



Tootsie's owner Doug Pekarek

## Step Inside Tootsies Shoes

A PERFECT FIT FOR DOWNTOWN BARRINGTON

**I**N LATE AUGUST, TOOTSIES SHOES set up shop in a highly visible, chic downtown storefront at 150 Cook Street, not far from its original location, after nearly two decades of selling fashion-forward, comfortable women's and children's shoes at Ice House Mall.

Long-time customers knew where to find Tootsies at the mall, but owner Doug Pekarek wanted a more visible location to attract new clientele; he found it on Cook Street. By returning to the Barrington Business District, where it first opened in 1998, Tootsies has come full-circle.

Indecisive shoppers beware: the independent shoe store's collection is constantly changing. "If you come in and see a shoe you like, and give yourself time to think about it, the next day, your neighbor may have just bought your size," says Pekarek, who owns a second location at 40 S. Dunton Avenue in Arlington Heights. To make shopping at the store exciting, he adds new brands and styles about every 60 to 90 days. "We're a miniature version of the internet," he says. "For fun and different shoes, we are your search engine."



Tootsie's carries Lucky Savage goods.

### FOLLOWING TOOTSIE'S FOOTSTEPS

Pekarek stays in front of customers on Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook. When designing the new, 2,000 square-foot location, he kept in mind that Millennials are different from Baby Boomers; they need a reason to come into the store. He has given it to them by creating an entertaining atmosphere with shabby chic and vintage décor. Trendy shoes are displayed on whimsy shelving units made from repurposed old relics: a ladder, wooden crates, and a vintage Vespa. Take a closer look and you will see that the front of an old bus is part of the sales counter. Stadium chairs from Wrigley and Soldier Fields will soon make up some of the store's seating.

## TOP SHOE BRANDS

Tootsies carries shoes for women, moderately priced to high-end, by such popular brands as Birkenstock, Diba, Pikolinos, Spring Step, and Vaneli; and children's lines that cost from \$40 to \$60 by Plae, Saucony, Sketchers, Stride Rite, and Sukihosi. Pekarek recently introduced Tootsies "Junior" collection for kids, in sizes four, five, and six, that women in their forties are buying because the styles are ageless, and the shoes are cheaper. Although Tootsies doesn't officially carry men's shoes, the store does sell the Hey Dude line of California topsiders for men that are lightweight, machine washable, and very popular with customers for wearing around the house or out on the town.

Leather-soled shoes in textured fabrics like Burberry Plaid and brilliant floral patterns are trending now—looks Pekarek brought to Tootsies after meeting a manufacturer at a trade show in Atlanta who puts different fabrics on shoes. "We always have to be ahead of the game," he says. "I have to go far away from local trade shows to find exciting shoes."

## MEASURED SUCCESS

The ability to measure customers' feet and help them find the right size shoe sets Tootsies apart from its online competitors. Pekarek and his staff know firsthand whether a shoe runs small or true to size, something a paper-sizer that a customer prints from their computer cannot do. Every so often, the store runs promotions, and discounts on certain collections of shoes or other items in the store, such as leather jackets, portable rain ponchos, leather bags, socks, and gloves—to give customers another reason to stop by.

Forty-percent of Tootsies revenue comes from the sale of children's shoes. "A parent will come in because they were fitted with Stride Rite as a child and they want their children to wear the same brand," Pekarek says, noting there are other exciting options available. He carries brands from Japan that he says are a better fit, machine washable, and infused with green tea to help fight foot odor.

"My favorite thing to sell is a baby's first pair of shoes," says store manager Gayle Wohlert. "The parents are so excited. Everyone is taking pictures. It's a big step in a baby's life and we're part of it." In keeping with tradition, kids receive a parting gift with their shoes: bubbles, toy airplanes, or lollipops.

## OLD-FASHIONED SERVICE

The staff at Tootsies maintains size records for each child and sends postcards to parents that include a \$5 off coupon, to remind them when their kids need a shoe check. "There is no obligation to buy," he says. "If you are fine, come back next month."

Pekarek says the number of independently-owned shoe stores in the Chicago area has drastically declined over the years because potential third-generation owners saw how hard their fathers and grandfathers worked to make a nice living and chose to pursue occupations that didn't require heavy lifting and long hours. Pekarek's story is different. His dad worked for the Chicago Post Office as an assistant postmaster and his mom was a homemaker. He started in retail after graduating from the University of Illinois and became addicted to it. "The shoe industry has always been in my blood," he says. "It's fun. Each day is a different opportunity."

*Located at 150 Cook Street in Barrington, Tootsies Shoes is open Mondays through Fridays, 10 a.m. to 6 p.m.; Saturdays, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.; Closed Sundays. U*

*Melanie Kalmar is a freelance writer specializing in business and human-interest features. When she's not writing, she enjoys spending time with her family.*

