

EYEBizz Sept/Oct 2009

SELF-MADE

As is well known, the profession of an optician can take many different forms. Many opticians do exactly, or almost the same thing, as others do, but some opticians forge new and different directions, with the courage to take risks and the desire to leave well-worn paths. It is these business owners that EYEBizz features in every issue. This time it is

Lisa Martinsson, USA - Salem

Self-Made

Salem is the capital of the U.S. State of Oregon – a typical American town along the northwest coast where time seems to have stood still a little. There is no trace of the hectic life of a big city. People are friendly and respectful to each other and apparently have time for whatever they are doing at the moment. Movies that don't take place in New York, San Francisco, or Los Angeles, but rather in a rural, country-like setting, could be filmed here.

The first settlers came to this region toward the beginning of the 19th century, coming westward by way of the legendary Oregon Trail. That was exactly eight generations ago – and today you can still see how the local descendants of these settlers have been influenced by the confidence and industry of their ancestors. The global economic crisis is certainly much less noticeable here than elsewhere. Perhaps it's because even today most people here earn their living by using their hands and not by speculating in the stock market. This is apparent by looking into store windows and shops: you can buy work clothing on every corner – but you have to look long and hard for a well-stocked men's clothing store.

The capital and university town Salem has a population of 150,000, approximately the size of Heidelberg or Potsdam. The entire state on the northwest coast, which has belonged to the USA since 1859, has an area about the size of the former German states – but doesn't even have 4 million inhabitants. No wonder that distances here are greater than in Europe – and that you can't find a terrific optician on every street corner. It should be noted that the optician business in the U.S. can not really be compared with the optician business in Germany: the average colleague in a small American town is content with a store that looks more like a gun shop than a European lifestyle store. It's no different in Salem than anywhere else.

When an entrepreneurial optician goes a step further here, it is all the more noticeable. Just a few years ago Lisa Martinsson took this step: her small, high-quality store by the

name of “Glance” is located in the middle of the oldest part of Salem in one of the historic buildings on Court Street. It was rather due to chance than by design that this trained graphic designer got into the optician business: “I was bored, always working alone; at some point it was no longer fun.” So she took advantage of the chance to work in the shop of an ophthalmology team as an optician, and was able to come into contact with people, with their desires, their troubles, their dreams. “I was an artist without a medium – until I found optics,” she explains today, laughing. Her hand tool was her unmistakable feel for faces, forms, colors and materials – and her talent for communication which enables her to approach anyone and start a conversation.

At this point we should explain a little about the American profession of being an optician, which by the way isn’t the same in every state. It does however basically resemble the British system, with optometrists on the one hand and dispensing opticians on the other: The former can conduct all the measurements and also medical testing for vision, and of course can also run their own stores; the latter may only sell eyewear, no medical aspect. Even after 200 years of existence, part of the American dream in the land of unlimited possibilities is that you can still earn a living by using your own knowledge and skills.

Lisa Martinsson did good work: her employer was more than satisfied with her. When the six colleagues, founded “Glance” seven years ago, there was a small “system mistake”: A modern store can not really function well with, traditional “recipes” and is therefore not particularly profitable. So the self-made optician suggested a deal to her employers: if they should ever think about selling the store, she would like to take it over. It’s still not clear today whether it was her charm, her persuasive power, or her persistence; the fact is, after much initial shaking of the heads on the part of the owners, several months later Lisa Martinsson was the sole owner of “Glance.”

Now she could manage things exactly the way she wanted. One of the first things she did was to overhaul the inventory selection: She allowed herself to listen to her gut feeling, and not to buy only whatever others just happened to offer. Instead, she turned to small, high-quality collections from distant Europe, such as Mykita, Markus T., or Theo. Until Glance, no one in Salem had ever seen such glasses, except perhaps at the most in fashion magazines or on television – now, suddenly you could touch them, try them on, and above all, buy them.

“The resonance was wonderful,” Lisa Martinsson reflects (life motto: I love living in my skin!) on her courageous decision to depart from the well-worn path. Being self-taught certainly played a role in helping her avoid being a slave of a system in which the argument “but we’ve always done it that way!” dominated. She simply listened to her own gut feeling and made “Glance” into a store where she herself would have liked to

purchase glasses, before she underwent laser surgery. For Lisa Martinsson's childhood and youth were strongly influenced by having to wear bottle-thick glasses in ugly frames. By all rights this woman should hate glasses – and instead she has made them her mission in life.

She likes to tell the story of the shy, 12 year-old girl who came into her store with her parents, looking like a mirror image of herself: dominating the delicate face of the girl was a pair of glasses which were way too big and heavy, with thick lenses. The parents looked around the store and yet again nearly repeated history with another “wrong” frame for this delicate little face. “So, I took the girl by hand and together we set out to find the perfect frame for her,” Lisa Martinsson remembers, “A few days later, when this shy little darling came to pick up her glasses, and she put them on, gazed in the mirror, and saw a completely different reflection. After a few silent moments, she turned and whispered, 'I'm pretty!'” Lisa Martinsson herself gets moist eyes when she tells this, and adds, “That is why I do what I do.”

She does this in a way that doesn't really offer any true rivalry for the, at least 24 other local competitors. All of these colleagues adhere to the traditional American concept of having an optical department connected to a doctor's office, with a very conventional selection of frames; so Lisa Martinsson thinks of her own offerings not as competing with, but as supplementing what the others have: “My customers come with a prescription from the eye doctor. I help them find a suitable pair of glasses and send everything to a lab for grinding. The customers virtually get a face lift from me and are completely thrilled to find afterwards that they often look many years younger,” the business woman explains.

She is especially proud that her customer base includes not only half of Oregon and a part of the neighboring states of California and Washington, but even extends to the White House. That is, after all, on the other side of the continent!

Captions:

Page 1:

(above): An average American optician's store looks more like a gun shop, and not like a European life-style shop.

(below): I got bored always working alone, and it was no longer fun.

Page 2:

(above, left): I love living in my skin!

(below, right): The customers virtually get a face lift from me and are completely thrilled to find afterwards that they often look many years younger.

(below, left): I was an artist without a medium – until I found optics.

