

ONE WOMAN, TWO STORES

MEET BONNIE HAMILTON

An indie retailer with plenty of horse sense.

There's more than bourbon in Bardstown, Kentucky and Bonnie Hamilton proves it. Located south of Louisville and nestled north of the Martha Layne Collins Blue Grass Parkway in central Kentucky, Bardstown is known as one of the 100 Best Small Towns in America and the "Bourbon Capital of the World." What many don't realize is that the historic downtown main street area boasts some fantastic indie retailers. Retail Minded was lucky to chat with Bonnie Hamilton, owner of both Sugar Buzz and Shaq & Coco located in the heart of downtown.

Bonnie Hamilton came to the retail business as the force behind Sugar Buzz, a bakery known for its specialty cakes. She and her pastry chef Lydia Piles spotted the perfect location on the best block of North 3rd Street and with the help of a preservation renovator, the 112-year-old space was transformed into a fun, yummy place that quickly became the go-to bakery that has amassed a large and loyal group of followers since its December 2011 opening. When the tenant next door to Sugar Buzz vacated and moved, Hamilton saw another opportunity to bring independent retail to Bardstown. Despite its poor condition and gloomy feel, Bonnie and her renovator Joe Buckman worked closely with the town's preservation committee to bring the space to life while restoring the original wood floors that had been hiding under old carpet. Shaq & Coco, a mixed bag of retail that includes gourmet food, jewelry, clothes, gifts, home accessories and furnishings opened September 13, 2012 and Hamilton has been off to the races ever since.

Hamilton credits her success to a combination of experience and attitude. For 20 years, she worked as a scrub nurse for a neurosurgical team and excelled at working in a high-pressure environment. After she retired from nursing, she went to work running the racing and breeding operations at Silverton

Hill Farm, a thoroughbred horse farm that she and her husband own. Despite a lack of retail background, she wasn't afraid of the challenges involved in operating two retail stores. "A lot of my skills apply to retail. Running a large breeding and racing operation requires you to manage employees, time, materials and budget, just like in my stores," explains Hamilton. "I'm also not afraid to find the right person to do the right job. I have an excellent manager, Cindy Ballard, and wonderful staff, but there's nothing I ask them to do that I wouldn't do myself. I'm a 'git-r-done' kind of person."

When Hamilton reflects on opening one store, then another store in an area tightly controlled by a Historical Review Board, it's easy to see why she's so successful. A woman who knows how to get things done, she realized that the best way to get what she wanted for her retail spaces was to try to comply. "Bardstown's HRB is strict and you have to get their stamp of approval for everything," Hamilton explains, "but if you listen, let them coach you and try to see it their way, they will make sure you meet all the deadlines and requirements. They are very astute and the reason why Bardstown looks as great as it does in order to win the Rand McNally 'Most Beautiful' Best Small Town Award."

Hamilton credits her community with being a huge resource for her. She named Kimberly M. Huston, President of the Nelson County Economic Development Agency and Anne Ballard, director of Downtown Development, Bardstown Main-street program as two women who jumped through a lot of hoops to help because they would do anything for anyone coming in town to open a business. Not only did she utilize the local business resources to get started, but she also subscribes to the notion that it's a joint effort to make Bardstown as special as it is. "We're on the Bourbon Trail, so we get a lot of people visiting," Hamilton remarks. "Everything that we do, from being extra helpful and friendly to the bourbon industry to bringing and sending people to each others' stores, comes from a shared attitude that what's good for you is good for all of us."

Hamilton realizes that winning a national contest and having several of the most popular bourbon distilleries close by are advantages that not every small town retailer has, but she will readily admit that she's an extrovert who loves to sell. Hamilton also has a keen eye for what sells, and does all the buying herself. She also keeps her horse experience close at hand by still running their farm's racing operation because it keeps her sharp; she knows that experience translates into being effective at her stores. "Owning a store is the hardest work you could ever do, but there's nothing like the reward of it either," she reveals. "I never stop thinking about the stores and figuring out what we can do better. I know if you have self-confidence and ambition without letting your ego get in the way, that it's fun."