her own business.

"All this experience was helpful," she says now. "It was a great education, including the three years in which I was making custom shoes. But when I began looking



Measuring a challenging foot.

CREDIT: SUNNYBROOK CENTRE FOR INDEPENDENT LIVING

for a job again and found this opening here at Sunnybrook, where the emphasis is on getting the patients mobile, I realised how little I really knew."

Comfort and fit

The main focus at the Sunnybrook Centre for Independent Living is on comfort and fit. Many of the patients are people who have had a foot crushed in a lumber yard or manufacturing facility and they need shoes that fit well and provide exceptional levels of comfort and support. The team comprises eight shoemakers and three clinicians, certified podorthists who assess, diagnose and prescribe shoes to meet each person's needs. Ms Roterling and her colleagues, who come from "various European countries where they often started in this business as children", take moulds of a

patient's foot and make lasts. They next mould plastic round the last shape to model the shoe that they will make.

Extra support is often required in areas such as the ankle, which the team often finds it can achieve by using heavier pieces of leather without affecting the look too much. In spite of the view that the elderly Italian lady formed, the look of handmade shoes matters at Sunnybrook. "We're certainly trying to work harder on look," Ms Roterling says, picking up a pair of work boots in tan suede. They have specially built-up soles to support injured feet, but at first glance it will look like the wearer has more or less the same boots as everyone else in the lumber yard where he works. And this matters because it's a means of restoring some of the self-confidence injured workers often lose.

When it comes time to choose leather



Custom orthopaedic footwear built by the specialist team.

CREDIT: SUNNYBROOK CENTRE FOR INDEPENDENT LIVING

to make the shoes, the store in the team's laboratory looks well stocked, but in spite of its huge agricultural land-mass and 13 million head of cattle, Canada is not an ideal source of this, the key material. The Sunnybrook team works with a wholesaler, whose showroom is becoming less and less full, according to Sarah Rotering. Internal Canadian opportunities to broaden the supply base seem unlikely, and with hospital budgets constantly under scrutiny, buying finished leather directly from suppliers in Europe would bring cost concerns. The answer may be Mexico. It has the tanneries, it has the finished leather output and it's a NAFTA free-trade partner. She believes this idea has promise, but thinks it's a pity there is so little going on in Canada, in leather production, in design and in high-end finished product manufacturing. Trying to set up an association of artisan

leathergoods and shoemakers there would be "like herding cats" in her view.

Space to make noise

She explains: "National confidence is an issue. I suppose if you were looking for a nice way to put it you could say Canadians are humble. I think that is changing, and I hope that one of the things we will be able to do is reshape the way we view our designers. Even with architecture, it looks to me as though designers can only be accepted here after they have had success internationally. Even Frank Gehry, [designer of iconic buildings such as the titanium-covered Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao]. We need there to be a design school. A school here would attract a lot of people. I ran tiny courses on shoemaking from my studio, which was about twice the size of a table, and I still get emails about that.

OCAD [The Ontario College of Art and Design] is quite well known, and it would be great if it could offer a shoe design course, but it doesn't and I don't think it ever has."

Conversations she has had on this subject "a few times with a few people" have made her realise that a lot of groundwork will be essential if Toronto is ever to have its own footwear design course. Apart from a scarcity of leather, there is an issue of space. People learning to work with leather and make shoes need to be able to get their hands dirty and make some noise because, as Ms Rotering puts it, "you can't just have people sitting at Macs all day". Leather production seems largely to have fallen off Canada's manufacturing radar, making life hard for devoted designers who love the material. But at least the talent is there. You can buy most other things. ☺