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New Zealand trek inspires wool-based business

eNZees founder leaves retirement for startup

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Courtesy of Jill Schuman

Jill Schuman discovered the blister preventative power of sheep's wool about three years ago while hiking in New Zealand where it is commonly used for this purpose. The wool is lightweight and biodegradable and contains a naturally wax not found in wool socks that helps prevent blisters.

hen Durangoan Jill Schuman went trekking in New Zealand, she had no intention of getting back into the business world, but some drug store wool changed her



Jill Schuman came out of retirement to launch her new company, eNZees, to bring New Zealand wool to the U.S. She distributes her product from Denver and it is available in six local retailers.



Jill Schuman's company was selected to be featured by The Grommet website. The website markets directly to consumers and help startups connect with retailers. Her product, eNZees Foot Soother, is already sold in 55 stores.

The wool soothed hot spots on her feet and prevented blisters from forming on her lengthy hike, just as her trekking guide said it would.

She couldn't believe that no one had brought the wool to the U.S., and so she decided that it would be worth coming out of retirement to import it.

It's not her first startup. In 1991, Schuman started a business that provided education for the software industry. When she was 44, she sold the business and retired.

But her new company, eNZees Foot Soother, named after New Zealand, was a completely different undertaking.

"It was a long, hard journey. I knew nothing about retail. I knew nothing about importing," she said.

The first step was identifying the type of wool she needed. In the end, she sent some of the drug store wool back to New Zealand to be analyzed, so she could make sure the eNZees wool would have the right amount of lanolin. Lanolin is a naturally occurring wax in wool that draws moisture away from the body, not just from feet.

"People have discovered all different ways to use it," she said.

For example, customers have used the wool in their bike shorts to heal and prevent rashes and to prevent bedsores.

The lanolin helps differentiate eNZees wool from wool socks. Normally, lanolin is taken out of the wool before it is made into a sock and any traces are lost when the socks are washed.

"If wool socks were sufficient to prevent blisters, then everyone would wear wool socks and we would never hear about anyone's foot problems. Obviously, this is not the case," she said in an email.

Schuman's wool is taken from 1-year-old sheep, and it is processed lightly to preserve the lanolin.

Her wool arrives by ship in bails and is packaged by SHALOM Denver, a nonprofit that employs people with disabilities and other barriers to employment.

She sought out a sheltered workshop to do her packaging because her mom always volunteers in this kind of workplace.

It has been about three years since her first visit to New Zealand. Since then, eNZees has been

stocked in 55 stores, including six in Durango, and she has sold about 3,000 bags at \$11.95 each.

She is expecting to see more growth after being selected to be featured by The Grommet this month. The website considers 60,000 startups annually and selects 3 percent of them to help

launch. The company also helps startups connect with retailers.

Zealand.

"I would love to get this in the hands of everybody that walks," she said.

Schuman's dream is to make eNZees ubiquitous, just like wool-blister prevention is in New

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