

thinking **BIGGER** BUSINESS

VOL. 22 // ISSUE 12 //
DECEMBER 2013

THE GENIUS OF STUFF

Doing things a little differently has helped turn a Brookside shop into a neighborhood institution.

(SMART COMPANIES THINKING BIGGER)

iThinkBigger.com

Small but Mighty
Why your company is a
bigger deal than you think.

BIG | focus

Tax Planning



SISTER ACT OF KINDNESS

STUFF regularly sponsors in-store fundraisers for local charities, and the Simmons sisters each serve on several community boards.



The STUFF of Genius

Doing things a little differently has helped turn a Brookside shop into a neighborhood institution.

By Mary Bush

ENTREPRENEURS

Sloane and Casey Simmons

COMPANY INFORMATION

STUFF

316 W. 63rd St.

Kansas City, MO 64113

(816) 361-8222

www.pursuegoodstuff.com



TYPE OF BUSINESS

Retail store

YEAR FOUNDED 1996

EMPLOYEES

3 full-time

6-12 part-time

KEYS TO SUCCESS

"We apply the 'pursue good stuff' lens to every decision. It has served us well."

Casey Simmons, co-owner and founder

It's hard to describe STUFF to someone who's never been there before. If you stroll down Brookside's neighborly 63rd Street, though, you'll definitely notice the store's whimsical, playfully painted window. Step through the propped-open door, past the perky Australian Shepherd mix—his name is Chancey—and you'll see, well, stuff you can't find anywhere else.

For the past eight years, *NICHE* magazine has recognized STUFF as one of the top stores in America that feature fine American crafts. It also was a Thinking Bigger Business Media 25 Under 25® winner in 2008. And in an industry that consistently struggles with profitability, STUFF has experienced double-digit growth every year except one.

As co-owners and sisters Sloane and Casey Simmons will tell you, STUFF isn't just a shop or gallery, and it's certainly not your typical business.

"The name says it all," said Casey. "It's a unique shopping experience that continues to evolve with our customers and artists leading the way."

Off the Wall, Into Retail

Not surprisingly, STUFF did not come about in the usual way. It was the early '90s, and the Simmons sisters, both gainfully self-employed as political and corporate consultants, were working with clients such as Ford Motor Co., the United Auto Workers and various political campaigns. Along with sharing a profession and an office in the River Market area, the two both possessed a deep love and respect for art.

"It was before the art community in Kansas City really took off," said Sloane. "Local artists had very limited outlets to share their wonderful, one-of-a-kind creations."

So the Simmons sisters invited local artists to showcase their art on the expansive walls of their office. Clients and others who dropped by soon began purchasing the innovative, handmade art. That morphed into several years of Friday night wine-and-cheese gatherings where numerous

local artists displayed their wares and attracted even more customers hungry for accessible, unusual and unexpected fine art. Casey and Sloane took no commission for sales.

"We did it for the pure joy of sharing the visions of these talented people," said Sloane. "But it became clear there was an active market for creative, inspirational art in all its different forms."

So in November 1996, STUFF formally opened its doors in a small West Plaza space on 47th Street. The store was originally open only a couple days a month as the sisters continued working their day jobs, but word of mouth spread and eager customers encouraged the store to open daily. Through it all, Sloane and Casey offered a consistent message.

"Our vision then and now was to pursue good stuff in the community, in our lives and in the world," said Casey. "Whether it's with art, food, music, causes, volunteer work or some other outlet, pursuing good stuff is a way of life for us."

About that time, the sisters, who were traveling about 200 nights a year, were ready for a



LEFT // Casey and Sloane

Simmons, co-owners of STUFF, surrounded by the large selection of handmade items provided by local artists.

career change. As customer interest in their shop grew, they sought advice from other storefront retailers. In 1997, they took the plunge and moved to Westport, opening STUFF seven days a week. Though they kept their two biggest consulting clients, Casey and Sloane devoted maximum effort to STUFF. The eccentric little store thrived for five years in Westport before moving to a larger space in Brookside in 2001, where it is today.

"We just thought we were busy before," laughed Sloane. "But at STUFF, there is no daily grind and we love it."

Dealing with Tough STUFF

The only year that STUFF hasn't grown? The recent economic crisis.

"That was a very tough time for retail," said Casey. "We decided not to retreat and let the economy roll over us, but rather to head into the storm."

In November 2008, during some of the darkest days of the financial meltdown, Casey and Sloane sent a letter to their customers thanking them for their business and encouraging them to shop not only at STUFF, but at other local establishments, too, especially during the upcoming holiday season.

"We just kept going," said Casey. "We didn't cut commissions to our artists or ask them to cut their costs. We knew they had the same tough journey we did."

It worked. STUFF popped through the economic down-



turn and continues to thrive in a bricks-and-mortar environment that challenges many retailers. Casey and Sloane credit the store's success to staying true to their vision and purpose—to pursue good stuff.

"We apply the 'pursue good stuff' lens to every decision," Casey said. "It has served us well."

Today, STUFF's 1,800 square feet of store space are packed and stacked with thousands of items from about 350 artistic sources, including 85 local artists. Approximately 300 artists seek representation in STUFF each year, and about five new ones are added to the store. STUFF showcases groupings of work from each artist, so their vision is clearly communicated to customers.

"We partner with our artists and want their message to be heard," said Casey. "We also pay in full and on time, and our artists are very appreciative."

STUFF's long, sidewalk-facing window reflects the store's personality and has showcased everything from a swimming pool made of 18,000 marbles to

elephant-shaped watering cans "munching" on 200 pounds of peanuts. Casey and Sloane dream up the eye-catching windows, which they change every few weeks. They keep a journal of all 113 of the store's fanciful, unpredictable windows.

"Our ideas for the windows come from the flow of everyday life and are just a little left of center," said Sloane.

A Good Relationship with the Community

The sisters also believe in consistently pursuing good customer relationships.

STUFF has an active Facebook page with about 3,000 followers and is on Instagram, Pinterest and other social media. And the sisters co-write a blog.

"From the beginning, our growth has been a very grassroots, natural kind of thing," said Casey. "Social networking has helped us along our way."

Casey and Sloane use STUFF to support causes they're passionate about.

They sponsor more than 30 in-store fundraisers that take place in November and December, known as "Season of Giving" events. Fifteen percent of the proceeds from each event is donated to causes that reflect the



ABOVE // Julie Smith organizes a jewelry display composed of earrings made from recycled magazines.

LEFT // Wint Doering is arranging a display of artist-made ornaments.

sisters' vision. Recipients include the local Women's Employment Network, AIDS Walk, Susan Henke Miller Cancer Research Fund and more. The store offers similar events after hours throughout the year for other not-for-profit organizations.

Casey and Sloane also feel a responsibility to help others who, like themselves, are pursuing a different path. They offer very affordable small business Q&A seminars for aspiring entrepreneurs in STUFF's basement classroom.

"We broke the rules and conceptualized our own future," said Sloane. "We want to encourage that level of dreaming and encourage others to find their path, too."

Additionally, the two do brainstorming jam sessions for groups

"We honestly came about by accident and with extreme naivety, but our mission to pursue good stuff has not changed."

Casey Simmons // co-owner and founder

and are available for one-on-one consulting.

The Continuing Pursuit of Good Stuff

In 2014, Casey and Sloane will realize a longtime dream when they launch a line of wholesale goods branded under the "pursue good stuff" label, a name Casey and Sloane trademarked several years ago.

"The items we market will reflect our trademark and lifestyle," said Casey. "Sloane and I are developing the entire product line from scratch."

They will market their products online, at trade shows and gift markets. They said it is a good time for the expansion.

"Starting this line represents the core of our mission to always be evolving and sharing our message," said Sloane. "It's simply the next step."

Sloane and Casey continue to be inspired by their unusual, 17-year retail adventure.

"We honestly came about by accident and with extreme naivety, but our mission to pursue good stuff has not changed," said Casey. "It has kept us true to who we are



and what we want to contribute to the world we live in."

Sloane adds that owning a store like STUFF provides her with a long list of "get-to's."

"I get to work with my sister, get to help an endless number of worthwhile organizations, get to meet talented people and get to be surrounded by art," Sloane said. "It doesn't get much better." ■

Mary Bush is a freelance writer based in Kansas City.

Access Opportunity

We're making your business our business at mymcpl.org/small-business.

- Find customers.
- Research markets.
- Connect to resources.
- Get templates and forms.



Access it now with your mobile device.

Need room to work? Our 34 locations have free wifi!

