

A Storybook

Success



Bestselling author sets newest book at longstanding, family-owned bridal boutique.

What Shelley Becker-Mueller first thought was a phone call from a solicitor turned out to be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for the third-generation bridal retailer.

The assumed solicitor was actually bestselling author Jeffrey Zaslow. (See sidebar, pg. 152.) And he wasn't making a sales call; he wanted to write his next book about Becker's Bridal.

Zaslow first called the store last May. In fact, owner Becker-Mueller says, he actually phoned seven times before she reluctantly took his call. Zaslow then proceeded to pitch his idea of using weddings to explore the hopes and dreams parents have for their daughters, and asked if Becker-Mueller thought a bridal shop would be the right setting for that storyline.

It took some time before she realized that Zaslow wanted her family-owned business to be that bridal shop.

"Absolutely never in my wildest dreams would I have thought someone would have called me up and offered that," Becker-Mueller says.

Zaslow arrived at Becker's Bridal the very next day. The final result was "The Magic Room," which will be published in January 2012 by Gotham Books.

The non-fiction narrative tells the stories of a handful of the salon's

Becker's Bridal is the subject of "The Magic Room," published in January 2012.

brides, as well as the story of Becker's Bridal, with its unique location in the small village of Fowler, Mich., and its impressive longevity spanning nearly eight decades.

Transitioning From General Store to a Bridal Shop

The Becker family has been a presence in the Fowler business community since 1898, when Becker-Mueller's great-grandfather opened a general store.

Her grandparents, Frank and Eva, continued the business, reported to be one of the largest general stores of its time.

"If you can picture a 'Little House on the Prairie' setting, that's exactly what it looked like," Becker-Mueller says. "Grandma had the pickle barrels, shoes, bolts of fabric and cheese wheels."

Then in 1933, a local restaurant owner named Helen was engaged to be married. She approached Eva and asked her to keep an eye out during her annual fabric-buying trip for anything that looked like a wedding dress.

Eva, known for having an eye for fashion and an ability to size up someone's taste, found a dress she thought would be perfect for Helen. The dress

Where is it?

Becker's Bridal operates shops straddling both sides of Fowler, Mich.'s Main Street. Fowler, a village with about 1,200 people and one stoplight, is located in central Michigan, about 50 miles east of Grand Rapids.

Many residents of the rural community make the 30-minute commute south to the state capital of Lansing to work for the government or large employers such as General Motors.

Meanwhile, brides drive from near and far to Fowler to see the extensive collection of gowns at Becker's Bridal. The majority of the brides hail from western Michigan with the remainder of the salon's business coming from the east side of the state, its upper peninsula and the Chicago area.

fit perfectly, Helen loved it and the story traveled quickly through the tiny town.

The next year, another local bride-to-be asked Eva to bring home a wedding dress for her.

"Grandma said since she was there, she'd just grab six dresses, put them on a rack, put them in the store and see how they do," Becker-Mueller says. "So that was the beginning of gradually switching from a general store to a very, very large bridal shop."

During the Great Depression, the business moved nearby into a former bank. The three-story building accommodated the general store merchandise and the growing collection of wedding dresses.

Over time, the general-store atmosphere slowly gave way to bridal. By the mid-1960s, the store was solely a bridal shop.

Building A Family Owned Bridal Business

While under the ownership of Becker-Mueller's parents, Clark and Sharon, Becker's Bridal expanded by repurchasing the original storefront.

Today, the second location now houses mothers, bridesmaids, flower girls, prom and special occasion. Bridal is still showcased in the former bank, and recently, the old bank vault was incorporated into the design of the salon.

In the past, the vault was used as a storage and pressing room, as well as a room to display discounted dresses. Its solid concrete walls and small size made it challenging to more effectively utilize the space.

But two years ago, when the store was short on viewing areas, Becker-Mueller decided to remodel the vault complete with infinity mirrors, a circular pedestal and church lighting. At first she was unhappy with the lighting, and planned to change it.

But then the very first bride went in, started crying and said, "Oh my gosh. I look like I'm in front of the priest. I can see myself getting married in this dress."

"We were like, 'Let's not change it. This is perfect,'" Becker-Mueller says.

This turned out to be a good decision. On Saturdays, there's a line about 10 brides deep waiting to view their dresses in the newly remodeled vault.

Customers feel a deep sense of trust due to the store's longevity.

The room – referred to as "the sparkle room" by Becker's Bridal consultants - became the focus of Zaslows's attention during his visits to the salon.

After watching interactions between brides and their families, he called the vault "the magic room," hence the title of his new book.

Becker-Mueller has been seeing that type of "magic" since she began working in the family bridal shop at age 14.



On the bridal salon's main level, Owner Shelley Becker-Mueller conducts a final fitting for a customer.

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The Becker's Bridal full-time staff (L to R): Sandy Schmitz, Jennifer Badgett, Gwen Seguin, Alyssa Mueller, Owner Shelley Becker-Mueller, Danyel Vining, Bill Goldman, Beverly Schaefer, Kimberly Thelen and Mona Bryant.

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The "Magic Room" in its entirety.

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Although at one point she considered venturing out to try something else, an innate desire to preserve the family business caused her to stick around and, ultimately, buy the shop from her parents eight years ago.

"There was always something that told me I need to be here," she says. "The business becomes almost like one of your children. There's such a nourishment that you can't let go of it. You can't see yourself without it."

She continues, "I ate, drank and

An old, remodeled bank vault serves as a unique dress-viewing area.

breathed it. And what's crazy about it is my daughter probably has more of a thirst than maybe I did. This need to take it to the next level just seems to pass down through the bloodline."

Becker-Mueller's 25-year-old daughter works at the salon, as do her two sisters. Running a longstanding, family-owned business has its advantages,

Becker-Mueller says, because customers feel a deeper trust knowing the longevity of the business, thus somewhat lessening the pressure for the shop to "prove itself."

Making The Destination Worth The Journey

Located in a village of about 1,200 people and surrounded by farmland, Becker's Bridal is dependent on out-of-town customers venturing to shop there. The average customer drives

Who is Jeffrey Zaslow?

Wall Street Journal columnist Jeffrey Zaslow is the author of "The Magic Room," a nonfiction narrative set at Becker's Bridal that will be released in January 2012 (www.magicroom-book.com). He has also authored or co-authored three best-sellers: "The Last Lecture," "The Girls From Ames" and "Highest Duty."

Currently, Zaslow is working with Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords and her husband, astronaut Mark Kelly, on their memoir.

Zaslow, a father of three daughters, shared his observations about bridal and Becker's Bridal, in particular, with VOWS:

Q. How did you hear about Becker's Bridal?

A. I wanted to write a nonfiction book about the love we all wish for our daughters. I needed a place to set the book – a place with great emotion – and my wife suggested a bridal shop. "There's something about a wedding dress..." she told me. I was willing to go anywhere in the country to find the right store and the right stories, but I began by looking closer to my home in suburban Detroit. When I came upon the Web site for Becker's, which is exactly 100 miles from my house, I was very intrigued.

Q. What initially attracted you to the store?

A. I loved that Fowler, Mich., is a town with more wedding dresses (2,500) than residents (1,200). I loved that the store has remained in the same family since it was founded in 1934, and that it inhabits an old bank building. Not many people outside of Michigan know about the women of Becker's – a daughter, her mother, her grandmother, and her great-grandmother – who built and nurtured the store, guiding 100,000 brides into all of their dresses for 76 years. It's a beautiful story.

Q. How did you know Becker's Bridal was the right store for your book?

A. The minute I stepped into The Magic Room, I knew. Saleswomen at Becker's don't use the word "magic" lightly. They routinely watch brides and their mothers melt into tears

when they enter the space. After seeing their daughters on The Magic Room pedestal, fathers are often overcome with emotion, too. They excuse themselves, leaving the store. Fathers can be seen pacing up and down Main Street in Fowler, blowing their noses and wiping their eyes. I loved the whole scene around Becker's.



Q. What did you learn about bridal while working on this book?

A. I saw that it is a business, yes. But I also realized that those in the bridal industry are selling much more than dresses. They're selling dreams, hope, love, the future. I tried to capture all of that in the book.

Q. What can other bridal shops do to make the type of "magic" you observed at Becker's Bridal?

A. Shelley and her staffers resist the hard sell. Their clientele tends to be middle-class, and they don't conspire to steer brides into more expensive dresses. Instead, they aim to be good listeners. Every bride has a story, and they would tease out those stories from brides and their families.

Q. What impressed you most about Becker's Bridal?

A. It was so meaningful to see how Becker's has serviced the community in central Michigan for generations. Some of today's brides made their pilgrimage to the store because they were following in the footsteps of their great-grandmothers, grandmothers and mothers.

Q. How might the time you spent at Becker's Bridal influence how you will help your daughters shop for their wedding gowns?

A. I'll try to remember what Shelley and her staffers told me: A bride should make the final decision about which dress she feels she looks best in. What a parent thinks is secondary. I have three daughters, and my main job will be simply to tell them I love them.

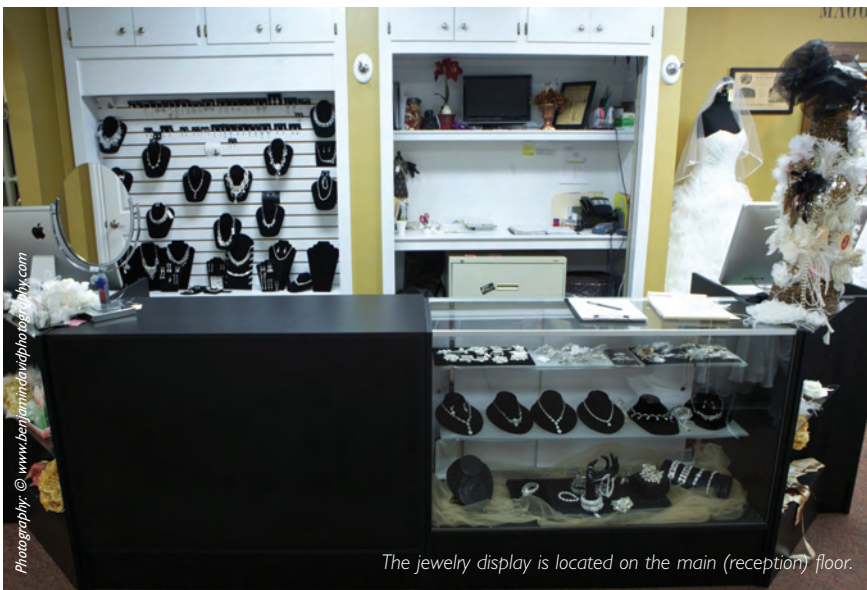




The bridal salon's upper level, also known as the loft or third floor, contains destination gowns, discontinued gowns and plus-size gowns.



Owner Shelley Becker-Mueller (back) and her daughter Alyssa Mueller search for that perfect dress for a new client.



The jewelry display is located on the main (reception) floor.

Employees make a point to learn the name of each person in the bridal party.

one to two-and-a-half hours, although brides have also traveled from as far away as Texas.

To make the destination worth the journey, Becker-Mueller is committed to providing customers with selection, service and value.

The store's bridal collection includes 2,000 to 3,000 different gowns. As customers enter the shop, Becker-Mueller often overhears comments like, "See, I told you we needed to come all the way over here," or "If you can't find it here, you're not going to find it."

She estimates that the bridal shop brings 10,000 to 12,000 people to town each year. On busy Saturdays, consultants handle 60 to 90 bridal appointments, and the bridesmaids' side of the business is just as full.

What's more, bridal sales have doubled since the mid-1990s. And even during times of economic downturn, Becker's Bridal has yet to experience any downspin in sales, Becker-Mueller says.

Rather, she has seen business increase during some of those periods. Currently, Becker's Bridal is selling 1,500 to 2,000 bridal gowns annually. The salon mostly sells moderately priced gowns, averaging \$700 to \$900, but also has a fair share of sales in the \$1,500 to \$2,500 range.

As well, Becker-Mueller says the business is becoming increasingly couture with recent remodeling in the store. Meeting customers' expectations for "hometown service" has been key to the salon's success.

Employees – several of whom have been working at Becker's Bridal for 20 years – relish meeting brides and their families, and they make it a point to learn the name of each person in the bride's party.

Consultants listen to the bride and handle her shopping experience as if it were their own.

"The employees are really absorbed into what that bride's appointment is

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Photography: © www.benjaminandphoto.com

A view of the reception area upon walking into the salon from Main Street.

In The Spotlight: *Becker's Bridal*

Business Established: 1934; has remained in the Becker family the entire time.

Store Size: 9,000 square feet, divided into two stores: Bridal, 6,500 square feet, and bridesmaids/formal, 2,500 square feet.

Total Staff: 12 full-time and eight part-time employees. Additionally, six to eight part timers are added during the busy winter months.

Compensation: Hourly plus commission.

Alterations: By referral.

Marketing: Web site (www.beckersbridal.com), blog, Facebook, Twitter and bridal show participation.

Recent Good Business Read: Owner Shelley Becker-Mueller reads *VOWS*: magazine and uses the articles in monthly staff meetings.

Charities They Support: Becker's Bridal donates dresses and more to several local organizations including high school and college theater programs, and a mission group that travels to the Appalachian Mountains. Most recently, the salon outfitted a young Make-a-Wish recipient for her trip to meet the Disney princesses. "We feel that touching people's lives one at a time is our form of tithing," Becker-Mueller says. "We can see where the monies go, personally see their smiles and know that someone is truly getting something that they otherwise would never dream of having."

Local "Must See": "I guess we are the local tourist attraction," she says. "When people are driving by, they will stop just to walk through the store."

Friend them on Facebook: www.facebook.com/beckersbridal1934

Follow them on Twitter: twitter.com/beckersbridal

Take a Virtual Tour (new!): http://www.elocallink.tv/vp6/spon-fcsa_a.php?fm=1&sponid=ATUANIM3UjIUbw==&vid



Word-of-mouth is the store's strongest form of advertising.

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all about," she says. "So it's not a matter of setting a goal of reaching a certain sales number. They really come in at the beginning of the day wondering who they're going to meet today."

Staying Competitive In A Changing Market

Just as news of Eva Becker's first wedding dress sale spread in the 1930s, word of Becker's Bridal continues to travel decades later.

"We've been so blessed with what my grandparents did years ago," Becker-Mueller says. "They built such a solid foundation, and thank God. And then my parents grabbed it, and ran with it and built it up."

She continues, "We have such good word-of-mouth after being here 78 years; we have great-grandparents coming back with the brides."

To remain competitive in the future, Becker's Bridal will continue to rely on word-of-mouth advertising and also mix in some modern marketing.

The store currently maintains a Web site and blog, and is active on Facebook and Twitter. Looking ahead, Becker-Mueller plans to continue gradually growing the business and increasing the sales volume.

Given the store's location, providing customers with value will be imperative in meeting those goals, she says.

"People are always going to be able to find something cheaper or online, but that doesn't always give you the value," she says. "I think the customer service and the value that the customer feels they're getting is the only thing that's going to keep us here."

Becker-Mueller is hopeful that another couple of generations will follow in the footsteps of those before them. Her daughter, who holds degrees in literature and apparel, has worked in the store since high school.

"I know she's got it in her blood because when she's not here, she feels guilty. That's a good sign," she says.



Photography: © www.benjaminidavidphotography.com

A corner angle of the "Magic Room."

In the short-term, though, the team at Becker's Bridal is eagerly awaiting the release of "The Magic Room," which should hit shelves in January 2012.

And to add to the excitement, a handful of television and movie production companies have expressed interest in the story.

"It's just truly amazing," Becker-Mueller says. "It's such an honor for what my parents have sacrificed."

She continues, "People don't realize when you own a business what you give up, on the family front and at a personal level. So it's an honor to see my parents honored in that way – and my grandparents as pioneers back in their day – for what they've established and maintained."



Most Memorable Moment

Nearly 30 years after experiencing her first flash flood, Shelley Becker-Mueller, owner of Becker's Bridal in Fowler, Mich., still recalls the emotions she felt that day in 1983.

At the time, Becker-Mueller was 18 years old and employed at the bridal store then owned by her parents. The ground floor of the three-story shop, which held all of the dresses sold to brides with upcoming weddings, was the main concern when water began gushing in through the front doors.

"I remember being there with my brothers and parents, and we had to grab every single sold dress from the main level because the water was coming in so fast, and just throw them up on the next level without concern of tags falling off, keeping them intact, or how we would figure out whose dress was whose," Becker-Mueller says.

Together, they moved nearly 1,000 gowns up a short flight of stairs, bucket-brigade style. Adrenaline kicked in, as did a strong desire to protect not only the dresses, but also hundreds of brides' weddings.

"I just thought of each bride as a dress was handed to me: 'I wonder when her wedding is' or 'I wonder who this is,'" she says. "You really didn't see it as a dress. You saw it as a person when it came through your hands."

Fortunately, all gowns were spared from damage. But at the top of the stairs, "it was just a mountain of tangled white fabric. You didn't even know where one dress ended and another dress started," Becker-Mueller says.

In total, it took two weeks to sort through the heap, match gowns to brides and make reassuring phone calls to customers.

Although that has been the only flood to affect Becker's Bridal, it has made Becker-Mueller think differently about safeguarding assets – from dresses to data – in case of an emergency.



Photography: © www.benjaminidavidphotography.com

The bridesmaids salon houses more than 1,000 current bridesmaid samples and more than 400 mother of the bride/groom dresses.



Photography: © www.benjaminidavidphotography.com

A headpiece and shoe display.