



The mother of invention

How a need to have things done properly inspired Kay Wheaton to sell decorator tins from her dining room

by Eleanor Beaton

Photography: Perry Jackson



The Berwick store, where it all began. The atmosphere—scented air, quiet music—makes it a weekly destination for some folks.

THE PROBLEM was, her two middle kids needed braces.

The cost—nearly \$7,000—was enough to momentarily erase the sun from Kay Wheaton's pleasant face. It was 1989, and her name wasn't yet synonymous with country-style decor. Back then she was a mid 30s, stay-at-home mom with bills to pay, and teeth to straighten.

Her husband, Garnet Wheaton, a soft-spoken Christmas tree farmer, balked when she delivered the orthodontist's verdict. "They might have to grow up the old-fashioned way, crooked teeth and all," he said.

The Wheatons and their four children lived in the same house Garnet grew up in, on a 90-acre farm on the outskirts of Berwick, NS. They were comfortable, but never had much money left at the end of the month. But Kay is a woman who likes things done properly. It's a trait she inherited from her mother and aunts, hard-working women with a flair for good housekeeping and impeccable hospitality. If her kids needed braces, they would have them.

For a couple of weeks, she thought about her problem and prayed for an answer. And then one day an answer came to her, just as simple and straightforward as you please.

Among the decorative flourishes in Kay's country kitchen was her collection of decorator pretzel tins. They were included in the possessions she brought with her from Lancaster, Pennsylvania, after she married Garnet, her university boyfriend, in 1975. ("He swept me off my feet and across the border," she would later joke.) The tins were gifts from her father, an entrepreneur who, at one time, ran a trucking operation for a local pretzel maker. Her Nova Scotian friends coveted the tins. So whenever Kay travelled to Pennsylvania to visit her parents, she'd bring some home as gifts.

But the need for braces gave her a new focus. During the next trip she made south, she picked up a larger load of tins, and

also candles and other housewares you couldn't buy in Berwick. She set up a display in her dining room, and called her friends over for a shopping spree.

Word travelled fast. Within weeks people from the community were knocking on her door to look at her wares. It got so that the family could barely sit down to a homecooked meal without having to get up to let in a shopper. Kay didn't mind—she was enjoying herself. And besides, another one of her kids needed braces.

"I'm parched. I need some water. Do you need some water?" Kay Wheaton breezes across the main floor to the water cooler at Wheaton's in Lower Sackville. It is the eve of Wheaton's Yard Sale, an annual event held at each of their four stores on back-to-back Saturdays in July. End-of-line linens, discontinued wood furniture and other decorative items are sold off at the white tent events. Diehard fans follow the sale from one location to the next.

"It's a wonderful yard sale," Kay calls over her shoulder in a breathy, sing-song voice. "But it's tiring."

With sloping Southern vowels and relaxed, homey manners, Kay is warm and resolute with employees and customers alike. Twenty years after she first began selling decorator tins from her dining room, Wheaton's has become a household name in Atlantic Canada, with stores in Berwick, Moncton, Lower Sackville and Fredericton, and about 100 employees. Kay moves purposefully through the cinnamon-scented air, flicking away invisible specks of dust from country hutches, ushering stroller-pushing parents to go ahead, providing last-minute instructions to employees. Her quiet confidence is a trademark of her leadership.

It has only ever been truly shaken once. Kay and Garnet broke ground for the two-floor, 20,000 square-foot Lower Sackville store, their third at that point, in 2001. They were in the middle of an aggressive expansion when, almost



Kay and Garnet Wheaton, trying out the goods. If there's a piece of furniture that epitomizes this couple, it's the kitchen table. "It's a place for families to be together," Garnet says.

roots & folks: family business

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1,000 kilometres away in New York City, the Twin Towers collapsed.

"I felt so devastated," says Kay. "I remember thinking, 'Why in the world are we taking this step now?'" Nevertheless, the couple moved ahead with the expansion, opening the doors to their new store in November. But while other businesses faltered in the wake of 9/11, Kay says their experience was the opposite. Their particular brand of relaxed Maritime homeyness struck a chord. "More than ever, people wanted to embrace the comfort and stability of home," she says.

Seth Wheaton, Kay and Garnet's eldest son, always had a bit of his parents in him. "He was the kind of kid who wanted to be busy, who you had to keep busy," Kay says. She was still running the store from her dining room when she asked Seth, then 13 and a budding woodworker, to cut out some shelves and a step stool. Tole painting was in its heyday, and Kay was ready to add to her inventory.

Garnet set his son up in the basement with a workbench and scroll saw, and Seth began churning out the earliest versions of Wheaton's handcrafted solid wood furniture. By the time he was in high school and Kay's store was in the newly renovated barn, Seth had hired one of his friends to help.

Today, the woodshop employs 20

people from the community. "We just kept building on," says Garnet. "It was room by room until we grew out of the first barn, so then we built another, and then another one after that." Garnet worked in the business from the beginning, overseeing the financials and operations, swinging a hammer on a new barn when necessary. Kay focused on purchasing and merchandising, painstakingly crafting a shopping experience that would draw people from miles around.

Sue Ross remembers the company's early days well. Though she is now the manager of the Lower Sackville store, she first discovered the company as a shopper. She and a group of other stay-at-home moms from a neighbouring town met at Wheaton's in Berwick almost weekly. "It was the scented air, the quiet music, the things to touch and see," she recalls. "It was a destination."

On the days Sue and her friends visited Wheaton's, they often encountered groups of women from other parts of Atlantic Canada, especially New Brunswick, who travelled there to shop several times a year, and later provided a core market for their stores in that province.

In fact, the flagship Wheaton's store isn't really in the town of Berwick, but five kilometres outside it, on a picturesque country lane dotted with fields and sprawling farmhouses. Starting their retail business so far off the beaten track has never been a disadvantage—quite the opposite.

"We had to give people a reason to come, and treat them really well when

they got here," Garnet says. By creating an experience for shoppers—say, of relaxing on the store's sun porch in an old-fashioned rocker after a satisfying homecooked lunch at the Cider Press Café—Wheaton's established a competitive advantage that has allowed them to hold their own against an onslaught of big box retailers.

Kay Wheaton makes her way to a quiet corner upstairs, where she sits at a heavy oak kitchen table with Garnet. If there's a piece of furniture that epitomizes this couple, it's the kitchen table. "It's a place for families to be together," Garnet says. "That's what we want our business to stand for, in people's minds: for families."

When the Wheatons call their stores a family business, they aren't simply referring to their own partnership, or the fact that their second-eldest son, Jesse, now works in the company. Kay dreams of decorating the walls of her store with portraits of families sitting around kitchen tables from Wheaton's.

As they look to the future, Kay says the most important priority is to stay true to the values that got them this far. "We want to keep doing what we're doing and become one of the great Maritime companies."

And if that goal isn't enough, there is also the small detail of their four grandsons, who, as luck may have it, could yet need braces. 🐼

This is the first in what will be a series of articles showcasing Atlantic Canadian family businesses, large and small, that have stood the test of time.