

# Customer service behind this 75-year success story

By Tara Marion

As the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of V&A Bootery's downtown location approaches, co-owner Bill VanDis looks forward to another 75 years and reflects upon how his family-owned business was built: Through customer service, sound advice and quality footwear, V&A Bootery takes pride in keeping its customers comfortable.

VanDis cites the long-term experience of his staff as one of the critical factors behind V&A Bootery's success. The downtown store's four full-time employees average 20 years of service and their familiar faces make V&A customers feel comfortable.

Tom Morin, for example, is one of the salesmen who has been with V&A the longest and he knows many of his customers by name. "Tom makes it so easy," said Shirley Materi, of Portage. "He knows exactly what size and styles I need for my hard-to-fit feet."

Customer services doesn't stop when you walk out the door with your purchase either. Years ago, Materi had a problem with a shoe; it came unstitched. Although she'd already worn it six to eight weeks, Morin fixed the shoe—free of charge.

If a customer says he or she has had a shoe for a while, and it's too big, V&A will gladly add an insole or offer assistance to make it fit. "We always adjust shoes for the lifetime of the shoe," VanDis said.

Judy Moore, of Portage, said this is just one of the benefits of shopping at V&A Bootery. "It's nice to know that if you buy something there, they're going to stand behind their product," she said.

In an effort to avoid problems in the first place, employees at V&A Bootery routinely measure customers' feet because feet change and grow over time—a fact of which most people are unaware.

When a woman has her first child, for example, her foot increases by a half size because the tendons elongate. Other weight changes affect the size of the foot as well. By trying to routinely measure people's feet, we keep tabs on how things change," VanDis said.

Moore knows firsthand V&A Bootery's knowledgeable staff and she said that all of the employees are extremely helpful. "I think they must do good training in customer service because no matter who waits on you, I think you'll always get a lot of help," she said. "It's sort of a standard they've set, so I've always been comfortable shopping there."

Agrees Kimberly Williamson, of Downtown Kalamazoo Inc. "I encourage other merchants to walk in a mile in their shoes. We're very lucky to have them downtown."

Williamson says that V&A Bootery, in her opinion, is a true retailer. "Seventy-five years certainly is a demonstration of their expertise at what they do," she concludes, "and definitely a demonstration of their commitment to downtown and their belief in our community."