

The Right Fit

BCom grad Kendall Barber finds startup success with Poppy Barley, a made-to-measure boot design company

by Isha Thompson

Think of a great idea, turn it into a business and spend your days passionately serving that idea—it's a task on any entrepreneur's bucket list. Kendall Barber's (BCom '05) boot design company, Poppy Barley (*poppybarley.com*), is undoubtedly a product of this vision. However, it is only after recounting the story of how she came to design handcrafted footwear, that this wide-eyed fashionista suddenly morphs into a seasoned executive, reminding us of the difference between those who simply draft bucket lists, and others who stomp on said bucket to hoist their way to the top. Kendall Barber is in the latter category.

The light bulb moment came shortly after Kendall's younger sister Justine Barber travelled to Bali last February. When a local shoe store associate casually asked if she wanted to be measured for a custom pair of boots when in-store sizes didn't fit, she was in awe. Justine returned to Alberta and shared her experience with Kendall, and they began to investigate whether custom-made footwear was something Canadian shoppers might appreciate.

After combing through survey results and focus group data, Kendall and Justine found that over 60 per cent of women struggle to find boots that fit properly. They also learned that a large number of shoe manufacturers that supply the U.S. are based in León, Mexico. The sisters decided it was time for some first-hand research. "We ultimately made the decision to buy plane tickets, go there and figure it out," says Kendall. "We were two girls from Canada with an idea, looking for a partner who believed in us enough to commit to making some samples."

Kendall and Justine eventually formed a relationship with a manufacturer willing to work with their requirements,



Founders Justine and Kendall Barber.

such as using an eco-friendly tannery and monitoring where the materials came from. Environmental concerns have always been important to the sisters, as has maintaining a close connection with suppliers and employees in León. This is what pushes them to make frequent trips south, instead of relying only on email and Skype.

Named after poppy seeds and barleycorns, the original elements used to make made-to-measure footwear, Poppy Barley launched in November 2012. With prices starting from \$450, the company strives to supply handmade boots that fit perfectly and are built to last, while providing exceptional customer service.

Poppy Barley has been open for less than a year and Kendall says the experience has been a whirlwind. That said, she is reluctant to take credit for the company's initial success. "I think that sometimes the founders of companies get too much credit. I feel like there have been so many people that have made Poppy Barley what it is today."

Some of Kendall's biggest supporters have been fellow UVic business alumni

she has kept in touch with since graduating. Many of these colleagues have been valuable resources while getting Poppy Barley off the ground. Kendall is glad to have chosen the UVic program—smaller class sizes allowed her to form these lasting relationships with her classmates. "I went to school



Getting one step ahead with bespoke boots.



Handmade by skilled crafts people.

with some amazing people who have gone on to be incredibly successful entrepreneurs," she says.

Judging from the enthusiasm of Poppy Barley fans, avid followers on social media platforms and the decision to expand the product line in the upcoming months, it is safe to say that Kendall can now count herself as a successful entrepreneur—one who will keep checking off items on her bucket list. **BC**