

the entrepreneurial spirit

leap of faith

by josephine matyas

photography by david bell

W

hen Heather Spencer tells you that she is not a risk-taker, you might want to give her that sideways look with a raised eyebrow. The one that says, "Oh yeah?"

What else could you say when you hear Spencer's tale of a midlife career switch into totally uncharted territory, including a complete shift in city and lifestyle with a mammoth renovation job thrown in for good measure?

The *before* Heather Spencer was a financial analyst in the booming high-tech field, commuting in and out of Ottawa and enjoying success in her chosen field. The *after* Heather Spencer has put down roots in Harrowsmith – living and working from the landmark old Frosty Muggins building – settling into work each day in her jeans and boots, talking grooming gear, saddles and cowboy hats with customers who have discovered her new equestrian tack shop. Now, that's a career switch!

"I've ridden from the time I was 10 years old," Spencer explains. "My sister lives on a farm in the Kingston area and I keep two of my horses at her place. I found that I wanted more time to ride and spend with my horses. Moving here gives me a more flexible lifestyle, got me out of the city and out from behind sitting at a desk all day."

Spencer started searching for a location for her new store in October 2005 and within five months the ink was drying on the deal. With her planning skills and financial background, she knew what she wanted and needed: a location close enough to town on a high-traffic route, with enough space to live and work. The Frosty Muggins building was on the market, but solely in need of renovations and cleanup.

"When I walked through with the realtor, I only spent 15 minutes in the building. My sister arrived just as we were leaving and commented that I must not have been interested. I said, 'Oh, no. I'm going to buy the building. I just can't stand to be in it anymore.' That's just how gross it was."

The renovation job ahead was like climbing a mountain: a new roof and complete water system were required; and floors, staircases, lighting and walls were in disrepair and needed to be torn out and rebuilt. In addition to a construction crew, family and friends pitched in to create the clean, bright space that now makes Harrowsmith Horse Country.

"On my first walk through, I could pretty well see what needed to be done: everything," she says.

Harrowsmith Horse Country is a series of fistfists for Spencer: her first foray into retail as well as her first stab at self-employment. But this entrepreneur knows her market, has sharp financial skills and seems to have enormous vision and boundless energy. Her positive outlook – "if something doesn't work out it just means that something better is waiting" – is part of what keeps her sane and successful.

"Most tack shops are dull, dark and full of greys and browns," she says. "I wanted my store to be sassy and fun, filled with colour and zip (look for the sections of pink floor). Most of my clientele are women and girls, so why not cater to those people?"

Spencer's goal was to carry the expected tack shop supplies – boots, saddles, bridles, bits and halters, grooming aids, riding helmets and saddle pads – but to branch out into horse and riding-themed items not carried by the competition. You'll find shelves and racks lined with stylish clothing and accessories, jewelry, books, candles and stationery.

When she hops up onto one of the original bar stools tucked behind the oak sales counter, Spencer will look you in the eye

"Most tack shops are dull, dark and full of greys and browns. I wanted my store to be sassy and fun, filled with colour and zip."

and tell you that she is not a risk-taker. It could just be a matter of semantics. No one could label Spencer as foolhardy, but a woman with vision and an educated risk-taker for sure – a characteristic that runs like a thread joining all those with a true entrepreneurial spirit.

This new "equestrian concept store" is located on Highway 38 in Harrowsmith (15 minutes north of Kingston) in the former Frosty Muggins building – a landmark originally built in 1860 as a stagecoach inn for travellers. 4930 Hwy. 38, Harrowsmith; 613-372-5085. Open Tuesday through Sunday. ■