

MEMBERSHIP NOW

Celebrating 70 Years of Success at Shepherd & Schaller

Shepherd & Schaller is celebrating its 70th anniversary as a destination for sporting goods in the central Wisconsin community of Wausau. Owner Robb Shepherd has continued the successful tradition of service and expertise started by his father Allen Shepherd and uncle Stanley Schaller in 1949. Robb Shepherd, who is a member of the National Ski & Snowboard Retailers Association (NSSRA) Board of Directors, took time to share some of his thoughts and memories about his family's business with Julie Pitts, the Business Development Director for the National Sporting Goods Association and the President of NSSRA.

Q: What have been some of the keys to Shepherd & Schaller's success for 70 years?

A: Our 70-year history is only possible because of our response to local market needs, new trends and to the relationships we've built with customers, community stakeholders, suppliers and supporting organizations, including the NBS (Nation's Best Sports) buying group, NSSRA and NSGA. Business gets harder each year but it's never less rewarding.

Q: How old were you when you started working at Shepherd & Schaller? When did you know you wanted to be such a big part of the business your father built?

A: I was 11 years old when I started working here at the store. My first jobs were sweeping, breaking down cardboard, taking out trash and hauling hundreds of boxes of ski boots. I knew I wanted to partner with my father, Allen "Shep" Shepherd, who opened the business with my uncle in 1949, when I was in middle school.

I have four siblings and five cousins, all of whom worked a little in the store while growing up. They all passed on making it a career, though, so I made a promise to my dad when I was about 15. Dad and uncle Stan made it 40 years without me, and I just couldn't let their blood, sweat and tears go to waste. I bought the business in 1988 when I finished college. I knew it would be a 24-7 job.

Q: Your dad was very involved with NSGA as a member of its Board of Directors. What are some of your favorite memories of going to NSGA shows and how did that inspire you to become part of the sporting goods industry?

A: I accompanied dad to an NSGA show in Anaheim, California in the mid-'70s. We visited Disneyland. It was after hours. I



>> Robb Shepherd, Allen "Shep" Shepherd, Dorothy "Dottie" Shepherd and Gulf War General Norman Schwarzkopf, who spoke at the 1992 NSGA Trade Show.

was the only kid in the park and felt like a king in the front seat of a double-decker bus while driving to Walt Disney's private dining room for the Board's dinner! The walls of my office are covered with dad's NSGA photos and plaques: dad with California Governor and future President Ronald Reagan, General Colin Powell, General Norman Schwarzkopf (I'm even in that photo). NSGA really had some amazing keynote speakers!

My dad and uncle were both World War II vets and my dad's military career is what landed him in Wausau, where we are today. While in Europe, one of dad's responsibilities was leading recreation for morale. I always wanted to work in sporting goods/recreation because of the balance it provides every part of life. Our family table prayer is unique. I think dad made it up: "Thank you God for today, for food, rest, work and play." That kind of sums it up.

Q: How has Shepherd & Schaller evolved with competition from Internet sales and the big box chains? How has your product mix changed through the years?

A: Shepherd & Schaller started out stocking anything to do with recreation: athletics, hunt, fish, camp. We engraved trophies, filled dive tanks, drilled bowling balls. As big box stores moved into town in the '90s, along with the Internet, we had to let a lot of categories go. Now, we focus on Outdoor Specialty, with a full-time ski and bike back-shop, rentals and a huge inventory of clothes and shoes.

In the '90s we started attending several ski swaps each year and created an in-house event called Dungeon Sale, where we sell used ski and snowboard gear on consignment. It's the biggest four days of our year, beating out the first 10 days of December. We



launched ShepsSports.com in 2011. Our local customers use it as an on-line catalog to pre-shop and our out-of-state sales grow each year, though we don't expect it to grow to the point we originally hoped for. Amazon, backcountry.com and supplier sites are just too big to compete with.

Q: What separates Shepherd & Schaller from those competitors?

A: We separate ourselves from big box store and online competitors the same way other successful local shops do with expert customer service and quick response to changing trends. We try to stay tuned-in to changing customer expectations and one surprising example is that we started closing Sundays in the summer to give our staff a break and more work-life balance. Thank you, Millennial!

It goes hand-in-hand with stocking our shelves with brands who walk the walk with us. We used to laugh when repurposing became a buzzword because a look around our building will show that we are all about recycling and repurposing! Our building is 120 years old (and not always easy to live with), our office desks were rescued from a neighboring bank remodel and our vintage display decor wasn't purchased, it was gathered from the closet. Integrity is important to us at every level.

Q: Do you have family continuing the tradition of working at Shepherd & Schaller?

A: There won't be a third generation of family owner-operators at Shepherd & Schaller, but I was able to convince my wife Theresa to leave her career in marketing/promotion to join me as soft goods buyer in 1999. She heads up our merchandising and displays, which are nothing like they used to be, and spends a lot of time searching for complementary merchandise. Dad would roll over if he saw the wool pillows, jewelry and home decor things she brings in! Our customers love the little extras. Theresa also handles everything to do with our website and social media and is training staff to take over more each season.

Our kids worked at the store in their teens but Theresa and I agree they are better off in careers that fill their souls. Our daughter is a teacher and our son is an engineer, though they both help out when we need them. And the truth is, when a tough situation rolls around, it's been great to bounce ideas off our kids, because they have a unique perspective to help us work through challenges and see things from another side.

Q: How important has it been for you to serve the industry as a member of the National Ski & Snowboard Retailers Association (NSSRA) Board of Directors? What are some of the key issues facing NSSRA members?

A: I've been privileged to serve my fellow NBS members through the '90s on the Winter Hardgoods Screening Committee (and Theresa on their Softgoods Screening Committee), my local Board of Education for 12 years, various Wausau steering committees and boards (Theresa, too) and recently with the Board of Directors of NSSRA. When we met in June in Chicago, the NSSRA Board discussed a number of challenges including the need to create a level playing field with Internet competitors, Pro Form abuse and our role as a unified voice for independent retailers. A few of the topics we feel the need to address include trade show date selection, business and health insurance.

Q: What drives you to keep Shepherd & Schaller as a destination for outdoor enthusiasts in the Wausau area and Wisconsin?

A: I think every community needs a local outdoor expert, to not only to sell the gear people want and need, but to recommend local destinations and resources, lead local events, advocate and support. Those are things big box stores can't do in quite the same way. I can't believe it's been 31 years since I bought the business. Time flies! I've got several more years in me and the support of a great team, so I think Shepherd & Schaller will continue to serve Wausau's outdoor community for a long time to come.



>> Theresa and Robb Shepherd