

Sisters put people first, stuff second

LINDA FRIEDEL

STAFF WRITER

As children, sisters **Casey** and **Sloane Simmons** enjoyed playing store, emulating their parents' small businesses.

Their child's play eventually became the "stuff" of their current business.

"We loved it," said Casey, who co-owns STUFF, a retail boutique, with her sister, Sloane. "We played in a setting we knew a lot about."

Their father, who designed and sold surgical kits to hospitals and doctors, and mother, a special events consultant, gave the sisters business-related responsibilities while growing up. The girls did not consider the activities work.

"We grew up around small businesses," Casey said. "We wanted to be a part of that process. It was intriguing, valuable and fun."

Casey and Sloane, three years apart, grew up in Kansas City, and attended the University of Missouri in Columbia as young adults.

Pulled to the business world before completing their degrees, they worked together in special event planning and then launched their boutique STUFF, specializing in hand-crafted local artistry, home, gift and art pieces.

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BEN MCCALL/SUN PHOTO

SISTERS Sloane, left, and Casey Simmons, owners of STUFF, 316 W. 63rd St., in Brookside, have been named the 2009 Top Retailer from Niche Magazine for the sixth consecutive year.

Sisters receive honors for their Brookside business

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"We actually started in the west Plaza, west Seventh Street, up on the hill," Casey said.

After six months in the Plaza location they moved the store to Westport for five years, and then to their current location at 316 W. 63rd St. in the Brookside Shops. The sisters and co-owners will celebrate 13 years of STUFF in November, though they have worked together for 25 years.

"We love everywhere we've ever been," Casey said. "They're all great. We have learned from every neighborhood."

Casey and Sloane have celebrated numerous awards in addition to their milestone anniversaries, including finalist in the 2006 Heart of America Ethics in Business award, Kansas City Small Business Monthly's 2008 Top 25 Under 25 award and recent nomination for the 2009 Top Retailer award from NICHE Magazine, marking their sixth nomination as Top Retailer.

"We are floored yet again to have been chosen for this award," Sloane said. "It may be sponsored by an industry publication, but the people who nominate us are working artists - people who have dedicated their hearts

and souls to producing great art."

Casey said she and her sister appreciate each honor, but her favorite is the 2006 Ethics award, presented by Midwest Christian Counseling Center and Baker University. The organizations take an in-depth look at ethical practices, treatment of employees and contributions to the community.

"That was a huge honor for us," Casey said. "We are humbled by these nominations."

Casey said ironically, for a business that specializes in stuff, she and Sloane focus on the people aspect of their business, including tens of thousands of customers, 300 artists and their 12-employee company.

"We're in a relationship with a person," Case said. "That's what is important with us."

The sisters agree that respecting boundaries and utilizing each other's strengths are key components to running a successful business. They do not contract for outside help and between the two, create and manage their Web site, newsletter, e-mails, branding, window displays, merchandizing, public relations and scripts for broadcasting, constantly educating themselves in the

industry.

They have started coaching "creative brainstorming" to individuals and stores throughout Kansas City, and are in the process of adding this new dimension to their business plan.

"We thrive so much on the creative process, we have energy left over for others," Casey said.

Sloane said she loves working with her sister, adding that mutual respect and setting boundaries remain at the heart of getting along with each other on a day-to-day basis.

"You know when you're business partners, you know when you are sisters, you know when you're best friends," Sloane said.

For sisters considering a joint business venture, Sloane recommends they research and develop a business and exit plan.

"If you have those discussions, you will probably succeed," she said. "We have every intention of succeeding for a long time."

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