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## INSPIRED GIFT GIVING

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# INSPIRED GIFT GIVING

Gifts and stationery for every occasion — a winning recipe for success at this Texas boutique

BY JULIE MCCALLUM  
*Editor in Chief*

Offering a little something for all of life's celebrations helps customers look like the hero, and that is exactly what the team at Barque is committed to. From unique and personalized gifts to custom invitations and stationery, the Lubbock, Texas boutique offers its shoppers a creative space to inspire their best gift-giving.

We sat down recently with Kandice Matsler, owner at Barque, to chat about how her business started, how it grew and how it has survived the pandemic.

**You came back to Lubbock and were offered the chance to buy the store where you once worked. Tell us about taking that leap. What did you do to make it your own?**

**KM:** When I purchased the store in 2008, it had been in business for almost 30 years. I was working on the wholesale side of the invitation industry, and since the previous store owner purchased our products, we were still in touch occasionally.



Photos by Cristy Cross Photographys.



Kandice Matsler is the owner of Barque in Lubbock, Texas.

At that time, there was no room for promotion at my current job, so when the store owner reached out wanting to sell—I leapt at the chance.

It was a whirlwind! Three weeks after her phone call, I owned a store in Lubbock, Texas (while I was still living in Dallas). Over the next month, we moved the store to its current location, which took a small army of family and friends that I'm so thankful for. I put my own spin on the store in 2014 when we did a complete interior renovation and changed the name to Barque. I wanted our product mix to reflect all of my favorite things: paper, gifts, kitchen/cooking and dogs.

**How has the pandemic altered your customers' buying habits?**

**KM:** It's been an interesting shift. We do have sales from new customers across the country, but the bulk of our sales are from our local, loyal customers. They enjoy the convenience of shopping on our website any time of day, then picking up their order in-store or curbside when we open. Many of our customers pick up a gift on their way to a birthday lunch or plan to leave a gift on a friend's porch, so they'll ask us to wrap it in the notes of their online order. Having more products on our website gives our customers the chance to buy what they need and get it checked off their "To-Do" list any time of day.

**Tell us about the personalized items you sell. Do you monogram those in-store? How does that work and how long have you offered this?**

**KM:** Our most popular personalized items are stationery, acrylic accessories (like desk organizers and jewelry boxes), wooden cutting boards, Corkcicle/Brumate/Swig drinkware and of course, Jon Hart. Jon Hart is one of our favorite lines. It's made in Texas, so it's really popular with customers who are familiar with the brand. For the most popular pieces, we carry blank stock in a variety of colors and then personalize (hot stamp) them in-house in about



Dog treats by Bocce's Bakery fill up a set of vintage drawers. The West Paw Designs dog toys shown in tiered baskets are one of the store's favorite pet brands.

3 days. Customers appreciate that it's a lot faster to get from us than if they have to order it to be "made" at the factory. If someone is in a hurry and can't wait 3 days, we also provide the option for us to gift wrap the blank item with a coupon for stamping. That way the gift recipient can bring it back later and choose how they would like the item personalized. We've carried the Jon Hart line since 2013, but we didn't purchase our own hot stamping machine until about 5 years ago – it was a game changer for us and our customers.

**Let's talk pets! It sounds like pet gifts have been on your shelves from the beginning. How did this come about?**

**KM:** Well, technically we don't carry gifts for all pets... we only carry gifts for dogs and their humans. I'm a dog mom, so our dog section perfectly aligns with my interests and experience. I only sell products that I've personally used or love for my own fur babies... and I'll tell you – they don't mind being the official testers of any potential treat or toy that we carry!

**Gourmet and kitchen items are another mainstay for you. How do you merchandise your product mix throughout the store?**

**KM:** Most of the time we merchandise products based on their category – like kitchen items are in the "kitchen section" – but occasionally I like to mix things up by doing a "showcase" display (on our main table) based on a specific theme or color. From seasonal merchandise



Gourmet selections include local jam from Kelle B Jammin' made from local produce, as well as lots of cookbooks and kitchen towels. Grilling items also do well – like Perini Ranch steak rub and Thermoworks meat thermometers.

to a color scheme, we try to move things around pretty often. As it turns out, that retail saying, "Move it, and it will sell" works! I focus on creating an interesting "story" for any display. For instance, a Le Creuset dutch oven and a stack of cookbooks will make their way onto a "cozy" winter table display, or my favorite vegetable peeler will end up on a gardening themed table. Sometimes we also do displays by color too – everything green for St.Patrick's Day or anything black and orange for Halloween. Throwing in unexpected products adds interest and promotes creativity.

**What is the hardest thing to keep in stock?**

**KM:** Our local products! We have designed an exclusive series of items that feature Lubbock – from 806 mugs to Lubbock tea towels to pencils, postcards, pillows, glasses, napkins, coasters and more. Our local series, called "This is Lubbock," is a hand-drawn map of Lubbock's iconic landmarks and is very popular. If I had to pick one item that's almost impossible to keep in stock, I would choose our Chilton rocks glasses. We sell them in a gift set of 4 glasses and have coordinating items like napkins, coasters and tea towels. The Chilton is a drink that's famous locally, and our customers LOVE giving these products as gifts to people who are familiar with the area and the cocktail.



The "This is Lubbock" Collection, drawn by Matsler, is exclusive to Barque. Items such as folded notes, notepads, tea towels, postcards, ornaments, pillows and bugs feature the design and are particularly popular among realtors, who love to give something local to new-comers in the area as a "closing gift".

**How has this last year changed you and your store? What lasting effects do you think it will have on you and how you do business?**

**KM:** When the pandemic hit, the possibility of losing this business that I love scared me and I decided that it was time to double-down and work even harder. Since I didn't know how bad things would get – my team of 10 became a one-woman show – me. We closed the store to the public for 2+ months, and during that time I had to tackle learning a variety of new tasks. Given that there are a fixed number of hours in the day and my workload went from 9-10 hours a day to 15+ hours, the value in prioritizing EVERY resource became crucial. Time was my biggest commodity, so I had to make quicker decisions and move faster to keep up with our customer's needs and local regulations.

Before 2020, I would have never considered buying face masks, hand sanitizer and sanitizing wipes, but I did because that's what customers were requesting. The advantage of being a small business is being able to change directions quickly, and I'm thankful for that. Moving forward, my team and I plan to focus even more on maximizing our resources to align with customer needs, and re-evaluating often.

**Where do you see your store five years from now?**

**KM:** If the next 5 years go like 2020, I have NO idea... but I hope that we are still adapting and learning, and doing the best we can to meet the needs of our customers, whatever they might be. I expect some major changes in technology, who knows – maybe instead of calling our phone line customers will video call and shop virtually? I'm not sure, but I'm excited to see what the future brings. *Gs*