

SEVEN DAYS

[March 6, 2019]

MIDDLEBURY'S BEAU TIES COLLARS THE MARKET ON DAPPER NECKWEAR

Anyone who wears a bow tie is making a statement. It can be "I'm conservative," "I'm in the wedding party," "I'll be your server this evening," or "I'm intelligent and dexterous enough to knot my own bow tie." Regardless of the message, bow ties get noticed, as do the people who sport them.

Not everyone can pull one off—or tie one on. Those who wear bow ties are a rarefied set. And for many bow tie enthusiasts around the country, their bow tie mecca is Beau Ties Ltd of Vermont: a modern, one-story manufacturing facility in a Middlebury industrial park. There, bow tie aficionados are occasionally seen getting their pictures taken in front of the giant polka-dotted bow tie out front.

Never heard of Beau Ties? That's unsurprising in Vermont, where few people routinely wear ties of any kind. According to Elizabeth Smith, copresident and CEO of Beau Ties, most of the company's clients live out of state and buy their products online or through their catalogs.

But this predominantly retail business, now in its 26th year, boasts an impressive clientele of famous bow tie-wearing blokes: the late popcorn entrepreneur Orville Redenbacher, science educator Bill Nye "The Science Guy" and retired "CBS News Sunday Morning" host Charles Osgood, who has his own signature line of bow ties with the company.

Beau Ties has also produced ties for the Obama White House, Tiffany & Co., PBS, and countless colleges, prep schools and fraternal organizations. It's also the official tie maker for the U.S. House of Representatives and the Vermont Statehouse. And its private-label clients include fine menswear retailers Ben Silver, Barneys New York and Brooks Brothers.

On a reporter's recent tour of the facility, Smith and fellow copresident Cy Day Tall rarely referred to their clientele as "customers." Instead, they were "our guys" or "our fellas." While the bow tie market isn't huge, or exclusively male, the people who purchase their bow ties, neckties and other fashion accessories—cummerbunds, cufflinks, suspenders, cravats, pocket squares—tend to return time and again. Often they'll phone the company and ask to speak to a specific employee who helped them in the past.

"In our mind, we're a family business," explained Smith, who splits management duties with Tall. Smith handles customer service and sales, while Tall is the chief marketing officer and "wordsmith" of the catalog, the mainstay of their retail business.

Beau Ties' familial feel extends to its staff, too. Of the 30 employees, several are mother-daughter or grandparent-grandchild pairs. Many, including Smith, have been with Beau Ties 20 years or more. All but three are women. The company also hires no seasonal help, Smith noted, so that everyone can earn a decent wage with benefits.

Notwithstanding its reputation for formal attire, Beau Ties is actually a casual and relaxed workplace, where several seamstresses were listening to music on headphones and joking among themselves while sewing. Zooey, a small black pug, and Margy, an energetic Welsh corgi, enthusiastically greeted a visiting reporter.

Beau Ties was founded in 1993 by Bill Kenerson and his wife, Deborah Venman. Kenerson, a native of New Haven, Conn., and a Marine Corps veteran who attended Yale University, moved to Vermont in 1978 to buy the Killington Country Resort. A year later

he took a job at Simmonds Precision Products in Vergennes, where he worked until 1990. In 1991, then-governor Richard Snelling tapped him to serve as commissioner of economic development.

Though Kenerson had a strong business background, he had no training in men's apparel, Smith said. But he was a dyed-in-the-wool bow tie aficionado who inherited many of his favorites from his father and grandfather. Discouraged by the dearth of quality ties he liked, he and Venman launched their own bow tie business in the spring of 1993.

Two months later, they hired Vivian LaFave, a New Haven seamstress, who set up their shop in her basement and began cutting and sewing ties from fabrics Kenerson and Venman purchased in New York City's garment district. LaFave is still with the company and considered the grand dame of the sewing floor.

Kenerson and Venman began by marketing just eight bow ties via a one-page circular, which they mailed to 5,000 people; it eventually evolved into a catalog. The company also advertised in periodicals that Kenerson assumed would appeal to fellow bow tie wearers, such as Smithsonian magazine and the New Yorker.

Smith remembers the surge of business that occurred the day after Kenerson ran an ad on page two of the Wall Street Journal in the late 1990s. "We couldn't answer the phone fast enough," she recalled.

For several years, Kenerson and Venman ran the business out of their home, said Smith. However, the company quickly outgrew that space.

"Deb had to get up and get dressed every morning because we had to go through their bedroom just to get to our offices," she noted. In November 1999, Beau Ties moved into its current building. Wanting to maintain the company's homey feel, Kenerson had it outfitted with a large kitchen, an outdoor deck, a grill and even a dog run.

Soon, the company was producing 36- to 48-page catalogs that featured nearly two dozen new ties per month, as well as some ancillary products. The company's website also lists another 500 to 600 bow ties, which come as pre-tied, clip-on or "freestyle," that is, DIY knots.

Basically, the styles fall into two categories, Smith said: the subdued patterns for "the conservative fellows" and the loud, bold and bright colors for the more flamboyant dressers. On the day of Seven Days' visit, seamstresses were sewing plenty of green Celtic themes (for St. Patrick's Day), hearts (for Valentine's Day), and purple, green and gold masks (for Mardi Gras). Mostly, the fabrics come from China, Italy and the UK, Smith said.

It's worth noting that the "Ltd" in the company name isn't an aesthetic flourish but reflects the time-sensitive availability of its products.

"Bill and Deb's concept was to be limited, so that people come back," Smith explained. "I have to have something [new] to entice them to buy from me every month."

Beau Ties continued to grow throughout the 2000s. By September 2012, however, Kenerson, who was facing significant health challenges, sold the company to its current owners: David Kramer, who lives in New York State, and David Mutter, in California. Though other buyers approached him, Smith said, Kenerson insisted on finding people who would keep the company in Vermont and run it the same way he and his wife had.

"This was Bill's baby," Smith added. "Every single person who worked here was completely valuable to him." As she noted, Kenerson opened every piece of mail that came in and usually answered customers himself. A mere two months after the sale,

the "Beau" of Beau Ties died at the age of 81.

Though one might assume that the typical Beau Ties customer is a stodgy, Barry Goldwater-era conservative, Smith said that members of the younger generation also want to fashion one on.

Representative of the new demographic is 21-year-old Andrew Brown of Bristol, who's been working at Beau Ties since he was 17. His grandmother, Barb, works there, too. The younger Brown, a dapper youth who sports a bow tie daily, is now the company's social media manager.

"The bow tie wearer is the musician. He's the architect. He's the fella who works in a museum," Smith said. "He's the attorney and the judge. He's the young guy who wants to wear something on 'bow tie Friday.' He's the preppy kid who wants something to wear to the yacht club."

Doctors and other health care professionals tend to prefer bow ties, too. Why? The short ties don't drape onto their patients and spread germs, Smith explained. Pediatricians like them because babies and toddlers can't grab them. In fact, Burlington pediatrician Joe Hagan belongs to a professional group of docs from around the country called the Pediatric Travel Club, which gets its neckwear from Beau Ties.

Tall, who names all the ties and writes the product descriptions, said that, when Beau Ties first started, there were maybe five other bow tie manufacturers in the United States. Today, there are more than 50. To remain competitive, she said, Beau Ties keeps its prices in the \$45 to \$49 range, though some higher-end ties cost as much as \$75.

Beau Ties is unique in another respect, Smith added: It accepts old neckties from customers who want them converted into bow ties. Such "one-off" special orders are yet another way to maintain customer loyalty.

"Some guys will send in a hundred of them," Smith added. "We make an awful lot of custom ties here."

Like other industries, Beau Ties enjoys great benefits and faces challenges from being in the Green Mountain State. Its location far from its customer base increases the cost of shipping. For years, the company printed its catalogs on the East Coast until, as Tall put it, distribution costs became "exquisitely painful."

At the same time, Tall noted, "Vermont always has a certain cachet, and we certainly play that up in every letter we write."

"The core of this place is the manufacturing," Smith added. "I don't mean to sound schmaltzy, but I'm the one who goes out into the world to sell this stuff, and I'm always so proud. I never have a product that I don't think is amazing. And how fortunate am I? I get to see it get made every day."

(At the request of Mr. SCHUMER, the following statement was ordered to be printed in the RECORD.)

VOTE EXPLANATION

• Ms. HARRIS. Mr. President, I was absent for vote No. 77 on Executive Calendar No. 200, the nomination of David Bernhardt to be Secretary of the Interior. Had I been present, I would have voted no on the nomination.●

NATIONAL LIBRARY WEEK

Mr. REED. Mr. President, I want to take a moment to join in the celebration of National Library Week. This year's theme, "Libraries = Strong

Communities,” is fitting. Every day, our libraries help make our communities stronger and more vibrant, as they innovate and mobilize resources to provide programs and services that meet ever-evolving community needs.

That is why I have been proud to work during my time in the Senate on ways to support our Nation’s libraries. Last December, on a bipartisan basis, I secured passage and enactment of my legislation to reauthorize and enhance the Museum and Library Services Act. This law authorizes Federal funding, a relatively modest investment, through the Institute of Museum and Library Services, IMLS, to enable libraries and museums to work in partnership at the State and local levels and with nonprofits, universities, businesses, and others to support, educate, enlighten, and enrich our communities. For libraries, this law seeks to ensure they are equipped to serve community needs, in areas such as workforce, economic, and business development; digital and financial literacy; critical thinking; and new and emerging technologies. Critically, this new law ensures that increases in library formula funding will be shared more broadly across States and specifically smaller ones like Rhode Island.

Just last week, I hosted a conversation with our State’s library professionals to follow-up on a similar round-table I held in Rhode Island in 2016 as I began my work on the Museum and Library Services Act. It was inspiring to hear the many ways in which our libraries are hard at work transforming themselves to serve their diverse communities.

I was glad the director of IMLS, Dr. Kathryn Matthew, could join us for this event. We have a special duty in Rhode Island to elevate the work of IMLS, which is one of my predecessor, Senator Pell’s, many lasting gifts to our Nation.

While the President’s budget proposes to once again eliminate funding for IMLS, I have been able to instead secure an increase of \$11 million for this agency over the last 2 years. There is broad, bipartisan support for the work IMLS does, and I am continuing to work with my colleagues to increase funding so we can advance IMLS’s mission.

My work on libraries extends to ones in our schools, which also need our care and attention. Studies show that effective school library programs, staffed by a certified school librarian, have a positive impact on student achievement and educational success. Knowing how to find and use information are essential skills for college, careers, and life in general. A good school library, staffed by a trained school librarian, is where students develop and hone these skills.

Yet, according to the American Library Association, while 91 percent of the over 90,000 public and private elementary and secondary schools in the Nation have a school library, only 61

percent have a full-time librarian. A National Education Association report about trends in school libraries found that students in the highest poverty schools were less likely to have librarians at their schools and there were significant disparities in staffing at schools with high percentages of minority students. Access to an effective school library program, staffed by a certified school librarian, is an issue of educational equity.

In 2015, I was pleased to work with the library community and my colleagues on both sides of the aisle to ensure that our main Federal elementary and secondary education law continued to specifically address the critical equity issue of public school libraries. Since my time in the other body, I have worked hard to ensure Federal support for our school libraries and I continue to fight for increased funding for the Innovative Approaches to Literacy, IAL, grant program authorized in the Every Students Succeeds Act, ESSA. IAL provides competitive awards to school libraries, as well as national not-for-profit organizations to support children and families in high-need, underserved communities. By providing age-appropriate books, supporting parental engagement programs, and reinforcing professional development, the IAL program helps to support literacy skills to ensure children are best positioned for success.

I encourage all of my colleagues to visit their local libraries and school libraries to see firsthand that libraries are no longer quaint and quiet places to find the latest books, although they still offer plenty of that. They are community hubs providing innovative programming and services to spark creativity, boost learning and STEM education, promote the use of emerging technologies, and develop new career pathways. In sum, they are strengthening our communities, our States, and our Nation.

VOLUNTEER RESPONDER INCENTIVE PROTECTION ACT

Ms. COLLINS. Mr. President, I wish to introduce the Volunteer Responder Incentive Protection Act with my friend and colleague from Maryland, Senator CARDIN, which will benefit the brave women and men who volunteer at our local firehouses.

Across our Nation, volunteer firefighters play a critical role in helping to ensure the safety of our communities and the well-being of our neighbors. The State of Maine, for example, has approximately 9,785 firefighters who serve the State’s 1.3 million citizens. Maine is largely a rural State, and more than 90 percent of firefighters are volunteers. Without these public-spirited citizens, many smaller communities would be unable to provide firefighting and other emergency services at all.

Often, communities seek to recruit and retain volunteers by offering mod-

est benefits. The legislation we are introducing today would support these efforts by helping to ensure that these nominal benefits to volunteers are not treated as regular employee compensation.

The Volunteer Responder Incentive Protection Act would allow communities to provide volunteer firefighters and Emergency Medical Service, or EMS workers, with up to \$600 per year of property tax reductions or other incentives, without those benefits being subject to Federal income tax and withholding. This would ease the administrative burden that local departments sometimes face when they reward their volunteers.

We should take care to protect our volunteer firefighters who serve this country with such bravery. Our legislation would help us achieve that goal, and I urge my colleagues to join us in supporting this bill.

ACCESS TO PRIMARY CARE

Mr. ALEXANDER. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that a copy of my opening statement at the Senate Health Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee be printed in the RECORD.

There being no objection, the material was ordered to be printed in the RECORD, as follows:

ACCESS TO PRIMARY CARE

Mr. ALEXANDER. Dr. Lee Gross, of Florida testified last year at this Committee’s fifth hearing on the cost of health care. He told us that, after seven years as a primary care doctor, he had an epiphany: too many government mandates and insurance companies were getting between doctors and patients and making primary care more expensive than it needed to be.

So in 2010, Dr. Gross created one of the first Direct Primary Care practices. Instead of working with insurance companies and government programs, Dr. Gross’ patients pay him a flat monthly fee directly: \$60 a month per adult, \$25 a month for one child, and \$10 a month for each additional child.

Dr. Gross is one of more than 300,000 primary care doctors in the United States who most of us go to see for day-to-day medical care—receiving vaccines like the flu shot, annual physicals, and help managing chronic conditions, like diabetes. It is also our entry point to coordinate additional medical care, if, for example, we need to get our hip replaced or an MRI to diagnose a problem.

We heard from Dr. Brent James of the National Academies of Medicine at our second hearing that between 30 and 50 percent of what we spend on health care is unnecessary. I have asked for specific suggestions on what the federal government can do to lower the cost of health care for American families, and this year, I am committed to passing legislation based on that input to create better outcomes and better experiences at a lower cost.

Dr. Gross’ practice is one of about a thousand similar clinics in the United States, and is a good example of how a primary care doctor can help reduce costs. The first way Dr. Gross does this is by helping with his patients’ wellness. For \$60 a month, Dr. Gross can do EKGs and cortisone injections, manage chronic conditions like diabetes, asthma,