

Crafting a 'small and intimate' business



Nick Krug/Journal-World Photos

COBBLER CASEY SMITH WORKS on May 5, repairing the heel of a pair of women's shoes at BKB Leather. The shop is cluttered with character, and although nestled in North Lawrence without a steady stream of foot traffic, the business has managed to survive over the years by word of mouth and personality, according to owner Bruce Barlow.

Owner of leather shop shapes work to fit family

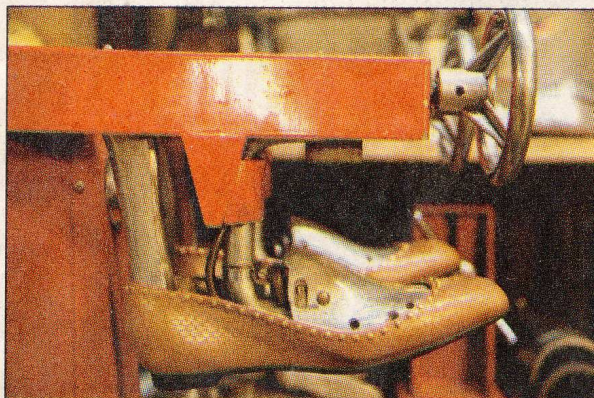
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ONLINE: See the video at LJWorld.com

Isadora lies on a quilt-covered chair, watching her owner, Bruce Barlow. In the other room, Barlow's son-in-law cuts pieces of leather to shape, gluing them into place. Saddles, jackets, shoes, pianos, paint and stringed instruments line the rooms. Later, Barlow's brother will come to work.

For Barlow, 56, his leather business in North Lawrence is all about family. He started BKB Leather, 811 Elm St., after he injured himself at his construction job. He started play-



A PAIR OF FLATS are put to work in a shoe stretcher at BKB Leather. Owner Bruce Barlow says his shop specializes in "old school thinking" repairing the old and tired.

ing with some leather scraps in his house and made a couple of tool belts for his fellow workers. That was in 1986.

Now, his shop is one of the few places left in Lawrence to

see a cobbler for shoes, to fix a favorite purse or get custom saddle work done. In his eclectic shop, old carries as much

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Nick Krug/Journal-World Photo

BKB LEATHER OWNER BRUCE BARLOW WORKS TO REPAIR a leather belt as his wife, Kris, watches and dog Isadora Duncan sleeps on the floor nearby. Barlow says that over the years he's thought about expanding his business or moving it to downtown but in the end balked at the idea because he appreciates the intimate feeling of his store as it is.

Leather

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weight as new.

"We just fix things and make things. It's all pretty exciting," Barlow said.

Originally started in Barlow's laundry room, the business grew and eventually moved to a location across from Johnny's Tavern, 401 N. Second St. But Barlow decided to bring it home eight years ago and built his shop next door to his house.

He has one full-time employee, along with his son-in-law and brother working for him. Isadora, a dog named for a turn-of-the-century dancer, wanders around the shop along with cats Blixen and Agnes and a bird he's had for 18 years.

"We're going to stay here, keep it small and intimate," Barlow said. "Most customers like that."

Barlow's shop specializes in what he calls "old school thinking," repairing the old and tired. The cobblers repair shoes ranging from zebra-striped spike heels to years-old loafers. In fact, one man has Barlow repair the same pair of shoes every year.

"It's just word of mouth

"We're going to stay here, keep it small and intimate. Most customers like that."

— BKB Leather owner Bruce Barlow, on the decision to build his shop next door to his house in North Lawrence

and we try to do good work," he said.

And in a down economy, some people would rather fix their old favorites than buy replacements. It's all about saving old things, something Barlow's good at — the wood stove in the shop is decades old, and he's never thrown away a sole he's taken off a shoe in 20 years. Many adorn a tree outside the shop.

"A lot of our job here is teaching people how to take care of their stuff," he said.

Casey Smith, 32, married Barlow's daughter, and then became one of the shop's cobblers. He uses glue, blades and some creativity to repair shoes, something that has become an art form for him.

"Sometimes you become the artist and make it look how you want it to look," Smith said.

Barlow often works on more specialized projects, such a leather-rimmed mirror or a custom belt similar to the 30-year-old one he wears.

He uses high-quality

leathers, usually from Canada and occasionally from France or England. Leather prices have gone up just like everything else. Barlow said he used to be able to buy leather for 90 cents per foot, but now it's \$7 to \$10 per foot. The cost is worth it to him, though, and the prices he charges go up proportionally.

"It doesn't pay to buy anything to compromise the quality," he said.

Barlow likes to take on new projects, and remembers the one that perplexed him most: a removable skin for a basketball.

"He doesn't know how to say he doesn't know how to do something," said his wife, Kris, who operates a quilting business in their home.

The variety of work Barlow's shop does keeps them busy; he says it's actually five shops in one. And having his family around makes it a comfortable environment, one he hopes will last for years.

"There's no way I could do this by myself," he said.