



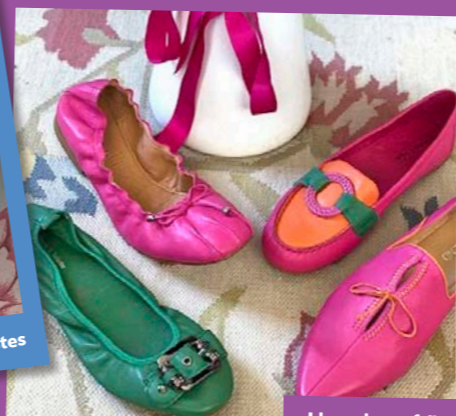
I'm so proud I turned my passion into a thriving business



We have shoes from 10-14...



...to suit all ages and tastes



I have lots of flats...



...and even floral lace-up boots



Me and CC in the shop

IF THE SHOE FITS

Carol Haffke, 54, knows that beauty comes in all shapes and sizes

We don't have anything in her size,' sighed the sales assistant. 'Have you tried the men's department?' 'My daughter's not a man,' my mum Ingrid said, furious. 'Come on, Carol, let's go.' At 18, I was searching for evening shoes to go with my white dress for the school formal. Having a size 12 foot, it was impossible. My mum, who wore a size 10 shoe herself, sympathised.

We ended up buying white nanna-style court shoes to match my outfit. It seemed unfair. None of my friends had issues buying footwear. When we went shopping together, I never went inside shoe shops with them. It was too upsetting. I loved fashion too, and felt frustrated that my outfits could never be coordinated with anything below the ankles! After leaving school, I went to uni to study journalism and afterwards got a job on the *Gold Coast Bulletin* in Qld. I loved it and after 12 months, travelled overseas, writing for different publications. I worked in Canada and Portugal, but it was Namibia in Africa that really stole my heart.

On returning to Brisbane, Qld, I moved across to public relations, entering the world of fundraising and charities, writing speeches for others and working as a media spokesperson. Then, in November 2011, at age 44, I organised a fundraising dinner that didn't go as well as I'd hoped.

'I want to celebrate fabulous footwear'

The next morning, I sat sobbing on my sofa for hours. Burnt out, I didn't want to stay in my profession, let alone my job. Then I had an idea. *I could open a women's shoe shop specialising in longer sizes!* I thought, excited by the prospect. I could be my own boss and help others with the

same annoying shoe issues I'd faced all my life. Deciding against borrowing from the bank, I put my townhouse on the market, instructing my real estate agent to sell to an investor, so I could continue to live there as a tenant. And that's exactly what happened! Handing in my notice at

work, I rented an empty shop located in a charming cottage around the corner from where I lived. 'Shoe shops are too drab,' I said to Mum. 'I want a colourful space that celebrates fabulous footwear.' So I decorated it myself, with beautiful vases and rugs I found in stores and antique shops. Then I went to a shoe expo in Sydney and, with the money from my house sale, bought hundreds of pairs of gorgeous shoes, ranging from size 10 to 14. On April 14, 2012, I popped the champagne corks and formally opened The Shoe Garden. Customers piled in,

delighted they'd finally found somewhere to buy fashionable footwear. They also had their own horror stories. 'People would tell me to forget the shoes and wear the shoebox,' one said. 'I'm so ashamed of my big feet, I've never worn open-toe sandals,' said another woman. 'You don't have big feet, you have long feet,' I said, correcting her.

Often customers would cry when they found elegant shoes in their size. Some women brought in their daughters to be fitted. The girls would be convinced there wouldn't be shoes that they liked, but then they'd find one pair and then another, and get so excited! 'Some of these are actually too big for me!' one girl squealed, delighted. Other mums came in with their transitioning teenagers. 'This is my daughter,' one said defensively, fixing me with a steely gaze. 'No problem, what would she like?' I replied. Once she realised I had no issues with her child, she completely relaxed. I also had crossdressers ring me. 'Is it okay for me to come in?' they'd ask, explaining they'd been rejected from other stores.

GENERATION Y NOT

'Of course,' I'd reply, sad they even had to ask. Drag queens were always fun. 'I want the highest, most glamorous shoes you have,' one said, before joking around with the other customers, having them in stitches. 'I've never enjoyed shoe shopping so much,' another customer laughed. My customers were aged from 10 to 90, both short and tall, and most were a size 12 like me, although 30 per cent had longer feet. As I carried hundreds of different shoes and boots across 15 different lines, from size 10 to 14, mostly Australian made, there was something to fit everyone.

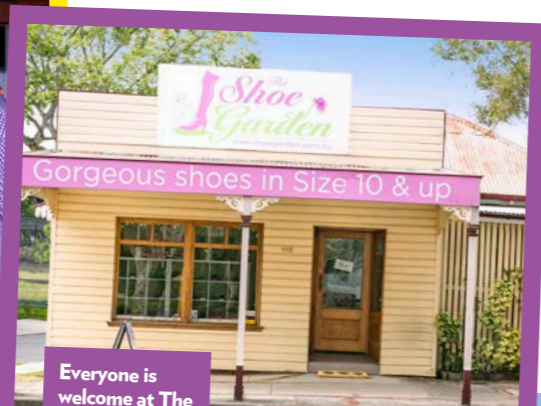
Twice a week, Mum and my dad Eric came in to help out, getting to know all the regulars. Mum loved my shoes so much she threw out all of hers. 'I'm only wearing yours,' she declared. Nine years on, my little shop is doing well, and I'm also selling lots online. And because Africa remains so close to my heart, I also donate a portion of all sales to MicroLoan Foundation

Australia to help African women in Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe start or grow their businesses. So far, I'm thrilled that we've raised more than \$40,000. I feel very lucky to be making people happy and am proud I created a thriving business from nothing. Strangely, I've gone from representing other people's points of view as a journalist and in PR to being myself. It's so liberating. I wear colourful kaftans

instead of corporate suits, and until my beloved Maltese terrier CC sadly passed away in October, she came to work with me every day. So if you are looking to be your own boss, don't get 'cold feet'. Do your research, and find a niche gap in the market that's close to your heart. Then, if the shoe fits, wear it! **tl** For more info, visit shoegarden.com.au



Mum, me, CC and Dad at the shop's 3rd birthday party



Gorgeous shoes in Size 10 & up

Everyone is welcome at The Shoe Garden

AS TOLD TO EVA LEWICKI PHOTOS: DEBBI BRETT PHOTOGRAPHY; JO HAMMOND PHOTOGRAPHY; SUPPLIED

ARE YOU PART OF GENERATION Y NOT?

Generation Y Not are 40-plus women who are grabbing life with both hands. Are you doing anything that's a bit different? You just might inspire other women like you in ways you won't even

know. Let's share the fun! If you've ripped up the rule book, email us at tl.megamonthly@aremedia.com.au to tell us your story, or go to the *that's life!* Facebook page at [facebook.com/thatslifemag](https://www.facebook.com/thatslifemag).