

# Southland store carries on V&A tradition in Portage

By Tara Marion

V&A Bootery has thrived in the community for 75 years, and its Southland location has been a prominent contribution to the company's success since 1980. "It's quite unusual for these days for a store like that to be in business for that many years," said Jeff Gibson, who co-owns the store.

What's the secret behind V&A Bootery's success?

"You just can't beat V&A's selection, knowledge and service—and this has proven to be a winning combination," said customer Gayle Morton, of Portage.

Added Fred and Nancy Reeves, of Portage, "We have patronized V&A Bootery for years because of its courteous and knowledgeable staff, impeccable service and quality products at a fair price."

V&A Bootery offers its customers men's and women's comfort footwear in a variety of sizes and widths. By "comfort," Gibson said he means the store sells comfortable shoes that do not sacrifice fashion.

Comfort is especially important to the store's older patrons. As people age; they often experience problems with their feet. Gibson said that one particular line of shoes that they carry, SAS shoes, are everyday comfort shoes—perfect for people with hard-to-fit or problem feet. "We have a lot of sizes we can work with, and it's a brand that a lot of the foot doctors know about," Gibson explained. "It works for problem feet."

V&A Bootery is not an orthopedic store, and its employees are not trained to diagnose foot problems. However, said Gibson, because of its training and experience, the staff at V&A is able to recognize a lot of common, minor problems. Most of their salespeople, Gibson said, have a minimum of 15 years experience at V&A and, not only do they know what they're doing, but they also "take time and patience in serving their customer's needs," giving each customer one-on-one attention.

Morton said she also appreciates the familiarity of this long-term staff. "I first became a V&A customer 25 years ago when Jeffrey Gibson, now one of the owners, was a young man in college and working at his uncle's V&A store," she said. "I did not personally know Jeff until we became neighbors 10 years ago, although I was already one of V&A's loyal customers."

This relationship is no exception to the rule. Gibson said many of his long-term employees know the store's customers well. "Harold has probably sold me more shoes than any other salesperson," said Dottie Sutter, of Portage. "I always appreciate his smile.

V&A Bootery also maintains an excellent relationship with the Meyer C. Weiner Co., developers and owners of Southland Mall.

While the mall has undergone many changes over the years, Josh Weiner, CEO of the Meyer C. Weiner Co., said V&A Bootery enjoys longevity because it is a leader in its field, as well as a leader in the community.

Weiner said he is proud of the family of merchants at Southland, which includes local businesses and national chain stores. "We're very thankful to have them as a part of Southland, but we're just as thankful and appreciative—perhaps just a little more so—of those fine, well established, experienced, local merchants like V&A ... because they add a local flavor and character that makes Southland unique."