

## Schmitt's Stride Rite:

# If It Fits, It Must Be from Schmitt's!

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Located in Rochester, Minnesota, Schmitt's Stride Rite has served the small midwestern city with just over 120,000 people since 1982. The independent shoe retailer inhabits 1,500 sq. ft. of space within the TJ Maxx & Homegoods shopping plaza that also houses additional chain retailers and backs up to busy US Highway 52. Besides offering specialty shoes for all children, Schmitt's proximity to major area medical facilities including the world-renowned Mayo Clinic, Hangar Clinic, and Olmsted Medical Center also allows for current owner, Terri Pickett, to provide expeditious service to the young patients referred to the woman-owned business. These services include fitting for braces, orthotics, prosthetics, or other special fittings. The fitting and brand expertise held by the employees, in addition to the store's extensive inventory with over 32 brands represented, is valued by these medical facilities as evidenced through longstanding partnerships that continually bring Pickett pride.

### A Rochester Institution

Schmitt's remains Rochester's only children's shoe store, a title held for over four decades and one that comes with a great responsibility to carry a wide variety of colors, sizes, and styles that meet a historically particular (read:

picky) population. With a focus on children's shoes that start with pre-walkers spanning the distance to a kids size 7, this specialty store has a diverse inventory of brands in stock such as Stride Rite, **New Balance**, Tsukihoshi, Saucony, **KEEN**, Crocs, Skechers, Bogs, Kamik, Billy, Sperry, Merrell, Reef, Teva, and Native. Attention is paid to characteristics like durability, comfort, style, half sizes, and width. Terri even considers how washable the shoes are for parents and caregivers of those who come into the store.

Where the store truly shines is with the personalized approach that it offers when

it comes to fittings. For the last forty years, Rochester-area families, as well as international families that are in the area to access the elite medical facilities, have come to appreciate the experience of the sit-and-fit method, where 10-12 pairs of shoes are brought out and sales personnel wait on one family at a time. Each customer is unique in their needs, so waiting on one family at a time is essential to their purchasing experience. Sales personnel work dutifully to make the customer feel welcomed and comfortable as they listen to their needs, a trend that Terri believes is making a come-



**Children's shoes, from pre-walkers up to size 7 and in a diverse collection of brands, are offered at the store.**

**Schmitt's has toys on the salesfloor to keep little ones occupied while their parents shop.**

back in retail. "It's all about the kids and connecting with the customer," remarks Terri. Customers that feel heard and are satisfied with their in-store purchase are willing to pay a little more upfront. A quick glance at the store's website ([www.schmittsstriderite.com](http://www.schmittsstriderite.com)) presents a plethora of positive customer reviews with the sales team as part of the joy in finding that great style, fit, and brand of shoe at Schmitt's Stride Rite.

In addition to sit-and-fit, another method from her parent's days of ownership includes a database that Terri lovingly refers to as "old-fashioned" – handwritten index cards for each customer that include the date of purchase, style, and brand. These cards are updated after each sale and are also referenced when Terri handwrites out personalized postcards to each customer if they are more than four months out from their last purchase as a reminder to come back into the store for another fitting. In the busy life of a parent or caregiver, it is easy to forget when new shoes are needed, especially when the littlest customers can't communicate that need. This special touch from the owner is another way for customers to feel like their presence, not just their purchase, indeed made an impact on the people at Schmitt's. Terri and her sales team enjoy watching the children grow up and love to help them find comfortable, durable footwear throughout each stage of their journey through childhood. Such is just another testament to the longevity of Schmitt's Stride Rite in the Rochester community.

In addition, Schmitt's offers a loyalty program that averages the dollar amount of the last twelve pairs of footwear, and that dollar amount is applied towards the thirteenth pair of shoes. If the purchase amount is less than the average, they get the footwear for free;



but if the purchase is more, the customer only pays the difference. This is Terri's way of thanking the most loyal customers for shopping locally and supporting her independently owned business.

### **Family First**

Like most independent shoe retailers, Schmitt's welcomes the return of foot traffic to family-owned brick-and-mortar stores with deep ties to the community. Pickett herself grew up in the shoe business, starting as a sales associate at her parent's store when she was just fifteen years old. In the early 2000s Terri found herself managing Schmitt's, and only five years ago she made the official move to purchase the store from her father, Pat Schmitt. Even though Pat, now in his eighties, relinquished ownership to his beloved daughter, he still engages with the business side of things helping with Quickbooks and even bringing in food for the sales team on occasion. It isn't unusual to find a platter of a deliciously homemade treat in the breakroom by Mr. Schmitt, something that the sales

team members enjoy in addition to the stocked refrigerator with snacks and drinks for all employees.

Terri endeavors to keep her employees happy not just by keeping them fed, but also with her managerial approach. With nine regularly scheduled part-time employees – the longest three employees being with the business for over twenty years – there is a sense of family for those who work at Schmitt's. Terri strongly encourages flexibility and transparency with her scheduling processes and has a strict policy of family first, school second, and work third when it comes to priority rankings, especially with her school-aged employees.

Employee trainings with the owner herself that last up to a year aren't unusual at Schmitt's Stride Rite. These focused trainings enable each employee the opportunity to gain the knowledge and confidence to be successful in meeting customers needs. The premise behind these extended trainings is to help ease

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any anxieties that sales team members may have with particular brands, styles, fits, or even the temperaments of such young customers. Since brands often prove to be as unique as the people who choose them, Schmitt's philosophy is to find a way to provide the best option for each individual.

### Keeping Current and Connected

While former owner Pat Schmitt's presence is always appreciated, it is especially so when he fills in for Terri when she attends events like the Northwest Shoe Travelers Buying Market and the Dallas Market Center's events. Terri previously attended the Las Vegas trade shows that typically took place in February and allowed for an escape from the cold Minnesota winters. In addition to these shows, Stride Rite holds annual licensed dealer meetings that gather the U.S. independent dealers to discuss market and fashion trends within the different states. These sessions offer chances for the Stride Rite dealers to troubleshoot, network, and build knowledge within the industry. These events, as well as publications like *Shoe Retailing Today* and *Footwear Plus Magazine*, help keep Terri fresh with current trends in the market while also allowing her to network with other independent shoe retailers. In fact, Terri makes a concerted effort to travel to at least one annual event with two other women-owned independent shoe store owners from across the country. This camaraderie helps feed Terri's soul, allowing her to come back rejuvenated and ready to tackle the next season of sales.

In terms of keeping connected to the greater Rochester community, social media also has proven itself as a useful means to help Terri keep abreast of local happenings. Keeping a pulse on local events through the Rochester Mom (now *Rochester Local*) Facebook page has con-



**Terri Schmitt in front of the family store after taking ownership in 2018.**

nected Terri to local charities and fundraisers like school bazaars and toy library day parties where Schmitt's is represented with donated gift cards and sponsorships. Terri sees these donations and sponsorships as a way to give back to the community that has supported her family for almost half a century and enjoys the opportunity to deepen those bonds.

Schmitt's also found a way to utilize social media differently during the lockdown period when in-person shopping was shut down for four months due to COVID-19. Since Terri couldn't sell in store, she made videos that she posted on the store's Instagram, Facebook, and business webpage that helped customers access advice on purchasing children's footwear, even offering to deliver shoes to customers within a 35 to 40 mile radius if they purchased over the phone. It wasn't uncommon for Terri to bring the Schmitt's personalized sit-and-fit approach to a customer's front porch during this time. Terri didn't see this as anything extra, but just a different means of connecting with customers and maintaining relationships during a challenging time.

### Challenges and Rewards

When asked about the hardest part of



**Terri's father, Pat Schmitt, is the original owner of the store and still helps out.**

being a business owner, Terri indicated that the business aspect is the most challenging – specifically making sure the cash flow is accurate, paying the bills, and always keeping close tabs on projected sales. The most satisfying part is the buying/purchasing and socialization that comes along with owning a retail business. "I go to work every day and I love it," she exclaims when talking about how much she enjoys her time at Schmitt's Stride Rite. While Terri truly enjoys her profession, she reminds all that there needs to be a good work-life balance and that work shouldn't consume one's life. Golf is Terri's escape and one that helps her keep active outside of the store. Terri's husband, Tim, also is a major source of support, as he has been her biggest cheerleader for the duration of their relationship, which spans almost thirty years. Tim was the driving force behind her purchasing the store when Pat decided it was time to retire. Her biggest advice to all is to "treat others the way you want to be treated" and to "be yourself." In a world that seems ever divisive, Terri's reminder of the golden rule and importance of authenticity are tried and true words to return to in tumultuous times. ■