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## Nat's Outdoor Sports celebrates 50th anniversary

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1 of 17



**Above:** Nat Love stands at the store's 12th Avenue location in 1975.

Submitted

Bowling Green's outdoor shopping staple turned half a century old this year.

Nat's Outdoor Sports this month celebrated its 50th anniversary with a grand event, giveaways and appearances from local city leaders, members of the Bowling Green Area Chamber of Commerce, former employees and longtime customers.

Lisa Martens, the store's owner and daughter of founder Nat Love, said it felt like a "big reunion" filled with the many people who helped keep the store alive over the years.



Love passed away in 2011, but Martens said he's still part of the store today – and not just as a cardboard cut-out left in the display window. She said they wouldn't be where they are today without the community around them, fostered by Love's legacy.

“He left to us and all the employees, as well as the community, just a love of the outdoors and being involved with the community and giving back,” Martens said.

The store came from humble beginnings in 1971 as a “L&M Bookstore” located on Western Kentucky University’s campus. Love added a bicycle section to the store in 1973, the first sign of things to come, then outdoor clothing after a rough winter.

Martens said the store has employed WKU students for almost as long as it’s been open, which helped them stay in touch with trends and build close ties with the city.

“They would have to go on to their ‘real job’ as far as what they went to school for and would always come back and say, ‘this was our favorite job,’ ” Martens said. “You were with like-minded people that all enjoy the outdoors, were pretty laid back – probably more so than a business should be – and they had a lot of fun working here.”

Employees often went on camping and skiing trips, coming back with memories and practical experiences they can convey to customers. Martens said what sets Nat’s apart is the customer service provided by experienced and passionate adventurers.

“Our customers love coming in and talking to our employees about their next trip just as much as general shopping,” Martens said.

The store moved to 12th Avenue in 1975 and Martens herself joined the business while studying accounting at WKU in 1985. The store soon moved again and expanded its lifestyle collections to focus further on outdoor sports.

After graduation, Martens began applying for jobs related to accounting, but Love suggested she just stay with the store. She agreed – a choice she has never regretted.

“There was something new every day,” Martens said.

“Some jobs are monotonous, this one is not. You’re doing things you enjoy and it was interesting.”



Martens helped Love in all aspects of the store. She said as a small business owner, “You’re the marketing team, you’re the HR team, you’re the buyer, you’re working with your employees, you kind of do it all.”

When things got stressful, Martens reminded herself “It’ll work out,” an attitude reinforced by the store’s long history. She described herself as a “numbers person” who usually finds herself focusing on inventory and finances.

Her father, however, was a personality person. Martens said he had a way of making customers and employees alike “feel special” in their own way, which helped “get the ball rolling” as the store started out.

“We would send out an invitation to all of our customers for (each year’s) Anniversary Sale and it would say, ‘To my 10,000 close, personal friends’ or something like that,” Martens said. “And you know, a lot of people thought of him that way, as ‘Oh, he’s like one of my best friends,’ and he had 10,000.”

The store made its final move in 1993 to its current location at Wilkinson Trace, giving them 10,000 square feet to spread their legs and wares.

Love began Nat’s Bikes for Kids program the following year, taking donations of slightly used bikes, fixing them up and giving them out to children in need during Christmas. The store has partnered with the Jaycees civic group, the Boys & Girls Club and local school family resource centers to provide thousands of bikes over the years.

Martens said the store also regularly sponsors local events, from marathons to canoe races to disc golf competitions.

“If there’s a run 5k or whatever, we’re probably on the back of the T-shirt,” Martens said.

Martens said COVID-19 shook the store up significantly, but an increase in people seeking outdoor activities meant business stayed steady. She said they sold out of kayaks and boats entirely and struggled to meet the demand for new bikes and shoes.

“We opened back up in May 2020 and we weren’t back up to full speed, but it was definitely going in the right direction,” Martens said. “And we gained some new customers there because everybody was trying to get outside.”

Once things settled down, Martens said it was largely back to business as usual. Customers returned to roaming the store and chatting with employees about their last getaway.

Martens was glad to see them return.

“I always stress with my customers and (local) leaders that we wouldn’t be here at 50 years without them,” Martens said. “This community is really loyal to local and they’ve always supported us. That’s a big reason why we always give back – it’s as much them as whatever we’re doing.”

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