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The News & Observer (Raleigh, North Carolina)

February 20, 2007 Tuesday
Final Edition

For 36 years, she's given women fits; A Raleigh bra shop owner is retiring and looking for just the right replacement

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SECTION: LIFE; Pg. E1

LENGTH: 1020 words

RALEIGH--The Pennyrich Bra Patch is no Victoria's Secret. You won't find a diamond-encrusted bra or supermodels.

But you will find legions of women who swear by the skills of shop owner Sally B. Russell, who, 90 percent of the time, can look at a woman and tell her exactly what size bra she should be wearing. Some say she's the best bra fitter in the Triangle.

After 36 years of finding the right undergarments for thousands of women in the Triangle and across the country, Russell is thinking about retiring.

She put her store and list of 2,000 active customers, who buy the custom-fitted Pennyrich/Jeunique bras, up for sale in late January and extended her lease only through April.

Two heart attacks have forced the 71-year-old Russell to think about whether she wanted to die at work or at home, she jokes.

"I hate to give it up. I really do," she said.

While most women may never discuss them in mixed company, bras might be a woman's most frustrating piece of clothing. Bands ride up the back. Straps fall off the shoulder. Cups overflow.

Most women wear the wrong size, according to experts. And finding the right one is kind of like a religious experience.

"It seriously changed my life," said Christa Wessel, a Durham resident who traveled to the Bra Patch a few years ago and thought so much of the store she wrote about it on her blog.

"My figure changed. I suddenly had a defined waist."

Her first bra

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Russell can remember her first bra, an Exquisite Form bra from Hudson Belk, which sold for \$1.50. In high school, she remembers noting which girls looked best in their sweaters. And, as a supervisor at the office of a grocery store chain, she and her employees would often point out women with ill-fitting bras.

A chat about one employee's bra -- a Pennyrich bra, sold at home parties like Tupperware -- led to a new career. A few months later in 1971, Russell was selling them.

She sold the bras from a suitcase only to grow frustrated that she couldn't carry more stock. So, in the mid-1970s, she opened her first store on Whitaker Mill Road with the only business loan she's ever gotten -- \$4,000 from her husband.

Russell, whose middle name is Jane, says she is not related to the actress Jane Russell, who in the 1970s became well-known as the spokeswoman for the Playtex 18-Hour bra advertisements. She says she used to jokingly tell her customers, "This is Jane Russell, not the 18-Hour bra, but the Pennyrich bra."

She came up with the name Bra Patch because she wanted customers to know she specialized in bras. It was a play on the name of the old stories about Brer Rabbit and the Briar Patch.

"It's a catchy name," said Russell, who has her store's name emblazoned on her license plate.

By the 1980s, Russell had a mini lingerie empire with two stores in Raleigh, one in Durham and one in Fayetteville.

She sold the Pennyrich bras, along with other brands and lingerie. In a back room, she had sexy novelties.

Customers brought in photographs of themselves or their wives wearing lingerie from the store. Some still hang, framed in gold, in the store.

The Fayetteville store closed when her daughter, who managed it, moved in the late 1980s. She never reopened after a second robbery in Durham. She merged the Raleigh stores 15 years ago.

Changing times

Today, her store in North Market Square shopping center off Old Wake Forest Road, has a slimmed down inventory. Lingerie and bras hang from the wall and racks. A box of yellowed greeting cards sit on the counter for half off and a few racy board games lay on top of a cabinet. Lingerie sales have slowed, which Russell blames on expanding waist and bust lines.

The average bra size she sells has changed too. When she started, it was a 34 B. Today, the average size she sells is a 42 or 44 G or H, though she caters to bustier women, who can't find their size at the mall.

Most stores carry no larger than a DDD cup. Russell carries up to a J cup and fits women, who have had mastectomies, with breast prostheses.

Russell said many women come in desperate, sometimes wearing as many as three bras to support their busts.

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When fitting a bra, Russell is hands on, measuring a woman's rib cage with a tape measure and helping to put flesh into the proper places.

"It caught me a little off guard, but she's so incredibly friendly," Wessel said of her fitting. "Within 10 seconds, I felt like I'd known her my entire life. It wasn't like some clinical experience. She clearly wants the best for you."

Debbe Gardner, owner of Fuquay-Varina's Enchanting Moments, which sells upscale bridal and formal gowns, regularly sends women to the Bra Patch.

There, they find solidly built, good foundation wear, she said. Maybe not the frilly number they were looking for, but the support they need to make their gown fit the best, she said.

"It scares me," Gardner said of Russell's impending retirement. "It really distresses me that she's going to be gone."

Russell is concerned too, especially about her customers who haven't been able to find a properly fitting bra elsewhere. She's looking for just the right person to take over her business, she said. Not someone just interested in cute lingerie or flimsy bras, she said.

"It's just got to be a person that's willing to fit bras."

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Sally Russell's bra tips

- To find the right size, make sure the bra fits snug around the rib cage and sits low in the back. Breast tissue should be pulled out from under the arm and pulled forward to fill the cup.

- Wires should be touching the body, not the breast.

- The breast should be supported by the back of the bra, not the straps.

- Bras should be hand washed. But if you insist on dumping them in the washing machine, put them in a garment bag.

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Looking for a good undergarment?

Other places in the Triangle where you can get fitted for bras:

Any department store, such as JCPenney or Lane Bryant, fits bras, though they usually don't carry more than a DDD.

Local boutiques offering bra fittings including:

J. Alane's in North Hills, which opened about a year ago, carries A through K cups.

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The almost 40-year-old Night Gallery in Chapel Hill's University Mall carries A through F cups.

LOAD-DATE: February 20, 2007

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH

GRAPHIC: Sally Russell, the owner of the Pennyrich Bra Patch in Raleigh, has been selling bras since 1971 and many customers swear by her fitting skills. Staff Photos by Juli Leonard

Sally Russell sells other lingerie items at her Pennyrich Bra Patch, but the inventory of hard-to-find bra sizes is what draws customers to her.

Russell wants to retire, so she is looking for someone to buy her business.

DOCUMENT-TYPE: Lead

PUBLICATION-TYPE: Newspaper

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