

‘Dyed in the Wool’ Vermont Originals by Stephen Russell Payne

Shopping at the Princeton University Store in New Jersey recently, I was drawn to a great looking ski hat with the school’s logo knitted into the wool. I was surprised to find that the hat was made in Morrisville, Vermont by home knitters who work for a company named, Vermont Originals.

Returning home, I realized several of our favorite ski hats were made by this same company. Intrigued, I discovered that Vermont Originals is owned by (of all people!) a pair of expatriate Californians, Tad and Jane Washburn.

Though the Washburns lived in San Francisco, they had owned a vacation home in Woodstock for many years and during their visits here had gradually fallen in love with the Green Mountain State. About six years ago they decided to leave California and began looking for a small Vermont Company to purchase and run until they retired. Searching the internet, they came upon Vermont Originals, and even though the Washburns knew nothing about making ski hats, they bought the company anyway. Needless to say, the move from San Francisco to Morrisville was quite a culture shock.

Vermont Originals was run out of a small space in the old Cabot Creamery building, selling their hats through independent ski shops in the Northeast. Unfortunately, at the time the Washburns bought the business, many skiers were trading their wool hats for high tech helmets and a lot of ski shops were struggling to stay open. Their new company didn’t own a computer nor have a website and they relied on only one part time sales rep to sell their goods. They also inherited an uneven and at times contentious work

force and soon after they bought the company, its long-standing supplier of wool yarn went out of business. Sitting in their tiny, dimly lit Morrisville office, the Washburns of California seriously wondered what they'd gotten themselves into.

Pulling the company together took everything they had in them. "Luckily," Jane says, "Tad is a very smart, creative businessman with the ability to see his way through things to the other side." "And," Tad chimes in, "Jane is amazing at organizing very complicated things into systems that work efficiently. And to survive, we needed to do a whole lot of that!"

In addition to their regular Nordic ski hats, Vermont Originals also made custom "logo" hats for a few colleges and high schools. Tad and Jane quickly realized they needed to expand the custom aspect of the business if they were going to succeed. Over the next three years they worked pretty much night and day, expanding their work space, hiring many new home knitters and taking on more sales reps. They computerized the business with custom software that allowed them to efficiently produce a greatly expanded line of hats. Tad and Jane also began going to events like the College Apparel Marketing Expo and the US Lacrosse show, at which they sold over 3000 hats in two days! They knew they were on to something big.

As the business took off, the Washburns felt like they could finally catch their breath. Then Jane got the shock of her life. On New Year's Eve, 2007, she found a hard lump in her breast. With Tad's support and the help of a local doctor, she was soon undergoing intensive treatment for breast cancer which required she be away from home and the business for weeks at a time.

About this time the business hit serious financial and manufacturing snags. Custom hat orders came in faster than the company could produce them. With Jane out of commission, they relied on their local staff to take over critical functions, including managing the many home knitters, keeping track of complex inventories as well as overseeing maintenance of their aging knitting machines. Early on, employee relations hadn't always been easy, but over time the Washburns had put together a great team of savvy, hard working women dedicated to the success of the company. Tad and Jane had embraced their employees and treated them well. When the Washburns fell on hard times, their employees embraced them in return.

When Jane completed her rigorous treatments, she realized she could no longer work long, grueling hours in the constant stress of the business. She had to let go and it was then that she felt truly surrounded by the loving support of the women who worked for the company. "These local women just embraced me. They were tremendously supportive; it came right from their hearts. Here I was this California girl – their boss – and they brought in baskets of homemade bread and cookies, soaps and nice feminine things that truly helped me feel better and get through a terribly difficult time." Jane shakes her head. "They really helped save me, Tad and the business. It changed the whole dynamic around here."

Nestled in the foothills of the northern Green Mountains, the company's thirty-five home knitters have made nearly half a million hats in over 200 different designs, selling them in 38 states stretching from Maine to Alaska. Hundreds of schools, sports teams and companies rely on Vermont Originals for their custom logo hats. Feeling very

grateful for Jane's recovery, the Washburns designed a custom "pink ribbon" hat and donate \$10 from each hat to the Susan Komen Cancer Foundation. They also donate hats to a women's hockey group in Massachusetts called "Shoot for the Cure, to local churches, to clothing drives at their bank and to a group called TROSA in Georgia that helps troubled kids.

"It's still tough making it as a small business," Tad and Jane say, "but we feel so lucky to be here in this beautiful place doing something we love that's also good for the community. Using home knitters allows many young mothers as well as older women (sometimes their grandmothers!) to work in their homes, picking up and leaving off their knitting orders once a week." Though at times they miss the excitement of San Francisco, they are very happy to be in Vermont. As Tad says, "Life here has been a real adventure and a great challenge which is what we wanted. We really enjoy the seasons and the beauty of the Green Mountains and we have made some really good friends here." Like so many others 'from away,' they've found Vermont to be a pretty special place.

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